

Terrell Davis believes John Elway will chase a veteran QB. And there's one who really "moves the needle."

By Nicki Jhabvala

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If anyone knows John Elway's drive and thinking it's Terrell Davis, a fellow Hall of Famer and Elway's sidekick in a pair of Super Bowl victories. Davis, now an analyst for NFL Network, has made the rounds at Radio Row ahead of Super Bowl LII in Minnesota and on Wednesday weighed in on Elway's — and the Broncos' — looming decision.

THE decision.

The quarterback decision.

The Broncos experimented with handing the keys to a first-round pick in Paxton Lynch, and hoped to find their long-term starter in seventh-rounder Trevor Siemian. But in two years, the Broncos have failed to find a consistent starter through the college ranks and now Davis believes Elway has his eyes set on landing a veteran.

"I don't think (the draft is) a road that he wants to travel down again without having the security of a guy that he knows," Davis said while a guest on WFAN's "The Afternoon Drive." "There's not a lot of mystery about Kirk (Cousins) right now. And if there is, there are things that you think you can work on. In Washington, he wasn't surrounded with an uber talented roster. So John has seen him — believe me they got tape on Kirk for four years now that they can say, 'OK, we like him.' College players, it's a crapshoot. You can fall in love with one of these quarterbacks, but there's no guarantee they're going to turn out to be a good quarterback in this league.

"The sense of urgency is to win now. It's high."

Davis called Elway the most competitive person he's ever met and has plenty of anecdotes as proof. But one Davis brought up Thursday was Elway's first major signing as a Broncos executive. In 2012, after a whirlwind courtship, he signed Peyton Manning to a five-year, \$96 million contract. Manning lasted for four years and, well, we know how those played out.

"Think about that decision for a minute," Davis said. "He brought a guy coming off neck surgery. Four neck surgeries, I'm sorry. Didn't know what he was going to be like. But (Elway) felt like it was a risk and a gamble he was willing to take. Bringing Peyton in, sign him to some nice money and it paid off."

In the wake of Alex Smith's trade agreement to Washington, the prospect of the Broncos landing Cousins has been in overdrive. Cousins is expected to land the biggest contract in NFL history — bigger than the five-year, \$135 million deal Matthew Stafford signed last year — and his impending payday has created pause for some Broncos fans.

But Davis has Cousins firmly in the mix for Denver.

“(Elway) might be eye-balling some college players, but for him and what he wants? He wants to win now,” Davis said. “He has a defense that is intact and starting to come a little bit unraveled, so you got to kind of replace some of the pieces in that. But great defense, a quarterback that doesn’t need to be great but can you manage a football game? (Elway) doesn’t want to go through the process of trying to develop a quarterback. That’s the hard part, developing a quarterback. Kirk doesn’t need development; he needs tweaking. He needs pieces around him. That’s what they’re looking for.”

Cousins won’t be the only veteran the Broncos look at, be it Case Keenum or Tyrod Taylor, perhaps even Nick Foles via trade.

“I don’t think any of those names you mentioned, besides Cousins — maybe Eli. Maybe Eli if somehow they can go get him. But those other quarterbacks? I don’t see Tyrod Taylor, I don’t see Case Keenum — Case Keenum’s case is, ‘All right was this year an anomaly? Was this just an outlier in his career?’”

The list of second-tier quarterbacks expected to be available don’t “move the needle,” Davis said.

But Eli Manning?

“Oh, he moves the needle, man,” he added.

The Broncos figure to enter the Kirk Cousins sweepstakes. What could their competition look like?

By Nick Kosmider

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Broncos linebacker Von Miller was clear Wednesday while making the media rounds ahead of the Super Bowl in Minnesota: he would love to have Kirk Cousins as the team's starting quarterback next season.

Of course, the Broncos won't be alone in that pursuit. Rarely do quarterbacks of Cousins' caliber hit free agency — a certainty after the Redskins traded for Alex Smith on Tuesday — and the bidding war figures to be fierce. But what does Denver's competition look like?

Here are five teams that could be in the mix to sign Cousins this spring, with salary cap numbers from Spotrac:

Cleveland Browns

Predicted cap space: \$103 million

Their pitch: Cleveland's biggest asset in the pursuit of Cousins is, well, its assets. Should the Browns sign Cousins, they would be able to use their two top-five draft picks (Nos. 1 and 4) to put weapons — Penn State running back Saquon Barkley, perhaps — around their new quarterback. Even with a high-priced QB and two high picks on their books, the Browns would still have plenty of financial wiggle room to pursue more talent in free agency. And though an 0-16 record wouldn't suggest it, Cleveland finished 14th in total defense in 2017 and only figures to improve on that side of the ball behind intriguing young talent.

Their hurdle: Cleveland has quite simply been a graveyard of quarterbacks. The Browns have started at least three quarterbacks in the same season five times since 2010, and they haven't had a quarterback start all 16 games in a season since Tim Couch in 2001.

New York Jets

Predicted cap space: \$78 million

Their pitch: Like the Browns, the Jets have more than enough cash to meet the high financial bar that will certainly be set in the pursuit of Cousins. They could fit him onto the roster without having to shed the contracts of players who could be instrumental to the rebuilding process, and playing in a market like New York would also offer the face of the franchise further financial opportunities. Plus, should Patriots QB Tom Brady retire in the next season or two, playing in the AFC East could offer a favorable path to the postseason.

Their hurdle: Cousins would be taking over an offense with limited weapons. The Jets' top receiver, Robby Anderson (63 catches for 941 yards and seven touchdowns in 2017), has run into repeated legal troubles. They are aging at the running back position and dealt with inconsistency along the offensive line. The Jets don't appear to be as close to a postseason run as other teams vying for the quarterback's services.

Minnesota Vikings

Predicted cap space: \$56 million

Their pitch: Minnesota has one of the best defenses in the NFL, two standout wide receivers in Stefon Diggs and Adam Thielen, a reliable tight end in Kyle Rudolph, a promising young running back in Dalvin Cook, a brand new indoor stadium and a dedicated fan base. There is plenty for Cousins to like with Minnesota, which could choose to part ways with free agent Case Keenum despite his breakout 2017 season.

Their hurdle: Cousins has stated the opportunity to win would be the most important element of his free-agency decision. Clearly, the Vikings, who were one win away from the Super Bowl this season, stand on firm ground there. The only thing that may be standing in the way of Minnesota's pursuit of Cousins would be a desire to try to keep Keenum for the sake of continuity.

Jacksonville Jaguars

Predicted cap space: \$20 million

Their pitch: Jacksonville was a fourth-quarter collapse away from playing in the Super Bowl. The Jaguars had the league's best defense in 2017, according to most key qualifiers, and they have a future star at running back in Leonard Fournette. The Jaguars could make the case that an upgrade at quarterback is the last missing piece to put them over the top.

Their hurdle: The Jaguars have less available cash than several other teams that will be pursuing Cousins. They could add \$19 million if they cut QB Blake Bortles before the start of the new league year in March. But Bortles' contract for next season — a fifth-year option picked up by the team — would become guaranteed by injury. Bortles had wrist surgery shortly after the AFC championship, and the timeline of his recovery presents uncertainty about Jacksonville's financial commitment to the QB.

Arizona Cardinals

Predicted cap space: \$27 million

Their pitch: No team outside Denver needs a quarterback more than the Cardinals, who don't have one under contract in 2018 in the wake of Carson Palmer's retirement. Arizona has become a more favorable free-agent destination in recent years and is starting a new era under new head coach Steve Wilks. Plus, you can't beat the Phoenix-area weather in the fall.

Their hurdle: Money could be a major issue for Arizona, which has many other needs outside the quarterback position. If they are committing \$25 million or more per season to Cousins, addressing needs at wide receiver and along the offensive line would become a tougher task. They may decide that a cheaper option — one of the Vikings' three quarterbacks, for example — may allow them to better construct the rest of the roster.

