

Emmanuel Sanders “progressing fast” after injury; Paxton Lynch game status; more Broncos notes

By Nicki Jhabvala
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Broncos coach Vance Joseph said receiver Emmanuel Sanders is “progressing fast” from an ankle sprain and “chances are good” he will play Sunday in Philadelphia. Sanders missed the team’s last two games because of the injury and, though there was some hope he’d be able to play in Kansas City, Sanders admitted he wasn’t close to suiting up.

Sanders has been limited in practice this week, but said he’s “optimistic” of returning Sunday and possibly injecting some life into Denver’s passing game.

“Just hoping it continuously gets better,” he said. “I can make all the cuts I want. I don’t feel like I’m all the way myself, and that’s going to happen — nobody is 100 percent in this league — and we still got, what, three or four days before the game? So I’m optimistic and just got to continuously work and run on it and, hopefully, it gets more and more comfortable.”

Inside linebacker Todd Davis, who sat out Week 8 as well because of an ankle injury, has also practiced on a limited basis this week.

“He’s getting better day to day,” Joseph said. “He had a high ankle sprain, so Todd should have been out probably a couple weeks to three weeks, but Todd’s a tough guy. He wants to go. He almost went last week, so we’ll see. We’ll see where he’s at.”

Two QBs. The Broncos’ latest quarterback switch has led to continued speculation about Paxton Lynch’s availability for Sunday and beyond. But Joseph said, like last Monday, the team will have only two active quarterbacks against the Eagles: newly appointed starter Brock Osweiler and backup Trevor Siemian. Lynch is no longer on the injury list with a shoulder sprain, but he will be among the team’s inactives for the second-consecutive game Sunday.

Miller vs. Eagles’ O-line. Among the matchups to watch Sunday will be linebacker Von Miller against right tackle Lane Johnson. In his career, Miller has recorded 24 sacks in 23 games against NFC opponents (Super Bowl 50 included) and will be looking to rack up more in Philadelphia. But he knows they won’t come easy.

“They’re solid all the way across the board,” Miller said of the Eagles’ offensive line. “Lane Johnson probably is the best right tackle in the league. If not THE best, he’s tied for the best. He’s definitely up there. I’m sure you can make arguments for this guy and that guy, but Lane Johnson is the premier right tackle in the National Football League. Jason Peters is out right now. If they would have had him it would have been double trouble.”

Footnotes. Eagles tight end Zach Ertz was a new addition to the team’s injury list. He practiced on a limited basis Thursday because of a hamstring injury. ... Miller dressed as Colonel Sanders for Halloween. Why? “I don’t know,” he said with a shrug. “I was thinking about chicken ...”

Broncos running back Devontae Booker appears ready for larger role in Denver backfield

By Nick Kosmider
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Tim Patrick leaped off the couch at his apartment in Denver on Monday night and hollered as Devontae Booker, his former teammate at Utah, sprinted through a massive hole and into the end zone from 6 yards out in the third quarter, pulling the Broncos to within one score of the Chiefs.

As a member of the Broncos' practice squad, Patrick didn't travel with the Broncos to Kansas City. But as he watched the telecast of the game, there was no mistaking the old Booker, the one who left bruises on Pac-12 defensive players who tried to stay in front of him.

"Devontae is the best running back I've ever seen, honestly, in person," said Patrick, a wide receiver who joined the Broncos last month. "He was just waiting for his opportunity, so it was cool to see, but there are going to be many more by the end of this season."

The Broncos on Monday provided a reminder — to themselves, most important — that perhaps the only way to emerge from the funk that has enveloped their season is to consistently run the football. Denver went run heavy in the second half, routinely pushing against the Chiefs' defense with two tight ends. The result was 177 yards rushing in a 29-19 loss, only 1 yard shy of the Broncos' season high this year.

Denver's players and coaches were left to wonder just how much damage they could have done in the running game were it not for an avalanche of five turnovers.

The Broncos averaged 5.7 yards per carry, with three running backs — Booker, C.J. Anderson and Jamaal Charles — all gaining at least 39 yards. Booker, who had a season-high 40 yards, set up his touchdown with a 26-yard run that provided a glimpse of what the Broncos were missing while the second-year pro was forced to sit out all of training camp and the first three games of the season while recovering from wrist surgery. Booker returned against the Raiders in Week 4 and had three carries for 14 yards. His workload had increased only incrementally since, but his second half against the Chiefs could be a signal that he's ready to be a bigger part of a backfield rotation that was as equally distributed among the three running backs Monday as it had been all season.

"Devontae Booker has played well," coach Vance Joseph said. "He's had limited touches, but in those touches he's had explosive plays. He's a young guy with strong, fresh legs. He has great ball skills. As we go along here, he should get more opportunities."

Injuries have been the biggest road block for Booker since his senior year at Utah, which ended after 10 games because of an injury to the meniscus in his knee that required two surgeries. That setback precipitated a fall in the draft that allowed the Broncos to select him in the fourth round. When Anderson was lost for the 2016 season after only seven games, Booker stepped into a starting role and finished as Denver's leading rusher (612 yards) and its third-leading receiver (265).

In June, Booker suffered an injury to his wrist while working out on his own. It was initially believed to be a sprain, but another X-ray when he arrived for training camp at the end of July revealed a fracture. It was a blow for a player who was preparing to compete for a starting job.

"I feel good now being back in it for some weeks now, just getting to play football again," Booker said Thursday. "While I was sitting out, I was still here, still in tune, with the playbook and in the meetings. When I came back I was able to start fast, and there have been no setbacks for me out there on the field."

Booker's surge could put a wrinkle into how the Broncos use their three running backs. After fumbling on his third carry Monday, Charles was handed the ball only five more times, finishing with eight carries for 39 yards. Anderson led with 78 yards on 15 carries. Booker, meanwhile, gained 38 yards on his four second-half carries.

Being part of a three-man rotation has been a different experience for Booker, who was the featured back throughout his college career and then again at the midway point of his rookie season with the Broncos.

"As weeks go on and game plans come, we kind of get adjusted to it," he said. "All of us have certain plays for whatever type of situation in a game. It could be red zone, goal line or whatever. We all have different packages that we go in on. We just learn to adjust to it and we just try to spark one another when we're out on the field. If we see one go out there and get a 10-yard run, one of us is going to want to do the same or do better. It's been pretty good with all three of us in the backfield."

Backfield in motion

A look at what Broncos running backs C.J. Anderson, Jamaal Charles and Devontae Booker have produced on the ground this season:

Player ...	Games ...	Carries ...	Yards ...	Y/C ...	TDs
C.J. Anderson ...	7 ...	107 ...	469 ...	4.4 ...	1
Jamaal Charles ...	7 ...	50 ...	235 ...	4.7 ...	1
Devontae Booker ...	4 ...	12 ...	62 ...	5.2 ...	1

Carson Wentz's offseason gains have put the Eagles quarterback at front of MVP conversation

By Nick Kosmider
Denver Post
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Brent Vigen, from time to time inside his office at Wyoming, would turn on film of Carson Wentz, who was quietly evolving into an NFL quarterback prospect in 2014.

Vigen was Wentz's offensive coordinator at North Dakota State, during his freshman and sophomore seasons in 2012 and 2013, before following coach Craig Bohl to Wyoming.

The quarterback Vigen would see on film wasn't the same young player trying to grasp the game two years earlier. So last year, when Vigen connected again with Wentz, he wanted to know what had changed.

"I had asked Carson what the biggest thing going from his first year starting, which was the first year we had left, to his senior year at NDSU," Vigen told The Denver Post in July. "And he said, 'I was finally able to watch myself and learn from myself instead of watching someone else do it.'"

Wentz has now transformed from small-college quarterback to legitimate MVP candidate. He has led the Eagles, who host the Broncos on Sunday, to a 7-1 record while throwing 19 touchdown passes, tied for the most in the league.

The second-year quarterback, the No. 2 overall pick in the 2016 NFL draft, followed a similar formula this past offseason as he did when he prepared to take over as the starter at North Dakota State. He watched himself, taking notes of what went right and wrong during his rookie season.

It was a deep self-study — resulting in some minor mechanical changes, among other things — for a quarterback who has guided his team to a six-game winning streak, throwing 15 touchdowns and just three interceptions during that stretch.

