

Why haven't the Broncos re-signed John Elway yet? It's complicated.

By Nicki Jhabvala
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Thirty-four years ago, when John Elway was prepared to sign his first NFL contract, he didn't have any idea which town he would call home.

He just knew it wouldn't be Baltimore.

Now, nearly two decades after hanging up his cleats and seven years into his tenure as a Broncos executive, Elway is in the middle of another contract discussion. And this time, he has said he is quite certain of where he'll be.

"I look forward to being here with the Broncos for a long time," he said in May, adding that he didn't have "any doubt" a new contract would be signed before the season began.

Given Elway's stature with the franchise and the state of Colorado, and given his unmatched track record while in the front office, the question is not so much about whether a deal will get done, but how and when.

"I thought it would be done, because normally you don't have a very good executive potentially being a lame duck," former sports agent Joel Corry said. "The season doesn't start until September, so there's still time, but usually you get those things ironed out before this time, before the draft."

Broncos president and CEO Joe Ellis said in January that the team had conversations with Elway's representatives in October and that talks would continue. "I'm optimistic we'll get something done," Ellis said then.

In fact the team had initiated contract talks as early as midway through last season with the hope of getting a deal done well before Elway entered the final stretch of his current contract.

As talks drag on — and the sides have maintained dialogue recently — the general assumption is there's discord or tension, but a team source said that's not the case. Elway, as he has shown with nearly every major player deal that has gone to the deadline, operates on his own time. Perhaps his own negotiations are no different.

But if there's one given, it's this: The Hall of Famer will be paid handsomely in a manner that reflects his value to the team on and off the field.

"It's just the other issues that make it more complicated," Corry said.

"A unique position"

John Elway is the Broncos and has been since 1983, really, and his value continues to soar. No executive, it could be argued, means more to a franchise than Elway does to the Broncos.

“Which puts Elway in a unique position, because when you think Denver Broncos, he’s synonymous with the team,” Corry said. “He’s got more leverage than any GM has had in quite a long time, because what were the Broncos like before he got there? It’s kind of hard to argue with the on-field success.”

Since Elway took over football operations in 2011, the Broncos rank second in total wins (73) and have five playoff berths, five division titles, two Super Bowl appearances and, of course, that Super Bowl 50 victory. He built the most prolific offense in NFL history in 2013, and then constructed the top defense in 2015, which sits among the league’s finest units in history.

To pad his résumé is his proven talent evaluation. In his six years as an executive, Elway is the only general manager to have found Pro Bowlers in the draft, in street free agency, in unrestricted free agency and in college free agency.

In the NBA, he would be the \$201 million free agent, unquestionably warranting the “Super Max” deal.

If only NFL executive deals were that simple.

When Seattle Seahawks general manager John Schneider re-upped last year, his annual salary was reported to “approach” the \$3.75 million Baltimore’s Ozzie Newsome receives as the supposedly highest-paid GM.

“(Elway) may be a unique situation because of the ownership challenges,” Corry said. “One of the holdups might be him angling for some sort of ownership or a piece of the team.”

Shortly before Pat Bowlen announced he would step down from his day-to-day duties as owner in 2014, Elway signed a three-year extension and added general manager to his title of vice president of football operations, giving him complete autonomy over the football side and the roster construction.

Bowlen is still the owner of the team, but the Broncos have been placed in a family trust operated by three trustees: Ellis, team counsel Rich Slivka and Denver attorney Mary Kelly. The trust is intended to serve as the vehicle to hand controlling ownership to Bowlen’s seven children. Each child will have equal stake as a beneficiary of the trust, but the trustees are tasked with appointing the ownership representative among the seven kids.

Ellis has said emphatically that Bowlen’s succession plan remains the only plan and that re-signing Elway remains a priority.

“I’d like John to stick around,” Ellis reiterated at the NFL owners meetings in March. “I think I’m in the majority.”

But consider the trustees also have the authority to sell the team in full and in part. Ellis, as president and CEO, has the power to extend Elway’s contract. And Ellis and the other two trustees have the authority to push to give him a piece of the team — should that even be something they and Elway are considering.

It's unclear whether Elway is asking for a piece. But as with any ownership transaction, league approval and compliance with policies would be required, raising plenty of legal questions with the Bowlens as well as NFL questions about precedent.

The ripple effect could be tremendous, which is why it does not appear to be a realistic scenario.

Setting the record straight

Shortly before Super Bowl 50, ESPN reported that Elway turned down minority stake in the Broncos when Bowlen offered it to him nearly 20 years ago, spurning what would be now worth about \$480 million, based on Forbes' latest team valuations. But the offer was never exercised by Bowlen amid a court battle with previous owner Edgar Kaiser.

In speaking to The Denver Post last August, Elway made it clear that turning down any stake in the team was not by choice.

"There were circumstances there that didn't make it work out. Let's put it that way," he said. "It wasn't because I didn't want it to. It's just that there were some circumstances there that I can't go into that caused it not to work out, which I was obviously very disappointed with."

If Elway wanted a piece then, perhaps he still does. But in 2014, when Bowlen stepped down from his day-to-day duties with the team, Elway was asked just that.

"Pat Bowlen still owns the Broncos," Elway said then. "We have total respect for that. They've hired me to run the football operations, and I'm thrilled to do that. I work for Pat still — as well as the Bowlen family — and I'm going to continue to do that."

Perhaps something different is being considered, such as a unique compensation structure. He, as arguably the most coveted GM in the NFL, is the only one with the leverage to get it.

Elway's situation is complicated. The Broncos' situation is complicated. But both insist on only one possible outcome that could still be met before the Broncos return to the field July 27.

"This will always be my home," Elway said. "(I'm) not going anywhere. As a kid, I moved around quite a bit. But, Colorado and Denver will always be my home."

