

# Did New England help the Broncos by keeping Tom Brady and trading Jimmy Garoppolo?

By Mark Kiszla  
Denver Post  
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It's too late to shut the gate after the horse is already gone, but it seems like the Broncos were left at the starting gate on two good quarterbacks: Jimmy Garoppolo and Alex Smith. Both were had on the cheap, and we are now looking at lesser options at much higher costs. Yuck.

Steve, Golden

Kiz: Yep, Smith and Garoppolo would've looked mighty fine wearing orange. But the chances of it happening? Zilch and none. Kansas City didn't want the twice-a-year headache that would have resulted from trading Smith to an AFC West rival, and New England shipped Garoppolo as far away as humanly possible from Tom Brady, by sending him all the way across the country and to the NFC. So look on the bright side. How many trips to the Super Bowl does Handsome Tom have left in his 40-year-old bones? Maybe Garoppolo could've extended the life of the Patriots' dynasty. What's bad for New England is good for Denver, right?

Kirk Cousins doesn't rhyme with Jake Plummer, but it sounds the same.

Dirk, pigskin poet

Kiz: Darn, wish I had thought of that quip. It's not only funny, but a pretty accurate description of Cousins.

Hey, Kiz. I just renewed my digital access to The Denver Post. And it's all because of you. No bull. I pay for The Post to read you. What about this? Colin Kaepernick comes to our Dusty Old Cowntown. He can do the run-pass option thing, and the price is right. If Elway blows 30 large on Cousins, I'm going to be ticked. Get Kaepernick, beef up the defense and the offensive line, and the Donkeys are right back in playoff contention.

Paul, Eagle

Kiz: Humble thanks for renewing your digital subscription. At a monthly rate that costs no more than an order of chicken wings at Mile High, every Broncos fan in the worldwide web should have one. I would like to see Kaepernick get a shot with the Broncos, for football reasons. Those who oppose the idea frequently cite political reasons. To each his own.

Oklahoma quarterback Baker Mayfield compiled his Heisman Trophy winning stats behind a great offensive line that gave him three or four seconds to throw most of the time. Oklahoma State quarterback Mason Rudolph had great success behind a leaky offensive line for two years and an average line as a senior. As a freshman starting his second game, Rudolph beat the Sooners.

David, bleeds orange

Kiz: Although you failed to mention Rudolph lost his final three games against Oklahoma, he might be an intriguing pick should he be there for the Broncos to take him in the second round.

And today's parting shot might hurt our old friend Carmelo Anthony almost as much as the dagger by guard Gary Harris that gave the Nuggets a 127-124 victory over the Thunder late Thursday.

Melo and his wife thought Denver was a bit hillbilly for them. Now he's stuck in the thriving metropolis of Oklahoma City. I think that's hilarious.

Brad, high on Colorado

# Reasons to worry? Against underdog Eagles, Patriots have plenty in Super Bowl LII

By Nicki Jhabvala

Denver Post

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As the Broncos marched to Super Bowl 50 and Peyton Manning neared the end of his 18th NFL season, the veteran quarterback began to let his guard down, if ever so slightly. His children, twins Marshall and Mosley, clung to his side at postgame news conferences. He reflected on his career more frequently, and relished it. His tales from years past were shared, often in detail.

Maybe there's something about No. 18.

Tom Brady, finalizing his 18th season and seeking yet another Super Bowl championship ring, has done the same. Early last week he shared a tale about the first time he tried chewing tobacco — it was in Minnesota when he was a boy, and it ended with him puking — and later he told of the two times he was bitten by dogs.

One was, again, in Minnesota at his grandfather's farm. The other time was at Gillette Stadium in Foxborough, Mass., where New England Patriots owner Robert Kraft allowed military training on the field.

"Some guys were kind of excited to see us walk out, so I kind of got close to all the guys, and I didn't realize there were dogs," Brady said. "Obviously those weren't like Labradors. These were like tough dogs. I raised my arms up over my head, and right when I raised my arms up, the dog jumped up, and I guess was going for my neck and the guy grabbed the dog back down and the dog got my thigh on the way down.

"I was standing there with a bunch of tough guys, and they all saw it. They're like, 'Are you OK?' I'm like, 'Yeah, of course I'm OK,' but I could feel the cut.'"

Brady is back in Minnesota, and he could leave with a grand story to tell about his record sixth Super Bowl victory. Or he could return to New England with a tale about being attacked again, this time by a pack of underdogs.

The Patriots, the reigning champions, are favored over a Philadelphia Eagles team that, despite having the No. 1 seed in the NFC, wasn't expected to make it here. A slew of injuries, including to star quarterback Carson Wentz, were supposed to thwart the Eagles' magical run.

But with second-year coach Doug Pederson, veteran quarterback Nick Foles, a stout defense and an offense that could be changing the game, the Eagles are a force.

"We've been the underdogs. I think that's the mentality of our football team. I think that's the mentality of our city, and I'm OK with that, I'm fine that," Pederson said. "I've been an underdog my whole career, my whole life. Everything I've done, I either haven't been good enough or something negative has been written or said, and I just blow it off. I have confidence in these guys and this team."

Built for adversity

The Eagles were supposed to be finished Dec. 10 when Wentz went down with a season-ending knee injury in a win over the Los Angeles Rams. The MVP in the making was the engine behind the Eagles' resurgence, and after losing offensive tackle Jason Peters and running back Darren Sproles, there was no way Philadelphia could withstand the loss of Wentz too. At least that was the conventional thinking.

But the Eagles' plan to transform a 7-9 team into a 13-3 NFC champion was still unfolding.

Pederson, a former backup to Brett Favre who joined the NFL coaching ranks with the help of Andy Reid, returned to Philadelphia in 2016 to clean up the mess left by Chip Kelly. In 2016, Pederson was a rookie head coach and Wentz was a star rookie whom the Eagles gave up a haul to draft No. 2 overall.

And over this past year, the Eagles have retooled and rebuilt around Wentz, with the acquisition of veteran wide receivers (Alshon Jeffery, Torrey Smith), a pair of veteran defensive linemen (Chris Long and Timmy Jernigan) and a couple of powerful backs (LeGarrette Blount and Jay Ajayi), among others.

"Two years ago the plan was to acquire a quarterback," Pederson said. "That was our first plan and we were able to do that in Carson. We do have a quarterback of the future with the Eagles, obviously. After that it was about building the talent around him and it's not just always offensive guys. It's about acquiring talent on defense."

But the Eagles also shrewdly signed Foles, a quarterback who was on the brink of retirement just two years ago but stayed in the game at the urging of Reid (there's a theme to this Super Bowl). Foles' two-year, \$11 million contract was questioned last year, but the Eagles' investment has proven to be wise.

Now few, if any, are questioning Philadelphia's tactics. In fact, some are following their lead.

Pederson has remained aggressive in his play-calling, no matter the names and numbers on the field, no matter the size of the Eagles' lead in games. No team converted more fourth downs (17) in the regular season than the Eagles, and only one — the Bills (101) — had more third-down conversions (96).

"From my standpoint, you get a little bit of that adrenaline going in those situations," Pederson said of his play-calling and success on fourth downs. "You make sure that you're calling the right play obviously to put our team in a good situation on third down, and ... I'm very confident in our guys, that they can execute in stay on the field and trusting the quarterback, whether we're throwing it, that he's going to make the right decision with the ball and staying on the field. Especially later in the game, maybe the second half, they can definitely be tense moments in those times."

