

Broncos have toughest schedule in 2017, will open at home vs. Chargers

By Nicki Jhabvala
Denver Post
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Forget 9-7. Forget no playoffs.

“That’s a thing of the past,” safety T.J. Ward said. “It’s a new year.”

But it won’t be an easy one.

The Broncos’ road back to the playoffs will be bumpy — the bumpiest in the league with a .578 opponents winning percentage — and it will begin and end in Denver. It will include five prime-time matchups (including two on Monday nights against divisional rivals); a Week 2 battle with the Cowboys in Denver; a Thursday night stop in Indianapolis, a return to Miami for Vance Joseph; a meeting with another Manning and another Brandon Marshall at home; a must-see game against Tom Brady and the Patriots at Sports Authority Field at Mile High again; and finally, a sure-to-be thriller against the Chiefs at home to close it out.

The last four Broncos season openers have been reunions of sorts, be it for the men on the sideline or the stars on the field. This year will be no different, as the Broncos host the Los Angeles Chargers in the second Monday night game of Sept. 11 (8:20 p.m., ESPN), following New Orleans at Minnesota.

“My eyes go to Week 1,” Joseph said in a Broncos release. “It’s important to get off to a great start. It’s a home game and it’s in division, so that’s important.”

The game, Joseph’s first as an NFL head coach, pits Broncos offensive coordinator Mike McCoy against his former team, for whom he was head coach for four seasons in between his stints as Denver’s coordinator and offensive play-caller.

If last year’s Broncos opener against Carolina was another battle of defenses, this one is surely one of offenses with veteran quarterback Philip Rivers on one side and McCoy’s latest offensive rendition on the other.

This year is also the seventh consecutive season in which the Broncos will open at home, perhaps a bit of a surprise given the postseason-less campaign in 2016. Denver has won its last five season openers. Its latest opening defeat just so happened to be against another California team — the Raiders — on Monday night in Denver in 2011, John Elway’s first year in the front office and John Fox’s first season as the team’s head coach.

The Broncos take on nondivisional opponents from the AFC East and NFC East this year and will hit the road to face the Bills in Week 3 (Sept. 24), the Eagles in Week 9 (Nov. 5), the Dolphins in Week 13 (Dec. 3), the Colts in Week 15 (Dec. 14), and the Redskins in Week 16 (Sunday, Dec. 24).

@psmyth12

Broncos HC Vance Joseph is all smiles as he reviews his first schedule as an NFL head coach.

Running the offense in Buffalo is former Broncos offensive coordinator Rick Dennison. But a return to Miami, where the Broncos haven't been since 2011, is one that should be circled in red ink. Not only will Joseph face his former team, the Broncos will take on Adam Gase, their former offensive coordinator and quarterbacks coach under McCoy.

For the third straight year, Denver is spared a trip to Gillette Stadium and will host the reigning Super Bowl champion Patriots (Nov. 12) along with the Cowboys (Sept. 17), Giants (Oct. 15), Bengals (Nov. 19) and Jets (Dec. 10). The Broncos have split their last two regular-season meetings with the Patriots, winning in overtime on a C.J. Anderson touchdown run in 2015, then faltering after holding Tom Brady to a mere 188 yards passing and zero touchdowns in 2016.

Denver hasn't faced the Cowboys since 2013 in Dallas, where recently retired edge rusher DeMarcus Ware donned blue and silver and Peyton Manning infamously scored a 1-yard rushing touchdown on a naked bootleg.

The "Brandon Marshall Bowl" in Week 6 is another to circle as Marshall the receiver, now a Giant, returns to Denver for the first time since 2011 to face Marshall the linebacker. The last time the Broncos hosted the Giants was Nov. 26, 2009, when Josh McDaniels was Denver's coach and Kyle Orton its starting quarterback. Eli Manning has never won in Denver and has a career record of 1-2 against the Broncos.

Denver's divisional schedule takes on a new look this year with the Chargers residing in Los Angeles. In two or three years, the AFC West will shake up yet again when the Raiders leave Oakland for their new digs in Las Vegas.

As part of its full schedule announcement, the Broncos also revealed the dates and times of their four preseason games. Denver's preseason slate will begin in Chicago on Aug. 10, then head to the Bay Area for practices with the 49ers ahead of their Aug. 19 game. The Broncos will return home for their final two matchups, against Aaron Rodgers and the Packers on Aug. 26 and then the Cardinals on Aug. 31.

While the four matchups carry zero weight in the team's push to return to the playoffs, they are significant in large part because of the impending quarterback competition between Trevor Siemian and Paxton Lynch. The two will duke it out for the start job the second consecutive offseason.

Buckle up.

BRONCOS' 2017 REGULAR-SEASON SCHEDULE

2017 Preseason						
Week	Day	Date	Opponent	Location	Time/Result	TV
1	Thurs.	Aug. 10	Chicago	Soldier Field	6 p.m.	KTVD
2	Sat.	Aug. 19	San Francisco	Levi's Stadium	8 p.m.	KTVD
3	Sat.	Aug. 26	GREEN BAY	Sports Authority Field	7 p.m.	KTVD

4	Thurs.	Aug. 31	ARIZONA	Sports Authority Field	7 p.m.	KTVD
2017 Regular Season						
Week	Day	Date	Opponent	Location	Time/Result	TV
1	Mon.	Sept. 11	CHARGERS	Sports Authority Field	8:20 p.m.	ESPN
2	Sun.	Sept. 17	COWBOYS	Sports Authority Field	2:25 p.m.	FOX
3	Sun.	Sept. 24	Bills	New Era Field	11 a.m.	CBS
4	Sun.	Oct. 1	RAIDERS	Sports Authority Field	2:25 p.m.	CBS
5			BYE WEEK			
6	Sun.	Oct. 15	GIANTS	Sports Authority Field	6:30 p.m.	NBC*
7	Sun.	Oct. 22	Chargers	StubHub Center	2:25 p.m.	CBS*
8	Mon.	Oct. 30	Chiefs	Arrowhead Stadium	6:30 p.m.	ESPN
9	Sun.	Nov. 5	Eagles	Lincoln Financial Field	11 a.m.	CBS*
10	Sun.	Nov. 12	PATRIOTS	Sports Authority Field	6:30 p.m.	NBC*
11	Sun.	Nov. 19	BENGALS	Sports Authority Field	2:25 p.m.	CBS*
12	Sun.	Nov. 26	Raiders	Oak.-Alameda County Coliseum	2:25 p.m.	CBS*
13	Sun.	Dec. 3	Dolphins	Hard Rock Stadium	11 a.m.	CBS*
14	Sun.	Dec. 10	JETS	Sports Authority Field	2:05 p.m.	CBS*
15	Thurs.	Dec. 14	Colts	Lucas Oil Stadium	6:25 p.m.	NBC/NFLN/Amaz.
16	Sun.	Dec. 24	Redskins	FedEx Field	11 a.m.	CBS*
17	Sun.	Dec. 31	CHIEFS	Sports Authority Field	2:05 p.m.	CBS*

*All times Mountain; Sunday games from Weeks 5-17 eligible for time change per NFL's flex-scheduling
Broncos to have joint practices with 49ers before preseason game.*

MATCHUPS TO WATCH

vs. Cowboys (Week 2, Sept. 17)

The Tony Romo saga has ended (for now), but the Broncos' defense will test its strength against young QB Dak Prescott and his sidekick, RB Ezekiel Elliott. Too bad DeMarcus Ware will be a spectator for this one.

vs. Giants (Week 6, Oct. 15)

The return of a Manning and a Brandon Marshall (WR) vs. Brandon Marshall (LB) showdown. Eli Manning has never won in Denver.

vs. Patriots (Week 10, Nov. 12)

Broncos' defense held Tom Brady to 188 passing yards, zero TDs last time but lost. The previous meeting, they hit him 20 times. Patriots Week is a nice label for all-out battle.

at Dolphins (Week 13, Dec. 3)

Vance Joseph takes on his former team and Mike McCoy takes on his former disciple. Adam Gase, head coach of Miami, worked with McCoy in Denver and helped build offenses for Tim Tebow and then Peyton Manning.

vs. Chiefs (Week 17, Dec. 31)

The Broncos lost to the Chiefs both times last year in games that played significantly into their postseason fate. Will the final game against their division foe determine the Broncos' playoff fate this year?

BRONCOS' LAST 10 SEASON OPENERS

2016: vs. Panthers – Thurs., Sept. 8 (W 21-20)

2015: vs. Ravens – Sun., Sept. 13 (W 19-13)

2014: vs. Colts – Sun., Sept. 7 (W 31-24)

2013: vs. Ravens – Thurs., Sept. 5 (W 49-27)

2012: vs. Steelers – Sun., Sept. 9 (W 31-19)

2011: vs. Raiders – Mon., Sept. 12 (L 23-20)

2010: at Jaguars – Sun., Sept. 12 (L 24-17)

2009: at Bengals – Sun., Sept. 13 (W 12-7)

2008: at Raiders – Mon., Sept. 8 (W 41-14)

2007: at Bills – Sun., Sept. 9 (W 15-14)

Broncos to host Eli Manning, New York Giants on Sunday Night Football

By Nicki Jhabvala

Denver Post

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Peyton Manning retired more than a year ago, but a Manning will be under center for at least one Broncos game this season.

The other Manning.

The Broncos will host Eli and the New York Giants on Sunday Night Football on Oct. 15, according to a league source. The team's full 2017 schedule will be revealed Thursday evening at 6 p.m. MT.

The last time the Broncos hosted the Giants was Nov. 26, 2009, when Josh McDaniels was Denver's head coach and Kyle Orton its starting quarterback. The Broncos won that game, 26-6, although an infamous rant by McDaniels during a timeout may be remembered more than the victory.

Eli Manning has never won in Denver and has a career record of 1-2 against the Broncos. Their last meeting was in East Rutherford, N.J., on Sept. 15, 2013, when Peyton threw for 307 yards and two touchdowns and Eli had four interceptions in a 41-23 Broncos rout.

This year will have the added feels as Brandon Marshall, the receiver, returns to Denver as a Giant. The ex-Bronco signed a two-year contract with the Giants following his release from the Jets. Marshall the receiver hasn't played in Denver since 2011, when he was with the Dolphins.

Earlier Thursday it was reported by 9News that the Broncos will open their season at home against the Los Angeles Chargers in a Monday night game Sept. 11. The matchup will be the first in the head-coaching career of Vance Joseph and will pit offensive coordinator Mike McCoy against his former team.

The game will also mark the seventh-straight year in which the Broncos kick off their season at home. Denver has won the last five. It's last defeat? At home, on Monday night against another California team, the Raiders, in 2011.

