

# 2017 NFL draft's defensive line breakdown: rankings, sleepers and how Broncos fix their run defense

*General manager John Elway prioritizes getting his lines bigger and tougher*

By Cameron Wolfe  
The Denver Post  
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Editor's note: Last of a seven-part series breaking down the NFL draft, April 27-29. Today: the defensive line.

Broncos general manager John Elway probably still has nightmares about that November night in Oakland when the Raiders ran for 218 yards against Denver. The Broncos no longer were the bullies of the AFC West.

Elway has made it a priority this offseason to have his lines get bigger and tougher. Most of the attention this offseason has been directed at the offensive line because that's the weaker side of the ball, but improving the defensive front is also a must.

There's only one certainty on Denver's defensive line going into the 2017 season, defensive end Derek Wolfe. And even Wolfe had an up-and-down 2016 season as he battled injuries. Denver added two potential starters on the line in free agency, nose tackle Domata Peko and defensive end Zach Kerr, but neither should be seen as the missing piece. The Broncos will likely spend a draft pick or two on the defensive line later this month.

Here's a look at the top defensive linemen in a unusually weak draft class. This breakdown is reserved for players who would fit into Denver's 3-4 scheme.

1. Jonathan Allen, Alabama, 6-foot-3, 286 pounds; grade: top 5

Strengths: Relentless, strong and physical. Great hands with the ability to dominate with power, technique or quickness. Solid burst for a guy his size. Good run defender with a diverse amount of 'win' moves.

Negatives: Shoulder injuries could be a long-term issue that shortens his career. Played on a defense full of NFL talent. Undersized with average height and length.

2. Malik McDowell, Michigan State, 6-6, 295 pounds; grade: top 10 on-field.. late round off-the field.. likely second day pick

Strengths: Has the talent, athleticism to challenge Allen for the top spot and be a potential top 10 pick. Gets constant penetration to the backfield. Strong lateral quickness enables him to make splash plays off stunts and movement from gap-to-gap.

Negatives: A lot of rumblings about questionable work ethic and character. Statistics were surprising average for someone with his ability. Too out-of-control running past the play at times. Falls a lot due to lack of balance, footwork.

3. Chris Wormley, Michigan, 6-5, 298 pounds; Grade: early second round

Strengths: Ideal size, length for 3-4 defensive end. Powerful bull rush, but he can also win with speed. Three-year starter with a solid mix of run defense and pass rush.

Negatives: Straight line rusher with little lateral movements or complex pass rush moves. He's not explosive or a game-changer. Disappears at times.

4. Caleb Brantley, Florida, 6-3, 307 pounds; Grade: late second round

Strengths: Strong, stout defender who demands attention. Has a quick first step and will win with his hands if he gets them out early. Will command double teams and he won't lose much ground against them.

Negatives: Likely limited to a defensive tackle role, but may need more bulk at that spot. Not a great pass rusher. Needs more diversity in his attack moves.

5. Dalvin Tomlinson, Alabama, 6-3, 310 pounds; grade: early third round

Strengths: Did the dirty work for Reuben Foster and Allen. Versatility to play nose tackle, defensive tackle or 3-4 defensive end. Powerful with ability to make splash plays. Commands double teams and will split them.

Negatives: Hasn't played much, one-year starter in a stacked defensive line. Won't ever be a great pass rusher. Not a great athlete.

Next up: Larry Ogunjobi, Charlotte; Demarcus Walker, Florida State

Mid-round starter: D.J. Jones, Ole Miss: One of the few, true nose tackles in this draft class, Jones has the size and strength to eat up running lanes. He also has some pass rush and lateral movement skills.

Late-round sleeper: Grover Stewart, Albany State: Stewart has the size, strength, upside and domination on the Division II level to be a late-round project for an eager defensive line coach.

# Broncos biggest draft splash would be Christian McCaffrey, Joe Thomas

By Mike Klis  
KUSA-TV  
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ENGLEWOOD—John Elway can make the biggest draft splash of his career as the Denver Broncos' general manager.

Here's how: Elway uses the No. 20 overall draft pick on local legend Christian McCaffrey. Elway then trades his No. 51 pick in the second round, and his third-round compensatory pick (No. 101 overall) to the Cleveland Browns in exchange for left tackle Joe Thomas.