Review: Best and worst of Manning-hosted ESPYs

By Mike Klis

9 News

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As Peyton Manning was making a big deal about the 25th anniversary of the ESPY awards, it occurred to me I had never watched more than a few minutes of the previous 24 shows.

Peyton was why I watched the full ESPY show for the first time Wednesday night.

The former Denver Broncos' quarterback should be proud of his performance. Perhaps, we should grade him on a curve. As a former professional athlete trying to be a comedian, Manning would get an A. Compared to other comedic hosts – Alec Baldwin at the NFL Honors show in 2013, say – Manning would still get a B.

He does have a natural sense of humor. He is not an egomaniac in real life, but he does a great job playing one for laughs.

I was squirming for him early, though.

His monologue did not get off to an uproarious start. But he hung in there and rallied, although it could have been better without the seemingly pre-staged, stone-faced reaction by Keven Durant to a Manning diss. (It was staged, correct? Either way, it's funnier when the roasted subject laughs along with the joke.)

And 2 ½ of Manning's three pre-recorded skits were hilarious. Here are my observations on how the 3-hour show (including commercials) went Wednesday night:

*I had never been previously interested in the ESPYs because the competitive awards are silly. The only individual awards that matter in sports are the top honors – MVP in all leagues, CY Young in baseball, Vezina Trophy in hockey, Defensive Player of the Year in basketball and football – in a player's respective sports.

Aaron Rodgers doesn't play quarterback for the Green Bay Packers so he can win an ESPY for Play of the Year.

But the show's three serious, heart-tugging award presentations – the Arthur Ashe, Jimmy V and Pat Tillman – are riveting. I was wrong to not pay closer attention to earlier shows.

The silly awards, I have concluded, are necessary fillers to these must-watch stories of inspiration.

*Best moment: The video clips of Eunice Kennedy Shriver's work in starting the Special Olympics in honor of her sister Rosemary. The occasion was enhanced by former First Lady Michelle Obama presenting the Arthur Ashe Award to the late Kennedy Shriver.

Timothy Shriver accepted the award on behalf of his mom. He is a powerful orator, although he went on way too long.

*Worst moment: The Chicago Cubs receiving the Best Moment award. And I'm a Cub fan, which emphasizes how uncomfortably unfunny this bit was.

Comedic actor Nick Offerman, a long-time Cubs fan, had a nice, subtle line or two, but Bill Murray bombed and I didn't get the David Ross shtick.

Mercifully, the routine just ended, apparently for no other reason than it was getting too painful to watch.

*Second-worst moment: Kevin Durant mooning his underwear to the TV cameras because his sweat pants fell halfway down his bottom as he got up to accept the oh-so-prestigious Best Championship Performance award.

*Best Manning moment: His jingle-coach skit with country music star Brad Paisley.

"It's what I do," Manning said to a dumfounded Paisley. "The jingle is ... me. I am the jingle."

I about lost it.

*Second-best Manning moment: The skit where he hosted the Super Bowl LI party. The show's writers played up his career-long rivalry with the New England Patriots.

Manning perfectly reflected what 95 percent of the viewing audience was feeling on Feb. 5 – loving every second of the Atlanta Falcons taking a 28-3 lead, and anguishing bitterly as the Patriots rallied to win in overtime.

In his skit, Manning threatened to literally pull the plug, or change the channel, during the Pats' comeback. As James White is about to cross the goal line in overtime to complete the historic comeback, Manning fires a football that pummels his TV.

"Beat it, no autographs," he tells his friends who want nothing to do with him as they leave his home.

*Third-best Manning moment: At first, his skit with the retirement home was a rip-off of his famous United Way routine on Saturday Night Live. Only instead of chewing out young kids, Manning was tough-coaching senior citizens.

But the routine turned amusing halfway through when Manning developed a personal dislike for an elderly lady named Ruth, who later was outed as Tom Brady's grandma ("Gam Gam" as only sweet Tom Brady can say it.)

"Shut up, Ruth," Manning told her after she asked if he won five Super Bowls, too.

*Best Zinger with Worst Response: During his monologue, Manning said the U.S. women's gymnastics team "was so dominant that Kevin Durant wants to play for them next year."

This was a humorous reference to the superstar Durant leaving the Oklahoma City Thunder for the already star-stacked Golden State Warriors last year.

Durant didn't laugh, and neither did his former Oklahoma City teammate Russell Westbrook when Manning asked for his response. Almost every review on the Internet reported Durant and Westbrook didn't think Manning's crack was funny, but there were signs of a pre-arranged set-up.

Both Durant and Westbrook put their right hand over their mouths, as if to make sure they didn't laugh. And at show's end, Durant was on stage accepting some other silly award (Best Team, the Golden State Warriors) and exchanged a man hug with Manning.

Best Manning rally: I could see Broncos staffers laughing in acknowledgement as Manning's monologue shifted to spoofing his OCD-like perfectionism by ordering the cameras popped back, lights colored blue and red, and directing star shines and rimshots. Bronco people lived it for four years with the obsessive Manning.

Other observations:

*Von Miller is becoming the Taylor Swift of sports awards shows.

Networks seemingly host awards shows – Grammy, Academy, Emmy, Golden Globe, MTV, Country, whatever – so they can cutaway to Swift, the megastar singer, a couple times an hour as she sits in the audience.

Miller was given a front-row seat at the ESPYs event though he didn't present, or receive an award. Manning did use him as a sidekick to bust the selection of Super Bowl LI winning the silly, "Best Game" award.

"I didn't even watch it," Miller said to Manning, who took the seat next to him. "Did you?"

Otherwise, Miller was there simply because, like Swift, he is remarkably telegenic.

*The night's greatest hero with Colorado ties was not Manning or Miller, but Air Force Master Sgt. Israel Del Toro, who has called Colorado Springs home.

