

Kirk Cousins? Alex Smith? Baker Mayfield? With Broncos, everything is an option at QB.

By Nicki Jhabvala

Denver Post

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When the Broncos walked off the field for the last time in 2017, they knew what they had just seen. Patrick Mahomes, a first-round rookie quarterback who had yet to play in a regular-season game before facing the Broncos, flashed the arm strength most knew he had, but also the decision-making most believed would need more time and experience to acquire.

“He’s a quality quarterback. He’s a quarterback of the future for the Chiefs,” Broncos linebacker Von Miller said afterward.

“He’s smart. I see him checking protections, I see him reading the defense. We know how strong his arm is, and the guy is a competitor,” Broncos cornerback Aqib Talib said days later in a radio interview. “So I think Alex Smith, he definitely might be on the market next year.”

Mahomes, it became clear, is the future for Kansas City. Smith, who might have played his final game as a Chief on Saturday in a playoff loss, could be sporting new colors in 2018. (He has one year remaining on his contract and when asked by reporters after the wild-card loss to Tennessee if he wanted to stay, he offered limited words aside from, “Yeah, are you kidding?”)

If Smith is not an option for Kansas City, could he be one for Denver? What about Kirk Cousins? Or Drew Brees? Or Baker Mayfield or Josh Allen or Josh Rosen or, hey, what about Eli Manning?

The truth is nearly every option is being considered by the Broncos — drafting a quarterback, signing a free agent, trading for a veteran. Would the Chiefs actually trade their quarterback to a divisional rival?

The Broncos capped another playoff-less season with another quarterback quandary, leaving them in essentially the same spot they were a year prior when Gary Kubiak abruptly resigned after two years as head coach. It’s likely worse, actually, because hope for potential among their two young players, Trevor Siemian and Paxton Lynch, has been eroded by mediocre performances and time. The former has one year remaining on his rookie contract and is due about \$1.9 million in salary in 2018, thanks to performance escalators. Lynch has cap hits of about \$2.6 million and \$3 million over the next two years, respectively.

Lynch’s future is the bigger question, and “one that’s going to be high on the topics as far as discussion, where we think he is and if he can be that guy going into the future,” general manager John Elway said last week.

The options for the Broncos vary in cost and experience and are dependent on whether Elway views this team as ripe for a rebuild — something owner Pat Bowlen never did — or in need of a revamp. Starting anew with a rookie would likely require time and patience. Finding a veteran, despite the cost, is a sign Elway believes the rest of his roster has the pieces to go deep in the playoffs and stick to “Plan A,” as he calls it.

“I don’t really see him drafting a rookie and trying to rebuild,” Talib said. “I see him getting a vet and getting back to the top ASAP because that’s where he belongs.”

Later this month the Broncos will coach the Senior Bowl and guide a North Team that is expected to include Heisman-winner Mayfield of Oklahoma. They’ll get a close look at his potential as a possible No. 5 pick in the draft, as well as that of Allen, from Wyoming.

Come March, if neither is re-signed already by their incumbent teams, Cousins and Brees figure to be high on the Broncos’ list, too. Though each will carry a significant price tag.

“There’s a lot of unknowns,” Elway said . “Until we kind of figure out exactly what that is—once we figure that out then we can set a plan of how we want to attack it. I think there is no doubt we have to get better at that position.”

Five NFL prospects to watch in Monday's national title game — and why they might fit with the Broncos

By Nick Kosmider

Denver Post

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Two SEC powers will collide Monday night when Alabama and Georgia meet in the national championship game in Atlanta. The game will only be the beginning for a handful of players who will turn their attention toward the 2018 NFL draft once it ends. The title game is loaded with pro prospects, and with the No. 5 pick in April's draft at their disposal, the Broncos will have a close eye on a number of them. Here is a look at five NFL prospects in Monday night's clash and why they might fit with the Broncos:

Minkah Fitzpatrick, defensive back, Alabama

Credentials: Fitzpatrick was everywhere in Alabama's dominating victory over Clemson in the Sugar Bowl, a microcosm of the impact he's made during his career with the Crimson tide. The 6-foot-1, 202-pound junior has played safety, cornerback and even outside linebacker, and he makes plays wherever he is lined up. The Bednarik Award winner as the nation's top defensive player this season, Fitzpatrick has returned four of his nine career interceptions for touchdowns.

Why he could fit: The Broncos have two elite cornerbacks in Aqib Talib and Chris Harris. But the Broncos would be on the hook for only \$1 million in dead money in 2018 if they moved on from Talib, who is owed \$11 million in base salary if he's on the roster. Fitzpatrick, who projects as an early first-round selection, could likely step in and contribute for a team as a rookie.

Roquan Smith, linebacker, Georgia

Credentials: The 6-1, 225-pound Smith was named the defensive MVP of the Rose Bowl after piling up 11 tackles in Georgia's thrilling, 54-48 double-overtime victory over Oklahoma. The sideline-to-sideline playmaker won the Butkus Award this season as the nation's top linebacker and was a consensus All-American. He has 124 tackles and 5½ sacks this season, numbers scouts believe he can replicate at the NFL level due to his strength, speed and nose for the football.

Why he could fit: Though the Broncos have more pressing needs — at quarterback and on the offensive line among them — the Broncos could have a major hole to fill at linebacker if Todd Davis heads elsewhere in free agency. Smith is projected to go between the early and middle part of the first round.

Calvin Ridley, wide receiver, Alabama

Credentials: Ridley is likely to be the first wide receiver off the board — and for good reason. The 6-1, 190-pound playmaker can beat with you with speed and separation or by rising over defensive backs down the field. He has 220 catches — 18 of them touchdowns — for 2,749 yards in his three seasons at Alabama.

Why he could fit: Veterans Demaryius Thomas and Emmanuel Sanders are under contract for a combined \$16.75 million in base salary in 2018 and remain a strong 1-2 punch when healthy. But Denver has lacked big plays down the field in each of the past two seasons, and adding a big young weapon for a potential new quarterback could be a boon to a sagging offense.

Rashaan Evans, linebacker, Alabama

Credentials: Evans has followed in the line of Rueben Foster and C.J. Mosely as Alabama linebackers who are built for the next level. He had 11½ tackles for loss and six sacks this season, despite missing two games due to injury. He had nine tackles and a sack in the Sugar Bowl win over Clemson, demonstrating next-level field awareness.

Why he could fit: Evans could possibly be had early in the second round when the Broncos make their second pick. That could be good value at a position the Broncos will need to upgrade if Davis is not with the team after free agency.

Sony Michel, running back, Georgia

Credentials: Michel sprinted Georgia into the national championship game with his game-winning touchdown run against Oklahoma in the Rose Bowl. He tallied 181 rushing yards on 11 carries — an eye-popping average of 16.5 yards per carry. The senior displayed speed, speed and more speed in the victory over the Sooners, and he'll sit at the top of the scouting report for Alabama's defense Monday night.

Why he could fit: As the Broncos aim to revive an offense that has ranked among the league's worst the past two seasons, they must add more players capable of making game-changing plays. Michel's speed will translate to the next level and he could be a coveted weapon — he had four catches for 41 yards in the Rose Bowl — for a new quarterback.

Other prospects to watch: Ronnie Harrison, safety, Alabama; Nick Chubb, running back, Georgia; Da'Ron Payne, defensive lineman, Alabama.

Despite coaching turmoil, Elway strives for stability

By Mike Klis

9NEWS

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At the annual Boy Scout breakfast two years ago at the Pepsi Center, I had the privilege of moderating a panel that included Broncos' head coach Gary Kubiak and his three coordinators Wade Phillips, Rick Dennison and Joe DeCamillis.

The four coaches were all coming off a Super Bowl 50 victory. They were all fascinating speakers.

And they are all gone.

It has been widely stated the Denver Broncos have been undergoing a difficult transition because of the retirement of legendary quarterback Peyton Manning.

Understated is how this organization has reeled since Kubiak was forced to retire from coaching because of medical reasons.

When Kubiak left, most of his assistants eventually exited with him, with more leaving last week. A major reason why Broncos general manager John Elway decided to keep head coach Vance Joseph despite his first-year, 5-11 record was to assuage this massive coaching turnover.

"I don't like to make change," Elway said in a 9News interview last week.

Wait a minute, John. The NFL industry may dispute that statement.

"I know that but they've got to go back and look at the record," Elway said. "I think because John Fox was not here and Gary retired, somehow I became a guy who wants to get rid of head coaches. I don't like that. I don't like change. I want us to be very good every year and have a good group where everyone understands what their responsibilities are. That's the goal. That's what I look for."

Kubiak's departure as head coach a year ago (he has remained in an advisory role) has led to the near-complete exit of his Super Bowl coaching staff. Greg Knapp, Clancy Barone, Brian Callahan, Brian Pariani, Samson Brown, James Cregg, Marc Lubick and Tony Coaxum followed Kubiak and the coordinators out the door last year. Some left for better opportunities, some not.

And now Eric Stutesville, Tyke Tolbert and Fred Pagac have been deemed good enough to help the Broncos win a Super Bowl, only to be told they are not good enough two years later. Phil Rauscher is about to leave for Washington and its assistant offensive line position.