In their blowout win over the Vikings in the NFC championship game, Pederson's oft-labeled "unorthodox" play-calling helped the Eagles paste 456 total yards and 38 points on the league's top defense, and helped Foles put on the finest performance of his career.

But Pederson hasn't remained steadfast in his ways. His black and white is gray, and changes shades with each game, each opponent.

The Eagles adapted in ways unfathomable after losing their all-pro left tackle, Pro Bowl running back, starting quarterback, starting middle linebacker (Jordan Hicks) and their special-teams ace (Chris

Maragos) to injuries. And while their coaching and overall talent have, in large part, carried them through, their system has too.

Keeping options open

Go back to Pederson and Reid. When Pederson retired from the NFL, he spent four years in high school coaching to test the waters. Just to see whether he liked coaching, and whether it liked him.

The experiment worked out as Calvary Baptist Academy, a private school in Shreveport, La., went 40-11 in four years with Pederson as its coach.

In 2009, Reid, then the Eagles' head coach, lured Pederson back into the NFL as Philadelphia's offensive quality control coach. In 2013, Pederson followed Reid to Kansas City as the Chiefs' offensive coordinator.

And that's when Pederson's introduction to run-pass options was made.

"Then coming here with Carson, obviously with his background and coming from it in college and Nick had been exposed to it under Chip Kelly in Philadelphia. You're seeing these young kids come out of these systems in college," Pederson said. "Now, I would say it's not all conducive to the National Football League. You still have to line up under center, you still have to go run the football and do some things that way. And it's a small part of our offense too. It's not the total package. Finding that Nick's strengths are just that — trying to limit the formations, limit the motions, limit the shifting, try to just allow him to see the defense and execute the play."

The Eagles ran RPOs more than any other team in the league this season (207), according to Pro Football Focus, allowing them to capitalize on the strengths of Foles and his backs. RPOs are essentially three-way plays: A quarterback can pass the ball, hand it to a running back or keep it himself and run with it.

"A lot of teams are running it," Patriots linebacker Kyle Van Noy said. "I think more media is paying attention in the playoffs with it. I felt like Kansas City runs a lot of it as well. The Rams, to name a few."

The gains are often small — the average gain on RPO passes is 5.1 yards, according to PFF — but they're plays built to eliminate a defender by confusion. The play did its job against the Broncos this season, when Jeffery beat cornerback Aqib Talib for a 32-yard touchdown in the Eagles' blowout win.

"I don't like the RPO. It's hard on defense and it's not fair," Broncos coach Vance Joseph said with a laugh at the Senior Bowl recently. "It's part of our game. For a defensive back, it's a conflict. Do I play run or do I play pass? You watch Aqib in the Philly game. He played run. It was pass, so it's tough."

Though Pederson emphasizes RPOs comprise only a fraction of the Eagles' offense, they're key components nonetheless, especially in the wake of Wentz's injury. According to PFF, Foles has completed 93.8 percent of his passes on RPO plays this season (playoffs included) compared with 61.5 percent on non-RPO passes. Coupled with the Eagles' menacing defensive front, the RPOs give them a pair of critical weapons to counter the Patriots, who were burned four times on the same RPO used by the Jaguars in the AFC championship game.

"I think the big thing is just the execution — our guys up front understanding the blocking scheme, me understanding who I'm reading, what affects the play, our receivers understanding their routes, their

adjustments, what they're looking for," Foles said. "So when everyone is on the same page and they have knowledge of what they're doing you can execute at a high level, you're going to have success and it adds that piece of the offense that is hard to defend. But once again, it's a piece of what we do."

But perhaps the biggest thing going for Philadelphia is its journey. After Wentz went down, the Eagles weren't supposed to fly past the Falcons in the divisional playoffs. They weren't supposed to rout the Vikings and their top-ranked defense in the conference championship.

And yet here they are, flaunting their plastic dog masks and embracing a mentality that has carried them through a strange, exciting season.

The Patriots may be perennial Super Bowl contenders. But this year, they just may get bit.

# Kirk Cousins on impending free agency: “At the end of the day, I want to win.”

By Nicki Jhabvala

Denver Post

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Kirk Cousins can confirm that he expects to be a free agent come March 14.

The veteran Redskins quarterback was a guest of SiriusXM NFL Radio here on Radio Row at the Super Bowl on Friday and admitted he was taken aback by the news of the Chiefs trading quarterback Alex Smith to Washington.

If fact, Cousins heard much the same way everyone else did.

“It was a surprise,” he said. “I was working out here in Minneapolis at my hotel and finished my workout, went over to my phone, had a lot of text messages and saw the news. Certainly hadn’t heard anything. But in this league and my story, I’ve learned that curveballs come all the time.

“I expect to be a free agent come March 14. We’ll see if that plays out, and if it does, it’s a unique opportunity I look forward to. Haven’t had a chance to pick where I’m going to play since 2007 when I chose to go to Michigan State. Looking forward to that opportunity.”

The trade and Smith’s four-year contract extension cannot be finalized until March 14, when the new league year begins. But the news sets up Cousins to land the most lucrative contract in NFL history, topping the five-year, \$135 million contract awarded to Matthew Stafford last season.

This was always a possibility for Cousins, who had already played on two franchise tags with Washington and was on pace to either get a third, sign a long-term deal with the club or hit the open market.

Now he’s high on the Broncos’ list of possible quarterback targets this offseason, as well as that of other quarterback-needy teams.

“At the end of the day, I want to win,” Cousins said. “I was talking with Coach (Charlie) Weis earlier and he made it clear, ‘Hey, go where you can win.’ That’s exactly what the plan is.

“Now ... there are a ton of variables that decide, ‘Do we think we can win?’ But that will ultimately be what makes the decision.”

Denver’s top appeal certainly would be its defense, which ranked among the league’s top five in total yards, passing yards and rushing yards allowed last season. Though it lost a veteran in safety T.J. Ward last year and could lose veteran cornerback Aqib Talib this year, the group still has one of the NFL’s top players in Von Miller and a stout secondary. But, barring offseason moves, it also has a pair of 1,000-yard receivers in Demaryius Thomas and Emmanuel Sanders and a Hall of Fame quarterback in John Elway making the football decisions.

Cousins' ties to Colorado already are strong as his agent is Mike McCartney, son of former Colorado coach Bill McCartney, and the man who drafted him at Washington in 2012 was Mike Shanahan, the former Broncos coach.

"Certainly you hire an agent for a reason so I let him do his job. But we communicate effectively," Cousins said. "He's done a great job for me. I trust him implicitly. Mike McCartney has been phenomenal since the day I hired him back in 2012. But in this league, the winning thing comes and goes. I mean, you look at what Jacksonville was able to do this year. Nobody expected that back in July, but they built a great team and they did a great job and went all the way to the AFC Championship game. So a lot can change year to year."

# Von Miller has an idea on how to beat the Patriots ...

By Nicki Jhabvala  
Denver Post  
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Von Miller has an idea on how to beat the Patriots.

“When we play the Patriots, this is the game plan,” he wrote for The Players’ Tribune:

“Sack Tom Brady.

“That’s it.

“End of article.

“We good here?

“Nah, nah ... there’s more to it than that, of course. But let’s start there because when you play the Patriots, getting to Tom Brady is where everything starts.”

