

AFC West Q&A: Who is the best newcomer to this division?

By Staff

ESPN

July 10, 2017

Who is the best newcomer to this division?

Jeff Legwold, Denver Broncos reporter: The best newcomers who arrived in this division in both free agency and the draft will not score all that highly on the glamour meter. That's because in both cases the players are likely offensive linemen.

While tight end Jared Cook is a quality addition for the Raiders -- six 30-catch seasons in his career with six seasons in which he averaged at least 12 yards per reception -- Broncos guard Ronald Leary could well be the best addition in free agency. Leary is a power player in his prime, and many personnel executives think he would have been a far better option for the Cowboys than the player whom they will line up to replace him.

The Broncos' Garrett Bolles and Chargers' Forrest Lamp -- also offensive linemen -- are among the division's best new arrivals through the draft. But, if it's too much trouble to sift through the line of scrimmage to watch those guys work, Chargers rookie receiver Mike Williams has one of the most accurate passers in the league in Philip Rivers to feed him the ball. His numbers should reflect it.

Adam Teicher, Kansas City Chiefs reporter: This was not a great year for the arrival of immediate impact players in the AFC West, either through the draft or free agency. Kansas City's first-round draft pick, Patrick Mahomes II, is a developmental player. The Chiefs' main free-agent addition, Bennie Logan, is a nose tackle. The Chargers' top pick, wide receiver Williams, didn't practice in the offseason because of an injury, raising questions about his ability to contribute when the season begins. Los Angeles concentrated on fixing the offensive line, a priority in Denver as well. Look to Oakland for the new player who can have the biggest immediate impact. One candidate from the Raiders is tight end Cook, a free-agent addition. Cook provides another receiving threat for quarterback Derek Carr. Another possibility is cornerback Gareon Conley, Oakland's first-round draft pick. Conley has the ability to help the Raiders improve their suspect pass defense. If they do, they'll win their first AFC West title since 2002.

Eric D. Williams, Los Angeles Chargers reporter: In his prime, Marshawn Lynch was one of the most powerful and productive runners in the NFL. Lynch rushed for over 1,000 yards in four straight seasons starting in 2011 while with the Seattle Seahawks, helping them win a Super Bowl. He totaled 5,357 yards and 48 rushing touchdowns during that time, tops in the NFL. However, Lynch finished an injury-plagued year with just 411 rushing yards his final season in Seattle in 2015. After taking a year off last season, I believe Lynch will shake the rust off and return to his days as Beast Mode, giving Oakland's offense another dangerous weapon out of the backfield.

Paul Gutierrez, Oakland Raiders reporter: As long as he is more Beast Mode than Bust Mode, and he is more rested than rusted, the easy answer is Raiders running back Lynch -- by a long shot. Yes, Lynch, who is coming off a one-year retirement, was far from the dominant force his last season in Seattle, averaging just 3.8 yards per carry while missing nine games with injury. But you might say he was still bitter over not being used from a yard out the previous Super Bowl. His head is definitely in a different place now in coming home to Oakland, where he grew up. He said the reason he decided to come out of retirement was to play for the youth in the East Bay so they could watch him before the team moves to Las Vegas. He is rested and ready to prove doubters wrong, and his quirky personality has not only been accepted by the Raiders, it has been celebrated. AFC West rivals, beware.

Approaching 31, Demaryius Thomas has no plans to slow down

By Aric DiLalla
DenverBroncos.com
July 10, 2017

Demaryius Thomas has no plans to slow down.

He knows former Detroit Lions wide receiver Calvin Johnson retired at 30, and he's seen other wide receivers lose a step as they reach their 30s.

Thomas is doing everything in his power to make sure that doesn't happen to him. As he approaches his 31st birthday in December, he still has plenty he hopes to accomplish.

"It's a change of my diet, the way I work out [and] take care of my body," Thomas said. "I still remember the talk I had with [former Broncos safety] Brian Dawkins, and he was telling me the things that I should do and change up, because as you know, the first two years, I was injured. [I] talked to him and [former Broncos cornerback] Champ [Bailey], and they kind of helped me out and gave me the path and I took it and ran with it. Ever since then, I haven't missed a game and don't plan on missing one."

Thomas has been the quiet iron man on the Broncos roster since the end of his 2011 season. He's started 90 straight games, even as he's battled hip pain for much of the recent past.

That pain is gone now and Thomas should have reason to again expect the stats that tend to accompany a player of his caliber.

Reunited with Offensive Mike McCoy and challenged by Head Coach Vance Joseph, a healthy Thomas should be a focal point of the Broncos offense.

In McCoy's final season with the Broncos during his first stint as offensive coordinator, Thomas earned his first Pro Bowl appearance and tallied 94 receptions, 1,434 yards and 10 touchdowns.

Those numbers have Thomas feeling hopeful a renaissance could be on the horizon.

