

With focus on development, Broncos take new approach with recent coaching hires

By Nicki Jhabvala

Denver Post

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The day after Broncos general manager John Elway ended his internal questioning of whether coach Vance Joseph would stay or go, the two sat together at the team's headquarters to admit mistakes and vow change.

Elway went first, saying he wanted to give Joseph another shot and that he also wanted to give his coach "the best opportunity to be successful" with some new assistant coaches and a revamped roster. "I don't feel like we gave him that chance," Elway said. "We had some positions that didn't play very well, that I thought would play better than they played. That part is on me."

Joseph chimed in soon after, admitting his shortcomings as a first-year head coach.

"Early on in the season, I didn't do a good job of pushing our coaches to make the proper changes that I thought could have helped us," he said. "I allowed guys to coach — that was my goal — but I wasn't very good at coaching the coaches. I'll get better at that."

Since then the Broncos have made alterations to their staff while still devoting much of their time to evaluating on-field talent. After firing six assistants, they've hired seven new ones, changed the roles of a few others and will likely bring on a couple more to focus on development, to help the younger players adjust better and faster, and to help bridge the gap.

"You look at Philly and you look at Kansas City — we have to adjust also as pro coaches. We're drafting these guys for their skill set that we see on tape," Joseph said. "So we can't take these guys and assume they can do something else. What we draft them for, we have to play to their strengths. ... So we have to evolve as coaches also, take these kids' skill sets and put it to work. So what we see in these players that we love, we have to apply to our game. It's simple as that in my opinion."

On the offensive line, instead of having just one primary coach and his assistant, the Broncos have split duties, giving new hire Sean Kugler the task of coaching the guards and centers. Chris Strausser, previously the assistant offensive line coach, will work with the tackles.

In the secondary, Marcus Robertson, a former 12-year safety, will remain the lead coach for the defensive backs. But the Broncos added Greg Williams, previously the Colts' defensive backs coach, to focus on the cornerbacks. And, in the coming weeks, the team is expected to hire a coach to be a pass-rushing specialist working with the outside linebackers and the defensive linemen.

The Broncos have shifted away from the traditional coaching structure they've employed in years past and taken on an approach that's becoming more common in the NFL — not just during the season, but in the offseason, too.

“As I travel around calling games for FOX, I see a lot of former players that have been brought onto rosters to do some coaching and to help out. It’s been interesting,” said former Broncos guard and current NFL analyst Mark Schlereth. “I’ve had a lot of teams over the years reach out to me about potentially joining staffs and one team I covered this year asked me to come out in the offseason and basically do a zone-blocking tutorial and spend time with the coaches in that realm, kind of almost as a consultant. I think you’re going to see more and more of that.”

Consider the Texans, who last year employed former slot receiver Wes Welker as an offensive and special-teams assistant. Or the Falcons, who have employed former players with lengthy NFL careers as coordinators, such as Bryant Young.

“A lot of teams are going in that direction because the less and less guys are allowed to practice, the more and more they need to have those discussions and to understand the nuance of playing this game,” Schlereth said. “I think there’s nobody that can give you a better sense of nuance than a guy that’s played it at a high level for a long time.”

The Broncos’ offensive line, a group that has struggled for years with development and cohesion, last year featured a rookie left tackle (Garett Bolles) and a rotating cast of right tackles that together were an improvement over the 2016 front five. But mistakes were frequent and the level of play was far from what many inside the Broncos’ building had sought.

The college-to-pro transition for offensive linemen is often said to be one of the most difficult in the NFL because of the knowledge and skill needed, not to mention the drastic change in physicality and scheme. When many tackles are drafted, they’re raw and they join a veteran group whose focus is no longer on developing technique but simply playing — playing together as a unit and playing well.

“In the pros, they just want you to get the job done so they can complete the pass, so they can get the run. They don’t care how you do it. They just want you to do it,” former Broncos tackle and current radio host Ryan Harris told The Post last year. “It’s imperative, and I think necessary, for offensive linemen to have a good technique base or, if not, have a good coach who’s teaching them technique because not every offensive line coach in the NFL teaches technique, which is mind-blowing.”

The focused approach has become especially popular in the offseason, when players seek out skill coaches — coaches specific to receivers or defensive backs or quarterbacks, coaches for footwork, coaches for speed, throwing coaches and strength coaches. Broncos receiver Emmanuel Sanders often takes his maniacal training regimen back to Houston, where he works with receivers coach David Robinson and Rischad Whitfield, a trainer known to most as “The Footwork King.” Others have turned to Seth Minter, a former college receiver now known as “The FootDoctor” after working with the likes of Chad Johnson.

Current players are even finding ways to specialize on their own, as Broncos linebacker Von Miller did last year in orchestrating his first Pass Rush Summit at Stanford, where both current and former players shared secrets of their trade.

The Broncos have taken notice. In their still-developing look for 2018, they’ve changed their approach on the sidelines with hope of changing the outcome on the field.

LB Brandon Marshall on Broncos' QB options: "We played against a guy in Week 16 that was pretty good."

By Nicki Jhabvala

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Ask Broncos veterans and they'll tell you that John Elway is primed for a free-agency splash this offseason.

Inside linebacker Brandon Marshall was a guest on NFL Network's "Total Access" on Thursday and, in agreement with others in the Broncos' locker room, said he expects his general manager to pursue a veteran quarterback in the coming months.