"I can see it on film," Wentz told the Philadelphia Inquirer. "Everything, pocket movements, different things, everything's more subtle. Everything's quieter from my feet. And it just looks like I'm more comfortable."

If there's one thing the Broncos' inconsistency at the quarterback position since Peyton Manning retired in early 2016 has proven, it's that there's no easy way to predict quarterback success. But teammates saw it from Wentz in his first season, when he responded to a five-game losing streak to lead the Eagles to wins in their final two games, momentum they believe set up the impressive start in 2017.

"He's a great quarterback," Broncos safety Will Parks said. "His maturity level is at an all-time high. He's not turning the ball over a lot. He's doing a good job as far as reading his targets. It's going to be a pretty good challenge for us, but a challenge we'll be ready for."

Demaryius Thomas seeks to continue game streak, snap 13-game TD drought

By Mike Klis

9 News

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Demaryius Thomas is a rare No. 1 receiver who never misses a game. Not in six years he hasn't.

He's played in 98 consecutive games dating back to Tim Tebow's starting debut in 2011. His 87 consecutive starts, which began with Peyton Manning's first game as a Bronco in 2012, is the longest durability run among active NFL receivers. That's good.

But Thomas is also a perennial Pro Bowler who has gone 13 straight games without a touchdown. That's baffling.

There hasn't been too much attention paid to his skid. But he knows about it.

"It's been since Week 10 (of the 2016 season, at New Orleans)," Thomas said. "I know, I know, it's been a while. I don't know how to feel, anymore.

"I've been determined to end it. I've been determined to end it every week. It just doesn't work that way. Half the time it's about winning but as a receiver you do want to score touchdowns."

Thomas is still getting his catches and yards. For the most part. He's on pace for 80 catches and 1,040 yards through seven games this season. The previous five years, he averaged 98 catches and 1,374 yards.

But D.T. is a guy who caught 14 touchdowns from Peyton in 2013, 46 in his previous five seasons. He has the size to post up in the end zone, and the explosiveness to take a bubble screen and take it 80 yards.

At least he did until 13 games ago.

"We were putting in red zone today and most of the time I'm in the back like, 'Give me that play! Give me that play!'" said Broncos No. 2 receiver Emmanuel Sanders. "(But today) I was like 'Hey, give it to 'D.T. Give it to D.T.'"

"He's getting to go a full year without a touchdown so we have to change that."

Maybe the quarterback swap from Trevor Siemian to Brock Osweiler this week will help snap Thomas' scoreless drought.

Change brings much needed renewed hope. Maybe Brock Osweiler can also bring Thomas a touchdown Sunday against the Eagles in Philadelphia.

"He is a number one receiver in our offense and gameplans are made to stop him from scoring touchdowns," said Broncos head coach Vance Joseph. "Our overall goal is to win games, whoever scores the touchdowns. He's one of our best players, so the more he scores the more we can win. Our pass game goes through '88' (Thomas) and '10' (Emmanuel Sanders)."

Broncos notes: Wentz climb, updates on Sanders, Davis, Butt, Kelly

By Mike Klis

9 News

November 3, 2017

Do you realize Carson Wentz sat behind Brock Jensen for two years at North Dakota State, yet in 2017 is working on a six-game NFL winning streak in which he's thrown 15 touchdown passes against just 3 interceptions for the Philadelphia Eagles?

Granted, Jensen led North Dakota State to three consecutive small-college national championships and later played a bit in the Canadian Football League. You betcha, far as the Fargo campus is concerned, Wentz is no Brock Jensen.

Do you also realize that after playing against the likes of Youngstown State, Weber State, South Dakota State and University of Incarnate Word in college, Wentz in just his third game as an NFL rookie threw for 301 yards and two touchdowns with no interceptions in a 34-3 win against Ben Roethlisberger's Pittsburgh Steelers?

A year later, in this his second season, Wentz threw for 304 yards and four touchdowns to destroy Carson Palmer and the Arizona Cardinals, 34-7.

Granted, Wentz dominated his small-college schedule, combining for 42 touchdowns against just 14 interceptions and guiding North Dakota State to two more national championships in his two years as a starter.

Still, all those quarterbacks from big-time college programs who struggle mightily to master the pro system. And here we have Fargo and Philadelphia connected not only by critically-acclaimed movies, but by Carson Wentz incarnate.

"I'm not sure his background, but he's the second pick of the draft for a reason," said Vance Joseph, head coach of the Denver Broncos who face Wentz and the Eagles on Sunday (kickoff at 11 a.m. MST). "He's a talent. He uses his legs. He's a big guy, he has a great arm and he has great legs. He has courage and poise and he's smart. I'm not sure how he got to that school, but where he is now, he's a special player."

"He's up for the MVP in my opinion watching the guy play. He is a playmaker and he plays with a lot of courage. He has some Brett Favre in him. He doesn't slide, he runs for first downs and he hangs in the pocket and holds the ball a long time on occasions to make big plays. He's a special player. I'm not sure how he got there, but where he is now he's special."

One small-college habit Wentz has yet to shake is he does hang on to the ball longer than most NFL quarterbacks, which means Von Miller and Shane Ray will have some sack opportunities. Miller will line up against Lane Johnson, the best right tackle in the NFL, according to Miller. Ray will not be lining up against nine-time Pro Bowler Jason Peters as the left tackle recently suffered a season-ending knee injury.

Wentz has been sacked 22 times, but he's run away from many others.

"He just has that vibe about him," Miller said. "I hate comparisons in the National Football League. I don't want to compare him to Ben Roethlisberger or Aaron Rodgers or Andrew Luck because he's totally different than them. He does have the ability to stay up. He's not trying to go down. He's out there trying to play football. He's not even playing quarterback.

"It's similar to Ben Roethlisberger and Andrew Luck, but like I said, I'm not making any comparisons. He's totally different. He's faster than those guys. He's quicker than those guys. It's going to be a tough challenge."

Sanders ready, Davis maybe not

Broncos No. 2 receiver Emmanuel Sanders has been running at full speed this week after missing the past two games with a sprained ankle.

"Chances are he will go this week," Joseph said.

Inside linebacker Todd Davis, though, has a more severe high ankle sprain. Although he has returned to practice this week after missing the Kansas City game Monday, Davis isn't moving like he usually does.

"He should have been out probably a couple weeks, three weeks," Joseph said. "But Todd is a tough guy. He wants to go. He almost went last week. We'll see where he's at."

Butt, Kelly face IR deadline

Jake Butt is without a doubt going to be a solid, NFL tight end. In 2018.

Chad Kelly is going to compete for the Broncos' backup quarterback job. In 2018. (It's 2019 that Kelly is penciled in to seriously compete for the starting job).

The two drafted rookie players, though, may be practicing for the last time Friday and Saturday. As players on the physical unable to perform (PUP)/non-football injury (NFI) list, they must be activated on the 53-man roster by Monday – or be placed permanently on injured reserve.

Butt and Kelly are both trying to come back from torn ACL injuries suffered late in their college careers. Both sat out the first six weeks of their first NFL regular season, per PUP rules, then were given three weeks to practice. Following the ninth week – Monday in the case of both Butt and Kelly – a definitive decision on their status must be made. Either they're up on the 53, or down for the year.

Butt was further ahead than Kelly in his recovery, as he practiced during the week 7 lead up to the Los Angeles Chargers' game. However, soreness in the knee area caused the Broncos to hold him back from practicing last week.

Butt returned to practice this week. He has a gung-ho, competitive spirit, but for his long-term health it would be a surprise if the Broncos activated him Monday. To wit: His best chance to become the Broncos' opening-day tight end in 2018 is if he uses all of 2017 to fully recover.

If he is placed on IR, he would not be able to practice the rest of the season, although he can continue to work out with strength and conditioning coach Luke Richesson and attend certain meetings.

Kelly never was a serious candidate for the big 53 this season. Besides the knee injury, he tore ligaments in his right throwing wrist during his Pro Day leading up to the draft. He has only recently started throwing at medium-range length.

Joseph has already said Kelly would be placed on IR.