Miller would know.

In nine meetings with the Patriots in his career — playoffs included — he has defeated Brady and Co. twice and both were en route to the Broncos’ Super Bowl 50 win in 2015-16.

There of course was the snow game, when Brock Osweiler played in place of an injured Peyton Manning and running back C.J. Anderson ran in the game-winning score in overtime. Miller had one of the Broncos’ three sacks of Brady in that 30-24 win.

Then there was the AFC championship two months later, a game that was perhaps the finest showing by Denver’s historically elite defense that year. Miller had 2.5 sacks and four of the team’s 17 hits on Brady. Miller also had an interception on a pass intended for Rob Gronkowski in the second quarter.

“Tom doesn’t like to get hit. No quarterback does,” Miller wrote. “So you gotta get to him ... a lot. You need two — not one, but two — legit pass rushing threats on the outside. It’s gotta be a two-sided rush because if it’s just one guy, the offense can shift, slide, double-team, chip — they can take him out of the game. Some of my best games against the Patriots came when I had DeMarcus Ware on the other side, because the offense can’t account for both of us without keeping an extra guy in to help. And that takes away one of Tom’s options downfield. So it forces them to pick their poison.”

Miller went on to record 2.5 sacks of Cam Newton in Super Bowl 50, was named Super Bowl 50 MVP, earned the biggest contract awarded to a non-quarterback and now sits behind only Reggie White (0.85) for most sacks per game in NFL history (0.80).

But in his seven losses to New England, Miller fell victim to the same thing the Falcons did in Super Bowl LI and the Jaguars did in this year’s AFC Championship.

“When we played the Patriots back in 2013, we were up 24–0 at halftime. I remember going into the locker room thinking, ‘That’s a wrap. There’s no way they’ll be able to come back,’” Miller wrote. “And then ... boom. They beat us 34–31 in overtime. I learned my lesson that day.”

But in the years since, Miller and the Broncos have provided a loose blueprint for defeating the Patriots. Problem is, few teams, if any, can replicate the defense Denver owned in 2015. And no pair of edge rushers can replicate Miller and Ware.

“Getting to Tom Brady is like trying to beat King Koopa in the final stage on Super Mario Bros,” Miller wrote. “Sometimes it feels impossible ... but it can happen.

“Mario can get it done.”

# Kirk Cousins 'would love it if Denver was interested'

By Mike Klis

9NEWS

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Kirk Cousins was walking briskly through the packed hallways at the Mall of America when his marketing handlers and mall security escorted him through a forbidden, back-room tunnel that led to a VIP-only lounge and service elevator.

Cousins stopped quickly to chat with Tennessee quarterback Marcus Mariota, then announced to his people they had two minutes to get to his next appointment. (He had been doing appointment-only radio and TV appearances to promote Bose, but otherwise Cousins, or at least his handlers, were not permitting interviews to those not on his marketing team's schedule.)

Dropping the name of his agent Mike McCartney gave the 9NEWS reporter, who had been trailing the Cousins entourage, a brief opening.

You're big in Denver, Cousins was told.

"I'm going to keep my eyes and ears open to anything and open," Cousins said in a friendly manner after pushing the elevator button and waiting for the enormous bank to arrive. "I'm in the information-gathering stage at this point."

The elevator arrived, Cousins, wearing a Tar Heel-blue sweater over a dress shirt, moved quickly to the rear. His handlers gathered around him.

Hope Denver shows interest?

"I would hope any team is interested and would love it if Denver is interested," he said.

There you go, Broncos fans. Three days after it became apparent Cousins would become the most coveted quarterback in free-agency, the Broncos are somewhere on his shopping list.

Had the elevator been like all those other elevators and took forever to arrive, there could have been another Bronco-related question or two.

As it is, it was February 2 and free agency doesn't begin until March 14.

Cousins' status as a free agent became a foregone conclusion when his team, Washington, acquired veteran quarterback Alex Smith in a trade on Tuesday. Washington surrendered a second-round draft pick, and one of the league's best young cornerbacks, Kendall Fuller, in exchange for Smith.

A steep price. Cousins is also expected to command perhaps the richest contract in NFL history, a multiyear deal that may well exceed the \$26.5 million a year average quarterback Matthew Stafford receives from Detroit.

Besides the Broncos, the New York Jets, Arizona Cardinals and Buffalo Bills are also expected to show interest in Cousins, who has averaged 27 touchdown passes against just 12 interceptions in his past three full seasons as a starter.

Cleveland, Miami, Jacksonville, Minnesota and the New York Giants are other teams with uncertain quarterback situations.

# C.J. Anderson has brawn, ability to impress Harvard brains

By Mike Klis

9NEWS

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C.J. Anderson was on a stage with a microphone in his hand, addressing Harvard students in the graduate of education program.

That's right, Harvard. Wasn't Anderson a little intimidated about speaking to all those intellectuals?

"Not at all," Anderson said during a reprieve this week from his Super Bowl LII radio row commitments here this week. "I believe I'm an intellectual myself."

Anderson is a smart football player, one reason why he got enough playing time to amass 1,007 yards rushing this season. He's also a strong runner with vision.

But an intellectual? We put him to the test.

How does he answer all the questions he's received about whether he will be back playing with the Broncos next season?

"I'm still under contract for two more years," Anderson said. "That's how I answer it. I've never left. I can't come back if I never left. People think I have to sign a new deal. That's not the case."

Can't come back if he never left. Smart answer.

Anderson is midway through a four-year contract that paid him \$6 million in 2016 and \$3 million in 2017. He is scheduled to make \$4.5 million in each of his next two seasons with the Broncos, with none of that money guaranteed.

Let's try again. Anderson has spoken out in support of the Broncos going after soon-to-be free agent quarterback Kirk Cousins. Brandon Marshall and Von Miller have done the same.

But isn't stating a strong desire to sign Cousins in turn taking a jab at the Broncos' current three quarterbacks: Paxton Lynch, Trevor Siemian and Brock Osweiler?

"I don't think it's any different than if guys were saying, 'Let's go get Le'Veon Bell,'" Anderson said, referring to the Steelers' star running back. "The (quarterback) position had its ups and downs last year, which you saw when we played three different guys. That's not to say those three guys we have now can't have a helluva season this season, too."

"Do you take your chances on that? I don't know, but we just have a lot of respect for Kirk Cousins and his game. We know having him would be a huge up. He'd make any offense better."

Another smart answer.

Truth is, Anderson had already long passed the test set by Harvard. He spoke about how he made it big despite growing up in a poor, rough neighborhood of Vallejo, Calif. How he made the first step to junior college, then as a backup running back at Cal, then as an undrafted NFL player before becoming a 1,000-yard rusher.

And then turning around and giving back to his hometown by ambitiously planning to build a youth academic and athletic facility in Vallejo.

“It was an awesome experience,” Anderson said of speaking at Harvard last week. “I talked to about 245 people who listened to my speech about the foundation. I got a lot of good feedback. Got about 28 or 29 e-mails from people who wanted to be a part of what we’re doing in Vallejo that we followed up on.”

# Super Bowl ads shy from politics and mind their manners

By Mae Anderson  
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Peyton Manning takes a family to Universal Parks & Resorts. Chris Pratt works out to get in shape to tout Michelob Ultra. Bill Hader takes a break on set to snack on some Pringles.

