

Forget the quarterbacks. Player the Broncos should covet in NFL draft is Saquon Barkley.

By Mark Kiszla
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Quarterback is the No. 1 priority for the Broncos. So John Elway had better find one before the NFL draft. Why? Penn State running back Saquon Barkley is the quickest way back to the playoffs for Denver.

With the No. 5 pick in the first round, Elway's lone thought should be to take the best football player on the board. Barkley can do what running back Todd Gurley has done for football in Los Angeles and make Denver relevant again in the playoff conversation.

There's only one prospect worth the trouble and resources Elway would have to commit to trading up the draft board to land. It's not a quarterback. It's Barkley. With absolutely no apologies to Josh Rosen or Sam Darnold, they do not have the same Pro Bowl potential as Barkley. He has the legs to take it to the house on any carry and the hands to be a primary receiver on third down.

I get the obsession with the quarterback in Denver. It's ultimate clickbait. But get over it.

While quarterbacks have ruled the NFL since before Elway laughed all the way to the Hall of Fame, the trend in the league is undeniably toward more smash-mouth football, as you can see every time veteran superstar Drew Brees defers to Alvin Kamara or Mark Ingram down in New Orleans.

Check what Ezekiel Elliott has meant to the development of Dak Prescott in Dallas, and it's not hard to imagine why Barkley could become the bestie of Tyrod Taylor in Denver, or whichever veteran quarterback the Broncos obtain before the draft.

Yes, I know Elway has said the lone way the Broncos can get better is if they improve at quarterback. But here's the good news: Finding a better starting quarterback than Trevor Siemian or Brock Osweiler won't be hard. Among league QBs, they were ranked 36th and 40th, respectively, by those film-grading geeks at Pro Football Focus, behind Brett Hundley and Tom Savage, who ruined the playoff dreams of Green Bay and Houston.

If Washington allows Kirk Cousins to test the free-agent market, all it takes is one greater fool to pay him more than Elway is willing to spend. While I would be surprised if Kansas City can bring back Alex Smith as its starting quarterback after another playoff collapse, it might be even more shocking if the Chiefs agreed to trade Smith within the AFC West.

So navigating the veteran QB market will be tricky for the Broncos, but finding an upgrade is definitely possible, especially if Elway listens to Gary Kubiak, a strong, new voice in Denver's front office and a longtime admirer of Taylor's. What makes Taylor appealing? His low interception percentage and 5.5-yard rushing average seem like ideal fits with the clean-football and run-first attack favored by Broncos coach Vance Joseph.

The architects of NFL rosters notoriously overpay at the top of the draft for quarterbacks, whether it's Mitchell Trubisky or Robert Griffin III. Let's hope Elway is too smart to make the same mistake. Let some QB-needy franchise jump into the top four slots of the first round to make a high-stakes gamble with the selection of Rosen or Darnold.

If Barkley is available to the Broncos at No. 5, his selection is a no-brainer. It would be the easiest choice for Elway since he picked linebacker Von Miller second overall in 2012.

The main concern for Denver? Despite an obvious need at quarterback for Cleveland and the New York Giants, Barkley's talent might be too irresistible to let slide to No. 5. Barkley might well not get past Indianapolis, which owns the third pick in the opening round.

Trade up to get Barkley? Would it be wise for Denver to give up assets to obtain Barkley, when the only running backs to be drafted in the top 10 during the past five years are Leonard Fournette, Christian McCaffrey, Elliott and Gurley?

Only if the Broncos want to make the playoffs next season.

Connecting the dots as the Broncos remake their coaching staff and roster

By Nicki Jhabvala

Denver Post

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The NFL is a game of who you know. Offseason moves by players and especially coaches are so often dictated by connections to others in the league. The Broncos are a prime example as they've developed and found success with coaching staffs and players with close ties.

Consider 2015, when the team parted with head coach John Fox, and the top candidate to replace him was Gary Kubiak, the former Broncos coordinator and Mike Shanahan understudy who helped John Elway to two Super Bowl titles in the late 1990s. Upon arriving in Denver, Kubiak hired a staff that included many familiar faces in defensive coordinator Wade Phillips, offensive coordinator Rick Dennison, quarterbacks coach Greg Knapp and a roster that had holdovers from Kubiak's past NFL stops in Baltimore and Houston.

Comfort can breed success.

"A few years ago, everyone just assumed "Pot Roast" (Terrance Knighton) was going to Oakland because of (Jack) Del Rio," said Joel Corry, a former agent and current salary cap analyst for CBS. "Then you saw Reggie Nelson play in Jacksonville (where Del Rio had coached), and he went to Oakland. You see those connect-the-dots thing happen. ... It's something I noticed dating back to (Bill) Parcells. And Dan Reeves had turned the Giants into the New Jersey Broncos."

As the Broncos map out 2018, their plan could likely include paths to those they're familiar with — coaches they know and players the staff previously coached.

Kubiak, a respected talented evaluator and right-hand man to Elway, joined the Broncos' front office last year and now has an expanded role (title TBD) to give him more say over the offensive draft prospects as well as free-agent candidates. There's a clear method to this madness, if even it's not publicly stated. Read between the lines and dig a little to years past and you'll come up with another potential path for the Broncos' future.

Kubiak was the offensive coordinator in Baltimore during Tyrod Taylor's fourth and final season with the Ravens. Taylor never started a game for the Ravens, and when he hit free agency in 2015, he opted for Buffalo over, reportedly, more money in Denver, where he probably would have been third string behind Peyton Manning and Brock Osweiler.

In his last three seasons as the Bills' starter, Taylor went 23-21 while completing 62.6 percent of his passes for 201.3 yards per game, 51 total touchdowns and only 16 interceptions (the Broncos' quarterbacks had more than that in the first 13 games of last season alone) for a 92.5 rating.

In a Week 3 win over the Broncos, Taylor gave Elway and Co. a close look at what could be, completing 20-of-26 passes for 213 yards, a pair of touchdowns and a 126.0 passer rating as the Bills' offense

marched over the Broncos, and quarterback Trevor Siemian tossed a pair of interceptions in the second half.

“He’s definitely one of the hardest quarterbacks to take out,” linebacker Von Miller said after the game. “He’s a great quarterback. He’s one that lifts up his other teammates. If they’re 80s, when Tyrod jukes the ball they’re 90s, they’re 95s. He really knows how to boost his teammates.”

But now Taylor, 28, is probably done in Buffalo after a wild-card loss to the Jaguars this past Sunday that landed him in the concussion protocol. The Bills are expected to either trade or release the seventh-year quarterback who is due \$10 million base salary and has a \$6 million roster bonus he’s owed shortly after the new league year begins in March.

The Broncos need a new quarterback and with Kubiak back as a Broncos decision-maker, many have already pegged Denver as the top landing spot for Taylor in 2018. The Broncos have an array of options to fill the void at quarterback, some will be costly and others risky.

Kirk Cousins is expected to receive more than \$30 million per year if he’s not franchised tagged a third time by the Redskins.

“I think Cousins is a guy you can with,” Corry said. “I don’t think he’s a guy you win because of, but I think you can win with him.”

Drew Brees could leave New Orleans as a free agent, but “I can’t imagine him ending up anywhere else,” Corry said, echoing the feeling of so many in the league.

Alex Smith could be on the outs in Kansas City. But he’s an AFC rival.

“I wouldn’t think that they’re going to trade him within in the division,” Corry said. “You only do that if you think he won’t play. ... If you’re going to trade for Alex Smith, (agent) Tom Condon is going to rake you over the coals on an extension. He’s coming off his best year.”

Vikings quarterback Sam Bradford could be an option, but any deal would require faith despite his injury history.

And it was reported by ESPN that if Vikings offensive coordinator Pat Shurmur is hired as a head coach by a team seeking a quarterback, he could bring with him Minnesota’s Case Keenum, also an impending free agent. Why?

Because comfort can breed success. Connect the dots.

Broncos to hire Tom McMahon as special teams coordinator

By Nicki Jhabvala

Denver Post

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The Broncos filled one of their major missing pieces on the coaching staff.

Tom McMahon, previously the Indianapolis Colts' special teams coordinator, will be hired in the same position in Denver, an NFL source confirmed. Former Colts punter Pat McAfee first reported the news on Twitter.