Bronco Bits

The Broncos have three players who grew up in Philadelphia or the area – kicker Brandon McManus, safety Will Parks and linebacker Zaire Anderson. McManus, who was born in Philly and grew up about 25 miles north in Hatfield, Pennsylvania, has 136 friends and family attending the game. That’s right, 136. He also played ball at Temple University, which is located on North Broad Street in the city of Philly proper. ...

Joseph on Eagles’ running back Jay Ajayi, who was acquired this week in a trade with the Miami Dolphins: “When you trade for a guy—it happened what, Tuesday, and a game Sunday? If he’s in the football game, it’s going to be a limited package probably to run the football, if he’s even dressed. That’s tough to bring a guy in. They have three or four backs that they’re playing with that are being successful. It would be tough to even dress him, but if he’s dressed, it’s going to be run plays.”

Trevor Siemian was benched, but 'it's not one guy ... we're all in this together'

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN

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When the Denver Broncos take the field Sunday against the Eagles in Philadelphia, the only major change in the team's struggling offense that would be immediately noticeable is that Brock Osweiler will be behind center instead of Trevor Siemian.

But Thursday, offensive coordinator Mike McCoy said while it was Siemian who was benched that he wasn't alone in the mistakes and turnovers that forced the signal-caller change.

"It's not one guy, we made the change ... on offense everyone's got to play better, we've got to coach better, we're all in this together," McCoy said. "It's not one guy, we're not looking at one position and saying 'this is the reason.' ... But as a group we've got to eliminate the big mistakes and we all know what those are."

Siemian's 10 interceptions, including three in the 29-19 loss to the Kansas City Chiefs this past Monday, led the list of reasons coach Vance Joseph cited to make the change. He called the three interceptions "horrific" and noted the Broncos have outgained their opponents in all four losses, but that all four of those games turned on turnovers.

Joseph has said Osweiler will start against the Eagles Sunday, and if he plays well that he would start again the following week against the New England Patriots. Joseph said after practice that Osweiler and Siemian -- who has worked as the backup in practice, including most of the scout-team work -- would be the only two quarterbacks in uniform against the Eagles, as Paxton Lynch will be a gameday inactive.

"I think [Siemian] has handled it the right way ... it's everybody on offense when you look at that," McCoy said. "This was a tough decision to make."

"He's been awesome," Siemian said Wednesday of Osweiler. "I think we've got a good relationship, so that helps. Like I said, I'm going to do everything that I can. Whatever he needs from me, I'll support him. He's a heck of a guy. He's going to do just fine."

Vance Joseph: 'Chances are' Emmanuel Sanders will play against Eagles

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN

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As he finished testing his injured ankle this past Monday night, a little over two hours before kickoff in Arrowhead Stadium, Denver Broncos wide receiver Emmanuel Sanders said he hoped he could return to the lineup Sunday in Philadelphia.

And after Thursday's practice, coach Vance Joseph said Sanders is on track to do just that. Sanders practiced Wednesday and Thursday and was listed as limited in both, but Joseph has liked what he's seen.

"He's progressing fast, he's a tough guy," Joseph said. "He wanted to go last week and he wasn't quite ready. Chances are he will go this week."

That would be welcome news for a team that has struggled so mightily on offense that wide receiver Demaryius Thomas doesn't have a touchdown catch, quarterback Trevor Siemian has been benched and only four teams have scored fewer touchdowns than the Broncos' 14.

Sanders suffered a right ankle injury in the Oct. 15 loss to the New York Giants, the first loss in what is now a three-game losing streak for the Broncos. Sanders missed the team's losses to the Los Angeles Chargers and the Kansas City Chiefs.

None of the team's wide receivers has a touchdown catch since Sanders had two Sept. 17 against the Dallas Cowboys.

Linebacker Todd Davis, who suffered a high ankle sprain against the Chargers two weeks ago, also practiced on a limited basis Thursday. Davis isn't quite as close to returning as Sanders is, but Joseph expressed some optimism there as well.

Davis is third on the team in tackles, with 36.

"He's treating, he's getting better day to day," Joseph said. "I mean he had a high ankle sprain, so Todd, he should have been out a couple of weeks to three weeks, but Todd's a tough guy ... so we'll see."

Broncos face a little unfamiliarity against 7-1 Eagles' offense

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN

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The Denver Broncos don't need a Post-it note to know Carson Wentz is an MVP candidate with his league-leading 19 touchdown passes, or that he's the guy who makes the offense go for the 7-1 Philadelphia Eagles.

But when the Broncos play Sunday at Lincoln Financial Field, there will be a little of the unknown to deal with. There's mystery with the Eagles' new-look running game, and there's also the tight end matchup, which has been the only one opposing offenses have had success with against the Broncos' snarling defense.

Wentz will certainly be the starting point in the Broncos' plan, but the Eagles added a Pro Bowl running back in Jay Ajayi just before the trade deadline earlier this week. The Broncos never faced Ajayi in his three seasons with the Miami Dolphins and simply won't be able to predict how much the Eagles will use him just five days after his first practice with them.

"That's crazy," Broncos safety Will Parks said. "I remember playing against Jay Ajayi in Arizona against Boise State in the Fiesta Bowl. He's a pretty solid guy. He's fast. He hits the hole pretty good. We'll see where he's at. He just got there, too. We probably won't see him as much, but like I said, we're going to be ready for every single one of these players on the team."

However, the Broncos can safely predict that Eagles tight end Zach Ertz will see the ball plenty. Ertz leads the Eagles in targets (64), receptions (43) and touchdowns (six).

And while the Broncos are the league's No. 1 defense overall, No. 2 in run defense and No. 6 against the pass, opposing tight ends have found room to work. The Dallas Cowboys' Jason Witten had 10 catches for 97 yards and a touchdown, the Giants' Evan Engram had five catches for 82 yards and a touchdown, and the Chiefs' Travis Kelce had seven catches for 133 yards and a touchdown on Monday night.

Chiefs quarterback Alex Smith was particularly effective finding Kelce when the Broncos chose to match up safety Darian Stewart or Parks on Kelce in man-to-man coverage. Stewart was matched up on Kelce for his 29-yard touchdown catch in the first quarter of the Chiefs' eventual 29-19 win.

Buffalo Bills tight end Charles Clay also had a touchdown catch against the Broncos this season.

Eagles coach Doug Pederson said that trend was indeed noteworthy, "but you still have to protect, you still have to get the ball to him."

Ertz has been targeted like a wide receiver -- at least eight times in five games, at least 10 in three -- and has touchdown receptions in each of the past four games.

In their run game, the Eagles have largely used LeGarrette Blount as their primary runner; it's believed the Eagles will eventually use Ajayi in a third-down role. Pederson wouldn't say earlier this week whether Ajayi would play against the Broncos.

"We've got to get him in the mix. He's got to get caught up offensively in what we're doing in order for him to see the field at this point," Pederson said. "[It] just depends on a few things, how much he can learn, obviously, in a short period of time. I don't want to do him a disservice by putting him out there and by affecting the roster. ... We'll see as the week goes. We'll see how much he can learn and understand."

The Eagles have been a fairly balanced affair on offense to this point with the No. 5 run game (129.3 yards per game) to go with the No. 11 passing game (242.5 yards per game). They are also No. 4 in scoring at 29 points per game.

"In the run game, we've just got to keep doing what we've been doing all year," Broncos linebacker Brandon Marshall said. "Just play our gaps and keep the edges as outside linebackers. The guys inside and D-linemen do a good job of running to the ball, getting off of blocks and making the plays. In the passing game, we've been doing good against that, too. We just have to keep after the quarterback."

Broncos' pass protection will get major test with Eagles' front four

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN

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With a change at quarterback, a pile of offensive woes and a No. 1 wide receiver in Demaryius Thomas without a touchdown catch this season, the Denver Broncos continue to hope their passing game can shake itself loose from too many turnovers and a growing list of lost opportunities.

However, the Philadelphia Eagles' defense presents a different sort of challenge. The group has essentially allowed some quarterbacks to pile up the yardage, but it has also punished the passers for doing it.

"It's all based on the front, and the front four they play the run on the way to the pass," Broncos coach Vance Joseph said. "... They're really good up front, they've got four real rushers, that's the key to having a great pass rush."