"I got longer than 30 [years]," Thomas said. "I think I've got a couple good years [left]. Like I've been saying before, this is the best I've felt my whole career. I haven't had the problems I usually have with my hip, because that was one of the things that held me back.

"I wake up now and I don't feel it, and that's a good sign, because usually I wake up in the morning and I'm like, 'OK, my hip's tight. I've got to loosen it up to get it going.' But now it's totally different."

Even as he turns the corner into the next decade, that's a reason to expect heavy production.

Last season, Thomas spent his birthday in Kansas City on a wet night that saw the Broncos lose 33-10 as their playoff hopes slipped away.

He'll hope for a different result this year as the Broncos travel to DC for a Christmas Eve matchup with the Washington Redskins.

That penultimate game of the regular season could well decide playoff positioning — and whether Thomas gets to ring in 31 with a ring.

That's the plan, at least.

Asked how he wanted to welcome this year, Thomas didn't hesitate.

"Hopefully with a Super Bowl."

WATCH: Broncos legend Terrell Davis finally receives his gold Hall of Fame jacket

By Sean Wagner-McGough

CBS Sports

July 10, 2017

Terrell Davis is a month away from joining the Pro Football Hall of Fame, so his career is undoubtedly filled with numerous memorable moments. There was the time he won his first Super Bowl, rushing for 157 yards and three touchdowns to capture MVP honors. There was the following season when he eclipsed the 2,000-yard mark, which led to an MVP award. There was the time he helped the Broncos win their second straight Super Bowl. And then there's what happened Friday when Davis received his gold jacket.

"The baby's here," he said in a video posted to Twitter by the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

Take a look:

It's a well-deserved honor for Davis, who didn't play for long due to injuries, but was one of the greatest runners in the history of the game when he was healthy. From 1995-98, Davis averaged roughly 1,600 rushing yards and 14 touchdowns per season. He notched more than 1,000 rushing yards in the playoffs (1,140 to be exact) despite appearing in only eight playoff games. He scored 12 touchdowns during those eight games, which means he's tied for the fourth-most rushing touchdowns in postseason history. And as previously mentioned, he's won a Super Bowl MVP and a regular-season MVP award.

Reminder: He was a sixth-round pick. So, it'll be extra sweet for Davis to be inducted into the Hall of Fame along with the rest of the 2017 class on August 5.

It'll also be extra sweet considering the promise he made to his agent Neil Schwartz. As our Jason La Canfora reported last month, Schwartz made Davis promise to let him be his Hall of Fame presenter. He made that promise before Davis even played in the NFL.

"I remember he and I sat in this diner for like eight hours, and when we came out it was like three or four in the morning," Davis told La Canfora. "And we talked about everything, life, we just had a great connection. And actually what happened was, when we left that diner that night -- or really that morning -- Neil asked me to promise him something. And I was like, 'Sure man, whatever.' And he said, 'Promise me that when you make it to the Hall of Fame you'll allow me to present you.'"

"Now, he said this way before I was drafted. I had no teams. I had no nothing. I was a guy from Georgia without a whole lot of people clamoring for me, and that showed me that he had confidence in me. And for him to have the confidence to say that ... when somebody has that kind of confidence to say that, it was great for me to hear."

Davis kept his promise. Schwartz will be his presenter at the ceremony.

LOOK: Von Miller warns Vic Beasley that he's coming for his sack crown

By Sean Wagner-McGough

CBS Sports

July 10, 2017

Broncos linebacker Von Miller is known as the game's best pass rusher, but the stats didn't show it last season. In 2016, Miller finished with 13.5 sacks, which was good enough for second in the NFL. The leader? Vic Beasley Jr., who registered 15.5 sacks with the Falcons.

On Sunday, Miller warned Beasley that he's coming for his crown.

Coming for you fam @VicBeasley3

— Von Miller (@VonMiller) July 9, 2017

Before we address Miller's warning, a necessary disclaimer: Yes, J.J. Watt is the game's greatest pass rusher when healthy. But Watt is coming off back surgery, which can be tricky. There's no guarantee that Watt will be the same Watt when he eventually returns this year. That's why I called Miller the best in the game. If Watt is unaffected by his back issues, he'll reclaim the throne.

Another disclaimer: Miller probably wouldn't be that mad to see Beasley beat him out again. After all, Miller and Beasley trained together at a pass-rushing summit that featured the game's best pass rushers.

Back to Miller's warning. It's worth noting that he's topped 15 sacks only once in his career, all the way back in 2012. Even still, Miller has racked up the second-most sacks (38.5) in the past three seasons -- only Watt has more. So, it really wouldn't be surprising to see Miller emerge as the sack leader in 2017.

Other challengers will be vying for the title. Don't forget about Khalil Mack of the Raiders. And, of course, Beasley could very well repeat after his breakout season. From Year 1 to Year 2, he improved his sack total by 11.5.