Others to watch: Buffalo Bills, New York Giants.

Colts will get a calmer Josh McDaniels than Broncos did

By Mike Klis

9NEWS

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When Super Bowl LII is completed Sunday, Josh McDaniels will get a second chance as an NFL head coach.

It didn't work out the first time, did it Bronco fans?

McDaniels was plenty smart enough. He could devise an offense and knew how to build a roster. The problem McDaniels had as the Broncos' head coach from the start of the 2009 season until he was fired with four games remaining in 2010: He was too emotionally volatile.

He was too joyous in victory. Too angry in defeat.

He was seen pumping his fist maniacally after defeating his mentor Bill Belichick and the New England Patriots in week 5 of the 2009 season, a win that boosted the Broncos' record to 5-0 and had McDaniels looking like a boy genius.

Yes, it was huge for McDaniels to beat his former boss and team. But don't act like it.

He was often demonstrative on the sidelines. He yelled at his offensive linemen, for all the NFL Network audience to hear, in a win against the New York Giants. And he lambasted defensive coordinator Mike Nolan on the headsets as Indianapolis Colts' quarterback Peyton Manning was dissecting the Denver defense for a quick, 21-0 lead in a late-season loss.

McDaniels' temperamental style, his combativeness, is why he quickly lost his team. The Broncos went from 6-0 to 8-8 and out of the playoffs in 2009. The next year, McDaniels was fired after a 3-9 start.

As he gets ready to become the new head coach of the Indianapolis Colts, McDaniels said keeping his emotions in check is something he has self-evaluated and addressed.

"It sure is," McDaniels said Thursday in his final pre-game interview as the Patriots' offensive coordinator. "I think you learn this sometimes the hard way. Being able to maintain calm and poise, set a great example for others in that situation is really imperative from that position of leadership. Impulsivity is not a great thing when you're in that spot. You have to do a good job of keeping a level head, making good decisions.

"There's going to be adversity every single Sunday in our game. It doesn't matter what we're talking about: An injury, a call, something didn't go right. Having enough patience, having confidence and trust in the process you try to put in place, that's what important.

"Not making fast decisions. Not reacting to the moment. I think I've tried to do that as I've moved forward, I really do."

Nate Solder would agree. The Patriots' left tackle was playing for the same position for the University of Colorado Buffaloes at a time when McDaniels was coaching the Broncos.

"There was a public perception of him that is totally inaccurate to the person he is," Solder said. "He is a phenomenal coach. He has always put me in the best position to be successful. He's a phenomenal person. He's a great family guy, he's a great person. He's reached out to my family. He's been very loving, he's been very caring.

"The perception I had when he was in Denver and the perception I have now are way different."

McDaniels was a Belichick disciple when the Broncos tapped him to be the Broncos' head coach in 2009. After failing as a head coach, McDaniels returned to run Belichick's offense in 2012 and this time, he studied as if he got to retake the test.

Grumpy as Belichick's personality may be during press conferences, he rarely loses his cool while coaching in games. He might chase down an official after a game, but he stays calm on the sidelines, even if all is not well.

"After I left, I came back and now I have a chance to look at him through a little bit of a different perspective, little bit of a different lens," McDaniels said. "Because when you're sitting there before you do that job, you really don't know things that go on, what that guy has to do, the hats he has to wear.

"Having an opportunity to do that and then coming back and watching him a second time has been really important for me. And I've learned a lot from him. He's been incredibly gracious with his time with me to try to help me in any way that he could. Not to just in preparation for another opportunity but in general. He's made me a better coach."

McDaniels has stayed calm as the Patriots offensive coordinator – a job he does very well. Of course, having Tom Brady at quarterback will help a coach keep his wits.

If Indy quarterback Andrew Luck can return healthy in 2018, McDaniels will be a far better head coach for the Colts than he was with the Broncos.

Super Bowl LII shows what a difference two years have made for Broncos

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN.com

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Just two seasons removed from a Super Bowl appearance, the Denver Broncos are now in a position where they have to dig out from a 5-11 season and try to rediscover their success. Meantime, the team they beat in the AFC Championship Game on the way to that title -- the New England Patriots -- will play for its second consecutive Super Bowl win Sunday.

The fall from their Super Bowl 50 win has been swift and painful. So much so that Broncos president of football operations/general manager John Elway has warned of the dangers of getting comfortable, and this past season went so far as to say the organization had gotten "a little bit soft."

As Elway has said this offseason: "Our goals have not changed for the Denver Broncos and what we want to do, and that's to compete for world championships. Now, we have to build towards that process."

The kind of process that has eluded the Broncos in each of the two seasons since Peyton Manning retired. And the kind of process that has Patriots coach Bill Belichick and quarterback Tom Brady trying to win their sixth Super Bowl together.

Josh McDaniels, whose stint as a head coach in Denver was a frustrating one -- he was fired with four games remaining in the 2010 season, just weeks before Elway was hired -- said Thursday that beyond Brady's stature as a Hall of Fame-bound quarterback, the Patriots' ability to turn the page from one season to the next has been key.

And as McDaniels is poised to be a head coach again -- he is expected to be introduced as the Indianapolis Colts' coach following Sunday's game -- he said it's a difficult and necessary thing to do for any team, including the Broncos. That's because it entails, somehow, quickly leaving a Super Bowl win behind, often at the expense of a celebration for something that is a career goal of most everyone in the league.

"It's a never-ending process regardless of what you achieved the year prior," McDaniels said. "And we attack the offseason -- you would never know in the middle of February what happened the last year in our building because we don't talk about it. We move to next event ... and I think that's a testament to Bill's drive.

"... And that may bother some people too, some people may want to enjoy it for a little while," he added. "But I think to keep doing it at a high level, eventually you've got to move from the last year."

Throughout the 2016 season, when the Broncos finished 9-7 and out of the playoffs, as well as during this past season's cave-in, several veteran players often lamented how the Super Bowl hangover never seemed to completely go away.

“But we’re a long way from that now,” linebacker Von Miller said before the players adjourned for the offseason. “... I think we have great leadership, but overall we have to come back ready to find that hunger and keep it as a team.”

McDaniels said when the Patriots players return for their first offseason conditioning work in April, it’s made very clear, much like when Belichick has deadpanned that he’s “moved on to Cincinnati” during the regular season, the new year has begun.

“When they come back in mid-April, it’s got to feel like a different year,” McDaniels said. “It’s 2018, it’s 2019 or whatever it is, I don’t think anybody has to chastise anybody, our focus, and everything that they’re hearing is about next season. And at some point the players just figure out it’s about next season.”

“... And you have so many different people in that squad meeting, that team didn’t win, that team is trying to make its name,” McDaniels added. “Bill does a great job of moving on, but he doesn’t do it in a way that disparages what you just did. He just moves on because the next year is important and if we don’t move on to that next year we won’t finish it the way we want to. You can’t wait until June, July or August to kind of turn the page because then it’s too late.”

McDaniels admitted some groups are more difficult to convince than others and that “we had some teams that were easy to do it and we’ve had challenges. That’s just human nature.”

Handicapping Broncos' chances of landing quarterback Kirk Cousins

By Troy Renck
KMGH
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Earlier this week after visiting Super Bowl 52's Radio Row, Kirk Cousins stood in line for Shake Shack. Approximately 915 miles away, Denver Broncos fans devoured rumors about the quarterback landing in the Mile High city.

The prospect of Cousins signing with the Broncos picked up velocity over a fascinating 48 hours. Washington acquired Kansas City's Alex Smith, eliminating any chance of Cousins returning. It leaves Cousins untethered as a free agent -- no transition or franchise tag to complicate the process for a salivating suitor.

Broncos players wasted no time with their full-court recruiting press. All-Pro linebacker Von Miller, who has spoken with Cousins, made his opinion clear. "He can take us over the edge," Miller told The Dan Patrick Show. Running back C.J. Anderson suggested general manager John Elway sign Cousins with his "car (dealership) money." Thursday, I asked linebacker Brandon Marshall if, like his teammates, he wanted Cousins: "Absolutely."