The only top deputy coaches remaining from that Super Bowl 50 staff are Joe Woods, Bill Kollar, Reggie Herring and Luke Richesson.

Coaching matters in the NFL. The resurrection of the Los Angeles Rams and dominance of the New England Patriots is proof.

The Broncos' coaching upheaval is not Joseph's fault, although maybe a little. In my view, Joseph inherited a near impossible, lose-lose situation.

My favorite teacher of all-time was my third-grade teacher, Mrs. Robertson. One of my least favorites was my fourth-grade teacher. Looking back, my fourth-grade teacher had no chance.

Joseph's first season was dreadfully disappointing. But the context of that disappointment is a major reason why Elway is giving his head coach another chance.

As Joseph's former college coach Bill McCartney said while observing a Broncos practice in December: "It takes time for a leader to impose his will."

"Ultimately, that's why I wanted to stay with Vance," Elway said. "Give him that opportunity where if he wanted to make some changes on his staff he would do that and see what steps he would take to get us out of what we went through this year."

To fix offense, Broncos may need to find an identity before a QB

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN.com

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As the Denver Broncos try to repair all that went wrong in a troubled 2017 season, one of the most difficult hurdles for them to clear will be their own recent history.

Because as they try to fix an offense that has largely failed them in back-to-back seasons, they must do it in the rather large shadow of a memory. As in four seasons ago, where the Broncos produced more points in a season than any offense in league history.

The 2013 Broncos were the only 600-point team in NFL history, totaling 606 in their 16 games, as Peyton Manning set league records with 5,447 yards passing and 55 touchdowns. The Broncos had two 1,200-yard receivers in Demaryius Thomas and Emmanuel Sanders to go with a 1,000-yard rusher in Knowshon Moreno.

To put all that in perspective, the Broncos have scored 622 points and have thrown 39 touchdown passes in the past two seasons combined. The makeover is on the way and these are what will be the biggest decisions:

Decide who they are: The time of gathering players to suit the whims of each new position coach is over. The Broncos have to decide what they want to be and gather players for that, especially in the offensive line and at quarterback -- just four of the nine offensive linemen on the roster to end the season are Broncos' draft picks. Talk to evaluators around the league and many say the Broncos spent much of the season trying to be something they were not on offense. Their continued attempts to play out of a three-wide receiver set, with the quarterback in the shotgun, was ineffective and many of their game-changing mistakes came out of that formation. In their first 12 games, including their eight-game losing streak, 31 of their 40 sacks allowed were out of the three-wide set and 14 of their 18 interceptions were thrown out of it. It cost offensive coordinator Mike McCoy his job in November as well as three other assistants on offense at season's end. Also, the Broncos had five games in a 5-11 season when they ran the ball more than they threw it -- all five of their wins. GM John Elway noticed as well: "Offensive football is about getting the best players we can possibly get and putting them in the best situations to be successful. And we've got to do a better job of that. We didn't do a great job at that this year. That is something we definitely have to get better at."

Find the Alpha: Look, everybody knows the Broncos are on the hunt for a quarterback who can walk it, talk it and throw it. But beyond the skill set, the Broncos need a set-the-tone guy. Because their locker room, by the admission of their own veteran players, has many younger players that didn't seem all that interested in grinding. The Broncos need somebody on offense -- they really hope it's a quarterback -- who can pull the younger players along. Until it happens, the Broncos will continue to have several first- and second-year players thinking they're doing enough, with plenty of veterans angry that those same young players haven't done enough.

Define the rules: Again, losing often brings out the complaints. But overall, there was a sense among some of the team's more experienced players that there wasn't enough accountability across the board, especially on offense. And while every head coach deserves the opportunity to set his own tone, including Vance Joseph, player after player has said the type of critiques by Manning and the Monday morning review of mistakes former coach Gary Kubiak held in the team meeting room were missing. The Broncos have to find some sense of purpose where all of the players know what, exactly, gets them in the lineup and what removes them from the lineup -- no exceptions.

Close the deal: The Broncos scored 27 touchdowns on offense in 2017. Opposing offenses scored 39. There is the season in a nutshell. Red zone play is about matchups and your players winning them. The Broncos didn't win enough up front or in the pass pattern. Their quarterbacks contributed to that, to be sure. But C.J. Anderson, Devontae Booker and Jamaal Charles had a combined two rushing touchdowns after Nov. 1, while Sanders didn't have a touchdown catch after Week 2 as he missed practice and game time after a Week 6 ankle injury. The Broncos had no 100-yard receiving games after Nov. 12 and none from anybody other than Thomas and Sanders. And other than that duo, the Broncos had no other player catch more than six passes in any game.

2018 NFL draft order: Top 23 picks set

By Seth Walder

ESPN.com

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Now, how will it shake out for playoff teams? Fans of more than 20 franchises are looking ahead to free agency in March and the draft in late April. As the postseason continues, we'll update this page as teams drop out of the hunt for the Lombardi Trophy and into the confirmed 2018 NFL draft order. The top 23 picks are below, with one coin flip pending between the Raiders and 49ers.

Round 1 of the draft begins on ESPN and WatchESPN at 8 p.m. ET on April 26 and takes place in Arlington, Texas.

Note: The projected order for 24-32 is based on FPI projections from the end of the regular season.

1. Cleveland Browns (0-16)

The Browns will want a quarterback. The question for Josh Rosen and Sam Darnold might now be: Do they want the Browns? Both underclassmen have declared for the draft.

2. New York Giants (3-13)

The Giants locked up the second overall pick despite beating the Redskins in their season finale thanks to the Colts, who beat the Texans in their final game.

3. Indianapolis Colts (4-12)

Though they would have been much better off with the No. 2 slot, the Colts will be in the enviable position of having the best draft pick among teams that don't need a quarterback. That means they might be able to return a haul if they decide to trade down.

4. Cleveland Browns (via Houston Texans, 4-12)

In addition to potentially drafting a quarterback No. 1 overall, the Browns can take another premium player here or -- in the spirit of the old Browns' regime -- trade down.

5. Denver Broncos (5-11)

John Elway was a quarterback. John Elway needs a quarterback. John Elway might draft a quarterback. There are four first-round caliber quarterbacks in Darnold, Rosen, Josh Allen and Baker Mayfield. The question is: Will the QB that Elway wants still be available at No. 5?

6. New York Jets (5-11)

This is the third time in four years the Jets have ended up with the No. 6 pick. If it works out the way Leonard Williams and Jamal Adams have so far, they ought to be in good shape. Vernon Gholston on the other hand ...

7. Tampa Bay Buccaneers (5-11)

The Bucs don't need a quarterback but have the benefit of drafting early. They could use some help in the secondary, however.

8. Chicago Bears (5-11)

Given that the Bears desperately need to get Mitchell Trubisky some help, one has to think that Alabama wide receiver Calvin Ridley would be a candidate to land with them.

9/10. Oakland Raiders (6-10, coin flip pending)

The Raiders and new head coach Jon Gruden could use some help on defense.

9/10. San Francisco 49ers (6-10, coin flip pending)

Through Week 12, the 49ers had a 99 percent chance to end up with a top-five pick. Then Jimmy Garoppolo happened. Hard to imagine there will be any complaints out of San Francisco, though. They have found their franchise quarterback.

11. Miami Dolphins (6-10)

The Dolphins are another team with an interesting decision to make at quarterback after the Jay Cutler experiment didn't work out. Do they hand the reigns back to Ryan Tannehill? Do they bring in some veteran insurance? Or do they draft another young QB with high upside?

12. Cincinnati Bengals (7-9)

Is it totally crazy to imagine the Bengals moving on from Andy Dalton and entering the quarterback free-for-all? Maybe not. If so, they might be better positioned to try a veteran, but at No. 12, maybe they have a shot at one of the second-tier rookies.

13. Washington Redskins (7-9)

Jay Gruden will be back. Will Kirk Cousins join him? If not -- and if the Redskins don't replace Cousins in free agency or the trade market -- then we can add them to the list of teams that could add a first-round quarterback. At this spot they might be in range for Mayfield, or maybe they could trade up for one of the other hot names.

14. Green Bay Packers (7-9)

It was apparent after watching the Packers without Aaron Rodgers that this team needs help. In particular, they could use some help on defense, perhaps part of the reason why Todd McShay had Green Bay selecting Boston College pass-rusher Harold Landry in his first mock draft.

15. Arizona Cardinals (8-8)

Carson Palmer has retired, and the Cardinals need a quarterback of the future. They could absolutely be in the mix for the four potential first-round signal-callers.

16. Baltimore Ravens (9-7)

The Ravens had a 97 percent chance to reach the playoffs heading into their regular-season finale against the Bengals, per FPI. Sometimes, that 3 percent happens.

17. Los Angeles Chargers (9-7)

Here's another sleeper quarterback team. Rivers is still good enough that the Chargers can win with talent around him -- and they do have talent around him -- but they also might want to start thinking about life after him.

18. Seattle Seahawks (9-7)

The Seahawks need help on the offensive line. Everyone knows that. They might be hoping that one of the Notre Dame offensive linemen -- offensive tackle Mike McGlinchey or guard Quenton Nelson -- fall to them here.

19. Dallas Cowboys (9-7)

With Dez Bryant's future in Dallas uncertain, perhaps Dallas could look to the draft for another top-flight wideout at No. 19.

