

Is John Elway willing to beg, borrow and steal to sign Kirk Cousins as Broncos quarterback?

By Mark Kiszla
Denver Post
Feb. 1, 2018

The Broncos need quarterback Kirk Cousins more than he needs them. Is John Elway too proud to beg?

While nobody mistakes Cousins for a truly elite NFL player, he represents the most certain path back to the Super Bowl for a quarterback-needy team, and now that it's obvious Cousins is done working in Washington, all of Broncos Country is twitter-pated about his impending free agency. Cousins brings a swagger to the huddle that's easy to like. But does anybody really love the idea of giving \$100 million guaranteed to a 29-year-old quarterback who has never won a playoff game?

Here's the rub: If Elway doesn't pay a king's ransom to land Cousins, do the Broncos really have a viable Plan B? The other potential veteran options, whether we're talking Case Keenum or Tyrod Taylor, would be regarded as little more than a stop-gap solution and probably not allow Denver to use its fifth overall pick in the NFL draft on a position other than quarterback.

Elway is Mr. Colorado. He is used to giving the orders around here. But the pressure is on old No. 7 like few other times since he walked into Denver 35 years ago. Why? A generation of Broncomaniacs has never experienced the pain of back-to-back losing seasons during the Elway era.

Elway is facing pressure not only from the team's fan base but also has heard not-so-subtle suggestions from players in his employ to go get Cousins. Within hours after word leaked Kansas City was trading quarterback Alex Smith to Washington, Broncos making the rounds Wednesday at the Super Bowl began campaigning to make Cousins the richest player in pro football.

"We need Kirk. I would like to have Kirk. We have great quarterbacks now. Kirk could take us over the edge," Broncos linebacker Von Miller told "The Dan Patrick Show," amplifying a sentiment he had expressed in December, when Cousins threw for 299 yards and three touchdowns during Washington's 27-11 victory against Denver.

After an appearance on the NFL Network, Broncos running back C.J. Anderson joked on social media that Elway needed to use some of the fortune accumulated from his ownership of car dealerships to raise the ante for Cousins.

Dial back the natural adrenaline rush caused by the juicy prospect of a quarterback chase and there are sobering realities staring Elway in the face. The Broncos will have to pay a steep price if they intend to win the bidding for Cousins. He certainly won't be short of suitors. Teams such as Cleveland and the New York Jets are flush with cash to offer Cousins, while he might view Jacksonville or the Minnesota, where Cousins could replace Keenum, as more ready-made for a championship run than Denver. What's a reasonable guesstimate for his annual salary? Let's start at \$28 million.

With the salary cap projected to be in excess of \$175 million in 2018, the Broncos can probably beg, borrow and steal to find at least \$50 million to spend, which is enough to sign Cousins and sprinkle fresh

talent around him. But it figures to come at a human cost. As much as Elway might be averse to removing talent from the defensive side of the football, the acquisition of Cousins could well compel the Broncos to part ways with Pro Bowl cornerback Aqib Talib, whose ball-hawking skills and \$11 million salary might be a better fit for our old friend John Lynch as he builds his roster in San Francisco.

Do whatever it takes to win the Cousins sweepstakes, and instead of being forced to gamble on the potential of Oklahoma's Baker Mayfield or Wyoming's Josh Allen at quarterback, Elway can go about the business of rebuilding his offense by using his valuable first-round draft choice on somebody like Notre Dame guard Quenton Nelson or perhaps Penn State running back Saquon Barkley.

Hey, I get why Broncos Country is giddy. Cousins could look good wearing orange and blue.

But make no mistake. This is a crapshoot for Elway. When he gambled on the health of Peyton Manning in 2012, it was with a \$96 million, team-friendly contract that protected the Broncos if Manning was physically unable to play like a Hall of Fame quarterback.

It would probably cost Elway much more, including \$100 million in guaranteed money, to find out how good Denver can be with Cousins at quarterback. And want to know the only safe bet? Cousins won't ever join Manning in Canton, Ohio.

Roger Goodell weighs in on Broncos' ownership, succession plan

By Nicki Jhabvala

Denver Post

Feb. 1, 2018

The Broncos are set up well. No concerns.

That was the message from NFL commissioner Roger Goodell on Wednesday during his annual news conference ahead of the Super Bowl. Goodell, in a question-and-answer session with media, was asked specifically about the Broncos and their eventual selection of a next owner.

"Those decisions ... are all questions that the trustees have to decide," Goodell said. "They are in compliance with our rules. They have been very thoughtful."

Pat Bowlen, the Broncos' owner of 34 years, stepped down from his day-to-day duties in the fall of 2013 because of the progression of Alzheimer's disease. President and CEO Joe Ellis was appointed Controlling Owner Delegee and has served as the voice of the team at league-wide functions and its top decision-maker.

"They have done a terrific job of leading that franchise over the last several years as Pat's focused on his health issues," Goodell said. "I think Pat put that in place because of the care and focus and the importance of the Broncos to him and making sure that it continued to be in the right hands and with the right kind of leadership."

Ellis is also one of three trustees, along with team counsel Rich Slivka and Denver attorney Mary Kelly, who are tasked with appointing the Broncos' next controlling owner.

Bowlen's wish — and the primary reason for establishing the trust — is to transfer ownership to his seven children, with one being named controlling owner. It's up to the trustees to select which child if any — the trustees have the authority to sell the team, too — will land that role.

"The focus is what Pat Bowlen wanted and how he set this up," Goodell said. "Having been very close to Pat I care very much about him, his family, his health. He was an extraordinarily important person to the NFL when he was active in the league, and he continues to be somebody that we all admire and care for his health.

"Second, he was very active in making sure that he did exactly that, which is, 'How do I make sure that the Broncos franchise continues to be successful? I want it to be a point of pride for the people in the Denver community and Colorado. I want it to be something that the NFL is proud of, my partners are proud of,' meaning the other 31 clubs. He's done an extraordinary job of setting that up."

In February 2015, the trust informed Bowlen's adult children and wife Annabel of a loose criteria for their selection, which include at least five years of "senior management" experience with the team, league or Stadium Management Company, plus a bachelor's degree paired with an MBA, J.D. or other advanced business-related degree.

The criteria leave two of the children — Beth Wallace, 47, a daughter with first wife Sally Parker, and Brittany Bowlen, 28, a daughter with Annabel — as two on track to be qualified. Wallace received her law degree from the University of Denver in 2016 and worked for the Broncos as their director of special projects for more than three years. Brittany Bowlen was a part of the NFL's junior rotational program, spent a season as an analyst in the Broncos' business department and is expected to accept a position with McKinsey & Company Consulting upon completing her MBA at Duke University.

Kirk Cousins is surely a target for the Broncos now. But he's not the only one.

By Nicki Jhabvala

Denver Post

Feb. 1, 2018

News of the deal was barely 12 hours old when Broncos players chimed in.

It was reported Tuesday night that the Kansas City Chiefs agreed in principle to trade starting quarterback Alex Smith to the Washington Redskins in exchange for a 2018 draft pick and cornerback Kendall Fuller. The surprising move ended one era for the Broncos' divisional rival and began in earnest Denver's ride to the future.

Smith's new home, which can't be made final until the league year begins March 14, ensures quarterback Kirk Cousins finds a new home, too.

And Denver is surely on the shortlist.

The Broncos need a quarterback. They've needed one since Peyton Manning retired two years ago, and with a No. 5 draft pick, nearly \$30 million in projected salary cap space and a Hall of Fame quarterback running football operations, a move west would seem to be a good fit for Cousins.

Broncos players think so, anyway.

"We need Kirk. I would like to have Kirk," linebacker Von Miller said on "The Dan Patrick Show" on Wednesday. "We have great quarterbacks now. Kirk could take us over the edge. But that's the National Football League. There are a lot of teams that need Kirk. There are a lot of teams that need a great quarterback. Whatever team he ends up on would be a different team."

Added running back C.J. Anderson, on NFL Network: "If (John) Elway can make it happen, which he can find a way — I mean, he is Mr. Colorado. He doesn't need the NFL cap. He can jump into that car money, too, to make it happen. We need to find a way to make that happen."

Make no mistake, the Broncos expect change, and since their 5-11 season came to an end, many players believe Elway will open the checkbook and acquire a veteran. But after the Chiefs' deal, the price for Cousins will be steep.

As the rare, 29-year-old elite quarterback to hit the open market, Cousins' next contract will probably reset the quarterback market and surpass the five-year, \$135 million contract that Matthew Stafford signed last August. The expectation: more than \$30 million a year.

His appeal is obvious, and includes the backing of Mike Shanahan, the former Broncos coach who drafted Cousins in Washington.

"A lot of people say they want to get to the next level, but they don't have the work ethic or they don't have the ability to process things," Shanahan told The Denver Post last month. He added: "But other

guys, you can see they get it pretty quick and usually the ones that really get it have an unbelievable work ethic, feel for the pocket, feel for the game and they're studying constantly and their preparation for a game, as well as the offseason, trying to pick up the little things that will separate you from the next guy. And you could see that with (Cousins) very quickly — that he did have that."

But the money is a significant obstacle. The Broncos already have the largest non-quarterback contract on their books with Miller's six-year, \$114.5 million deal. Tying the bulk of their cap space to two players would hinder their ability to upgrade the roster at areas they've needed to for years, namely the offensive line.

Elway has a history of keeping a hard line in negotiations and has typically been unwilling to overpay to acquire or retain talent.

That is why he could look instead to the next tier of quarterbacks who might hit the open market. Case Keenum, who was drafted by the Houston Texans when Gary Kubiak was head coach, increased his value with his play for the Minnesota Vikings this season and is projected to receive a deal that averages close to \$20 million a year. (Mike Glennon was given \$15 million a year from the Chicago Bears last March and Brock Osweiler was given \$18 million a year by the Texans after starting only seven games. Keenum has enjoyed more success than both.)

Tyrod Taylor's time in Buffalo has seemingly ended, and the Broncos wanted him once before. His year of working with Kubiak in Baltimore in 2014 could help to lure him to Denver — and for a more reasonable price.

Nick Foles, the Eagles' Super Bowl starter who nearly retired two years ago, has one year remaining on the two-year contract he signed with Philadelphia. With Carson Wentz waiting to reassume his starting role, Foles' second stint with the Eagles could come to an abrupt end via trade. The Broncos, following the lead of the Chiefs, could be in play if the option is presented.

"It might sound crazy, but I'm really grateful to be in the moment," Foles said. "To have one more game and have it be a Super Bowl, that's all I care about. My career, we'll see what happens after this."

But the Broncos, fresh off their week of coaching in the Senior Bowl, could avoid strapping themselves to a hefty contract and accept a roster rebuild by drafting their starting quarterback in the first round. They left Alabama and the Senior Bowl last week impressed by Josh Allen, the Wyoming standout Elway watched from the sideline in the Potato Bowl. And they also got a good look at Baker Mayfield, the Heisman Trophy winner from Oklahoma.