The Broncos other non-divisional opponents for 2017 have already been set, along with the team's preseason slate. The dates and times for the latter will be released along with the full schedule Thursday evening.

Broncos' 2017 Non-Divisional Opponents

Home

New England Patriots

New York Jets

Dallas Cowboys

New York Giants

Cincinnati Bengals

Away

Buffalo Bills

Miami Dolphins

Philadelphia Eagles

Washington Redskins

Indianapolis Colts

Broncos' 2017 Preseason Schedule

Week 1: at Chicago Bears — Aug. 10-13

Week 2: at San Francisco 49ers — Aug. 17-20

Week 3: vs. Green Bay Packers — Aug. 24-27

Week 4: vs. Arizona Cardinals — Thurs., Aug. 31

Previewing Broncos 2017 schedule

By Mike Klis

9News

April 21, 2017

Let's review old news to the 2017 Denver Broncos' schedule.

The Broncos will play home games this season against Dallas, New England, Cincinnati, Los Angeles and the two New Yorks. Plus, the usual home games against Kansas City and Oakland.

The Broncos will play road games this season at Buffalo, at Indianapolis, at Miami, at Philadelphia, at Washington and at Los Angeles. Plus, the usual road games at Kansas City and Oakland.

Los Angeles is new. The nation's second-largest city replaced San Diego as home to the Chargers.

The NFL will release the day, dates and times of the Broncos' 16-game regular-season schedule, plus the Broncos' lone bye week, plus more exact appointments to their four preseason games, at 6 p.m. Thursday.

Here are the known opponents to the 2017 Broncos schedule:

Home	Away
New York Giants	Washington
New York Jets	Miami Dolphins
Dallas Cowboys	Buffalo Bills
New England Patriots	Indianapolis Colts
Cincinnati Bengals	Philadelphia Eagles
Los Angeles Chargers	Los Angeles Chargers
Kansas City Chiefs	Kansas City Chiefs
Oakland Raiders	Oakland Raiders

Without knowing how it lines up, the potential difficulty of the Broncos' schedule is five games played in the eastern time zone. Perhaps, this could tax the biological time clocks by season's end. Perhaps, not.

Broncos to open 2017 season at home against Los Angeles Chargers

By Bobbi Sheldon and Mike Klis

9News

April 21, 2017

For the seventh consecutive year, the Broncos will open their football season at home.

The Broncos will start the 2017 season by taking on the Los Angeles Chargers at Mile High on Monday, September 11, according to Broncos Insider Mike Klis

The Chargers are calling Los Angeles home for the first time since the 1960 debut season of the American Football League. They were the San Diego Chargers from 1961 through the 2016 season when stadium issues caused the franchise to move to Los Angeles. They will simply be the Chargers for the season opener in Denver, where quarterback Philip Rivers will still be the Broncos' arch nemesis.

The question is: Who will be Rivers' opposing quarterback, Trevor Siemian or Paxton Lynch?

The NFL will release more details on the Broncos regular-season schedule at 6 p.m. Thursday.

2017 Denver Broncos game-by-game predictions

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN.com

April 21, 2017

Just this week Denver Broncos safety T.J. Ward said when you miss the playoffs, as the Broncos did in 2016, you have to get to work "in the dungeon" to earn your way back. The Broncos' schedule gives them plenty of work to scrap their way back into the postseason conversation with the likes of the Dallas Cowboys, New England Patriots, New York Giants and Miami Dolphins on the slate to go with two teams in their own division that made the playoffs last year -- the Kansas City Chiefs and Oakland Raiders. Oh, and four of the last six games of the season are on the road.

Week 1: Sept. 11 vs. Los Angeles Chargers, 10:15 p.m. ET

For the seventh consecutive season, the Broncos will open with a home game. They have not opened a season on the road since 2010, in Jacksonville, and are 5-1 in those previous six season openers. This will be the first visit by the Los Angeles Chargers to Denver since 1960, the first year the Broncos played in the AFL. **Record:** 1-0

Week 2: Sept. 17 vs. Dallas Cowboys, 4:25 p.m. ET

It is the Cowboys' first visit to Denver since 2009, which is exactly four head coaches ago for the Broncos, five division titles and two Super Bowl appearances. Overall, it will be just the seventh time the Cowboys have played in the Mile High City. But the game is on Fox, so former Cowboys quarterback turned CBS analyst Tony Romo will be elsewhere. **Record:** 2-0

Week 3: Sept. 24 at Buffalo Bills, 1 p.m. ET

This is the first visit to Buffalo for the Broncos since a Christmas Eve appearance in 2011 -- a game in which Tim Tebow was intercepted three times. The game will feature two first-year head coaches in Vance Joseph and the Bills' Sean McDermott. And the Broncos have had their issues through the years with the early game in the Eastern time zone, so Joseph gets his first crack at that trend. **Record:** 2-1

Week 4: Oct. 1 vs. Oakland Raiders, 4:25 p.m. ET

The Broncos closed out the 2016 season with a home win over the Raiders -- it was Gary Kubiak's final game -- when Oakland quarterback Derek Carr didn't play because of a broken leg. Hard to know how all of the team's moving plans will affect the play on the field, but the Broncos usually have little difficulty getting things dialed in to face the Raiders. **Record:** 3-1

Week 5: Oct. 8 BYE

Broncos get an early off week this time around. It means they'll have to wait until the days following a Thursday night appearance in Week 15 to give the players any more significant time off again. **Record:** 3-1

Week 6: Oct. 15 vs. New York Giants, 8:30 p.m. ET

A good challenge for the "No-Fly Zone" in this one with Odell Beckham Jr. and former Broncos wide receiver Brandon Marshall, who signed a two-year deal with the Giants in free agency last month, offering some things for the Broncos' secondary to worry about. With the schedule rotations, it is the Giants' first appearance in Denver since 2009. **Record:** 4-1

Week 7: Oct. 22 at Los Angeles Chargers, 4:25 p.m. ET

It will be the Broncos' first visit to the Chargers' intimate, temporary home at the StubHub Center. The stadium, which usually houses the LA Galaxy, is expected to seat 30,000 for an NFL game. It will also be the Broncos' third AFC West game in the first seven weeks of the season. **Record:** 5-1

Week 8: Oct. 30 at Kansas City Chiefs, 8:30 p.m. ET

This has been a notoriously difficult trip for the Broncos unless Peyton Manning has been at quarterback. Last season, the Broncos lost 33-10 and then-Chiefs nose tackle Dontari Poe threw a 2-yard touchdown pass just to put an exclamation point on a bad Broncos day at the office. **Record:** 5-2

Week 9: Nov. 5 at Philadelphia Eagles, 1 p.m. ET

This is another trip the Broncos haven't made since 2009, so nobody on the roster was with the team that season. It will be the first look the Broncos' defense, which has finished No. 1 in pass defense in each of the past two years, has at Eagles quarterback Carson Wentz. **Record:** 6-2

Week 10: Nov. 12 vs. New England Patriots, 8:30 p.m. ET

Another season, another game against the Patriots -- Manning used to joke "it's another division game." This will be the seventh consecutive season the two teams have played in the regular season. They have faced each other three times in the playoffs over that span as well. **Record:** 6-3

Week 11: Nov. 19 vs. Cincinnati Bengals, 4:25 p.m. ET

From this point until the end of the season, the Broncos have just three home games. They have to make this one count. **Record:** 7-3

Week 12: Nov. 26 at Oakland Raiders, 4:25 p.m. ET

Hard to know, with the move to Las Vegas having already been approved by the league, if Broncos fans will be able to make this more of a home game by scooping up tickets from disgruntled locals, much like they did in San Diego last season. Things could certainly change in the months ahead, but with some of the Broncos' uncertainties in the offensive line right now, it's still hard to call a season sweep over one of last year's AFC wild-card teams. **Record:** 7-4

Week 13: Dec. 3 at Miami Dolphins, 1 p.m. ET

This is a nice December return to southern Florida, where Vance Joseph was the Dolphins' defensive coordinator last season. Dolphins coach Adam Gase knows the Broncos' personnel well after his time in

Denver and has worked with Broncos offensive coordinator Mike McCoy on both Josh McDaniels' and John Fox's staffs, so both teams may need to find some new wrinkles to throw at each other. **Record:** 7-5

Week 14: Dec. 10 vs. New York Jets, 4:05 p.m. ET

The Jets will likely open the season with even more questions on offense than the Broncos. And by this time, both teams will have long settled into what they can, or can't, do when they have the ball. The Broncos will likely lean on their defense for another late-season home win. **Record:** 8-5

Week 15: Dec. 14 at Indianapolis Colts, 8:25 p.m. ET

This one will be the dreaded short-week road trip for the Broncos and this will be 10th game they've played since their bye. A tough way to plow through the stretch for the Broncos in what figures to be a tight AFC West race. **Record:** 8-6.

Week 16: Dec. 24 at Washington Redskins, 1 p.m. ET

This will be the Broncos' fourth game in the early time slot in the Eastern time zone. The Redskins have had plenty of intrigue this offseason with a front-office shake-up and quarterback Kirk Cousins getting the franchise player tag -- again. If the Broncos handle their business, their defense should carry them. **Record:** 9-6

Week 17: Dec. 31 vs. Kansas City Chiefs, 4:05 p.m. ET

The Broncos could well need this one to get back in the playoff field and it should also have a lot to say about the division race. Last season, the Broncos' defense let the Chiefs put together a 10-play field goal drive in overtime to tie the game and another four-play field goal drive in overtime to win the game -- a 30-27 Broncos loss that was one of the games that kept Denver out of the postseason. **Record:** 10-6

Draft will give Broncos chance to find third wheel in passing game

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN.com

April 21, 2017

Denver Broncos cornerback Chris Harris Jr. has spent plenty of time studying opposing offenses over the years, but he has also seen what the Broncos' offense has to offer.

In an offseason when coach Vance Joseph has said he'd like to see more "juice" on offense, as in more speed, Harris dialed those thoughts in a little more this week.

Asked, as the Broncos moved into the second week of their offseason program, how he would have defended the sometimes-balky Broncos' offense in 2015, Harris said: "Try to take away D.T. (wide receiver Demaryius Thomas) and E (wide receiver Emmanuel Sanders) -- fast. Those are our top explosive receivers. I'd try to make our tight ends beat us and our running backs."

While the Broncos do still have a rather noticeable opening at left tackle and it's no secret they'd like to snag a running back in the draft with some breakaway speed, the third option in the passing game needs attention.