"Guy is an absolutely incredible coach," McAfee wrote. "Genuinely loved going to practice w/ him holding the whistle. Made me fall in love w/ the process again. Denver will love him."

@PatMcAfeeShow

Congrats to the @Broncos on signing Tom McMahon as their new Special Teams coordinator.. Guy is an absolutely incredible coach. Genuinely loved going to practice w/ him holding the whistle. Made me fall in love w/ the process again. Denver will love him.

McMahon coached the last four seasons in Indianapolis, where he led its special teams units to top-five rankings in efficiency by Football Outsiders in three of those years. McMahon also helped McAfee and kicker Adam Vinatieri to a combined three Pro Bowl selections and two first-team all-pro honors in that span.

McMahon has spent the entirety of his 11-season NFL coaching career on special teams, with the Falcons (2007-08), Rams (2009-11) and Chiefs (2012) before heading to Indianapolis.

The Montana native takes the spot of Brock Olivo, who was fired after his first season as coordinator on Vance Joseph's staff. The Broncos were riddled with errors and inconsistency on special teams and in a game against the Patriots had four perplexing gaffes that contributed to a loss.

The Broncos fired six assistants after the 2017 season ended with a thud, and have since appointed Bill Musgrave as their full-time offensive coordinator, named former Giants coordinator Mike Sullivan their quarterbacks coach, appointed Curtis Modkins running backs coach and added Sean Kugler as an offensive line coach tasked with helping the interior linemen. The team still needs to fill its wide receivers, outside linebackers and assistant defensive backs coaching positions, among others.

A Broncos tight end produced the team's longest play of 2017. But consistency from the group was hard to find.

By Nick Kosmider

Denver Post

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For a fleeting moment, Jeff Heurman looked more like The Terminator than a tight end.

Heurman was lined up in a three-point stance during the third quarter of the Broncos' game at Indianapolis on Dec. 14. At the snap, the 6-foot-5, 255-pound, third-year player out of Ohio State sprinted from his spot on the left side of the formation, put a quick move on safety Matthias Farley and cut toward the middle of the field. Quarterback Brock Osweiler delivered a strike and Heurman caught the ball at the apex of his post route.

It was a throw so perfect, Heurman said, "I could have caught it with my teeth."

The catch was just the first part of the highlight, though. Heurman completed the 54-yard touchdown play by shoving safety Darius Butler aside and spinning with ease across the goal line. It was the longest play of the season for Denver, a key strike in their 25-13 victory that night. And it was the type of mismatch — the hulking and athletic tight end down the field against smaller defenders — the Broncos had hoped to produce all season.

In reality, it was a rare bright spot in another season that featured underwhelming production from the tight end spot.

Heurman, a third-round pick of the Broncos in 2015 who missed all of his rookie season due to a knee injury, had the same number of catches in 2017 (nine) as he had in 2016, and he had only one more receiving yard (142) this season than last. Though he caught two touchdown passes, including the highlight play against Indianapolis, Heurman failed to find consistency as the Broncos shuffled — twice — through three starting quarterbacks.

But Heurman wasn't the only Broncos tight end who failed to make a weekly impact on the offense. Veteran Virgil Green, now an unrestricted free agent, had eight fewer receptions in 2017 (14) than the previous season. A.J. Derby had 19 catches before he was waived in the middle of November. He, too, had failed to turn a big highlight — his one-handed touchdown catch against the Raiders on Oct. 1 — into consistent production.

The group entered 2017 eager to be a bigger part of the passing game after failing to produce much there during Denver's 9-7 finish in 2016. Derby, Green, Heurman and Austin Traylor, a former undrafted player out of Wisconsin who may have been Denver's most consistent performer at the position in the final seven games of the season, finished with 50 combined catches. Compare that to the 13 teams who had one tight end catch at least that many passes. Though Denver's group did its part to pave the way for running back C.J. Anderson to reach 1,000 yards rushing, the vision of creating more big plays in the air with the tight ends never materialized.

The Broncos may already have the missing ingredient on their roster. Jake Butt, the fifth-round pick in 2017 out of Michigan, was never able to get on the field this season because of the torn ACL he suffered in the final game of his college career. Butt participated in two weeks of practice during the middle of the season, but the Broncos ultimately decided the 22-year-old wasn't ready to step into an NFL game.

"I feel like I've been away from football for a long time, so as much as I think I can be Superman and just walk in and play, that's just not the reality," Butt said shortly before the Broncos decided to leave him on the injured-reserve list in November. "The big thing — and what I appreciate from everyone around here — is that my health is a priority and everyone is making sure that if I'm sore, we're not putting me out there where I'm going to be at risk."

Come spring workouts, Butt will be ready. And come training camp, he could have an opportunity to cement himself as a trusted weapon for whoever the team's starting quarterback will be. If the past few seasons have proven anything, it's that the Broncos' sputtering offense certainly needs a spark at the tight end spot.

Broncos hire Tom McMahon to run special teams

By Mike Klis

9NEWS

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If he was good enough to coach Adam Vinatieri, Tom McMahon is more than qualified to become the new special teams coordinator for the Denver Broncos.

McMahon has been hired to replace Brock Olivo as the Broncos' special teams boss, team sources confirmed to 9NEWS. Pat McAfee, McMahon's former Pro Bowl punter with the Indianapolis Colts, was the first to report the news.

Vinatieri is arguably the best placekicker of all time, and McAfee and Rigoberto Sanchez were Colts' punters who were among the league's best during the five seasons McMahon was the coach.

McMahon became available when the Colts fired head coach Chuck Pagano last week. McMahon has 11 seasons of NFL coaching experience, nine as a coordinator.

The Broncos weren't about to go with an inexperienced coordinator this season after their special teams under rookie coach Olivo ranked No. 30 in 2017, according to Football Outsiders.

Broncos' kicker Brandon McManus slipped from a tie for 14th in field goal percentage in 2016 (85.3 percent) to a tie for 26th this year (75.0), punter Riley Dixon fell from 9th in net punting (45.7 yards per punt) in 2016 to 22nd (40.2) in 2017, and punt returner Isaiah McKenzie coughed up the ball five times.

Meanwhile, former Broncos' running backs coach Eric Studesville will interview Wednesday for the New York Giants' head coaching job and Denver's former offensive line coach Jeff Davidson interviewed for a similar role Tuesday with the Cincinnati Bengals.

Here are the Broncos' 2018 opponents

By Alexander Kirk

9NEWS

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After watching the Broncos limp to a last-place finish in the AFC West, fans have turned their attention to the clean slate of 2018.

The opponents the Broncos will face next year were finalized on Sunday.

The teams coming to soon-to-be-renamed Sports Authority Field at Mile High include the Cleveland Browns, Houston Texans, Pittsburgh Steelers, Los Angeles Rams and Seattle Seahawks.

As always, the Broncos will play home and away games against AFC West foes Kansas City Chiefs, Los Angeles Chargers and Oakland Raiders.

The Broncos will head on the road in 2018 to play the New York Jets, Baltimore Ravens, Cincinnati Bengals, Arizona Cardinals and San Francisco 49ers.

Dates and times have not been announced for the 2018 schedule and preseason opponents have not been announced. NFL schedules are typically finalized in April.

Broncos needed more than they got from draft class, but gems emerged

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN.com

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It was a year of transition for the Denver Broncos. They were minimal participants in free agency, so they hoped for -- and needed -- more than they got from their rookie class.

Injuries certainly didn't help, as three of their eight picks from the 2017 draft spent the season on injured reserve. In the end, the Broncos had just one draft pick who was a starter -- left tackle Garrett Bolles -- and the older, veteran players often wondered when the youngsters were going to kick it in gear.

ROUND/PICK	NAME	POS	COLLEGE
1/20	Garrett Bolles	OT	UTAH
2/51	DeMarcus Walker	DE	FLORIDA STATE
3/82	Carlos Henderson	WR	LOUISIANA TECH
3/101	Brendan Langley	CB	LAMAR
5/145	Jake Butt	TE	MICHIGAN
5/172	Isaiah McKenzie	WR	GEORGIA
6/203	De'Angelo Henderson	RB	COASTAL CAROLINA
7/253	Chad Kelly	QB	OLE MISS

Grade: Below average

Best rookie: Several of the Broncos' undrafted rookies ended up in situational roles by season's end and showed promise, but among the draft picks, Bolles went end-to-end as the starter at left tackle. He flashed athleticism and potential but also showed that he has plenty to learn, especially when it comes to rebounding from mistakes, maintaining his footwork and listening to those trying to help him.