As Mr. Smith goes to Washington, Denver's options are coming into focus, and though Broncos players have placed their votes, Elway and his checkbook will determine the result.

John Elway dons Von Miller jersey on No. 16 at Phoenix Open, talks Alex Smith trade

By Nicki Jhabvala

Denver Post

Feb. 1, 2018

As the Super Bowl LII festivities continue in Minneapolis and much of the league grapples with the news of Alex Smith heading to Washington, Broncos general manager John Elway headed for the green in Arizona.

But as one of the headliners at the Annexus Pro-Am at the 2018 Waste Management Phoenix Open at TPC Scottsdale on Wednesday, Elway couldn't fully escape the NFL.

As he approached No. 16, Elway donned Von Miller's No. 58 Broncos jersey, and later weighed in on the Smith news.

"Well, I'm happy for Alex," Elway said. "Obviously we played against him. Him being in Kansas City, he's been in our division for a long time, so we're glad he's leaving the division and obviously that opens up some other opportunities for different people. So we'll see what happens."

The Smith trade, which won't be official until March 14, all but ensures Kirk Cousins' exit from Washington as a free agent. Though Cousins is expected to land a record contract, the Broncos will be among the handful of quarterback-needy teams in the hunt for his services.

Safeties John Lynch, Brian Dawkins hope to continue Broncos Hall of Fame run

By Mike Klis

9NEWS

Feb. 1, 2018

If Brian Dawkins didn't share the final Pro Football Hall of Fame ballot, there would be little doubt John Lynch would be elected into the class of 2018.

Had Lynch already been inducted in any of the four previous years he was among the 15 modern-era finalists, it may well be Dawkins' turn when the 48-person Hall of Fame voting committee elects its new class on Saturday in the Twin Cities area.

Lynch and Dawkins are both safeties who finished their careers with the Denver Broncos. The question is, will they split the safety vote as was likely the case in 2017?

"By all accounts, a lot of people said Dawkins and I canceled each other out last year," Lynch said in a phone interview with 9NEWS this week. "I feel good about it this year. Actually, I never know how to feel but it seems like it's going in the right direction and hopefully this is the year."

Dawkins should have been more encouraged than disappointed with the results last year. He was eligible for the first time and yet he not only made to the top 15 finalist group, he made it inside the top 10. That's remarkably strong support for a first-year candidate.

In fact, four of the five players who finished 6 through 10 in HOF voting last year – Lynch, Dawkins, Ty Law and Tony Boselli – had Broncos or Colorado ties.

Lynch played four seasons in Denver after 11 with the Tampa Bay Bucs. Dawkins played his final three seasons in Denver after 13 with the Philadelphia Eagles. Law played his final seven games, and recorded his 53rd and final interception with the Broncos in 2009.

Boselli grew up in Boulder and was a starting left tackle for Sam Pagano's state championship team at Fairview High School in 1987.

Only Kevin Mawae, a 16-year NFL center and two-term players' union president, was among the second five who didn't once call the Denver-area home.

Dawkins made two Pro Bowls while playing box safety for the Broncos, but it was his first 13 seasons with the Eagles-- a period that included four, first-team All Pro selections -- where he made his mark as one of the NFL's best safeties of a generation.

"I was not going to pay attention to it last year," Dawkins said of the Hall of Fame voting process Sunday after arriving in the Twin Cities with the NFC-champion Eagles, whom he serves as a football operations executive. "I got a little bit more involved than I wanted to. That turned out to be something I really didn't like.

“So, this year, I’m not really going to talk much about it. All the details about my time with the Broncos, I’ll have those conversations after this weekend. It’s about these guys and the Super Bowl. The reason I’m here is because the Eagles are here. It’s about these guys and our Super Bowl run. If something happens, we’ll talk about it after it’s done.”

Hall of Fame voters can elect no more than five modern-era candidates each year. Because there are 22 positions on a football field, the committee rarely chooses two at one position.

There are exceptions, the most recent occurring last year when two running backs, Terrell Davis and LaDainian Tomlinson, were selected.

Davis or kicker Morten Andersen may have made it because Lynch and Dawkins cancelled out the safety vote.

If Dawkins is permitted through Canton’s hallowed halls, he will walk primarily as an Eagle. He had a terrific first season with the Broncos in 2009, helping Josh McDaniels to a 6-0 start and finishing with 116 tackles, 11 pass deflections, two interceptions, and three fumble recoveries.

His leadership was invaluable during his final season of 2011, organizing workouts with local sports performance coach Loren Landow during the lockout and registering 3.0 sacks off the blitz in an injury plagued season.

He still lives in the Denver area with his wife and two young children, while two other kids are in college.

“Absolutely, love it in Denver,” he said.

Lynch also is primarily a Buc although his career has a deeper shade of orange of blue. He didn’t just play four years in Denver, he made four Pro Bowls, a feat that earned him a place into the Broncos’ Ring of Fame.

His John Lynch Foundation has awarded \$1.1 million in college scholarships, including \$118,000 worth of awards in the Denver-area last year even though he had already been hired as general manager of the San Francisco 49ers.

“That time with the Bucs was tremendous,” Lynch said. “It was 11 years and it was formative years but I would say I went through a rough year with my neck. But became confident that No.1, I was going to be OK. The motivation was there, and Mike (Shanahan) really sold me more than anything because he believed in me. He believed I still had something left, and I felt the same way. Unfortunately, we couldn’t get quite over the hump but we came close.

“The football was great and the one thing I’ve always said about the Broncos as an organization is they give you an opportunity every year to win. A lot of teams pay lip service to it but I think that’s what Pat Bowlen stands for more than anything is he’s going to give you an opportunity and chance to win each year. That’s why I went there. We fell short but you know, we made a run.

“But for me it became more than football. I became part of the community. Our kids were raised there and we spent 11 years as a family there. Our foundation there was supported more than I ever thought

it would be. In Tampa the folks supported it so well and we surpassed what we did there in terms of the amount of money we raised. It's a very special place in the Lynch household and in my heart."

With the Broncos, Lynch became much more active as an in-the-box safety, to the point he almost became a pass-rushing outside linebacker.

During the 2005 season in which the Broncos went 13-3 during the regular season and beat the two-time defending champion New England Patriots in a second-round playoff game before losing at home in the AFC Championship Game to Pittsburgh, Lynch had 4.0 sacks, 4 forced fumbles and two interceptions in what was the best overall season of his career.

Lynch might have been a half-step slower during his time with the Broncos but he also may have been a half-second quicker to the ball because of the anticipation that comes with experience.

"I think that's fair," Lynch said. "Those were years 12 through 15 -- that's fair. I didn't believe that at the time but in retrospect, yes.

"What was fun for me we tried to copy what we were doing in Tampa. That's what was part of the allure, (defensive coordinator) Larry Coyer and Mike sold me on the fact, hey we watched you guys in Tampa and you're what we're trying to emulate. But we kind of scrapped that. Instead we got real creative and we started blitzing the heck out of people. That one year I thought I was a D-lineman. For the first time in my career I was asked to rush the passer. That was fun for me."

With Ed Reed appearing on the Hall of Fame ballot next year, and Troy Polamalu in 2020, the hope is the voting committee clears some safety room this year by electing Lynch, who has been waiting the longest, or Dawkins, who is extremely popular among the big-market NFC East cities, or both.

With the Eagles, Dawkins says he does a little bit of everything with emphasis on consulting. With the 49ers, Lynch's ultimate task as general manager is to evaluate talent. It's a skill he developed as a player.

"I think one of the great pleasures of playing in Denver was playing next to one of the greatest players I ever played with in Champ Bailey," Lynch said. "I put him at the top of the list with the Warren Sapps and Derrick Brooks in terms of rare talents and players who were arguably the best that ever did it at their position."

Bailey is eligible for election next year, where he will have a good chance of becoming a first-ballot Hall of Famer.

"If he's not, there's something wrong," Lynch said.

After a long spell of Hall of Fame snubs, the Broncos could get on an impressive streak: Terrell Davis in 2017, Lynch or Dawkins in 2018, Bowlen as a leading contributor candidate and Bailey in 2019.

Winners, losers and fallout from Washington's trade for Alex Smith

By Bill Barnwell

ESPN.com

Feb. 1, 2018

Plenty of people figured that the Chiefs were going to trade Alex Smith this offseason to free up their starting job for 2017 first-round pick Patrick Mahomes. They were half-right. The Chiefs didn't wait for the offseason to make their move, agreeing to a deal Tuesday night to deal Smith to Washington for a third-round pick and cornerback Kendall Fuller.

Washington's stunning trade for a new quarterback should reverberate around the league; a half-dozen teams that weren't involved with the deal suddenly saw their offseason plans change or come into focus. The deal (and Smith's subsequent extension) obviously suggest that Washington will be moving on from incumbent quarterback Kirk Cousins, who will hit unrestricted free agency.

Let's break down the winners and losers from this swap, both now and in the offseason to come:

Winner: Alex Smith

There's a huge difference between being a veteran quarterback in free agency and a veteran quarterback on the trade market. As a free agent, Smith would have had plenty of options and could have made a move in the division to the Broncos, who likely would have been the best landing spot for a veteran quarterback given their defense.

Coach Andy Reid wasn't afraid to trade a quarterback inside his own division in the past when he dealt Donovan McNabb to Washington when he was with Philadelphia, but Smith is a much better player at this point of his career than McNabb was back in 2010. The year remaining on his contract left Smith with no leverage in these trade talks, which totally changes the way we have to view his options. It wouldn't have been crazy for the Chiefs to ship Smith to the Browns, where he would have been joining a terrible team and likely serving as a bridge to whomever Cleveland takes with the first overall pick in the 2018 draft.

Through that prism, Washington is a solid landing spot for Smith. He'll be behind an above-average offensive line with a bevy of useful options at receiver. You can already picture Smith falling in love with Jamison Crowder, Jordan Reed and Chris Thompson when they're back on the field in 2018. Jay Gruden works out of a West Coast scheme that shares plenty of underlying principles with what Reid uses in his passing game; the common link between the two, of course, is Jon Gruden.

Instead of serving as a one-year rental before hitting free agency, Smith also gets a four-year extension to stick around in Washington. We don't have specifics on the deal yet, but the former first overall pick is in line to reportedly take home \$94 million, with \$71 million in guarantees, though the deal can't become official until after the new league year begins on March 14. The word "guarantees" doesn't mean anything unless it's prefaced by "fully" or followed by "at signing," so take that number with a grain of salt. Unless the entire extension is triggered by an option after the 2018 season, Smith is going

to be priced in as Washington's starting quarterback through the end of the 2019 season and possibly into 2020. This trade ensures his professional future on a competitive team.