Ba Da Boom. Ba Da Bing.

War room phone drop. War room walk off.

Elway could then let his top assistant, Matt Russell, and new head coach Vance Joseph handle the final six picks in four rounds 4 through 7 for all anyone cares.

I'm not saying Elway is considering such maneuvers with his two top two draft picks. I am saying this would stir the most excitement and get this Broncos region thinking Super Bowl again.

I also think the McCaffrey-veteran left tackle idea coming out of their top two picks – if not Thomas, the Broncos should also consider taking a run at Philadelphia's Jason Peters, or someone of that ilk -- must be a package deal. I don't think the Broncos would take McCaffrey at No. 20 if they don't have their left tackle in place.

Left tackle is simply too great a need. Based on last season, current offensive tackles Donald Stephenson and Ty Sambrailo need a readjustment to a swing position, at least to begin this season.

I picked Cleveland's Thomas and Philly's Peters because they play for teams whose front office has previously demonstrated a willingness to trade players for draft picks.

Von Miller will always be Elway's best draft pick. But Miller is a better pro than he was in college. He didn't become a superstar until Super Bowl 50.

McCaffrey will enter the NFL as a star. More importantly, the Broncos could use him. I'm not sure they would want a rookie receiving so much monstrous publicity. As the son of Ed and Lisa McCaffrey, brother of so many other McCaffrey athletes, and a former Valor Christian Academy star, Christian would be a bigger deal here than with any other NFL team.

McCaffrey was at Broncos headquarters Thursday as part of the team's local pro day. Unlike so many others local prospects like quarterback Austin Apodaca, who played at Silver Creek High School and New Mexico, receiver Stephen White, who played at Valor and Northern Colorado, and offensive tackle Justin

Taxinger, who played at Longmont and Colorado School of Mines, McCaffrey did not work out for the Broncos.

Instead he showed up at the UHealth Training Center wearing a dark suit with red tie. Clearly, McCaffrey was dressing for a job interview. He let the Broncos know that if he's still around by then, he wants that No. 20 draft slot.

The Broncos' quarterbacks spotted him walking through their building, dressed to the nines.

"Obviously, he is a great player," said Paxton Lynch. "You see him all over ESPN making these ridiculous plays. Wherever he ends up, if it's here, I'm sure we'll all be grateful to have him here. You've got a guy like Demaryius and Emmanuel to learn from, too, which would be very beneficial to him. I'm sure wherever he ends up, he's going to help the organization."

Ordinarily, the versatile skill position types go in the second round. Not sure why. But that's where NFL executives and scouts have valued the position.

McCaffrey is almost certain to go in the first round, though, because he is spectacularly versatile.

"He's a good player, obviously," Trevor Siemian said. "Wherever he goes he's going to have a ton of success. I don't know what the draft board looks like up there. Again, Elway has got a better answer for you. I'm looking forward to what he does in the league."

McCaffrey may not be a 20-carry-a-game running back, 16 games a year. Who is, anymore? More significantly, who wants one? The Kansas City Chiefs were better without Jamaal Charles the past two seasons. The Minnesota Vikings had just one great season with Adrian Peterson and that was because Brett Favre had one last great fling.

Where McCaffrey is special is what he can do as a receiver. His NFL scouting combine workout – where he cut so smoothly and explosively on his routes, while Leonard Fournette was clanking his way downfield – likely eliminated any chance of McCaffrey falling to the second round.

His character and gene pool also make him a "safe" first-round pick. From the jump, he should average one kickoff return, two punt returns, eight carries, five catches and 135 all-purpose yards a game.

I'd call that first-round value.

In his way of landing with the local team he has known intimately since the crib is the Broncos' desperate need for a left tackle. The Broncos can't come away from this draft without a starting left tackle. If they work a trade for a veteran, the Broncos must select a left tackle with their No. 20 overall pick.

The Broncos could well go left tackle Cam Robinson, Garrett Bolles or Ryan Ramczyk in the first round, and trade up from their No. 51 spot in the second round to take a versatile skill position player like Alvin Kamara or Joe Mixon.

It just wouldn't create the buzz of a Christian McCaffrey-Joe Thomas pairing.