Because defenses often did exactly what Harris said. Thomas and Sanders, who finished last season with 90 and 79 catches, respectively, were the only wide receivers on the roster to have more than 21 catches. They were the only wide receivers with more than 250 yards receiving last season and defenses repeatedly could load the line of scrimmage to stop the Broncos' run game, give a little extra attention to Thomas and Sanders.

Joseph said it could be exposed when the Broncos got in position to score.

"The perception was the offense wasn't very good, but in my opinion the offense was pretty good," Joseph said earlier this offseason. "They didn't finish well in the red zone, but the quarterbacks played well."

Which is why the deep group of pass receiving tight ends in the draft will get a long look, as will some of the draft's multi-taskers at wide receiver and running back, given the Broncos are looking for help at returner as well.

But with the No. 20 pick in the first round, the Broncos are not expected to have a chance at Stanford's Christian McCaffrey, who could line up in the backfield, at receiver and be a team's primary returner, as many people in the league believe McCaffrey will easily be selected among the draft's top 15 players.

But players like Washington wide receiver John Ross, who was the fastest player at the NFL combine and can be a returner, or Miami tight end David Njoku are the kind of playmakers in the passing game with the speed to stress defenses.

Down the board a player like North Carolina A&T running back Tarik Cohen or North Carolina's T.J. Logan or Boise State's Jeremy McNichols will interest the Broncos as well. Logan ran a 4.37-second 40-yard dash at the NFL combine, while Cohen and McNichols were at 4.42 and 4.49, respectively.

All three of those running backs have receiving skills, while Logan and McNichols have been returners as well. There are receivers who clocked in the 4.4s at the combine like Michigan's Amara Darboh, Alabama's Ardarius Stewart and Miami's Stacy Coley, who will also get a long look with his experience as a kick returner.

In the end, the Broncos have made major financial commitments in recent seasons to both Thomas and Sanders and the two are the unquestioned top targets in the team's passing game. But they won't be at their best unless the Broncos get a little more help from at least one more player.

"No question," Joseph said. "We need to make it a lot more difficult for teams to play us the way they played us last season."

Pats lead challenging schedule in Broncos coach Vance Joseph's debut season

By Jeff Legwold
ESPN.com
April 21, 2017

The NFL has released its 2017 regular-season schedule. Here's a look at what's in store for the Denver Broncos.

Breakdown: The Broncos simply cannot afford a slow start in Vance Joseph's first season as coach. They will have to make the most of their schedule's first half given four of their first five games are in Denver. Joseph got no breaks in the road trip department, either. The Broncos have three consecutive road games as October turns to November and, in what they hope will be their stretch drive, four of their last six games are away. And while last year's totals rarely hold form in the new football year, the numbers say they Broncos will have to do it all against what is now the toughest strength of schedule in the league -- based on their opponents' 2016 record (.578).

What? Again: From John Fox to Gary Kubiak and now to Joseph, there is simply no escape from the New England Patriots. The defending Super Bowl champions may indeed live two time zones away from the Broncos, but the Nov. 12 game in downtown Denver will mark the seventh consecutive year the Broncos have faced the Patriots in a regular-season matchup. And that total doesn't include three playoff games since the start of the 2011 season. The Broncos' defense held the Patriots to their lowest point total of the 2016 season when Tom Brady was at quarterback in a 16-3 New England win.

Early bird gets the division: While the league has tried to construct the schedule so there are plenty of division rivals facing off down the stretch, the Broncos will have to get plenty of work done in the AFC West in the first half of their season. They open the season on a Monday night with a division game against the Los Angeles Chargers and have four of their six division games in the first half of the season. After the season's halfway point, they only have two division games -- Nov. 26 at the Oakland Raiders and the regular-season finale on Dec. 31 against the Kansas City Chiefs.

Strength of schedule: 1st, .578

Broncos Regular-Season Schedule (All times Eastern)

Week 1: Monday, Sept. 11, Los Angeles Chargers, 10:20 p.m.

Week 2: Sunday, Sept. 17, Dallas, 4:25 p.m.

Week 3: Sunday, Sept. 24, at Buffalo, 1 p.m.

Week 4: Sunday, Oct. 1, Oakland, 4:25 p.m.

Week 5: BYE

Week 6: Sunday, Oct. 15, NY Giants, 8:30 p.m.

Week 7: Sunday, Oct. 22, at Los Angeles Chargers, 4:25 p.m.

Week 8: Monday, Oct. 30, at Kansas City, 8:30 p.m.

Week 9: Sunday, Nov. 5, at Philadelphia, 1 p.m.

Week 10: Sunday, Nov. 12, New England, 8:30 p.m.

Week 11: Sunday, Nov. 19, Cincinnati, 4:25 p.m.

Week 12: Sunday, Nov. 26, at Oakland, 4:25 p.m.

Week 13: Sunday, Dec. 3, at Miami, 1 p.m.

Week 14: Sunday, Dec. 10, NY Jets, 4:05 p.m.

Week 15: Thursday, Dec. 14, at Indianapolis, 8:25 p.m.

Week 16: Sunday, Dec. 24, at Washington, 1 p.m.

Week 17: Sunday, Dec. 31, Kansas City, 4:25 p.m.

NFL draft capsules for AFC teams

By Staff

Associated Press

April 21, 2017

1, 12. CLEVELAND BROWNS (1-15)

LAST SEASON: Following 0-14 start under first-year coach Hue Jackson, Browns barely avoided becoming only second team to lose all 16 games. Owners Jimmy and Dee Haslam vowed to be patient with new front office and coaching staff and were mostly true to word as team underwent minimal offseason changes. Cleveland's biggest issue remains as it has been for 15 years, no long-term answer at quarterback. Defense isn't much better, ranking 31st overall and lacking impact players. Fan base is disillusioned with front office's plan.

THEY NEED: QB, DL, S, WRs.

THEY DON'T NEED: Another blown draft.

POSSIBLE FIRST PICK: DE/LB Myles Garrett, Texas A&M.

OUTLOOK: By shrewdly stockpiling assets, Browns control top of draft with two first-round picks and five in top 65. Cleveland is desperate to find franchise quarterback, but this might not be year to reach for one with early pick or by trading up. Unless they are blown away by deal, Garrett appears to be lock. There's strong interest in North Carolina QB Mitchell Trubisky, local kid who could slip to 12 if he gets past Jets at No. 6. Browns have assets to be active, but more prudent approach this time would be to focus on picking quality players. Browns loaded up on offensive linemen in free agency to better protect passer. QB Brock Osweiler, acquired in trade at opening of free agency from Houston, could be dealt if team takes quarterback in early rounds.

4. JACKSONVILLE JAGUARS (3-13)

LAST SEASON: Finished with double-digit losses for sixth consecutive year and ended one of worst coaching tenures in NFL history by firing Gus Bradley with two games remaining. Jaguars hired interim coach Doug Marrone in January and brought back Tom Coughlin to oversee every aspect of football operations. Marrone, Coughlin and GM Dave Caldwell all got three-year contracts, a clear indication owner Shad Khan believes team is close to competing for playoff berth.

THEY NEED: RB, TE, OL, DL.

THEY DON'T NEED: CB, LB.

POSSIBLE FIRST PICK: RB Leonard Fournette, LSU; DE Jonathan Allen, Alabama; DE Solomon Thomas, Stanford.

OUTLOOK: Coughlin has final say in draft, and 70-year-old executive is expected to make bold picks that will help right away. Coughlin wants to fortify both lines of scrimmage and improve running game, which he believes will benefit embattled QB Blake Bortles. So Fournette makes sense. Jaguars whiffed repeatedly (DE Derrick Harvey, OT Eugene Monroe, DL Tyson Alualu, QB Blaine Gabbert, WR Justin Blackmon, OT Luke Joeckel, maybe Bortles, maybe DE Dante Fowler) while picking in top 10 in each of

last nine years. But they hit on cornerback Jalen Ramsey with fifth overall pick in 2016 and hope to find similar success. Having added DE Calais Campbell, CB A.J. Bouye and SS Barry Church in free agency, Jacksonville appears poised to address offensive needs in draft.

5, 18. TENNESSEE TITANS (9-7)

LAST SEASON: In Mike Mularkey's first full season as coach, Titans tripled win total and just missed first AFC South title since 2008. Marcus Mariota proved he was no one-year wonder with sixth-highest passer rating for quarterback in first two seasons. His 95.6 passer rating was third best in franchise history. With Pro Bowl running back DeMarco Murray, Titans ranked 11th in total offense and led NFL at scoring touchdowns inside 20. Yet, first-year coordinator Dick LeBeau couldn't cover up poor secondary enough as Titans ranked 30th against pass. Titans also couldn't overcome 2-4 record inside division.

THEY NEED: CB, WR, TE, S, LB.

THEY DON'T NEED: QB, RB, LT, RT.

POSSIBLE FIRST PICKS: S Jamal Adams, LSU; LB Reuben Foster, Alabama; S Malik Hooker, Ohio State; WR Corey Davis, W. Michigan; TE O.J. Howard, Alabama; WR Mike Williams, Clemson; WR John Ross, Washington.

OUTLOOK: Second-year general manager Jon Robinson made it very clear year ago by trading away No. 1 overall draft pick that he is open to dealing. That brought Titans fifth pick overall from Rams, and sliding down could allow him to get into second round, where Tennessee currently has no selections. Robinson already has bolstered secondary in free agency with CB Logan Ryan from New England, CB Demontre Hurst from Chicago, and S Johnathan Cyprien from Jacksonville. But CB Jason McCourty is gone from area that needs better depth and competition. Titans let WR Kendall Wright walk in free agency and need targets for Mariota. With Anthony Fasano leaving for Miami, Mularkey needs more tight ends.

6. NEW YORK JETS (5-11)

LAST SEASON: After promising first season under Todd Bowles in 2015 that ended win shy of playoffs at 10-6, Jets were mess last year, with poor quarterback play major reason. Ryan Fitzpatrick followed impressive 2015 season of team record 31 TD passes with brutal campaign in which he was benched twice and finished with 12 TDs and 17 INTs. He and Geno Smith are gone, Bryce Petty did little to establish himself in limited opportunity before shoulder injury ended season. As QBs struggled, passing game suffered as Brandon Marshall dealt with injuries and had fewest catches (59) since rookie season, and Eric Decker played only three games before shoulder injury. Stunning decline of Darrelle Revis led to extremely leaky secondary. Second-year DL Leonard Williams was one of team's few bright spots, making first Pro Bowl after leading team with seven sacks.

THEY NEED: CB, QB, TE, LB, RG, LT, S.

THEY DON'T NEED: LG, DE, LS.