"In my opinion, we already drafted a quarterback, first round a couple years ago, so we've tried that," Marshall said. "I think he's going to get a free-agent quarterback. I think he's going to go spend some money and fix the position, because it's kind of a toss-up with these rookie quarterbacks. You never know. But the only thing about getting a free-agent quarterback is some guys will have to go. I hope everybody gets to stay, but that's just the business."

Broncos players have been vocal about the upcoming decisions of the offseason, and even during the season fielded questions about the array of options at quarterback. With a No. 5 pick in the upcoming draft, the Broncos could get one of the highly touted prospects in this year's class, which includes Baker Mayfield, Josh Rosen, Sam Darnold and Josh Allen, among others.

If the Broncos do pin their future on a rookie quarterback, it'll be the second time in three years they'll hope a first-round quarterback becomes their starter. Denver traded up to get Paxton Lynch at No. 26 in the 2016 draft, but he's started only four games since and his future is suddenly uncertain.

On the open market, the Broncos have more proven options, but they'll come at a significant cost.

"I mean, there's a couple guys out there," Marshall said when asked if there's a free-agent quarterback he'd prefer. "You know. We played against a guy in Week 16 that was pretty good. There's a couple guys out there."

That guy in Week 16 was Kirk Cousins, Washington's quarterback who is expected to draw more than \$30 million in average annual salary as a free agent if the Redskins don't re-sign him first or franchise tag him for a third time, for about \$34 million fully guaranteed for one season.

Paying that much would, as Marshall said, require the Broncos to make others tough decisions with current players to clear cap space. One name that has come up quite a bit is cornerback Aqib Talib, who is due \$11 million in salary next season but carries only \$1 million in dead money value, the amount that would count against the Broncos' cap if he's released. Bradley Roby's salary will jump from about \$1 million to more than \$8.5 million next season and, along with Chris Harris, would give the Broncos three corners whose cap hits rank among the team's top eight.

Talib recently said on Altitude 950 that “there’s a chance” he may be back, but “it wouldn’t be the most surprising thing in the world” if he’s not.

Talib also said that he too believes Elway will chase a veteran quarterback this offseason.

“Me knowing John, I don’t really know if he wants to rebuild and have two more seasons of 8-8 and 7-9 and ‘we’re getting better,’” Talib said. “I don’t know if he’s ready to do that. John is ready to get back to the top because that’s where he belongs. That’s just John Elway. I don’t really see him drafting a rookie and trying to rebuild. I see him getting a vet and getting back to the top ASAP because that’s where he belongs.”

The Broncos' youth movement at safety, led by Justin Simmons, could pay dividends after encouraging signs in 2017

By Nick Kosmider
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One of the first texts Justin Simmons received April 29, 2016, moments after he was selected in the third round of the NFL draft by the Broncos, came from veteran safety T.J. Ward.

Ward, whose stellar performance less than three months earlier had helped the Broncos win Super Bowl 50, was reaching out with welcoming arms to the new kid at the position. Right away, Simmons said, Ward took on the role of an "older brother figure" for the rookie. And Simmons was eager to soak up any morsel he could.

"He gave me the ins and outs of the defense by helping me out with my eyes and just discipline at the safety position," Simmons said. "He showed me what it takes to be a Pro Bowl safety year in and year out like he was."

So when Ward was released by the Broncos 16 months later — just before the start of Simmons' second season in the NFL — the young player out of Boston College was conflicted. He knew the impact Ward had on the locker room because it was an impact Simmons himself felt significantly. But the competitor drumming inside of him was ready, both to become a starter at safety and to fill some of Ward's role as a trusted locker room voice.

"It was tough in that aspect," Simmons said of losing Ward, " ... but in the same token, I have the utmost trust in my ability and what I can bring to the team. Obviously, the end of the season didn't go the way I wanted it to go as far as the ankle injury went, but I still feel like there is so much I can build on and help bring to the football team."

In a 2017 season of dark clouds for the Broncos, one of the few silver linings was the growth and impact of Simmons, who looked at times in 2017 like a player who could have Pro Bowl nods in his future. His Pro Football Focus grade of 80.2 was fourth among all AFC West safeties behind Jahleel Addae (83.5) and Tre Boston (81.4) of the Chargers and Karl Joseph (80.8) of the Raiders. He led a youth movement at the safety position in Denver this season that featured 2016 sixth-round pick Will Parks stepping into a larger role, undrafted rookie Jamal Carter making strides after making the team out of training camp and fellow undrafted player Dymonte Thomas making the most of a late-season audition.

"With all of the experience with T.J. leaving," defensive coordinator Joe Woods said in late December, "I felt like those guys stepped up and filled that role."

Simmons led the charge. He finished with 63 tackles, 1½ sacks, two interceptions and a touchdown in essentially 12 games. He suffered a high-ankle sprain early in Denver's Week 14 win over the Jets and was then placed on season-ending injured reserve. As much as he blossomed in his role as a starter — he almost never came off the field — he also became a steady voice in the locker room amid Denver's

torrential struggles. His willingness to be the first player to address reporters, even after difficult losses, helped earn him the team's Darrent Williams Good Guy Award.

The award is given annually to the Bronco who best exemplifies Williams' enthusiasm, cooperation and honesty while dealing with members of the press, and for Simmons it was a reflection of his desire to carry some of the heavy weight Ward had left behind.

"We want 10 more guys like Justin Simmons," Broncos coach Vance Joseph said in December. "As a player, he has a bright future, but as a person, he's A-plus. We want more guys like Justin Simmons."