# Broncos QBs have to fix flaws before they can win the job

By Jeff Legwold  
ESPN.com  
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ENGLEWOOD, Colo. -- The Denver Broncos quarterbacks are at the start of what will be a full-grown quarterback competition in the weeks to come, but Trevor Siemian and Paxton Lynch already know they've got things to repair in their play before they can worry about the 2017 season.

Coach Vance Joseph has said the two will use April, May and June largely to learn the new offense and the on-field competition for the starting job will mostly be underway in training camp.

Lynch looked uncomfortable at times as a rookie last season when he made the transition from the spread offense played at Memphis to the Broncos' system. He continues to work on his footwork and learning what defenses are trying to do. To that end, Lynch spent time with Charlie Taaffe, a long time college play-caller who also coached in the Canadian Football League.

Lynch had worked with Taaffe before the 2016 scouting combine.

"I wouldn't say there's just one area," Lynch said Thursday. "I kind of did a bunch of stuff, from my footwork, to some classroom stuff that I could do ... whatever Coach Taaffe could really help me [with], seeing stuff before the snap and after the snap is really what I've been focusing on."

Opposing defensive coaches said Lynch had a difficult time with the move from his college offense to the pro game. They said he was slow to work the middle of the field in the passing game and often too quick to pull the ball down and run if his first read wasn't open.

Having played almost exclusively out of the shotgun at Memphis, Lynch also saw his accuracy waver at times as he tried to drop back from under center to throw. That's why, Lynch said Thursday, he returned to work with Taaffe in the weeks before the Broncos opened their offseason program.

"I figured once the season ended ... he would know right where I left off and where I need to pick up," Lynch said.

For Siemian -- who had offseason shoulder surgery and missed two games last season with injuries -- his biggest offseason task was clear from the moment his 2016 work was done. Gary Kubiak, before he stepped down from coaching in January, said he told Siemian his biggest job would be to find a way to keep himself from taking so many hits in the pocket.

Siemian said Thursday, he took that advice to heart.

"You look around the league, the older guys that stay healthy, they're really smart with the football," Siemian said. "They ditch it when they have to, they're shooting check-downs pretty quickly or they're getting down. I got a chance to watch Peyton [Manning] do that. I don't know if I thought I was Superman my first year [as a starter] and thought I could take a couple hits. You can't play for an extended career doing that. I'll fix that."

Asked if that meant he would include the "self-sack," a tactic Manning would use when he would go to the ground if a pass-rusher came free right after the snap, Siemian joked: "I've gone outside and fallen down a few times."

Siemian also referenced the Broncos' work on third downs overall, which, in addition to the run game, was a trouble spot last season for an offense that struggled to close out drives with touchdowns.

"Tough for me to pinpoint exactly one thing," Siemian said. "Obviously we want to be better on third downs, whether that's me throwing it, running it, ditching it, or running the ball on better on third and short. As a quarterback, whether it be me or Paxton, we've got to get better there, stay on the field, hopefully score a ton of points."

The Broncos will continue their conditioning-only workouts next week as well before they have their first minicamp April 25-27 when the players will get in their first on-field work in position groups.

# Woody Paige: Broncos would be silly not to draft McCaffrey or Peppers

By Woody Paige  
KMGH-TV  
April 14, 2017

DENVER — The Broncos have a clear track to drafting Christian McCaffrey.

It's just a matter of whether or not John Elway is willing to move into the passing lane for the second straight year.

The Broncos definitely are interested in picking the Stanford version of the Swiss Army Knife. He just drove off to Broncos headquarters for a meet-and-greet; the Broncos interviewed him at the NFL Combine when he was the most impressive running back, and they attended his Pro Day when he showed his receiving skills. And he did attend the same university as Elway, and there is not a hint of Christian, who is a devout Christian, ever stepping out of bounds on or off the field.

The Swiss Army Knife originally was developed in Switzerland, naturally, in 1991 as a multi-tooled pocketknife for soldiers. The terrific gadget features a screwdriver, a can opener, a reamer, a bottle opener, a wire-stripper and, yes, a knife.

McCaffrey doesn't quite have that many versatile uses, but he's close.

The Valor Christian High School graduate who was born and raised in the upscale Castle Pines area south of Denver is a running back, a (motion) H-back, a wide receiver, a slot receiver, a punt returner and a kick returner.

And, in high school and college, he occasionally played a wildcat quarterback in the shotgun formation.