Loser: Washington

This isn't for acquiring Smith, who was actually better than Cousins this season and was the second-best quarterback after Cousins who was going to come available this offseason. Washington couldn't have expected one of the better quarterback prospects in this year's draft to fall to it at No. 13, and it would be self-destructive to make another trade up to the top of the first round after failing with the Robert Griffin III trade in 2012. Given the mess the team made, Smith was a nifty acquisition.

You shouldn't congratulate a company for doing a great job of cleaning up its own toxic waste spill, though, and I can't sit here and pat Daniel Snyder and Bruce Allen on the back. As someone who doubted Cousins for several years, I can't fault Washington for being skeptical of Cousins after his breakout 2015 season and slapping him with the franchise tag heading into 2016.

Everything afterward, though? Yeah, that's on Washington. The public missteps the organization made during 2016 were one thing, but the dismal offer the franchise made to Cousins last summer -- which was followed by publicly throwing Cousins under the bus with distorted statistics surrounding the proposal -- was scarcely believable. Can you imagine any other team's executives calling their star quarterback by the wrong name?

Smith is four years older than Cousins and has two playoff wins in seven appearances. From this moment forward, he's also going to (unfairly) be the scapegoat for what Washington did wrong with an understandably furious fan base. Smith is the just-as-good replacement you buy when your child loses his/her favorite toy. The sentimental attachment probably means more than the actual toy itself.

Trading for Smith and extending him eliminates the possibility of getting a serious return for Cousins. Washington would have been playing a dangerous game by franchising Cousins for a third season at \$34.5 million, but it would have allowed Washington to field trade offers from teams that would have acquired Cousins and immediately offered him an extension to reduce his cap hold.

Instead, with Smith likely occupying \$20 million in cap room, Washington will let Cousins hit unrestricted free agency this March. They would be in line to receive a third-round compensatory pick in the 2019 draft, but that will happen only if Snyder sits out free agency and doesn't sign any players who will cancel out the Cousins comp pick. Doing that would require levels of patience and forward thinking this organization simply hasn't shown.

Incomplete: The Chiefs

It's too early to judge this trade for the Chiefs, given that it really serves as part of the broader decision to trade up in last year's draft and acquire Mahomes with the 10th overall pick. Mahomes started for the Chiefs in Week 17 and looked alternately impressive and overmatched in a win over the Broncos. There were plays in which he looked like Aaron Rodgers and plays in which Mahomes resembled Blake Bortles, and it would be foolish to say it told us a ton about where Mahomes is likely to fall on the quarterback spectrum in 2018.

The Chiefs understandably have high hopes for Mahomes, who was reportedly the No. 1 player on their draft board. They also have a coach in Reid who has done an excellent job of developing quarterbacks and building schemes around their strengths. It's reasonable to believe Mahomes will be a fine option at quarterback, but this is swapping a low-ceiling/high-floor quarterback for a high-ceiling/low-floor option. There will likely be short-term growing pains even if Mahomes does grow into his role in time.

Fuller could figure as a bigger part of the trade than the third-round pick, which will be the 78th selection in this year's draft. The Virginia Tech product struggled as a rookie but emerged as an excellent slot cornerback in 2017 and still has two years left on his rookie deal at a combined cost of under \$1.4 million. The Chiefs could very well try to push Fuller outside and see if he is able to lock down the wildly problematic cornerback spot across from Marcus Peters. The Chiefs will be delighted if Fuller can pull that off. If he just settles as a slot cornerback, though, defensive coordinator Bob Sutton will be happy to have Fuller onboard.

Winner: Kirk Cousins

Once Washington failed to make Cousins a serious offer this past summer, it was clear that the franchise wasn't ever going to pay him anything resembling Cousins' market value. It was time for the 29-year-old to move on, which would have been far tougher if Washington had slapped Cousins with either the transition or franchise tag. Any team looking to acquire Cousins now won't have to pony up a ton of cap space in Year 1, which would have been needed to scare Washington out of matching in the case of a transition tag. The freedom to make an offer with a huge signing bonus spread over several years opens opportunities for teams like the Dolphins to get involved with the bidding.

Cousins is about to become the highest-paid player in the history of the NFL, and the numbers are going to be staggering. This kind of opportunity -- the ability to acquire a franchise quarterback in his prime without having to give up a draft pick -- comes around once in a generation. The last guy who really came close was Drew Brees in 2006, and even then he was coming off of a torn labrum in his throwing shoulder (which famously led the Dolphins to pass on Brees, pushing him to the Saints). Peyton Manning was 36 and coming off of multiple neck surgeries in 2012. Cousins isn't a Hall of Famer, but he's healthier than both those guys were. This simply does not happen.

Matthew Stafford reset the quarterback market this summer when he signed a five-year, \$135 million extension that guaranteed him \$60.5 million at signing and paid out \$87 million over his first three years. The Lions also had Stafford under contract for another year and the ability to franchise him. Cousins has 100 percent of the leverage as a free agent. He'll be able to ask for anything he wants.

It wouldn't be shocking at all to see Cousins top \$90 million over the first three years of his new deal, and he could take home \$100 million in meaningful guarantees at signing. A \$40 million signing bonus and guaranteed base salaries of \$18 million in 2018, \$20 million in 2019, and \$22 million in 2020 gets Cousins to \$100 million in three years. Cousins could sign a five-year, \$150 million deal and still have another shot at a lucrative extension or free agency before turning 35.

Nobody is arguing that Cousins is a perfect quarterback, but teams without passers are going to take a risk over the next couple of seasons. Is any passer who is likely to come available a better risk than the guy who is sixth in passer rating and seventh in Total QBR over the past three years? Cousins is about to be the subject of one of the most heated bidding wars in league history.

Losers: The Falcons and Packers

The next two veteran quarterbacks in line for lucrative extensions are Aaron Rodgers and Matt Ryan. Rodgers has two years left on his deal, while Ryan is entering the final season of his contract. Both former MVPs are overdue to receive deals that reset their compensation with the guys at the top of the financial charts, a group that currently includes Stafford, Derek Carr and Andrew Luck.

Unfortunately for Atlanta and Green Bay, the negotiating parameters are about to change. Before, they were operating within a paradigm in which the highest-paid quarterback was Stafford. Now, it's going to be Cousins, and his deal is going to be a degree of magnitude larger than that of Stafford. Instead of negotiating from a position where the peak three-year value for a quarterback deal is \$87 million, Ryan and Rodgers (and their agents) will be looking at something closer to \$100 million over that same time frame. That's going to be extra money in their pockets. Don't be surprised to see the Falcons and Packers make renewed pushes to sign their quarterbacks before the Cousins deal lands.

Winners: The Bills, Broncos, Browns, Cardinals, Dolphins, Jets and Vikings

If you're a team with either a hole or a problematic veteran at quarterback now and no real path toward a new starter, congrats! One of you is almost assuredly going to end up pocketing a bona fide, above-average NFL quarterback for nothing more than money. That's a dream scenario, and every one of these teams woke up Wednesday morning imagining what their pitch to Cousins will be like over the next couple of months.

There's no perfect fit on this list. The Vikings are the furthest along on a football level and have plenty of cap space, but they have tons of talent to re-sign with players such as Anthony Barr, Stefon Diggs and Danielle Hunter approaching free agency next offseason. They would be making a tough choice to devote significant cap room toward a quarterback at the expense of several other positions on their roster over the years to come. It wouldn't necessarily be a wrong move, of course, but Minnesota just came within one game of the Super Bowl with a third-string quarterback no team wanted before the season. It might think about running this back with Keenum or Teddy Bridgewater at low-end starter money over the next couple of years.

Everyone has flaws. The Bills just ran Tyrod Taylor out of town and have middling weapons in a division with Tom Brady. Denver's defense is beginning to fall apart and its offensive line is a perennial disaster. The Browns, well, you know. The Cardinals are squeezed by the cap and in the middle of overhauling their offensive line. The Dolphins are Washington South in terms of franchise dysfunction. The Jets' best weapon (Robby Anderson) has had legal issues, and they just fired an offensive coordinator who made hay with a bunch of castoffs and Josh McCown at quarterback.

Barring some sort of wildly unexpected decision -- Brees, Eli Manning or Ben Roethlisberger leaving their respective teams this offseason -- Cousins will almost definitely be on one of these rosters come 2018. My first guess would be the Vikings, who might be the favorites to come out of the NFC next season by adding the former Michigan State star. With options and leverage, Cousins will be the one to decide whether he wants to optimize for the best shot of winning or the most money.

Loser: The Jaguars

Jacksonville would be among the favorites to sign Cousins, but the fifth-year option it handed out to Blake Bortles is creating more problems. Bortles underwent wrist surgery last week on an injury that has apparently been bothering him since December 2016, several months before the Jags locked up Bortles' fifth-year option for 2018.

It was a questionable decision at the time and is significantly more curious when you consider that the Jags knew Bortles' wrist was eventually going to require surgery. The former third overall pick's option was guaranteed only for injury, meaning that the Jaguars could get out of the contract unless Bortles suffered an injury that prevented him from passing a physical. A pre-existing condition like a wrist injury requiring surgery is exactly the sort of concern teams might have in offering a player his fifth-year option.

The Jaguars responded to the news by basically suggesting that they knew Bortles was going to be their starting quarterback in 2018, which would have been a foolish call at the time they made the decision and doesn't look all that much better now. Bortles improved on a dismal 2016 season, looked impressive late in the season, and then delivered a pair of useful postseason games against the Steelers and Patriots, but there also were stretches in which he looked like a totally useless appendage to the best defense in football.

The Jaguars might be in the Super Bowl right now if they had been starting Smith, who would have been a dream trade candidate for them. They would be the second-favorites in the AFC behind the Patriots if they were able to sign Cousins, who would have been a major upgrade on Bortles. Instead, the Jaguars seem committed to keeping Bortles and paying him \$19.1 million in 2018. The organization has developed tunnel vision around its starter, and it might cap its peak while that dominant defense is still getting elite production from players such as Calais Campbell.

Loser: Case Keenum

Keenum was set to be the best veteran quarterback on the free-agent market and at least in line to take a franchise tag from the Vikings, which would have put \$23.6 million on the table for a guy who had previously made about \$7 million in his six-year career.

Now, the Vikings find themselves with a possible lead on Cousins, which would keep them from offering Keenum the franchise tag. Keenum will have to play second fiddle to Cousins in free agency and likely wait for the former Washington quarterback to make his decision before the losing teams in the Cousins sweepstakes swoop in for Keenum as a fallback plan. His calling card was going to be as the veteran quarterback who could hold his own now, and Cousins represents that and more. The coming rise in upper-echelon quarterback money from a Cousins contract isn't likely to trickle down to Keenum, either. The former Houston star could get squeezed after a big year that seemed to justify meaningful long-term money.