The Broncos' youth movement at safety, though, did come with growing pains. Though the Broncos finished fourth in the NFL against the pass and narrowly missed a third straight season of surrendering less than 200 yards per game (200.6), the 29 touchdown passes thrown against them were the fifth-most in the league. Tight ends, who caught a combined nine of those scoring passes, were an especially problematic kryptonite.

Still, the Broncos have reason to be encouraged by a position that should remain largely in tact this offseason as Denver reworks its roster following a 5-11 season. Darian Stewart carries a dead-cap hit of \$4.2 million next season and still provides a valuable veteran presence. Simmons and Parks are entering the third year of their respective rookie deals, and the Broncos were encouraged with what they saw out of undrafted players Jamal Carter and Dymonte Thomas. Internal development is the clearest path for Broncos at safety.

"I think there were definitely great leaps made from my rookie year to this season, but still not even close to being satisfied with where I'm at athletically, physically or even mentally," Simmons said. "I think there are so many steps that I can take and all that is going to be repetition, making sure that I find the finer details within the details that I already know to kind of execute my game at a higher level."

With Baker Mayfield, Broncos would weigh if resume, swagger are a fit

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN.com

Jan. 12, 2018

The Denver Broncos weren't even 48 hours into their offseason when John Elway quickly and efficiently outlined the team's top priority to dig out of a 5-11 finish.

The Broncos want, and need, a solution at quarterback. What they have to decide is if the draft, free agency or both will provide that solution.

"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 the Broncos own the No. 5 pick in the 2018 draft in a year that happens to feature a collection of quarterback talent unlike the league's evaluators have seen in some time.

This is the third of a one-a-day look at how the top quarterbacks available in the draft could fit with the Broncos.

Today: Oklahoma quarterback Baker Mayfield

Monday: Wyoming quarterback Josh Allen

In a nutshell: Mayfield easily has the most detailed resume of the top quarterback prospects. He attempted at least 340 passes in all four of his seasons (one at Texas Tech, three at Oklahoma) and never threw more than nine interceptions in any of those seasons. He finished his college career with 131 touchdown passes and 30 interceptions. His Heisman-winning 2017 season saw him throw for 43 touchdowns and six interceptions. He had 24 300-yard passing games, five games of 400 yards and two of 500 in his career.

Why he fits: He has exactly the personality Elway has made clear he's seeking at quarterback. Mayfield plays with an edgy swagger that bothers some but could serve him well -- if he focuses it on football -- as he navigates a bumpy ride on the NFL learning curve. He also performs at his best in the tightest situations. His game travels nicely -- 58 touchdown passes in home games, 52 in road games and 21 in neutral sites. His completion percentages: 69.4 at home, 69.2 on the road and 65.3 in neutral sites. His performance on third down, in the red zone and in possessions after an error have been worthy of double-takes. His mobility and ability to make the tough throw on the move is a benefit, as is his desire to wring the most out of every play.

The work to be done: With a significant number of his completions coming at or behind the line of scrimmage, Mayfield has made a living making lay-up throws without the best footwork. He will often not step and throw when he has room to do so, electing instead to throw wherever his feet may be in that moment -- with his hips usually open and feet in a straddle position. That will eventually affect accuracy. Also, the video reveals that, like many college quarterbacks, he doesn't often let the ball fly

unless the receiver has already cleared the defender by two steps. In the NFL, that will never be an on-time throw because the definition of "open" is far different. He's listed at 6-foot-1, but many scouts want to see what he measures at the Senior Bowl later this month -- his height will be an issue for some teams. He will have to maintain a high release and an understanding of the need to get himself into a position in which he has a throwing lane.

The plan for him would be: Mayfield played four seasons of college football and has dealt with plenty of the scrutiny, both for his play and his off-field behavior (a February 2017 arrest that included charges of public intoxication; not starting Oklahoma's Senior Day game in November because of lewd gestures he made the week before), that comes with the territory as a high-profile NFL rookie. But any team that dives in to select him in the first round will have likely decided his intensity, knowledge of the game and confidence behind center are enough to let him compete for the job from Day 1.

Will it happen?: The Broncos will get an up-close look at Mayfield at the Senior Bowl, so they'll be able to make a decision about his ability to transition as a long-term NFL starter. They also have to decide if that means they think he's a prospect they would pick at No. 5, or move down and gamble on getting later. Coach Vance Joseph has said the Broncos -- as do other NFL teams -- need to do a better job of tailoring their playbooks to players' strengths, including quarterbacks. That means they are open to fitting their offense around what's best for the quarterback better than they did for much of the past season. It would mean Elway has expanded the profile of what he wants given Mayfield would be the shortest quarterback Elway would have selected in the draft in his tenure as the Broncos' chief football decision-maker.

He's just 20, so Broncos would need plan to raise Sam Darnold right as QB

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN.com

Jan. 12, 2018

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That the Broncos want, and need, a solution at quarterback -- "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 the Broncos have the No. 5 pick in the 2018 draft, a year that also happens to feature a collection of quarterbacks that the league's evaluators haven't seen in some time.

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

Thursday: USC quarterback Sam Darnold.

Friday: Oklahoma quarterback Baker Mayfield.

In a nutshell: Darnold is a rare player because of his frame, arm strength and athleticism at the position. He'll also be the youngest of the top prospects at the position, given he'll turn just 21 three weeks before his first NFL training camp opens. He was a two-year starter for the Trojans -- he played in 27 games overall -- and threw 57 touchdowns in those 27 games (2.1 per game). Go ahead and wrap your head around this as well, but when he finished with 4,143 yards passing this season he became the first quarterback in USC's history to top 4,000 yards and he was 20.