This much remains clear. The Broncos need a new starting quarterback. Without improvement at the position, the Broncos will bounce back about as well as a bowling ball dropped on the sidewalk. Cousins represents a significant upgrade, averaging 4,300 yards and 27 touchdowns over the past three seasons as a starter. During this stretch, he has not missed a game. He is durable, absorbing countless sacks, while playing behind a makeshift offensive line and, last year specifically, a depleted receiving corps.

Cousins has delivered eight fourth-quarter comebacks over the past two seasons. He embraces carrying a team, and features an edgy, Type-A personality desperately needed since Peyton Manning's retirement. Whether Cousins represents a good investment -- he is expected to pass Matthew Stafford as the NFL's highest-paid player, leaving him in line for roughly a five-year, \$135-million deal with \$93 million guaranteed -- is a fair question.

Can the Broncos sign Cousins and have enough money left over in the couch cushions to address needs along the offensive line, linebacker, cornerback and receiver? I believe if Cousins chooses Denver he will work with the Broncos, especially on his first-year cap hit, to allow for flexibility.

Yet, there remains no guarantee Denver becomes his next destination even if the odds are improving. Let's handicap the likely suitors, knowing there could always be a mystery team that emerges:

6. Buffalo Bills: The Bills own a playoff-caliber defense and a strong running game. Quarterback Tyrod Taylor took care of the ball, but never convinced the front office he could take care of business in the postseason. However, the Bills hired new offensive coordinator Brian Daboll, who is not from the West Coast philosophical tree. It would create an adjustment for Cousins. It's more likely the Bills draft a quarterback.

5. Cleveland Browns: The Browns possess \$103 million in cap space. They need a new face of the franchise, a fresh start after posting a 1-31 record over the past two seasons. Cousins has not dismissed the idea. He has roots in the Midwest. The Browns could shower him with money. Left tackle Joe Thomas admitted if Cousins turned them into a contender they would build a statue of him outside the stadium. The reality is Cousins has played in two playoff games in six seasons. He is 0-1 as a starter. It is difficult to see him wanting to rebuild.

4. Minnesota Vikings: The Vikings have three quarterbacks and might have none. Their trio -- Case Keenum, Sam Bradford, Teddy Bridgewater -- is not under contract. If Cousins wants to be in Minnesota, he would have to take less money. NFL folks believe Keenum sticks in Minnesota on a new contract.

3. Arizona Cardinals: Few teams have a greater need at quarterback than Arizona. Carson Palmer retired, and Arizona does not own a top draft pick. The Cardinals missed out on Alex Smith. The number of athletes who love living in the desert's warm weather remains well known. Arizona has a defense capable of winning in the tough NFC West. I can't rule them out, but they are not a favorite.

2. New York Jets: Beam Him Up, Captain Kirk, the backpage headline blared. The Jets have been looking for their Super Bowl champion quarterback since Joe Namath left. Rarely do signal-callers in their prime become available. At 29, Cousins represents a prize. And he knows new Jets offensive coordinator Jeremy Bates, who has ties to the Mike Shanahan offense in which Cousins excelled. The Jets can offer a decent young core of players with a strong defense and \$70 million in cap space. Is that enough? The Jets figure to be squarely in the mix.

1. Denver Broncos: Elway does not do patient. He missed on his drafted quarterbacks in Brock Osweiler and Paxton Lynch. He wants back under the velvet rope of the playoffs. The quickest path is a veteran quarterback. Elway changed the history of the organization when he landed Manning as a free agent. Can he pull it off again? The Broncos offer a strong defense, a legacy of winning and a locker room that wants Cousins. After the last few seasons of Washington's half-pregnant commitment, Cousins should enjoy being coveted and respected. Signing Cousins would free Denver to draft an offensive lineman in the first round as well.

To make it work, Cousins has to show slight elasticity, allowing for money left over to improve other weak spots. But there's a reason the Broncos are considered the favorite.

The speculation of Cousins landing in Denver will only increase over the next several weeks as free agency opens with its soft launch on March 12 with signings permitted to become official March 14 at 2 p.m. Elway never shies away from bold moves or comeback victories. This (offseason) drive could change the entire complexion of 2018 season and beyond.

For NFL players, racial profiling often personal

By Errin Hanes Whack and Fred Goodall

Associated Press

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A son who saw a police officer hold a gun to his father's head. A husband whose wife was pulled over driving a Bentley.

These unsettling scenes are among the stories from some of the NFL's marquee players, multimillionaires sharing tales of racial profiling by law enforcement. It is a troubling concern for people of color that has been at the center of the protests begun in August 2016 by former San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick.

The protests have waned, but the ongoing issue for players — and the black communities they come from — has not.

The Associated Press surveyed 56 of the 59 black players at last weekend's Pro Bowl game as part of its look at how African-American athletes have long used their sports platforms to effect social and political change. The AP asked the players whether they or someone they knew have ever experienced racial profiling.

All said yes.

"You can probably ask any black man out here and the answer is yes," said Jacksonville Jaguars defensive tackle Malik Jackson. "It's not like this is just starting today or a new thing. It's gone on for a long time. I think African-American men have been (victims) of racial profiling for a long time, by either the things they wear or just by the color of their skin."

In protesting, Kaepernick and others attempted to highlight the killings of unarmed black men by police, an issue brought into the national spotlight by Black Lives Matter activists after the shooting death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014. But the message was quickly overtaken by fans offended by the players' decision to kneel during the anthem.

"That was the main thing with the protests, to bring awareness so people know what's going on," said Jaguars cornerback Jalen Ramsey. "That's the first step to trying to fix the situation."

NFL players who have protested this season have been in the minority, and protests waned as the season went on. Some players are focusing on ways of addressing injustice off the field.

"If it affects that many people by taking a knee, just stand up, it's that simple," said Pittsburgh Steelers center Maurkice Pouncey. "Taking a knee during the anthem, in my opinion, changes nothing. Giving back to the community, being around the kids and people in poverty, I respect that."

For many players, the issue is not one of patriotism, but rather it is personal.

"At the end of the day, we're not trying to disrespect nobody," said Jaguars cornerback A.J. Bouye. "No matter what happens, I feel like somebody is not going to be happy, but we have a lot of respect for our country and respect for the game."

Bouye was among the players who recounted firsthand experience with racial profiling.

"My dad, when I was growing up ... gun to his head and everything," Bouye said. "That's why it hits close to me. We know that there are issues going on, and maybe some people don't want to bring awareness to them, but we'll find a way."

Tampa Bay Buccaneers defensive tackle Gerald McCoy said he, his father and his wife have all been victims of racial profiling — even after he became a successful athlete.

"It happened to my wife in the past couple of years," said McCoy, who was drafted in 2010. "She got pulled over. She was driving a Bentley. Nice neighborhood, and they pulled her over. All her stuff was right and they just didn't have any reason. It just wasn't right."

Black athletes have been finding a way to fight for social change for more than 100 years, from Jack Johnson to Muhammad Ali to Kaepernick.

Their fights have come at great personal expense, from alienation by fellow Americans to incarceration to the loss of their careers.

NFL players faced backlash of their own in 2017.

During the season, President Donald Trump referred to the players as "sons of bitches" and suggested they be fired. And Trump again condemned the protests in his State of the Union address on Tuesday night, juxtaposing the campaign against the patriotic efforts of a white child who has planted thousands of American flags on the graves of veterans.

A recent AP-NORC poll showed most Americans think refusing to stand for the national anthem is disrespectful to the country, the military and the American flag. Most African-Americans polled were more likely to approve of the players' protests. Only 4 in 10 Americans polled saw refusing to stand for the flag as an act of patriotism.

Players have pointed out that the protests are allowed under free speech, one of the cornerstones of American democracy. Martin Luther King Jr. framed civil disobedience as a commitment to conscience tied to founding revolts of our country like the Boston Tea Party.