The Eagles are 26th in the league in pass defense and have given up 256.8 yards per game, a number that will keep many defensive coordinators up at night in these pass-happy times. But defensive coordinator Jim Schwartz has spent plenty of time in the league trying to rattle the best quarterbacks, including his annual battles with Peyton Manning as the Tennessee Titans' defensive coordinator.

And Schwartz has allowed some yardage at times through the years, but his defenses usually hit quarterbacks plenty and create turnovers. And with a dynamic, multipurpose defensive front like the Eagles have, powered by defensive tackle Fletcher Cox, Schwartz doesn't have to consistently add extra players to the rush to get pressure.

As a result, despite some double-take yardage totals -- Eli Manning, Philip Rivers and Kirk Cousins each topped 300 yards passing in losses to the Eagles this season -- the Eagles are tied for ninth in sacks (22) and tied for fifth in interceptions (nine). That's what Brock Osweiler, who has replaced Trevor Siemian at quarterback for the Broncos, will have to contend with behind an offensive line that has struggled at times in pass protection.

While the Eagles' quick-strike offense that has outscored opponents 47-9 in the first quarter this season has often put opponents in pass-first mode, Philadelphia also leads the league in run defense at 70.4 yards rushing allowed per game. The Chiefs' Kareem Hunt is the only running back to have rushed for more than 38 yards against Philadelphia this season when he had 81 yards and two touchdowns in the Eagles' only loss this season.

Carolina Panthers quarterback Cam Newton rushed for 71 yards and San Francisco 49ers rookie quarterback C.J. Beathard rushed for 40.

"The front's really good ... it starts with Fletcher Cox, he's a top-five guy in this league as far as [defensive] tackles," Joseph said. "They're aggressive at D-line and their [linebackers] are really aggressive and great tacklers. They're that good."

But the Broncos know the role their pass protection has played in some of the offensive troubles, and that has been especially true when they have lined up in a three-receiver set. Over the past five games, when the Broncos are 1-4, they have given up 17 of their 19 sacks in those five games in the three-receiver set and all eight of Siemian's interceptions in those games were from that formation.

It's a struggle they've faced as they've tried to move the ball in the passing game to this point.

"You just have to focus on what's in front of you and blocking your guys so [Osweiler] feels comfortable back there throwing to the guys that he needs to that are open," said Broncos left tackle Garrett Bolles, who will find himself across from Eagles defensive end Brandon Graham plenty.

Graham leads the Eagles with five sacks, and Cox has 4.5.

"There's calls, there's audibles, there's sight adjust and hot [reads], but you can slow the game down, and like Coach [Joseph] said, just manage it," Osweiler said. "Take care of the football, find completions and find ways to move the sticks. You don't always have to take the big play. Four plus four plus four equals a first down. Check-downs are OK and flats are OK. It's taking what the defense gives you and taking it one play at a time. When you have that approach and you stack up a lot of good plays, you're going to have good results at the end of the game."

Broncos know QB switch isn't the only fix

By Arnie Stapleton
Associated Press
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The Denver Broncos' locker room is abuzz over Brock Osweiler 's promotion after Trevor Siemian's dozen turnovers cost him his starting job this week.

They know Siemian's poor play wasn't the only reason for their 1-4 tailspin that's threatening to waste another elite Denver defense. They have plenty of corrections to make if they're going to avoid their first four-game losing streak since 2010 when they visit Philadelphia on Sunday.

"Absolutely, football isn't an individual sport, it's a team sport," tight end Virgil Green said Thursday. "Yeah, we're bringing Brock up to do things, but we all know that Trevor is totally capable. We just need a little more from everybody. Not just one position, every position."

Coach Vance Joseph lamented this week how Siemian's three ugly interceptions nullified another outstanding defensive performance in a tough loss at Kansas City on Monday night despite better blocking and a 177-yard rushing effort.

"The run game was fine but I played terrible," said C.J. Anderson, who had 78 yards on 15 carries. "I didn't score and missed some opportunities. That's on me. I just have to get better. The scouting report says I'm not a home run threat. Let's prove them wrong."

That task will be daunting when the Broncos (3-4) visit the NFL-leading Eagles (7-1), who sport the only run defense in the league that's better than Denver's.

Joseph noted that Osweiler brings experience, especially in Mike McCoy's offense, and "our veteran players trust him because they've been here with him before. That's why he was the perfect fit to be our backup."

And now, their starter.

"On offense, everyone's got to play better," McCoy said. "We've got to coach better. We're all in this together."

One player who isn't thrilled with the move, of course, is Siemian.

"This was going to be a big year for him," Joseph said. "He thought he was going to take off this year, but it hasn't happened that way. I've said this 10 times, it wasn't all Trevor's issues that made this happen. We could have coached better. We could have played better around Trevor."

Siemian was sacked 25 times and some of his dozen turnovers were the result of his discomfort in the pocket either because of poor protection or the Broncos' heavy use of three-receiver sets with empty backfields.

"We just have to trust in each other and we have to do better protecting our quarterback," rookie left tackle Garrett Bolles said. "That's one thing we need to focus on as a group just going out there and doing the things we need to so that Brock feels comfortable back there and we can get back on the winning side of things."

Joseph stuck with Siemian longer than some fans wanted but the Broncos kept hoping he'd cut down on his mistakes and Denver would ride its dominant defense to victories.

"We've out-gained our opponents in the four losses," Joseph said. "Our numbers and stats for Monday night, it's silly. We won the yardage. We won third downs. We won the red zone. We lost one battle, and that's turnovers. That's all about managing the game better and picking our moments better to make big plays versus making things bad to worse."

So, now they're pinning their hopes on Osweiler, whose career stats are remarkably similar to Siemian's but include seven starts and five wins with a Super Bowl team in 2015.

Osweiler has 26 career TDs and 22 interceptions. Siemian has 27 TDs and 20 interceptions.

Osweiler is 14-9 as a starter, Siemian 11-10. Osweiler's career passer rating is 77.3 and Siemian's is 81.9.

The Broncos brought back Osweiler in September, capping the quarterback's 18-month odyssey that included a big contract with the Texans, a benching, a playoff win, a trade and a release from the Browns.

"He's been in this system before so he picked it up quickly," center Matt Paradis said.

Osweiler kept the Broncos afloat when Peyton Manning missed seven games with a foot injury two years ago and general manager John Elway said they wouldn't have won Super Bowl 50 without him.

Receiver Emmanuel Sanders said Osweiler brings a new energy to the offense .

"Peyton groomed him well, for sure," Sanders said. "In breaking down film, he was telling us exactly what he's seeing and we were able to get on the same page. Just that energy he brings, that leadership mentality he brings, the guy knows and thinks that he's a franchise quarterback. I'm happy for him."

Von Miller sees Osweiler leading Denver on another nice run.

"It kind of feels like 2015 again," Miller said. "We've won with Brock. We've done a lot of great things with Brock. I'm totally confident in Brock and what he'll be able to do for us going forward."

Notes: Sanders said Demaryius Thomas shows no frustration over his 13-game streak without a touchdown. "Nah, Demaryius doesn't get frustrated. At least he doesn't show it. He might be mad but he'll still smile at you and walk away."

Back as starter, Brock Osweiler leads Broncos vs. Eagles

By Rob Maaddi
Associated Press
November 3, 2017

Congratulations on the starting gig, Brock Osweiler. Now go beat the best team in football.

Osweiler will be under center for the first time since January with Houston when the Denver Broncos (3-4) visit the Philadelphia Eagles (7-1) on Sunday. He has a tough task in a game that Broncos must win to prevent from falling further behind in the standings.

"This week is not about me," Osweiler said. "This week is solely about our team finding a way to get a win on the road in a hostile environment against a great opponent. We know we have a huge challenge."

Indeed.

The Eagles have won six straight games and six in a row at home, going back to last season. Their average margin of victory in the past three games at the Linc has been 20 points.

"Starting with the best is a good way to make a statement about us getting back on track," linebacker Shaquil Barrett said.

Osweiler was 5-2 as a starter filling in for Peyton Manning in 2015. He returned to the bench as Manning and the defense led the Broncos to a Super Bowl victory.

Osweiler signed a big contract with the Texans after that season and went 9-7 in 2016, including 1-1 in the playoffs. He was traded to Cleveland, released and came back to Denver as Trevor Siemian's backup.