Horribly injured with burns from a roadside bombing in Afghanistan in 2005, Del Toro in February made his 131st parachute jump – and first in 12 years – at the Air Force Academy. The first airman with a 100 percent disability rating allowed to re-enlist in the Air Force, the inspiring Del Toro received the Pat Tillman Award.

*After the story of young Jarrius "JJ" Robertson was told during the presentation of the Jimmy V Award, I checked my driver's license to make sure I was an organ donor. A "Y" in the middle of a heart is there in the lower right corner.

*The Best Game award should have gone to Game 7 of the World Series, not Super Bowl LI. And Morgan William's buzzer beater shot to beat the mighty UConn women's basketball team in the Final Four should have won Best Play, not Rodgers pass to Jared Cook.

If you're going to insist on having silly awards, get 'em right.

Broncos' tight ends look to break out in new offense

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN

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When it comes to where, exactly, tight ends have fit in the Denver Broncos' offense of late, Virgil Green has consistently said "forgotten" is too strong a word.

"I wouldn't say that," is how the six-year veteran put it early in the Broncos' offseason program. And "I still wouldn't say that" is what he said just before they adjourned for their summer break last month.

However, "sparingly" is not too strong a word. And with a new coach, new offensive coordinator, a new playbook and one very crowded spot on the depth chart, the Broncos seem inclined to see what more they can get from this group in the passing game.

But here's the bottom line: This isn't a new dilemma. The last time a Broncos tight end finished a season with at least 50 catches when a future Hall of Famer (Peyton Manning) wasn't throwing the ball or a current Hall of Famer (Shannon Sharpe) wasn't catching it was 2001.

The player?

Your answer there is Desmond Clark, who finished with 51 receptions that season.

In between, Tony Scheffler had a pair of 40-catch seasons in 2007 and '08, but since Sharpe's retirement, only Manning in Adam Gase's wide-open offense consistently made a tight end a 50-catch threat. Julius Thomas had 65 grabs in 2013 -- when the Broncos were second in the league with 659 pass attempts and set a single-season record for points -- while Jacob Tamme had 52 receptions in 2012.

And while a 50-catch season is a lot to ask as the current Broncos aim to give wide receivers Demaryius Thomas and Emmanuel Sanders plenty of action in the passing game, offensive coordinator Mike McCoy's recent history suggests Denver's tight ends can expect to be more involved than last season, when Green's 22 catches led the position group.

"I just think we had to do things a little differently [last season]," Green said. "We were in, blocking some -- we had to get the run game going a little more, and we were in a lot to block the rushers."

Certainly, the presence of a player such as Antonio Gates in McCoy's offense in his four seasons as Chargers coach pumped up the tight-end numbers. And the Chargers didn't have a tandem of receivers to work on the outside like Thomas and Sanders.

Still, McCoy kept the tight ends and running backs busy in those four seasons, and the Broncos players who have looked at that game video believe he will do the same in his return to Denver. Gates caught at least 53 passes in all four of his seasons with McCoy. During that same stretch, the Chargers also saw a running back catch at least 36 passes three times and a tight end other than Gates catch at least 36 passes twice.

"I think this is a great offense for tight ends," A.J. Derby said earlier this offseason. "I think [McCoy's] past record in San Diego shows that."

Of the group, Green is the only player who was on Denver's roster when McCoy was in his first stint as the team's offensive coordinator (2009-12). The Broncos have seven players at the position, including two picks from the past three drafts in Jeff Heurman and Jake Butt.

The Broncos took Butt in the fifth round of the 2017 draft, but had it not been for a knee injury in Michigan's bowl game in December, Butt would have carried a first-round grade from many teams. Butt almost certainly will open training camp on the physically unable to perform list as he continues his rehab.

The Broncos like his progress, and he projects for plenty of playing time down the road; coach Vance Joseph said Butt likely would play sometime in the regular season. The Broncos drafted Heurman -- who missed his rookie season in 2015 with a knee injury -- with the idea he could also be the blocker/receiver combination they want.

Further, the Broncos liked what they saw from Derby after his arrival from New England in a trade last season, and have always believed Green's athleticism warranted additional time in the offense.

For his part, McCoy hasn't committed to more work for any particular players. He has consistently said the Broncos will "do what we do best" and construct an offense that "puts everybody in the best position for us to move the ball, score points and help us win games."

"But we think that can be us," Green said. "No question, we have the group of guys to get that done. We just need opportunities and want them and then take advantage of those opportunities."

AFC West Q&A: Who will win the division and how many teams will make the playoffs?

By Staff

ESPN

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Who will win the AFC West and how many teams from the division will make the playoffs?

Jeff Legwold, Denver Broncos reporter: There are plenty of personnel folks in the league who believe the Chiefs are poised for a step back from last season's 12 wins. They have significant questions of age on defense and they expended an awful lot of their draft capital this April to secure quarterback Patrick Mahomes II. The Raiders will have to fight lame-duck status in Oakland and no matter how many times they say it won't be a problem, it will certainly be a problem. If they handle it, they can, and should, win the division. That is an enormous if, however. Yet if Derek Carr stays healthy and the Raiders play with at least some consistency in their secondary, they are positioned to lead the way. The Chargers are vastly improved, but if Russell Okung can't play better than he did last season with the Broncos, left tackle is a spot that is going to be an issue.

Put all of that together and if the Broncos can do some work in the first half of their schedule, especially before they have three consecutive road games -- Oct. 22, Oct. 30 and Nov. 5 -- the division's best defense could power a run for the title for the sixth time in the past seven years. In the end, three teams in this division should make the postseason if the Raiders can solve playing in front of fans who are angry to see them go.

Adam Teicher, Kansas City Chiefs reporter: The Raiders will be the popular pick, and perhaps they should be. But for that to happen, they'll need to figure out a couple of things. The first is to play better defense against all opponents. The Raiders allowed 375 yards and 24 points per game last season. If they don't trim those numbers, it's going to be difficult for them to win the AFC West. The second is to figure out a way to beat the Chiefs.