20. Detroit Lions (9-7)

The Lions already have a good cornerback in Darius Slay, but it's hard to have too many corners in the NFL.

21. Buffalo Bills (9-7)

Although they made the playoffs, the Bills were just the 24th-best team in the league according to FPI ratings before their wild-card matchup with the Jaguars. They have plenty of room for improvement. The good news: They have two first-round picks ...

22. Buffalo Bills (via Kansas City Chiefs, 10-6)

Blowing an 18-point lead in the playoffs is a bummer. Chiefs fans get to think about that all offseason while also remembering that they have no first-round pick this year. They dealt it away last season to trade up for Patrick Mahomes.

23. Los Angeles Rams (11-5)

Now that Sean McVay has checked winning the NFC West off his list, he can get ready for another first: Being part of a first-round selection as a head coach. The Rams didn't have one last year because they had traded it to the Titans in the Jared Goff deal the year before.

Projected 24-32, from FPI (as of Week 17):

24. Carolina Panthers (11-5) OR New Orleans Saints (11-5)

25. Tennessee Titans (9-7)

26. Atlanta Falcons (10-6)

27. Carolina Panthers (11-5) OR New Orleans Saints (11-5)

28. Jacksonville Jaguars (10-6)

29. Pittsburgh Steelers (13-3)

30. Philadelphia Eagles (13-3)

31. Minnesota Vikings (13-3)

32. New England Patriots (13-3)

Roger Goodell says NFL still has top events despite ratings

By Michael DiRocco

ESPN.com

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NFL commissioner Roger Goodell defended the league despite a drop in television ratings by saying that NFL games accounted for 20 of the 30 highest-rated shows in 2017.

"We always want ratings to go up, but we're 37 of the top 50 shows, which is higher than ever," Goodell told a small group of reporters shortly before the Jacksonville Jaguars' home playoff game against the Buffalo Bills on Sunday. "We're likely to be the No. 1 show on Fox -- excuse me on all of television, the Fox Sunday afternoon game. Sunday night, prime time is for the seventh year in a row the No. 1 show. Thursday night football is No. 2.

"I think dominance of the NFL in television is still very clear."

According to numbers registered by Nielsen, NFL television ratings fell 9.7 percent during the 2017 regular season. That followed the 2016 season in which ratings fell 8 percent. Per the Nielsen numbers, a typical game was watched by 1.6 million fewer people in 2017 than in 2016.

The Nielsen numbers also show that 20 of the 30 highest-rated shows on television in 2017 were football games. NBC's Sunday Night Football and ESPN's Monday Night Football were the most-watched shows every single week in all key male demographics. The NFL and Verizon have partnered to stream in-market and national games. The league also partnered with Amazon to stream 10 Thursday night games this season.

"We always want to figure out how to expand our audiences, and that's why we're doing things with Verizon, we're doing things ... with Amazon," Goodell said. "Those types of things are how we're reaching more consumers and that's a transition and that's something that we're putting a lot of focus on."

Yannick Ngakoue accuses Bills' Richie Incognito of using racial slurs

By Michael DiRocco

ESPN.com

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Jacksonville Jaguars defensive end Yannick Ngakoue accused Buffalo Bills offensive lineman Richie Incognito of using racial slurs during the Jaguars' 10-3 playoff victory Sunday.

Ngakoue said on Twitter that a Bills player wearing No. 64 was "goi[n]g to come harder than some weak racist slurs."

Ngakoue ended his tweet with the hashtag #Iaintjonathanmartin!

Ngakoue could not be reached for comment. The Bills and Incognito's agent, David Dunn, did not immediately respond to a request for comment Sunday evening.

Bills lineman Dion Dawkins tweeted in support of Incognito.

@DDawkins66

Just for the world to know, everyone always tryna put some bad thing on @68INCOGNITO i was next to my guy the entire game and the entire season and believe me, if he was saying some racist stuff I would have been the first to let him know that was out of line. Cut The BS

Incognito, 34, has made the Pro Bowl each of his three seasons since signing with the Bills in 2015. Buffalo gave Incognito a second chance in the NFL after the Miami Dolphins suspended him for the final eight games of the 2013 season for his role in a bullying scandal in which ex-offensive lineman Jonathan Martin was a target.

NFL investigator Ted Wells released a report in 2014 detailing "a pattern of harassment" against Martin by Incognito and other Dolphins players that included racial slurs. Incognito's attorney later called the report "replete with errors."

The NFL cleared Incognito later in 2014 to return to football, but he spent that season out of the league before joining Buffalo the next year.

Brian Gutekunst goes from Green Bay's director of player personnel to GM

By Rob Demovsky

ESPN.com

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The Packers decided to stay within the Ron Wolf scouting tree for their next general manager, but it's not his son, Eliot. Instead, the more experienced Brian Gutekunst was promoted to replace Ted Thompson.

Gutekunst will receive a five-year contract, a source told ESPN's Adam Schefter.

Gutekunst was set to interview for the Texans' general manager vacancy Sunday. The Houston Chronicle first reported the news of the Packers' decision to hire Gutekunst as GM.

The 44-year-old had been the Packers' director of player personnel since 2016. He joined the Packers in 1998, when he was hired as an area scout by Wolf, the Hall of Fame general manager, and served in that role for 13 years. Previous to his last promotion, he was the director of college scouting from 2012 to '15.

Packers president Mark Murphy picked Gutekunst over the younger Wolf, 35, and another in-house candidate, Russ Ball (the team's vice president of football operations/player finance), and former Bills GM Doug Whaley.

Had the Packers hired Ball, they would have broken from the Wolf scouting tree by hiring a GM without a background in player personnel and talent evaluation. According to multiple sources, Ball had taken on a larger role in that area over the last two years as Thompson, 64, cut back on his duties in part because of his age and his health.

The Packers also contacted two of their former scouts who are current GMs -- John Schneider (Seattle) and Reggie McKenzie (Oakland). They were denied permission to interview Schneider, while McKenzie declined.

The Packers risked losing Gutekunst and Wolf if they hired Ball. It's still possible Wolf will leave the organization. They also already lost senior personnel executive Alonzo Highsmith to the Browns last week, and it's possible Wolf would join him to work under former Packers personnel executive John Dorsey.

The Packers would like to retain Ball in a high-level position.

While there could be turnover in the scouting department, this should stabilize the coaching situation. According to a source, coach Mike McCarthy is comfortable working with Gutekunst. McCarthy is under contract through the 2019 season after he signed a one-year extension late this season.

Mason's Mailbag: It's early, so draft possibilities are wide-open

By Andrew Mason
DenverBroncos.com
Jan. 8, 2018

You can tweet questions to me with the hashtag #AskMase or use the submission form to your right (if you're viewing on a standard browser) or at the bottom of the page if you're on the mobile site.

How likely is it that the Broncos would look to draft a quarterback with their first round pick and are they interested in Baker Mayfield at that spot?

-- Jesse Langmacher

It's a valid question, but it is impossible to answer accurately. Some people would offer you a guess that would be a line of bull. I'm not going to do that. Anyone who says they could answer that question with any certainty at this point is being dishonest.

Too much could change between now and the draft. We don't know how the free-agent class of quarterbacks is going to look, and what the Broncos do there will have a massive impact on how they use their first-round pick. At the same time, what they think of this year's quarterback class -- including Mayfield, who they will coach in the Senior Bowl -- could determine their free-agency choice, and how much of their cap space is allocated to adding a veteran quarterback.

As for Mayfield specifically, at this point, they're evaluating all possible quarterback options in the draft class, including Mayfield. So there is interest there, but there is interest in a slew of other draft possibilities at quarterback, as well, and there are many factors to evaluate, some of which President of Football Operations/General Manager John Elway noted at the season-ending press conference Tuesday:

"I think half of it is what you see on film and the other half is figuring out what kind of guy [he] is," Elway said. "I think the biggest challenge about playing the position is there is a lot of good football players and a lot of guys that have a ton of talent out there.

"But again, obviously stepping into that role when you come out of college -- in college you're allowed to be a kid. You come to the NFL and the expectation levels rise, especially if you're a high pick. You're expected to be good or show signs of being a very good player early. The other half is how are they going to handle the situation and how are they going to handle the [significance] of being a quarterback in the NFL.

"That is the biggest part and I say it all the time. Just trying to figure out how these guys can handle the tough times, because there's going to be tough times. When the world feels like it's caving in, are they going to be able to battle through that and not lose their confidence? ... What gets you here is your swagger and your confidence as quarterback. You have a chance to play in the NFL and that's what gets you here and you can't be afraid of it. Then all of a sudden if you get in the world and all of a sudden

things aren't going well, the world starts caving in on you and you lose that swagger or you lose that confidence, it's very, very difficult to get it back.

"You have to figure out how strong they are, what they believe in and how strong they are, what they are as a quarterback and to be able to battle through that. If they can do that, then they have a chance to have a great, long career.

"To me, I say it all the time: It's 50 percent the physical side of it and 50 percent mental side. The heart and finding out what they have inside, that's the difficult part."

I believe the Broncos would be better drafting a running back like the kid from Penn State [Saquon Barkley] or a linebacker in the first round and addressing the offensive-line need in the second and third round I'm wondering what your opinion is on that.