This year's Super Bowl advertisers are minding their manners. They're trying hard to steer clear of everything from politics to the #MeToo movement with lightly humorous ads that don't offend.

The goal is to capture the attention of the 111 million-plus viewers expected to tune in Sunday when the Philadelphia Eagles take on the New England Patriots. Thirty-second slots are going for more than \$5 million for airtime alone.

Last year, ads that tackled political issues fell flat, like an 84 Lumber ad about immigration. And some thought the recent Grammy Awards' low ratings were because the show contained too many political moments, such as Hillary Clinton reading from the Trump biography "Fire and Fury."

People are in the mood for "political-free entertainment," said Kim Whitler, a marketing professor at the University of Virginia.

Several ads will be taking a light-humor approach with mostly male celebrities. PepsiCo brands Doritos Blaze and Mountain Dew Ice are showcased in two 30-second linked spots showing Morgan Freeman and Peter Dinklage in a lip-sync rap battle.

In a Pringles ad, Bill Hader has a snack on set and introduces a made-up practice dubbed "flavor stacking," in which he mixes and matches different Pringles varieties. M&Ms enlisted Danny DeVito to embody what happens when a red M&M becomes a person after wishing on a lucky penny.

Keanu Reeves surfs on his motorcycle through the desert in an ad for Squarespace. Chris Elliott lives in a bio dome to tout avocados from Mexico, while "Stranger Things" star David Harbour shows up in Tide's commercial.

"They're light hearted and good natured," Whitler said. "That's on target with the mood of the country."

"We're exposed to so much constant negativity," said Andy Goeler, a marketing executive at Bud Light. "Delivering something just light hearted and fun is the root at what beer is all about." The brand's two spots showcase a mythical kingdom a la "Game of Thrones" centered on Bud Light and the catchphrase "Dilly Dilly."

Amazon's 90-second fourth-quarter ad stars a bevy of celebrities who sub for the voice of Amazon's Alexa voice assistant: singer Cardi B, actress Rebel Wilson, star chef Gordon Ramsey and even actor Anthony Hopkins putting a Hannibal Lector spin on things. Leading up to the halftime show, Pepsi's ad

references past celebrities who have appeared in Pepsi Super Bowl ads: Britney Spears, Michael Jackson, Cindy Crawford and others.

Nonetheless, two Super Bowl ads are bucking the trend and sidling up to political issues, however obliquely.

Coca-Cola's anthemic 60-second ad features varieties of Coke, from Coke Zero to the stevia-flavored Coke Life, quaffed by women, men and a person who uses the "they" pronoun.

"There's a Coke for he, and she and her and me and them," a voiceover states.

Coca-Cola executives say the ad highlights the diversity the company has always used in its advertising, adding that they consulted African-American and LGBTQ groups among its own employees. A biracial couple and a person in a wheelchair also appear in the spot.

"We want to celebrate all the people that make up the world," Coca-Cola executive Brynn Bardacke said. "We don't want to exclude anyone."

On the other hand, WeatherTech, which makes car mats and other interior car products, has a staunchly pro-American approach in its ad, which shows the construction of a factory that opened late last year.

"At WeatherTech, we built our factory right here in America," the ad's text reads. "Isn't that the way it is supposed to be?"

It's the fifth year WeatherTech has advertised in the Super Bowl touting its all-American operations. Founder and CEO David MacNeil said his ad doesn't have typical Super Bowl accoutrements — "no ponies, no puppies, no pretty girls" — but said it's straight to the point about its message.

"Isn't it just logical to build your own factory in your own country so your own fellow citizens can have jobs?" he said. He said he doesn't believe the ad might be divisive. "It wouldn't occur to me that I could offend anyone by supporting my own country," he said.

While the majority of advertisers release their ads ahead of time to try to drum up publicity, there are some holdouts. Fiat Chrysler usually appears during the game without advance warning. Other advertisers that have remained mum about their plans so far include E-Trade and Monster Products.

"It may be that advertisers with risky ads are waiting for the game, hoping to protect the surprise and break through the clutter," said Tim Calkins, a marketing professor at Northwestern University.

# Irreconcilable differences: Why the Players Coalition split apart

By Jim Trotter and Jason Reid

The Undeclared

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Josh Norman was done. On the evening of Nov. 7, in a Players Coalition group chat of nine players including Philadelphia Eagles safety Malcolm Jenkins, New York Jets offensive tackle Kelvin Beachum and Seattle Seahawks wide receiver Doug Baldwin, the volatile Redskins cornerback sent a blunt message to 49er Eric Reid.

“Let’s just cut the BS,” Norman typed to the safety who was starting to be seen as an obstacle in talks between the NFL and the coalition on a proposed \$89 million social-justice partnership. “Why are you creating chaos? Why can’t the guy [Colin Kaepernick] speak for himself? ... It’s greater than one. Majority rules. You’re in or out.”

“Who are you to dictate?” Reid shot back as members watched on their phones. “Don’t try to capitalize on something [the protest movement] you never participated in.”

“If you have a real issue, problem with me, straight up, I ain’t with the BS,” Norman said. “Here’s my address.” He then offered to purchase Reid a plane ticket so they could face off.

This is not the way the chat was supposed to go. If the players could not find common ground with each other, how would they ever find it with NFL commissioner Roger Goodell? It was suggested they meet in person — Kaepernick included — to get on the same page and define a united purpose going forward. Dallas was suggested as a central location.

“I’m in. I’m in. I’m in. I’ll go. I’ll attend,” members responded, one after the other. Reid did not reply.

“Hey, we’re just waiting on a response from you, brother,” a member said to Reid after roughly 30 minutes. “Can you [and Kaepernick] make the meeting next Tuesday in Dallas? Or do you need to get back with us tomorrow?”

Why Reid wouldn’t attend the meeting is a matter of some dispute. He would tell ESPN The Magazine that he saw the invitation as an ultimatum and he wouldn’t be able to attend because of his grandmother’s funeral. But an examination of that group text shared with The Undeclared by a coalition member reveals other issues were at play that went to the heart of the coalition’s divide.

“Before I even consider attending this meeting and asking Colin to attend,” Reid replied, “are we in agreement that the agenda for this will be to discuss the logistics behind separating the coalition — which has always been focused on criminal justice reform — from a new entity in which Colin will be at the helm and the protesting players [will] move forward in communication with the NFL to address the systematic oppression of black and brown people? Then, yes, I will try to make it on Tuesday or find another day that works for all of us. If not, there’s no point in having a meeting.”

Why? That was the dominant question nearly a month later on Nov. 29, when Reid, Los Angeles Chargers offensive tackle Russell Okung, wideout Kenny Stills and safety Michael Thomas of the Miami Dolphins broke from the coalition on the cusp of a landmark agreement with the NFL. Once you get past all the issues, most notably the lack of trust and an abundance of ego, the simplest answer is irreconcilable differences. Each side had such dramatically different objectives, they should never have coalesced in the first place.

Reid & Co. were focused first on getting Kaepernick a job after the former 49ers quarterback went unsigned entering 2017, perhaps as retaliation for igniting leaguewide protests the previous year when he demonstrated against police brutality by kneeling during the national anthem. They also believed Kaepernick should lead the talks with the league since, at the core, it was his actions that brought the league to the table.

Reid did not respond to multiple requests for an interview for this story nor would he answer questions via email or text.