The issue has loomed over the entire NFL season, which culminates with Sunday's Super Bowl. And a year into his presidency, Trump's Department of Justice has abandoned talk of police reform in favor of support for law enforcement and criticism of activists.

Of the players surveyed at the Pro Bowl, 42 said they would support the idea of the NFL going back to keeping teams in the locker room until after the anthem is played, a practice that was changed in 2009 — not that they believe they have much say in what decision league owners will make.

"The league does what the league does," said Jackson. "I don't have any say in it, so I don't care."

CSU students from Broncos Sports Management Institute give presentation

By Ben Swanson
DenverBroncos.com
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On Jan. 24, four students from the Denver Broncos Sports Management Institute at Colorado State University visited Sports Authority Field at Mile High, where they presented ideas to support fan engagement.

The topics at hand included how to attract millennials to attend games — as opposed to consuming games solely through technology — and creating new ways for fans to engage with the team on game days.

"The primary benefit to the students was receiving real world feedback and coaching from a room full of Broncos business executives, and the primary benefit to the Broncos was to gain some insights from college students who are bringing a different perspective to our approach to marketing and sponsorship initiatives," said Darren O'Donnell, Vice President of Business Development.

CSU students Carlee Craddock, Dean Klinkerman, Kevin Ware and Carrie Monroe answered these questions by implementing mobile technology into concessions sales and developing more game-day events and in-stadium promotions.

"We were proud to host the students from the Denver Broncos Institute at CSU," O'Donnell said. "The group did a great job in presenting many ideas to our team on topics like enhancing our game day experience for fans, marketing promotions and technology in sports."

The presentation was part of the Broncos' partnership with CSU, which gives students in the program first-hand experiences learning from team employees through trips to the Broncos' offices or via visits from team employees to the school. Ultimately, the students can graduate with greater knowledge of how a major sports team like the Broncos works and the experience can help them make their own path in the industry.

NFL players could have a higher risk of death and brain disease, study indicates

By Karen Weintraub

USA Today

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Playing professional football may increase the risk of dying young — or at least of suffering from brain disease.

A new study from the Journal of the American Medical Association compares two groups of football players: those in the National Football League in the 1980s and those who were replacement players during the three-game strike of 1987.

About 5% of the NFL players had died by about age 49, while it took another six years for the replacement players to reach that mark.

“Six years is a big difference in life expectancy,” said Donald Redelmeier, a professor of Medicine at the University of Toronto, who reviewed the study but was not involved in it.

Although researchers say the finding was not statistically significant, meaning it could have happened by chance, the study contradicts earlier studies that found that NFL players live longer than other members of the public.

The study also comes as the NFL and other sports organizations have enhanced their concussion protocols after more cases of the degenerative brain disease chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) have come to light.

NFL players are far from average, Redelmeier said. Other people of the same age and race as the players are probably less fit and earn less money. But professional football players are also known for partying, and some have used performance-enhancing drugs, which might counter the benefits of wealth and fitness, he said.

Comparing the NFL athletes to replacement players is more realistic, Redelmeier said, praising the authors' work as “ingenious.”

About 900 men played as replacement players during the 1987 season, which became the basis of the movie *The Replacements*. Researchers compared them to men who had played in the NFL from 1982 to 1992, following them from the time of their retirements until late last year. Both groups are still mostly in their 50s, so only relatively few have died.

But far more of the men who had careers in the NFL are no longer living than those who played just a few games. “At any given time, their (NFL players') risk of death was 38% higher than replacement players,” said Atheendar Venkataramani, an assistant professor of medical ethics and health policy at the University of Pennsylvania, who led the research.

The finding is only suggestive, he said, because of the lack of statistical significance. He plans to continue to track the players to see whether the gap continues as the men age.

In a prepared statement, the NFL referenced the earlier studies that had found players lived longer than men in the general population: one that looked at those who played for at least five years from 1959 to 1988, and another that examined players who retired from 1986 to 2012.

“As with all new research on this topic, we will look at it closely to see what we can learn to better enhance the well-being of our current and former players,” the statement said.

The NFL Players Association did not respond to requests for comment.

The new study confirmed that long-time professional players did not get cancer more often than the replacement players and found that they actually died less often of heart disease. But NFL players did seem more prone to neurological problems and were more likely to have died in car crashes or other accidents that might be related to poor judgment or reflexes — a finding which is also supported by earlier research.

Among the NFL players in the new study, 5% died of neurological disorders, such as amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, known as ALS, and nearly 14% in transportation accidents. None of the replacement players died from neurological problems and only 5% in crashes.

This suggests that trauma from head injuries might be shortening players’ lives — or at least dramatically changing them, said Steven DeKosky, a professor of neurology and neuroscience at the University of Florida College of Medicine, who was not involved in the study but wrote an accompanying editorial.

DeKosky said he’s not yet ready to believe that playing ball long term takes years off someone’s life. The lack of statistical significance in the study, he said, means the researchers got “close but no cigar.”

But he is concerned about the “ridiculously high rate” of neurological diseases among the long-term NFL players, likely caused by repeated blows to the head during practice and games over many years.

There’s long been a link seen between professional athletes and ALS, a fatal brain disorder often called Lou Gehrig’s Disease after the Yankees first baseman who died from it in 1941. But DeKosky said he was shocked to see such a high rate among the NFL players — 40-times higher than he would have expected.

“There is something about multiple (head) trauma that clearly induces change in the nervous system,” he said. In addition to ALS, some players suffered from a Parkinson’s disease-like syndrome that causes severe movement problems, and others from CTE.

DeKosky, who has been deeply involved in CTE research, said he is curious about why some people with the same history of brain injury might be fine, while others develop movement disorders and still others, dementia or ALS. Also, some players seem to struggle with neurological problems at a very young age, while others develop them decades after leaving the field.

He is hoping to follow current NFL players going forward to see whether the extra brain disorders seen in this study were a fluke or whether professional players really are at substantially higher risk than the general public and to learn more about those injuries.

One bit of good news from the study: None of the replacement players suffered from brain disorders, suggesting that amateur players and high school and college athletes are not at substantially higher risk than the general public, DeKosky said.

Where does the NFL go after a season of division

By Mark Leibovich
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They could have been any two billionaire schmucks taking an evening stroll through Manhattan. Robert Kraft and Arthur Blank, the owners of the New England Patriots and the Atlanta Falcons, respectively, had met up at the Plaza Hotel, where Kraft keeps an apartment. It was a warm night in August, and they decided to forgo the usual limo and head to dinner on foot.

Passers-by who recognized them on the street expressed mild surprise that Kraft and Blank, the rival owners from last February's Super Bowl, would be seen together. Kraft and Blank shared a few laughs over this. They are in fact close friends of similar age (Blank is 75, Kraft 76), background (observant Jews from the Northeast, Blank from Queens and Kraft from Brookline, Mass.), means (multiple billions) and tastes (bespoke suits, younger women). But few bonds run deeper than shared association in this most exclusive club of American fat cats, the 32 magnates who own N.F.L. franchises.

Blank needed to unburden himself of a minor beef with Kraft. It involved the aforementioned Super Bowl LI. After the Falcons blew a late 28-3 lead over the Patriots and lost in overtime, and "28-3" entered the lexicon of football taunts, Kraft ordered exactly 283 diamonds embedded into each of the 10-karat white gold Super Bowl rings he commissioned for the Patriots. Blank, who bought the Falcons in 2002, mostly took the loss and the attendant trolling in stride. But the ring stunt bothered him. He found it unnecessary and tacky. "I said to Robert, 'You didn't have to do the 28-3 in the ring,'" he told me recently. "It kind of pissed me off."