Only one other player in the draft can serve that many, or more, purposes. Michigan's Jabrill Peppers is a defensive back, linebacker, kick and punt returner, running back and wide receiver. In fact, The Wolverine lined up at 15 different positions during his collegiate career. Hard to believe. He didn't play center or guard.

And Peppers could be available, too, to the Broncos.

A couple of latter-day Jim Thorpes (he could play everywhere, and did) are there for the choosing in the first round.

But the dilemma for each is: Can he play any one position at a Pro Bowl level. Peppers has been compared to former Heisman Trophy winner (over Peyton Manning) and future Hall of Famer Charles Woodson. McCaffrey has been characterized as another Reggie Bush (who won a tainted Heisman Trophy), although I liken him to a Darren Sproles, who has accumulated 19,020 all-purpose yards in 11 seasons with San Diego, New Orleans and Philadelphia.

Sproles is more like the Energizer Bunny. He just keeps going.

If the Broncos could get Sproles-type or Woodson-like production and years out McCaffrey or Peppers, they'd be silly not to draft one or the other.

McCaffrey is the sexy, smart selection – and the hometown kid and son of the former popular Broncos' receiver – Ed McCaffrey.

Peppers would provide depth immediately in the defensive backfield of an already loaded Broncos defense, and give them a high-octane returner. And he could step in at safety or cornerback in a couple of years when the Broncos lose an Aqib Talib or a T.J. Ward.

Problem is, both likely will be taken just before the Broncos pick 20th in the first round.

If the Broncos stay at 20, they'll probably watch Peppers and McCaffrey go away in the teens (13-19) of the first round.

And here are the Broncos probable choices at that point: Offensive left tackle, in this order (mine) – Garrett Bowles, Ryan Ramczyk and Cam Robinson (more suited to right tackle or left guard); tight end – David Wjoku or, just possibly, O.J. Howard slips to here; guard Forrest Lamp, or an undisclosed player (perhaps a defensive end or tackle) that nobody is guessing.

The other way to go for the Broncos is to trade down and pick up another pick or two, and they could still acquire one of the left tackles.

The way the Broncos get McCaffrey or Peppers (and they didn't interview him at the NFL Combine or offer him a visit to Dove Valley) is to trade up in the first round.

In The Elway Reign, the Broncos have traded both directions, getting Paxton Lynch and Derek Wolfe.

(The advantage to keeping a first-rounder is the fifth-year option for control.)

So, where do they go?

They make a deal with Arizona (which is where I'm writing this column) for the 13th pick. According to the NFL draft trade chart, the Broncos' pick is worth 850 points, the Cardinals' choice 1150. The Broncos could exchange positions and add their second round pick (worth 390 points) for 1240, and also receive the Cardinals' fourth-or-fifth round pick.

Why the Cardinals? Because they're not interested in McCaffrey. They seem to be honing in on quarterback Patrick Mahomes.

Well, he'll be there at 20 unless somebody goes berserko. But Washington, Tampa Bay, Indianapolis and Philadelphia already have quarterbacks. The Cardinals are looking to replace Carson Palmer in a year or so.

Washington, Tampa Bay, Indianapolis and Philadelphia indeed are interested in McCaffrey, or, possibly, Peppers. McCaffrey is high on the Eagles' list, and Washington invited him in for a meeting. The Colts and the Bucs would dearly love to add another offensive addition, such as a McCaffrey.

So, if the Broncos jumped ahead of that crowd, they could grab McCaffrey, for sure. (The only other team in the top dozen that has given any thought to Christian is Carolina, and the Panthers probably can take Leonard Fournette at eighth.

Is Elway ready to gamble and give up a second? The Broncos really haven't done well, or much at all, with second-rounders, and they actually do better with fourths, sixth and sevenths (Trevor Siemian, for example). They've reached too often with the No. 2 selection.

If the Broncos want McCaffrey, or even Peppers, the fast lane and the right track are open.

# David Ramsey: Trevor Siemian is underdog in battle for Denver Bronco starting QB

By David Ramsey  
Colorado Springs Gazette  
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Trevor Siemian says he's "not at all" insulted by coach Vance Joseph's declaration that it's a "50-50" battle for the Broncos starting QB job.

Of course he's not insulted. Siemian was the 250th pick of the 2015 draft, and he was surprised, and thrilled, to even be drafted.