The majority of coalition members disagreed. While sympathetic and supportive of Kaepernick's fight to secure employment through a grievance he filed against the league, the players still thought the focus should remain on the big picture. "He knew there could be consequences," Norman said. "It's not right what's happening, but this is bigger than one person. We're trying to help communities across this country."

Twelve days into his tenure as the newly minted commissioner of the NFL in 2006, Goodell attended a preseason game in Oakland, California. He was less interested in the action between the Raiders and 49ers than what was being discussed in the cramped San Francisco owner's suite. Seated next to him was University of California, Berkeley professor emeritus and longtime 49ers adviser Harry Edwards, a respected sociologist and civil activist who is widely regarded as a forefather of athlete activism.

Goodell wanted input regarding the state of the league and what major challenges might await him, particularly as it related to players. Edwards had a unique perspective as someone who has focused on the confluence of race, sports and activism and is a leading authority on social issues related to African-American athletes.

During his talk with Goodell, Edwards touched on many topics, but perhaps most prophetically, he cautioned that a cultural shift was taking place in NFL locker rooms, not simply in the sense that more African-American players were entering the league, but that increasingly they were going to be viewed as the game's stars. Edwards warned that public imagery surrounding the product on the field was going to become more problematic if that issue wasn't addressed. Stardom equals power. And black power shakes the status quo. Sooner or later — and in ways no one would be able to see coming — that was going to come to a head.

"I don't think he really wrapped his mind around what that meant," Edwards says today. "These athletes don't leave the issues that they have in the community at the locker-room door; those come in to the locker room. ... He was going to have to deal with some sociopolitical issues that were extrainstitutional that were going to come over the stadium wall."

The sociopolitical issue Edwards had foreseen a decade earlier didn't scale the stadium wall, it plowed through it, leaving many to wonder what would be left of the NFL when the rubble was cleared. Owners

were apoplectic, sponsors were uneasy and fans on both sides of the issue were upset. Some promised to boycott the NFL until the players stood, while others pledged to boycott games until Kaepernick had a job. The passage of time only brought increased pressure.

Nearly 200,000 supporters signed a #NoKaepernickNoNFL petition in August. Then in September, President Donald Trump called on owners to “fire” any “son of a b—” who kneeled during the anthem. And in November Papa John’s pizza founder John Schnatter criticized the league for not forcing the players to stand, adding: “We are disappointed the NFL and its leadership did not resolve this. Leadership starts at the top and this is an example of poor leadership.”

A message about police brutality and oppression had been co-opted into a discussion about respect (or the lack of) for law enforcement, then the military, then free speech, and finally patriotism. Goodell was caught in the crosshairs. He had to deal not only with an overwhelmingly conservative league culture run by team owners without a single African-American majority owner among them but with a player pool that is roughly 70 percent black. The league’s poor handling of recent high-profile crises, be it domestic-violence cases, alleged bounty and bullying incidents, or the controversial suspension of New England Patriots quarterback Tom Brady also didn’t help. The commissioner needed to get this one right and no one was going to make it easy on him. In one ear, he had owners telling him to act immediately to make the protests stop; in the other he had Troy Vincent, the league’s vice president of football operations, advising him to proceed cautiously.

Vincent, who is black, played cornerback in the NFL for 15 seasons before joining the league office after a short stint with the NFL Players Association. He knew from conversations with black players how strongly many of them felt about the things taking place in their hometown communities, notably the killing of unarmed black men and women by police. The players were not looking for a fight with the league, but neither were they going to back down from one. More and more they were coming to view themselves as partners with the owners, not merely employees. Kaepernick had given them a voice without saying a word, and they intended to use it.

Shortly after Kaepernick first took a knee in August 2016, more than 100 players got together in an online chat. Many were frustrated by what was happening in society and wanted to show support for Kaepernick and his message. But how best to do it? Should they take a stand by taking a knee? Would it be more effective to raise their voices or raise their fists? Might something subtler be more powerful?

Unable to reach an agreement, Kaepernick asked that guys do nothing if they weren’t going to take a knee, fearful that the message would be diluted, bastardized or overshadowed by people focusing on the method of protest rather than the message behind it. He was right, of course, but not quite in the way he intended. Different players were demonstrating for different reasons, making it near impossible for anyone to succinctly name what was being protested. Coalition leader Anquan Boldin, while choosing not to kneel or make a public gesture, spoke out in hopes of giving a voice to the voiceless after a cousin was killed by a plainclothes police officer in 2015. Jenkins raised a fist in support of the Clean Slate Act, which would seal the criminal records of anyone with misdemeanor convictions — save violent and sex offenses — if they stay clean for 10 years, after his brother was charged with a felony for possessing small amounts of marijuana. Others wanted improved police training. And numerous others kneeled in protest of Trump’s comments.

In February 2017, while attending the Super Bowl in Houston, Jenkins and Boldin brainstormed with other players on how to bring together all the voices speaking out for change. The two had been

partnering for criminal justice reform for over a year, including a trip to Capitol Hill in November 2016 to seek support from members of Congress. The group was only five players then — Boldin, Jenkins, Andrew Hawkins, Josh McCown and Glover Quin — but more players were reaching out to see how they could get involved. During the lull between meetings at the 2017 Super Bowl, they decided the time was right to create a formal working group and trademarked the name “Players Coalition.” The number of members is fluid, with the coalition claiming 30 to 40 members, not all of them black, many of whom who asked not to be identified to keep the focus on their work.

Jenkins tried multiple times to bring Kaepernick into the group, but the former Super Bowl starter, while receptive and supportive, preferred to remain on his own. He had not spoken publicly about his situation since opting out of his 49ers contract in March 2017, two weeks before the start of the new league year. Kaepernick knew the team planned to release him if he had not opted out, and he wanted to get a jump on free agency. He quickly found there was no market despite career passing marks of 72 touchdowns and 30 interceptions, including a 4:1 touchdown to interception ratio in 2016. It was too early to claim collusion by owners, so he bit his tongue, waited for his opportunity and continued putting in work in local communities, notably holding “Know Your Rights” camps across the country.

In a text message to The Undeclared, Kaepernick’s lawyer declined to make his client available for comment on this story.

Unlike Kaepernick, Boldin was not sure he wanted to continue playing after the 2016 season ended. After 14 seasons with Arizona, Baltimore, San Francisco and Detroit, during which he amassed 13,779 yards and 82 touchdowns on 1,076 receptions, he questioned whether it was time to spend more time with his wife and young sons. He also felt a powerful tug to escalate his fight for social justice following the shooting death of his cousin. Even after signing a one-year, \$2.75 million deal with the Buffalo Bills on Aug. 7, he wasn’t sure he’d made the right decision. His suspicions were confirmed five days later when a car sped through a group of counterprotesters at an alt-right and white nationalist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, killing a 32-year-old woman and injuring at least 19 others.

The event shook him. He had always been able to concentrate on football during training camp, but it now felt secondary in his life. On Aug. 19, from his dorm room at St. John Fisher College near Rochester, New York, he got on a conference call with Goodell, who was still searching for a path to end the protests and address the players’ concerns about racial and social inequities.