"He has experience on the big stage," Broncos coach Vance Joseph said. "I'm hoping that move can simply stabilize the offense so that we can get into a fair game so we can win some football games, or to simply see where we're at as a football team."

There are no quarterback issues in Philadelphia.

Carson Wentz is having an MVP-caliber season and is a major reason why a team that wasn't supposed to be ready to contend has become a front-runner to win the NFC.

"He's a great quarterback," said Broncos safety Will Parks, who grew up in Philly. "His maturity level is at an all-time high. He's not turning the ball over a lot. He's doing a good job as far as reading his targets and throwing them. It's going to be a pretty good challenge for us, but a challenge we'll be ready for."

Here's some things to watch for Sunday:

PROTECTING WENTZ: The Eagles had a tough time against San Francisco's aggressive, blitzing defense. Wentz was sacked three times and took several more hits. They somehow have to find a way to keep Von Miller off Wentz. Miller normally rushes from the left side so he would go against right tackle Lane

Johnson. But with Halapoulivaati Vaitai filling in for nine-time Pro Bowl left tackle Jason Peters, Miller could line up in different spots.

"I would expect him to move around," Eagles offensive coordinator Frank Reich said. "He's moved over enough times that every team has to prepare for it for sure."

PROTECTING THE BALL: Turnovers are a big reason why the Broncos have lost three straight games. They have 10 giveaways during the stretch and are minus-11 overall. Teams that have at least three turnovers in a game are 3-40 this season.

"Winning starts with protecting the football," Osweiler said. "When you win the turnover margin and when you don't turn the ball over at all, your chances of winning skyrocket."

STINGY DEFENSE: The Broncos have the league's top-ranked defense, so it'll be a big test for Wentz and the rest of Philadelphia's high-powered offense. Miller has seven sacks and Aqib Talib and Chris Harris form perhaps the best cornerback tandem in the NFL.

MR. VERSATILE: Eagles safety Malcolm Jenkins is all over the place in the secondary. He plays safety in base defense, nickel cornerback in some packages, linebacker in others.

"He's a do-it-all player," defensive coordinator Jim Schwartz said. "He's good in the box. He's good in the deep part of the field. He's a very valuable guy to have and he gives you a lot of flexibility to be able to handle things that come up within a season, within a game plan and in the course of a game."

A NEW WEAPON: Running back Jay Ajayi joined the Eagles this week in a trade from Miami and upgrades the fifth-ranked rushing offense.

It's uncertain how much work he'll get against the Broncos because he still has to get acclimated to a new offense. LeGarrette Blount is having a fine season for Philadelphia so Ajayi doesn't have to be a workhorse.

NFL sidelined pizza sales? Papa John's says yes, others no

By Joseph Pisani
Associated Press
November 3, 2017

The CEO of Papa John's slammed the NFL's leadership and blamed protests by football players for pizza sales going cold. A day later, rival Pizza Hut said it saw no such impact. So what's going on?

Papa John's is closely associated with the NFL, due to its sponsorship of the league. But experts say it is also facing more competition as other fast-food chains start to deliver burgers and fried chicken, taking a bite out of pizza sales. And there may be other issues in play: More people are cooking at home, and Papa John's may have been too dependent on TV ads at a time when more people are spending time online.

The NFL also has fewer viewers than it used to. The average game this season has attracted 14.8 million viewers, down from 15.6 million at the same point last year.

Former San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick knelt during the national anthem to protest what he said was police mistreatment of black males. More players started to kneel after President Donald Trump said in September that team owners should get rid of those who protest during the anthem.

Papa John's said customers now have a negative view of the chain's association with the NFL. "The controversy is polarizing the customer, polarizing the country," CEO John Schnatter said Wednesday after the company had released softer sales figures.

"NFL leadership has hurt Papa John's shareholders," he added. "This should have been nipped in the bud a year and a half ago."

Pizza Hut said the opposite: "We're not seeing any impact from any of that on our business," said Greg Creed, who is CEO of Pizza Hut owner Yum Brands Inc.

Commissioner Roger Goodell and several owners said at the league's fall meetings last month that they did not discuss altering the anthem policy language from "should stand" to "must stand." A representative for the NFL didn't respond to a request for comment this week.

Restaurant analyst John Gordon says he is skeptical of the NFL's impact. There was a time when pizza chains were the only ones able to deliver food quickly, but that's changing rapidly, says Gordon, the founder and CEO of Pacific Management Consulting Group.

McDonald's Corp., for example, expects to expand delivery of its burgers, nuggets and fries from 5,000 of its nearly 14,000 U.S. locations by the end of the year. And KFC, which like Pizza Hut is owned by Yum Brands, hopes to double delivery sales at the fried chicken chain to \$2 billion by 2020.

Pizza Hut has also been working to up its delivery game and catch up with the more tech-savvy Domino's Pizza Inc., which makes it easy for customers to order pizza pies through apps, social media posts or even text messages. Pizza Hut said Thursday that sales rose 1 percent at its established locations worldwide and were flat in the United States, an improvement from past quarters.

Domino's, though, said sales rose 8.4 percent at established U.S. stores during the third quarter. That's down from the 13 percent growth it reported in the same period the year before. "Nothing we reported in the quarter included commentary about the NFL because we saw no reason to call it out," a Domino's spokeswoman said Thursday.

As for Papa John's, it reported this week that third-quarter sales rose 1 percent at established locations in North America, which it said was below what it had expected. In the same period a year ago, sales rose 5.5 percent at established locations.

"We believe the reason for the sales decline is more complicated than fewer people are watching NFL games," analysts at Stifel said. The analysts said it appears that Papa John's puts more money to advertise on NFL games and has "has fewer advertising dollars to allocate to other consumer segments."

Papa John's said this week it hired a new creative agency that will help it create more digital ads

"We're an e-commerce brand — it's time we stop thinking in TV scripts," Chief Marketing Officer Brandon Rhoten said in a statement.

Brock Osweiler returns, will Demaryius Thomas' TD drought finally end?

By Troy Renck

KMGH

November 3, 2017

Brock Osweiler took the snap, swiveled his head right and let loose a rainbow Thursday. Following the arc of the pass brought optimism, and this season, a rare pot of gold. Demaryius Thomas ran under the ball and jogged into the end zone.

What was once as predictable as a Scooby-Doo ending -- Thomas scoring a touchdown -- has not happened this season. Thomas owns exactly zero scores. It seems unthinkable for a 6-foot-4 target with a wide catch radius and good speed. A deeper dig creates more consternation.

A Broncos' receiver has not scored a touchdown since the second game of the season. And Thomas' scoreless drought spans 13 games dating to last season, and he owns one over the last 16.

Think on that for a minute.

Demaryius Thomas, who will one day become a Ring of Famer, appears to be a falling star. Teammates would argue against this. He is as well-respected as anyone in the locker room. He plays hurt, he plays hard, but his production is no longer akin to an elite receiver.

Thomas is on pace for 80 catches and 135 targets, his fewest since becoming a starter in 2012. Thomas dropped weight through a vegan diet in hopes of staying healthy. He is moving better than last year, but has yet to breakaway on a bubble screen or a long pass.

This week represents a prime opportunity to end the drought. Philadelphia has allowed 13 touchdown passes, ninth most in the NFL. Emmanuel Sanders, the last receiver to haul in a touchdown, returns this week after a two-week absence with an ankle injury. And did I mention Brock Osweiler is starting?

Perhaps, Osweiler can create a chemistry and connection with Thomas that was lacking this season with Siemian. Osweiler is the new, old quarterback. During his 5-2 stretch as a starter in 2015, Osweiler connected on five touchdowns with Thomas, including one in his debut at Chicago.

Prior to the season, coach Vance Joseph challenged Thomas to be dominant. He has provided leadership, but not the statistics. This week is about winning the turnover battle. As Osweiler put it, "ball security is job security." However, the Broncos will have a couple of chances downfield to take shots if the running game works.

If one of those connections looks like the scene that played out Thursday, Thomas will have his first touchdown and the Broncos will produce their first road win of the season.

Broncos Injury Report: Emmanuel Sanders works back up to 'full speed'

By Andrew Mason
DenverBroncos.com
November 3, 2017

After practicing for a second consecutive day and being able to get to "full speed" as he went about his work, wide receiver Emmanuel Sanders was optimistic that he would be able to return from a sprained ankle in time to play Sunday in Philadelphia.