Why he fits: With a limited body of work given he enters the draft process having just played his final college season as a redshirt sophomore, he is also a player who has accomplished plenty, yet still just might be an untapped wealth of football awesomeness. He has a relaxed, what-me-worry, big-moment swagger about him and, by all accounts, is grounded and understands the ebb and flow of the position as well as how to handle the scrutiny of the job. He has the athleticism to play under center, handle play-action and work out of the shotgun, so offensive coordinators can get most of what they want from him.

The work to be done: He has an innate ability to adjust his delivery for his situation -- including short and compact at times when he's in a crowded pocket -- and consistently keeps his eyes downfield. But when he has time and room he has a big windup. That could be an issue in terms of delivering the ball on time in the league if that is really his comfort zone rather than simply a condition of having been more self-taught than some prospects who have made the camp rounds since their preteen years. Like many of the gifted behind center, he will force throws at bad times or take a sack that costs his team some field position in the hope he can create a play. Put some improved red zone decision-making down on the things-to-do list for him.

The plan for him would be: Given his youth and the need to tighten up some of his mechanics, Darnold probably would present a team like the Broncos with a dilemma. Because the Broncos have never really approached a down season with anything other than as quick a rebound as they could muster. However, Elway hinted after this past season at the possibility of a little slower ramp up in exchange for long-term benefit: "I don't want to raise the expectation level by saying, 'Yes, automatically we're going to get back there.'" But a player of Darnold's potential, coupled with some fundamental work to be done, probably would force them to decide whether to simply play Darnold through the rough spots of a rookie starter, given his demeanor and talent, or let him learn a season and then play him as a slightly more finished product. The Broncos also would have to put a far better offensive line in front of him than they had last season or Darnold's developmental curve would be impacted.

Will it happen?: One of the biggest mistakes some folks can make about the draft is not to remember, always, that it's about pro potential and that will always outweigh college production. So despite some rougher edges as a player than some of his peers in the draft, Darnold, like Josh Rosen, is a top-of-the-board prospect whom the Broncos probably would have to move up to get. That's an all-in decision that would affect the next two or three drafts because they'll have to surrender plenty of picks to move up from No. 5.

Coaching shake-ups by Seahawks, Packers, Panthers show there's no room for complacency in NFL

By Mike Jones

USA Today

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Mike McCarthy could've made excuses. Pete Carroll could have asked for a mulligan. Ron Rivera could have said, "We were this close..."

But as their offseasons began in disappointing fashion these last two weeks, those three coaches demonstrated that in the NFL, there's no room for complacency.

McCarthy didn't view the Packers earning a 7-9 record despite the nine-game absence of his future Hall of Fame quarterback as a moral victory.

The Seahawks going 9-7 and missing the playoffs by just one game amid an injury-plagued year didn't give Carroll any consolation. And Rivera didn't accept the Panthers' return to the playoffs (where they lost 31-26 to the Saints) one year after going 6-10 in 2016 as sufficient progress.

Instead, all three coaches made the difficult decisions to fire key members of their coaching staffs in hopes of better positioning their teams to win the Super Bowl in 2018.

McCarthy fired both offensive coordinator Edgar Bennett and quarterbacks coach Alex Van Pelt days after parting with defensive coordinator Dom Capers. Carroll fired offensive coordinator Darrell Bevell and offensive line coach Tom Cable, and the team also might not return defensive coordinator Kris Richard.

Meanwhile, Rivera jettisoned offensive coordinator Mike Shula and quarterbacks coach Ken Dorsey.

Firings and hirings happen every year. But it's not often that you see perennial playoff contenders make such drastic moves. McCarthy, however, best explained the reasoning.

"Are we doing enough to win a world championship, or are we doing everything we need to do to win a championship?" he asked during a recent news conference after his team having missed the playoffs for the first time in nine years and for only the third time in his 12 seasons as head coach.

"You don't get to say, 'But if Aaron (Rodgers) doesn't get hurt,'" McCarthy said. "That's a loser's mentality. We don't get to operate that way."

How many times have team leaders preached staying the course following bumps in the road similar to the ones Green Bay and Seattle experienced this year? How many coaches have given the "trust the process" line when their teams still don't quite deliver?

McCarthy, Rivera and Carroll will not settle, however, because they understand any NFL team's window remains open for only so long.

When Rodgers, 34, broke his collarbone six games into the season, the Packers' Super Bowl hopes essentially shattered with it. Rodgers' eight-game absence also exposed the deficiencies that his supreme talents had helped mask.

McCarthy said after the season that Rodgers' replacement, Brett Hundley, "should've been better prepared for the situation that he was put into," which is an indictment of Bennett and Van Pelt.

To start, McCarthy hired Joe Philbin for a second stint as offensive coordinator. Philbin served as the Packers' offensive coordinator from 2007-11, helping them win the Super Bowl in 2010, before taking Miami's head coaching job in 2012.

Down in Charlotte, Rivera's reasons for change are clear. In Cam Newton, he has one of the most physically gifted quarterbacks in the league. But the 2015 NFL MVP remains unrefined.

Believing a better offensive coordinator and position coach will help cure inconsistencies and help Newton truly live up to his MVP caliber potential, Rivera looks to have zeroed in on hiring Norv Turner. Rivera also wants to hire Turner's son, Scott Turner, who as quarterbacks coach in Minnesota not only aided Teddy Bridgewater, but also helped Sam Bradford in 2016 complete a dazzling 71.6% of his passes, the second-highest single-season clip in league history.