POSSIBLE FIRST PICK: CB Marshon Lattimore, Ohio State; QB Deshaun Watson, Clemson; RB Leonard Fournette, LSU; QB Mitchell Trubisky, North Carolina; QB Patrick Mahomes, Texas Tech; S Malik Hooker, Ohio State; S Jamal Adams, LSU; TE O.J. Howard, Alabama.

OUTLOOK: With Jets in clear rebuilding mode and GM Mike Maccagnan looking toward future, Bowles in unenviable situation of coaching for present because of tenuous job situation, uncertain if he'll be back if New York endures another lost season — despite lack of experience on roster. With so many needs, Maccagnan has said covets more picks and Jets could trade out of No. 6 spot. Despite signing well-traveled veteran Josh McCown, Jets still could draft quarterback in early or middle rounds to compete with Petty, McCown and Christian Hackenberg in camp. Side note: No. 6 spot has been mixed bag lately for Jets. In 2015 they took Williams, who has looked promising. But previous sixth pick came in 2008, when they selected DE Vernon Gholston — largely regarded as one of franchise's biggest draft busts.

7. LOS ANGELES CHARGERS (5-11)

LAST SEASON: Chargers have won only nine games in two seasons, and now must try to stand out in crowded and competitive Los Angeles market after leaving San Diego because voters refused to help fund new stadium. Coach Mike McCoy was fired and replaced with Anthony Lynn from Buffalo Bills. There were few bright spots in 2016, such as DE Joey Bosa winning Defensive Rookie of Year Award and RB Melvin Gordon rebounding from miserable rookie season. But there are still problems on offensive line, and stars such as WR Keenan Allen and CB Jason Verrett can't stay healthy.

THEY NEED: S, WR, DL, OL, QB

THEY DON'T NEED: TE, CB, K, P.

POSSIBLE FIRST PICK: S Malik Hooker, Ohio State; S Jamal Adams, LSU.

OUTLOOK: Noting that Rivers is getting "long in the tooth," Lynn said he'd like GM Tom Telesco to draft quarterback so he can learn under Rivers, who is under contract through 2019. "Philip is the ultimate pro in my opinion," Lynn said. "We have a good situation for a young quarterback that doesn't have to come in and play right now. He can sit, watch." Said Rivers: "We're going to at some point. I'm not going to be here forever. ... I certainly don't fear that day when that comes whatsoever. I don't take it as my role, 'Oh, we drafted a young guy, your eventual replacement so get him ready.' But at the same time I enjoy sharing both things I've learned and letting the young guy see how I've done things. At the same time, shoot, I'm always going to compete. All of us have to compete and never feel comfortable. Should this be the year there's a young guy in here, he'll come in here and be in what I would think would be a pretty good situation."

9. CINCINNATI BENGALS (6-9-1)

LAST SEASON: Bengals' run of five straight playoff appearances — and first-round losses — came to end. Offensive line struggled with Cedric Ogbuehi in first season at right tackle; he wound up benched for a while. Defense started showing some age, slipping to middle-of-pack status. Line suffered two significant hits in free agency when left tackle Andrew Whitworth and right guard Kevin Zeitler left. Bengals also declined to hold on to defensive tackle Domata Peko, but supported cornerback Adam "Pacman" Jones after his latest arrest, which left him at risk of another suspension from NFL. Kicker job is open to competition.

THEY NEED: DE, LB, OT, OG, RB.

THEY DON'T NEED: QB, P, C.

POSSIBLE FIRST PICK: DE Jonathan Allen, Alabama; LB Reuben Foster, Alabama.

OUTLOOK: Coach Marvin Lewis is entering final year of contract — he and front office couldn't reach accommodation on extension. Bengals plan to let young, inexperienced players take on bigger roles, which implies some growing pains. Offensive line is most glaring concern, with Ogbuehi expected to move to left tackle after rough season on other side of line. With OL struggling, QB Andy Dalton was under pressure and running game never developed any consistency. Offense should be better with A.J. Green and Giovani Bernard back from significant injuries, assuming line can hold its own.

10. BUFFALO BILLS (7-9)

LAST SEASON: Rex Ryan's inability to build bully, particularly on defense, led to coach being fired in final week of second season. Behind LeSean McCoy, Buffalo led NFL in rushing for second consecutive year, but inconsistent and injury-depleted passing attack sputtered, contributing to franchise extending playoff drought to 17 seasons — longest active streak among North America's four major sports. Bills turned to detail-oriented Carolina Panthers defensive coordinator Sean McDermott to take over as first-time head coach.

THEY NEED: CB, WR, LB.

THEY DON'T NEED: S, DE, OL.

POSSIBLE FIRST PICK: WR Mike Williams, Clemson; CB Gareon Conley, Ohio State; LB Reuben Foster, Alabama; QB Patrick Mahomes, Texas Tech.

OUTLOOK: Pressure on GM Doug Whaley to deliver after spotty drafting history and questions whether he's had difficulty working with team's two previous coaches, Ryan and Doug Marrone. Whaley's public voice has been diminished with McDermott now mostly speaking on team-related issues, including draft. With only six picks, don't rule out Bills trading down to add selections. Though QB Tyrod Taylor returns for third season as starter, difficult to envision Bills being in position to contend immediately under fourth coach in six seasons and introducing yet another new system.

15. INDIANAPOLIS COLTS (8-8)

LAST SEASON: Andrew Luck fought through injuries for second straight season and even though he finished schedule, Indy still missed playoffs. Team owner Jim Irsay's solution: fire general manager Ryan Grigson, hire Chris Ballard and focus more heavily on fixing defense. During coach Chuck Pagano's five-year tenure, Colts' defense has never been ranked in top half of NFL. Retirement of Robert Mathis, Colts' career sacks leader, won't help, either. But Colts' revamped offensive line showed signs of progress in last month of season.

THEY NEED: DE/OLB, CB, RB, G.

THEY DON'T NEED: C, K.

POSSIBLE FIRST PICK: LB Haason Reddick, Temple; LB Reuben Foster, Alabama; G Forrest Lamp, Western Kentucky; OT Ryan Ramczyk, Wisconsin; DE Derek Barnett, Tennessee; CB Gareon Conley, Ohio State.

OUTLOOK: Ballard filled some holes by signing solid, mostly reasonably priced free agents. But Indy still needs defensive playmakers. Top priorities appear to be finding young, legitimate pass rusher and

starting cornerback. That's not all. Among other needs, Ballard needs successor for soon to be 34-year-old running back Frank Gore, and possible backup for Luck, still recovering from offseason shoulder surgery. Colts should try to strengthen right side of offensive line and may add to linebacker group that already has four new faces. Deep defensive draft gives Ballard plenty of options, including trading back to collect more picks.

16. BALTIMORE RAVENS (8-8)

LAST SEASON: Baltimore won its first three games, then lost four straight and finished by dropping three of last four to miss playoffs for second year in row. Joe Flacco passed for career-high 4,317 yards but threw 15 interceptions and received little support from running game that ranked 28th. K Justin Tucker led team with 141 points, RB Terrance West was second with only 36. Defense ranked seventh but yielded 114 points over final four games, including 21 in fourth quarter of pivotal 31-27 loss to Steelers. Only six teams had fewer sacks than Ravens (31). Baltimore placed 18 players on injured reserve, including five CBs.

THEY NEED: CB, DE, WR, OT, C, FB.

THEY DON'T NEED: QB, TE, RB, S.

POSSIBLE FIRST PICK: WR Corey Davis, Western Michigan; WR John Ross, Washington; OT Ryan Ramczyk, Wisconsin; LB Charles Harris, Missouri; CB Marlon Humphrey, Alabama.

OUTLOOK: GM Ozzie Newsome has plenty of holes to fill, so he should have plenty of options with 16th overall pick. Retirement of Steve Smith leaves void at WR, but despite Newsome's keen eye for talent on draft day he's been off mark at that position with No. 1s (Travis Taylor, Mark Clayton, Breshad Perriman). Newsome fortified defensive backfield by signing free agents Brandon Carr and Tony Jefferson, but Ravens desperately need depth at CB because Jimmy Smith has had difficulty staying healthy. Release of LB Elvis Dumervil and advancing age of LB Terrell Suggs leaves Baltimore in dire need of someone who can hunt down quarterbacks.

20. DENVER BRONCOS (9-7)

LAST SEASON: For first time since John Elway returned as GM in 2011, Broncos failed to reach playoffs last season. He found himself conducting his third search for head coach after Gary Kubiak stepped down over health concerns just two years into job. Elway hired Miami Dolphins defensive coordinator Vance Joseph, who promoted secondary coach Joe Woods to replace D-coordinator Wade Phillips, and hired ex-Chargers head coach Mike McCoy to run offense. After dominating AFC West with five consecutive titles, Broncos slipped behind Chiefs and Raiders following Peyton Manning's retirement. DeMarcus Ware retired this year but Denver is still loaded on defense. They have to fix offense that was inept much of last season.

THEY NEED: OT, LB, CB, RB, TE, WR, KR.

THEY DON'T NEED: C, QB, K, P, G, S.

POSSIBLE FIRST PICK: S Jabrill Peppers, Michigan; LT Garrett Bolles, Utah; LT Ryan Ramczyk, Wisconsin; RB Christian McCaffrey, Stanford.

OUTLOOK: Elway whiffed on attempts to sign DT Earl Mitchell and DE Calais Campbell in free agency. But he did address run defense with additions of Domata Peko and Zach Kerr. On offense, he jettisoned LT Russell Okung and added some nastiness to O-line by signing free agents Ron Leary and Menelik Watson. Elway could land left tackle in first round but this draft is so deep on defense it wouldn't be surprising if he scraps plans and grabs another highly rated defender like when Bradley Roby and Shane Ray slipped down in previous drafts.

22. MIAMI DOLPHINS (10-7)

LAST SEASON: New coach Adam Gase led Miami to first playoff berth since 2008, but 35-14 loss to Patriots in regular-season finale and 30-12 first-round playoff loss at Pittsburgh showed Dolphins are still far from championship. Offense began to jell in October, but defense allowed franchise-record 6,122 yards, and draft emphasis will be to find help for new defensive coordinator Matt Burke. There's excellent core in middle with DT Ndamukong Suh and S Reshad Jones, but Dolphins are in dire need of defensive help on flanks. They had decent 2016 draft, first one with trio of Gase, vice president Mike Tannenbaum and general manager Chris Grier making decisions. Picks included top choice Laremy Tunsil, who looks to be anchor of OL for years to come. But to gain ground on Patriots, they'll need to do even better this time.

THEY NEED: CB, S, LB, DE, G, DT, C.

THEY DON'T NEED: QB, T, TE, RB, WR.