"I told [Head] Coach [Vance] Joseph, 'I don't want to go out there if I can't be myself.' That's what it's about," Sanders said. "I'm trying to get to myself. I felt good today in practice. I was able to hit full speed."

Joseph noted that Sanders is "progressing fast" in practice.

"Chances are, he will go this week," Joseph said.

That's a long way from Monday night, when Sanders said he "wasn't close at all" to playing in the loss to the Chiefs.

"But you know me," he said with a smile. "I always think I can go."

Inside linebacker Todd Davis also saw limited work once again; he missed Monday's game because of a high ankle sprain.

"He should have been out probably a couple to three weeks, but Todd's a tough guy," Joseph said. "He wants to go. He almost went last week, so we'll see where he's at."

Tight end Jake Butt practiced for a second consecutive day after missing last week's work with knee soreness, but the Broncos face a Monday deadline to decide whether to move him from the non-football injury list to the 53-man roster.

"Jake is still working through learning the offense and getting into football shape," Joseph said. "We're figuring it out."

Right guard Ron Leary practiced on a limited basis for a second consecutive day because of an elbow injury, but is still on track to play Sunday.

Right tackle Menelik Watson was added to the practice report with a foot injury. He saw limited work Thursday.

Offensive tackle Donald Stephenson was the only Bronco who did not practice Thursday; he sat out because of a calf injury.

BMW Ultimate Performance: Broncos' rushing game rediscovers its footing

By Andrew Mason
DenverBroncos.com
November 3, 2017

Given what the Broncos will face on Sunday in Philadelphia, with the Eagles leading the league in rushing defense, it was imperative that they get their ground game back to form Monday in Kansas City. Once the Broncos shook off the frustration of Jamaal Charles' first-quarter fumble Monday night, they did that, finishing with a season-high 5.7 yards per carry while racking up 177 yards.

The game saw the Broncos bolstered by double-digit runs; a season-high six of their 31 attempts went for at least 10 yards. That gave the Broncos more double-digit pickups on the ground in any game in over a calendar year, since their 27-9 win over Houston on Oct. 24, 2016.

C.J. Anderson had three of the double-digit pickups, with one each for Charles, Devontae Booker and Trevor Siemian. For Anderson, who once again led the Broncos in rushes and rushing yardage and is on pace for his first 1,000-yard season, that wasn't enough; he wants the breakaway run.

"[After] my first 41-yard touchdown [in 2014], I am considered a home-run running back. We just want to make plays. I thought the run [game] was really good and we stepped up," Anderson said. "Now it's time to make that next step in our room. That's protecting the football and making long runs.

"Nothing wrong with 10-to-12-play drives, but we can get it done in two."

Some of that explosive production from the running backs could come as targets in the passing game, which opens the door for Booker in particular. Among the 49 running backs with at least 10 receptions so far this season, only seven have a higher yards-after-catch average than Booker, who has picked up 9.5 yards after the catch per reception.

That explosive potential is why Booker could become a larger part of the offense in Week 9 and beyond.

"He's had limited touches, but in those touches, he's had explosive plays. He's a young guy with strong, fresh legs," Head Coach Vance Joseph said. "As we go along here, he should get more opportunities."

But whenever Booker, Charles and Anderson succeed on their own, they will celebrate together.

"We have three very, very unselfish guys back there and we all share it," Anderson said. "When 'Book' scored, we were all in the end zone. Just like when I've scored they've been in the end zone with me, and when Jamaal scored against Buffalo, we were all out there.

"We know we're sharing the carries and we're just trying to be the best backfield in the National Football League any way possible."

DEFENSE LIMITING YARDAGE AS FEW HAVE

On the defensive side of the line of scrimmage, the Broncos have done something they haven't accomplished in over a decade: hold eight consecutive opponents below 5.0 yards per play.

That is the team's longest regular-season streak since an eight-game run that extended from the last two games of the 2005 season through the first six games of the 2006 season.

Denver is also the only team in the league to hold all of its opponents so far this season to below 300 yards in each game. No other team has done that more than five times. The Broncos are the first team since the 2008 Steelers to hold their first seven opponents below 300 yards, according to pro-football-reference.com.

Making matters all the more exasperating is the fact that the Broncos are the first team in 19 years to hold their first seven opponents below 300 yards -- but not post a winning record in those games.

As Joseph has mentioned, this is where everything comes back to the issue of turnovers.

"We've outgained our opponents in the four losses," he said. "Our numbers and stats for Monday night, it's silly. We won the yardage. We won third downs. We won the red zone. We lost one battle, and that's turnovers."

Unfortunately for the Broncos, that has made all the difference -- for all the wrong reasons.

NFL players' protests face challenging new context with Salute to Service

By Nate Davis
USA Today
November 3, 2017

A National Football League season that's largely been defined by what happens before kickoff rather than once the games begin will enter a delicate new phase this weekend.

Players who have protested social issues, racial inequality, police brutality and profane criticism from President Trump must now decide whether to continue taking a stand (or a knee) during the pre-game playing of the national anthem even while the NFL explicitly honors veterans, active duty military members and their families during its annual "Salute To Service" celebration.

"It's never been about the military. It's never been about the flag," Philadelphia Eagles safety Malcolm Jenkins, who has raised a fist during the playing of the anthem since last season, told USA TODAY Sports when asked about the ongoing protests. "Those things aren't mutually exclusive. You can continue to protest and draw awareness to social injustices while still honoring those who have served for us."

Jenkins, who often shakes hands with service members and first responders following the anthem on game days and acknowledged the "sensitive timing" around Veterans Day, added: "Most of the guys, including myself, who have protested and demonstrated either have family members or know people who are in the service, do a lot for those people and honor those people. Our demonstrations don't change that."

Seattle Seahawks wide receiver Doug Baldwin, the son of a police officer, is another one of the league's most outspoken stars and has worked with Washington state Attorney General Bob Ferguson and Seattle mayor Ed Murray in an attempt to improve police training and tactics.

Like Jenkins, Baldwin is supportive of the military but also plans to keep using his platform to advance his social causes.

"We're going to continue to do what we have done, continue to push the message that this is not about our military. This is not about flag, it's not about disrespect. There is no disrespect," Baldwin told USA TODAY Sports. "It's about bringing awareness to inequality and injustice in our society, and having a chance to effect change when it comes to those topics."

"They can hijack (the message) all they want to, but the truth of the matter is the only thing we care about is doing the right things for the right reasons."

"If we piss off the people who think it's disrespectful, or we piss off the people who think we aren't doing enough, so be it. But we're going to do the right thing for the right reasons."

It's a complex conundrum.

Many players believe that some form of protest during the anthem is the most effective way to leverage their platform and draw attention to their message. Former San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick ignited the movement after he was seen sitting on the bench during the playing of The Star-Spangled Banner during the 2016 preseason. He subsequently took a knee on the sideline during the anthem for most of last year. However from the beginning, he was careful to explain his actions were not intended as an affront to the military.

Regardless, fans, Trump and others have accused protesting players of being unpatriotic, and the league has received significant blowback politically, from sponsors and ticket holders.

But the NFL's ties to the military run deep. It's a partner of the Pat Tillman Foundation, TAPS, Wounded Warrior Project and the USO, a relationship that extends more than five decades. Since 2011, more than \$17 million has been raised through its Salute to Service program in order to support its non-profit military partners. The NFL doesn't profit from money raised by the sale of camouflaged-patterned team gear on its website and in stadium retail stores, instead sending the proceeds back to its partners.

Atlanta Falcons guard Ben Garland, an Air Force Academy graduate who still serves as the executive officer of the Colorado Air National Guard, is proud of his team's outreach program, which has included training with former Navy SEALs but also makes a concerted effort to actively engage military members and families, including an initiative by coach Dan Quinn to put the initials of a fallen serviceman on each player's helmet during Salute to Service.

"It puts everything into perspective," Garland, who's lost friends in battle, told USA TODAY Sports. "These people have done the ultimate sacrifice in order to allow us to play this game.

"All players, especially with our team, there's always been a huge respect for the military and services," Garland continued. "I think the Falcons do more for the military than I've seen any team ever do. We're constantly having guys out from Fort Hood (Texas) and all over Georgia as well as Alabama coming to our practices, and we're taking care of them and supporting them."