“I think it’s unfortunate that we have this going on right now,” Boldin said, speaking of the protests in general and the conditions that caused them in particular. “You have some coaches and some [general managers] and owners who say that protesting is not the way it should be done, and then you have owners and coaches who say, I support my guys. Saying that you support us in protest is not the type of support that we’re looking for. In actuality, that’s not support at all. It’s permission. Guys don’t need permission to protest something they feel strongly about, whether there are consequences behind that or not.”

It helped that Goodell was in a similar frame of mind. He had reached out to Edwards once again, who’d told him the league had to find a way to move from protest to progress via community-based programs. Action, not reaction, was the path forward.

“You know what?” Goodell said to Boldin. “I never looked at it that way. I never looked at it as support vs. permission. For you, what does support look like?”

That question was the genesis of what would become a multifaceted seven-year, \$89 million commitment the league would make three months later toward social-justice causes important to the players. Boldin announced his retirement the next day, saying his life's purpose was bigger than football. Three days after that, he and Jenkins got on the phone with Kaepernick in hopes of making him part of the coalition. Kaepernick was still unsigned and had been brought in for an interview only by the Seahawks, despite many less-accomplished passers having no problem finding work. This time Jenkins and Boldin believed they had something compelling to sway Kaepernick: a seat at the table with the owners. The three spoke for 45 minutes, but the call ended with nothing more than an agreement to keep talking, according to both Jenkins and Boldin.

Still more talk finally produced dividends in September when Reid and several other players who had previously declined invitations joined the coalition. This didn't mean it was smooth sailing. The new members disagreed with founding members on everything from who should be leader to what it was looking for from the league to how much focus should be placed on addressing Kaepernick's unemployment.

In October alone, the players held three conference calls that ranged in length from 30 to 85 minutes. The first included Boldin, Jenkins and Mike Thomas; the second featured 11 players, among them Okung and Reid; the third included seven players and took place on the eve of the first face-to-face session with the owners. There was a sense of cautious optimism among many of the 13 players who arrived at league headquarters on Oct. 17 to meet with 11 owners, Goodell and Vincent. After nearly four hours, the session concluded not only with a commitment to continue talks, but a pledge of unconditional support from the owners that there would be no strings attached as they continued to work with the players — meaning, the owners would not demand an end to player protests in exchange for league support.

From the outside looking in, the pledge seemed to signal that a path forward was possible. But among the players, the vibe was different. Much of it had to do with Reid's belief that Jenkins and Boldin were trying to shut Kaepernick out of the negotiations. It had become painfully clear that everyone was not on the same page when Reid tried unsuccessfully to get the players to join him in wearing black T-shirts that read "#IMWITHKAP" at the meeting with the NFL. Just a month earlier Reid had told reporters that Kaepernick "without a doubt" should be the leader of the movement. But the former 49ers star was conspicuous in his absence from any face-to-face talks.

Jenkins and several other players said the coalition invited Kaepernick to attend, however Kaepernick's camp said he was disinvited by both the league and the NFL Players Association, something each vigorously denied. It had been left to the coalition to decide which players would participate in the feeling-out session, everyone agreed. Though it was no secret that the league was not exactly eager to engage with Kaepernick, who had filed a collusion grievance against team owners over his lack of employment. He did so without assistance from the association, choosing instead to hire attorney Mark Geragos, who has represented many high-profile clients, including Michael Jackson and Chris Brown.

Several players expressed surprise when the Kaepernick camp asserted he was not welcome at the meeting. Jenkins was even more perplexed when a Kaepernick attorney formally requested he set the record straight and admit Kaepernick was not invited. That prompted Jenkins to remove Kaepernick from the group chats, on the recommendation of his own attorney, who cautioned that Jenkins could find himself in the middle of the collusion grievance.

Reid was enraged by the move, but others supported it, notably Norman. "I told Malcolm to take him off the group chat long before he did," Norman said. "It was toxic. He was creating so much chaos."

According to several players, Kaepernick phoned in to the players' conference call the day after the New York meeting and accused Jenkins of stealing his ideas (even though multiple members contend Kaepernick never submitted any ideas to the coalition or the league). Reid also claimed Jenkins was trying to be the face of a movement Kaepernick and he should own. According to multiple league sources, Vincent texted Kaepernick and/or his representative on two separate occasions, once in September and once in November, and asked for a face-to-face meeting. There was no response either time.

The call that night lasted 90 minutes, with no resolution about the developing divide between those in the Kaepernick camp and those in the Jenkins-Boldin camp. Still it was clear that Reid believed the leadership wasn't doing enough to include Kaepernick in the talks, telling The MMQB on Oct. 29: "The way this has been established, Malcolm has been the point of contact with the NFL as it relates to these meetings. I don't know how that came to be, but that's what it is so far. I've been trying to get in touch with people from the NFL, can't do it. Colin's been trying to get in touch with people from the NFL, can't do it. For some reason, they only want to talk to Malcolm. That's not a problem, but Colin and I started this protest, and we feel we should be the point or, if not, more heavily involved in the communication."

Reid complained repeatedly on the next conference call about a lack of transparency, openly questioning why Jenkins was having one-on-one discussions with the Goodell or Vincent. Eventually someone suggested that all future communication with the league include multiple coalition members, thus ensuring that everyone's point of view was being represented. Everyone agreed.

But three days later, league spokesman Joe Lockhart confirmed on a national media call that Reid had attempted to arrange a mediated session for himself, Goodell and Kaepernick. Lockhart's disclosure blindsided the Players Coalition. "Nobody knew anything about him trying to arrange the meeting," one member said. "We got on a group text and everybody was like, 'Dude, we just talked about this. This is what you had an issue with [as far as lack of transparency], and you do this?' A lot of true feelings came out. Eric is laying into Malcolm, and Malcolm is continuing to give him the facts and reiterate that we're trying to work together and you should have gone through the group."

Norman was having none of it. That was the moment he felt compelled to challenge Reid to a fight over group text and send an offer of a plane ticket to facilitate it. "I wanted to have a conversation face to face," Norman said a month later. "I believe in progress. I believe in the majority. I also believe in what's right and what's wrong, and what was right was what we were doing [for] going forward. The majority wanted to do something to help others. We were about the group and making progress, not about a few individuals. It sucks when you have a few who try to bring down the majority."

Three weeks later, on the morning of Nov. 29, Vincent says Goodell received a text from the 225 area code, which represents southern Louisiana. He didn't immediately recognize the number, but the message was clear: "Hey, commissioner. Just wanted to let you know that the coalition will no longer be speaking on my behalf. And I'll be following up with you separately to talk about these issues."

The message was from Reid, a Louisiana native. He was out. He would later claim that he could not go forward after Jenkins sent him a text asking if he and Thomas would end their protests if the league contributed money to their causes. Jenkins confirmed the text to The Undeclared but said it was in

response to a call he, Reid, Thomas and Boldin had had days earlier with four NFL executives: Vincent, Goodell, chief operating officer Tod Leiweke and chief financial officer Joe Siclare. Vincent also confirmed that he specifically asked each player what more the league could do to support the players or address their concerns, with an implicit understanding that the endgame was to make the players comfortable enough that they'd no longer feel the need to demonstrate.

Reid asked if player contributions on the local level could go to their hometowns instead of the cities in which they played. Jenkins asked if the contributions could come from the players' foundations instead of from their own pockets. Vincent then asked each player if he was prepared to move forward if those issues were addressed. Each of them said they believed so. The next day Vincent drew up what he thought would be the final proposal and sent it to Jenkins, who waited until after the weekend's games to text Reid and others to confirm what had previously been said on the call — that they would be comfortable moving forward under the previously stated conditions.