Winners: The Colts and Giants

There's a chance that the Browns, who had previously been expected to draft a quarterback with the first overall pick, could instead pivot and use some of their \$111.6 million in cap space to outbid everyone for Cousins. Cleveland has what should be an above-average offensive line, a pair of useful young receivers in Corey Coleman and Josh Gordon, and a coach who was once a quarterback developer in Hue Jackson, although every one of those statements is subject to multiple "Well, butts." If the Browns

sign Cousins and can use the first overall pick to draft Saquon Barkley, though? Suddenly, Cleveland's offense looks scary.

If the Browns sign Cousins and hold onto the first overall pick -- and they're probably done trading down for extra picks in the short term, if out of spite alone -- the Giants are suddenly in great shape with the second overall pick. They'll have their pick of the quarterbacks in the draft to develop behind Manning. Likewise, the Colts might be in better shape with the third overall pick, given that they likely won't be drafting a quarterback. They wouldn't be able to take Barkley and wouldn't be able to trade their pick to a team who falls in love with the guy the Giants select, but they would be in much better shape to ship this selection for multiple first-rounders if the draft doesn't start with quarterbacks at Nos. 1 and 2.

Von Miller might be Broncos' biggest Kirk Cousins booster

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN.com

Feb. 1, 2018

It's clear that Denver Broncos linebacker Von Miller likes the idea of QB Kirk Cousins as a potential teammate. He's been stumping for Cousins for weeks.

With the Washington Redskins having acquired quarterback Alex Smith in a trade with the Kansas City Chiefs on Tuesday, Cousins is now poised for a free-agency windfall as a proven passer in a quarterback-starved league.

So count Miller, a six-time Pro Bowl selection for the Broncos and the Super Bowl 50 MVP, as a very assertive "yes" vote on whether the team should dive into the sweepstakes for the 29-year-old Cousins. In an appearance Wednesday on "The Dan Patrick Show," Miller said he remains solidly in Cousins' court.

"I've talked to him before. He knows exactly how I feel ... and what he would mean to our team, and what he would mean to a lot of teams."

Miller added: "We need Kirk. I would like to have Kirk. We have great quarterbacks now. Kirk could take us over the edge."

It is exactly in line with what Miller said about Cousins both before and after Cousins threw for 299 yards and three touchdowns Dec. 24 in the Redskins' 27-11 win over the Broncos in FedEx Stadium. Cousins threw for 202 yards and two touchdowns in the second half of that game.

The Broncos did not sack Cousins that day.

After that game, Miller said: "Kirk's a great quarterback; I'll say that every day of the week. A lot of teams would kill to have a quarterback like that. He just came out and he was playing great ... I'm with everybody else. Like I said before, a lot of teams would literally kill to have a quarterback like that. The list is long, but we'll cross that bridge if we ever get to it."

Just four days before that game, Miller had said: "Whenever it comes to elite guys, that's just who they are. It's just Kirk. It's just Kirk Cousins, he's good at everything. With his contract and all that stuff, he's still been able to block that stuff out and go out there and perform at a high level. If you're looking at quarterbacks doing that -- it's easier if you're a receiver, linebacker or anything like that. But if you're a franchise quarterback, you have all of that uncertainty about your contract, that could really (mess) with you. For him to go out there and have the type of success that he's had over these last couple of seasons has been amazing. He's a true warrior."

The Broncos' top football decision-maker, John Elway, is already on record multiple times this offseason as saying the Broncos won't improve from their 5-11 finish until the team gets better at quarterback. Elway also said at the Senior Bowl last week that the Broncos would assess the players they believed

would be available in free agency immediately following Sunday's Super Bowl, and Cousins is now certainly on that list.

"After the Super Bowl is over, we'll dig into the free-agency side of it," Elway said in Mobile, Alabama. "That will be the focus until we get to the (scouting) combine."

Cousins will turn 30 in August and has had three consecutive 4,000-yard passing seasons with at least 25 touchdown passes in each of those seasons. The Redskins were 24-23-1 in those three years. Peyton Manning is the only quarterback in Broncos franchise history to have back-to-back 4,000-yard passing seasons (he had three in a row).

The Broncos do have a limited history with Cousins, given he was one of the players the team brought in for a pre-draft interview in the weeks leading up to the 2012 draft. The Broncos had interest in Cousins, but had signed Manning in free agency that year and elected to use a second-round pick on Brock Osweiler in that draft.

Von Miller: Kirk Cousins could take Broncos 'over the edge'

By Staff

ESPN.com

Feb. 1, 2018

The Denver Broncos may have gotten a close look at some of quarterbacks available in the NFL draft, but linebacker Von Miller wants the team to pony up for veteran Kirk Cousins.

"I've talked to him before. He knows exactly how I feel ... and what he would mean to our team, and what he would mean to a lot of teams," Miller told "The Dan Patrick Show" on Wednesday.

"We need Kirk. I would like to have Kirk. We have great quarterbacks now. Kirk could take us over the edge."

Cousins threw for 4,093 yards and 27 touchdowns this season for the Washington Redskins, who acquired Alex Smith in a trade with the Kansas City Chiefs on Tuesday.

Denver currently has quarterbacks Paxton Lynch, Trevor Siemian and Chad Kelly on the roster.

The Broncos' staff coached the North team at the Senior Bowl, allowing them to work with Heisman Trophy winner Baker Mayfield of Oklahoma and Wyoming's Josh Allen. Team president and general manager John Elway said Denver would "dig into the free agency side of it" after the Super Bowl.

The Broncos have the No. 5 overall pick in the draft.

"That's the National Football League; there's a lot of teams that need Kirk," Miller told "The Dan Patrick Show."

"There's a lot of teams that need a great quarterback. Whatever team he ends up on, would be a different team."

Whether younger (Baker Mayfield) or older (Kirk Cousins), Broncos want leader at QB

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN.com

Feb. 1, 2018

To many, it was the video clip that summed up the Denver Broncos' season.

The one with quarterback Brock Osweiler, seemingly trying to ignite the Broncos, screaming to largely unresponsive teammates on the sideline during Denver's Christmas Eve loss to the Washington Redskins. But the aftermath offered a glimpse of the kind of quarterback the Broncos want and what they want that quarterback to do.

Two days after Osweiler's rage against what appeared to be apathy, Broncos coach Vance Joseph said: "That's Brock, and one thing about Brock, he provides a leadership quality that we haven't had on offense from that position, in my opinion. ... We need more of that. We need more players pushing players."

And there it is: the one criticism, veiled or not, that was often levied against the even-keeled Trevor Siemian; the thing the Broncos wanted to see more of, even as he won training-camp battles in back-to-back seasons to be the team's starter. But last season, all three of the quarterbacks who started games for the Broncos -- Siemian, Osweiler and Paxton Lynch -- often looked to be struggling to lead the locker room when they didn't know their own status week to week.

In an odd sort of football chicken-and-egg riddle, the Broncos wanted more leadership from the quarterback, and the quarterbacks seemed to be waiting for a vote of confidence that never really came before they would step forward. Osweiler, as the most experienced of the three, tried as the season drew to a close, but by then the Broncos were on the way to a 5-11 finish.

That message, however, did make it to the Senior Bowl in Mobile, Alabama, where some of the quarterback hopefuls in the 2018 draft spent last week under the Broncos' watchful eyes, among them Heisman Trophy winner Baker Mayfield of Oklahoma and Wyoming's Josh Allen.

Denver's coaching staff worked with the North team through the week, with a roster that included Mayfield, Allen, Washington State's Luke Falk and Nebraska's Tanner Lee. And one of the things the Broncos -- who hold the No. 5 overall pick -- most wanted to glean from their week of up-close work with those quarterbacks was to see how each handled himself in front of the team, in the huddle and in the meeting room.

Because -- even as Kirk Cousins fever gripped the Rocky Mountains with the veteran poised to hit the market in the wake of the Redskins' trade for Alex Smith -- the Broncos still want to know which of the quarterbacks in the draft class they believe could handle the job if they don't choose a solution in free agency.

That's why it was worth noting when Joseph said of Mayfield: "I want a guy with confidence. I want a guy with swagger because it's a hard league. Guys can get broke by this league. I want a guy with great swagger and great confidence in his own abilities."

And Mayfield was astute enough to understand the Broncos, and others, would factor in whether he could be a leader in a locker room where he would be one of the youngest players.

"I think that's one of the things they want to see about you," Mayfield said. "It's different, with more experienced players, it's their job, and as a quarterback [being a leader] would be part of your job."

Mayfield also said "taking control of the huddle" and "letting the guys know that I know what I'm doing back there" were two of the most important things he wanted to show at the Senior Bowl. Allen, who will turn 22 in May, believes that will be part of any NFL learning curve as well.

That would be particularly true if he is chosen at or near the top of the draft board, where teams have earned those picks because of their struggles on the field.

"I'm ready to tackle any situation that's in front of me," Allen said. "I'm going to embrace any team that takes me. ... This is the only thing I've ever wanted to do. ... It's not going to be perfect, and every day you've got to learn."

Whether the Broncos dive in, checkbook in hand, to sign a veteran free agent such as Cousins or use their first-round draft pick on a quarterback, or both, Joseph made it clear that, beyond all the football items on the list, the Broncos want something else.

"You want a guy who is in charge, pushing, leading," Joseph said. "It's important in this league, and all of the good teams have it."

NFL execs predict Kirk Cousins' next contract, new team

By Mike Sando

ESPN.com

Feb. 1, 2018

The Alex Smith trade was good for Kirk Cousins and discouraging for the Cleveland Browns. That was one initial takeaway from conversations with NFL executives about what comes next for Cousins, the Washington Redskins quarterback expected to hit free agency next month.

Cousins, who turns 30 in August, will become the rare starting quarterback to reach free agency in his prime after Washington arranged to acquire Smith from Kansas City in a deal that can become official when the trading period opens March 14. Once Cousins hits the market, he will be in position to choose from a range of suitors based on criteria that matters most to him, under the assumption that any team serious about signing him will pay him well.

It's unclear just how much Cousins might command, but one salary-cap analyst thought the deal could average more than \$27 million per year, with a \$50 million signing bonus and \$90 million in the first three years. Cousins would then supplant Matthew Stafford as the highest-paid player in NFL history -- and subsequently lose that title when the next QB mega-deal is signed.

Here's a look at how NFL execs see the dynamics at this early stage.

Three teams execs mentioned first, with some caveats

Denver Broncos, Minnesota Vikings, Arizona Cardinals

The Broncos and Vikings could see themselves as a quarterback away from contending. Both teams could be attractive to a free-agent quarterback because they possess strong defenses. The Vikings also have coaching stability. The Cardinals can offer an elite running back and strong defense if they can make the salary-cap particulars work.

"You have two teams that think they are a quarterback away from really competing in Minnesota and Denver, and so I think [agent] Mike [McCartney] is just going to set his price, and they are either going to match it or they won't," one exec said.