He added that Atlanta players who have protested are just as supportive of the franchise's military initiatives.

"We had a couple guys take a knee during the protest. I know for a fact they have huge respect for the military and even talked about (the protests) with the team, and it's not about that — it's a freedom of speech thing.

"Whether that's the right time or manner, they have that freedom to do so — that's what some of these military members are protecting, that freedom of speech that they have."

The Falcons and every other NFL team will be honoring active and retired military members at a home game this month, and several teams have benefits and public appearances set up in their respective communities throughout November.

However the optics obviously won't be ideal if some players are kneeling or sitting on the bench a few yards away from servicemen and women who have potentially been wounded or lost colleagues in the country's ongoing conflicts abroad.

But the NFL isn't publicly changing its position on pre-game protests despite the potential for awkwardness and more public anger.

"The commissioner has said that he believes everyone should stand for the National Anthem at all of our games. This is true for all preseason, regular and postseason games," league spokesman Brian McCarthy wrote in an email to USA TODAY Sports.

That doesn't mean teams won't weigh in with their players. Kansas City Chiefs linebacker Justin Houston told USA TODAY Sports that team chairman and CEO Clark Hunt has asked that his players refrain from any kind of protest during the Salute to Service celebrations.

"Hunt came and talked to us. We were cool about it," said Houston. "We're here to play football. We weren't trying to make it bigger than what it was. It's a game of football. If you have a chance, then speak about it, but this time they asked us not to do it, so it was no problem."

And even though Baldwin and Jenkins have been at the forefront of player activism, they're also assuming a leading role in celebrating veterans. They, along with Eagles defensive end Chris Long and Tennessee Titans tight end Delanie Walker, will be featured in a Salute to Service public service announcement — it was scheduled to debut during Thursday night's Jets-Bills game — in order to thank service members while discussing their involvement with the military.

Jacksonville Jaguars defensive lineman Malik Jackson provided a unique perspective to the whole dilemma.

The Jags and Baltimore Ravens were the first teams to play following Trump's initial outburst at a rally in Alabama on Sept. 22. Both clubs had players take knees during the anthem before they faced off in London two days later. Jackson said the Jags returned to a "firestorm" in Jacksonville, which has a heavy military demographic, and saw "a lot of extra empty seats" at their next home game. The Jaguars later apologized for their demonstration.

Jackson generously gives his money and time to support militarily focused events in the Jacksonville community. Yet he's also plugged into their issues, even suggesting some players protest on behalf of the military.

"My personal opinion, I think people will relax on taking a knee this month because of its significance," Jackson told USA TODAY Sports. "It's an interesting point of view."

"But you have to understand we're also (protesting) these VA hospitals and the attention they need to give to these servicemen and women. For too long they come back, and they don't get attention. We need to help these guys, too."

"We're trying to put a light on a lot of things."

CBS Sports chairman: Thursday night games diluting overall ratings

By Frank Schwab
Yahoo! Sports
November 3, 2017

On the surface, you'd think television networks like "Thursday Night Football." Even for bad matchups, those games do ratings that should make any network happy.

For example, the Oakland Raiders-Kansas City Chiefs "Thursday Night Football" game on Oct. 19 did 14.38 million viewers according to Deadline.com. The first four games of the World Series, involving two major television markets with a Houston Astros team that had never won a title and a Los Angeles Dodgers team that hadn't won since 1988, did between 15 and 15.7 million viewers each game, according to Sports Media Watch. Remember when you hear about the NFL's ratings crisis, it's all relative. The NFL does monster viewership numbers.

But the extra games on CBS are hurting the overall ratings on Sunday, CBS Sports chairman Sean McManus believes. So are early-morning London games, McManus told the Wall Street Journal, via Darren Rovell of ESPN. McManus might also not be acknowledging that his issues with "TNF" is probably related to cost more than anything else. Last year CBS and NBC paid a combined \$450 million annually for "Thursday Night Football." That contract expires after this season, so we could see "TNF" go away soon.

Fans or media can complain about the quality of Thursday night games, and that doesn't really matter as long as people are tuning in (and they are). But when a television partner isn't happy with the product? That's another issue.

The Thursday night games usually aren't great, because it's impossible for NFL teams to get ready mentally or physically for a game in three days. With tired players and basic game plans, we don't see the best teams have to offer. While we have had a few good "Thursday Night Football" games recently — Rams-49ers and Chiefs-Raiders this season were fun games — for the most part those games would always be better on Sunday. If television partners don't want Thursday night games, the NFL would have to consider dumping them.

London games probably shouldn't happen at all, because it upsets the balance of the NFL schedule by making some teams give up a home game to play there, but they're not going away because the league wants to grow internationally. There's no benefit to American fans for London games that start in a normal 1 p.m. Eastern time slot. The early starts at least were something, but apparently CBS thinks it would be better for overall ratings to lump them in with the regular schedule.

Part of the reason the NFL is so popular is the level of time commitment involved. It's easier to devote 17 Sundays to the NFL than it is to follow a baseball team for 162 games or an NBA game for 82. That's why the NFL became appointment viewing even with an audience that rarely sits down to watch anything for three hours anymore. London games and Thursday night games might spread the NFL too thin and make the games seem like less of an event. On weeks when there has been an early London game, there have been six windows for NFL football. Some people like that. CBS apparently doesn't.

And if this is it for a full season of Thursday night games, it won't be because of the quality of games or player safety. It will be because the networks don't believe there's a good return on investment anymore.

Pizza Hut says it's 'not seeing any impact' on business from NFL player protests

By Des Bieler
Washington Post
November 3, 2017

To the head of Papa John's, NFL player protests have had a negative impact on his company's bottom line. For Pizza Hut, however, they don't appear to have been any problem at all.

That's according to Greg Creed, CEO of Yum! Brands, the umbrella corporation that owns Pizza Hut as well as fast-food chains such as Taco Bell and KFC. Regarding the protests, he said Thursday (via CNBC), "We're not seeing any impact from any of that on our business."

Creed was speaking on a conference call, in which he touted Pizza Hut's continued growth. The company grew by 1.0 percent in the most recent quarter, defying forecasts of an 0.7 percent decline (via CNBC), while posting five straight quarters of positive same-store sales growth.

That's in contrast with Papa John's, which cut its earnings growth expectations for the year and saw its stock fall by about 10 percent Wednesday. In reaction, CEO John Schnatter said, "NFL leadership has hurt Papa John's shareholders."

[Papa John's claim that NFL protests are hurting pizza sales is a stretch. But the backlash won't last.]

"This should have been nipped in the bud a year and a half ago," Schnatter added of the protests. "Like many sponsors, we are in contact with the NFL and, once the issue is resolved between the players and the owners, we are optimistic that the NFL's best years are ahead. But good or bad, leadership starts at the top, and this is an example of poor leadership."

Another Papa John's executive, chief operating officer Steve Ritchie, made the case Wednesday that, as the official pizza company of the NFL, its fortunes are tied to the league. Ritchie said he expected the earnings decline for Papa John's "to persist" until "a solution is put in place" by the NFL for its player protests.

Pizza Hut is an official sponsor of the NCAA, not the NFL, but like many companies of its ilk, it benefits from football fans ordering food during games. Its 1.0 percent quarterly growth rate was actually the same as that of Papa John's, but expectations were higher for the latter company, which had sales growth of 5.5 percent over the same period last year.

The NFL's TV ratings have declined sharply over the past two seasons. "Last year, the ratings for the NFL went backwards because of the elections. This year, the ratings are going backwards because of the controversy," Schnatter said.

An executive at Kohl's told CBS News that his company was looking forward to working with the NFL on a holiday ad campaign. "What we see is a lot of our shoppers and prospective shoppers are watching NFL, so that is what is behind the decision," chief marketing officer Greg Revelle said. "We are very confident."

NFL's Litany of Excuses Runs Out After Ratings Fall for Second Year

By Lucas Shaw
Bloomberg
November 3, 2017

TV networks are running out of excuses for the dwindling popularity of the National Football League.

They blamed the election for ratings declines last year, and hurricanes for a soft week one in September. Protests during the national anthem, and President Donald Trump's criticism of the league, have faded from the headlines.