On Tutors, Problems and One of the Ugliest Gigs in Football

By Andy Benoit

MMQB

July 10, 2017

Peter King is on a well-deserved vacation. So off the bench I come. In this week's Monday Morning Quarterback, we'll hear from Patriots corner Stephon Gilmore on his new team and growing family. We'll chat with the game's most underrated defensive lineman, Green Bay's Mike Daniels, and get his take on why fans notice Ndamukong Suh more than him. Atlanta's Robert Alford will also tell us what it feels like to have made an iconic Super Bowl play only to have it diminished in defeat, and you might be surprised who helped Alford become the NFL's most improved cornerback last season.

But we start with the most dynamic running back in the NFC and why he's interested in Le'Veon Bell's contract negotiations with Pittsburgh.

David Johnson Has a Looming Problem

Let's be honest: intelligence is rarely emphasized when discussing running backs. It's not because they're dumb. Ninety nine percent of all NFL players are explicitly not dumb. It's just that, more than any position save for maybe a man-to-man cover corner, a running back is regarded for his physical traits. Can he break tackles? Make defenders miss? In traffic, can he locate space and then accelerate?

Cardinals third-year star David Johnson, who is as rich in these traits as anyone in football, understands. A lot of running "comes from instincts, especially in the heat of the battle, heat of the game, where you don't have time to think," Johnson told me over the phone recently. "It's all reaction." But a player still must put himself in the right position to react.

Johnson does consistently. When he speaks, his football IQ shines through. He explains, in fine detail, how different defensive fronts impact where his eyes go on running plays. He points out that, because of his receiving prowess, he must also read coverages. Those reads differ based on where he lines up. And sometimes his routes are determined by the read.

Amidst this talk, Johnson and I got into a discussion about what he describes as Arizona's "bread and butter" run play. Twenty-three double, they call it. An inside zone run with two tight ends aligned side by side. There are various double-team blocks across the board, depending on the defense's structure. And, the real kicker: Larry Fitzgerald. The 14th-year receiver motions down, behind the tight ends, and is responsible for blocking one of the second level defenders (either a linebacker or a safety, again depending on the defense's structure). Johnson described the nuances of this play in a quote long enough to exhaust a person scrolling through it.

That description mentioned several things I heard a few weeks ago sitting in on the Rams' offensive coaches meetings for my 24 Hours with Sean McVay story. Most notably, the importance of the runner keeping his shoulders square. Even if the back is bouncing an inside zone run to the outside, staying square is vital because it influences defenders in ways that give linemen easier blocks. Blockers obviously help a ballcarrier, but a ballcarrier must also help his blockers.

I asked Johnson if, growing up, he would he have believed that one day he'd be in the NFL and running a bread and butter play that hinged on the blocks he gets from, of all people, superstar wide receiver Larry Fitzgerald?

"It's definitely hard to believe," says Johnson. "Every time we're in practice, every time I see him do what he does, it's mesmerizing. Sometime I catch myself daydreaming watching him, not really paying attention to what I'm supposed to be doing."

Fitzgerald, of course, has plenty of receiving habits for Johnson, perhaps the game's best pass-catching back, to emulate. Johnson is a bona fide weapon from anywhere in the formation, be it out of the backfield, in the slot or out wide.

"I'm just trying to do better than last year," Johnson says. "Trying to get 1,000 (yards) receiving, 1,000 rushing. I was close last year."

I ask him where he ranks himself among NFL backs. He said: "I'm definitely going to have to say I feel like I should be number one. If there's a player in the NFL who doesn't feel that way, they definitely should not be in the NFL. I feel like I should be number one, especially with the season I had last year, helping out the team. And I still have a lot of room to improve."

The only other player with Johnson's diversity of skills is Pittsburgh's Le'Veon Bell, who this spring was slapped with a \$12.1 million franchise tag and has one week remaining to figure out a long-term deal with the Steelers. Johnson, of course, has an interest in these negotiations. Bell's contract will help set the top end of the running back market. Johnson's deal expires after the 2018 season.

"I hope he gets the deal he deserves," Johnson says. "I hope it's going to be the type of deal that cornerbacks get and quarterbacks get."

There are problems with Johnson's situation, which he's aware of but doesn't fret about. For starters, he's simply underpaid. Arguably the most valuable non-quarterback offensive player in football, he has a 2017 salary (including prepaid bonuses) of almost \$800,000. In 2018, his salary is just south of \$900K. Johnson is worth about 15 times that much. But such is the nature of a rookie contract. Teams who can find stars in the mid-rounds of the draft (Johnson was a third-rounder) gain a huge financial advantage. The player's second contract eventually corrects things.