Two other execs questioned whether the Vikings, with a defensive-minded head coach, would see the value in spending \$25 million or more per season on a quarterback who might not provide a dramatic upgrade in a new environment.

"I think Cousins would fit well in Minnesota, but I think they like their own guys, whether that is [Teddy] Bridgewater or [Case] Keenum," an exec said. "If they like one of those guys, they will give him a chance and figure they can pick up the pieces if they fail because they have done it before. They can find somebody. They don't need a \$25 million-a-year quarterback to make their engine go."

The Vikings do have a history of pursuing veteran quarterbacks as upgrades (Brett Favre) and out of desperation (Sam Bradford). But multiple execs thought Minnesota would prefer sticking with its own, especially Bridgewater.

"A defensive coach like [Mike] Zimmer probably feels like, 'Hey, play good defense, and we can make the other parts work,'" another exec said. "He might rather spend it on pass-rushers."

What about the Broncos? One exec paused for a few seconds and sighed before answering.

"Great defense," this exec said. "You kind of like their chances in the division again. They have had recent success. What worries me about them is they kind of chew up quarterbacks. They just fired the offensive coordinator [Mike McCoy]. If you are Cousins, maybe you wonder whether that continues with you."

The exec who thought Cousins' agent would set his price and wait for Minnesota or Denver to match it saw Arizona as a team that would try to get into the conversation, but he wasn't sure the Cardinals would be able to compete.

"I could see Cousins willing to go there," a different exec said of Arizona. "I was just thinking from a money/cap standpoint, it might be harder than some other places."

Another exec said he thought the Cardinals should be appealing to Cousins as long as there are no concerns about their new and relatively unknown head coach, Steve Wilks.

"Arizona might be my top pick," this exec said. "They are competitive. I think Seattle is headed the other way. The Rams could take a step back. Arizona has a good defense, a pretty good recent history, some talent and a good running back. Plus, it's a good place to live, and they did this already with Carson Palmer, and it worked, so they have a history of relocating guys positively."

One team that might belong in the top group

New York Jets

One exec said he thought the Jets were a more realistic destination than the Vikings, based on their salary-cap situation and Zimmer's known affinity for Bridgewater. He thought the Jets could comfortably make an offer with excellent cash flow. The Jets' 2017 quarterback, Josh McCown, has said he would like to return. McCown and Cousins share the same agent, which might or might not affect the situation in a meaningful way.

"The Jets are a wild card," an exec said. "They go from spending to not spending to spending to not spending."

The Jets need a long-term quarterback and, like Cleveland, are flush with salary-cap resources. Two other execs said they saw the Jets as another version of Cleveland: a team that is not suddenly going to contend with Cousins on the roster.

The Jets' new offensive coordinator, Jeremy Bates, worked previously under Mike Shanahan, Cousins' initial NFL head coach. But head coach Todd Bowles is entering his fourth season after two consecutive losing ones. Is this a great situation for a veteran quarterback if Cousins is seeking stability and a chance to win?

"Maybe Cousins could change it, but he also might sink with it," an exec said.

One team execs were less sure about

Buffalo Bills

Yes, the Bills could use a quarterback, but what are their intentions? One exec said he didn't have a feel for the Bills and wasn't sure whether Cousins would consider them seriously.

"Buffalo is an interesting one," another exec said. "You have to consider that. They are on the upswing. There is positive there. Something worries me a little. They got rid of the other guy [Tyrod Taylor] so cold-heartedly when they benched him. That kind of worries me."

A third exec placed Buffalo in the Minnesota category, in that both teams have defensive-minded head coaches who might prefer funneling resources elsewhere to going all-in with Cousins.

One team execs thought Cousins might avoid

Cleveland Browns

Cleveland seems to rank high on most Cousins-related lists because the Browns have obvious quarterback needs and tons of salary-cap space. Neither of those factors necessarily makes Cleveland more attractive for a free agent with the ability to consider a wide range of options if we assume, as stated from the outset, that every team interested in him will pay him well.

If Cousins wanted out of Washington to escape dysfunctional leadership, how eager should he be to sign with a Browns team that arguably has leadership that has been even more dysfunctional? Would going from Redskins owner Daniel Snyder to Browns owner Jimmy Haslam make sense for a player getting his one and only shot at setting his own career course?

"He is not going to Cleveland," an exec said. "Alex Smith just said that in a very nice way. How could you go to a 1-31 team, no matter how good you are? You can't, can you? Unless you have nothing else, but this guy will have other things."

Smith's willingness to enter into a contract extension with the Redskins does not necessarily mean he ruled out entering into a new deal with the Browns, who were also known to be interested. However, the fact that Smith did essentially approve the pending trade with Washington by agreeing to extend his deal was seen as a potentially bad sign for Cleveland.

"I think Cleveland is a real possibility, money-wise," another exec said, "but I don't know if he wants to go there. I think they will be better under [new general manager John] Dorsey, but does Cousins want to wait? They do have some pieces on the defensive side. Can Cousins get past the craziness of the past five years? If he puts that on the owner, you cannot get around it."

Cousins has earned nearly \$44 million the past two years. He's in position to seek out the best possible situation, not just the most lucrative one. Beyond ownership, the Browns will have no shortage of strong, established and opinionated personalities under one roof with Hue Jackson, Todd Haley, Gregg

Williams and Dorsey working together. Those are the types of dynamics Cousins would likely take into consideration.

"Cleveland could be a price driver in this," an exec said.

Another exec speculated that the Browns might prefer starting fresh with a rookie such as Sam Darnold, as opposed to paying huge money for Cousins. This could be a case of mutual disinterest under that type of scenario.

Three teams execs thought might stick with current starters

Jacksonville Jaguars, New York Giants, Miami Dolphins

It's looking as though these teams will stick with their projected 2017 starters in some capacity. Jacksonville moving on from Blake Bortles seemed more likely than the Giants dumping Eli Manning or the Dolphins casting aside Ryan Tannehill, the execs thought.

"You never know," an exec said, "but it sure does seem like they'll stick with Bortles."

One exec who had the Broncos, Vikings and Jets as his top three destinations said he thought the Dolphins were potentially lurking as a surprise team.

Roger Goodell downplays rise in Thursday night injuries

By Kevin Siefert

ESPN.com

Feb. 1, 2018

A rise in injuries during Thursday night games in 2017 was so small that it is "not even statistically significant," NFL commissioner Roger Goodell said Wednesday.

Goodell's comments, made during his annual Super Bowl news conference, came as the league announced a five-year deal to continue broadcasting its Thursday night package. Fox Sports will pay the league an average of \$660 million annually to broadcast 11 games per season, according to ESPN's Darren Rovell.

League data released last week showed that NFL players suffered an average of 6.9 injuries per Thursday night game in 2017, compared to 6.3 in games played on other days. It was the highest average of Thursday night injuries since the league began releasing the data in 2014 and the first time that the Thursday night rate was higher than those for Saturday, Sunday and Monday games.

Over the past four years combined, the average rate for Thursday night injuries was 5.7 injuries per game and 6.7 for all other days.

"Out of those [four years]," Goodell said, "only this year showed a slight uptick, which was not even statistically significant. If you take the [full] period, the injury rate is low. So we do not think that is something we need to overreact to."

Players have long complained the quick turnarounds for Thursday games are difficult and run counter to the league's commitment to the health and safety of its players. The league's response has pointed toward data that showed lower injury rates on Thursday night. This flip in this season's numbers, however, did not change the league's outlook. Dr. Allen Sills, the league's chief medical officer, said last week that "assessing the overall health and safety impact of the game is a lot more complex than just a simple injury rate."

Sills added: "It would be somewhat naïve and superficial of us to say that because the number went up or down that Thursday night is safer or more dangerous."

Goodell said he has spoken to NFL Players Association executive director DeMaurice Smith about the issue but has found a "clearly mixed" reaction from players.

"Obviously, most players don't like the short week," Goodell said, "but they sure do love the 10 days that come after it."

Goodell spoke on several other issues during 35 minutes of questions and answers with reporters:

He reiterated that he wants to change the league's catch rule in time for the 2018 season, using a thorough process that starts from "scratch." He said he couldn't guarantee that the new rule would eliminate controversy, but he wants to address instances where passes are ruled incomplete when a receiver does not maintain control throughout the process of going to the ground. "We have some very

good ideas that we're going to submit to the competition committee," Goodell said, declining to address specifics.

He said the league has hired former SEC chairwoman Mary Jo White to investigate accusations of workplace misconduct by Carolina Panthers owner Jerry Richardson. White also worked with the NFL on investigating the New Orleans Saints' Bountygate scandal.

Goodell has not spoken with President Trump about players kneeling during the national anthem to protest police brutality and racial injustice. He added that he doesn't know whether to change the league's pregame script next season to keep players in the locker room until after the anthem is played.

Von Miller calls 2017 season 'regular,' discusses Broncos quarterback play, Aqib Talib's future

By Troy Renck

KMGH

Feb. 1, 2018

Von Miller expects more -- from himself and the Broncos quarterbacks.

Appearing on ESPN's First Take from the site of Super Bowl 52, Miller addressed the question hanging over the Broncos' offseason like an anvil.

What is going on with the Broncos' quarterback position?

Only the Browns performed worse than Denver in 2017 with the Broncos making six changes under center during a dreadful last-place finish in the AFC West. Miller, showing his evolution as a leader, pointed the finger at himself as he discussed the most important factor in the Broncos' recovery.

"I mean whenever you have a season like the 5-11 season we had this year, there's more than just one issue going on. It's all types of issues. And this offseason I think we will be able to address some of those," Miller said Wednesday morning. "We have to get some consistent quarterback play. We have to be more consistent on defense. Ten sacks for me? It's just regular. I am there to get 15, you know 20 sacks. I didn't have the year I could have possibly had. If I can get going on defense, and we get some more consistent play on offense, we could be right back in the playoffs."

Miller finished with 10 sacks, his lowest total since 2013. However, a deeper dive into the stats revealed his destructive production. Pro Football Focus ranked him first in quarterback pressures among edge defenders with 83. His 31 tackles on rushing attempts sat second behind Oakland's Khalil Mack among edge players.

Miller became the focal point of the opposition's game plan, consistently double-teamed and chipped. With Shane Ray suffering through a lost season because of left wrist surgery, the Broncos lacked a dynamic rusher on the opposite side. Miller believes, like many of his teammates, that a new quarterback can lead to a fresh start. He praised Kirk Cousins after the quarterback riddled the Broncos in a December victory.

With Alex Smith now in Washington -- "I thought it was quick, right? It's never too early to go and get a franchise quarterback," Miller said -- the path clears for the Broncos to aggressively pursue Cousins without fear of a transition tag or draft pick compensation. Miller wants him, has talked to him, admitting, "It's still a quarterback's game." He indicated earlier this week that Cousins could elevate the Broncos, echoing what he said in December.