Paxton Lynch, Siemian's competition at QB, was the 26th pick of the 2016 draft, and he hoped to go even higher.

If Siemian's potential is greater than Lynch's, the Broncos are in trouble. Potential is not reality. I get that. If Siemian is the superior quarterback for 2017, he deserves the job. Plenty of 1st-round QBs – Ryan Leaf, Tommy Maddox, Joey Harrington, JaMarcus Russell – have ended up on the NFL junk heap as busts. Lynch could be the next arrival on the junk heap.

The big question about Siemian is this:

Can he improve much on his 2016 performance?

I believe we saw Siemian at near-peak Siemian. He was often solid, but seldom spectacular. Yes, he finished a respectable 8-6 as a starter, but he had a superior, frightening defense strutting beside him. Siemian is not destined to bust into the list of the NFL's top 15 quarterbacks. He's an elite backup, and that's it.

Lynch could bust into the top 15, and beyond. His ceiling is higher, much higher, than Siemian's. He could become an elite starter.

Lynch was a great college quarterback, throwing 50 touchdowns and only 13 interceptions in his last two seasons at Memphis.

Siemian was a good, not great, college quarterback, throwing 18 touchdowns and 20 interceptions in his final two seasons at Northwestern. (Siemian faced stronger college defenses than the ones faced by Lynch.)

"I think you learn pretty quickly, or at least I did, you've got to earn it every year, every day in the league. And that goes for beyond me and Paxton; that's everybody," Siemian said Thursday.

Good answer, Trevor, who doesn't talk as if he's in a big lead in the QB race.

That's because he's not in the lead. He's tied, as he should be, as the struggle begins.

# Broncos LB Brandon Marshall is Latest NFL Player to Voice Support for Colin Kaepernick To Get Signed

By Simon Ogus  
Forbes  
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There is a growing chorus of NFL support for Colin Kaepernick, the free agent quarterback, that he deserves a spot in the game next season. Perhaps the firmest support so far came on Friday afternoon when Denver Broncos' linebacker Brandon Marshall stated, via his Twitter feed, that Kaepernick deserves a spot on an NFL roster next season and that he is the best quarterback on the free-agent market this offseason. Yet he still remains unemployed.

Free agent quarterback Colin Kaepernick remains unsigned, but a growing number of players continue to advocate for his spot on an NFL roster. (Photo by Scott Cunningham/Getty Images)

At the beginning of the week, first-year 49ers coach Kyle Shanahan stated that Kaepernick's skill set is a poor fit for his system and that his dual-threat skills would have been too great of an overhaul for the offense he wants to implement with his new team.

"Yeah. I think just the experience of doing that type of stuff, you don't just run stuff and think you're going to be good at it right away," Shanahan said of having to switch the offense to fit Kaepernick. "You've got to commit to it and work at it year-round, and it's all the positions. When all your quarterbacks have different ways to be successful, which I've been in situations like that and you try to prepare them best, it does take a toll on your offense. What are you trying to get good at? You can't practice everything. You can't be great at everything. You've kind of got to commit to something and do it over and over and over again and once the type of running game or drop-back game, you're going to commit to one quarterback is completely different than the other, then that does affect your team."

Those comments came on the heels of comments by two of Shanahan's current players and Kaepernick's former teammates. They voiced their support for their quarterback from last season and admitted their confusion over his continued unemployment. Kaepernick's backfield partner Carlos Hyde had this to say earlier in the week:

"I am surprised," running back Carlos Hyde said. "I've seen some quarterbacks [that] got signed that Kap is way better than, in my opinion. But I'm not a GM. I'm not a head coach. So that's out of my league."

While there seem to be many explanations from front office people and coaches about why Kaepernick might not be getting signed, there is also a growing chorus of current NFL players that are openly wondering why the quarterback hasn't been signed. Brandon Marshall of the Broncos had this to say on Friday:

Brandon Marshall ✓ @BMarshh54

It's time my Brother @Kaepernick7 gets signed. He's better than every QB that got signed in Free agency

While Marshall is on a different NFL team than Kaepernick, the two have some history. Marshall participated in the movement that Kaepernick started, that involved kneeling during the national anthem of NFL games in a protest of racial oppression and inequality. In Marshall's case, the gesture of a silent protest cost him endorsements from The Air Academy Federal Credit Union and CenturyLink. Marshall was also a college teammate of Kaepernick's at the University of Nevada-Reno, so he knows the quarterback better than many in the NFL outside of the San Francisco 49ers.