Most improved rookie: Defensive end DeMarcus Walker arrived with the expectation that he would contribute in the pass rush immediately -- he had 25 sacks in his last two seasons at Florida State, including 16 as a senior. That didn't happen. The Broncos also tried him at outside linebacker, and he struggled to make the transition to the day-to-day routine. He kept at it, however, and had a sack in the season finale.

Most disappointing rookie: Wide receiver Isaiah McKenzie had the distinction of being awarded a "starting" job before any other first-year player when he was tabbed as the punt returner as training camp opened. McKenzie was benched twice because of fumbles, and Jordan Taylor is now far more deserving to keep the job. McKenzie was also almost a nonfactor on offense. He needs a get-after-it offseason to get back in the mix.

Jury is still out on: Jake Butt. The tight end spent the season on injured reserve recovering from the knee injury he suffered in his last game at Michigan. Butt, at 6-foot-6, 250 pounds with receiving skills, is

exactly the kind of player the offense desperately needed all season. There is no question that offensive coordinator Bill Musgrave will want to make him a big part of things in 2018.

Undrafted rookie evaluation: Even as their draft picks had their share of struggles, the Broncos continued to show a knack for finding undrafted gems. Safety Jamal Carter, cornerback Marcus Rios and safety Dymonte Thomas each showed that they were ready when opportunities arrived. All three flashed enough potential that they deserve longer looks moving forward.

If Broncos want Josh Rosen, they'll have to make blockbuster trade

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN.com

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The Denver Broncos weren't 48 hours into their offseason before John Elway quickly and efficiently outlined the team's top priority as it tries to dig out from a 5-11 finish.

The Broncos need a quarterback and have to decide if the draft, free agency or both will provide what they seek.

"I think there is no doubt we have to get better at that position," Elway said. "For us to have a chance to get better, we have to get better at that position."

It just so happens that the Broncos have the No. 5 pick in a draft that features a collection of quarterbacks the likes of which the league's evaluators haven't seen in some time.

This is the first of a one-a-day look at how the top quarterbacks on the board could fit with the Broncos.

UCLA quarterback Josh Rosen

In a nutshell: With the NFL scouting combine and pro day workouts still weeks away, Rosen is considered the top quarterback prospect on the board by many around the league. Rosen thrust himself onto the college football stage as an 18-year-old by throwing for 351 yards in his first game with the Bruins. He finished with at least 300 yards passing in 17 of his 30 career games, including five matches in which he topped 400 yards.

Why he fits: Just watch him throw the ball. He has a clean, efficient motion with a quick release. His footwork, especially when he sets to throw, is more fundamentally sound than that of most of his contemporaries. Add his arm strength, composure in a collapsing pocket and ability to make tough throws, and you have a top-of-the-board candidate.

The work to be done: He has to learn when to bail after taking a lot of punishment in a Bruins offense that didn't always run the ball well or protect him well enough when it did throw -- a set of circumstances familiar to Broncos quarterbacks this past season. As a result, Rosen missed the last six games of the 2016 season with a shoulder injury and had two concussions in 2017. He was held out of UCLA's bowl game this season. As many gifted college players do, Rosen has often, when pressed, believed that he could make throws he shouldn't consider in the NFL. He has taken risks with the ball and at the professional level will pay for many of those with turnovers. Peyton Manning said one of the toughest lessons for a young quarterback is learning what he can and can't do.

The potential plan for him: Rosen has taken some of the heat and lived with the scrutiny an NFL quarterback experiences for things he has done off the field. Rosen had a hot tub installed in his dorm during his freshman season, he wore a profane hat about then-Presidential candidate Donald Trump while golfing at a Trump golf course, and he was quoted by Bleacher Report's Matt Hayes as saying that

“football and school don't go together. They just don't.” As a result, Rosen understands what it feels like to be at the center of things in the social media age. He played through it and flourished at times. If he ends up with the Broncos, the team would likely build around and protect their rookie starter as he learns just how big the footsteps of Elway and Manning can be.

Will it happen?: Nobody has thrown a pre-draft pass yet, but if things go as people expect in the interviews, private workouts and private visits to come, the Broncos will have to move up from the No. 5 pick, possibly even to No. 1, to get Rosen. Given what people have traded to simply move one spot to get to No. 1 or No. 2, that would be an all-in, better-be-sure decision that could cost multiple first-round picks in future years as well as perhaps an established starter or two. In the deal to move up from No. 15 to No. 1 in 2016 to select Jared Goff, the Rams sent the Tennessee Titans two first-rounders (2016 and 2017), two second-round picks (both in 2016) and two third-round picks (2016 and 2017) as well as fourth- and sixth-round picks in 2016.

Coming Thursday: USC quarterback Sam Darnold

NFL overhaul rankings: Teams that will change most for 2018

By Mike Sando
ESPN.com
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NFL teams will spend the first months of 2018 devising their game plans for free agency and the draft. In the meantime, several indicators help with projecting how far teams might go in overhauling their rosters.

Coaching changes, scheme changes, front-office changes, expectations, average player ages and starters unsigned for next season can provide clues. Using those and other cues, I've placed all 24 eliminated teams on the overhaul continuum. Check back after each playoff weekend to see where the newly eliminated teams rank.

The first 11 teams seem likely to make bigger changes and/or a larger number of moves.

1. Arizona Cardinals

Indicators: new head coach; new QB; NFL's oldest starters; league-high 10 unsigned veterans with at least eight starts and seven more with one to seven starts

GM Steve Keim has alluded to an overhaul that will probably make the Cardinals younger as they build around David Johnson, Chandler Jones and Patrick Peterson. The timing seems right, with coach Bruce Arians and quarterback Carson Palmer retiring.

The Cardinals rank No. 1 by a wide margin in 2017 snaps and starts by unsigned veterans (40 percent of their starts from 2017 are tied up with players who have four-plus years of experience and no contract for next season). As the oldest team in the NFL, the Cardinals have even more reason to overhaul. Keim has been aggressive in the lower-priced veteran market. Now, he could be looking for players to fit new schemes.

2. Chicago Bears

Indicators: new head coach; team is all-in on a second-year QB; fourth-year GM has new contract but must rally from 14-34 record

The Bears need an offensive overhaul, particularly at wide receiver, as they build around quarterback Mitchell Trubisky. They have a new, offensive-minded head coach in Matt Nagy. They could also have a new scheme on the defensive side of the ball. We'll know more as the offseason progresses, but for now, Chicago is high on the list. The Bears need to make up for a string of high draft choices who might not pan out (Kevin White has been hurt, Leonard Floyd is hurt and Trubisky might or might not be what the Bears need him to be). That could be a recipe for moving aggressively. The question is whether the Bears agree.

3. Cleveland Browns

Indicators: new GM; head coach with a 1-31 record; new QB; NFL's youngest starters

The Browns are unlike most teams high on this list. They have by far the fewest 2017 starts and snaps for unsigned veterans with at least four years' experience. Even so, they look like a team about to shuffle the roster. GM John Dorsey has sharply criticized the existing talent while suggesting that the Browns should contend for the AFC North title right away. Dorsey is also armed with extensive draft capital. That is a recipe for an overhaul. Cleveland could add a mix of veterans and draft choices.

4. Indianapolis Colts

Indicators: second-year GM; new head coach; QB uncertainty; 4-12 record

GM Chis Ballard has had a full season to assess the Colts' roster. He is also bringing in a new head coach. That combination should lead the Colts to shake up their roster, though Ballard has shown that he would rather take a deliberate approach than go for a quick fix. The Colts rank third in 2017 snaps by unsigned veterans with at least four years in the NFL, behind Arizona and San Francisco. The Colts won't be in the market for a quarterback if Andrew Luck returns to health -- but will he?