But this brings us to the second part of Johnson's problem: he'll be 27 when negotiating that second contract. For a running back, that's the back half of middle age. A 27-year-old at any other position is presumed to have five or six years left in his prime. Teams negotiating with Johnson will try to argue that he'll hit the infamous running back wall at 30, like so many before him. Johnson doesn't have as much tread on the tires as most backs, but that won't stop teams from at least initially trying to negotiate this way. They may want to discuss money commensurate with a three- to four-year deal. A running back's value can get minimized on paper.

"That is so true," Johnson says. "I feel like, especially now, with the running backs we have in this league, we're going to definitely change the mentality of the running back and those contract deals. We're going to definitely make it (understood) that running backs are more important than you'd think. Everyone

thinks it's a passing league, but I think running backs are starting to show up and show out and prove that you need a good one to be a capable team."

* * *

Stephon Gilmore: Personal and Professional

Imagine one day signing a five-year, \$65 million contract with the world champion Patriots and having it be the second biggest thing to happen to you that day. That's the reality for former Bills cornerback Stephon Gilmore.

Immediately after signing with the Patriots on March 10, the free agent raced to the airport and caught a flight to Charlotte, where he and his wife Gabrielle make their offseason home. (Gilmore grew up about a half hour away in Rock Hill, S.C.) Gabrielle was in labor with their second child (first daughter), who, coincidentally, would be named Gisele.

"I got there at the easy part when she's pushing and had been numbed with the epidural," Gilmore said. "I wasn't there when she was in pain; I was there when she was about to push."

And has she noted the convenience of your timing?

"Oh yeah, she'll always remember that," Gilmore laughs. "Luckily her mom was there. She's a nurse so she took care of her and she was okay. I got back just in time so it wasn't too bad."

Merging football life and personal life is nothing to Gilmore. When he and Gabrielle married in July 2014, among the wedding's groomsmen were Alshon Jeffery, Melvin Ingram and Jadeveon Clowney. Add the groom and you have one wedding with four South Carolina Gamecocks turned full-fledged NFL stars. (In describing his wedding party to me, Gilmore listed everyone and then explained, "Melvin, Alshon and Jadeveon are still in the league." Thank you, Stephon.)

Gilmore earned the Patriots payday because he's a lanky, physical man-to-man corner. That fits New England's system. In Buffalo, he played a lot of Quarters coverage, which is a matchup zone—emphasis on the matchup part—in Rex Ryan's defense. "When we were running Cover 4 (i.e. Quarters), it was pretty much man," Gilmore says. "I mean, that's how we played it. My technique wouldn't change, just my leverage would change sometimes, depending on the coverage."

Gilmore played only on the defensive right side in Buffalo. In recent years, the Patriots have matched up their corners. Malcolm Butler, whom Gilmore may have been signed to replace but is back for at least one more year, has traveled with the opponent's quickest receiver. Logan Ryan, who left for Tennessee in free agency, has traveled with the bigger, more physical receiver. Presumably, Gilmore will assume Ryan's duties, though part of what got Ryan paid in Tennessee is his ability to cover the slot.

In Buffalo, "I didn't play the slot much," Gilmore says. He believes he can, though. "I'm pretty sure playing outside is harder. I'll do whatever the coaches want me to do."

It's unusual to hear someone argue that covering the slot is easier than covering the perimeter. But on the perimeter, "nobody is out there, you're on an island most of the time," says Gilmore. "You are responsible for that third of the field, especially in man-to-man. In the slot, you have to be a little

quicker, but now they're putting bigger receivers in there. You're closer to the line and closer to the 10 players on the field and you can use that to your advantage."

The Patriots, of course, can never be counted on to do what you expect, so it's possible their cornerback roles will shift. Gilmore says it hasn't been decided yet.

Or maybe it has and he's just being mum. Though he's only been in Foxboro for four months, Gilmore has nearly mastered The Patriot Way. "I don't want to tell too many of my tricks," he says. Knowing he won't be willing to compare Bill Belichick and Rex Ryan on the record, I instead ask how many times he's been asked to compare the two.

"Too many times," he laughs. "They're two different guys. Two different personalities. That's all I can say. Two great coaches."

* * *

Mike Daniels is Ndamukong Suh With Uglier Job

Green Bay's Mike Daniels could very well be the NFL's most improved defensive lineman over the past three seasons.

"It's funny you say that, about me improving at every stage of my career," Daniels said over the phone from his home in New Jersey. "My kids and my cousins just got done playing Madden, and obviously they want to play as the Packers. That's the team that they all root for. And they came downstairs screaming, 'Pop! Pop!' or 'Mike! Mike!' I'm like, 'What is it?' They say to me, 'On the game they just said you get better every year! I think that's awesome that people take notice of that. I take pride in my craft, man.'"

The NFL is in the golden age of interior defensive linemen. The defensive tackle and 3-4 defensive end positions are stacked. Daniels falls into this group, though not necessarily into one division or the other. The Packers are unique. Instead of playing a 4-3 or a 3-4, defensive coordinator Dom Capers plays variations of both. And because he likes to play with extra defensive backs, he often settles for what amounts to a 2-4 front in nickel. Capers will play this lightened nickel package even if the offense is in its usual running down personnel. The only way this can work is if your defensive linemen do the dirty work.