But Blank and Kraft had more important matters to discuss. They had come to New York in their capacities as members of the N.F.L.'s compensation committee, the six owners charged with determining the salaries of the league's top executives. They would be meeting for dinner in a private room at the Midtown restaurant Patroon to iron out the details of a new five-year contract extension for the N.F.L. commissioner, Roger Goodell. By the terms of the agreement that had been in the works for several months, Goodell stood to make as much as \$200 million by 2024 if the league hit its financial targets.

But some other owners had begun grumbling about the deal, at first in private and then very much in public. After all, Goodell would earn this spectacular paycheck despite the fact that, of late, he always seemed to be presiding over some self-inflicted fiasco, and despite the creeping notion that the once-mighty N.F.L. had been operating in a baseline state of turmoil in recent years, if not outright decline. There had been a two-year drop in television ratings, which the league has blamed on factors like the attention-devouring 2016 presidential campaign and a proliferation of "cord-cutting" viewers disrupting the broadcast model (TV accounts for 60 percent of the N.F.L.'s total revenue). But the dip could just as easily have reflected more existential threats to the league. There was the drumbeat of ominous new research about concussions and, with it, a drop in youth participation in football; regular testimonies from former stars about the sad state of their health; and posthumous diagnoses of degenerative brain disease (chronic traumatic encephalopathy, or C.T.E.).

And that was before the league embarked, in 2017, on its most discordant season in years, replete with player protests, fan furor over the protests and the highly unusual circumstance of an American

president using the country's most popular and profitable sport as ammunition in the country's culture wars. In the dozen years since Goodell became its commissioner, the juggernaut league had gone from being one of the most unifying institutions in America to the country's most polarizing sports brand.

It was debatable how large a share of the blame Goodell personally deserved for this trajectory — and Goodell, in any case, was not inclined to accept much of it. "I think it's a little more reflective of how somewhat divided our society is at this stage," he told me in early January. But division was the inescapable theme that came up in the two-dozen interviews I conducted with players, owners and league officials about a season in which sponsorships were jeopardized, boycotts were threatened, blacklists against players were suspected, tickets and jerseys were burned and ratings and attendance were down. "There's no question, this season has been probably unlike anything that I've been around," said Art Rooney II, president of the Pittsburgh Steelers, whose grandfather founded the team in 1933.

The N.F.L. loves to emphasize how football brings friends, families and communities together, and to present the game as an oasis clear of the rest of life's messiness — or "distractions," as coaches like to call such extraneous passions as politics. "We offer fans a respite from the trials and missteps of everyday life," Jerry Jones, owner of the Dallas Cowboys, says. That promise would evaporate abruptly in 2017, when the most potent oligarchy in American sports would have its power structure shaken, and arrive at the end of the season wondering: Was 2017 an anomaly or the future?

I went to see Roger Goodell at the N.F.L.'s headquarters at 345 Park Avenue, the morning after a sluggish docket of first-round playoff games in early January. The commissioner was sitting in his sixth-floor office, sipping water and battling a cold. Goodell, who is 58, wore a beige V-neck sweater and looked somewhat worn down but freshly worked-out; he had just come from a Pilates class at a studio not far from the office. It had been a "challenging" season, Goodell allowed — there are never "problems," only "challenges" for this commissioner — but every season has its issues. "Never has there been a period in our history where everything's been great," he said. "We've always had our challenges."

Goodell, the son of the former Republican senator from New York Charles Goodell, is a gifted political animal. He can come off as stiff and cautious in speeches and on TV — and can in fact be stiff and cautious in person too — but he was also clearly bred for public life, and adept at turning it on as necessary. He is a prodigious slapper of backs, squeezer of shoulders and knower of names. He laughs easily — maybe for real, or maybe not. He has also mastered the paramount political skill of prioritizing constituencies, none more so than the 32 N.F.L. team owners who employ him, the "membership," as they are known to one another. "You have to be able to deal with and get along with 32 different personalities," John Mara, the president and an owner of the New York Giants, told me. "We range from people like me who were born in a family business, and people who are self-made billionaires who think they know everything about everything."

Then there was that other billionaire — the one in the White House. From early in his presidential campaign, Donald Trump held up the N.F.L. as a symbol of the sissified and hypersensitive culture he was running against: "You used to see these tackles, and it was incredible to watch, right?" Trump said at a campaign rally in Nevada in early 2016. "But football has become soft like our country has become soft."

Culture-war critiques of the N.F.L. were previously mostly confined to the left. Liberals were far more prone to suspicion of football for its violence, militaristic sensibility and over-the-top displays of

patriotism. But Trump struck a throbbing nerve on the right, making the N.F.L. an improbable symbol of permissive leadership and political correctness.

Seven months after Trump's Nevada rally, and just in time for the general election, Colin Kaepernick, the quarterback for the San Francisco 49ers, took to kneeling during the national anthem before preseason games: a protest, he explained, against police brutality endured by African-Americans and other minorities. It was only a matter of time before Trump served up the vegan Kaepernick as red meat to his base. "The N.F.L. is way down in their ratings," Trump taunted the league at a campaign rally in Greeley, Colo., a week before the election. He said that politics was "a much rougher game than football" and also more exciting. "We've taken a lot of people away from the N.F.L.," Trump boasted. "And the other reason is Kaepernick — Kaepernick!"

Well before Kaepernick was even born, the N.F.L. had figured prominently in the future president's personal ledger of grievance and unreturned affection. Trump had wanted into the membership for years, even though his earlier foray into football — as the owner of the short-lived United States Football League's New Jersey Generals in the 1980s — ended disastrously, with the league's collapse. In 1984, he finagled himself a meeting with the N.F.L. commissioner at the time, Pete Rozelle, at the Pierre Hotel in New York, in which he told Rozelle he would do whatever it took to get himself into the league, according to an account of the meeting in "Football for a Buck," the sportswriter Jeff Pearlman's coming book on the U.S.F.L. Rozelle was not impressed.

Rozelle was Goodell's mentor and idol, almost from the day Goodell set foot at the league in 1982. Rozelle's dim view of Trump — whom he saw as a clown and a con man — trickled down to his protégé, though Goodell is careful never to share his views on Trump publicly. He has met Trump at least twice over the years, once at a Yankees game about 15 years ago and then a few years later at a small dinner gathering. Goodell found Trump to be pleasant, engaging and solicitous in those limited encounters — maybe because Trump was still, at the time, angling for a place in the membership. In 2014, he tried to buy the Buffalo Bills, only to have his bid passed over. After losing out on Buffalo, Trump lashed out at his owner friends — particularly New England's Robert Kraft — for not doing more to grease his entry into the league. He also told friends that the N.F.L., particularly Goodell, was intent on freezing him out, on account of his history with the U.S.F.L.

When I interviewed Trump — now a presidential candidate — for an article a year later, he was still nursing a grudge, and on a particular hobbyhorse about how unfairly the league had treated his "great friend" Tom Brady. The New England Patriots quarterback had recently been suspended by the league for four games over his supposed role in the football air-pressure scandal known as Deflategate. Trump knew I had recently written about the N.F.L. and Brady, and he proceeded to deride Goodell to me as a "weak guy," "a dope" and "a stupid guy," among other things.

Goodell comes from a notable Republican lineage — albeit of the mostly extinct Northeastern-moderate subspecies — and has donated to Republican candidates. But he is carefully diplomatic in his public politics: "It's interesting times we live in," was as much as he allowed himself to say in our interview. The politics of his league were another matter. When you look at the various constituencies that make up the N.F.L. "family," it's a wonder the center has held as long as it has. More than 83 percent of N.F.L. fans are white, according to a Reuters report citing a 2007 study, and fans are 20 percent more likely to be Republicans than Democrats. Nearly 70 percent of the players, meanwhile, are black, according to data from the Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport. N.F.L. owners, with a few exceptions, lean Republican; several of them donated to Trump's campaign, and some donated \$1 million apiece to his

inauguration committee. But unlike Trump, the N.F.L. cannot afford to play only to its base. It needs far more than just the predominately white, heavily male voters that compose Trump's hard-core coalition. It wants everybody in the football family.