5. New York Giants

Indicators: new GM and new head coach; same QB (for now); ninth-youngest starters; five unsigned veteran starters

New GM Dave Gettleman set the tone early when he released disgruntled starting right tackle Bobby Hart before year's end. The assumption is that Gettleman and the Giants' next head coach will put their stamp on the roster, especially because it is apparent that the team needs a culture change. There could be overhauls on the offensive line, at running back and at quarterback, to begin with. Scheme changes could also drive changes.

6. Buffalo Bills

Indicators: second-year GM and second-year head coach; QB TBD; fourth-oldest starters; five unsigned veterans with four-plus years' experience and eight-plus starts

The Bills were wheelers and dealers during their first season with coach Sean McDermott and GM Brandon Beane. They presumably will remain aggressive because McDermott and Beane have an older team. Buffalo ranked near the top five in 2017 starts and snaps by unsigned veterans with at least four years' experience. Their handling of Tyrod Taylor suggests that they'll be in the market for a quarterback even if they hope Nathan Peterman starts. Defensive mainstay Kyle Williams is 34 and could retire. It's tough to see McDermott and Beane standing pat.

7. Denver Broncos

Indicators: QB TBD; sixth-oldest starters; reshuffled coaching staff; second-year head coach coming off a 5-11 season with a GM who demands playoffs or bust

The Broncos need to revamp their lines on both sides of the ball. They need to find a quarterback. Cornerback Aqib Talib could be out. GM John Elway isn't necessarily feeling the heat, but there's an urgency to win in Denver, which could drive changes.

8. Seattle Seahawks

Indicators: eight unsigned veterans with at least four years' experience and eight starts; missed playoffs for the first time since 2011; losing ground in the division

Kam Chancellor, Cliff Avril, Richard Sherman and Michael Bennett are among the familiar faces on defense that could leave the roster for various reasons. Tight end Jimmy Graham is another prominent player potentially on his way out. There will be an overhaul at running back, without question.

That's a lot of change for a team that settled in from a personnel standpoint over the past couple of seasons. Eight Seahawks without deals for 2018 started at least eight games this season. Only Arizona had more, with 10, a figure that does not include Palmer, who retired with one season left on his deal. The question is: How far will Pete Carroll and John Schneider go?

9. New York Jets

Indicators: fourth-year GM and fourth-year head coach coming off 5-11 records in each of the past two seasons; QB uncertainty; \$100 million in projected cap space

The Jets, ready to build up their roster after paring it back last offseason, enter 2018 with cap space and an owner who said the team will be active -- responsible but active -- in free agency. The quarterback position needs attention. Bringing back GM Mike Maccagnan and coach Todd Bowles reduces the scope of an overhaul simply because those two acquired a fair number of the players on the roster. They aren't starting over the way they were last offseason, when they ranked No. 1 on this list, but they do have work to do and the means with which to do it.

10. Oakland Raiders

Indicators: new head coach; fifth-oldest starters; renewed expectations following a disappointing 6-10 finish

Jon Gruden arrives in Oakland with the power to shape the roster to his liking. Some new coaches might need time to study the personnel they are inheriting. Gruden probably watched all the video before taking the job. It's what he does. He will bring new schemes on both sides of the ball, which will spur additional personnel changes. The Raiders will have much less cap space than some of the other teams ranked high on this list. They could need new tackles, a tight end fitting Gruden's offense and an even bigger overhaul in the defensive back seven.

11. San Francisco 49ers

Indicators: second-year GM and second-year head coach; more than \$100 million in projected cap space; excitement surrounding new QB Jimmy Garoppolo

The 49ers remain early in the building process and should be in position to make a significant jump in the NFC West standings, perhaps contending for a playoff spot. Will they push hard in free agency to accelerate the process? Having Garoppolo lets them focus their roster attention elsewhere.

"What they have the ability to do is go cherry-pick the 'blue' free agents, and they are an attractive team because they have a quarterback," an evaluator said.

Coach Kyle Shanahan is eager to bring back young players for development, but he and GM John Lynch are still relatively early in the rebuilding process. Fifteen unsigned veterans with four-plus years of experience started at least one game for the 49ers, the second-highest figure in the league behind Arizona (17). Five are at least 30 years old. Three are 28 or 29.

The next nine teams could go either way, based on a range of circumstances.

12. Miami Dolphins

Indicators: third-year head coach coming off 6-10 season; fourth-oldest starters on defense

The Jay Ajayi trade showed what can happen when a head coach is trying to get the locker room configured to his liking. Could there be additional significant changes after the Dolphins barely held off the Jets for last in the AFC East? General manager Mike Tannenbaum hasn't been afraid to move aggressively in free agency or the trade market.

Jay Cutler, Matt Moore, Anthony Fasano, Jermon Bushrod, William Hayes, Sam Young and Nate Allen are among the players in their 30s who combined to log more than 3,000 snaps in 2017 without being under contract for next season.

13. Green Bay Packers

Indicators: new GM; coming off 7-9 season; head coach signed through 2019 only

The Packers will almost certainly become more involved as buyers in free agency now that Brian Gutekunst has succeeded Ted Thompson as GM. Supporters called Thompson a disciplined builder through the draft. Detractors called him too restrained in free agency. A coordinator change on defense could drive additional changes. Will there be an overhaul or just some tweaking? This Green Bay offseason seems to be about embracing change.

14. Detroit Lions

Indicators: new head coach; second-year GM; seven unsigned veterans with four-plus years' experience and eight-plus starts

The Lions will likely undergo a scheme change on defense that will drive personnel changes. Ezekiel Ansah is the headliner among defensive free agents. Several other full- or part-time starters from that side of the ball are also without contracts, including Tahir Whitehead, Nevin Lawson, Tavon Wilson and Paul Worrilow. Haloti Ngata's future is also in some question.

15. Kansas City Chiefs

Indicators: QB decision pending; age in spots on defense; second-year GM

The Chiefs have star power at running back, tight end and wide receiver. Their offensive starters were the NFL's second-youngest, even with Alex Smith at quarterback. There is some age on the defensive side, however. Tamba Hali and Derrick Johnson are near the end. Smith could be traded as part of a transition to Patrick Mahomes II.

16. Tampa Bay Buccaneers

Indicators: fifth-year GM and third-year head coach coming off a 5-11 season; NFL's second-longest playoff drought (2007)

Expectations for the Bucs have been high since the team drafted Jameis Winston first overall in 2015, but it was the other three NFC South teams that reached the playoffs this season. Tampa Bay will surely address its pass rush after finishing the season last in sacks, down from ninth a year earlier. Running back is another position that needs addressing. With clear needs and obvious urgency, the Buccaneers will be a team to watch.

17. Houston Texans

Indicators: GM situation fluid; fifth-year head coach; fourth-most 2017 starts by players with four-plus years' experience and no contract for 2018

The Texans finally have a quarterback in Deshaun Watson. They do have some older starters without contracts, including Breno Giacomini, Xavier Su'a-Filo, Marcus Gilchrist and Johnathan Joseph. Whomever the Texans hire in a personnel leadership role will probably be an ally for coach Bill O'Brien. What kind of changes will they have in mind?

18. Washington Redskins

Indicators: QB in flux; 14th-oldest starters; coming off 7-9 record; fifth-year head coach with one playoff appearance

Kirk Cousins' status is the key variable here. If he leaves, the changes could feel like an overhaul; but aside from the QB position, most moves figure to be routine: an offensive lineman here, a running back and wide receiver there, a couple of defensive backs or an insider linebacker or two. Washington could be a team that banks on improved health more than colossal change. Cousins' unsettled status pushes Washington up in the order for now.

19. Baltimore Ravens

Indicators: second-oldest starters; one playoff appearance and one postseason victory since 2012 season; crushing defeat to Cincinnati in Week 17; fan discontent

Team president Dick Cass wrote an open letter in December attempting to reconnect with fans upset about the Ravens' on-field inconsistency and how the team handled anthem protests. The letter acknowledged a higher number of no-shows for games. Nine days later, Cincinnati knocked Baltimore from the playoffs with a shocking 49-yard touchdown pass on a desperation fourth-and-12 play in the final minute. That could be the context for roster change, especially with obvious needs for offensive weaponry. How far will the Ravens go?