An interesting aspect of Marshall's support is that Kaepernick was sought after by the Denver Broncos last offseason. The big sticking point at that time was that he was still under contract with the 49ers at a total compensation of \$14.3 million and the 49ers required a draft pick in exchange. A year later, the draft pick requirement and locked in salary are no longer an issue, but there has been no interest from Denver to date this offseason. While it could be said that the Broncos are backing last year's first-round pick Paxton Lynch, the team was a very interested observer in the Tony Romo saga with the Dallas Cowboys that ultimately saw the quarterback retire and take an analyst job with CBS Sports.

It is a tough to even unpack the rationale that the best free agent quarterback in the NFL could be unsigned on April 14th, but the list of quarterbacks that have signed with new teams all come in with inferior resumes to Kaepernick, who is still only 29 years of age. That list includes Mike Glennon, Brian Hoyer, Geno Smith, Josh McCown, Nick Foles, Chase Daniel, Aaron Murray and Matt Barkley. Hoyer and Barkley have signed with the 49ers, Kaepernick's team of the last six seasons.

It is tough to see when this situation might end for Kaepernick, but it likely will not be before the NFL Draft at the end of the month. It remains very improbable that Kaepernick won't eventually find himself on an NFL team for the 2017 season, but there has been no evidence to date that any team is looking to change his employment status anytime soon.

# The most-creative ways the Broncos have announced their draft picks

By Ben Swanson  
DenverBroncos.com  
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In recent years, the Broncos have showcased their history and community by allowing representatives to announce their picks. Which is your favorite?

The NFL Draft as a television production has given the Broncos and other teams opportunities to announce their picks in novel ways. When given the chance, Denver often asks its legends to represent the team, but the team has also experimented with other ideas recently as the league explores ways for teams to showcase their communities during their picks.

Here are just a few ways the Broncos have announced their picks without the commissioner at the podium:

## Upchurch brings down the house

After a brief introduction from NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell, Ring of Fame receiver/returner Rick Upchurch took the podium at the 2015 NFL Draft. But his first announcement wasn't the Broncos' pick; it was to thank Broncos Country for their support as he continued to fight leukemia. The crowd gave him a standing ovation before he proceeded to tell the world the Broncos' pick, Ty Sambrailo (second round, 59th overall).

## Alumni announcements

Upchurch is just one of a handful of legends to announce picks for the Broncos. Others include Hall of Fame running back Floyd Little (Zane Beadles, 2010), Ring of Fame halfback/kicker/returner Gene Mingo (Cody Latimer, 2014) and Hall of Fame tight end Shannon Sharpe (Rahim Moore, 2011).

But one of the more memorable alumni picks came just last year when former quarterback Jake Plummer hit the slopes at Winter Park Resort, stopping to announce fourth-round pick Devontae Booker.

## Making a wish come true

Like many Denver natives, Daniel Hailpern naturally loves his Broncos. But what separates him from the thousands of other Broncos fans is his devotion through difficult times in his life. As a leukemia patient at Children's Hospital Colorado, Hailpern won a Broncos-themed "Frozen"-parody contest which then sparked an hour-long radio show he hosted from the hospital's Seacrest Studios booth. Since then, Hailpern has visited Broncos practices as a junior reporter and done interviews on NFL Network. In 2016 the NFL and Make-A-Wish Colorado granted his wish to announce the Broncos' first pick, Paxton Lynch.

## Bonding time

Two rounds after Hailpern's appearance, DeMarcus Ware and his son, DeMarcus Jr., stepped onto the stage at Chicago's Auditorium Theatre to announce the 98th overall pick, Justin Simmons, on behalf of

the Broncos. Ware, in town for the draft, a legends luncheon with the commissioner and to provide commentary on ESPN, decided to make it a memorable father-son trip.

#### Salute to Service

In 2015, Buckley Air Force Base service members announced the Broncos' third-day draft selections, welcoming Max Garcia, Lorenzo Doss, Darius Kilgo, Trevor Siemian, Taurean Nixon and Josh Furman into the NFL.