Goodell was in Colorado on the Friday night in September when Trump, at a rally in Alabama, called on N.F.L. owners to fire players who knelt during the national anthem. "Get that son of a [expletive] off the field right now," Trump said. Joe Lockhart, the N.F.L.'s chief spokesman and former White House press secretary under President Clinton, called Goodell at 5:30 a.m. the following morning to discuss how to proceed.

Goodell's initial reaction was a mix of anger and resignation. The league's top executives — Goodell; Jeff Pash, the general counsel; and Tod Leiweke, the chief operating officer — divided up owners to call. The watchword was "unity": They should present a single front insofar as that would be possible. Owners and teams were encouraged to issue statements, emphasizing their support for their players. Nearly every team did, though very few called out Trump or even mentioned the president. Shahid Khan, the Jacksonville Jaguars' owner — a Pakistan-born Muslim and the only nonwhite owner in the N.F.L., as well as one of the donors to Trump's inauguration — joined his team on the field before the game and locked arms in a show of solidarity. Several other owners followed his lead.

Kaepernick's initial protests in 2016 had inspired roughly a dozen or so players to do the same or similar. But for all the media attention they received, the demonstrations had never reached a critical mass of players or prompted any great fan response. Trump's provocation in Alabama changed that. "The week before the president made his statement, four people knelt," Arthur Blank told me. "The president then said his thing, and then 400 people knelt." And even that response, Blank went on, showed signs of dying down within a few days — only to flare up again when Vice President Mike Pence waged (or staged) his own counterprotest, leaving an Oct. 8 Indianapolis Colts game he was attending at taxpayer expense after a group of visiting San Francisco 49ers knelt during the anthem. "A dumb thing," Blank called Pence's action.

But Trump and Pence most certainly appealed to a vocal subset of N.F.L. fans. They booed kneeling players and called for boycotts; teams argued politics among themselves, and some former players criticized current ones. ("It's the first time I've ever been ashamed to be a Patriot," the longtime New England lineman Matt Light said after a dozen current Patriots took a knee.) "No one was expecting this to happen, and it was hard to see coming," the Steelers' Art Rooney told me. "I think there was no question it hurt the league."

Certainly these episodes went well beyond "distraction," which itself became a term of offense among protesting players. "When people are doing things for kids or natural disasters, nobody considers that a 'distraction,'" Malcolm Jenkins, the Philadelphia Eagles defensive back, told me this week. "It's only when you're talking about racism or police brutality, all of a sudden those things are uncomfortable." Russell Okung, an offensive tackle for the Los Angeles Chargers, said that the whole sequence of events — begun by Kaepernick, propelled by Trump — had turned the notion of "distraction" into something that could in fact usher in a new period of activism in sports. "Never has our generation been presented with these historic choices," Okung told me. There could be ramifications inside what has traditionally be an iron-fisted hierarchy inside the N.F.L. That's the nature of movements: They don't necessarily respect boundaries.

As with so many things involving Trump, the president's cannonball into the middle of a relatively contained pool of player protest set off waves in all directions. In the absence of any substantial backlash to the initial Kaepernick-led wave of demonstrations, the N.F.L. could at least tacitly endorse the players' right to use their platform. But then suddenly not only the president of the United States but also a significant share of Americans were saying "Stand up and stick to sports." It moved the whole argument onto much more historically explosive — and, in a league where the owner-player divide is also largely a white-black divide, racially charged — grounds. "You guys are cattle, and we're the ranchers," the former Dallas Cowboys president Tex Schramm famously told the Hall of Fame offensive lineman and players' union leader Gene Upshaw during a collective-bargaining negotiation in 1987. The line — oft-quoted to this day — encapsulates both the authority structure of the N.F.L. and an autocratic view held by most of the "ranchers" and many of the paying customers. More recently, during a tense owners' meeting at the height of the anthem protests in October, the Houston Texans' owner, Bob McNair, said: "We can't have the inmates running the prison," according to an ESPN report. Most people construed the remark as an insult with clear racial overtones against protesting players, nearly all of whom were African-American. (McNair later apologized and claimed that the "inmates" he was referring to were not the players but executives at the league office.)

When I asked Goodell whether he or anyone on his staff had any communication with the White House, back-channel or otherwise, he smirked (I took this as a no). "Our focus is on what we do," he said. "Our focus is on the game itself." Nevertheless, owners and league officials close to Goodell said he was more supportive of the protesting players than they would have expected. He resisted pressure to enforce a "stand for the anthem" mandate from more conservative owners — the Dallas Cowboys' Jerry Jones and the Washington Redskins' Daniel Snyder among them. Goodell spent hours listening to players' concerns and meeting with members of the N.F.L. Players Coalition, a newly formed advocacy group dedicated to the racial-justice issues that prompted the anthem protests. The league pledged to the coalition that it would donate \$89 million over seven years to social-justice organizations. That was less than half what Goodell's new salary could bring him in just five years, but the commissioner still drew considerable praise from players who were critical of him in the past. "I was in two meetings with Roger, and I felt like he was sincere in what he was trying to do," Eric Winston, an offensive tackle for the Cincinnati Bengals and the president of the N.F.L. Players Association, the players' union, told me. "In hindsight you can always do more, but I do think he has done a very admirable job."

In conversations with owners, Goodell expressed grudging admiration for Kaepernick (at least until he sued the league in October, claiming collusion on the part of the owners to keep him from playing for another team). If nothing else, he respected Kaepernick's willingness to stand on principle and take an unpopular position. Goodell's father had done the same in breaking with a Republican president over Vietnam, and it had cost him his job; the previously friendly Nixon White House turned against him and helped to defeat him in his 1970 re-election campaign. Goodell keeps a copy of the Vietnam Disengagement Act, the bill his father sponsored to end the war, on the wall of his office. He fashions himself a similarly strait-laced man of principle — though principle is a tricky business for an N.F.L. commissioner with many constituencies (and principles) to consider.

If nothing else, Goodell and the players share a boss: the owners. With some exceptions, they are still, in the main, a geriatric boys' club: a mix of old money and new, sweethearts and criminals, men of enlarged ego and prostate. They are secure in the one position in the N.F.L. that is answerable to no one. They are subject to no re-election campaigns, recall elections or term limits. "I own this football team," the 49ers' owner, Jed York, felt compelled to remind a group of reporters after firing his general manager and third coach in three years after the 2016-17 season. "You don't dismiss owners." The

membership are coveters of high-profile properties who nevertheless generally avoid the spotlight. In most cases, they prefer to let their “football people” — their players and coaches — do the talking. They view themselves as higher-order sportsmen, concerned with the lofty business of legacies.

But the anthem protests dragged certain owners into a spotlight they would otherwise be reluctant to occupy. It forced them to take a public position on a matter where any position would anger a lot of people, be they ticket-holders or players. York himself would emerge as part of a newer, younger and more progressive faction of the membership — outspoken in support of N.F.L. initiatives promoting social justice and community-action causes, and one of the few owners to address reporters during the contentious October meeting in New York, when the owners gathered to discuss the kneeling protests.

“Ultimately, social justice is not a political issue,” York said, holding court in the lobby of the Conrad Hotel in Lower Manhattan. Far from distancing himself from 49ers players that protested, York embraced them. He took pride that it was his team that employed the player who started it all. (Kaepernick opted out of the final year of his contract with the 49ers last March; the team’s general manager, John Lynch, said he would have been released for reasons unrelated to the protests regardless.) “I don’t want to take a bow and say that we did something great and special,” York said. “It happened to start with us. But it started with Colin. And I give Colin so much credit, so much respect for doing something that he knew was going to create backlash.”

The Falcons’ Arthur Blank, too, was generally considered an ally of the players. A few days after Pence’s walkout in Indianapolis, I met Blank in the family office he keeps in Buckhead, the suburban Atlanta neighborhood. Blank is known for his sleekly tailored suits and the pride he takes in them. “I say to the players, ‘You put your uniform on every Sunday, the owner should, too,’” Blank said as he slurped up the last noisy drops of a massive Nutella milkshake he had brought in from a nearby Steak ‘n Shake.