-- Stacy Poll

I believe that it's Jan. 7, and the Broncos' coaching staff will be at the Senior Bowl in just over two weeks, which will provide a horde of additional bits of information and data points to their evaluations -- especially at quarterback. Free agency also takes place between now and the draft. So it's too early to make that call.

@mcivorclarke

@MaseDenver can you tell me why @Broncos draft ahead of @nyjets? Same record but we beat them head to head. Wouldn't that put them ahead of Broncos?

Because head-to-head results have no impact on draft tiebreakers. Strength of schedule is the first tiebreaker, with the team whose opponents had the lowest collective winning percentage picking first. The next tiebreakers are conference record, then divisional record -- if both teams are in the same conference or division. After that, it goes to a coin flip.

Titans ownership backs Mike Mularkey in statement

By Marc Sessler

NFL.com

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Now that was a fun weekend. Marcus Mariota, tucking in his cape so we could hardly see it, threw two touchdown passes, caught a touchdown pass, made the block of the weekend and saved his coach's job, all in three hours. Atlanta's defense made the best offense in football, the 2017 Rams, look like the 2016 Rams. Jacksonville won a home playoff game for the first time in 18 years against a team playing a playoff game for the first time in 18 years. Drew Brees turns 39 a week from today, and the Saints don't need him to be The Man anymore, but they needed him to play well to beat Carolina, and he did. "Still The Man," said Saints running back Mark Ingram. "I've been telling you all year—don't sleep on Drew."

Now this is going to be a fun weekend coming up. A top-seeded home dog in the (Petrified) City of Brotherly Love on Saturday at dusk. Another promising young contender, Mariota, comes at the king, Tom Brady, Saturday night. The Roethlisberger Redemption Show trying to overcome a team playing like a bunch of scolded dogs (I will explain) Sunday afternoon. Three good pieces of drama. Then the best game: the incredibly rebuilt Saints with their forever coach and quarterback against the team that's so hot it prays the bye week didn't cool it off. Saints-Vikings, in the last game of the round-of-eight.

This is a season that still doesn't have an identity, beyond the anthem protests and the President Trump attacks. It's sort of the changing of the guard, but not really—not with New England and Pittsburgh and Drew Brees and Matt Ryan still contenders for championship weekend. And it's sort of the rise of the offseason 'dogs. But the Jaguars need Blake Bortles to be competent. Same with the Eagles and Nick Foles. Same with the Titans around Mariota.

What it comes down to in January, I think, isn't the star power. It's the games. And this weekend, Saints-Vikings is the best. It should be great.

The NFL could use some megastars. It's a strange year in the league. In the final eight, the only remotely sure thing to me is New England over Tennessee. But we all could see the wounded top-seeded Eagles finding a way at home, same as we can see Atlanta flying into Philadelphia and winning. We all could see Jacksonville winning in Pittsburgh—and if you say you can't, you haven't watched that swarming defense. We all could flip a coin for Saints-Vikings.

This is how Minnesota's defense ended the season, in the final three games:

Record: 3-0.

Points allowed per game: 5.7

Yards allowed per game: 200.3

Opponents completion rate: 48.6 percent.

Now, the Vikings faced Andy Dalton, Brett Hundley and Mitchell Trubisky down the stretch. This week they'll face an all-timer. It's been a strange year for Drew Brees, but a great year for the Saints. New Orleans was coming of three straight 7-9 seasons, and, truth be told, the Saints may have taken a decent trade offer for coach Sean Payton, just to start anew.

NFL

Have the Panthers Underachieved During the Cam Newton-Ron Rivera Era?

But Payton re-invented himself, sort of. He said with some pride that the Saints were going to be more run-reliant and less Brees-reliant; all the great offensive stats weren't winning any January games, after all. Payton was convinced his team would be better off trying to win with defense and a running game than playing bombs-away. So the Saints drafted a long-term right tackle, Ryan Ramczyk, in the first round, and a three-down back, Alvin Kamara, late in the third, fortifying the secondary with cornerback Marson Lattimore and safety Marcus Williams in between. I am not exaggerating when I say that the trio of GM Mickey Loomis, college scouting director Jeff Ireland (remember him, Dolfans?) and Payton had one of the best drafts in recent history. All four of those players, incredibly, are above-average NFL starters as rookies. In fact, 14 of the 22 starters in Sunday's wild-card win over Carolina were not active Saints in 2015. Talk about a changing of the guard.

Watching Minnesota in the last two weeks of the season—in the beatdown of Green Bay and the rout of Chicago—was educational. What a confident player Case Keenum is, against all odds. The Vikes' quarterback should be Sam Bradford, or maybe a healed Teddy Bridgewater, by now. But every time he steps on the field, Keenum shows he belong, and he shows GMs with quarterback holes (John Elway in Denver, John Dorsey in Cleveland, Mike Maccagnan with the Jets) to pay attention if for some reason the Vikings don't aggressively try to re-sign him after the season. And then there's the defensive talent, led by instinctive difference-maker Harrison Smith at safety. The Vikings are the NFC Super Bowl favorites, the team with the best chance to make it to Super Bowl LII in Minneapolis, the team that could end the schneid of no team ever playing a Super Bowl team at home.

Sean Payton and offensive coordinator Pete Carmichael, play-designing ... Alvin Kamara and Mark Ingram, mandating respect in the run game ... a better line than the Saints have had since their Super Bowl season ... and the Jordan-led young defense. "These young cats, they don't know what we've been through," Jordan said. "Losing hurts. Most of these guys haven't seen it. But that's okay. The biggest difference in our team is how the locker room feels. These guys are so confident. They're winners."

What a test Sunday in Minneapolis. Brees against a tremendous front, and against a safety (Smith) with sideline-to-sideline instincts of the guy he just beat (Luke Kuechly). The NFL, in the round of eight, has saved the best for last.

More in a moment on an eventful week—the retirements of Carson Palmer and Bruce Arians, the Patriots defending their culture, the Raiders finally nabbing Jon Gruden, the continuing mayhem of instant-replay—and the looming divisional round. First, some voices of the wild-card games:

- Titans 22, Chiefs 21: Tennessee running back Derrick Henry (23 carries, 156 yards), on Marcus Mariota ... Titans up 22-21, third-and-10, Kansas City 44. Chiefs blitz. Mariota hands to Henry. "It was a zone read play, and there was nothing there. I hit it outside, to the left, and it was gonna be me and [Chiefs linebacker Frank Zombo] behind the line of scrimmage. And there was Marcus. He made the block to take the guy out of the play. Then all I had to do was get the first down and the game is over. That's how it happened. Marcus, that's just him being who he is, him being great. He has the kind of attention to detail on plays like that—he's just one of the guys, trying to make a play for another one of the guys. Everybody was excited." Seven teammates hopped around Mariota, congratulating the quarterback for one of the plays of the game. A block.

- Falcons 26, Rams 13: Atlanta linebacker Deion Jones (10 tackles, one very big pass defended), on the play that clinched the game ... Atlanta up 26-13, fourth-and-goal from the Atlanta 5-yard line, 2:11 left. Jones on wideout Sammy Watkins. "I was pretty much by myself on the coverage. Watkins used his body to get leverage on me, and in that situation, I have to fight through it, or it's going to be a pretty easy touchdown. Every week on plays like that, it's a fight. I mean, a physical fight. Like Coach Quinn said before the game, 'This game's gonna be a fight, and the defense has to be closers.' So this is fourth down. The play had to be made." Jones broke up the pass two yards deep in the end zone. Game over.
- Jaguars 10, Bills 3: Jacksonville defensive lineman Malik Jackson (one sack, one pass defended), on making a bad franchise competitive ... "It feels like the city's erupting. I'm just glad we could give Duval [County] the kind of team it deserves. We're one of eight teams left. That's why I was brought here from Denver, to win games like this. This game was a dogfight. But that's all right—we like dogfights. Hard-nosed, old-school football. We play like scolded dogs." Huh? "Like Jaguars on the hunt, with reckless abandon. Eleven guys, playing all-out. We make everybody feel us. We have that angry northeast-football style of play, taught by our coach [Bronx native Doug Marrone]. I mean, we have some angry guys on this defense. I am going to put you in the dirt. Know what I'm saying? Pittsburgh's next. We don't care. Whoever it is, we'll play. If America favors them, we don't care."
- Saints 31, Panthers 26: New Orleans defensive end Cam Jordan (one sack, two passes batted down, one vital intentional-grounding forced), on the great joy in beating Cam Newton and the Panthers for the third time this year ... "We had to remind 'em, this is our year. We knew Cam was gonna try to be a hero. We made him a traditional quarterback for sure. When he gets running, he gets more and more energetic, he's the real Cam, Superman, the cape, all that. We didn't want him to run, so we kept him in the pocket. Late in the game we hurt him and he came back. What a competitor he is to come back. But all game, I wanted to make him as uncomfortable as possible. Got a good couple pressures, then got him on the grounding play. Such a huge win. I am going to send Cam a bottle of wine. A Jordan, from Sonoma, to remind him what it's like to be 0-3 against us."