20. Carolina Panthers

Indicators: ownership change pending; interim GM; 10th-oldest starters

Julius Peppers, Charles Johnson and Jonathan Stewart are age-30-plus veterans facing uncertain futures, but the Panthers' list of veteran players without contracts for 2018 is a short one. Andrew Norwell, Ed Dickson and Star Lotulelei are three starters on that list. What happens on the ownership and GM fronts could be pivotal.

The final four teams seem more likely to make smaller changes.

21. Los Angeles Rams

Indicators: rising second-year head coach with clout following an 11-5 season that saw the Rams score 478 points, most in their Los Angeles history

The Rams rank 11th between Buffalo and Miami in 2017 starts by players with four-plus years' experience and no contracts beyond this season. Trumaine Johnson, John Sullivan, Sammy Watkins,

Lamaricus Joyner and Connor Barwin account for most of those starts. There will be some changes of note, but the Rams have key pieces in place.

22. Los Angeles Chargers

Indicators: aging QB; second-year head coach; sixth-year GM with increasing win totals over the past three seasons but no playoffs since 2013, his first season

The Chargers will presumably keep a similar scheme on defense even if there is a coordinator change. They will definitely be in the market for a kicker. Beyond that, however, this team seems likely to take things slow and steady. GM Tom Telesco has not been the quick-fix type.

23. Cincinnati Bengals

Indicators: ninth-oldest starters

Only the Steelers and Browns got fewer 2017 snaps from veteran players who are unsigned past this season. That number is a little misleading because Tyler Eifert, Jeremy Hill and AJ McCarron are three bigger-name players who could reach free agency after combining to play only 202 snaps last season. The Bengals could realistically part with all of them.

24. Dallas Cowboys

Indicators: third-youngest starters

Owner Jerry Jones expected the Cowboys to contend in 2017. From his perspective, Ezekiel Elliott's six-game suspension ruined everything. With Elliott back and with a relatively young roster, the Cowboys appear likely to make another run with largely the same group.

Broncos Denver7 postseason awards: Von Miller earns MVP honors

By Troy Renck
KMGH
Jan. 10, 2018

Almost immediately after the Los Angeles Chargers throttled the Denver Broncos, the questions became uncomfortable. Will Trevor Siemian remain the starter? How will the team improve offensively?

In that press conference after the Broncos were shut out for the first time since 1992, Siemian looked like a prize fighter who had taken a 10-count. His nose was bloodied and swollen. He appeared determined, but lost in a daze after absorbing hits from Melvin Ingram and Joey Bosa.

What fans hoped was an aberration in an embarrassing loss to the New York Giants -- a game that later prompted general manager John Elway to call his team 'soft' -- became a pattern.

The Broncos stepped on a slippery slope and plummeted into a death spiral, losing eight straight games, and going 1-7 on the road. Watching the offense was confusing, not just for fans, but coach Vance Joseph. As the song "Rockstar" puts it eloquently: why do you have a 12-car garage if you only have six cars? That sums up my thoughts on offensive coordinator Mike McCoy's reliance on the three-wide set. All the Broncos had to do was use it, then step back and let the sacks, interceptions and fumbles begin. It led to the midseason firing of McCoy, whose reluctance to change or work in collaboration with Joseph left the Broncos straying from a run-first attack.

It was one of many low points. There were, of course, some memorable performances. My look back:

Most Valuable Player: OLB Von Miller

Honorable mention: CB Chris Harris Jr.

The quick glance at Miller's stats reveals almost none of his excellence. He finished with 10 sacks, and zero in his last three games. However, he ranked as the most-dominant edge defender in quarterback pressures by Pro Football Focus. Opponents centered their game plan on him. They doubled him, chipped him, and directed quarterbacks to release the ball quickly to neutralize him. Not having a consistent force on the other side hurt Miller. Shaquil Barrett played well in spurts, but Shane Ray's Pro Bowl-caliber season never materialized because of a preseason left wrist injury. Notably, Miller developed into a true leader, holding teammates accountable, while remaining positive throughout.

Chris Harris' versatility helps make the defense work. Like Harris himself, I prefer he moves outside and is no longer relegated to slot duty. However, that will be impossible if the team trades Aqib Talib (Again, I would love to see Talib stay on a restructured contract and eventually retire as a Bronco).

Most Valuable Offensive Player: RB C.J. Anderson

Honorable mention: C Matt Paradis

Had the Broncos committed to the run, limiting the exposure of their quarterbacks, it's fair to wonder if they would have been competitive. Following an offseason cycling routine, Anderson showed newfound durability to match his typical passion and grit. He produced his first 1,000-yard season, finishing with 1,007 yards, averaging 4.1 per clip. Anderson faces an uncertain future in Denver. He is scheduled to make \$4.5 million next season. That won't happen. Could he return on a new deal? Perhaps. But he has zero dead money, so Denver could simply move on. Regardless, Anderson showed well, and will help somebody, somewhere next season.

Paradis has played every snap the past three seasons. This offseason will be the first in seven years where Paradis can train without worrying about his surgically-repaired hips.

Biggest Surprise: NT Domata Peko

Honorable mention: DE Adam Gotsis

Peko, 33, appeared done in his last season in Cincinnati. He told me a change in scheme contributed to his slide, and insisted he had plenty left. He was right. Peko brought energy, attitude and professionalism. The Broncos improved their run defense dramatically with Peko at the nose, allowing 89.4 yards on the ground per game compared to 130.3 last season. Peko is a keeper as the Broncos try to regain their winning culture.

Gotsis, meanwhile, took a huge step forward, adding bulk and strength. The next step is developing an inside pass rush, which has been sorely lacking since Malik Jackson's departure in free agency two years ago.

Least Valuable Player: QBs Trevor Siemian, Brock Osweiler and Paxton Lynch

Honorable mention: Special teams

Listen, everyone wants to be Cy Young. Some are Sigh Young. No one is blameless in the Broncos' 5-11 season, but the quarterback play is impossible not to single out. The inefficiency was stunning, and related in part to McCoy's expansive playbook that was more suited for Peyton Manning and Philip Rivers. The Broncos ranked 25th in touchdown passes with 19, and 31st in interceptions with 22. The quarterbacks were sacked 52 times. Siemian regressed in the new offense, and ended the season with a second straight left shoulder surgery. Brock Osweiler went 0-4 as a starter, but prevented a winless road record with a terrific relief outing against the Colts. Paxton Lynch never progressed as hoped in his sophomore season, undone by injuries and his inability to beat out Siemian in training camp.

The only reason special teams did not win the honor is because quarterback is a more important element. Brock Olivo bombed as a first-time coordinator as the team made every type of mistake imaginable.

Biggest Disappointment: The 2017 draft class

Honorable mention: Tight end Jeff Heuerman

Only rookie Garrett Bolles contributed, and he endured an uneven season because of his inexperience and the endless carousel of quarterbacks. Where to start? Defensive end DeMarcus Walker dropped to

242 pounds because of a position switch after Ray's injury and an illness. He never regained traction and was frequently inactive because he had no role on special teams. Receiver Carlos Henderson appeared in danger of being inactive all season before suffering a thumb injury. Cornerback Brendan Langley, a project who had never played a full season of defense until this year, had a bad day at Oakland, and eventually lost his spot on the depth chart to Marcus Rios.

Jake Butt, an All-American tight end at Michigan, sat out the season healing from his second ACL surgery. Isaiah McKenzie muffed six punts, never rewarding the odd faith the coaching staff showed despite horrific results. Running back De'Angelo Henderson remained buried on the depth chart until the season finale when he scored a touchdown on a screen pass (where was that play all season to Jamaal Charles?). And quarterback Chad Kelly, who healed multiple injuries and dropped from 236 pounds to 212 pounds, sat out the entire year. He remains an intriguing prospect. He might be in the mix depending how the search for a starter plays out.

This was supposed to be Heurman's breakthrough season. It never materialized (nine catches for 142 yards), leaving the Broncos to count on Butt and the addition of a free agent to fortify the position this offseason.

Broncos linebacker Brandon Marshall says no surgery for now

By Troy Renck

KMGH

Jan. 10, 2018

Denver Broncos linebacker Brandon Marshall remains well-versed in playing in pain.