Blank had issued one of the stronger statements in response to Trump, though like the other owners’, it did not mention him specifically. “Creating division or demonizing viewpoints that are different than our own accomplishes nothing positive,” Blank had said. As for the players’ protest, Blank told me when we met: “A lot of what they’re protesting in my view is very legitimate.” When Trump weighed in as he did, he said, “it became a manhood issue” for many of the teams — “or in some cases a brotherhood issue.” He wondered whether Trump’s attacks on the N.F.L. were motivated by “real issues,” or whether they were just “distracting from real issues or other issues having to do with the country.”

Blank’s relative outspokenness also reflects the demographic makeup of his customers. The Falcons’ season-ticket base is 40 percent African-American — a figure that could very well be higher than that of any professional sports team in America. Likewise, Kaepernick’s 2016 protest, and York’s vocal support for it, were bound to receive a more sympathetic hearing in liberal San Francisco than they would have in, say, Dallas, home of the Cowboys and dominion of Jerry Jones.

A devilish Arkansas wildcatter who owns the league’s most valuable team, Jones, 75, fashions himself the biggest, swingiest member of the membership. He likes to make his big opinions known about how the league should be run. For years, while generally supportive of Goodell, Jones had maintained that the league office had become bloated, its top executives overpaid. His feelings were hurt when Blank chose five owners not named Jerry Jones to serve on an expanded version of the compensation committee last year.

At the time, Jones had otherwise been feeling rather pleased about his elevated place in the football universe. In August, he was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in Canton, Ohio, an honor Jones had coveted. He celebrated with a blowout party at Glenmoor Country Club in Canton, under a huge white tent, fit for a circus. Cowboys cheerleaders, dressed in gold, flanked the entrance to welcome the arrivals. Justin Timberlake performed and declared from the stage that “the greatest owner in the history of sports is being honored tonight.” Cocktail napkins were printed with inscrutable “Jerryisms,” memorable lines uttered by Jones over the years. (“You don’t have to spend a lot of time going over and kind of circumcising the mosquito,” he once proclaimed in an apparent critique of overthinking.)

Goodell was among the guests, and he greeted Jones with a hug. He did not happen to mention a piece of looming business the commissioner knew would put a damper on Jones’s bar mitzvah weekend. A few days later, the N.F.L. would announce it would be suspending Ezekiel Elliott, the Cowboys’ star running back, for the first six games of the 2017 season following accusations of assault from a former girlfriend. (Elliott was never charged.)

Jones was not happy with this verdict, to say the least. When the commissioner called with the news, Jones promised, in so many words, to make Goodell’s life a living hell. Coming from a protégé of Al Davis, the infamously oppositional and litigious Oakland Raiders owner, this was not an empty threat.

Jones never raised strong objections to the particulars of Goodell’s new contract until the Elliott decision came down, three members of the compensation committee told me. But after the decision, Jones swiftly set about trying to undermine Goodell’s deal. He got in Blank’s ear so frequently about the contract that Blank eventually gave Jones an adjunct role on the compensation committee — but it was a nonvoting position, with limited influence.

So Jones set about establishing himself as an opposition government to Goodell. He told at least two owners that he represented a silent majority inside the membership, giving voice to a building frustration among owners over the commissioner’s leadership. Jones tried to rally support to not only scuttle Goodell’s new contract but also, as some owners interpreted it, topple him altogether. He hired the powerhouse litigator David Boies, and in a conference call with members of the committee, Jones vowed to sue them all if they went forward with Goodell’s new deal.

Jones also became more and more direct in his disapproval of how the N.F.L. was handling the protests. He tore into the Clinton alum Joe Lockhart, whom he believed had been too aggressive in his response to Trump’s attacks on the league — and disrespectful to the president himself. “Everyone should know, including the president, this is what real locker-room talk is,” Lockhart said in a September conference call with reporters. It was a clear shot at Trump’s attempt to explain away a leaked “Access Hollywood” video, in which he infamously described grabbing women by their genitals without their consent, as “locker room talk” during the 2016 campaign.

A week and a half after Trump’s Alabama speech stirred players to protest en masse, Jones announced that any Cowboys player who did not stand during the national anthem would not take the field. “If there’s anything that is disrespectful to the flag, then we will not play,” Jones said. This was widely deemed unhelpful by many at the league office and fellow owners struggling to quell the issue, and Goodell, too. “I think Roger’s feeling on it was that any ultimatum would only prompt a larger protest if you attempt to enforce it,” the Giants’ John Mara told me. Some owners, like Jones and Washington’s Snyder, may have believed Goodell should have “put the hammer down,” Mara said. “But I think most of us believed that would cause more problems than it would have solved.”

Not surprisingly, Jones's threat to would-be kneelers also caught the attention of Trump, who promptly tweeted his praise for the Cowboys owner: "A big salute to Jerry Jones, owner of the Dallas Cowboys, who will BENCH players who disrespect our Flag. 'Stand for Anthem or sit for game!'" This was a week and a half after Trump advertised that he had spoken to Jones ("Jerry is a winner who knows how to get things done"). If there's one thing Trump understands, it's how to manipulate needy billionaires. In addition to being probably the two most powerful, successful and visible owners in the league, Jones and Kraft share a basic insecurity, and also something of a rivalry. They compete for alpha-dog status within the membership, for Super Bowl rings (Kraft has five, Jones three) and Hall of Fame gold jackets (Jones 1, Kraft 0). Both men also prize the limelight and the company of celebrity friends. Both go way back with Trump, and it could not have been lost on Jones that Trump so conspicuously cozied up to Kraft during the presidential campaign — and even more so after Trump won the presidency and Kraft's Patriots won their fifth Super Bowl last February. Within a few days of the game, Kraft joined Trump and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe of Japan for a private dinner at Mar-a-Lago.

Some of Jones's fellow owners, meanwhile, had begun describing Jones as the N.F.L.'s own version of Trump: a big-talking, attention-seeking billionaire showman who was easily dismissed as a carnival barker. When I asked Jones about this comparison last spring, he was clearly thrilled. Trump's ascent, he said, "is one of the great stories in America. And let me tell you this," he went on: "The president ain't no joke. He's got as good a chance to be right as any of them."

The owners' final scheduled meeting of the season, in early December at a Four Seasons outside Dallas, looked for a while as if it would be a Texas showdown. As it turned out, all the major issues with Goodell's contract were resolved, and the contract was actually signed, before anyone got to Texas. Jones did deliver a stemwinder of a speech in an owners-only session, complaining that the ranchers should have more say in how the league was run. But his message appeared lost on most of the room. "Jerry, you just spoke for about 40 minutes, and I have no idea what you're talking about," Kraft said after Jones finished.

It was possible, even likely, that Jones could have built a formidable coalition of owners against Goodell before the season — several of them had grown frustrated with aspects of his leadership — and could have leaned on him harder to be more combative with players over their protests. But by December, most of the membership had grown weary of Jones's antics: his threat to sue if he did not get his way; his perceived grandstanding over the anthem protests; his self-appointment, during the contentious owners' meeting in October, as the league's "senior owner."

Everyone pretty much agreed that it was time to end this chapter and move on to the final weeks of the season. In a hallway interview, Blank played down differences with "my good friend Jerry." The Colts' owner, Jim Irsay, praised Jones as "a Texas gentleman." In a brief news conference afterward, Goodell was asked if he took Jones's rebellion personally. "Do I look like I take it personally?" Goodell replied. No one quite knew how to answer that. "Jerry, do I look like I take it personally?" Goodell said, pointing to Jones, who was standing behind him and didn't seem to know how to answer that either. Either way, \$200 million can buy a lot of therapy.