The Chiefs have won five straight games against Oakland, with an average margin of victory of more than 12 points. The final margin hasn't been under six points in any of those five games. The Chiefs have defended Carr better than any other Raiders opponent. They, for instance, intercepted him three times in the fourth quarter of a 2015 game in Oakland to rally for a victory. The Raiders last season averaged more than 26 points in the regular season, but they didn't score a combined 26 in both of their games against Kansas City.

So the Raiders have some things to prove before I'm ready to declare them the best in the AFC West. I'll stick with the defending division titlists, the Chiefs, to win again. But the Raiders will make the playoffs as the AFC West's second and only other postseason participant.

Eric D. Williams, Los Angeles Chargers reporter: If they stay healthy, the Raiders should earn the AFC West crown. The Raiders have the most talented quarterback in the division and are strong up front on both sides of the football. However, the Achilles' heel of the Raiders is the pass defense. Oakland allowed a league-high 61 passing plays of 20 or more yards last season. The Raiders brought in assistant head coach John Pagano, the Chargers' former defensive coordinator, to help rectify the issue. Oakland

also drafted cornerback Gareon Conley in the first round. So, we'll see how Oakland's new-look secondary performs in 2017. The Chiefs and the Chargers will compete for a wild-card berth.

Paul Gutierrez, Oakland Raiders reporter: This all comes down to how and if Carr can solve his Kansas City woes. The quarterback's first career win came versus the Chiefs in an Oakland rainstorm at night, after an 0-10 start in his rookie season of 2014. But since then, Carr is 0-5 against the Chiefs. Carr, meanwhile, is 4-2 against the Chargers and 2-3 against the Broncos. More impressive, though, is his 4-0 mark against the Chargers the past two seasons and going 2-1 against the Broncos.

It's this simple, really: If Carr beats the Chiefs, the Raiders win the division. If he cannot beat them, Kansas City repeats. Both teams, though, will be in the playoffs again. And while it feels as though the Broncos are rebuilding, they are merely reloading and can make a push for the division with a year of experience for quarterback Trevor Siemian. If the Chargers, who blew six fourth-quarter leads a year ago, can regroup under coach Anthony Lynn, they also can surprise.

Value of Denver Broncos jumps in latest Forbes rankings

By Ben Miller

Denver Business Journal

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The team value of the Denver Broncos jumped remarkably in the past year, according to a ranking by Forbes.

The Broncos are now valued at \$2.4 billion, up 24 percent from last year's valuation by Forbes of \$1.94 billion.

A year earlier, the Broncos were valued at \$1.45 billion.

According to the latest Forbes list, the Dallas Cowboys are the world's most valuable team for the second straight year at \$4.2 billion.

The Cowboys are followed by the New York Yankees at \$3.7 billion, and soccer teams Manchester United at \$3.69 billion, Barcelona at \$3.64 billion, and Real Madrid at \$3.58 billion.

The Broncos are ranked No. 24 on the list, up from No. 40 on last year's list.

Fifteen players to watch at Broncos training camp -- 14. Isaiah McKenzie

By Andrew Mason
DenverBroncos.com
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Small and quick, the rookie wide receiver and punt returner gives the offense another chess piece with which to work.

Nearly a decade and a half after the Chiefs popularized the notion of having an "X-factor" like Dante Hall in their offense and on special teams, the Broncos hope to extract that from their offense. However, creating that sort of game-changing explosiveness sometimes requires multiple players.

One component of that equation could be fifth-round pick Isaiah McKenzie. The 5-foot-7, 173-pound fifth-round pick has unique quickness and agility that makes him a potential game-breaking weapon as an inside receiving target, a runner on jet and fly sweeps and as a punt returner.

McKenzie flourished in all of those roles at Georgia, and scored once every seven offensive touches last season. He showed promise during OTAs and minicamp when given opportunities to handle the football in all of those situations, including one play where he took a short slant, burst upfield and scored.

Despite his small frame, McKenzie possesses what Head Coach Vance Joseph described in May as "big-man ball skills," and then spent the offseason practices displaying them.

"He has a skill set that we could use him in a lot of places," Joseph said last month. "He's exciting. He's a smart guy. He's a tough guy. So we're excited about him."

While he should have a multi-faceted role, his first chance for an impact is likely to come on punt returns, a discipline in which he set Georgia's all-time record for touchdowns (five). But what worked with the Bulldogs won't necessarily succeed in the NFL, even though he had success in the rigorous SEC.

"When he got to us, he was a good catcher. As you guys know, it's a little bit different here in the NFL," Special Teams Coordinator Brock Olivo told media in June. "He's going to have gunners in his face at times, [punt protectors] in his face at times, so we have to get him comfortable back there and get him to trust the system. He has to trust that it's going to be there."

"The thing that I love about Isaiah is that he's got all the confidence in the world in himself. I think he's going to be just fine."

Ranking NFL offensive lines by team: Cowboys have new challenger

By Nate Davis

USA Today

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NFL rosters are essentially set until training camps open later this month. In the meantime, USA TODAY Sports has analyzed each team's depth chart and is ranking units throughout the league.