"A lot of teams would literally kill to have a quarterback like that," Miller said.

In order to land Cousins, the Broncos will likely need to massage their \$23 million in salary cap space. It remains possible they will attempt to trade cornerback Aqib Talib, making room for Bradley Roby to start. The move would be connected to the team's confidence in the former Ohio State star more than

saving money on Talib's contract. The idea of Talib moving on, however, is not welcomed by many veterans, Miller among them.

"He's extremely important to our team, not only our defense, but the overall attitude of our defense," Miller said. "You know when you have Aqib on your team. ... whatever is right is going to be said, and whatever is wrong is going to be said. He doesn't hold his tongue for anybody. You know going into the game he has the players' best interest in mind and that we are going to play well because that's his mindset."

Miller straddled the fence when talking about the Super Bowl. He gave the slight edge to the Patriots because of Tom Brady, but believes the Eagles' pass rush gives them a chance to pull off the upset.

"You look at the four dudes they have rushing," Miller said. "The Eagles defensive line was the best in the league. But, if they aren't able to get to Tom Brady, he will be typical Tom Brady."

Roger Goodell: Pat Bowlen Trust, Joe Ellis doing 'terrific job' guiding Broncos

By Andrew Mason
DenverBroncos.com
Feb. 1, 2018

NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell reaffirmed that the Broncos' ownership structure through the Pat Bowlen Trust remains viable and in full compliance with league guidelines at his annual state-of-the-league press conference Wednesday.

"They are in compliance with our rules. They have been very thoughtful. They have done a terrific job of leading that franchise over the last several years as Pat's focused on his health issues," Goodell said.

"I think Pat put that in place because of the case and the focus and the importance of the Broncos to him and making sure that it continued to be in the right hands and with the right kind of leadership."

Bowlen stepped away from day-to-day stewardship of the Broncos in July 2014 to focus on his battle with Alzheimer's disease. He established the trust to ensure the franchise's smooth operation and a succession plan to pass the team to one of his children when one emerged to be ready to run the organization.

"The focus is what Pat Bowlen wanted and how he set this up. Having been very close to Pat, I care very much about him, his family [and] his health," Goodell said. "He was an extraordinarily important person to the NFL when he was active in the league."

In on-field matters, Goodell spoke at length about the definition of a catch, in light of numerous controversial rulings in recent seasons, particularly in the final moments of the Patriots-Steelers game in Week 15.

"I think we can clarify this rule," Goodell said. "I'm not going to tell you that there won't be controversy, but I think that we can get to a much better place."

That means focusing less on how such situations are called on the field and more on ensuring the rule is clearly worded in the rule book.

"I will tell you that I think a lot of the focus for us in the offseason will be in the rule book," Goodell said. "You look at the catch/no-catch rule. The officials are officiating that correctly. What we have to do is find a rule that we think is going to address what we think should be a catch in the league."

Goodell said that the league hosted a group of coaches, officials and Hall of Fame players at the NFL office this month to look at approximately 150 plays to begin debating the catch issue.

"There will be a lot of focus on going to the ground, which has been part of the focus in respect to that rule," Goodell added later. "We have a lot of opportunity to get this rule right."

Goodell also emphasized that continuing to improve the pace of play remains a priority. The league adjusted the timing protocol for halftime and the points at which commercial breaks were placed during game play in order to improve the flow of the game and prevent breaks from being stacked near each other too often, particularly around kickoffs.

Instant-replay reviews can disrupt the flow. Some reviews are necessary -- specifically those that correct "obvious" missed calls. But Goodell said the overall number of reviews needs to be examined.

"We did have more replay interruptions this year, and I think that's something we've got to look at and we can improve on. They were reduced in time," Goodell said.

"We spend a great deal of time in the offseason on game presentation. How do we make our game more attractive, less stoppages, shorter stoppages when they do occur, whether they're commercial or otherwise? And I think that's one of the things we're going to focus on: How do we do the replay in a way that will ensure correcting an obvious mistake but make sure that it doesn't interrupt the flow of the game?"

Miller: 'I've got to get more than 10 sacks'

By Aric DiLalla

DenverBroncos.com

Feb. 1, 2018

There's one football game left to be played in the 2017 season, but Von Miller has turned his attention to how he can improve in 2018 — and get the Broncos back to the playoffs in the process.

"[We're] one or two pieces away, but I've got to get more than 10 sacks," Miller told Orange and Blue 760, which is broadcasting live from Minneapolis. "I've got to get more than 10 sacks, Shane [Ray]'s got to get more than one sack. Shaq [Barrett] has to get more than five sacks.

"I'm a 20-sack guy. That's what the city believes in me to be, and that's what I believe myself to be. If I can get going, I can help the offense out a lot [more]. I think I only had two forced fumbles. I'm a six-plus forced fumble guy. I didn't get that done."

Miller also emphasized Wednesday the need for self-evaluation before the defense looks at the offense to improve.

"Before we start pointing fingers at the quarterback position and 'offense this' and 'offense that,' me personally, I have to do a better job," Miller said. "If I can do a better job, everything else will be a whole lot smoother."

On the heels of his sixth season with at least 10 sacks, Miller sees a path back to the postseason. But in addition to his own play improving, he knows he must lead the younger players to more-productive performances.

"We really have to hit on these draft picks," Miller said, "and the draft picks that we already have — I've got to do a better job getting those rookies, second-year guys going. If we can do that, the team will be totally different."

Goodell wants league to look deeply into catch rule

By Barry Wilner
Associated Press
Feb. 1, 2018

Roger Goodell wants to see the mystery of the NFL's catch rule solved, and he's ensured that the process has begun.

The commissioner said at his annual Super Bowl news conference Wednesday that he personally sees that rule as the most obvious to address.

Asked about the scrutiny that NFL officiating came under this season, Goodell said "on the catch/no catch rule, we need to find a rule we think will address that. We certainly need to get this rule right so everyone can appreciate."

Goodell recently spent three hours with former players, including Pro Football Hall of Famers, going over 150 plays. He said there were many good ideas offered, but as for the specifics of what should be a catch, there was little consensus.

"There were a lot of people with different perspectives and lot of disagreement in the room," he said.

So the competition committee will dive into not only this rule, but perhaps refining the rulebook.

"I would like to start back, instead of adding to the rule, subtracting the rule. Start over again and look at the rule fundamentally from the start. Because I think when you add or subtract things you can still lead to confusion. These rules are very complex; you have to look at what the unintended consequences are of making a change, which is what the competition committee, in my view, does so well and with so much thought.

"Clearly, the catch/no catch has had a lot of discussion. I won't tell you there won't be controversy (in the future), but we need to get to a better place."

He added that there were more video replay interruptions in 2017 "and I think we can look at that. How do we make the game more attractive with less stoppages is one of the things we focus on. How do we use replay to ensure correcting obvious mistakes but making sure it doesn't interrupt the flow of the game."

Goodell noted that in his 36 years working in the NFL, officiating always has been in the spotlight. Recently, because of advances in technology, the attention has ratcheted up significantly.

Goodell revealed that the league has hired an independent investigator to look into claims of sexual and racial misconduct in the workplace against Carolina Panthers owner Jerry Richardson.

Former U.S. attorney Mary Jo White will lead the investigation. White has led similar investigations in other fields, including a recent one at the University of Rochester.

Richardson stepped away from day-to-day operations after allegations surfaced and is seeking to sell the team. The NFL has said it didn't pressure Richardson to sell based on the allegations.

Goodell said he wants the team to remain in Carolina and believes most of the other owners do, as well.

"I am sure that is a question many of our owners will ask," Goodell said of the Panthers staying in Charlotte under new ownership.

He also:

—announced that the Rams will play a home game in Mexico City against the Chiefs. Until the new stadium in Los Angeles is ready in 2020, the Rams are likely to spend one home game a year elsewhere.

—reiterated his stance that it's not the NFL's place to get involved in whether Colin Kaepernick gets a chance with another team. "Clubs have to make their own decisions as far as who's on their roster," he said.

Kaepernick, who sparked the protests involving the national anthem early in the 2016 season, wasn't signed for the 2017 season following his release in San Francisco.

The comments from Goodell came a day after Philadelphia Eagles receiver Torrey Smith said Kaepernick not getting a chance with another team "kind of falls in the category of an injustice in itself."

As it relates to roster decisions, Goodell said the NFL won't "get involved in that in any way."

—referred to the recently created owners/players committee on social justice when asked any questions about protests during the national anthem, expressing optimism the NFL and its players are on the proper path.

—said he was aware of the plans to relaunch the rival XFL in 2020, but had been too busy to look at details. Goodell emphasized that the NFL constantly looks at spring football options if they will improve opportunities to reach the NFL.

AP source: Fox gets Thursday night football for 5 years, \$3B

By Barry Wilner
Associated Press
Feb. 1, 2018

Fox and the NFL have agreed to a five-year deal for Thursday night football games.

Those games previously were televised by CBS and NBC, two of the league's other network partners. Fox announced Wednesday that it will televise 11 games between Weeks 4 and 15, with simulcasts on NFL Network and Fox Deportes.

Fox, which has the Sunday afternoon NFC package, will produce all of the games under the deal, which is worth a little more than \$3 billion, according to a person with direct knowledge of the terms of the deal who spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity because the league didn't announce its value.

"This is a single partner deal, we are not splitting the package," NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell said in a conference call. "We had tremendous amount of interest from all the broadcast partners, all of whom wanted it exclusively. We felt this was the best opportunity for the NFL to grow the Thursday night package."

Goodell added that the league is exploring partnerships with digital outlets, also in conjunction with Fox.

The NFL has broadcast deals "five years out" with its other partners — ESPN has the Monday night package — so five years on this agreement made sense.

"Fundamentally, Fox was built on football," said Peter Rice, president of 21st Century Fox, noting that 25 years ago, the NFC package "helped launch a fledgling network into what it is today."

"These opportunities come along very, very infrequently," he added. "You either have the rights to the most-watched content in media or you don't. If you don't take the opportunity, this won't come up again for five years. We believe in buying the very best rights, and the best rights are the NFL."

CBS and NBC each paid \$450 million for the previous two-year package.

"We explored a responsible bid for Thursday Night Football but in the end are very pleased to return to entertainment programming on television's biggest night," CBS said in a statement. "At the same time, we look forward to continuing our terrific long-term partnership with the NFL on Sunday afternoons, with more than 100 games per season including next year's Super Bowl 53."

Fox could have a conflict if weather causes a World Series game to be postponed from Wednesday to Thursday. In recent years, Series Game 2 and 6 have been scheduled for Wednesday.

"In that hypothetical kind of a scenario, the World Series game would stay on Fox and our Thursday night game would become an FS1/NFL simulcast," Fox spokesman Eddie Motl said.