"You ask the casual fan, he'd say 'Oh yeah, Ndamukong Suh's way better than Mike Daniels,'" Daniels says. "But when you look at schemes, he and I have two different jobs. What Suh does is going to get seen more. What I do, it doesn't really get seen. You have to look at the amount of double-team blocks (that Packers defensive linemen face)."

Suh's Dolphins play a 4-3, one-gap scheme. Suh is tremendous at fighting double-teams, which he sees frequently. But, bigger picture, Miami's scheme allows for him to penetrate. When Suh makes a play, it jumps out on television. Daniels's assignments tend to be more nuanced. His plays stand out on film, but TV camera angles don't always capture it.

I ask Daniels if he'll allow me to put words into his mouth. Before he can answer, I proceed. "I get the sense you'd enjoy playing 3-technique on the weak side in a 4-3 scheme," I say. This is known as an "under front 3-tech," a position that shoots the gap and draws a lot of one-on-one blocks.

“Coming out, people said to me ‘you’re a natural 4-3 under front 3-tech,’” Daniels replies. “That’s where other big-name defensive tackles are. But I don’t care. I’m a pretty good square peg in a 3-4 round hole.” Daniels, who is very loquacious, doesn’t say much more on the subject. “Politics and scheme, those are the two things I don’t talk about,” he explains.

His diplomacy is not surprising. For one, though it’s never talked about, Mike McCarthy, not Belichick, is the NFL’s most paranoid coach when it comes to trade secrets. Daniels doesn’t acknowledge this, but I’ve bumped into it several times pursuing Packers projects over the years. Two, Daniels is one of those old-school guys who exhorts the virtues of lining up and just knocking your opponent into the dirt. Guys like that don’t publicly yearn for a more glamorous role.

Guys like that do, however, harbor small grudges and use them as fuel. Daniels brought up the challenges of his road. He grew up in South Jersey but did not even receive a scholarship offer from nearby Temple. In fact, the only major university to do so was Iowa. Daniels went there and didn’t start until late in his career. He stood out, but with concerns about his size, he fell to the fourth round of the draft. Then he didn’t play much early in his NFL career. That’s not uncommon for young Packers defensive linemen, but so what?

I say to Daniels, okay, fair points all, but what’s also true: lately, football people have recognized you as one of the game’s best. And, even better, you got a four-year, \$42 million extension in December 2015. So why do you still care about all that old stuff?

“You never forget where you come from,” he says. “A person without a past does not have a future. You would be extremely foolish to relax. Or get complacent because you’ve had a minor amount of success. Because in the grand scheme of things, there’s a lot more to life. There’s a lot more you can do. There’s a lot of greater things that can be done in this world. And to get complacent because you met one goal? Well I think that’s very foolish.”

* * *

Robert Alford’s Well-Known Tutor

The NFL’s most improved cornerback over the course of last season was Atlanta’s Robert Alford. After Desmond Trufant tore his pectoral in Week 9, Alford, an up-and-down fringe starter for much of his four-year career, assumed Trufant’s duties and began traveling with No. 1 receivers. In the elevated role Alford didn’t just survive, he thrived. This included covering the slot, which he hadn’t done much before. The Falcons, having stumbled upon a second No. 1 corner, wisely locked him up in December with a four-year, \$38 million extension.

I recently asked Alford what was behind his 2016 improvement.

“It was more film study,” he said. “Everyone wanted to say when Tru went down that my game elevated. But I felt like my game was improving as the season went on, whether he was there or if he wasn’t there. I didn’t feel like that was a big thing that played a part in it, in me improving each and every week. I just went with that mindset.”

NFL players don’t grow as a film student on their own. Like anything else, it’s something they’re taught. I asked Alford who taught him. “My DB coach Marquand Manuel,” he said. “I also had a friend named Ryan Clark.”

You mean the former Steelers safety?

“Correct.”

Interesting. The most improved cover corner in football attributes much of his progress to what he’s learned from a retired safety.

“(Robert) is giving me too much credit,” Clark told me, “because I don’t play football; he does.” Clark, who now works as an analyst for ESPN, works with a handful of NFL players, watching their tape and providing feedback, and when possible, training with the guy. Tracy Porter, Clark’s former Washington teammate, was his first pupil. Included in today’s group are Giants safety Landon Collins and Bills first-round rookie cornerback Tre’Davious White.

“There are so many different training facilities and different people doing this type of work now I decided if I was going to work with DBs, I’d work on it as a whole. Some guy that went to school for kinesiology and got his masters in something else and went to school to learn how to train people doesn’t understand the intricacies of playing the defensive back position.”