Doctors inserted screws in his foot two years ago. A finger remains permanently bent from causing a fumble. And this past season he fought through a rotator cuff tear for three months, finishing with 106 tackles and three sacks. An MRI eight days ago showed increased damage, but for now Marshall told Denver7 he is eschewing an operation.

"The tear got a little bigger. So I'll take the first month off to rehab and strengthen around it to see if I need surgery in February," Marshall said Tuesday.

Marshall is entering the second season of a four-year, \$32-million deal. He is considered one of the mainstays of the defense, calling the signals during the game.

Getting Kirk Cousins must be Denver Broncos' New Year's resolution

By Woody Paige
Colorado Springs Gazette
Jan. 10, 2018

John Elway unequivocally must go boldly for Captain Kirk.

The Broncos have a problem at quarterback. Kirk Cousins is The Solution.

If the Broncos desire to become relevant in the NFL and the postseason again quickly, the prerequisite is a quantum quarterback leap.

Drafting a quarterback at No. 5 will not accomplish that feat any season soon. Even in the case of The Great Showman Elway, the Broncos didn't win a playoff game, and reach the Super Bowl, until his fourth season in the league.

Based on my research, of the 50 quarterbacks picked in the top five of the draft since the merger, 14 have started in the Super Bowl, and seven have become world champions, six multiple times.

Objectively, 18 of those 50 were busts. Among that group were Art Schlichter, Rick Mirer, Ryan Leaf, Tim Couch, Akili Smith, Heath Shuler, David Carr, JaMarcus Russell and Robert Griffin III. Judgment has not been determined on a dozen young QBs, and the rest have been mediocre starters or career backups.

So, 28 percent have been very successful, 36 percent failures, and 36 percent in between.

Picking a quarterback in the first five is a crapshoot.

Thirty-two of the starting Super Bowl quarterbacks, including a couple of G.O.A.T.s, Joe Montana and Tom Brady, were selected after the first round.

K.C. was chosen by D.C. in the fourth round in 2012.

Of the eight quarterbacks drafted in the first four rounds of that draft, Cousins, who didn't start full time until 2015, would be ranked third behind Russell Wilson and Andrew Luck, but certainly ahead of Brock Osweiler and the rest. The Cousins stats, but not postseason accomplishments, are in the Brady, Drew Brees, Aaron Rodgers realm.

At 29, Cousins isn't a Super Bowl certainty, but his odds are superior to other quarterbacks who potentially could be available to the Broncos.

Cousins should be Elway's Plan "A," but, unlike in 2012 when Peyton agreed to come to Denver, the president of Broncos football operations will have several other letters of the alphabet in his plan playbook.

Because Washington is in control.

These are the key upcoming dates:

Jan. 22-27 - Senior Bowl practice and game. The Broncos will coach the North team, and Baker Reagan Mayfield will be on their roster; Josh Allen still is to be determined. Kirk Cousins played in the 2012 game, which was coached by then Washington coach Mike Shanahan - who drafted Cousins and became his most ardent supporter.

Feb. 20 - First day teams can designate "franchise" or "transition" players. If Washington places the franchise tag on Cousins for the third year, he will earn \$34 million. If Cousins receives the transition label and \$28 mil, Washington can match offers.

Feb. 27-March 5 - NFL combine.

March 6 - Last day for franchise and transition designations.

March 12-14 - Teams can negotiate with representatives of unrestricted free agents.

March 14 - Free agents can sign with new teams. And trades are allowed.

April 26-28 - Draft.

If Washington doesn't franchise or transition Cousins, the Broncos freely can negotiate with him. If he is a transition player, they could offer a lucrative, creative contract they hope Washington wouldn't decide to duplicate. The Broncos also could make a trade with Washington.

Cousins' agent, Mike McCartney, has strong Colorado connections. He is the son of famed CU coach Bill McCartney, grew up in Boulder and was a quarterback coach who helped recruit Vance Joseph to the Buffs. McCartney also represents Trevor Siemian and Zac Dysert, both former seventh-round selections by the Broncos.

Cousins idolized Elway as a kid, then copied Manning's face mask in high school (and still wears the same style). Perhaps Elway and Joseph could persuade Manning, Shanahan, Bill McCartney, Von Miller, who highly praised Cousins after the Christmas Eve game, and William Shatner, a Broncos fan and the original Captain Kirk, to recruit Cousins.

The Broncos' defense, Colorado as a home for Cousins, his wife Julie and their baby son Cooper, the Broncos' Super Bowl traditions and a strong religious community (Cousins is the son and grandson of ministers) would be attractive enticements.

And an eight-year contract worth \$150 million-\$200 million with bonuses, guarantees and incentives would be very tempting, too.

Cousins is the New Year's resolution to the Broncos' quest.

Broncos player visits deputy wounded in Highlands Ranch shooting

By Joe Dahlke

KDVR

Jan. 10, 2018

A Douglas County sheriff's deputy who was wounded in an ambush at a Highlands Ranch apartment complex on New Year's Eve got a visit from a Broncos player on Tuesday.

Deputy Jeff Pelle remains hospitalized after a suspect shot more than 100 rounds from a rifle at four deputies, injuring three of them and killing one.

On Tuesday, Broncos long snapper Casey Kreiter visited Pelle in the hospital. The team's community involvement page posted a picture of Pelle and Kreiter on Twitter.

Pelle was one of the first to respond to the disturbance call at the Copper Creek Apartment complex in Highlands Ranch in the early morning hours of Dec. 31.

His father, Boulder County Sheriff Joe Pelle, said his son was trying to pull his friend and fellow deputy, Zackari Parrish out of the line of fire when he was hit.

Jeff Pelle was shot under an arm. The bullet collapsed his lung, and punctured his liver and diaphragm.

While his son will physically make a full recovery, Joe Pelle said the emotional trauma will leave lasting scars.

"He lost a friend, been through a very horrific event," Joe Pelle said. "It's such a band of brothers. It's such a strong fraternity. The outpouring of love and prayers and hope has been wonderful."

Jeff Pelle served as a deputy in Pueblo County for five years and has been with the Douglas County Sheriff's Office for two years.

Five intriguing prospects to watch at the Senior Bowl

By Andrew Mason
DenverBroncos.com
Jan. 10, 2018

Quarterbacks like Oklahoma's Baker Mayfield and Wyoming's Josh Allen will attract the spotlight in two weeks when Senior Bowl practices begin. Every repetition will be scrutinized; every throw and decision will be dissected.

But the practices and prospects who will be under the guidance of the Broncos' and Texans' coaching staffs only begin with the two likely first-round passers. There are plenty of other intriguing players to watch among those who have already committed to the game, starting with this quintet of prospects:

Texas-San Antonio edge rusher Marcus Davenport

A long, quick pass rusher, Davenport finished his senior season with 8.5 sacks despite drawing the bulk of the focus from every blocking scheme he faced last season. Davenport's length allows him to get separation from opposing tackles, and his 255-pound frame allows him to hold up well against the run, giving him the potential to be an every-down player from the start, as opposed to just a situational rusher.

Oregon RB Royce Freeman

Freeman pulled out of the Ducks' Las Vegas Bowl game against Boise State to focus on NFL Draft preparation -- which includes the Senior Bowl, to which he accepted his invitation last month.

At 238 pounds, Freeman is built to withstand a pounding and accumulate yardage after contact, even against stacked boxes -- something he faced infrequently at Oregon because of its reliance on spread formations. He has the size/speed blend to handle an every-down workload, and his steady college production (6,435 yards from scrimmage, three seasons of at least 1,500 yards from scrimmage, averages of 10.3 yards per catch and 5.9 yards per carry) shows his consistency. But he will have to adapt to earning his yardage in a different style.

South Dakota State TE Dallas Goedert

Goedert passes all the eye tests, and his pass-catching productivity for the Jackrabbits exceeds that of any other tight end in the Senior Bowl. The 6-foot-5, 260-pounder dominated at the FCS level, posting back-to-back seasons with over 1,100 receiving yards, with a total of 164 receptions, 18 touchdowns and an average of 14.7 yards per catch.

An athletic, one-handed catch against Drake in 2016 got the attention of sports fans outside of the Dakotas and earned him a spot on ESPN SportsCenter's Top 10. If he can make his prodigious production and athleticism translate from FCS to facing a higher caliber of linebackers and defensive backs, he has a chance to be the first tight end selected.