A DIVISIONAL ROUND PREVIEW

Atlanta (11-6, NFC 6th seed) at Philadelphia (13-3, NFC 1st seed), Saturday, 4:35 p.m., NBC. The news is fairly stunning. A six seed, a dome team playing in open air in January at one of the toughest places in the league to play, is a 2.5-point favorite over a one seed. No six seed has ever been favored over a one seed since the playoff field expanded to 12 teams in 1990. That's the predicament the Eagles find themselves. The odds are Foles-centric, obviously. No one trusts Nick Foles to play a competent game this weekend. In his last two games, collectively, he never hit 50 in two fairly significant categories: completion percentage (46.9 percent) and passer rating (48.2). So Eagles offensive coordinator Frank Reich, when putting the game plan together with Doug Pederson, must be mindful of making this a power-running, Giants-of-the-eighties football game. This is the way Philadelphia can win this game. Run LaGarrette Blount and Jay Ajayi 40 or 43 times behind a line the Eagles trust far more than their quarterback. Blount and Ajayi, combined, rushed for 4.83 yards per carry as Eagles this year. This won't work unless Foles can, maybe once a quarter, hit one of his receivers with something beyond an intermediate route. But unless they run effectively, Philadelphia's not winning this game. One last thing: Bill Parcells used to say, It's not average per carry I care about. It's number of carries. In one of the biggest Super Bowl upsets ever, the Giants ran it 39 times and held the ball for 40:33 to beat Buffalo 27 years ago. That's the blueprint. The Eagles need to eat the clock and keep the ball away from a better offense to win this game.

Tennessee (10-7, AFC 5th seed) at New England (13-3, AFC 1st seed), Saturday, 8:15 p.m., CBS. Distractions will mean nothing in this game. Nothing, maybe, except they will make Tom Brady want to shove it down the throats of those who think he's a power-hungry warlord controlling his backups. As much as I think it's silly to think of these Patriots as a two-touchdown favorite against any team in the playoffs, I also think it's highly unlikely that rested New England can lose to Tennessee. The Titans will try to play smashmouth with Derrick Henry (that's certainly what I'd do), to be sure, and get Marcus Mariota out on the flank for some run-pass options. I think New England's Josh McDaniels will call a smarter game than the Chiefs did against Tennessee. In other words, the Patriots will be significantly more balanced. In New England's last two games, the Pats rushed for 340 yards and passed for 401 net yards ... and averaged 33:16 in possession time while winning two games by a combined 41 points. Dion Lewis gives New England a true outside threat in the backfield, along with bigger backs to go inside against Jurrell Casey, Sylvester Williams and a rising player, DaQuan Williams. (Challenging the Tennessee interior defense rarely goes well for any team.) I think Mariota gives the Patriots plenty to think about, and lots to game plan for. But the Patriots will be prepared. They're a vastly improved defense since the first month of the season, and coming off a bye could make them better. Here's a stat I like: Coming off their in-season bye, New England, in its next four games, allowed 16, 8, 17 and 3 points.

Marcus Mariota Puts on a Signature Performance in Titans' Comeback Win Against Chiefs

Jacksonville (11-6, AFC 3rd seed) at Pittsburgh (13-3, AFC 2nd seed), Sunday, 1:05 p.m., CBS. One of the stunning results of this NFL season happened in Week 5 at Heinz Field: Jacksonville 30, Pittsburgh 9. The first five-interception game of Ben Roethlisberger's career left him saying afterward: "Maybe I don't have it anymore." The other day, Roethlisberger confirmed he wanted the Jags in the divisional game: "I'd love to prove that five interceptions wasn't me in that game." That'll be the story all week, to be sure. But Pittsburgh will have other problems in this game—quite a few, in fact. The Steelers got steamrolled for 231 rushing yards by Jacksonville, and Leonard Fournette had 181 of them, including a 90-yard dagger to cap the game in the fourth quarter. It's clear the Jags have a problem on offense in the passing game. Blake Bortles is the AFC's Nick Foles, players their teams have to game plan around to win. On Sunday, after the 10-3 win over Buffalo, Doug Marrone tried to be nice, but the reality of the situation couldn't be avoided: The Jags can't trust Bortles. "I'd be a fool to sit here and say I'm not concerned," Marrone said. "If you want to continue to keep playing, you have to do a better job." Or, the Jags have to pick off Roethlisberger a couple of times, and play a grind-it-out game.

Blake Bortles Did Just Enough, Like He Has All Season, as Jaguars Shut Down Bills

New Orleans (12-5, NFC 4th seed) at Minnesota (13-3, NFC 2nd seed), Sunday, 4:40 p.m., FOX. So the NFL lucked into this: The last game of the weekend shapes up as the best game of the weekend. The Saints, fortunately, get to play last on divisional weekend (can't the NFL please find a better phrasing for the league's round-of-eight than Divisional Playoff Weekend?) after a brutally physical game against the division rival Panthers. If you look for clues from the first time these two teams met, you'll be disappointed. It was one of the two Monday-nighters from Week 1. Vikes won, 29-19. Sam Bradford threw for 346 yards and Dalvin Cook ran for 127, and Adrian Peterson was the Saints' headliner, and four Saints' rookies were making their NFL debuts. Now the Saints visit Minneapolis again, and wouldn't it be startling if New Orleans plays in U.S. Bank Stadium three times in five months? Of course, that would mean the team trying to be the first to play a Super Bowl on its home field would get knocked out ... and that's going to be a tough road for the Saints to travel. I think this game is about the maturation of the Minnesota defense playing some great football down the stretch against some poor offenses—

Cincinnati, Green Bay (minus Aaron Rodgers) and Chicago. Drew Brees, with a defined running game and a maturing defense, will be a superb test for the Vikings. The winner here will certainly deserve a spot in the NFC Championship Game.

THE WEEKLY REPLAY RANT

The final 22 seconds of the first half of the Falcons-Rams game took nine minutes, 22 seconds to play. The replay process continues to be dysfunctional and plodding.

Latest example: First quarter, Saturday night, Falcons at Rams. A Falcons punt falls to earth and—as replays would clearly show—bounces off Rams safety Blake Countess and then Rams returner Pharoh Cooper, and then into a pig-pile, and the Falcons recover. Ref Ed Hochuli signals: Falcons ball. Start the clock.

1:22. The third NBC replay clearly shows the ball first hit Countess' foot. So then, obviously, the ball is free to be recovered by anyone. This is 82 seconds after Hochuli first made his signal, but there's no question the New York NFL officiating center has now seen several replays—and surely the replay that shows the ball hitting Countess' foot.

2:17. Hochuli walks from sideline to address nation, presumably with a confirmation of the call on the field—Falcons ball.

2:22. Inexplicably, Hochuli gets on his mike for what should have been a confirmation of the call on the field. He says: "We will review the ruling." FOR WHAT! WE KNOW WHAT HAPPENED!!!!

3:34. The Coliseum PA system begins playing the "Jeopardy" song.

4:09. Hochuli confirms the ruling, beginning, "The ball was first touched by the receiving team." Al Michaels mutters on NBC: "No kidding."

At the end, in all quarters and in living rooms all over America, there had to be the same disbelief in this broken process as I felt.

"We moan about it every week," a disgusted Michaels said on NBC. "What are you gonna do?"

"Golden Globes speech," Cris Collinsworth said.

This process simply must be streamlined. Within 82 seconds of the play happening on the field, we saw a replay confirming two Rams touched the ball clearly. It is inexcusable to take four minutes and nine seconds from the time a play happens to adjudicate it, when, in half that time, TV replays show exactly what happened.

In the last 22 seconds of the first half, there was a 3-minute, 31-second delay between the ruling of a Todd Gurley catch on the field and the near-running of the next play, and then the eventual overruling of the Gurley catch.

After Falcons' Wild-Card Win vs. Rams, Consider Dan Quinn for NFL Coach of the Year

Officiating is hard. The NFL, by making it a science and drawing out the process, is turning off fans and going against the original intent of replay, which is to correct obviously wrong calls quickly. That's not happening. At all. This has to be a priority for Roger Goodell, the Competition Committee and the Officiating Department in February.

Finally: The time of game was 3:17. The average time of game for a 2017 regular-season game was 3:05.51. You can't make judgments on how the game is dragging based on one game, to be sure. But you can't tell me that, with a streamlined replay process that should be significantly better with centralized replay and the tablet being brought to the field to make the referee's replay-analysis quicker, that you couldn't have shaved at least four minutes off the process in the first half of this game alone.

ODE TO CARSON PALMER

Carson Palmer, the quarterback, retired Tuesday at 38, after a 14-year NFL career in Cincinnati, Oakland and Arizona. He had his down seasons, and his down moments, and there will be those in Cincinnati who will forever feel he never delivered the way the first pick in the 2003 draft should. I'd counter by saying Palmer got the long-struggling Bengals to the playoffs in 2005, and got his knee caved in during a playoff game against Pittsburgh 12 years ago today, and came back to be a proficient quarterback for four more seasons—until Bengal-dom (that's Boomer Esiason's pet word for the frustrations of playing in Cincinnati) got to him, and Palmer said he'd retire unless he could play elsewhere. That elsewhere led to parts of seven more seasons, and to 140 touchdown passes, and, ultimately, to a crushing playoff bummer at Carolina in the NFC title game two years ago.