The hope is that a new scheme and guidance can push Newton, who has completed just 58.5% percent of his career passes, to develop as a passer and set up his skill position players for greater success.

Meanwhile, the Seahawks' wave of change comes at the end of a season that saw them miss the playoffs for the first time since 2011, Carroll's second at the helm.

Bevell was praised for designing an offense that helped make Russell Wilson a star.

But the offense as a whole has regressed in the last two seasons, and Carroll saw the coordinator and his scheme as part of the problem. Sharing the blame with Bevell is Cable, who also served as the run-game coordinator. But since 2011, the Seahawks have drafted a league-high 16 offensive linemen, five of whom have never started a game. And since Marshawn Lynch's departure after the 2015 season, Seattle's rushing attack has finished 25th and 23rd in the NFL.

Throughout this season, the sense in Seattle was that the foundation had started to crack. A team that once looked like a rising dynasty with back-to-back trips to the Super Bowl in 2013 (a win) and '14 (crushing defeat) seemingly was trending in the wrong direction.

"We are challenged by change, but excited to attack the future with great purpose," he wrote in a statement when Seattle announced the Bevell and Cable firings.

With improved health alone, the Seahawks likely would find themselves back in the postseason next season. But Carroll – like McCarthy and Rivera – wants and needs more than just playoff appearances.

Elite aspirations consist of much more.

Agent's Take: 2017 NFL Contract Awards feature the good, the bad and the ugly

By Joel Corry
CBSSports.com
Jan. 12, 2018

Now that the playoffs are in full swing the 2017 financial landscape has been assessed, resulting in the NFL Contract Awards for the fifth-straight year here at CBSSports.com.

These awards differ from the traditional NFL honors because they are from an economic perspective, emphasizing 2017 veteran acquisitions. Players acquired by trades or in free agency can have a tremendous impact on an NFL team's fortunes. Rookies weren't given any consideration because their salaries are a function of draft position and the rookie-wage scale.

Most Valuable Acquisition

Case Keenum
MIN • QB • 7

Nobody envisioned Keenum becoming a vital part of Minnesota's success when he signed a one-year, \$2 million contract with \$250,000 in incentives, which he earned, a month into free agency to back up Sam Bradford. He has been the ultimate insurance policy that became necessary for the Vikings to cash in because of Bradford's ailing left knee limiting him to six quarters of action this season, while 2014 first-round pick Teddy Bridgewater, Minnesota's starting quarterback in 2015, was recovering from the career-threatening knee injury he suffered during the 2016 preseason.

Keenum helped the Vikings win the NFC North with a 13-3 record, which tied for best in the NFL, and secure a first-round playoff bye. He was named NFC Offensive Player of the Month for November after guiding the Vikings to a 3-0 record by completing 71.1 percent of his passes (69 of 97) for 866 yards with seven touchdowns and two interceptions to post a 114.0 passer rating. In 15 games (14 starts), Keenum threw for 3,547 yards with 22 touchdowns and only seven interceptions. He connected on 67.6 percent of his passes, which was second in the NFL, and had the league's seventh-best passer rating at 98.6.

Keenum has probably put himself in a position to land a contract with at least the type of money Mike Glennon received from the Bears in free agency with less of a track record. Glennon signed a three-year, \$45 million deal, which is destined to become \$18.5 million for a single season in Chicago because it took him only four games to lose his starting job to 2017 second-overall pick Mitchell Trubisky.

Keenum winning in the playoffs while continuing to play at a Pro-Bowl level could convince the Vikings to designate him as franchise or transition player. The non-exclusive quarterback franchise tag should be \$23.307 million with a \$178.1 million 2018 salary cap, which is the high end of cap projections given to teams at a December league meeting. At this cap figure, the transition tag is expected to be \$21.029 million.

Runners Up: A.J. Bouye (CB)-Jaguars; Calais Campbell (DE)-Jaguars; Jimmy Garoppolo (QB)-49ers

Least Valuable Acquisition

Adrian Peterson

ARI • RB • 23

VIA TRADE FROM THE NEW ORLEANS SAINTS

The expectation was Peterson would complement incumbent running back Mark Ingram, who had his first 1,000 rushing-yard season in 2016, when he signed a two-year, \$7.5 million contract (worth up to \$15.25 million through salary escalators and incentives) with the Saints shortly before the 2017 NFL Draft. After the Saints traded a 2018 second-round pick to select Alvin Kamara early in the third round, there was speculation that Ingram would be most affected because of more overlap with their skillsets.

It didn't work out that way. Peterson quickly became the odd man out in the crowded Saints backfield. The Saints pulled the plug on the Peterson experiment after four games by trading him to Cardinals for a conditional 2018 sixth-round draft pick. Peterson was a rather expensive four-game proposition for the Saints, costing them almost \$2.8 million because he received a \$2.5 million signing bonus.

Runners Up: Kenny Britt (WR)-Browns; Mike Glennon (QB)-Bears; Eddie Lacy (RB)-Seahawks; Terrelle Pryor (WR)-Redskins

Offensive Signing of the Year

Andrew Whitworth

LAR • T • 77

Whitworth, who signed a three-year, \$33.75 million deal (worth up to \$36 million with incentives), helped solidify an offensive line that ranked 31st in sacks allowed in 2016 with 49. He is the first quality left tackle the Rams have had since Hall of Famer Orlando Pace's departure nearly a decade ago. The Rams gave up 28 sacks this season, which was ninth in the NFL, and led the league in scoring. The 36 year old was named first team All-Pro for just the second time in his 12-year NFL career.