The arrangements are often made through Performance Enhance Professionals, a training facility in Arizona (the same place Steelers linebacker James Harrison trains, Clark points out). In Alford’s case, the connection went way back. Alford’s older brother, Fred Booker, was Clark’s teammate at LSU. Alford knew Clark before either man reached the NFL.

“It’s probably more informal than you think,” Clark says. “These guys are like my little brothers. Like my friends. It’s about so much more than just training them, about so much more than their success at football. Although it is huge. I enjoy when they play well. When I’m sitting at press row at the Super Bowl and Robert Alford is picking off the greatest quarterback of all time for a pick-six, it felt good to be there. It felt good to feel like I had some part in that journey.”

It’s not surprising that Clark would bring up Alford’s Super Bowl pick-six. I had asked Alford if there was a single play that best illustrated his growth as a student of the game. That’s the one he identified. On that play, the Patriots were in a three-receiver bunch, with the receivers crisscrossing on their releases at the snap. This tactic, which naturally defeats coverages like the man-to-man that Atlanta played more down the stretch, is a staple of New England’s. On this play, Alford recognized that his receiver, Julian Edelman, was running a crossing route. The Falcons had an extra free defender, safety Keanu Neal, in the shallow middle of the field. Instead of trying to fight through all the congestion and chase Edelman, Alford let him go, knowing that Neal was there to pick him up. Now Alford was the free defender, which allowed him to read Brady and jump his throw to Danny Amendola.

Had the Falcons held on and won, this would have been the defining play of Super Bowl 51. Instead, it’s a footnote. A bitter footnote?

“I’m happy with it,” Alford said. “Not everyone gets to pick off Tom Brady in the Super Bowl. Not everyone is able to get to the Super Bowl and get an interception. But I’m moving on. As you said, we didn’t win it.”

Alford also can’t help but remember that this same sequence nearly played out again later in the game.

But this time, Alford failed to catch the interception.

“I wish I could’ve gotten that second one back,” he said. “I wish I could’ve gotten my head around in time and snagged that one. Maybe the game would’ve turned out differently.”

It’ll be interesting to see Alford’s role in 2017. Trufant is back now and, judging from the five-year, \$69 million contract they gave him this offseason, the Falcons see him as their No. 1 corner. Alford undoubtedly will start, but where will he primarily line up?

“I have no idea. Like Coach (Dan) Quinn said, going into training camp, it’s a competition. For everyone. No one has a spot. So we won’t know that until after the last preseason game. But I would love to be inside in our nickel coverage.”

That’s where Alford played in Super Bowl 51, against the league’s shiftiest slot receiver, Edelman. It’ll be lost in history, but it’s evident on film: Alford won the battle against Edelman that day. The Falcons likely now have a premium slot corner.

* * *

Quotes of the Week

I

“I like to say it’s the Lovie Curse. Because since he left, (the Bears have struggled). He got fired being 10-6. I think they fire him either way. Even if we go to the playoffs, I think they fire him. I don’t think the GM liked the way he coached the football team. The guy’s a winner. I love playing for him. I don’t know what the identity of that team is. They sign (Mike) Glennon, then they draft a kid No. 2. I don’t know what (they’re doing). It’s confusing.”

—*Brian Urlacher, on CBS Sports Radio's Tiki and Tierney Show, on the identity and struggles of his former team.*

II

“I’ve never been a ‘yes’ guy. Now, can I be someone who can talk things over and work it out? Yes. I know Jay (Gruden) well and Bruce (Allen) well. And I know there are going to be times when we may not agree. That’s a good thing; that’s what scouting is all about.”

—*Doug Williams, to the Washington Post, on Washington's new front office structure and his role as senior vice president of player personnel*

III

“A lot of people kill Eli—and I’ve been one to look back and kind of have fun with it a few times, too—but he always has this face. People are like, ‘Why is he always looking like that?’ And I truly believe it’s because he’s always thinking. Like he is one of the smartest guys I’ve been around. And I’ve been around some smart quarterbacks. [Ryan] Fitzpatrick, extremely smart. Even Jay Cutler, extremely smart. Eli Manning, I’ve never seen anything like this guy. His brain never stops.”

—*New Giants receiver Brandon Marshall, on quarterback Eli Manning. Marshall recently shared a video on Instagram of the two studying film together over FaceTime.*

* * *

Stat of the Week

There have been 79 quarterbacks drafted with a top-20 pick since 1970. Only one of those QBs, Peyton Manning, has been name first-team All-Pro more than once. And only five others have earned the honor even once: Cam Newton, Matt Ryan, Jim Kelly, Bert Jones and Terry Bradshaw.

And an additional note on another top-20 drafted QB: Carson Wentz attempted a total of 612 passes in four years at North Dakota State. In 2016 with Philadelphia, he attempted 607.