I'll remember Palmer for a few reasons. He was unfailingly polite; when he got drafted by Cincinnati, he kept calling club owner Mike Brown "Mr. Brown," and was deferential to a fault. He took his job so seriously; I gathered Palmer, Matt Ryan, Aaron Rodgers, Ben Roethlisberger and Tony Romo for a quarterback roundtable in 2009, and Palmer was jonesing about it before and after, loving the stories from the other passers. "That was great," he told me over a beer afterward. "We ought to do it more often." I'll remember his 2015 season, when he took the deep pass to an art form. Pro Football Focus rated Palmer the best quarterback in football that year, in part because he threw the ball downfield as consistently well as it can be done.

And I'll remember him as a guy who loved his craft and worked exceedingly hard at it. In 2015, I asked Palmer if he would let me do a story on a week in the life of a quarterback. I told him it would be the way for him (and maybe his kids one day) to see what he did for a living, in full color, for all those years before he retired to be a full-time dad, or whatever the future held for him. He liked the idea. Bruce Arians tolerated the idea. But both helped me pull it off into one of my favorite stories (in two parts) in 37 years as a sports writer. The pieces:

I was lucky to find two men so open to discussing what the job of being a quarterback is really like. Watching Arians divine what would be in his game plan early in the week, I saw this in game plan control at the Cardinals' offices in Tempe:

There is a section smack dab in the middle of the white board headed HOME RUN. It means exactly how it sounds: big shots, far downfield.

Arians picks out six Home Runs per week. This week, one of the Home Runs stands out above all: Pistol Strong Right Stack Act 6 Y Cross Divide. "I love the play this week," Arians says.

Pistol means Palmer will take the snap four yards behind center. It's a short shotgun snap. Strong tells the fullback (backup center A.Q. Shipley, in this case) to line up to the tight-end side of the formation. Right is the side the tight end will line up on, assuming the ball is spotted in the middle of the field or the right hash. Stack tells the two wide receivers on the play to line up in a stack to the opposite side of the formation from the tight end. Act 6 is the protection, telling the two backs which linebacker to block if the 'backers rush; the fullback will seal the tight-end side, while the running back will take the blitz from the middle or weak side, if there is one. Y Cross Divide comprises the two routes run by the wide receivers. The Y, or slot receiver, will run a deep cross through the formation and hope to take a safety with him, while the split end in the stack will run a divide route; that means the split end, likely Larry Fitzgerald, will run a stutter-and-go, running maybe seven yards downfield, faking toward the sideline, then sprinting downfield. The route is divided into two segments, the first ending in the deke to the right, and then the go.

That's the kind of stuff Palmer and Arians shared, and there's much more. I did want to say upon Palmer's retirement that his contribution to football is not only as a great thrower of the ball, and quarterback of a consistent playoff team in Arizona, but on the educational side too. I'm grateful to him (and Arians) for opening up their lives to show exactly how the position is played, and coached, in a game week.

AS THE PATRIOTS TURN...

My takeaways from the kerfuffle over the ESPN Patriots' expose about Tom Brady guru Alex Guerrero, and how the Jimmy Garoppolo trade went down, and whether this is the last year of the Kraft/Belichick/Brady team after 18 years together:

- The Patriots haven't been as angry about anything since the Tom Brady deflated footballs scandal. Apoplectic might be a better word.
- I have never heard Robert Kraft more strident about anything—and that includes Spygate and Deflategate—than he was on the phone with me about the accusation that he mandated that Garoppolo be traded in a meeting with Belichick before the October trade deadline. As I wrote Saturday, Kraft said such an in-season meeting never happened. Garoppolo was dealt to San Francisco for a second-round pick Oct. 30. Kraft's voice rose, his ire clear sentence after sentence, as he insisted he did not tell Belichick to make the trade. I have known Kraft since soon after he bought the team in 1994, and the one thing that sets him off is someone questioning his word. That's why this set him off.
- Bill Belichick drawing a line in the sand, as both the Boston Globe and ESPN reported, about Guerrero has actually been a good thing for the organization. Before, there was a hazy line about Guerrero's role with the team inside the building and on the sidelines. I can't think of any coaches who would then restrict the access of the man who is closest to a five-time Super Bowl quarterback and possibly the best quarterback in history. But Belichick did. Now players other than Brady can be treated by Guerrero, but only independently, at the facility adjacent to Gillette Stadium that Guerrero operates.
- I think Belichick coaches the team in 2018. Beyond that? We're reaching the end of this great era. I just don't know exactly when it'll end. Kraft had some adamant words for me when I asked if there's any way he'd consider trading Belichick. Basically, the answer was no, or maybe NO NO NO.

- I doubt this is the end, as I say. But think of what has transpired over 18 years if it is: five Super Bowl wins (perhaps a sixth in the next month), and a run of greatness that includes a league record 12 regular-season wins or more in each of the past seven seasons. Think about it. Eighteen years. Vince Lombardi, Bart Starr and the publicly owned Packers lasted nine years together. Chuck Noll, Terry Bradshaw and the Rooney family lasted a far rockier 13 in tandem. Bill Walsh, Joe Montana and Eddie DeBartolo lasted 10 together.

Robert Kraft Responds: Patriots' Owner Denies Report of Extended Meeting About QBs With Bill Belichick

And that's how I'll leave this. In my time covering the NFL, 34 seasons, the gold standard of an owner-coach-quarterback marriage, with much justification, has been San Francisco's DeBartolo-Walsh-Montana trio. Ten seasons, seven playoff appearances, six division titles, three Super Bowl wins.

You decide if it's time to rethink the best triumvirate in modern football history. Kraft, Belichick and Brady, in 18 years together, have 15 playoff appearances, 15 division titles and five Super Bowl wins. What will be will be going forward, but we're not going to see a run like this again.

QUOTES OF THE WEEK

I

"There's some calls we want back. That's probably one of them."

—Buffalo coach Sean McDermott, on the play selection in the first half at Jacksonville, when, in a scoreless game late in the first half, the Bills had first-and-goal at the Jacksonville 1-yard line and chose to pass instead of handing it to LeSean McCoy. The Bills, after an offensive pass interference call, ended up kicking a field goal to end the drive. That was their best chance at points all afternoon. The Buffalo coaches will be thinking about those play calls for a while.

II

"I haven't had any support ... So no, I just assumed the worst."

—Tennessee coach Mike Mularkey, asked after the Titans' 22-21 win at Kansas City if he'd been told anything by Titans management after rumors swirled earlier Saturday that he could be fired if the Titans didn't win this game.

A tad ominous ... at least until Sunday afternoon. "Mike Mularkey is our head coach and will be our head coach moving forward," owner Amy Adams Strunk said in a statement.

III

"It was a special day. It was rocking. We wanted to get it done for the fans. Ultimately we didn't."

—Losing quarterback Jared Goff of the Rams, the highest-scoring NFL team in 2017. The Rams scored 13 Saturday night.

IV

“It's hard to say, 'Wow, this guy really was outstanding.' Kirk had his flashes where he was really good. From a consistent standpoint, over the course of 16 games, we're 7-9. He did some great things, threw for over 4,000 yards and [27] touchdowns. He's a very, very good quarterback without a doubt, but as far as getting us over the hump from 7-9 to winning the division with all the injuries we had, he competed and did some good things.”

—Washington coach Jay Gruden, on Kirk Cousins.

The relevant snippet: “As far as getting us over the hump ... he competed.” I do not dispute the accuracy of the quote. Cousins, at best, tread water in a disappointing 7-9 season. But the starkness of those words made me think Washington could very well let Cousins test the free-agent market.

Then what happens? Would he choose the riches of Cleveland or the Jets? Or maybe less money but the faith in the front office in Denver or Arizona? Either way, the end of Cousins in Washington is now a realistic notion.

V

“Absolutely.”

—Patriots owner Robert Kraft, when I asked him in the wake of the ESPN story claiming discord atop the New England franchise if he believes Bill Belichick will be the coach of the team in 2018.

VI

“I felt like it was the right thing to do. I had absolutely no idea it would pick up steam like this.”

—Bills fan Kevin Forrest, after contributing \$30 to the Andy Dalton Foundation, starting a run of generosity that stunned Bills fans and Dalton alike—more than \$300,000 has been contributed to the Andy Dalton Foundation after the Cincinnati's quarterback's fourth-and-12 touchdown pass in the final minute beat Baltimore and allowed the Bills to make the playoffs for the first time in 18 years.

Forrest lives in Grand Island, Neb. Yes, a Nebraskan started this avalanche. Good story by Aaron Besecker in the Buffalo News about it.

Sign of the Week

SEMPER ANNUS ALTER ERIT

—At the downtown Cleveland parade mourning the 0-16 Browns season on Saturday. Translation from Latin: “Every year, always it will be.”

I could also have used BISHOP OF THE WEEK from the parade. The Associated Press found a man dressed in Catholic vestments carrying a sign reading: "Deliver us from Jimmy and Dee." Haslam, presumably. The Browns owners have presided over a slightly unlucky 2-40 stretch for the franchise.