Today's positional group: Offensive linemen

1. Dallas Cowboys: When a greenhorn backfield brings home a rookie of the year award along with a rushing title, the "supporting cast" must be special. QB Dak Prescott and RB Ezekiel Elliott readily admit their 2016 success was enabled by a front regarded as the NFL's best for several seasons. Any unit featuring three all-pros (LT Tyron Smith, RG Zack Martin, C Travis Frederick) is, by definition, elite. But Dallas' hold on the top spot appears tenuous after LG Ron Leary left in free agency, and RT Doug Free retired. La'El Collins struggled inside last year and must prove he can be an NFL tackle, while new LG Chaz Green has played sparingly.
2. Tennessee Titans: RT Jack Conklin mauled his way to all-pro honors as a rookie. He and equally chippy Taylor Lewan could be the league's top tackle tandem for the next decade. Given the way Tennessee ran the ball down opponents' throats in 2016, the continued cohesion with QB Marcus Mariota and maintained continuity, this quintet seems poised to overtake Dallas.
3. Oakland Raiders: Though QB Derek Carr's broken leg scuttled Oakland's hopes in 2016, don't forget his line allowed the fewest sacks (18) in the league. There's a question at right tackle heading into camp, but is there any interior trio better than C Rodney Hudson and Gs Gabe Jackson and Kelechi Osemele?
4. Philadelphia Eagles: Perhaps the telling stat of the Eagles' 2016 season was their 5-1 record when RT Lane Johnson played vs. a 2-8 mark during his suspension. Johnson's presence also had a notable effect on QB Carson Wentz's play. C Jason Kelce must prove he hasn't become the weak link, but Philly looks formidable assuming good health and behavior from its front five.
5. Atlanta Falcons: They were charmed in 2016, C Alex Mack's arrival galvanizing the only line that remained intact all season. That's changed with Chris Chester's retirement, but this remains a top-shelf group that should have little trouble breaking in a right guard.
6. Washington Redskins: Perennial Pro Bowl LT Trent Williams headlines an underrated crew. G Brandon Scherff and RT Morgan Moses have developed into top-notch performers under the tutelage of master assistant Bill Callahan.
7. New Orleans Saints: LT Terron Armstead's recent shoulder injury is a huge setback for an offense trying to safeguard 38-year-old QB Drew Brees. Youngsters Andrus Peat and Ryan Ramczyk will just have to flourish sooner under the guidance of stalwart vets like Max Unger, Zach Strief and Larry Warford, a key free agent pickup.

8. Cleveland Browns: The front office seems committed to getting it right here after witnessing the impact Alex Mack's departure had last year. Free agent additions Kevin Zeitler and JC Tretter bolster the middle with a healthy Joel Bitonio. LT Joe Thomas' Hall of Fame bust should already be carved.

9. Pittsburgh Steelers: C Maurkice Pouncey and Gs David DeCastro and Ramon Foster are stout up the gut. LT Alejandro Villanueva has come a long way and needs a new contract.

10. Green Bay Packers: They're down some initials after losing T.J. Lang and JC Tretter in free agency. But Aaron Rodgers should still feel quite secure with Ts David Bakhtiari and Bryan Bulaga manning the edges.

11. New England Patriots: Assistant Dante Scarnecchia's emergence from retirement in 2016 was quite welcomed for a group that struggled during his absence. Continuity was also a huge factor after injuries took a toll in 2015. Ts Nate Solder and Marcus Cannon are the foundation.

12. Detroit Lions: The torn shoulder labrum LT Taylor Decker suffered last month is a costly blow, likely to shelve him at least half the season. At least the right side of the line shouldn't be a concern after free agency netted T Ricky Wagner and G T.J. Lang.

13. Chicago Bears: Excellent up the middle, with C Cody Whitehair producing a strong rookie season, while vets Josh Sitton and Kyle Long form one of the game's best guard combos — when healthy. But deficiencies at tackle were a reason Chicago's quarterbacks were under siege in 2016.

14. Kansas City Chiefs: G Laurent Duvernay-Tardif leads a solid, if unspectacular, unit that should probably be a bit better given the resources that have been allocated.

15. Buffalo Bills: It's a testament to the blocking when you produce the top-ranked run game. But there should be pause given LT Cordy Glenn's nagging injuries have carried into the offseason, and Tyrod Taylor suffered a league-high 42 sacks.

16. Miami Dolphins: With three first rounders, it should be strong group. But questions linger as Laremy Tunsil moves from guard to take over for departed LT Branden Albert. And C Mike Pouncey, who hasn't played a full season since 2012, is still trying to shake hip problems.

17. Baltimore Ravens: Marshal Yanda has probably been the game's best guard for a half-decade. LT Ronnie Stanley looks like a keeper. But with RT Ricky Wagner and C Jeremy Zuttah gone, there's work to do.

18. Jacksonville Jaguars: The protection of QB Blake Bortles should be markedly improved given the trade for LT Branden Albert and the second-round pick spent on Cam Robinson, who still needs a position. C Brandon Linder is the rock.

19. Arizona Cardinals: Lot of flux with Ts Jared Veldheer and D.J. Humphries flipping sides — Humphries is apparently now ready to watch Carson Palmer's blind side — and one of the guard jobs open.

20. Indianapolis Colts: LT Anthony Castonzo, G Jack Mewhort and C Ryan Kelly should be the foundation of an effective unit. But they need to stop getting QB Andrew Luck broken.

21. New York Giants: They've endured slings and arrows, and there's no sugarcoating the offense's inability to run. But did you know the Giants' 22 sacks allowed in 2016 were fewest in the NFC? As far as guards go, Justin Pugh's a pretty good one. But the organization is taking a leap of faith that young Ts Ereck Flowers and Bobby Hart, who too often look overmatched, will rise to the occasion.

22. Carolina Panthers: They must stabilize after Cam Newton was pummeled in 2016. New LT Matt Kalil hopes to revitalize his career, and it should help playing alongside brother Ryan, still an all-pro caliber center. Gs Andrew Norwell and Trai Turner can be better.

23. Los Angeles Rams: No team in the NFC surrendered more sacks (49). Enter veteran LT Andrew Whitworth and C John Sullivan as new coach Sean McVay attempts to build a unit that can keep second-year QB Jared Goff from looking over his shoulder while giving RB Todd Gurley room to maneuver.

24. Los Angeles Chargers: QB Philip Rivers has deserved far better for far too long. GM Tom Telesco finally went to work remedying the situation, signing LT Russell Okung then drafting Forrest Lamp and Dan Feeney in the second and third rounds, respectively. But with Matt Slauson apparently switching back to guard from center, the line may have to try several combinations before jelling.