That confirmation never came. Days later, Reid walked out the coalition door. Thomas, Stills and Okung soon followed, with Seahawks defensive lineman Michael Bennett left teetering between the two sides.

Goodell fluctuated between exasperation and anger at the split, according to those who spoke to him. Vincent suggested a conference call with Jenkins and Boldin, but Goodell balked. There was no need to talk unless the players were prepared to "put pencil to paper," as Goodell likes to say.

For months, the commissioner had had to hold off a growing number of owners who wanted him to shut down the protests as quickly as possible. And for months, he had worked with players to create a partnership. As the son of a former U.S. senator, he'd grown up insulated and largely unaffected by the injustices fueling the players' protests. That's why when Jenkins invited him to sit in on a bail hearing and go on a ride-along with Philadelphia police on Sept. 21, he'd accepted. And why when Miami Dolphins players invited him to meet with community leaders and law enforcement in South Florida on Oct. 10, he'd agreed.

The increased awareness — along with the passion and commitment to community work he witnessed from the players — led the commissioner to offer \$89 million of the owners' money to causes the coalition identified. All he needed now was the players' approval on a partnership, which had seemed imminent the night before Thanksgiving when he'd joined Jenkins, Boldin, Reid and Thomas on the conference call. Now Reid & Co.'s break from the coalition threatened to derail the partnership on the final morning of the league's committee meetings.

"There was a real sense of frustration on his part," Vincent said of Goodell. "You could see it in his face and hear it in his voice. It was, 'Guys! Guys! Every time we get on a call it's more and more and more. You want more. How do I explain this [to the owners]? My back is against the wall.' "

"Give the players a chance," Jenkins recalled telling Goodell on the call. "Don't hold us all accountable for a few we can't control. Commissioner, we didn't know that that was going to happen with Eric. Give us a chance, and give this platform a chance. Together we can make a difference."

"You're absolutely right," Goodell replied. "Let's just focus and what we can do and how we can make a difference."

He turned to Vincent and Kim Fields, his personal assistant, and asked them to put the players' request in writing. Then he asked Jenkins and Boldin to take the proposal back to the players for final approval. As a sign of good faith, he added two years to the initial five-year proposal and waived the players' matching contributions for two years. Hours later, the deal was done.

"It's proof that if you take the time to listen and understand one another and have the dialogue, you can make progress," Goodell said. "These players have done a remarkable job of leading and helping us understand the issues that they're concerned about. But it starts with just taking the time to listen and understand."

The partnership was not celebrated by everyone. Kaepernick supporters in particular accused coalition members of selling out and taking "hush money," particularly when Jenkins announced the following day that he would no longer raise his fist in protest. The Eagle said he was now focusing on moving forward and putting in the work for change, not getting into a public debate about whether he was fully transparent and represented the wishes of everyone in the group.

"Obviously everything that we're doing is to move past the protests of the anthem and move toward progress," he said. "But at no point in time has the mandate that we stop protesting been in the proposal or been anything that we've said we'd do until guys felt comfortable that there was an adequate replacement. It's unfortunate and I understand their frustrations at times at not being at the front of everything, but everything that we've done has been very, very transparent."

On Dec. 18, in a conference room at the league offices in New York City, owners Michael Bidwill of Arizona, Jimmy Haslam of Cleveland, Shad Khan of Jacksonville and Stephen Ross of the Dolphins met with coalition members Boldin, Beachum, McCown and Hall of Fame defensive back Aeneas Williams for the first time since putting pencil to paper. All of them quickly realized that the hard part was just beginning, because now they needed to figure out how the partnership would actually work. Who would be in charge of what? When would monies be allocated and how much? Who would have the final say on what programs got funded?

"When it comes to the deal itself, I'm not sure there is a deal," Edwards says when asked about the validity of the partnership. "As I look at it, the devil isn't in the details, it's in the delivery. ... There's nothing wrong with the civil rights bill or the voting rights bill or the equal housing opportunity bill or the Brown vs. the Board of Education decision — except it breaks down at the point of delivery. Unless you substantially control and manage the delivery, you've been took, you've been had, you've been bamboozled."

The uncertainty over so many of foundational details was another factor in why some players contend they broke from the coalition. One asked; "How can you agree to something without knowing the details of how it will work?" Boldin and Jenkins understand the criticism but contend they were running out of time to get anything at all done. And on the eve of the Super Bowl, there is now a formal committee and a process for identifying recipients, says Boldin. On the national level, the Players Coalition has chosen recipients including the United Negro College Fund to receive monies from the first round of funding.

"At the end of the day, the NFL is a business, and if the owners feel like the kneeling is going to hurt their bottom dollar, they will take that platform away from guys," Boldin said. "Then what will guys have? You going to take a knee at practice when nobody is watching? Now you don't have a platform and you don't have a seat at the table to bring about real change. I doubt there are any of those guys

who are willing to walk away from their jobs and say, 'I'm not willing to play in this sport anymore until X, Y and Z are done.' ”

There has recently been an attempt to smooth over the bad blood. Rhetoric has softened. All eyes are on the Super Bowl. But whether any lasting peace can be accomplished remains to be seen. As someone who was at the forefront of athlete activism in the 1960s and beyond, Edwards has seen this movie before — the in-fighting, the accusations, the battle for praise and glory and leadership.

“Leadership is not the function of Eric Reid and Colin Kaepernick,” Edwards said. “They have done something that no one else could do: They incited a movement, and they should take tremendous pride in that. But inciting a movement does not make you the leader of it. ... One of the things people find when they insist on being leaders while the parade is going in another direction — after a period of time they’re just ignored. They’re not leading anything, they’re just out for a walk. At the end of the day, these issues are too critical and there’s too much at stake. ... Look, I love Eric Reid and Kaep, but the reality is that the movement has grown so much bigger than the people who started it.”

Which was what led Norman to fire off his blunt message on Nov. 7. “It’s about trying to do good for others,” he says now, “not who gets the praise and glory.”

We’ll know who gets the money before we know about the praise and glory. That may well be for the history books to decide.

# Why it's time for John Lynch to be in the Pro Football Hall of Fame

By Andrew Mason  
DenverBroncos.com  
Feb. 3, 2018

Eventually, players who keep banging at the door for induction into the Pro Football Hall of Fame kick it in and receive their deserved inclusion.

So it seems a matter of when, not if, Ring of Fame safety John Lynch joins the game's immortals in Canton, Ohio, at some point. A five-time finalist for selection, Lynch has also made the final cut to 10 players in the selection room in recent years. His misses have been narrow.

Nevertheless, the wait remains frustrating, just as it was for Terrell Davis, who was eligible for 10 years before he was inducted last year. Here's why Lynch's time out of the Hall needs to end now:

His lineage of accomplishments demands inclusion

There are two defensive players eligible for the Hall of Fame with nine Pro Bowl selections and two or more first-team All-Pro nods who are not in the Hall: Lynch and fellow finalist Brian Dawkins. Their absence is further testament to how safety remains perhaps the most overlooked position in the Hall of Fame discussion.

He's a legend of two teams

Thousands of players have played for multiple teams in their NFL careers. Only a small handful have earned induction into the collection of distinguished players for multiple teams -- whether it goes by "Ring of Fame," as it does in Denver, or "Ring of Honor," as teams such as the Buccaneers use.