Runners Up: Alshon Jeffery (WR)-Eagles; Case Keenum (QB)-Vikings

Defensive Signing of the Year

A.J. Bouye

JAC • CB • 21

Calais Campbell

JAC • DE • 93

Bouye and Campbell were catalysts in Jacksonville developing arguably the league's best defense. The Jaguars had the NFL's stingiest pass defense, which allowed only 169.9 yards per game. The AFC South champions also ranked second in total defense (286.1 yards per game) and points allowed (16.8 per game).

Bouye came out of nowhere in 2016 to develop into one of the NFL's better cornerbacks during his final season with the Texans. He turned his contract-year success into a five-year, \$65 million contract containing \$26 million fully guaranteed. Bouye solidified his place among the NFL's top cornerbacks this season. He led NFL cornerbacks with six interceptions and earned his first Pro-Bowl berth. Opposing quarterbacks completed only 45.2 percent of their passes (38 of 84 attempts) when targeting him, for a 31.6 passer rating according to Pro Football Focus (PFF).

Campbell signed a four-year, \$60 million deal where \$30 million was fully guaranteed. He took the initial AFC Defensive Player of the Week honors this season after a career high and franchise record four sacks

against the Texans in his Jaguars debut. He led the AFC with 14.5 sacks. Campbell earned first team All-Pro honors for the first time in his 10 NFL seasons.

Runners Up: Micah Hyde (S)-Bills; Jordan Poyer-(S)-Bills

Biggest Steal

Patrick Robinson

PHI • CB • 21

The Eagles never imagined Robinson would have such a big defensive impact when he was given a one-year deal at his \$775,000 league minimum salary following an injury plagued 2016 season that led to the Colts releasing him. There was some concern whether Robinson would survive roster cutdowns because of a slow start in training camp after the Eagles made a preseason trade with the Bills for cornerback Ronald Darby, a 2015 second-round pick. Robinson received more extensive playing time than anticipated because Darby dislocated his right ankle in the season opener, which sidelined him for eight games. Robinson was on the field for 68.9 percent of Philadelphia's defensive snaps (710 of 1,031 plays). He excelled in covering slot wide receivers. Robinson led the Eagles with four interceptions and graded out as PFF's fourth-best cornerback this season.

Runner Up: Case Keenum (QB)-Vikings

Best Use of a Contract Year

Demarcus Lawrence

DAL • DE • 90

Lawrence's 6.5 sacks in the first three games of the season helped him garner NFC Defensive Player of the Month honors for September. He tied for second in the NFL with 14.5 sacks. Lawrence is a prime candidate for a franchise tag because of the immense importance of players who can pressure opposing quarterbacks, and his 2017 play is an outlier. The Cowboys would be justified in having concerns about giving Lawrence a deal comparable to Olivier Vernon's with the Giants (\$85 million over five years with \$52.5 million in guarantees) because his 14.5 sacks this season are 5.5 more than he had in the other 32 games of his NFL career spanning the previous three seasons. The defensive end franchise number is expected to be \$17.3 million with a \$178.1 million salary cap in 2018.

Runners Up: Jimmy Garoppolo (QB)-49ers; Case Keenum (QB)-Vikings; Andrew Norwell (OG)-Panthers

Worst Use of a Contract Year

Terrelle Pryor

WAS • WR • 11

Pryor was brought in to help offset the loss of wide receivers Pierre Garcon and DeSean Jackson in free agency. Garcon and Jackson were both 1,000-yard receivers in 2016. Pryor lost the bet he made on himself after a breakout 2016 season of 77 receptions for 1,007 yards with four touchdowns. He rejected the type of money from the Browns that Kenny Britt took to replace him in Cleveland. Britt signed a four-year, \$32.5 million deal with \$17 million in guarantees. Instead, Pryor took a one-year, \$6 million deal worth up to \$8 million with incentives in hopes of getting a contract for significantly more than Britt's as a free agent in 2018. The converted quarterback was largely a non-factor during Washington's first five games before seeing a precipitous drop in playing time. Pryor went on injured reserve shortly before Thanksgiving because of an ankle injury that required surgery. Look for the 28 year old to go the one-year prove-it-deal route again for less money that he made this season because he caught only 20 passes for 240 yards and one touchdown in nine games.

Runner Up: Tyler Eifert (TE)-Bengals; Eddie Lacy (RB)-Seahawks

Best Contract-Year Extension (for a team)

Adam Thielen

MIN • WR • 19

Technically, Thielen didn't sign a contract extension. Nonetheless, he qualifies for this category because he was scheduled to make \$2.746 million in 2017 on his restricted-free-agent tender before signing a four-year, \$19.246 million year deal where he gave up three unrestricted-free-agency years for \$16.5 million. These unrestricted years can be worth as much as \$25.8 million with outstanding performance during the contract thanks to base-salary escalators and incentives.

Thielen has taken his game to a different level this season after a breakout 2016 campaign in which he caught 68 passes for 967 yards with five touchdowns. He is the first Vikings player to reach 1,000 receiving yards in a season since Sidney Rice in 2009. Thielen's 1,276 receiving yards were the fifth most in the NFL. He was eighth in the league with 91 receptions. Thielen was named second team All-Pro and earned a spot in the Pro Bowl.