25. Denver Broncos: They couldn't run the ball and failed to adequately protect their young passers. So GM John Elway drafted LT Garrett Bolles in the first round after signing G Ron Leary and T Menelik Watson. C Matt Paradis, who graded as Pro Football Focus' top center in 2016, is recovering from surgery to both hips.

26. Tampa Bay Buccaneers: Changes inside as Ali Marpet moves from guard to center after a strong rookie showing. And G J.R. Sweezy is ready to make his Bucs debut after a back injury marred his first year in Tampa. LT Donovan Smith needs to have a breakout.

27. Minnesota Vikings: Decimated by injuries, it was basically the team's undoing a year ago. Free agency brought a reset with the acquisition of Ts Riley Reiff and Mike Remmers. Rookie Pat Elflein comes highly regarded from Ohio State.

28. Houston Texans: Given the quarterback issues, it's imperative the blocking improve. But LT Duane Brown is unhappy with his contract, C Nick Martin is an unknown quantity — he is Zack Martin's brother, for what it's worth — after losing his rookie season to an ankle injury, and RT Derek Newton won't be back from two ruptured patellar tendons this year.

29. San Francisco 49ers: In LT Joe Staley, C Jeremy Zuttah and G Josh Garnett, a first-round pick in 2016, there's ability here. But like everything with the Niners in 2017, the learning curve is bound to be long and painful.

30. New York Jets: Unrecognizable after being capably anchored for a decade by C Nick Mangold and LT D'Brickashaw Ferguson. G Brian Winters may be the only one of the current bunch with a long shelf life.

31. Cincinnati Bengals: Major recalibration after the loss of LT Andrew Whitworth and RG Kevin Zeitler in free agency. Time for third-year Ts Cedric Ogbuehi, who takes over for Whitworth, and Jake Fisher, never a full-time starter, to deliver.

32. Seattle Seahawks: Simply stated, their cap is spent elsewhere, leaving mostly smoke and mirrors for assistant Tom Cable. That wasn't sufficient in 2016 as the run game tanked, and QB Russell Wilson took a beating. But they're sticking with project LT George Fant, moving Germain Ifedi to right tackle and hoping Luke Joeckel can blossom at guard.

Ranking NFL special teams: Punter Johnny Hekker, Rams don't get enough credit

By Nate Davis

USA Today

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NFL rosters are essentially set until training camps open later this month. In the meantime, USA TODAY Sports has analyzed each team's depth chart and is ranking units throughout the league.

Today's positional group: Special teams

1. Los Angeles Rams: It's time Johnny Hekker got his due — and for a team that so badly needs his services. His 51 punts inside the 20 easily led the NFL, yet Hekker only committed one touchback — sublime precision. His 46 net yards per punt were nearly 2 better than any of his peers. And Hekker's background as a quarterback makes him dangerous on fakes whether he's punting or holding for K Greg Zuerlein. The Rams also deployed the league's top coverage teams and limited punt returners to a league-low 4.3 yards per chance. Zuerlein rebounded from a poor 2015 but needs more opportunities from the offense. Tavon Austin and Pharoh Cooper are highly capable return men.
2. Kansas City Chiefs: Tyreek Hill was the NFL's pre-eminent punt returner as a rookie, no one eclipsing his two TDs or 15.2-yard average. But his new role as the featured receiver could limit his opportunities, and the Chiefs no longer plan to use him on kickoffs. Dustin Colquitt's 38 punts inside the 20 paced the AFC, and he rarely allows chunky returns. Cairo Santos' 88.6% FG rate ranked fifth in the league.
3. Oakland Raiders: Entering his 18th year, Sebastian Janikowski looks to extend his career record for FGs from 50-plus yards (55). P Marquette King has a huge leg but does tend to outkick his coverage. Cordarrelle Patterson adds an explosive element after leading the league with 31.7 yards per kickoff last year.
4. Atlanta Falcons: They're understandably overshadowed. Yet it's always been that way for K Matt Bryant, one of the best in the business for 15 seasons. In addition to solid punting — though he's rarely needed — Matt Boshier capably handles kickoffs, leading the NFC with 65 touchbacks last year. Newly signed Andre Roberts improves the return game.
5. New Orleans Saints: Sean Payton doesn't give his kickers much rope, but Wil Lutz stabilized the position in 2016. P Thomas Morstead remains entrenched and can handle kickoffs, though Lutz assumed that role. Ted Ginn should jolt the return game.
6. New England Patriots: Last year was the first since 2011 that K Stephen Gostkowski failed to lead the league in points. Matthew Slater has long been one of the NFL's special teams aces. P Ryan Allen isn't a boomer but allows few return yards. The Pats could use more production on their own returns.
7. Baltimore Ravens: Did any team rely more on its kicker? Justin Tucker had a league-high 38 FGs, including 10 of 10 beyond 50 yards, and is now the most accurate man in NFL history (89.8%). Among a combined 66 FG and PAT attempts, he missed just once in 2016. Sam Koch equates his creative punts to

golf shots but comes off a bit of a down season. Special teams guru John Harbaugh would surely welcome more impact from his returners.

8. Houston Texans: Only Tucker had more FGs than Nick Novak's 35. Shane Lechler is one of the top punters in NFL history. Will Fuller's speed made him a terror on punt returns.

9. Detroit Lions: Pro Bowler Matt Prater was a valuable component for a team that lived on the edge and hit all seven of his FG tries beyond 50 yards. Sam Martin was just as good, finishing second in the league with 44.2 net yards per punt. Andre Roberts wasn't re-signed despite scoring twice on punt returns.

10. Pittsburgh Steelers: Antonio Brown always lurks as a threat to take a punt to the house. Since coming aboard in 2015, K Chris Boswell has proven a nice solution. He scored all 18 of Pittsburgh's points in last year's playoff win at Kansas City. The Steelers struggled to cover kicks.