When I visited Goodell in his office a month later, his demeanor betrayed a mix of relief, fatigue and a perhaps surprising measure of self-satisfaction. After all, so much vulnerability in the league had been revealed this season. When I suggested as much, Goodell assumed a seen-it-all-before jadedness. "Remember, I came into the league in 1982," Goodell told me. "We were facing litigation about the

Raiders move,” from Oakland to Los Angeles. “We were on strike for nine weeks. There was a competing league. We had a lot of issues going on.”

By comparison, he said, 2017 had merely been a year of “transition.” Discussing his dealings with the N.F.L. Players Coalition, he enthused about the “unprecedented dialogue” between players and owners. “One of the players said, ‘We’re sitting here not in a locker room, not on a field,’” Goodell told me. “‘We were sitting in a board room and dealing with each other as partners.’ That understanding and listening was remarkable, and really a powerful thing for us as a league.”

It’s easy to be cynical about this — to dismiss the league’s financial commitment to community and social-justice initiatives just as a way to placate the agitators. A group of players, led by San Francisco’s Eric Reid — one of Kaepernick’s original allies in the anthem protests — recently left the coalition, believing the commitment was just that. Kaepernick remains unemployed. Other reports have trickled out of lower-profile players who demonstrated feeling their job prospects were diminished. There is no question that future protesters in the N.F.L. protest at their career peril. What happens when, say, an Eric Reid, a mainstay at safety for the 49ers for the last five seasons, becomes a free agent this winter? “How do we make sure this doesn’t happen to anyone else?” Okung, who also left the coalition, asked me, referring to Kaepernick’s situation. “Reparations need to be made in some manner.” Still, many players and owners I spoke to seemed to give Goodell the benefit of the doubt. “I think he handled things as well as you could expect in this situation,” Mara told me.

But while Goodell and the N.F.L. may have survived 2017, the commissioner and his league seem to be at the mercy of very uncertain and uncontrollable events in the future. The conflicts of 1982 that Goodell evoked might have been more dramatic and certainly “distracting” — that year’s regular season was shrunk to nine games on account of a players’ strike. But they were also more easily resolved. The dilemmas of 2017 were more profound: There was no obvious common ground between Jerry Jones’s vision of the football field as a “respite” and Kaepernick’s vision of it as a platform. The players weren’t kneeling to gain leverage or extract donations, or anything else Goodell or anyone in the league could give them. They were trying to make themselves heard. “I talked to a lot of players who were saying, ‘Man, I don’t need to be quieter, I need to be louder,’” the Bengals’ Eric Winston, the union president, told me. “That to me was the key takeaway from this season.” And what happens if an owner like Jones decides to take matters into his own hands and “fire” players if their protests continue?

“Our focus is on what we do,” Goodell said, punting, when I asked him to speculate. “And always trying to figure out the best way to get ahead of issues and focusing on what we can control.” I pushed further: What happens if next season comes around and a handful of players are still kneeling and protesting? What if Trump tries to rekindle the issue, as you figure he’d love to do, just in time for the 2018 midterm elections — or, for that matter, fires off a tweet calling on viewers to turn off the Super Bowl in the event that any players kneel, prompting the players to do exactly that?

“You’re dealing with hypotheticals,” Goodell said. “You can come up with five scenarios of what could happen.”

Football is always generating new scenarios. That’s part of what makes it so great and so fascinating. But not all scenarios stay between the sidelines — or stay hypothetical.

Neal Dahlen, 77, has 77 cents in his pocket — and seven Super Bowl rings

By Sam Farmer

L.A. Times

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The rings are tucked away. Slipping them on would require Neal Dahlen driving to the bank near his home in Aurora, Colo., and retrieving them from a safe-deposit box.

Dahlen isn't the type to show off. The retired NFL executive would prefer to stay in the background as a living, breathing — and golfing — Trivial Pursuits answer.

He's the answer to question: Who is tied with New England Patriots Coach Bill Belichick for the most Super Bowl rings, with seven?

"I've got nine grandchildren," Dahlen said by phone. "They were excited about the rings. They've taken pictures with them. For me, it's more than the rings, it's the memories."

And does Dahlen have memories. As a front office executive, his teams were 7-0 in Super Bowls. He won five with the San Francisco 49ers and two with the Denver Broncos. Not bad for a guy who was a football coach at Hillsdale High in San Mateo for 17 years before getting a job in the NFL.

"When I was coaching, I was a fan of 49ers football and I'd seen enough ups and downs, so I knew each year was a new season unto itself and there's no guarantee you'll ever get back to the Super Bowl again," he said.

His favorite of the seven rings was his fifth with the 49ers, commemorating San Francisco's 49-26 victory over San Diego in Super Bowl XXIX.

"That's the one that looks best to me," he said. "It's a beautiful ring with five Lombardi Trophies on it. But they're all nice."

He began working part-time for the 49ers in 1979, and eventually took on more responsibilities. He was with that organization until 1996, when he was hired as director of player personnel for the Broncos. He was promoted to general manager in 1999, moved to director of football administration in 2002, and retired the following year.

Even some of his former players are unaware of his Super Bowl bounty.

"Wait, Neal has seven rings?" said legendary Broncos running back Terrell Davis, informed of that this week. "That's amazing."

He gets no argument from Dahlen on that.

"I attribute my good fortune to three key elements: Joe Montana, Steve Young and John Elway," he said, listing the Hall of Fame quarterbacks who led those triumphant teams.

Belichick has a chance to claim the record outright Sunday when the Patriots play the Philadelphia Eagles in Super Bowl LII at U.S. Bank Stadium in Minneapolis.

Belichick has won a record five rings as coach of the Patriots, and two as an assistant coach with the New York Giants. A year ago, before New England's comeback win over Atlanta in Super Bowl LI, his four rings equaled those of Pittsburgh's Chuck Noll. Green Bay's Vince Lombardi, who won the first two Super Bowls, also won six NFL championships before the Super Bowl era.

"If [Belichick] gets the record, he's certainly deserving of it," Dahlen said. "Life goes on. Whether or not you have a record for a certain amount of time, you expect it to be broken at some point."

Surely, the men have a similar mentality about their jobs.

"You don't stop to think about these things for very long," Dahlen said. "In the business, you just think about the next game. After you win the Super Bowl, you smile that evening, and the next morning you're thinking about what you have to do for the next season. That's what makes it beautiful, because you don't dwell on it."

Besides, Dahlen is perfectly happy sticking with seven rings. It's poetic, in fact.

"When I was a kid, Mickey Mantle was my baseball hero, and he wore No. 7," Dahlen said. "And along the way, when I was a high school coach, before we ever won one Super Bowl, I always used to put seven coins in my pocket to start the day that came out to 77 cents. Seven coins, 77 cents, and we ended up with seven Super Bowl rings. It was a coincidence, but it's fun."

Sunday, he'll be watching the game from the comfort of home. What 77-year-old guy has it better?

C.J. Anderson: It would be huge for Kirk Cousins to come to Denver

By Josh Alper
Pro Football Talk
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Von Miller isn't the only Broncos player trying to recruit quarterback Kirk Cousins to Denver.

The linebacker made the rounds in Minneapolis on Wednesday doing what he could to make the case that the Broncos are the right landing spot for the impending free agent. Anderson pointed to wide receivers Emmanuel Sanders and Demaryius Thomas along with himself as players that would round out a better offense with a quarterback like Cousins at the helm.

"It would be huge having a guy like Kirk. Veteran guy, been through it. It would be huge to come to us, a veteran team," Anderson said on NFL Network. "We know some pieces are going to change, but if we can keep some of the pieces on our offensive end — myself, Emmanuel, DT — our offense can be what we want it to be."

Linebacker Brandon Marshall signaled the direction Broncos players want the team to take earlier this month and the copious amounts of airtime afforded by Super Bowl week have amplified the message. Other Broncos may take the same opportunity to let Cousins know he's wanted, although it seems unlikely that Paxton Lynch and Trevor Siemian will be in that group.