THE AWARD SECTION

JONATHAN BACHMAN/GETTY IMAGES
OFFENSIVE PLAYERS OF THE WEEK

Marcus Mariota, quarterback/receiver/blocker, Tennessee. This was the absolutely perfect game to show why Tennessee drafted Mariota, and preferred Mariota, with the second pick in the 2015 draft. Mariota threw for two touchdowns—one to himself—and had a beautiful, win-sealing block for Derrick Henry in the final minutes to clinch a shocking 22-21 victory over the Chiefs. The first NFL playoff game of Mariota's life will also be the most memorable one. The highlight: the scramble, throw, bat, catch, dive and touch the pylon with the ball for a 6-yard touchdown, the first quarterback in NFL playoff history to throw a touchdown pass to himself. "It's hard to explain," Mariota said. "I really got lucky there. I kind of was in the right place at the right time."

Michael Thomas, wide receiver, New Orleans. Best receiver on the playoff field this weekend. The second-year ex-Buckeye, in his first NFL playoff game, came up huge: eight catches in nine Drew Brees targets for 131 yards. Two of the catches I don't know how he gripped; and his 46-yard catch and run gave the Saints a 12-point lead with five minutes left. He slithers through coverage, he doesn't get blocked off routes, he catches the ball like Beckham. What more do you want in a receiver? Thomas was critical to the Saints' first playoff win in six years.

DEFENSIVE PLAYERS OF THE WEEK

Aaron Donald, defensive lineman, L.A. Rams. Pressure player of the weekend number one. Donald swarmed Matt Ryan relentlessly (particularly in the first half), getting half a sack and recording 10 pressures, per Pro Football Focus.

Calais Campbell, defensive end, Jacksonville. Pressure player of the weekend number two. No sacks, but three quarterback hits and four more pressures, according to PFF. Jacksonville has made a few quality defensive signings in free agency in the GM Dave Caldwell regime, but none more impactful than this giant ex-Cardinal.

Cam Jordan, defensive end, New Orleans. Pressure player of the week number three. With a sack of Cam Newton, a huge forced intentional grounding on the final drive of the game, and an uncredited assist to safety Vonn Bell's game-ending sack, Jordan continued what's been one of the best seasons by a defensive player in football this year. A huge player, again, in the Saints' biggest win of the season.

SPECIAL TEAMS PLAYER OF THE WEEK

Matt Bryant, kicker, Atlanta. A kicker's dream, January football in L.A.: 60 degrees, no wind, aggressive Ram defense stunting Falcon drives. For the Falcons to win, Bryant needed to be huge. Indeed, he was.

Bryant's 29- and 51-yard field goals put the Falcons up 6-0 in the first quarter, and his 35- and 54-yard field goals put the Falcons up in the third quarter. Great night for the 42-year-old.

Brad Nortman, punter, Jacksonville. In a field-position game, Nortman's nine punts made Buffalo start at its 34-, 4-, 14-, 16-, 10-, 8-, 26-, 34- and 37-yard lines. Nine punts, 21 return yards. Not a bad day in the swirling winds for the former Wisconsin Badger.

COACH OF THE WEEK

Todd Wash, defensive coordinator, Jacksonville. The virtually unknown defensive strategist (still) had a good plan to confound Buffalo—don't worry about what Tyrod Taylor could do with his arm; worry about the legs of Taylor and LeSean McCoy. Those two managed 102 rushing yards, but not any killer runs, and the Jags held Buffalo to 45-percent passing, consistently swarming the quarterback and the ball-carriers. Wash is a Montanan in his 12th year as an NFL assistant, and is finally getting some head-coaching buzz. It could be a year or two early, but I can tell you a couple of GMs who've noticed Wash and are asking questions about his vastly improved defense and wondering if he has the stuff to be a head coach.

GOATS OF THE WEEK

Matt Nagy, offensive coordinator, and Andy Reid, head coach, Kansas City. A truly ridiculous loss by the Chiefs, highlighted by a strange abandonment of the running game. They share the goat horns here, because they share the play-calling. Reid said wryly afterward: "He called the good ones, I called the bad ones." The biggest fault I find is this: You've got the NFL rushing champion, Kareem Hunt, fully healthy, and he gives you the early lead with a one-yard bull-rush touchdown, and in the last 48 minutes of the games, you hand him the ball five times. Five rushes in the last 48 minutes. "It's criminal," Terrell Davis said on NFL Network, speaking of Hunt's 11 carries for the game. "Criminal ... They got out-coached in the second half."

Kaelin Clay, wide receiver, Carolina. Late in the first quarter of a scoreless game at New Orleans, on third-and-two from the New Orleans' seven, Cam Newton threw an absolutely perfect pass to Clay, in a sliver of an opening at the left side of the end zone. The ball went right through Clay's hands. I mean, that was the easiest seven points the Panthers had all season, and it happens when they could have taken a lead in the biggest game of the season. "I don't think Cam Newton could have walked this ball and handed it off any better than where he placed it," Troy Aikman said on FOX. "You just have to make that catch in a game like this." Couldn't have said it better. Then Graham Gano pushed a 25-yard three-pointer wide right. Half a quarter later, the Saints had a 14-3 lead.

FACTOID THAT MAY INTEREST ONLY ME

The Rams signed free-agent linebacker Kasim Edebali on Dec. 20.

The Rams played at Tennessee on Dec. 24. Edebali was inactive against the Titans, but Los Angeles won the NFC West title that day. Edebali, like all his teammates, got an NFC West championship cap in the locker room after the game.

The Rams cut Edebali on Dec. 27. The Saints signed Edebali on Dec. 28.

The Saints played at Tampa Bay on Dec. 31. Edeballi was inactive against the Bucs, but New Orleans won the NFC South title that day. Edeballi, like all his teammates, got an NFC South championship cap in the locker room after the game.

Eight days, zero snaps, two hats.

TEN THINGS I THINK I THINK

1. I think three things about the Jon Gruden deal with Oakland:

- It's a good hire. It truly is, and the Raiders (particularly the moribund offense that was awful in 2017) need a cold slap in the face from a nutty—in a good way—guy like Gruden. Derek Carr needs a competent guy in the passing game to coach him hard, and to teach him how to captain a ship.
- It's not without risks, to be sure. Gruden, in his last six seasons as an NFL head coach, won 45 and lost 53, and won zero playoff games, and developed no long-term quarterback. Isn't all of that counter to why Mark Davis is hiring him?
- There's something about the money that seems—while certainly not unfair—a little bit out of whack with even the NFL's warped reality. The Raiders are paying Jon Gruden \$100 million to coach football for a decade. I'm truly not saying he won't be worth it. But suppose he burns out in six years, or five. This is an intense human being who's been out of the fire for nine years. What are the odds he lasts 10 years? Fifteen percent? Twenty? Thirty? Four of the 32 NFL teams are being coached by a man who's been in the coaching seat there for 10 seasons or longer. Say Gruden lasts six, and gets fired. Imagine the Raiders owing him \$40 million, or whatever the structure of the deal mandates he gets paid in the final four years of the deal. I'm not saying I wouldn't have done this if I were Davis. I'm saying the Raiders could end up paying Gruden a sick sum to not work if this doesn't work out.

2. I think these are my quick thoughts on wild-card weekend:

- a. I thought Cam Newton was excellent on many levels Sunday, and if Kaelin Clay catches a perfectly thrown touchdown pass in the first quarter, there's a good chance it's Carolina at Minnesota on Sunday.
- b. Never thought I'd see Sean Payton dancing in a locker room, or anywhere. That's what beating one of your arch-rivals in the playoffs does.
- c. New Orleans and Jacksonville have ridiculously punishing defenses.
- d. If it's only about football, Julius Peppers should certainly play next year.
- e. Congrats to Brian Gutekunst for stepping into the seat held for the past quarter-century by Ron Wolf and Ted Thompson. I've heard nothing but good about Gutekunst; he's a scout's scout.
- f. How much do you think Marcel Dareus loved bursting through the Bills' line and dropping LeSean McCoy for a three-yard first-quarter loss?
- g. No team reached midfield in the first quarter of Bills-Jags. "Field-position game," said Tony Romo.

h. Calais Campbell saved the Jags four points with his shoelace tackle of Tyrod Taylor, running for the end zone inside the 5-yard line late in the first half.

i. Not saying it cost the Panthers the game, but as Ron Rivera said post-game, the pick by Mike Adams cost them 20 yards on the biggest drive of the season. Said Rivera: "You wish he would have dropped it or batted it down, just knowing the situation and circumstances."

j. Most important number of the weekend: 74,300. That was the Rams-Falcons attendance at the Los Angeles Coliseum Saturday night. Pretty good.

k. Advice to the equipment managers who have to play at the Coliseum in December and January: Pack the longer cleats for night games.

l. Saved by the win: Eric Decker of the Titans, with a huge drop early at Kansas City, and a huge touchdown catch late.

m. Best example of the weekend of playoff pressure getting to a guy: Rams return man Pharoh Cooper. Every time the ball got near him on a return, it looked like he got nervous. Very nervous.

n. Al Michaels with the line of the first half Saturday night, when a laconic Larry David was shown on-screen: "Curb your enthusiasm, Larry."

o. I heard that "Curb" theme song, Fred Gaudelli and Drew Esocoff.

p. Robert Alford played a very good game for the Falcons at cornerback. Two huge pass breakups, and only a 39.5 pass rating allowed, per Pro Football Focus.

q. The Rams thought Robert Woods was the hidden gem of their free-agent offseason shopping. And the way he played against Atlanta, particularly catching two seeds from Jared Goff, illustrated how important he's been to the Ram offense.

r. Deion Jones is just 6-1, and weighs just 223, but he's the perfect instinctive chaser in the middle of the Atlanta defense.

s. Man, Brian Poole of the Falcons is a heck of a tackler. Ask Todd Gurley.