POSSIBLE FIRST PICK: DE Taco Charlton, Michigan; S Jabrill Peppers, Michigan; G Forrest Lamp, Western Kentucky; LB Zach Cunningham, Vanderbilt; CB Tre'Davious White, LSU; DT Malik McDowell, Michigan State.

OUTLOOK: Dolphins invested heavily in core this offseason. WR Kenny Stills and DE Andre Branch accepted offers to remain rather than test free agency, G Jermon Bushrod re-signed, and Jones signed \$60 million, five-year extension. Miami acquired LB Lawrence Timmons, G Ted Larsen, TE Anthony Fasano and S Nate Allen via free agency, and added TE Julius Thomas and DE William Hayes in trades. With Tunsil moving from guard to left tackle to replace departed Branden Albert, Dolphins need help at guard, but otherwise they'll focus on defense in early rounds. They have only three of first 165 picks, compounding challenge of filling multitude of needs. But with good draft, Miami might even win playoff game for first time since 2000.

24. OAKLAND RAIDERS (12-5)

LAST SEASON: Raiders ended 13-year playoff drought behind strong play of QB Derek Carr and DE Khalil Mack. Broken leg for Carr in penultimate game of regular season cost Oakland chance at division title and sent Raiders home early with first-round playoff loss at Houston. But there was enough progress before that for team to build on heading into 2017.

THEY NEED: CB, LB, RB, DT.

THEY DON'T NEED: QB, OL.

POSSIBLE FIRST PICK: LB Jarrad Davis, Florida; LB Zach Cunningham, Vanderbilt; CB Marlon Humphrey, Alabama.

OUTLOOK: GM Reggie McKenzie has been mostly quiet this offseason, with most notable additions being TE Jared Cook, OL Marshall Newhouse and WR-KR Cordarrelle Patterson. Raiders have done little to address deficiencies on defense, which will likely be focus in draft. Top need will be finding linebacker who can shore up run defense and not be exploited in coverage. Improving interior pass rush and finding slot cornerback also will be high priority. One big need on offense is at running back, where starter Latavius Murray left in free agency and has not been replaced.

25. HOUSTON TEXANS (10-8)

LAST SEASON: Houston overcame J.J. Watt missing most of season with back injury to go 9-7 and win weak AFC South for second straight year. Emergence of 2014 top overall pick Jadeveon Clowney helped ease loss of Watt and allow Houston to lead NFL in yards allowed. After getting blown out by Kansas City in wild-card round in 2016, Texans were ousted in divisional round by New England largely because of another ineffective performance by quarterback Brock Osweiler. Osweiler was inconsistent throughout first season in Houston and after season team decided \$72 million investment was mistake and shipped him to Cleveland.

THEY NEED: QB, RT, S, CB.

THEY DON'T NEED: RB, DE, WR.

POSSIBLE FIRST PICK: QB Patrick Mahomes, Texas Tech; QB Deshaun Watson, Clemson; QB Mitchell Trubisky, North Carolina; QB DeShone Kizer, Notre Dame; OL Cam Robinson, Alabama.

OUTLOOK: When Tony Romo chose broadcasting over another NFL season, it left Texans in desperate need of another quarterback to compete with Tom Savage and Brandon Weeden for starting job. Many of quarterbacks that would be good in system, like Mahomes and Watson, could be gone when they pick, so they'd have to trade up to snag one. Houston did not sign any outside free agents, lost starting cornerback A.J. Bouye and safety Quintin Demps, leaving team with need in secondary. Could also use reinforcements at right tackle with starter Derek Newton recovering from injuries to both knees and unlikely to be ready for opener.

27. KANSAS CITY CHIEFS (12-5)

LAST SEASON: Chiefs won AFC West for first time since 2010, then were dumped by Pittsburgh in divisional round of playoffs. Coach Andy Reid and GM John Dorsey shelled out big money in offseason to keep SS Eric Berry and solidify other spots, but salary cap problems mean they will turn to draft to fill in rest of holes. Chiefs believe they have window to compete for Super Bowl in next couple years, so look for Reid and Dorsey to seek immediate help.

THEY NEED: RB, LB, WR, CB, OL, QB.

THEY DON'T NEED: TE, DL, FB, S.

POSSIBLE FIRST PICK: LB Zach Cunningham, Vanderbilt; RB Christian McCaffrey, Stanford; WR Zay Jones, East Carolina; QB Pat Mahomes, Texas Tech; CB Kevin King, Washington; LB Jarrad Davis, Florida.

OUTLOOK: Chiefs desperately need more playmakers after WR Jeremy Maclin underperformed last season. McCaffrey is ideal pass-catching RB for Reid's modified West Coast offense, while Jones would give Chiefs vertical threat they haven't had in years. But Chiefs also need potential replacement for LB

Derrick Johnson, coming off second Achilles tendon surgery and nearing end of his career, though that may be available for Kansas City in later rounds. Dorsey and Reid have shown willingness to trade down, so that may be option if top targets are off board, but Chiefs have 10 selections and are prime candidates to move up this year.

30. PITTSBURGH STEELERS (13-6)

LAST SEASON: Steelers emerged from midseason malaise to rip off seven straight wins to capture AFC North for second time in three seasons and reach AFC championship. That surge was due in part to rapid maturation of rookies CB Artie Burns, S Sean Davis and DT Javon Hargrave, team's first three picks in 2016 draft. Pittsburgh's one-sided loss to New England in playoffs still much work to be done to break New England's hammerlock on AFC. Tom Brady shredded Pittsburgh secondary (384 yards, three TDs) while getting sacked just twice.

THEY NEED: OLB, ILB, CB, S, TE.

THEY DON'T NEED: OL, QB.

POSSIBLE FIRST PICK: ILB Jarrad Davis, Florida; CB Marlon Humphrey, Alabama; ILB Zach Cunningham, Vanderbilt); OLB Takkarist McKinley (UCLA).

OUTLOOK: Steelers need to produce pressure off edge — James Harrison isn't going to play forever — and another big-time cornerback like Burns who isn't afraid to be matched up one on one with other team's top receiver. Upgrade at inside linebacker would help, too, after Lawrence Timmons left for Miami in free agency and New England outbid Steelers to hang on to Dont'a Hightower. They have eight picks in all, so finding depth lower in draft at running back and wide receiver shouldn't be issue. Talent that can make immediate impact like top three last year is must. While QB Ben Roethlisberger hinted at retirement in offseason, finding his eventual replacement isn't top priority when window to win with Roethlisberger is still open. If they take WR, it may be sign they don't feel Martavis Bryant is long-term solution. Bryant remains suspended for violating league's substance abuse policy, though he is eligible to seek reinstatement.

96. NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS (17-2)

LAST SEASON: Patriots won their second Super Bowl in three years, overcoming 25-point deficit in last 17 minutes to beat Atlanta. It was their 14th straight year with at least 10 wins and seventh in row with 12 or more. It also was eighth straight playoff appearance and 13th in 14 seasons. This was despite playing first four games without quarterback Tom Brady because of "Deflategate" suspension. Backup Jimmy Garoppolo was injured in second game, and third-stringer Jacoby Brissett started next two. They went 3-1 before Brady returned. Only game five-time Super Bowl champion lost was in Week 10 against Seattle in rematch of 2015 title game.

THEY NEED: To make decisions on whether to keep Garoppolo, RB LeGarrette Blount and CB Malcolm Butler; OL and DL help.

THEY DON'T NEED: QB, RB, WR, CB.

POSSIBLE FIRST PICK: No first- or second-round pick. OT Antonio Garcia, Troy; DT Elijah Qualls, Washington.

OUTLOOK: After sending No. 32 overall pick to New Orleans in trade for WR Brandin Cooks, and 64th overall pick to Carolina for Kony Early, acquiring TE Dwayne Allen in trade, and signing CB Stephon Gilmore as free agent and RB Mike Gillislee to offer sheet, defending Super Bowl champions can look at draft to build depth instead of plugging holes. Coach Bill Belichick likes it that way, anyway. Look for Patriots to trade Butler to New Orleans to get back No. 32 pick, then to trade down for more picks in later rounds when they can take complementary players and long-term projects. One of those could be another quarterback if Belichick decides to cash out on Garoppolo now rather than keep him around to sit while Brady continues to defy his age.

Broncos 2017 schedule released, includes five prime time games

By Troy Renck
KMGH
April 21, 2017

The finish matters little without an effective start. Vance Joseph walks knee-deep into opportunity and urgency in his first season as the Broncos head coach. Denver begins with four of their first five games at home. Lose two of those, and the brink inches under their toes before the first snow.

The evolution will be televised nationally as the Broncos open at home on Monday night against the Los Angeles Chargers at 8:20 p.m. It's the first of five prime time games.

"My eyes go to Week 1. It's important to get off to a great start," Joseph said. "It's a home game and it's in division."

The opponents surfaced months ago, but fans only learned when games would be in a much-awaited release on Thursday night at 6 p.m.

SCHEDULE RELEASE | See the ENTIRE Broncos schedule [here](#).

Primetime games will include the season opener; a Sunday Night Football game on Oct. 15; a Monday Night Football game on Oct. 30 versus the Giants in Denver; a Sunday Night Football game on Nov. 12 vs. the defending champion Patriots in Denver; and a Thursday Night Football game against the Colts in Indianapolis on Dec. 14.

While the schedule will feature a lot of orange in the national spotlight, it also brings some problems. The Broncos boast the most difficult schedule in terms of opponents' winning percentage. The Broncos linebacker, No. 54, pitted against the Giants receiver and one-time Bronco. Twitter might explode when Marshall tackles, um, Marshall.

"I can't wait for that," the Broncos' Marshall told Denver7.

Under Joseph, the Broncos will wade through a gauntlet after missing the playoffs with a 9-7 record a year ago. The Broncos start at home, always a good thing, but their bye week arrives a bit early for players' tastes. Joseph believes it can be a positive.

"I think the (anticipation of the) bye week is always based on where your team is at that moment -- injuries and how you rest your football team. Early, mid or late, it's all game planned around where your team feels. Having it early after four games, it's a good deal. I place the season in quarters. In the first four weeks, we get our first quarter over then we have our bye. It's always good. You hope to be successful obviously in that first quarter. But, to have that chance in week 5 to reboot and reset it again is important," Joseph added.

Denver will host AFC West rivals Los Angeles, Kansas City, and Oakland followed by New England, Dallas, Cincinnati, the New York Jets and the aforementioned Giants. The delicious storyline of Tony Romo

facing the Cowboys as a Bronco, always a longshot, dissolved when Romo accepted a broadcasting gig with CBS. This doesn't mean there won't be intrigue, particularly against the Chiefs, who swept the Broncos a year ago, Oakland, the budding contender, and New England, the reigning world champions who spent the offseason restocking their cupboards. Playing under the bright lights has become a welcomed routine in Denver.