UTEP G Will Hernandez

After four years developing under the tutelage of Sean Kugler, who agreed to terms to join the Broncos last week, the 6-foot-3, 330-pound Hernandez could be the best interior-line prospect on either squad at the Senior Bowl. Hernandez is a physical, persistent blocker who plays to the whistle, always finishing his blocks. He might not be able to knock his opposition to the ground as often at the next level as he did in Conference USA, but he should still be effective and will likely stand out in one-on-one drills.

Richmond QB Kyle Lauletta

Along with Oklahoma State's Mason Rudolph and Washington State's Luke Falk, Lauletta could have the most to gain of any quarterback at the Senior Bowl as he looks to make the leap from Richmond, which plays in the Colonial Athletic Association of FCS.

Lauletta has the requisite size (6-foot-3 and 215 pounds) and has poise in the pocket and he can work through his progressions. He has also shown the ability to quickly learn and adapt to different schemes. If he shows that he can adapt to the speed and athleticism from opposing defenses that he didn't see at FCS, he could play his way into the draft's second day.

Coaching Hires: When Fans Speak, Do Teams Listen?

By Jonathan Jones and Connor Orr

MMQB

Jan. 10, 2018

When Trip Underwood found out that Greg Schiano was going to be the next head coach at his school, the University of Tennessee, he started doing some research.

After following the rapid reaction from fans on Twitter and various “recruiting boards,” Underwood, a student who says he was just weeks away from his final exams at the time, read a 2015 deposition given by former Penn State assistant and Jerry Sandusky whistleblower Mike McQueary. McQueary and Schiano were not on the Penn State coaching staff at the same time, but McQueary said, under oath, that Tom Bradley, a long-time Nittany Lions assistant whose tenure crossed over with Schiano’s and McQueary’s, “had come into his office white as a ghost and said he just saw Jerry doing something to a boy in the shower.” Schiano and Bradley publicly refuted that part of McQueary’s testimony. It was never proven in a court of law—in fact, neither was ever summoned to court to address it under oath. Schiano, along with being vetted by Tennessee, had been put under the microscope by Ohio State, where he has served as defensive coordinator the last two seasons.

Still, Underwood thought, “When it comes to the highest paid public office in the state of Tennessee, just being implicated in this, under oath, should be enough to take a second look at this guy.”

So at 4 p.m. on a Sunday, about two hours after reports of Schiano’s hiring first surfaced, Underwood walked across campus, cans of spray paint in hand, to “The Rock”—a 97.5-ton boulder of dolomite stone that serves as a university landmark. It took him roughly an hour to paint the face of the stone white. Then, with the blank slate still drying and a local television reporter looking on, he crafted the most damning, memorable and powerful rebuke of UT’s Schiano decision, spraying in large black letters: “Schiano covered up child rape at Penn State.”

Underwood’s message was a visual representation of the backlash that eventually forced since-terminated athletic director John Currie to reconsider the hire. Underwood said he received only support from people passing by. He and roughly 100 on-campus protestors were also buoyed by a much larger army protesting online. “Outkick the Coverage” proprietor and Tennessee fan Clay Travis tweeted Currie’s phone number and email address and urged those upset with the hiring to let him know.

It was stunning and in some ways jarring to watch, given the lack of concrete evidence that Schiano had a role in any cover-up. It also raised an important question in a week when NFL teams will begin tabbing new head-coaching hires: Given the current state in which Americans consume and rapidly react to media, the hurried pace of hiring processes in the NFL, and the checkered background of some candidates, could this kind of backlash play out at the pro level?

The Lessons and Warnings of Tennessee's Greg Schiano Saga

Black Monday fell on New Years Day this year, with four teams firing their head coach and Bruce Arians announcing his retirement. That created six openings, including the New York Giants (who fired Ben McAdoo in early December). The first one was filled on Monday when the Bears hired Matt Nagy.

Teams looking for a head coach have about a week to 10 days to interview five to eight candidates. That means flying to them or bringing them to you, having your security team run a background check, talking with their references and friends around the league and making a decision. In the best-case scenario, the coach isn't on a team that's in the playoffs the following week, and you're the only one going after him.

If the candidate isn't highly sought after, a team has plenty of time to not only vet him but package him to fans as well. In Los Angeles, the Rams were a team in transition with little fan base to speak of. General manager Les Snead went after then-30-year-old Washington offensive coordinator Sean McVay, a riser in the coaching ranks but not someone that people were falling over themselves for—yet.

The Rams fired Jeff Fisher on Dec. 12, Washington ended its season on Jan. 1 and McVay was announced as the Rams' new coach on Jan. 12. L.A. had a full month to confirm he was their guy and, at the very least, 11 days to interview, check references and background. McVay and the Rams front office spent no fewer than five days together in January before the hire was official.

Three years earlier, McVay's former employer didn't have as much time when they hired his old boss, Jay Gruden. Washington fired Mike Shanahan on Dec. 30, 2013. By Jan. 6, the team had interviewed five coaches and had reportedly requested six others, including Gruden, then the Bengals' offensive coordinator and a hot coaching candidate. He interviewed with Washington on Jan. 8 while he was being courted by the Titans, Vikings and Browns. His first stop was Tennessee. Then it was on to Washington, which didn't let him leave town. A day after his interview Gruden was hired.

"If you were hiring these coaches the way the CEO of a company is hired, you'd take 30-60 days and make sure you knew everything there is to know," one NFL team executive told The MMQB. "People are making decisions in 24-48 hours, and if you don't take someone, someone else will."

There is no perfect analog for the NFL in relation to what happened at the University of Tennessee. First, there's nothing like being attached to the accusation of protecting child assault. Second, the fervor of college fandom, especially at an SEC school, is unrivaled by anything you'll find in the NFL.

The most recent hire involving a coach with a known red flag was Vance Joseph, named Denver Broncos head coach last January. Joseph, who had a two-year career as a defensive back in the NFL in the mid-90s, had been rising in the coaching ranks since breaking into the league with the 49ers in 2005. He made defensive coordinator on Adam Gase's inaugural Miami Dolphins staff in 2016 and was one of the top head-coaching candidates last offseason.

But Joseph had a past, and the Broncos knew it. While a DBs coach for two seasons (2002, '03) at the University of Colorado, his alma mater, Joseph had been disciplined by the school for having inappropriate sexual relationships with two female trainers, which rose to sexual harassment under the school's policy because he was a coach.

The two women spoke to a state task force investigating a recruiting scandal at Colorado. According the Boulder Daily Camera, which first reported the story, one of the women opted against pressing charges and the other declined to speak to police during their investigation. The case was closed, and Joseph was never questioned by police nor charged with a crime.

The Broncos vetted Joseph before the hire, speaking with people at Colorado, reviewing the report and talking to Joseph, who denied committing any crime but expressed embarrassment for his actions as a married father and as a coach. Joseph had come to Denver recommended by references at his four previous stops, the Fritz Pollard Alliance chairman John Wooten and the NFL career development advisory panel.

Joseph's relatively low Q-rating played in his favor. In the case of Schiano, many UT fans objected to his less-than-sterling reputation as a head coach after a highly publicized failure with the Tampa Bay Bucs. The link to the Sandusky scandal became a convenient—and effective—means to a desired end. Had Joseph had a similarly poor reputation as a coach, it's fair to wonder whether those allegations would have affected the Broncos' thinking.

A scroll through Tennessee Vols Twitter during the Schiano hiring process provided a peek into how volatile certain issues have become in the American consciousness. Fans were quick to package Schiano in with other unrelated but high-profile instances of sexual assault that have dominated the news cycle throughout the past few months. That sensitivity has further fortified NFL teams, who often prefer to look for outside help when hiring a coach or general manager.

The use of privatized search firms was a boardroom staple for decades and has maintained a presence in the NFL, where lines between a Fortune 500 CEO and head coach continue to blur. Jed Hughes, whose group Korn/Ferry has assisted the Browns, Seahawks, Chiefs, Falcons, Texans and Jets among other teams in recent years, sounds like a mix between campaign manager, presidential body man and former coach—the last of which is actually true. Before getting into the executive search world, Hughes worked under the likes of Bud Grant, Chuck Noll and Bo Schembechler as a position coach.