11. Dallas Cowboys: Only Justin Tucker has a better career FG conversion rate than deadeye Dan Bailey (89.5%), who's also drilled all 250 of his career PATs. Dallas is mediocre in most other areas. Dez Bryant has lobbied to return punts.

12. Green Bay Packers: K Mason Crosby proved yet again in the playoffs that he's money when it matters. It might make sense to allow Randall Cobb to make more of a difference as a returner.

13. Tennessee Titans: Steady Ryan Succop doesn't have a huge leg but also hasn't missed a FG inside 50 yards (32-for-32) over the past two seasons. Free agent signing Eric Weems can provide a boost on both returning and covering kicks.

14. Philadelphia Eagles: Darren Sproles can still take a punt all the way. K Caleb Sturgis has been fine, and the team seems content with P Donnie Jones, 37. Philly excels at limiting returns.

15. Indianapolis Colts: Adam Vinatieri is 44. Last year, he established an NFL record with 44 consecutive FGs. He nailed all 44 of his PATs, too. But beyond his reliability, Indy has issues — primarily replacing retired Pat McAfee, who was not only a great punter but also kicked off.

16. Minnesota Vikings: Marcus Sherels returned two punts for TDs, but the loss of KR Cordarrelle Patterson hurts. Kai Forbath was perfect on FGs (15-for-15) after replacing Blair Walsh, but he also had the yips on PATs, missing three of 14.

17. Denver Broncos: K Brandon McManus is solid. P Riley Dixon did well as a rookie. The coverage teams were among the league's best.

18. Seattle Seahawks: They're rolling the dice on scattershot Blair Walsh, a former all-pro whose accuracy issues ironically began when he shanked a game-winning FG attempt against Seattle in the playoffs two years ago. P Jon Ryan is a good athlete who gives Pete Carroll options on fakes. Tyler Lockett is apparently on track to keep the return game among the NFL's best.

19. Carolina Panthers: P Andy Lee and K Graham Gano struggled with injuries last year and must re-establish themselves. Ted Ginn's departure opens up the return jobs.

20. Washington Redskins: Few punt returners are better than WR Jamison Crowder. K Dustin Hopkins needs to be more accurate but does a nice job on kickoffs.

21. Tampa Bay Buccaneers: Their upcoming kicking battle could be the most anticipated in recent memory. That's what happens when you invest a second-round pick at the position (Robert Aguayo), then watch him post the worst FG percentage (71%) in the league. Nick Folk's track record gives him a good shot at displacing Aguayo. No worries about P Bryan Anger, though. A weak return game could now turn to DeSean Jackson in tight spots.

22. Arizona Cardinals: Special teams were a contributor to Arizona's underachievement in 2016. Even at 42, Phil Dawson should erase the place kicking concerns. Given the talent on hand, particularly Patrick Peterson, the Cards should get more mileage from returns.

23. Buffalo Bills: Ex-Seattle K Steven Hauschka is an upgrade, though he's been more accurate on FGs than PATs each of the last two seasons. Colton Schmidt's 42.4 yards per punt were fewest in the NFL. Brandon Tate has always been a good return man.

24. Jacksonville Jaguars: Marqise Lee averaged better than 30 yards on kickoffs. New DL Calais Campbell has a knack for blocking FGs with his 6-8 frame. K Jason Myers and P Brad Nortman are adequate at best.

25. Miami Dolphins: Andrew Franks' 76.2% field-goal rate isn't good enough. Jarvis Landry, Jakeem Grant and Kenyan Drake are capable returners.

26. New York Giants: Dwayne Harris is one of the league's standout special teamers, whether he's asked to return kicks or cover them. Rookie Aldrick Rosas is currently the only kicker on the roster.

27. Cincinnati Bengals: Responsible for a disastrous kicking game in 2016, Mike Nugent is long gone. Alex Erickson effectively took over the majority of the return duties.

28. Los Angeles Chargers: Josh Lambo led the NFL with 67 touchbacks on kickoffs. But he's in the bottom half of the league in terms of FG and PAT accuracy and, like every other aspect of the club's special teams, has room for substantial improvement.

29. Cleveland Browns: Rookie Jabrill Peppers might get the chance to make an impression. Zane Gonzalez was drafted to push K Cody Parkey.

30. Chicago Bears: K Connor Barth didn't make anyone forget Robbie Gould, while Pat O'Donnell struggled even more as part of the league's most generous punt team. Bears fans still miss Devin Hester, too.

31. San Francisco 49ers: Gould doesn't have predecessor Phil Dawson's leg. But place kicking will likely remain the most stable special teams area for this team.

32. New York Jets: New K Chandler Catanzaro will have fewer opportunities to disappoint here than he did in Arizona. Lachlan Edwards' 37.3 net yards per punt ranked worst in the league. He must improve given how busy he'll likely be in 2017.

Why recent big-money deals in sports can't be sustained

By Nancy Armour

USA Today

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Get those cartoonish contracts while you can, because the clock is ticking.

While even run-of-the-mill NBA free agents figure out how to spend their new largesse — \$23 million for J.J. Redick, really? — and the NFL divvies up \$7.8 billion among its 32 teams, it's nothing but bad news for the TV partners that make those ridiculous numbers possible. The cord cutting is accelerating, not slowing, and live TV viewing is dropping.

Which means that the bubble beneath the massive player contracts is bound to pop. It might even explode.

"I do see a significant correction coming," Michael Leeds, a sports economist who chairs the economics department at Temple, said Thursday.

"With the cord cutting and all of the chaos at ESPN, I think that there's every reason to believe that we're seeing a major change, a sea change," Leeds said. "And the (leagues) ... could be in for major changes the next time things come around."

For decades, ESPN, ABC, NBC, CBS, Fox and Turner Sports have been happy to write increasingly larger checks for sports broadcast rights. With good reason.