"I like the amount of prime time games. We're used to having a hard schedule. It's been like that every year," All-Pro cornerback Chris Harris Jr. told Denver7. "The bye week after Week 5 is a negative to me. I like it more at the end of the year."

Added quarterback Trevor Siemian to Denver7, "I think a lot of guys are just curious when the bye week is. Already knew who we were playing so sequence and time of year isn't too big of a deal."

Road games provide real impressions.

The one certainty about future Hall of Famer Peyton Manning? He could roll out of bed and win in a visiting park. The Broncos owned the AFC West under his four-year watch, winning 15 straight divisional road games entering last year. The Broncos were broomed in AFC West stadiums last season, ambushed in losses to the Chargers, Chiefs and Raiders.

The Broncos will travel to those teams, while also playing at Washington, Buffalo, Miami, featuring former Denver offensive coordinator Adam Gase in charge, Indianapolis and Philadelphia. The Colts game arrives on a Thursday, creating a quick turnaround after the Broncos host the Jets on Dec. 10. The Broncos lost at San Diego on Thursday night last season, creating issues in the division moving forward.

According to Joseph, success hinges on the defense

"Playing good defense on the road is always a must—keeping the point totals low and controlling the football, not turning the football over. Two out of three are division opponents. Two out of three are fairly easy trips (travel-wise). We do have a trip to Philly, which is a cross country trip. It's important to be a good road team. You have to play well on the road to be a playoff team. It doesn't bother me. Obviously, three straight is a great challenge. I'm looking forward to it," Joseph said.

Denver's preseason opponents were released last week with official dates announced Thursday. They play, in order, at Chicago on Aug. 10, at San Francisco on Aug. 19, which will include Broncos' shared practices in Santa Clara, home against Green Bay on Aug. 26, which could determine the winner of the quarterback derby, and Arizona at home on Aug. 31.

Troy Renck's predictions:

Vs. Chargers: This isn't the Dodgers. They have Philip Rivers, not Clayton Kershaw. Los Angeles must walk through a mess of moves and makeshift homes that could create issues early in the season. You can't win the AFC West in September, but you can lose it. This must be a win. 1-0.

Vs. Cowboys: This game became decaffeinated when Romo retired. Dallas is a scary opponent and offers a real litmus test for the Broncos' promised improved run defense. Can they stop slow Ezekiel Elliott, and force Dak Prescott to throw into the turbulence of the No Fly Zone? I say yes. 2-0

At Buffalo: The Bills remain unpredictable. They can beat anyone or lose to anyone. Even with good weather, this sets up as a trap game with Oakland waiting in Denver the following week. This is one of the losses that will create pangs as the season advances and the postseason hopes teeter. 2-1.

Vs. Oakland: The Raiders made this rivalry personal again. Coach Jack Del Rio relishes in beating the Broncos. Oakland manhandled the Broncos in prime time, but without Derek Carr in the season finale offered no resistance. Given the Broncos' road issues in the division last year, this is a swing game. The physical toll of facing three run-oriented, bruising teams will prove too much. 2-2.

Vs. New York Giants: The Giants can't handle prosperity. The best thing for the Broncos is the Giants entering this game hot. It means they are due for a perplexing loss. New York can win ugly. But their best player is a receiver, Odell Beckham Jr. The Broncos do well in those matchups. 3-2.

At Chargers: Broncos' fans will elbow themselves into the converted soccer stadium. The Chargers will receive juice from their weird setup early in the season. And yet, the Broncos will not get broomed again in road AFC West games. 4-2.

At Kansas City: No team provides more matchup issues for the Broncos than Kansas City. The Chiefs mirror the Broncos. They are willing to win low-scoring, redzone-stifling games. 4-3.

At Philadelphia: Carson Wentz boasts breathtaking talent. In Year Two, he will remain prone to turnovers and secondary disguises. The Broncos defense should win this with a pick six. Paging, Aqib Talib. Mr. Talib come to the white courtesy phone and pick up your football. 5-3.

Vs. New England: Tom Brady crushes teams. But he has a losing record in Denver. He played one of his worst games in years last season against the Broncos. It didn't matter because the Broncos scored three points, and argued in the lockerroom afterward. Referendums on first-year coaches are unfair. Oh well. It's the nature of the beast. If Joseph wants to curry favor with the populace, he will find a way to upset the champs. I believe they will come up just short. 5-4.

Vs. Cincinnati: The Bengals have shown a knack for gashing the Broncos with big running plays. Have I mentioned improved ground defense could determine if Denver returns the postseason? The Bengals are shrugged shoulders. They are also trending the wrong direction. 6-4.

At Oakland: This is where the Raiders featuring Derek Carr becomes problematic. He's good. MVP-quality good. And he refuses to throw picks. Oakland can become methodical, and rely on its monstrous offensive line. The only way the Broncos' win this game is if Oakland fans have soured on a slumping, relocated team, negating an increasingly real home field advantage. 6-5.

At Miami: Adam Gase is a human Red Bull. He works tirelessly, demanding excellence from his players while holding them accountable. He created a winning culture, and you better believe he wants to beat the team that didn't hire him as a head coach. 6-6.

Vs. New York Jets: The Jets are the type of team that gets other teams back on track. They make silly mistakes, and do not feature an offense capable of winning on the road. 7-6.

At Colts: Andrew Luck experienced a lost season a year ago because of injury. He is in danger of not realizing his potential because of a porous offensive line. However, he plays like a combination of Joe

Montana, Tom Brady and Cam Newton against the Broncos. Can Denver prevent him from making plays with his feet? They are due. 8-6.

At Washington: Washington is one of the NFL's great tease teams. They win games they shouldn't and lose at the worst possible times. Kirk Cousins vs. the No Fly Zone? He won't like that. 9-6.

Vs. Kansas City: Fitting. The Broncos will require a win over their rival to reach the playoffs. Having this game at home can't be overstated. Denver lost to Kansas City at Sports Authority last year, a defeat that changed their entire season. Redemption will arrive on New Year's Eve. 10-6.

Broncos schedule released Thursday, includes October home date vs. New York Giants

By Troy Renck
KMGH
April 21, 2017

The opponents surfaced months ago. The Broncos know who they will play this season and where they will play them. It's the "When" that creates suspense for Thursday's 6 p.m. NFL schedule release.

Leaks continue to drip out. Per multiple reports, the Broncos will open the season on Monday night football at home against the Los Angeles Chargers. The Broncos would follow the New Orleans Saints at Minnesota Vikings in Minnesota in the doubleheader.

Per the WFAN in New York, the Broncos will host the New York Giants on Oct. 15 on Sunday night football. This could be an issue. Two Brandon Marshalls will exist in the same place at the same time. The Broncos linebacker, No. 54, pitted against the Giants receiver and one-time Bronco. Twitter might explode when Marshall tackles, um, Marshall.

Under new coach Vance Joseph, the Broncos will wade through a gauntlet after missing the playoffs with a 9-7 record a year ago.

Denver will host AFC West rivals Los Angeles, Kansas City, and Oakland followed by New England, Dallas, Cincinnati, the New York Jets and the aforementioned Giants. The delicious storyline of Tony Romo facing the Cowboys as a Bronco, always a longshot, dissolved when Romo accepted a broadcasting gig with CBS. This doesn't mean there won't be intrigue, particularly against the Chiefs, who swept the Broncos a year ago, Oakland, the budding contender, and New England, the reigning world champions who spent the offseason restocking their cupboards. The order of the schedule becomes significant given injuries. Suffer those leading into a tough stretch and it can change the entire complexion of the season.

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Former Jets, Bills coach Rex Ryan believes Broncos should start Paxton Lynch

By Troy Renck

KMGH

April 21, 2017

The Broncos should not bother with a quarterback derby. It should be a one-horse race.

At least that's the opinion of former NFL coach Rex Ryan. Appearing Thursday on 104.3 The Fan with Mike Evans and Mark Schlereth, Ryan weighed in on the Broncos' quarterback competition. Let's just say, he prefers the tall guy.

"I will say this, I don't know why they don't go with (Paxton) Lynch. It makes no sense. They drafted the guy for a reason. He's not going to get better by sitting there. So put him in there," said Ryan, who was fired by the Bills last season. "Obviously from that kid's perspective, he has to protect the football and not be careless with it. You are not Brett Favre. So go in and do your job. If a guy is open, get him the ball. If he's not, run. The kid's an athlete. Run or get rid of it. Don't ever take the risk of putting your team in jeopardy. That's the only way you are not going to win in Denver because they have too good of a defense. The other kid is a journeyman. You made an investment in Lynch. You have to go with him."

Lynch went 1-1 as a rookie starter last season, looking overwhelmed as he transitioned from a college spread offense to working under center and in a huddle. Lynch arrived for offseason workouts two weeks early to get acclimated to the altitude and has been diligent in his preparation this month. The former Memphis star believes he can win the job, citing, in part, the use of more shotgun formations under new offensive coordinator Mike McCoy.

Siemian has been trailed by doubters since he was drafted in the seventh round. He, too, believes he can claim the No. 1 spot. Why wouldn't he? He won the job last summer, beating out veteran Mark Sanchez. Siemian went 8-6 as a starter, was named an offensive captain at midseason, and earned teammates' respect with his toughness.

"I thought Trevor had a great year last year. He definitely had some ups and downs, but the dude played injured a lot. He took a lot of hits. For him to get back up and do what he did, we see a lot of promise in him," cornerback Chris Harris Jr. said this week. "With Paxton, it's going to be a huge year for him. Mike McCoy's offense will help him a lot more, through his play style."

Ryan told The Fan he misses coaching. He forged a reputation as a strong defensive coordinator, creating strong bonds with his players. However, he struggled to win as a head coach, going 61-66. He lamented never having a franchise quarterback in a "quarterback-driven league."