His experiences in football helped mold Hughes' meticulous approach to the hiring process, which includes filtering out undesirable candidates, digging up background information and criminal history and preparing all invested parties on how to get behind the hire and create a sense of organizational unity. Before a process starts, for example, an owner can say the team wants nothing to do with anyone that has a domestic violence offense in their past (Hughes calls that a "knockout"). He ensures that none of those candidates make it beyond the screening process. His firm accounts for issues that have taken hold outside the world of football.

"Today, we're just so sensitive to these [hot-button topics]," Hughes says. "They're going on in politics, they're going on in entertainment [. . .] Whether you're guilty or not guilty there's just a perception in this environment; that stuff is deleterious to your health. No matter how capable and qualified an individual is, under these sets of circumstances—maybe in two years it's a different story—we're facing a different climate than we faced before.

"That's what you have to be sensitive to when you're doing a search. You have to not only understand local dynamics but you have to understand what's going on in the general population. [Tennessee] was a populous movement."

Tennessee may very well have vetted Schiano to their satisfaction. Ohio State felt comfortable enough in hiring him as their defensive coordinator, though that was before McQueary's deposition had been unsealed. But what NFL teams do markedly better than collegiate teams is create a utopian perception of the new candidate. A unified front, strategically, tends to knock down backlash. At a college program,

where big-money donors and boosters have almost as much power as athletic directors, it's tougher to wrangle everyone onto the same page.

Consider recent hires in Cleveland and Buffalo. Both staged video arrivals for their head coaches to thunderous applause. While this is not an exclusive offering by search firms, it is no doubt inspired by their foundational theory of a unified front.

"My guess is [a massive fan backlash] could be a factor. I don't know if that's really all that different from the past though," one NFL executive told The MMQB. "In the past, it wasn't social media. Saints fans have worn bags on their heads. Fans have flown banners. But I can't say it's not a consideration. The challenge is identifying whether it's a consensus among your fans or a vocal, very small minority."

Fan backlash played a heavy role in the first firing of this cycle. In December, Giants head coach Ben McAdoo faced an avalanche of fan criticism after an organizationally agreed upon plan to sit Eli Manning exploded into a week's worth of talk radio and tabloid criticism. Soon after, he became the first Giants head coach in 40 years to lose his job in-season, and the first in 25 years to last two or fewer seasons with the franchise. While his inability to sell fans on a quarterback succession plan wasn't the breaking point for team ownership, his performance in that realm certainly contributed to his demise.

"How often now are decisions going to be vetted in social media?" Hughes said. "And is that going to change a decision that has already been made, if people don't agree with it? Think of the repercussions going forward for other hires."

Could what happened at Tennessee happen in the NFL? It's highly unlikely when you consider the confluence of factors that led to the Schiano Fiasco: A billionaire alumnus was pushing for a coach with a reputation for poor interpersonal skills, while the school's legendary football coach was crafting a Game of Thrones-style coup for the athletic director job, while a radio bloviator told his legion of bro followers how they should think, all of which happened in an area where it's faith, family and football but not necessarily in that order.

While boosters and alumni could change the course of a college program, there is no equivalent in the NFL. For instance, even if Levi's wasn't wild about Jim Tomsula's opening press conference in 2015, their name is staying on the side of the 49ers' building.

The way NFL hierarchies are built, the hiring process is naturally smoother. Agents deal with the owner and general manger, and once hired the coach deals with the general manager and key personnel men. In college, you have agents or search firms trying to negotiate massive deals with academicians and board members who are all trying to appease fans and alumni with skin in the game. Almost always, these men will be the highest-paid university employee, and at many public schools they could be the highest-paid public employee in the state. An NFL head coach could be making less than your kicker.

Many interviewed for this piece shared a similar sentiment: If you're the University of Tennessee and you think you have your guy, roll with him and take the punches. You might have lost the press conference, but all is forgiven if there are wins when the games start. And if you hire the candidate who wins the press conference, you're going to get fired if it turns out the press conference is the only thing he can win.

Chiefs promote Eric Bieniemy to offensive coordinator

By Jeremy Bergman

NFL.com

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Andy Reid wasted no time replacing his departed play-caller.

On the same day that former Kansas City Chiefs offensive coordinator Matt Nagy was introduced as Chicago's next head coach, K.C. pegged running backs coach Eric Bieniemy to replace him.

"I've known Eric a long time, both as a player and a coach," Reid said in a statement released by the team. "He's done a phenomenal job with our running backs and has been involved in every aspect of our offense over the last five years. He's a great teacher and has earned this opportunity. I know he will do a good job."

Bieniemy has served as Reid's running back coach in Kansas City for five seasons. The new O.C. was previously Minnesota's running backs coach from 2006 to 2010 under Brad Childress. Bieniemy has overseen all-time great seasons from Adrian Peterson (four 1,000-yard campaigns), Jamaal Charles and Kareem Hunt in his 10 years as a running backs coach.

It is too soon to tell whether Bieniemy will call plays for the Chiefs next season. After Kansas City struggled in the middle of the season, Reid handed play-calling duties to Nagy for the final six games of the campaign, including Saturday's devastating wild-card loss to the Tennessee Titans.

With Nagy now calling plays in the Windy City, it will be up to Reid whether to pass off duties to a rookie coordinator or to take back control of the laminated play sheet.

Ravens hire Don Martindale as defensive coordinator

By Jeremy Bergman

NFL.com

Jan. 10, 2018

The Baltimore Ravens had their eye on an in-house defensive coordinator candidate all along.

Baltimore announced Tuesday that it has promoted linebackers coach Don "Wink" Martindale to defensive coordinator, filling the role vacated by the retired Dean Pees. Martindale, 54, has been with the team since 2012. He previously served as the Denver Broncos' defensive coordinator under Josh McDaniels in 2010.

"His aggressive mentality will serve to take our defense to new levels," Ravens coach John Harbaugh said in a team statement. "He is obviously respected by players, many of whom have already benefited from his direct coaching at the linebacker position. He knows the ins and outs of what we have been about on defense and has been an important contributor to our success on that side of the ball."

In corresponding moves, the Ravens promoted Mike Macdonald to linebackers coach and Sterling Lucas to quality control defense.

Martindale's promotion puts an end to speculation that former Indianapolis Colts coach Chuck Pagano would return to Baltimore, where he coached for four seasons and was Harbaugh's defensive coordinator in 2011.

Broncos hire Tom McMahon as special teams coach

By Charean Williams

Pro Football Talk

Jan. 10, 2018

The Broncos haven't announced their new special teams coordinator yet, but former Colts punter Pat McAfee let the coach out of the bag.

On Twitter, McAfee congratulated former Colts special teams coordinator Tom McMahon for taking the same job with the Broncos.

The Broncos are replacing Brock Olivo, one of six assistants that coach Vance Joseph fired after a 5-11 finish.

McMahon also worked for the Falcons, Rams and Chiefs before arriving in Indianapolis in 2013.

NFL'S 2018 international slate coming Thursday

By Darin Gantt
Pro Football Talk
Jan. 10, 2018

The NFL is set to announce its schedule of international games tomorrow, and there's a suggestion from overseas about who might make that list.

Via Gregg Bell of the Tacoma News Tribune, the Seahawks are one of six teams to not make that trip before, and officials there were trying to reel them in.

NFL UK managing director Alistair Kirkwood told ESPN in October: "We have a desire to get the other six teams that haven't been over."

"It's not the be-all and end-all, but you'd kind of like to get closer and closer to having all 32 teams over," he said. "That seems like a really nice narrative. . . . That's probably a really nice ambition."

In addition to the Seahawks, the Packers, Eagles, Panthers, Texans and Titans haven't made the trip.

And if the foreign powers want to check off as many boxes as possible, the schedule offers some options. With the schedule rotations announced, there are seven games next year which include two of the teams: Seattle at Carolina, Green Bay at Seattle, Carolina at Philadelphia, Philadelphia at Tennessee, Houston at Philadelphia, and the two Texans-Titans games.

The Raiders have been mentioned as a London possibility as well (they have a home game with the Seahawks scheduled), and there are reports that the Chiefs and Rams are playing in Mexico.