Goodell noted that the Thursday night games are a place for innovation.

"One of the things we've taken into consideration with Thursday night in general is to evolve this package, to use it as an opportunity to learn, to understand where these various platforms are going, and what we can do to make it a more attractive experience for our fans," he said. "We will look at that in that context, and the term will be consistent with what it will take to make sure that we continue to evolve that platform as well as the experience for our fans."

That means streaming outlets, of course.

"We have accepted bids for digital partners," Goodell said. "We have very healthy competition. In fact, I would say it's unprecedented competition from a number of digital partners."

"As I say, we put our focus on the broadcast package first. ... We are not required to go coterminous with the broadcasts. We can do any length of deal that we get to an agreement on with that digital partner. As I mentioned earlier, we will be doing this in cooperation with our Fox partners."

Roger Goodell: No contact with President Donald Trump on protests during anthem

By Lindsay Jones

USA Today

Feb. 1, 2018

NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell said he has not spoken to President Trump, who has openly criticized players and league leadership over protests during the national anthem this year.

Trump appeared to take a veiled shot Tuesday night in his State of the Union address at protesting players, praising a young boy in the audience as a reminder of “why we proudly stand for the national anthem.”

A handful of NFL players, led by former 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick, began demonstrating during the national anthem in 2016 as a way protesting police brutality and racial injustice. In September, Trump called protesting players “sons of bitches” and suggested they should be fired, sparking a large-scale protests around the NFL in Week 3.

Only a handful of players continued to kneel or sit during the anthem for the duration of the season.

But the shots from Trump have continued, including tweets directed at Goodell and NFL owners, who have not implemented any rules requiring players to stand.

Goodell on Wednesday declined to say if a policy change could come this offseason – either via a rule to require standing or by keeping players in the locker room during the anthem.

Eagles defensive end Chris Long, who has been among the most outspoken players to oppose Trump, sighed and shook his head Wednesday when asked about Trump’s comment during the previous night’s address.

“I’m not getting into too much talking about him. It is what it is,” Long said.

In race for Kirk Cousins, Broncos appear to have head start

By Charles Robinson

Yahoo.com

Feb. 1, 2018

On Tuesday afternoon, Kirk Cousins called his potential free agency “uncharted territory.” A few hours later, the Washington Redskins guaranteed Cousins would set sail for that unknown terrain.

With the pending acquisition of Alex Smith from the Kansas City Chiefs, the Redskins officially fired the starter’s pistol on Cousins’ race into free agency. And it is expected to be a fairly large market, even with as many as four quarterbacks expected to go in the first round of the NFL draft.

What will this derby look like? That’s the question that will take shape in the next six weeks. But Cousins gave at least part of the picture Tuesday when he was asked what a pending free agency might look like for him.

“Well that will be uncharted territory for me,” Cousins said, a few hours before learning that he would indeed be headed for free agency. “I haven’t been there before. So I don’t know what that process looks like at all to this point. That would be my first time going through it. But I want to win. I’ll make sure that any fact-gathering that I do, or business that I take, or coaches that I meet – it’ll all be centered on do I feel like this is a place where I can win, or we can win? That’s what it’ll all boil down to.”

That creates one fairly large box to check off. Cousins wants to go to a place where he can be part of a winner. In theory, that narrows the field when considering the quarterback needy teams on the market. Particularly when assessing which ones might draft a quarterback high in the coming selection process. Cousins has been there and done that with Robert Griffin III. If you’re drafting a quarterback in the first round, Cousins will not be an object of affection in free agency. But the timing of free agency – coming roughly six weeks before the draft – offers an interesting stage. It provides the opportunity that every quarterback-needy team should want: Two shots at securing a long-term solution at the position. With a game plan of pursuing Cousins as a primary target in free agency and then using the draft as a fallback option in the event of failure.

A multitude of the NFL teams could field that plan. In no particular order: The Buffalo Bills, New York Jets, Cleveland Browns, Jacksonville Jaguars and Arizona Cardinals could all be in pursuit. But in terms of the fit and endorsement that makes deals happen, the Denver Broncos make more sense than most.

This kind of scenario has been brewing since last offseason, when the Broncos should have gone all-in after Tony Romo and given the 2017 season some chance at life. Instead, Romo went his own way and the Broncos settled on hoping Paxton Lynch would take a big step forward. What the franchise ended up getting was a player who was badly behind the curve when it came to eliminating repetitive mistakes and finding some level of consistency.

By the time it became clear that both Trevor Siemian and Brock Osweiler were in the mix to potentially be juggled as starters, the gamble had already failed massively. And that’s when it became clear that the Broncos would be buyers in the 2018 quarterback market. Whether it was free agency or the draft,

some kind of plan was going to be set in place to dip back into the pool. And that decision was made long before it was known that Cousins would head to open waters in the offseason.

Here's the thing about the Broncos right now: They've already spent time eyeing all the first-round quarterbacks in this draft – from USC's Sam Darnold and UCLA's Josh Rosen to Oklahoma's Baker Mayfield and Wyoming's Josh Allen. Furthermore, the North roster of the Senior Bowl was essentially crafted specifically so the Denver coaching staff could spend a week with Mayfield and Allen.

A league source familiar with the Broncos' front office told Yahoo Sports that general manager John Elway and personnel rover Gary Kubiak believe that UCLA's Rosen has the purest passing stroke in this draft. An appreciation that is said to be so strong, Rosen would be a virtual lock at the fifth overall pick if he was still on the board. Of course, it's also January and there are other phases of assessment ahead. Things can still change. And in effect, they did Tuesday when the Redskins bailed on Cousins.

This is where Elway and company are in luck. The Super Bowl window is already aging significantly in Denver. That alone suggests that spending the fifth overall pick on a quarterback who will require a few years of development could be a problem. In essence, even a Rosen selection could suggest that – at best – a micro rebuild was already beginning. Cousins, on the other hand, is a veteran who could step in and immediately bring his full presence to the equation.

That matters for this Denver roster. Yes, he will cost money. Although Cousins has said in the past that he would be willing to put a salary blowout on the back burner if it was something that would aid in winning a Super Bowl. The message therein is that if you're a bad team signing Cousins, you're probably looking at having to set a new salary record at the position. But if you're a good team, something in the range of \$24 million to \$25 million with serious guaranteed money gets a deal done.

Denver can afford that kind of hit heading into this offseason. The Broncos have virtually no dead money on the books in 2018 and are already looking at being in the range of \$25 million to \$30 million under the salary cap depending on some small roster tweaks. The franchise can also open an additional \$10 million in space for 2018 if it chooses to trade or cut cornerback Aqib Talib.

The Broncos are in good enough shape financially to make a Cousins signing happen. And it would alleviate building pressure between a veteran core of defensive players who have increasingly felt let down by offensive failures the past two seasons. Not only is the money there, but the veteran backing for the deal is in place. It becomes a glimmer of hope that stabilizes the locker room and immediately puts Denver back into the AFC title contender conversation.

But there's one other over-the-top element in all of this: Mike Shanahan.

In no uncertain terms, he has made it known to both Elway and Kubiak that he believes Cousins is a special player who has been undercut by a failing Redskins franchise. Whether it's the defensive shortcomings or the problems in the running game or the inability to build all the right pieces around Cousins, Shanahan has been a Cousins champion where it concerns his relationship with the Broncos' brain trust.

That endorsement means something in the equation. Elway and Kubiak will listen. And they'll factor it into what has become a serendipitous development. If anything, we already know this kind of pursuit isn't too big for Elway. One of his crowning achievements remains his recruitment of Peyton Manning.

The next could be the recruitment of Cousins – resetting the Super Bowl window and side-stepping the disaster of failing to have Manning’s successor in place.

One way or another, this uncharted territory is coming for Cousins. The team that appears to be the right fit has been here before. If he lands on its map, these two sides will eventually find themselves at the free agency crossroads of opportunity and need, both looking for whatever road leads to winning.

NFL once again ignoring injury concerns with new 'Thursday Night Football' deal

By Eric Adelson

Yahoo.com

Feb. 1, 2018

You probably heard that the NFL has a new \$3.3 billion deal to broadcast “Thursday Night Football.” After all, big dollars make for big headlines.

You probably did not hear the latest injury data from the NFL, released last week. After all, medical information tends not to be as buzzworthy.

But it should be.

The injury rate (per game) on weekend and Monday games stayed roughly the same from 2016 to 2017. The Thursday rate jumped from 5.3 to 6.9.

The league held a conference call last week to discuss the data and the first speaker was Dr. Christina DeFilippo Mack, who is the senior director of epidemiology at clinical research company IQVIA. She said the following: “From 2014-17 ... the rates of injuries occurring during Thursday games have not exceeded those suffered by players with more days of rest. This season, for the first time, we saw a one-year shift, where injury rates on Thursdays were slightly higher than games played on Saturday, Sunday, and Monday.”

It’s “a one-year shift” so far. What if it becomes a two-year shift? Or three?

In fairness, Mack called it “not statistically significant.”

In his state of the league address at the Super Bowl, commissioner Roger Goodell said, “We don’t think it’s anything to overreact to.”

But it’s worrisome all the same. A lot of players do not like Thursday night games, and with good reason. They come off a difficult game on a Sunday, they sometimes have to travel that night, then they get only three days to heal, put in a new game plan for a new opponent, practice, and then it’s game day again. Richard Sherman, a noted opponent of Thursday football, said on a typical Wednesday a player is “still discovering bruises from Sunday that you didn’t know you had.”

Dr. Allen Sills, the NFL’s chief medical officer, was pressed on the “one-year shift” and he answered by asserting that “assessing the overall health and safety impact of the game is a lot more complex than just a simple injury rate.”

That’s fine, but then how are we supposed to know if “Thursday Night Football” is in fact more dangerous because of the short recovery time? Mack is measuring “any injury that caused the player to be removed from participation or precluded them from playing on a subsequent day,” but as we all know, NFL players fight through injuries without leaving the field of play. The 2014 data was a little

different, as it was based on a “historical surveillance injury definition.” Then it was changed in 2015. The old bromide is “Are you hurt or are you injured?” Both should matter for this conversation.

Concussion symptoms, for example, do not always show up immediately after a head injury. Sometimes they appear the day after a game, or even a day after that. Having six or seven or even eight days to monitor a player – for a brain injury or any injury – has to be healthier than three.

And therein lies the dilemma. There’s no question that money helps the league and, indirectly, the players. A new TV deal and a new source of revenue lift all boats financially. But there’s also no question that more recovery time between games helps the league’s most valuable asset: the players themselves. It also helps the product on the field. How many unforgettable Thursday night games can you recall off-hand?

“I just don’t understand why the NFL says it’s taking a stand on player safety,” Sherman wrote in *The Players Tribune*, “then increases the risks its players face by making them play on Thursday, before their bodies are ready.”

It’s a good question with no good answer.