Advertisers are starting to believe a different explanation: the viewers aren't coming back. Audiences are down an average 7 percent from a year ago through the first eight weeks of the season, excluding last Monday. That's on top of a decrease of about 8 percent last season that spurred numerous changes in the broadcasts, from shorter commercials to better matchups earlier in the year.

"There's just not as many people watching TV the way they used to watch TV," said Jeremy Carey, managing director of Optimum Sports, a sports marketing agency. "It's going to be an issue for advertisers when they can't reach a large-scale audience the way they have."

With CBS Corp., 21st Century Fox Inc. and Walt Disney Co. set to report earnings in the next few days, analysts are bound to raise questions. These companies have used the popularity of the games to extract additional fees from cable operators, promote other shows on their networks and sell lots of commercials. Pro football games drew about \$3.5 billion in ad spending last year, including the postseason, according to SMI Media Inc.

Media companies have spent billions of dollars on the right to air football games, which had been immune to the erosion of viewership for other TV programming. Audiences for TV networks have diminished for years as the growing popularity of online alternatives Netflix and YouTube and the availability of most shows on-demand have reduced the appeal of dramas and comedies. Live TV, like sports, was supposed to be immune, but that theory looks highly questionable now.

Ratings for the NFL suggest the same societal trends are now affecting the league, even if the declines aren't as dramatic. The drop in game viewership ranges from 5 percent for NBC's "Sunday Night Football" to 11 percent for the CBS Sunday package. "Monday Night Football," on Disney's ESPN, has attracted more fans this year than a year ago, but the numbers are still down from 2015.

Viewership of the four main broadcast networks fell 8.7 percent last year, and 12 percent among adults 18 to 49, an important demographic for advertisers.

CBS's 11 percent slump for NFL games is the steepest of the networks. Its parent company, which reports earnings after the close Thursday, is more vulnerable than rivals to the trend because the vast majority of its earnings come from the broadcast network. The declines at CBS reinforce a complaint that has gotten louder and louder in recent weeks: The league got greedy in adding the Thursday night game on broadcast.

Reserving top games for Thursday night robbed other time periods of good match-ups. After a nosedive in ratings at "Monday Night Football" last season, the league has scheduled better games for that time period, further damaging Sunday afternoon.

"Ratings declines on both general entertainment and NFL programming could be the single biggest point of focus for investors this quarter, and we're not sure what media companies can say about the health and tone of the ad market to assuage fears," Steven Cahall, an analyst with RBC Capital Markets, wrote in a note last month.

Viewership is dropping fast among people under 54 -- a key demographic for advertisers -- and even faster among those 18 to 34. Audiences for games on CBS, NBC and Fox have slid at least 10 percent among that younger cohort.

Advertisers aren't abandoning the NFL, one of the only places they can still reach more than 10 million people at once. But they are growing concerned. John Schnatter, who appears in TV spots on behalf of his Papa John's Pizza International Inc., laid into the league on a conference call this week, blaming the ratings for his company's slow revenue growth and calling for the league to put an end to player protests.

Networks and other advertisers identify a wide range of reasons for the NFL's struggles. The league has overexposed itself by making highlights available on Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and Snapchat. Identifiable stars like Peyton Manning and Aaron Rodgers have either retired or gotten hurt. The quality of play has deteriorated. Player protests and concussions have driven away some fans.

Some executives argue viewership of the league has still improved over the long term while dropping for every other show. Yet the amount of time people have spent watching football this season is at the lowest point since 2011, back when there were fewer televised games, according to Mike Mulvihill, Fox Sports' head of research.

"The cumulative effect of everything happening in the world at large is having an impact on NFL viewership," Mulvihill said. "The league was defying the laws of gravity."

Meet the Woman Who Is Transforming the NFL

By Dana Rose Falcone

People.com

November 3, 2017

Sam Rapoport has spent nearly 15 years working in football, a dozen of those years with the National Football League.

But as a student at McGill University in Canada, a professor discouraged the former quarterback from pursuing a career with the NFL.

“A professor I was working with told me that I should probably set my sights a little bit lower and apply for a college program, or something a little bit lower than the NFL,” Rapoport, one of PEOPLE’s 25 Women Changing the World, recalls in this week’s issue. “I remember looking at him in the eye and saying, ‘I guarantee you I’m going to work for the NFL.’ ”

The Montreal native followed through on her promise, helped by a Hail Mary pass to the NFL’s hiring committee.

“I sent a football with my résumé and wrote, ‘What other quarterback could accurately deliver a football 386 miles?’ ”

The play landed Rapoport a gig as a marketing intern in 2003, where she helped launch the NFL Network. Rapoport continued to work her way up through the league, and left in 2010 to spearhead female football leagues with USA Football. In 2016, the NFL created the director of football development for her, making Rapoport responsible for creating more opportunities for women in football.

“I would love for girls growing up in this country to believe that if they love the sport as much as I do, that they could be a part of it,” she says.

And her efforts have been working. Under Rapoport’s leadership, the Buffalo Bills have hired two female coaches, the Minnesota Vikings added two female scouts and their first female scouting intern, and five women — up from one the previous year — earned the league’s diversity coaching fellowship.

“Our goal is to normalize females on the sidelines,” Rapoport says. “That’s when we’ll know that we’ve scratched the surface and started to achieve something.”

Broncos benched Trevor Siemian, but offensive issues “not just one position”

By Josh Alper
Pro Football Talk
November 3, 2017

After Trevor Siemian threw three interceptions in a Monday night loss to the Chiefs, the Broncos did what had started to feel like an inevitable move and made a change at quarterback.

Brock Osweiler is in for this weekend’s game against the Eagles, but the message from the team isn’t that the switch will fix everything that’s been ailing the offense in Denver.

“Absolutely, football isn’t an individual sport, it’s a team sport,” tight end Virgil Green said, via the Associated Press. “Yeah, we’re bringing Brock up to do things, but we all know that Trevor is totally capable. We just need a little more from everybody. Not just one position, every position.”

Offensive coordinator Mike McCoy threw the coaching staff into the mix as well and said “we’re all in this together” when it comes to getting the Broncos on better offensive footing. After outgaining their opponents in each game of their three-game losing streak and losing the turnover battle 11-2, it seems pretty obvious where the Broncos need to start cleaning things up offensively.

Browns will pay Brock Osweiler \$895,588 to play for the Broncos this weekend

By Mike Florio
Pro Football Talk
November 3, 2017

Here's the stat of the week. Quarterback Brock Osweiler will start for the Broncos on Sunday at Philadelphia. The Broncos will pay him \$48,437 for his efforts. And the Browns will pay him \$895,588.

Of course, that's what the Browns have been paying him every week, under the \$16 million guaranteed salary that Cleveland inherited when accepting Osweiler and a second-round pick from the Texans. After the Browns cut Osweiler, the Broncos signed him to a one-year deal for the six-year minimum salary of \$775,000, leaving the Browns on the hook for \$15.225 million.

The ascension of Osweiler, who was cut by the Browns after starting multiple preseason games, comes at a time when Eagles quarterback Carson Wentz has been named the NFC offensive player of the month and Texans quarterback Deshaun Watson has been named the AFC offensive player of the month. Which means that someone needs to make a Browns jersey that lists on the back the names of all of the quarterbacks who either were or could have been on the Browns roster, and who went on to thrive elsewhere.

With a big game on Sunday, Osweiler will be added to the list. Either way, the Browns will keep adding \$895,588 per week to his bank account.

Broncos expect Emmanuel Sanders back this week

By Michael David Smith

Pro Football Talk

November 3, 2017

Brock Osweiler will get his first start of the season on Sunday, and he'll have a healthier complement of receivers than Trevor Siemian had before he was benched.

Broncos coach Vance Joseph said today that he expects receiver Emmanuel Sanders to be back on the field Sunday at Philadelphia. Sanders has missed the last two games with an ankle injury.

Despite missing the last two games, Sanders is still second on the team behind Demaryius Thomas with 25 catches for 266 yards, and Sanders is tied for the team lead with two touchdown catches.

Sanders and Osweiler had a good rapport when they played together in 2015, with Sanders having a career-high 181-yard game in one of the games Osweiler played ahead of the injured Peyton Manning that year.