* * *

Factoid That May Interest Only Me

Having an effective play-action scheme doesn't necessarily mean you need an effective running game. A stat to chew on: The top five teams in yards per pass on play-action snaps last season were Washington, Atlanta, San Diego, New England and Minnesota. Those same five teams' ranking in yards per rush: 9th, 5th, 26th, 25th and 32nd.

* * *

Tweets of the Week

I
@FieldYates

31 of 32 NFL teams have made at least one coordinator change since 2015. Meanwhile, the Patriots have had the same duo since 2012.

II

@__AWalkJr

10 Year Old Me: Dad If I'm Blessed To Play In The NFL, I'm Going To Buy You A New Car.

21 Year Old Me: Promise Kept! #Blessed

III

@AndrewBrandt

Derek Carr and Jruce Holiday both signed for \$125 million. Amount guaranteed upon signing:

Carr: \$40 million

Holiday: \$125 million

IV

@ktsharp

Players in MLB history w/ at least 3000 hits, 250 HR, 350 SB, 1300 RBI:

Derek Sanderson Jeter.

[the end]

* * *

Mr. Starwood Preferred Member Travel Note

I love sushi and live in a state known for potatoes. When I travel for work, I try to eat as much raw fish as possible. Usually this rockets me past Time Inc.'s per diem, putting my personal credit card into action. I don't care. You have to capitalize on your opportunities, even the ones created by overspending for fancy food that later leaves you still feeling a little bit hungry.

I used to prioritize sushi only when in coastal cities. But now any city will do. There's no further proof than the fact that last week in two-and-a-half days in Phoenix, the unofficial most landlocked big city in America, I ate sushi four times. And guess what? It was tremendous. At a place called Iron Chef, which was five minutes from where I stayed and seven minutes from the home of Patrick Peterson (the purpose of my trip), I had what I'm prepared to classify as the best Rainbow Roll of my life. And for reasons I never learned, it was all 40 percent off.

Good prices weren't uncommon on this trip. If you ever want a bargain, visit Phoenix in the dead of summer. Sure, temperatures rose into the mid-110s, making it literally painful to wear black leather shoes outside. (The tops of my feet would burn.) But my room, which was a full apartment on a golf course, was less than \$100 a night. And it had a fridge, which meant that in addition to sushi, I could continue drinking milk on this trip. Those who have traveled with me know I couldn't ask for anything more.

* * *

Ten Things I Think I Think

1. I think so what if Dak Prescott used a high-tech printer to forge his own autograph. (So far, this has only been alleged.) Is it wrong? Sure. Does it matter? No. Autograph culture is weird. Certain people get worshipped so much that they can add value to an artifact simply by writing their name on it. Unless an autograph is a personal gift you received, there's a certain phoniness to the whole thing anyway.

1a. I say this as someone who grew up collecting autographs. I had a knack for purchasing the signatures of soon-to-be disgraced athlete. Hanging on my wall: a signed photo of Barry Bonds before the steroid allegations; a signed photo of Michael Vick before dog-fighting; a signed photo of Kobe Bryant before Colorado; a signed photo of Brett Favre before Jenn Sterger and the Jets; and a signed photo of Tiger Woods before Thanksgiving 2009. Strangely, these are pretty much all of the autographs I own. I wouldn't buy Prescott's autograph now; I like the young man and want him to stay on top.

2. I think Michael Bennett's assertion that 49ers second-year pro DeForest Buckner will soon be a defensive MVP is reasonable. Buckner has a great frame and played with much better leverage in the second half of last season. My guess is he'll play Bennett's role in San Francisco's new Seahawks-style scheme. That means snaps as a 5-technique on running downs and 3-technique on passing downs.

3. I think Albert Breer said it best: Derek Carr's contract is evolutionary, not revolutionary. The Raiders were wise to get it done when they did.

3a. I also think Carr will be better in 2017 than he was in 2016. He was a markedly sharper quarterback over the second half of last season.

4. I think Zach Orr was tremendous as Baltimore's linebacker last year and it'd be great to see him have a long, fruitful career. But something about his efforts to return after retiring from a congenital neck and spine condition doesn't feel right. The Ravens have seen a player defy some doctors' orders and return after a life-changing injury before: tight end Dennis Pitta, who had fractured his hip twice in 2013-14. After sitting out 2015, Pitta caught 86 passes last season but recently re-injured the hip, ending his career for good and, probably (though hopefully not) creating more challenges for his long-term day-to-day life.

5. I think Aaron Rodgers is still the most difficult quarterback in football to reconcile. I was watching film the other night with one of my research guys, Allan Uy. What kept standing out was how often Rodgers left wide open receivers on the field. And these weren't receivers who got open just because Rodgers extended the play. They got open within the context of the play's design. And they were getting open because the play call was beating the coverage concept. Which means that Rodgers, reading the coverage, should have anticipated them being open. Rodgers leaves throws on the field almost every game. Other players who do this tend to be backups or fall out of the league (see Kaepernick, Colin; or Griffin, Robert). The difference? Rodgers still makes plays, even on the snaps where he misses plays. He is a unique talent and an impossible QB to classify.