At this point, the NFL can have its \$3.3 billion cake and eat it too. The money is rolling in, even though ratings have dipped slightly, and the injury data isn’t overwhelmingly negative. Yet.

But it’s fair to ask: if the injury rate for Thursdays develops into an alarming trend, what then? How many years of this would it take for the league to seriously consider scaling back Thursday night games?

Probably at least five, if not more. After all, money talks loudly, and injuries are usually kept to a whisper.

Von Miller says Broncos need Kirk Cousins: He 'could take us over the edge'

By Ryan Wilson

CBSports.com

Feb. 1, 2018

Broncos general manager John Elway was front and center in Mobile, Ala., last week eyeballing former Oklahoma quarterback Baker Mayfield. And while that's no guarantee that Denver will draft a quarterback with the fifth-overall pick, it does point to a glaring need at the position after Trevor Siemian, Brock Osweiler and 2016 first-rounder Paxton Lynch were all, to varying degrees, huge disappointments last season.

The trio was so bad, in fact, that it was unclear if first-year coach Vance Joseph would make it to Year 2. He did, and you can bet he won't let any of the quarterbacks who saw the field in 2017 decide his fate in 2018.

This brings us to Kirk Cousins, a proven commodity in Washington who was originally drafted by Mike Shanahan, the former Broncos coach who won two Super Bowls with Elway under center. Cousins will hit free agency next month after the Redskins agreed Tuesday evening to trade for Chiefs quarterback Alex Smith.

Sporting News' Eric Gelko wrote last week that the Broncos are front-runners for Cousins' services, and that was days before the Redskins traded for Smith.

CBS Sports NFL Insider Jason La Canfora echoed similar sentiments on Wednesday morning:

@JasonLaCanfora

Many teams are high on Kirk Cousins. But when it gets down to the mega-money at the end, the Jets and Broncos likely battle for his services

You know who else is high on Cousins-to-Denver? Broncos pass rusher Von Miller, who said in December following a Broncos-Redskins matchup (via PFT): "Kirk's a great quarterback. I'll say that every day of the week. A lot of teams would kill to have a quarterback like that."

Miller's feelings haven't changed; on Wednesday he told "The Dan Patrick Show" that "[Kirk] knows exactly how I feel about Kirk Cousins and what he'd mean to our team. And what he would mean to a lot of other teams. He's the hot quarterback on the market right now. ... Yeah, we need Kirk. We need Kirk. I'd like to have Kirk. We have great quarterbacks now. Kirk could take us over the edge. But it's the National Football League -- there are a lot of teams that need Kirk."

Miller's right -- the Broncos need Cousins because the trio of Siemian, Osweiler and Lynch were well below replacement-level talents this season, which goes a long way in explaining how the team has gone from Super Bowl champions in 2015, to 9-7 last year to a five-win outfit in 2017.

C.J. Anderson the latest Bronco to pine over Cousins

By Marc Sessler

NFL.com

Feb. 1, 2018

It's Super Bowl Week and Kirk Cousins hasn't played football in a month.

Cousins is all anyone wants to talk about, though, which makes sense after the Redskins hit the ejector seat on their veteran quarterback in favor of Tuesday's stunning trade for Alex Smith.

Set to break the bank in free agency -- after making a king's ransom in Washington -- Cousins looms as the biggest open-market prize since Broncos football czar John Elway lured Peyton Manning to Denver in 2012.

Can Elway do it again with Cousins? Broncos running back C.J. Anderson certainly hopes so.

"It would be huge having a guy like Kirk. ... It would be huge to come to us, a veteran team," Anderson told NFL Network on Wednesday. "We know some pieces are going to change, but if we can keep some of the pieces on our offensive end -- myself, [wideout] Emmanuel [Sanders], DT [wideout Demaryius Thomas] -- our offense can be what we want it to be."

Asked if a trustworthy quarterback was the missing piece, Anderson minced no words.

"Oh yeah, most definitely," he said. "If [Elway] can make it happen ... We need to find a way to make that happen."

Pro Bowl pass rusher Von Miller expressed similar sentiments on Good Morning Football while also telling The Dan Patrick Show: "Yeah, we need Kirk. We need Kirk. I'd like to have Kirk. We have great quarterbacks now. Kirk could take us over the edge."

Add Anderson's comments and Miller's wishes to the growing queue after Broncos linebacker Brandon Marshall essentially mouthed the same exact message earlier this month on NFL Network.

It's a good time for Trevor Siemian and Paxton Lynch to power down the laptops and stay offline, because it's crystal clear that Denver's roster has violently shifted into Cousins-or-bust mode.

None of these humans work in Denver's front office, though, leaving us with just one relevant curiosity: Will Elway make it happen?

Von Miller: Kirk Cousins could take us over the edge

By Josh Alper
Pro Football Talk
Feb. 1, 2018

After Broncos linebacker Von Miller got an up-close look at Kirk Cousins last December, he said that “a lot of teams would kill to have a quarterback like that.”

Now that it looks like a sure thing that Cousins will be hitting the open market and moving on from Washington, Miller is making sure that Cousins knows that he puts the Broncos in that group. Miller initially said he’d play it cool when asked about Cousins on The Dan Patrick Show Wednesday, but then said he’s made his feelings known.

“He knows exactly how I feel about Kirk Cousins and what he’d mean to our team,” Miller said. “And what he would mean to a lot of other teams. He’s the hot quarterback on the market right now. ... Yeah, we need Kirk. We need Kirk. I’d like to have Kirk. We have great quarterbacks now. Kirk could take us over the edge.”

Cousins told us on PFT Live this week that he’s “willing to make sacrifices or do what has to be done to make sure I’m in the best possible position to win” in the future. Whether he feels as strongly as Miller about what his arrival would mean to the Broncos as opposed to other teams will be one of many questions on the table when March rolls around.

We’ll have more with Miller when he stops by to talk to Mike Florio on Radio Row in Minneapolis on Wednesday.

No word yet on FOX's Thursday Night Football announcers

By Michael David Smith
Pro Football Talk
Feb. 1, 2018

The NFL has always made a point of requiring its Thursday Night Football broadcast partners to use their top broadcasting teams. That meant Jim Nantz calling games on CBS, first with Phil Simms and then with Tony Romo, while Al Michaels and Cris Collinsworth teamed up on NBC.

But the NFL has not made that requirement of FOX, its new Thursday night broadcast partner. And FOX told PFT that the network hasn't yet determined its Thursday night team.

"No decisions on FOX talent have been made at this time," FOX said in a statement to PFT. "With that said, we are committed to having a consistent Thursday Night announce team that delivers on the quality of a primetime broadcast."

A consistent Thursday night team would seem to rule out the No. 1 pairing of Joe Buck and Troy Aikman. Buck already has a very full plate in the fall because he calls the World Series for FOX. It seems extremely unlikely he would be calling Thursday night games while the baseball playoffs are in full swing. And if FOX wants to have a consistent Thursday night team, it couldn't start the season with Buck, have him leave for baseball in the middle of the NFL season, and then bring him back to Thursday Night Football later in the season.

So FOX is committed to having a prime time-worthy announcing team on Thursday nights, but that team will not be its No. 1 Sunday afternoon team. That might mean bringing in a new pairing, separate from the broadcast teams FOX already uses for Sunday NFL games. Just spitballing, Gus Johnson on play-by-play and Jay Cutler on commentary is a pairing that could make sense.

Whatever happens, FOX has big plans for Thursday nights. A financial commitment reported to be at \$660 million a year means FOX will want to find the right broadcasting team to make it work.

Goodell defends NFL's finding that Raiders complied with Rooney Rule

By Michael David Smith

Pro Football Talk

Feb. 1, 2018

NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell is standing by the Raiders, and by the Rooney Rule, despite questions being raised in the wake of Jon Gruden's hiring about whether the league let the team get away with violating the spirit of the rule.

Asked about the Raiders first agreeing to hire Gruden and then interviewing minority candidates only after that, Goodell suggested that's not what happened — even though Raiders owner Mark Davis has acknowledged that's what happened.

"I think we have a disagreement on the facts," Goodell said. (He did not explain what was factually inaccurate about the premise of the question.)

Goodell said the league looked into the way the Raiders went about hiring Gruden and also interviewing two African-Americans, Bobby Johnson and Tee Martin, and found that the Raiders were in full compliance with the rule.

"There was a full investigation of that from our staff," Goodell said.

The NFL adopted the Rooney Rule 15 years ago and has only found a team in violation once, when the Detroit Lions did not interview a minority candidate before hiring Steve Mariucci in 2003. If the Raiders were in full compliance this year, even though they knew they were hiring Gruden before they fired Jack Del Rio, it's hard to believe the NFL will ever find any team in violation.

Goodell: League will take a fresh look at catch rules this offseason

By Darin Gantt
Pro Football Talk
Feb. 1, 2018

The NFL has created confusion over the years by tinkering with the catch rule a bit at a time.

But during his press conference Wednesday, Goodell said the league wanted to take a fresh look at the rule with the competition committee this year.

He said the goal was to “start over” rather than adding or subtracting to current rules.

That would help, as the current Frankenstein’s monster of a rule has paralyzed officials at times, as they debate whether a receiver survives the ground.

“A lot of focus this offseason is going to be on the rulebook — the catch, no catch rule, officials are officiating that correctly,” Goodell said. “There will be a lot of focus on going to the ground. We have a great opportunity to get it right.”

They’ve had opportunities before, and we’ll see if the process yields a better result this time.

Roger Goodell wants fewer, shorter replay stoppages

By Josh Alper
Pro Football Talk
Feb. 1, 2018

The first question that NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell fielded during his pre-Super Bowl press conference in Minnesota on Wednesday had to do with officiating, including the way replay is used in the league right now.

Goodell noted that technology allowing plays to be broken down at a microscopic level has made the job harder for officials, who he said do an “extraordinary” job. Goodell did express concern about the amount of times that replay is being used and the way games grind to a stop when they happen.

“We did have more replay interruptions this year,” Goodell said. “I think that’s something we have to look at, we can improve on. ... You know we spent a great deal of time in the offseason on game presentation. How do we make our game more attractive? Less stoppages, shorter stoppages when they do occur whether they’re commercial or otherwise. I think that’s one of the things we’re going to focus on how do we do the replay in a way that will ensure correcting an obvious mistake but make sure it doesn’t interrupt the flow of the game.”

Goodell didn’t outline any potential shifts in replay policy, although an obvious one would seem to be a time limit on reviews that calls for on-field decisions to stand if no glaring error is found in short order. There were several cases last season when people expressed a belief that replay procedures under first-year officiating head Al Riveron had moved away from looking for clear and obvious evidence of those obvious mistakes to re-officiating the plays based on the video.

That seemed to swing back the other way during the postseason, which may be a sign of where the league wants things to go in Riveron’s second season on the job.