Fifth-year option tracker for 2014 first-round picks

By Michael David Smith

Pro Football Talk

April 21, 2017

Here's a look at the status of the fifth-year options for each first-round pick in the 2014 NFL draft:

1. **Jadeveon Clowney:** Option picked up by the Texans.
2. **Greg Robinson:** Hasn't played well for the Rams and surely won't have his option picked up.
3. **Blake Bortles:** The new regime in Jacksonville hasn't decided yet whether to commit to Bortles.
4. **Sammy Watkins:** The Bills think highly of Watkins and will want him around in 2018.
5. **Khalil Mack:** Option picked up by the Raiders.
6. **Jake Matthews:** Falcons plan to pick up his option.
7. **Mike Evans:** Option picked up by the Buccaneers.
8. **Justin Gilbert:** Has no fifth-year option because he was already released.
9. **Anthony Barr:** The Vikings have said they want to see a more motivated Barr and could motivate him by declining to pick up his option, but that seems unlikely for a two-time Pro Bowler.
10. **Eric Ebron:** A close call, Ebron has played well but not as well as some of the players drafted after him.
11. **Taylor Lewan:** Will definitely have his option picked up.
12. **Odell Beckham:** Will definitely have his option picked up.
13. **Aaron Donald:** Option picked up by the Rams.
14. **Kyle Fuller:** After missing the entire 2016 season, probably won't have his option picked up.
15. **Ryan Shazier:** Will definitely have his option picked up.
16. **Zack Martin:** Cowboys will pick up his option.
17. **C. J. Mosley:** Will definitely have his option picked up.
18. **Calvin Pryor:** Will probably have his option picked up.
19. **Ja'Wuan James:** Will probably have his option picked up.
20. **Brandin Cooks:** The Patriots wouldn't have traded for Cooks just to rent him for a year, so he'll have his option picked up.
21. **Ha Ha Clinton-Dix:** Will definitely have his option picked up.
22. **Johnny Manziel:** No option to pick up because he has been released.

23. **Dee Ford:** Coming off a 10-sack season, will probably have his option picked up.
24. **Darqueze Dennard:** Hasn't developed into a starter and probably won't have his option picked up.
25. **Jason Verrett:** Will definitely have his option picked up.
26. **Marcus Smith:** Hasn't become a starter and probably won't have his option picked up.
27. **Deone Bucannon:** Probably will have his option picked up.
28. **Kelvin Benjamin:** Panthers will pick up his option.
29. **Dominique Easley:** Has already been released by the Patriots and signed with the Rams, so he has no option to pick up.
30. **Jimmie Ward:** A starter last year before getting hurt, will probably have his option picked up.
31. **Bradley Roby:** Broncos will pick up his option.
32. **Teddy Bridgewater:** A difficult case. If the Vikings don't think Bridgewater will ever be the same again after last year's knee injury, they may decide not to pick up his option, which would have been unthinkable a year ago.

The five most-intriguing games on the Broncos' 2017 schedule

By Aric DiLalla
DenverBroncos.com
April 21, 2017

5. At Miami — Sunday, Dec. 3, 1 p.m. ET

Head Coach Vance Joseph will return to the city in which he spent a year as defensive coordinator, and the Broncos will visit the team that kept them out of the playoffs in 2016. The Dolphins' running game pushed them to the playoffs in 2016, and behind former Broncos offensive coordinator Adam Gase, they'll be looking to do the same this season.

Key storyline: How has Vance Joseph performed in his first season as head coach? Though the Broncos will still have four games left after their contest in Miami, his return to the Floridian coast will serve as a natural break in which his first season can be evaluated. Are the Broncos fighting for the No. 1 seed or are they struggling to stay in contention for the playoffs?

Player to watch: Jay Ajayi broke onto the scene in 2016 due to his tendency for huge outputs in games. While his production was inconsistent over the course of the season, he rushed for over 200 yards on three different occasions. That sort of potential makes him a threat to the Broncos.

4. At Oakland — Sunday, Nov. 26, 1:25 p.m. PT

This game will mark the Broncos' first trip to the Black Hole since the NFL owners approved the franchise's relocation to Las Vegas. More relevant to the Broncos' chances of winning will be containing the Raiders' young core of Derek Carr, Amari Cooper and Khalil Mack.

Key storyline: What will the atmosphere be like at the Oakland-Alameda County Coliseum after the relocation decision? Will Raiders fans rally together for one or two final seasons in Oakland or will they protest the move and diminish the Raiders' home-field advantage? In a tough environment in which to play, a calmer crowd could give the Broncos an edge.

Player to watch: Derek Carr. How will the fourth-year quarterback respond after he broke his leg against the Colts right before the playoffs? Will he pick up where he left off on his Pro Bowl season in which he would've blown past 4,000 yards and 30 touchdowns, or will he struggle to guide the Raiders to another playoff bid.

3. Kansas City — Sunday, Dec. 31, 2:05 p.m. MT

Last year with the season on the line, the Chiefs blew out the Broncos, 33-10, at Arrowhead Stadium. This season could very well come down to a date with the Chiefs, as well. This New Year's Eve contest could be snowy, will likely be cold and should have heavy playoff implications.

Key storyline: Can the Broncos contain Tyreek Hill? In 2016, he created a number of impact plays for the Chiefs, including an 86-yard touchdown on a kickoff return against the Broncos in October and a 70-yard jet sweep for a touchdown in Kansas City.

Player to watch: In a division flush with talented pass-rushers, outside linebacker Justin Houston stands out with 11.5 sacks in 10 career games against the Broncos. The Broncos' offseason offensive line overhaul will be determined a success or failure based on the unit's performance against elite pass rushers, and Houston certainly fits that bill.

2. Dallas — Sunday, Sept. 17, 2:25 p.m. MT

The NFC's No. 1 seed from a year ago will certainly have revenge on its mind in 2017 after it fell short in the playoffs against the Green Bay Packers. In this high-profile matchup against Dallas, the Broncos will face a potent offense and a rapidly improving defense.

Key storyline: Is the Broncos' run defense fixed? It will be tested early and often against Ezekiel Elliot and Dak Prescott. Elliot was named the AP Offensive Rookie of the Year in 2016 after he ran for 1631 yards and 15 touchdowns.

Player to watch: Elliot and Prescott get all the attention, but tight end Jason Witten will also pose a threat down the middle for the Cowboys' offense. The 16-year veteran had 69 receptions and three touchdowns in 2016.

1. New England — Sunday, Nov. 12, 6:30 p.m. MT

The road to the AFC Championship always begins and ends with New England. The Broncos will host the Patriots for the third-straight regular season, and their matchup with the Super Bowl LI champions will be the fourth-consecutive contest between the two at Sports Authority Field at Mile High. After a three-game road trip that traverses the country, this Sunday Night Football homecoming for the Broncos will mean a lot for their postseason hopes.

Key storyline: Can the Broncos' offense score enough to keep up with Tom Brady? Last season, the defense held Brady to 16 points, but the offense mustered just three points after a red-zone turnover by Trevor Siemian.

Player to watch: Tom Brady. It can't be anyone else other than the 40-year-old, five-time Super Bowl champ. Will he be able to continue his dominance as he crosses into his fourth decade of life, or will he show the same signs of rust that other quarterbacks his age often display?

Honorable mentions:

At Los Angeles Chargers (Sunday, Oct. 22, 1:25 p.m. PT): The Broncos' first trip to the StubHub Center will also be a homecoming trip for Offensive Coordinator Mike McCoy. The Broncos didn't win a road game on their AFC West slate in 2016. That will need to change if the Broncos want to make it back to the playoffs.

At Washington (Sunday, Dec. 24, 1 p.m. ET): This Christmas Eve battle with the Redskins will match up the Broncos' top-ranked pass defense with one of the league's best passers, Kirk Cousins. A potential cold-weather road game in December? That has classic written all over it.

At Kansas City (Monday, Oct. 30, 7:30 p.m. CT): Though Denver's other battle with the Chiefs may ultimately hold more weight for the playoff hopes, this game won't be one you should miss. A day-before-Halloween, Monday-Night-Football atmosphere at Arrowhead may be the most raucous one the Broncos play in front of all year on the road.

Broncos release 2017 schedule

By Aric DiLalla
DenverBroncos.com
April 21, 2017

For the seventh consecutive season, the Denver Broncos will open their season at home.

A "Monday Night Football" clash with the Los Angeles Chargers will kick off Vance Joseph's first season as head coach and wrap up Week 1 in the NFL.

That Sept. 11 meeting with the Chargers was one of five prime-time games on the Broncos' 2017 schedule, which the NFL released at 6 p.m. MT on Thursday.

The Broncos also play the New York Giants (Oct. 15, "Sunday Night Football"), Kansas City Chiefs (Oct. 30, MNF), New England Patriots (Nov. 12, SNF) and Indianapolis Colts (Dec. 14, "Thursday Night Football") in primetime.

Other noteworthy games on the Broncos' schedule include a Christmas Eve trip to play Washington and a New Year's Eve battle at home against the Chiefs.

The Broncos play four of their first five games at home. Their bye week comes in Week 5.

PRESEASON					
WEEK	DATE	OPPONENT	LOCATION	TIME (MT)	BROADCAST
1	Thu, Aug. 10	@ Chicago	Soldier Field	6 p.m.	9NEWS/KTVD-20
2	Sat, Aug. 19	@ San Francisco	Levi's Stadium	8 p.m.	9NEWS/KTVD-20
3	Sat, Aug. 26	Green Bay	Sports Authority Field at Mile High	7 p.m.	9NEWS/KTVD-20
4	Thu, Aug. 31	Arizona	Sports Authority Field at Mile High	7 p.m.	9NEWS/KTVD-20
REGULAR SEASON					
WEEK	DATE	OPPONENT	LOCATION	TIME (MT)	BROADCAST
1	Mon, Sept. 11	L.A. CHARGERS	Sports Authority Field at Mile High	8:20 p.m.	ESPN
2	Sun, Sept. 17	DALLAS	Sports Authority Field at Mile High	2:25 p.m.	FOX
3	Sun, Sept. 24	at Buffalo	New Era Field	11 a.m.	CBS

4	Sun, Oct. 1	OAKLAND	Sports Authority Field at Mile High	2:25 p.m.	CBS
5	Sun, Oct. 8	BYE			
6	Sun, Oct. 15	N.Y. GIANTS	Sports Authority Field at Mile High	6:30 p.m.	NBC*
7	Sun, Oct. 22	at L.A. Chargers	StubHub Center	2:25 p.m.	CBS
8	Mon, Oct. 30	at Kansas City	Arrowhead Stadium	6:30 p.m.	ESPN
9	Sun, Nov. 5	@ Philadelphia	Lincoln Financial Field	11 a.m.	CBS*
10	Sun, Nov. 12	NEW ENGLAND	Sports Authority Field at Mile High	6:30 p.m.	NBC*
11	Sun, Nov. 19	CINCINNATI	Sports Authority Field at Mile High	2:25 p.m.	CBS*
12	Sun, Nov. 26	at Oakland	Oakland-Alameda County Coliseum	2:25 p.m.	CBS*
13	Sun, Dec. 3	@ Miami	Hard Rock Stadium	11 a.m.	CBS*
14	Sun, Dec. 10	N.Y. JETS	Sports Authority Field at Mile High	2:05 p.m.	CBS*
15	Thu, Dec. 14	at Indianapolis	Lucas Oil Stadium	6:25 p.m.	NBC/NFLN/Amazon
16	Sun, Dec. 24	at Washington	FedExField	11 a.m.	CBS*
17	Sun, Dec. 31	KANSAS CITY	Sports Authority Field at Mile High	2:05 p.m.	CBS*

The DEA warned NFL doctors about drug laws in 2011. It didn't go well.