Sports is best watched live, making it the one type of programming viewers are less likely to watch on a DVR. Fans would rather grit their teeth and sit through yet more inane ads for credit cards or insurance than risk a friend unwittingly spoiling the outcome of the game or a spectacular play.

It also gave the networks solid programming to fill their schedules. Put the Knicks-Pistons on in March, when both teams are already out of playoff contention, and it's still likely to be a better draw than an infomercial or a rerun. Lost in the hysteria over the sagging NFL ratings early last season was that the games still produced numbers that would be a bonanza for any other offering.

This wasn't lost on the various sports leagues and organizing bodies, who either exacted a premium for exclusive renewal or pitted the networks against each other to jack up the rights fees. The NFL makes more than \$7 billion each year from its deals with CBS, Fox, NBC, ESPN and DirecTV. The NCAA will get more than \$850 million for next year's March Madness, and will average more than \$1 billion a year within the decade.

The NBA just finished the first year of its massive new TV contract, which will pay the league \$24 billion through 2025. That's about \$2.6 billion a year.

That influx of cash has a trickle-down effect. Which is how Redick ends up with \$23 million contract for one year and the oft-injured Blake Griffin gets \$173 million over five years.

It's also how the small-market Green Bay Packers can be competitive. According to the financials released Wednesday by the Packers, the only publicly owned team in the NFL, each team got \$244 million from revenue sharing last year, a 10% increase from the previous year.

But these deals were negotiated long before the bottom began dropping out on traditional TV viewing habits, cable TV in particular. As streaming becomes more popular — and the options to do so easier — people are deciding there's no reason to pay \$150 a month for dozens of channels they don't use.

In the first quarter of this year alone, pay-TV providers lost 762,000 subscribers, according to a report from MoffettNathanson's Craig Moffett.

Lose that kind of revenue, you're eventually going to have to rein in your spending.

"This era in which you had huge rights fees being paid for the NFL, for the NBA, for the NCAA tournament ... that's going to be, to a great extent, a thing of the past," Leeds said.

There will be new revenue streams through digital and subscriptions, of course. But it won't match the lottery-like jackpots the networks have been throwing around.

"I think there's going to be a pause in growth," said Frank Hawkins, a co-founder of Scalar Media, a New York-based consulting firm that specializes in television, new media and sports.

The good news for the leagues — and players — is that they've still got a few more years before the gravy train comes to a halt. The NFL's deals run through the 2022 season. The NBA's contract goes until 2025. Fox has rights to the next three World Cups. The only thing more enduring than the Olympic flame is NBC's hold on the Games.

Broncos' value increases 24 percent in Forbes rankings

By Chuck Hickey

FOX 31

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The value of the Broncos jumped 24 percent in one year in the latest valuation by Forbes.

The magazine values the Broncos at \$2.4 billion, up from last year's valuation of \$1.94 billion. In 2015, the Broncos were valued at \$1.45 billion.

The Broncos are listed as the 11th-most valuable NFL franchise and the 24th-most valuable sports franchise in the world. They were the 40th-most valuable sports franchise in the world last year.

The Dallas Cowboys, at \$4.2 billion, top the list, followed by the New York Yankees (\$3.7 billion), and soccer clubs Manchester United (\$3.69 billion), Barcelona (\$3.64 billion) and Real Madrid (\$3.58 billion).

Besides the Cowboys, the only other NFL franchises with a higher valuation than the Broncos are the New England Patriots (sixth overall at \$3.4 billion), New York Giants (eighth overall at \$3.1 billion), San Francisco 49ers (ninth overall at \$3 billion), Washington Redskins (11th overall at \$2.95 billion), Los Angeles Rams (12th overall at \$2.9 billion), New York Jets (13th overall at \$2.75 billion), Chicago Bears (16th overall at \$2.7 billion), Houston Texans (20th overall at \$2.6 billion) and Philadelphia Eagles (22nd overall at \$2.5 billion).

No other Colorado team made the list.

The rankings are based on Forbes' valuations over the past year for the NFL, NBA, Major League Baseball, NHL, Formula One, soccer and NASCAR teams.

The NFL had 29 of its teams in the top 50, followed by the NBA and European soccer (seven each).

Talks continue on John Elway's contract with Broncos

By Darin Gnatt
Pro Football Talk
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Other than the eight remaining draft picks, three franchise-tagged players and a few stray free agents, there isn't much in the way of negotiation news in the NFL right now.

But one place with a lot on the line is Denver, where executive John Elway's situation with the Broncos still hasn't been resolved.

Elway's contract runs out after this season, and there has been no word on any recent progress. According to Nicki Jhabvala of the Denver Post, the two sides have talked recently, and there's no indication a deal is anything other than inevitable.

Elway himself said in May he didn't have "any doubt" a deal would be done before the season started. "I look forward to being here with the Broncos for a long time," he said.

But the particulars of the deal will be fascinating, and could include a stake in ownership. There were reports that Elway turned down a minority stake in the team nearly 20 years ago, but that offer never materialized as owner Pat Bowlen was in the midst of a courtroom battle with previous owner Edgar Kaiser.

"There were circumstances there that didn't make it work out. Let's put it that way," Elway told the Post last August. "It wasn't because I didn't want it to. It's just that there were some circumstances there that I can't go into that caused it not to work out, which I was obviously very disappointed with."

Any deal involving a share of ownership would have to be approved by the league. With Bowlen not involved in the day-to-day operations of the team anymore, Broncos CEO and team president Joe Ellis oversees the family trust along with team counsel Rich Slivka and Denver attorney Mary Kelly. They will handle any transition to Bowlen's seven children, who will each have an equal stake in the team.

But Elway's success as an executive makes it obvious that the Broncos want to keep him, as they continue to work on the hows and the particulars of what should be a landmark deal for football executives.