3. I think this concussion protocol might just require an act of Congress to get right. Last week, the NFL said it would mandate a locker-room evaluation for concussion "for all players demonstrating gross or sustained vertical instability (e.g., stumbling or falling to the ground when trying to stand)." On Sunday in New Orleans, Cam Newton got hit hard twice on a Saints' pass rush, and he appeared to be squinting and wincing, particularly in his right eye, when the FOX cameras zoomed in. After a couple of moments down, Newton headed for the sidelines, but couldn't make it. He dropped to one knee, and team medics examined him again. He went inside the blue sideline tent and apparently never went to the locker room. Newton missed one play and went back in the game. Now, the Panthers may argue that Newton never demonstrated "gross or sustained" vertical instability. We'll find out soon enough, as the NFL officially has launched an investigation into how things were handled. Expect much more on this story this week.

4. I think the best way to explain Mike Brown keeping Marvin Lewis—after he couldn't get Jay Gruden or Hue Jackson—for a 16th season is this: Brown can't quit Lewis. Brown is a prisoner of familiarity.

5. I think Lewis didn't seem like a man all-in for the Bengals' extension the day before it happened. I'm told he was investigating TV jobs to see what was out there.

6. I think the Panthers have it right. If the coach works, keep him—for a long time. And Ron Rivera is working well in Carolina. When you win 12, 7, 15, 6 and 11 games in five straight seasons, and make the playoffs in four of the five seasons, it's a no-doubter that this is your coach of the future. Smart for GM Marty Hurney to get a two-year extension done before Sunday's playoff game in New Orleans, leaving no doubt about the faith this suddenly shaky-at-the-top franchise has in the head coach.

7. I think this was an excellent point by retired and prescient quarterback Dan Orlovsky, after the mistake-prone crew of ref Jeff Triplette made multiple errors in Tennessee-Kansas City: "That's on the NFL. Crews should be younger, in better physical condition, have annual tests for that, and their eyes. Greatest athletes in the world moving incredibly fast. These men aren't equipped to handle that." When the NFL studies crews, the league must study the athleticism and reaction times as well.

8. I think, of all the people leaving pro football at the end of this season, we cannot forget Len Dawson, who did his last Chiefs' broadcast on the Kansas City radio network pregame show Saturday afternoon. (Dawson, 82, works home games only.) Dawson thus ends a 60-year affiliation with pro football. His career:

- 1957-1959—Pittsburgh. The fifth pick in the first round couldn't win the starting job over Bobby Layne and got traded after the '59 season.

- 1960-1961—Cleveland. He can't beat out Milt Plum and gets released by '61.

- 1962-1975—Kansas City. MVP of the AFL in 1962, Super Bowl IV MVP, Pro Football Hall of Famer. Check out this photo. That is Dawson, at halftime of Super Bowl I in the bowls of the Los Angeles Coliseum 51 years ago, smoking a cigarette and drinking a Fresca. One of the classic old football images. Imagine Tom Brady sucking on a Camel.

- 1977-2001—HBO "Inside the NFL" host.

- 1985-2017—Chiefs radio network analyst, then pregame host.

What a football life he's had. This is the mark of a good man, and impactful man: I have never met a soul who had a bad thing to say about Len Dawson. Godspeed to him. One of my favorite notes about Dawson is that he's the seventh son from an Ohio family, and his father was a seventh son.

9. I think I'm going to miss talking to Bruce Arians, about football and other topics. I'll have more from a recent conversation with Arians soon at The MMQB.

10. I think these are my non-football thoughts of the week:

a. Happy Story of the Week: You know my love of "When Breath Becomes Air," the book of great life lessons by the late neurosurgeon Paul Kalanithi. You may remember my podcast with his widow, Lucy

Kalanithi. Now comes news of the new life of Lucy Kalanithi, and it sounds incredibly touching and incredibly happy—from Nora Krug of the Washington Post.

b. Sad Story of the Week: from “The Lives They Lived,” the annual marvelous special issue of the New York Times Sunday Magazine about the people of note who died in the previous year, an ode to DeMarlon Thomas, a victim of apparent gang violence in Michigan, by Ruth Padower.

c. Many of you who read this column might not know Robert Siegel. He retired Friday after hosting the last of a 30-year run of “All Things Considered” afternoon news programs on National Public Radio. He is a gem, one of the calmest, straight-down-the-middle newsmen of our lives. I’ll really miss him delivering the news, soberly, at 4 p.m. every weekday, the soundtrack of my late afternoons for decades.

d. From Siegel, on Friday, thinking back 40 years, to when he started at NPR, wondering if what he liked was what the country liked: “We didn’t imagine a great distinction between people like us, who reported the news, and people like you, who listened to it. We weren’t the only curious people in the country. There had to be millions more Americans out there who would welcome a smart, conversational program about politics, culture, science, the arts and just plain fun.” There were. There are. Thank you, Robert.

e. Man, Georgia linebacker Roquan Smith is a really good football player. He’s got radar for the ball like Luke Kuechly.

f. But ... Alabama 20, Georgia 17.

g. Rutgers loses to Stony Brook, Hartford and Purdue by a combined 35, then beats Wisconsin 64-60. College basketball’s a funny game.

h. TV Story of the Week: (I could give it to this man many, many weeks.) Steve Hartman of CBS News, on a fourth-grade teacher in Florida who gave the mom of one of her students an incredible gift.

i. That’s life, UCF.

j. Coffeenerdness: The black-and-white mocha is a keeper, Starbucks.

k. Beernerdness: It wasn’t a week in New York for beer. It hasn’t been a fortnight for beer, really. So can I give you Sparklingwaternerdness? LaCroix Tangerine, in 12-ounce cans, is wonderful.

l. Finished part 10 (the end) of “The Vietnam War,” the superb film by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick, and I can’t praise it enough. The stuff in the last part about the building of the wall in Washington was touching and emotional.

m. Great touch: The closing song in the doc was “Let It Be,” by the Beatles. A great song anyway, but so perfect here. I have no idea if this had anything to do with it, but “Let It Be” was released in the same May 1970 week that four students were shot dead at Kent State in one of the defining moments of the antiwar movement.

n. Saw “The Post,” the movie with Tom Hanks and Meryl Streep. It is fantastic. So real, down to the linotype machines that, 46 years ago, were the machines that printed newspapers. The movie is about

the socialite publisher of the Washington Post, Katherine Graham, who inherited the paper after the death of her husband, and soon was confronted with the monumental decision whether to go against the Nixon Administration and a court decree to not publish the Pentagon Papers. Those papers told the true story of how presidential administrations (plural) misled the American public about Vietnam. Meryl Streep plays Graham, and she is phenomenal as an American hero in an age when female heroes were scarce. Tom Hanks plays the paper's managing editor, Ben Bradlee, who pushed and pushed and pushed Graham toward solid and aggressive journalism. Hanks is phenomenal, with just the right touch of irascibility and realness. And it's always reassuring to see Steven Spielberg directing, because you know the movie's going to be as realistic as a filmmaker can make it. Strongly recommended.

o. All the fake-news howlers should see the movie too. We may be constantly at odds. But this movie will explain why so many kids grow up wanting to be reporters, and seekers of the truth. I will forever stand behind this business, and every loyal American should too.

THE ADIEU HAIKU

Do not mourn, Rams fans.

Greatness can come with hiccups.

Take a bow, McVay.

Titans ownership backs Mike Mularkey in statement

By Marc Sessler

NFL.com

Jan. 8, 2018

Mike Mularkey is sticking around as head coach of the Titans.

One day after Tennessee stunned the Chiefs in Saturday's wild-card tilt, the franchise publicly backed their coach in a team-issued statement.

"Our mantra all season has been to take things week by week and not get ahead of ourselves and it obviously has served us well," Titans controlling owner Amy Adams Strunk wrote Sunday. "I regret that outside rumors gained a life of their own. No one has been a bigger supporter of Mike Mularkey than I have over the last two plus seasons."

Reports surfaced Saturday that Mularkey's job was in danger despite carving out back-to-back 9-7 seasons in Tennessee. Strunk made it clear that Mularkey remains an integral part of the building process.

"Mike and [general manager] Jon [Robinson] have changed the culture of our team and organization and I am so happy we have been able to bring success on the field to our fans -- winning 19 games over the last two seasons, including our first playoff win in nine years.

"Just to eliminate any distractions moving forward, Mike Mularkey is our head coach and will be our head coach moving forward. We still have work to be done, including this week, but I am looking forward to the journey."

After the come-from-behind win over Kansas City, Titans pass-rusher Brian Orakpo scoffed at the notion that Mularkey was under fire.

"Saved his job? We went 9-7 back-to-back seasons. It hasn't been done [in Tennessee] in a long time. Why would his job be in jeopardy? That's complete nonsense, complete B.S. I love that man. Coach Mularkey has done a great job for us and will do a great job in the future."