By Rick Mase
The Washington Post
April 21, 2017

On a cold day in February 2011, doctors and athletic trainers from the NFL's 32 teams gathered at a hotel ballroom in downtown Indianapolis. Under scrutiny for its handling of prescription drugs, the league had invited the Drug Enforcement Administration, and an official named Joseph T. Rannazzisi made the trip from Washington armed with more than 80 slides of charts, photographs and bullet points about federal laws that govern how the doctors can medicate professional football players suffering from pain and injuries.

The presentation was called "NFL Physicians Briefing: Obligations and Responsibilities under the Controlled Substances Act and Code of Federal Regulations." It did not unfold as planned.

The NFL doctors grew defensive, then angry, according to participants in the room, as Rannazzisi lectured them on their duties and responsibilities in the context of the opioid epidemic that was sweeping the country. The doctors felt they were being compared to pill pushers, and the meeting became confrontational. "He was treating everyone like a criminal," said one doctor in attendance.

The teams' medical personnel were unhappy with the DEA official's tone, his message and the laws he was outlining. Groans, catcalls and even some boos filled the hotel ballroom at times. "I'd done hundreds of presentations," Rannazzisi said in a recent interview. "I'd never experienced that before."

"It was about as contentious as you can imagine a professional meeting getting," another participant said.

After the meeting ended, the doctors returned to their teams and continued administering powerful painkillers and anti-inflammatories in ways that often ran counter to federal guidelines. It would be four years until the NFL fully instituted rules and practices that addressed the DEA's concerns over the way teams travel with pain medications, store them at their practice facilities and administer them on the road.

The issues Rannazzisi warned team doctors about would become the heart of a DEA investigation into the NFL's prescription drug practices and the crux of a lawsuit involving more than 1,800 former players who say teams improperly medicated them during their playing careers. The lawsuit paints a cavalier attitude within the NFL about the quantities of drugs distributed to players, and alleges teams were reckless in the way they handled, stored and transported medications, failing to maintain proper records and allowing nonlicensed personnel, such as team trainers, to dole out prescription drugs.

Those in the Indianapolis ballroom say the doctors were particularly frustrated to learn they couldn't travel with prescription-strength medications across state lines to road games, as they had for years.

At one point, Rannazzisi said, a doctor raised his hand and asked why the President is able to travel with drugs aboard Air Force One. The DEA official explained that Air Force One is a military plane and statutes allow exemptions for military aircraft to move drugs around the country.

“I’m thinking as I’m saying this, ‘This is surreal,’ ” Rannazzisi recalled. “So he says, ‘The military is exempt? Well, think of our players as warriors every Sunday on the field of battle.’ I was stunned.”

Citing pending litigation, a spokeswoman for the NFL Physicians Society declined to comment. A person familiar with the meeting and the league’s policies and procedures in this area said the doctors were upset because the presentation ran counter to what they’d been told for years by the DEA. He said the team doctors were “puzzled. Some were troubled; some were sitting there thinking about how it was going to affect their treatment of their players going forward.

“They had consistently gotten advice that basically blessed the practices in which they were engaged. ... The DEA was mandating a departure in the way that the club physicians had operated and treated their athlete-patients for decades.”

The 2011 meeting followed unrelated DEA investigations into team drug practices in San Diego and New Orleans. The DEA had briefed league personnel at least three times in the previous year, and NFL officials felt a presentation might bring all 32 of the teams up-to-date on the federal laws that regulate prescription drugs. In a recent interview, Rannazzisi said he wanted the doctors to understand, “you can’t just do whatever you want to do.”

“And the funny thing was, I was there to help them. I wasn’t looking to take action against anybody,” he said. “I wanted them to understand if they were doing what I think they were doing — if they were just handing out drugs to players — they weren’t doing the players a service as patients.”

Midway through the presentation tailored for the NFL, Rannazzisi shared a slide of “Frequently Asked Questions,” which highlighted many of the potential problem areas the DEA had identified, including: Is it a violation to keep controlled substances at an unregistered location? Is it a violation if I travel with controlled substances? Is it a violation to issue a prescription for a controlled substance in a state that I am not registered in?

“But basically, everyone got so [angry], they didn’t buy into it. The message was lost,” said a doctor who was in the room. “The league understood the message, because they’d had other meetings with the DEA, but the league chose to ignore it.”

At the time, Rannazzisi was the deputy assistant administrator at the DEA, heading up the Office of Diversion Control. He retired from the DEA in 2015, having delivered hundreds of presentations and testifying before Congress nearly three dozen times.

As part of his presentation, Rannazzisi told the team doctors about the national opioid epidemic, and he explained that in Florida, pain clinics were raking in millions of dollars by liberally prescribing addictive painkillers.

“He was lumping all of the NFL doctors with the pain factory doctors,” said one team doctor who attended the meeting. “. . . The whole thing went over like a lead balloon.”

Late in the meeting, Rannazzisi said, a doctor from the Dallas Cowboys complained that federal statutes don't take into account the unique challenges posed by professional sports teams that travel out of state for games.

"I told him, 'The law is the law,'" Rannazzisi said. "He said, 'Well, my owner knows members of Congress and he'll get the law changed.'"

In March, The Washington Post published details of the former players' court filing in their lawsuit against the NFL's 32 teams that alleges instances in which team and league officials were made aware of abuses and likely violations of federal law. In most cases, the teams were either slow to respond or ignored the regulations entirely, the players said.

The day after the article appeared, Rep. Pete Sessions, R-Texas, introduced a bill in Congress that essentially would allow professional sports teams to travel for up to 72 hours with unlimited amounts of prescription drugs. They could administer those drugs on road trips, as long as they kept proper records.

"I believe this is an extremely important issue for all doctors, sports doctors in particular, and this bill will provide them with the opportunity to provide their athletes and patients with much-needed medical care under the authority of the DEA," Sessions said.

Sessions introduced a similar measure in December 2011, nine months after the heated DEA meeting with NFL doctors in Indianapolis, and another in July 2015. Neither got out of committee. Sessions's office said Cowboys team doctor Daniel Cooper first brought the issue to the congressman's attention.

Sessions's district includes parts of Dallas and suburbs to the north and northwest of the city. Even though neither the Cowboys' headquarters nor its stadium is based in the congressman's district, the team has taken a recent interest in helping Sessions keep his office.

Campaign finance reports show that the Cowboys never donated to the 11-term congressman before his most recent reelection bid in 2016. The most an individual can contribute to a candidate in an election cycle is \$2,700. Within a two-day period in December 2015, Sessions received that exact amount from Cowboys owner Jerry Jones, his wife, all three of his children, each of his children's spouses and four of Jones's grandchildren — a total of \$32,400.

Sessions also received \$5,000 from the NFL last year, in addition to a \$1,500 donation in 2012. Cooper has made three donations to Sessions, totaling \$2,000, but none since 2007. He sent a letter to Sessions in January 2012, according to a court filing, urging for a change in the law.

A spokesman for the Cowboys declined to comment.

Other lawmakers had a markedly different response to the claims outlined in the ex-players' lawsuit. Four House Democrats reached out to the NFL and the DEA, demanding answers to questions about the use of prescription medications in professional football and the way the NFL and the DEA have investigated the matter.

"These allegations suggest a troubling lack of respect for the laws governing the handling of controlled substances, and raise questions about the league's dedication to the health and safety of its players,"

the lawmakers, all members of the House Energy and Commerce Committee, said in a letter to NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell.

In 2010, the league's drug practices began drawing increased scrutiny from federal authorities. The DEA office in San Diego investigated the pro sports teams there after a Chargers player was found with 100 doses of Vicodin in his possession during a traffic stop. At the same time, the DEA's New Orleans office was looking into the New Orleans Saints regarding the theft of controlled substances. An Atlanta Falcons internal memo that same year, revealed in the recent court filing, stated: "We were also under the radar of the DEA because of the large amount of controlled substances ordered."

In August 2010, a group of team doctors joined Elliott Pellman, the league's former medical adviser, in Washington to meet with the DEA. Rannazzisi gave a presentation similar to the one he would deliver six months later in Indianapolis.

The ex-players' lawsuits filed in 2014 and 2015 drew the attention of Department of Justice, particularly the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Southern District in New York. Later in 2015, the DEA acknowledged the existence of a widespread investigation and said agents had interviewed NFL team doctors in multiple locations. Rannazzisi's slide show from the Indianapolis meeting was shared with investigators, who also were briefed on what transpired in the hotel ballroom.

In November 2014, the DEA conducted surprise inspections of NFL teams in three cities to see if they were still traveling with controlled substances. None were found, according to the ex-players' complaint in the lawsuit, because "the clubs were tipped off by a DEA employee in advance of the raids."

Any case against the NFL teams or their doctors carried inherent complications.

"These doctors are all independently licensed and registered, so they're the ones with the obligations, not the sports teams," said Larry Cote, who formerly worked as associate chief counsel for the DEA's diversion section. "I think that's where the DEA and the U.S. Attorney's Office have problems bridging that gap and holding sports teams liable when it's really the obligations of the doctors."

While some doctors might contend any infractions were relatively minor, Cote said that record-keeping violations can sometimes be indicative of larger problems.

"I think when you're talking about traveling with the drugs, when you're talking about administering the drugs in states where most often the doctors aren't licensed and when you're talking about trainers having unfettered access to the drugs, that's where you're getting into serious violations and potential for diversion misuse," said Cote, an attorney at Washington-based Quarles & Brady who specializes in compliance and enforcement issues related to the Controlled Substances Act.

The league had long discussed the idea of allowing local doctors to prescribe and distribute drugs to visiting teams, but some teams scoffed at the idea, fearful it would increase the risk of injury and put them at a competitive disadvantage because medical information would be shared. A handful of teams piloted the program the next year. Four years later, in 2015, the NFL's "visiting team medical liaison program" went into effect, and since then team physicians aren't supposed to administer prescription medication at road games. The league says all of its team are now in compliance with the Controlled Substances Act.

“I would say some of the changes were immediate, but it took some time to get it done,” said the person familiar with the league’s policies.

In a response to questions about the Indianapolis presentation, a DEA spokesman said “during the meeting a number of issues pertaining to the transportation and dispensation of controlled substances were discussed.

“DEA has since learned that the league has taken steps to address the issues discussed,” the spokesman said.