The undrafted free agent has given the Vikings the type of production expected out of Greg Jennings when he signed a five-year, \$45 million contract (worth a maximum of \$47.5 million through salary escalators and incentives) in 2013 while the salary cap was \$123 million. The Jennings contract is the equivalent of a deal averaging a little more than \$13.5 million per year under the current \$167 million salary cap. Davante Adams and Alshon Jeffery, who weren't nearly as productive as Thielen, recently signed extensions respectively with the Packers and Eagles in this neighborhood.

Runner Up: David Andrews (C)-Patriots

Worst Contract-Year Extension (for a team)

Kam Chancellor

SEA • SS • 31

Giving Chancellor a three-year, \$36 million extension (with \$25 million in guarantees) was a curious decision even before the career-threatening neck injury he suffered in early November. It appeared as if his eventual replacement had been found in the third round of the 2017 draft with Delano Hill. Chancellor's deal instantly became a salary floor for his fellow Seahawks safety Earl Thomas, who was made the NFL's highest-paid player at the position in 2014 on an extension averaging \$10 million per year. Thomas is under contract through the 2018 season.

Injury guarantees usually don't become relevant in NFL contracts. Chancellor's deal could be an exception. Seahawks head coach Pete Carroll isn't optimistic about the strong safety's return. Chancellor's \$6.8 million 2018 base salary and \$5.2 million of his \$10 million 2019 base salary were guaranteed for injury when he signed the deal in August. The Seahawks will be on the hook for \$12 million if Chancellor can't play football anymore because of his neck injury. The standard in Chancellor's contract for the injury guarantee is being unable to pass Seattle's preseason physical examination in the sole discretion of the team doctor. The Seahawks don't have the luxury of time regarding Chancellor's recovery. The \$6.8 million becomes fully guaranteed five days after the 2018 waiver period begins. This start date is Feb. 5, which is a day after Super Bowl LII.

It's best for Chancellor financially to let Seattle cut him even if he's already privately decided to stop playing. Chancellor would be letting the Seahawks off the hook for the \$12 million by voluntarily retiring. The guarantees would void because he would be breaching his contract. Chancellor would potentially be putting the final \$6.2 million payment of his \$10 million signing bonus, which he is set to receive on April 1, in jeopardy as well. The Seahawks would be entitled to collect \$7.5 million of the \$10 million signing bonus that was allocated to the salary cap in Chancellor's 2018 through 2020 contract years. Bonus money wasn't collected from Marshawn Lynch during his one-year retirement after the 2015 season.

There are going to be significant salary-cap ramifications for the Seahawks regardless of the outcome. Chancellor is currently counting \$9,581,250 for the 2018 league year, which begins on March 14. Seattle's cap charge for Chancellor would balloon to \$19.5 million by releasing him while acknowledging that the injury will prevent his return. It would be composed of the \$7.5 million in signing bonus proration from the final three contract years and the two injury guarantees. Guarantees from future contract years accelerate into the current year when a player is released.

Making Chancellor a post-June 1 designation, which would require waiting until the 2018 league year begins and letting the \$6.8 million become fully guaranteed, would allow the Seahawks to take the cap hit over two years. Seattle's cap charge would be \$14.5 for the upcoming league year and \$5 million in 2019 because of the delay in the acceleration of the signing bonus proration from the final two contract years.

Letting Chancellor go before his 2018 base salary becomes fully guaranteed early next month while disputing that the injury is a career-ender would likely result in him filing a grievance. The cap charge would be \$12.3 million. In addition to the \$7.5 million of signing-bonus proration, 40 percent of the \$12 million in dispute, which is \$4.8 million, would count on Seattle's books until the arbitrator made a decision. Seattle would get a \$4.8 million cap credit with a favorable decision. The remaining \$7.2 million would become a cap obligation with a ruling against the Seahawks. A settlement of the grievance would operate in similar manner where a cap credit or debit would depend on the actual amount.

Carrying Chancellor in 2018 at his full cap number with him most likely starting the season on the Physically Unable to Perform list might be Seattle's best option. In the event he did make a recovery, the 2019 injury guarantee wouldn't be an issue and Seattle would have the option to release him before the \$5.2 million became fully guaranteed in February 2019. The cap hit would be \$5 million with the guarantee out of the picture and \$10.2 million if there's still an obligation for it. Either way, Seattle would be getting cap relief because Chancellor's 2019 cap number is \$13 million.

Runner Up: C.J. Fiedorowicz (TE)-Texans; T.J. McDonald (S)-Dolphins

Scoring was down this season. Will the NFL's competition committee do anything about it?

By Mark Maske
Washington Post
Jan. 12, 2018

When members of the NFL's rulemaking competition committee deliberate each offseason about the on-field state of the game, one of the statistics they scrutinize is points scored per game. Historically, a meaningful drop in scoring leaguewide can result in a tweak to the rules if committee members become convinced that offenses need such an assist to keep games as attractive as possible to fans.

That issue will confront the competition committee this coming offseason. Scoring was down during the NFL's regular season. Teams averaged 21.7 points per game, a drop of more than a point per game from the 22.8 points per game they averaged last season, according to the NFL.

Whether the competition committee will do anything about it remains to be seen, however.

One person familiar with the committee's deliberations said Tuesday it was "too early" to know. Another person with knowledge of the inner workings of the league and the committee said on the issue of whether the competition committee will act to address the drop in scoring: "I doubt it, but I really have not focused on this at all."

Perhaps the most significant example of the competition committee stepping in to aid offensive play came in 2004, when it instructed game officials to stringently enforce rules prohibiting clutching-and-grabbing tactics by defensive backs against receivers more than five yards down the field.