6. I think Eric Decker is just a role player. He can be highly productive in the right role and scheme. (He was at his best working the slot for the Jets.) But he doesn't change the makeup of Tennessee's passing game.

7. I think I used to believe that Kirk Cousins would be with Washington long-term. But hearing informed people around league talk, I now think Cousins will eventually be a 49er (after 2017).

8. I think the Lions got it right with their new uniforms. And I love that they brought back the throwbacks with the simple blue jersey, silver helmet, no logo or outlining.

9. I think the Patriots are the most improved Super Bowl champion I've ever seen. How often does a high-scoring club remake its offense after winning the title and come away even more dangerous than before?

10. I think Peter King should be both institutionalized but also given a bronze statue outside of SI's offices for writing this column each week. I'll be recovering from it until Labor Day.

Von Miller takes aim at sack leader Vic Beasley

By Jeremy Bergman

NFL.com

July 10, 2017

Von Miller is widely regarded as the league's best pass rusher. In fact, his peers ranked him No. 2 behind the immortal Tom Brady on The Top 100 Players of 2017 countdown, making Miller the highest-ranked defensive player on the list.

But heading into this season, Miller has his eyes set on another prize: league sack leader, an honor currently held by Falcons pass rusher Vic Beasley. The Broncos linebacker took aim Sunday at the Super Bowl runner-up on the interwebs.

Miller tweeted the below NFL Network graphic of the number 13.5, his sack total from 2016, with the caption, "Coming for you fam @VicBeasley3." The Super Bowl 50 MVP later deleted the tweet.

@nflnetwork

2016:

13.5 sacks (2nd most in NFL behind Vic Beasley) @VonMiller voted No. 2 on the #NFLTop100 by his peers

10:01 AM - 9 Jul 2017

Beasley's league-leading 15.5 sacks was the lowest total to pace all defenders in a season since 2010 when then-Cowboys defensive end DeMarcus Ware tallied 15.5. Contributing to Beasley leading the NFL with such a relatively low sack number were the absences due to injury and suspension of notable takedown masters J.J. Watt, Justin Houston and Aldon Smith, players whom in years past have led the league with 19-plus sacks.

Miller's career high is 18.5 sacks in 2012; the pass rusher hasn't tallied more than 14 in a season since then.

Will Miller catch Beasley in 2017? Is the Broncos defender still the best edge rusher in the league even when Watt is healthy? Are offseason Twitter beefs petty? Embrace debate.

In other news, there are nine Sundays 'til football. Single digits, baby. Single digits.

Terrell Davis Shows Off His Gold Jacket

By Staff

CBS 4

July 10, 2017

Denver Broncos running back Terrell Davis will be enshrined in the Pro Football Hall of Fame next month and he's obviously pretty excited because he showed off his gold jacket.

"The baby's here," he said in the video posted by the Hall of Fame. "This doesn't come in the mail often. That's pretty sweet."

Davis and the rest of this year's class of players will be enshrined Aug. 5 in Canton, Ohio.

He joins John Elway, Shannon Sharpe, Floyd Little and Gary Zimmerman in the hall.

Push for Pat Bowlen to Hall of Fame expected to commence soon

By Mike Florio
Pro Football Talk
July 10, 2017

The momentum continues to build to put Broncos owner Pat Bowlen in the Hall of Fame.

As explained by Mike Klis of 9news.com, the Contributors Selection Committee will meet next month to determine its finalist for the next class of inductees. Per Klis, Bowlen is expected to receive his strongest consideration yet.

Some believe Bowlen should have gotten in before Cowboys owner Jerry Jones, who in four weeks will formally be enshrined. Bowlen's impact on the league arguably was matched that of his colleague from Texas.

"Ownership had always tended to follow Art [Modell] and whoever the commissioner was, and they felt they were well-served," former NBC Sports president Dick Ebersol told Klis. "But then along came Pat and Jerry, guys who were then called mavericks. I would say in retrospect they were visionaries. . . .

"Mr. B and Jerry Jones are the two people who really opened the flood gates of television money," Ebersol added. "It had increased every time since the '60s. But never like what happened when FOX came [in 1994] and the money changed."

Twelve years later another major change came, with NBC getting back in to the NFL business by taking over Sunday Night Football, a property that went from cable to broadcast and that became, as a practical matter, what Monday Night Football used to be. Ebersol has called Bowlen "the father" and the "single major force" of the Sunday night franchise.

Most believe Bowlen, who relinquished control of the team in 2014 due to Alzheimer's disease, inevitably will be enshrined. It won't be a surprise if it happens this year. The first major step will be for Bowlen to secure the lone spot devoted in the 2018 class earmarked for a contributor to the game.