That immediately led to one of the most passing-friendly eras in league history. Peyton Manning, then with the Indianapolis Colts, set a single-season league record with 49 touchdown passes in that 2004 season, breaking Dan Marino's 20-year-old mark. The New England Patriots' Tom Brady broke Manning's record three years later with 50 touchdown passes in 2007. Manning, by then with Denver, broke Brady's record with 55 in 2013.

Eight of the nine 5,000-yard passing seasons in NFL history have come since 2008, five of them by the New Orleans Saints' Drew Brees (and one each by Manning, Brady and Detroit's Matthew Stafford). The lone 5,000-yard passing season before 2008 was by Marino in 1984. Teams scored 20.8 points per game in the 2003 season. Following the emphasis on illegal contact by defenders in the secondary, that increased to 21.5 points per game in 2004.

Such intervention by the competition committee is not a guaranteed remedy for NFL offenses, however. The league announced before the 2014 season that illegal contact between receivers and pass defenders would be a "major point of emphasis" for game officials. But that time, the NFL stressed that receivers as well as defenders would be closely monitored. Scoring dropped, as teams went from averaging 23.4 points per game in 2013 to 22.6 points per game in the 2014 season. The competition committee's deliberations will intensify around the time of the NFL's scouting combine in late February and early March in Indianapolis. Committee members meet with representatives of the players each year at the combine.

The competition committee continues to deliberate after that, and recommends rule changes to the owners at the annual league meeting. This year, that's scheduled for late March in Orlando. Any proposed rule change must be approved by at least 24 of the 32 teams. Points of emphasis to the officials do not require ratification by the owners.

The decline in scoring this season could be particularly troubling to the league's leaders, given that it comes at a time when the NFL is dealing with a decline in television viewership over the past two seasons. That dip in TV ratings has been attributed to a variety of factors. But the NFL's leadership and its rulemakers undoubtedly will be eager to do whatever they can to make the on-field product as appealing to viewers as possible. In the past, the league has linked such appeal to fans at least in part to scoring.

It's not clear yet what factors the members of the competition committee believe are most responsible for the decline in scoring. Early this season, there was a relatively lively public debate about whether some of the safety-related cutbacks on practice time and hitting during practices made in recent years have eroded the overall quality of play.

Some coaches and others in and around the sport have argued that players' fundamentals have suffered because they spend less time on the practice field during the offseason and are permitted to hit less in practices during training camp and the season. Those restrictions were put in place as part of the 2011 labor deal between the league and the NFL Players Association.

But as the NFL deals with the issues related to concussions suffered by players and the long-term health consequences of head injuries, any suggestion that the practice-field restrictions should be eased undoubtedly will be weighed against player-safety considerations. The NFLPA has pointed to the practice-field restrictions as one of its most significant achievements in the last set of labor negotiations. The union's executive director, DeMaurice Smith, and players also have expressed skepticism about claims the cutbacks have affected the quality of play.

"We don't negotiate with coaches," Smith said during a meeting last January with Washington Post editors and reporters. "I don't [consider that complaint] because we don't negotiate with coaches. Nobody from the league has talked to me about [it]. No owner has put a proposal on the table called 'quality of play.' . . . So if a coach or a general manager is really concerned about the quality of play, I know this guy – typically it's a guy – called an owner and they should go and complain to him."

There was a long list of issues, both on and off the field, for the NFL to endure during this turbulent season, from the courtroom tussle over Ezekiel Elliott's suspension to protests by players during the national anthem to a very public clash with President Donald Trump to injuries suffered by star players to the attempt made by Dallas Cowboys owner Jerry Jones to block Commissioner Roger Goodell's contract extension.

The sport's leaders consistently said they wanted to put fans' focus back on the games being played. But issues then arose from the games themselves and the on-field product, including the drop in scoring. Now it will be up to the competition committee to determine whether the always-delicate competitive balance between NFL offenses and defenses must be adjusted.

Broncos linebacker Brandon Marshall thinks John Elway will address QB position in free agency

By Curtis Crabtree

Pro Football Talk

Jan. 12, 2018

It wasn't all that long ago that Denver Broncos general manager John Elway made a big play in free agency to fix the team's quarterback problems by signing Peyton Manning.

Broncos linebacker Brandon Marshall thinks Elway will look to free agency again this offseason to address a position that hasn't adequately replaced Manning since his retirement following Super Bowl 50.

"In my opinion, we already drafted a quarterback, first round a couple years ago (Paxton Lynch), so we've tried that," Marshall said on the NFL Network, via Nicki Jhabvala of the Denver Post. "I think he's going to get a free agent quarterback. I think he's going to go spend some money and fix the position, because it's kind of a toss-up with these rookie quarterbacks. You never know. But the only thing about getting a free agent quarterback is some guys will have to go. I hope everybody gets to stay, but that's just the business."

Marshall even had a specific free agent quarterback in mind.

"I mean, there's a couple guys out there," Marshall said. "You know. We played against a guy in Week 16 that was pretty good. There's a couple guys out there."

That quarterback was Kirk Cousins of the Washington Redskins, who is set to be a free agent in March. Cousins passes for 299 yards and three touchdowns in that December game against the Broncos.

The trio of Lynch, Trevor Siemian and Brock Osweiler did little to stake a full-time claim to the role into the future in 2017. Siemian is having surgery on his non-throwing shoulder for a second straight offseason as well.

Hitting free agency for a quarterback worked once before for Elway. He may look to do so again.