In 2016, Lynch was inducted into the Broncos' Ring of Fame and the Bucs' Ring of Honor. Both distinctions were well-deserved. Lynch is one of just two players in Broncos history to play at least four seasons with the team and make a Pro Bowl each time. In Tampa Bay, he earned five Pro Bowl selections and two All-Pro nods. The histories of the Bucs and Broncos cannot be written without mentioning No. 47.

As a member of two teams' most prestigious collection of players, Lynch stands alongside Hall of Famers such as Charles Haley, Paul Warfield, Vince Lombardi, Jim Ringo, Sonny Jurgensen, Reggie White, Eric Dickerson and Marshall Faulk.

The fact that his work in Denver merited selection into the Ring of Fame also shows the sustained excellence of his career. Once he emerged as a full-time starter with the Buccaneers during the 1996 season, he became one of the NFL's most feared and respected players for over a decade.

Lynch and other safeties need better representation in the Hall of Fame

Last year, Seattle's Kenny Easley was inducted after being nominated by the Seniors Committee. His addition to the Hall of Fame was long overdue. Before kidney disease cut his career short after just seven seasons, he was the most feared safety in the NFL in the early-to-mid-1980s.

The significance of Easley's inclusion into the Hall of Fame was obvious: He became the first pure safety to play after 1980 to be inducted. The only other safeties to play from 1981 through the present day that are in the Hall — Ronnie Lott and Rod Woodson — spent a significant portion of their careers as cornerbacks.

The safety drought seems likely to end in the next few years when Baltimore's Ed Reed and Pittsburgh's Troy Polamalu become eligible for induction. But their inclusion would still leave a gaping hole from the late 1980s through the turn of the century, an era in which the two best pure safeties were members of the Broncos Ring of Fame: Lynch and Steve Atwater, a Hall of Fame finalist in 2016.

"I think that's the sentiment that I feel most strongly about, and I've communicated [it] when asked by the Hall of Fame writers, that, hey, I certainly would like if it was me, but I think this is something that needs to change," Lynch said in 2016. "That argument really doesn't hold water with me.

"Maybe at one point that position was one that wasn't of great import in football and on defenses, but I think as anyone has seen the position evolve -- and that's where I feel fairly good about being a part of that position changing, because early in football, they were just kind of a last line of defense."

Safeties are much more than that, of course. Players like Lynch, Atwater and Dawkins are the quarterbacks of the defense -- which for Lynch and Atwater was particularly appropriate, since they were recruited to college as standout high-school quarterbacks before being converted to defense.

He was a core part of an iconic defense

In the 2020s, similar arguments will be made for the elite defenders of the 2015 Broncos that powered the team to its Super Bowl 50 win.

Lynch was one of three signature players who held up the banner for the Buccaneers' defense during its run of dominance from 1997 through 2002, alongside Warren Sapp and Derrick Brooks. Together, they led a once-woebegone franchise to five postseason trips, two division titles and a world championship in 2002. That title was fueled by its defense in a similar manner to the 1985 Bears, 2000 Ravens, 2013 Seahawks and 2015 Broncos.

Such defenses -- along with the Vikings' Purple People Eaters, Steelers' Steel Curtain and Cowboys' Doomsday Defense of the 1970s, are well-represented in Canton, with four members apiece.

# How the 1997 Broncos broke through in Super Bowl XXXII

By Jim Saccomano  
DenverBroncos.com  
Feb. 3, 2018

The Denver Broncos are one of nine teams to have won three or more Super Bowls, but it was an upset win in Super Bowl XXXII 20 years ago that first elevated them to championship status.

Going into that game against the defending-champion Green Bay Packers, the Denver franchise was 0-4 in Super Bowls and many Bronco fans were wary of the embarrassment that might come with another loss in the big game.

But that was a different Broncos team, one that exorcised all those demons and broke a streak of AFC Super Bowl defeats that had reached 13 straight, including three previous losses by Denver.

In each of those previous three losses during the NFC dominance, Denver was regarded by many as a one-man team, that one man of course being quarterback John Elway.

But under head coach Mike Shanahan, the Broncos brought a dramatically rebuilt team into San Diego for Super Bowl XXXII.

The Broncos offense included four future members of the Pro Football Hall of Fame, the highest number on any offense from 1997 to the present. That group included Elway, tight end Shannon Sharpe, left tackle Gary Zimmerman and the ultimate Most Valuable Player of Super Bowl XXXII, running back Terrell Davis.

Denver came into the game as a wild-card team and 11-point underdogs, but there was a very high level of confidence within the team.

As starting strong safety Tyrone Braxton explains, "For us, it was all about the journey. We had won playoff games at Kansas City and the AFC Championship Game at Pittsburgh, so after that, playing Green Bay on an AFC West neutral field that we played on every year did not seem like as large a problem. We looked forward to it."

Elway had waited 15 years for that moment, but he was not alone on a team that had been built for that very day.

Denver's starting lineup included eight draftees, two players acquired by trade (one of whom was Elway), 10 free agent players and two who had never been drafted at all.

Shanahan had set the Super Bowl as a goal from the first day of training camp, and the Broncos were where they had expected to be. No one could have known that the Broncos were in the midst of a winning streak that would not see them lose for a calendar year.

The stars all aligned for Denver in the California sky in a stadium that was very Broncos friendly, as members of the AFC West, Denver played at San Diego every year, often with great success. Shanahan pointed out, "Lots of our fans always travel to San Diego. And this is the Super Bowl, so half the crowd will be cheering for us."

Indeed, as the game played out, it became apparent that there was great support for Denver and Elway.

Both offenses displayed their talent immediately as Super Bowl XXXII became the first ever in which each team scored a touchdown on its opening possession. The Packers struck first when Brett Favre connected with Antonio Freeman on a 22-yard scoring pass, and the Broncos answered by driving 58 yards in 10 plays the first time they touched the ball, scoring on a 1-yard Davis run with 5:58 left in the first quarter.

The Broncos turned two Packers turnovers into 10 more points to take a 17-7 lead into the second quarter.

The first scoring opportunity off a turnover was created when Braxton intercepted a Favre pass. Eight plays later, Elway rushed around right end for a 1-yard score. Then free safety Steve Atwater, who had a brilliant game, sacked Favre on the next Green Bay possession, forcing a fumble that was recovered by defensive end Neil Smith. Four plays later, Jason Elam converted a 51-yard field goal, the second longest in Super Bowl history.

But with Elway's command and Denver's running game in control, the most critical moment for the underdogs came in the second quarter.

Davis suffered from exertional migraines throughout his career, and he had what is medically described as the onset aura of one early in the second quarter. Symptoms include difficulty seeing and a headache, and the only solution was to put him alone in a dark room and apply appropriate migraine medicines. The Broncos followed that procedure, and then-Head Athletic Trainer Steve Antonopoulos said, "Thank God for the long halftime."

It passed by the start of the third quarter and San Diego native Terrell Davis was on his way to becoming the first player ever to win Super Bowl MVP honors in his hometown.

The Packers had scored just before the half and tied the game early in the third quarter on a 27-yard Ryan Longwell field goal.

Late in the third quarter, the game was still tied and Elway was leading the Broncos downfield again. Inside the Green Bay 10, Elway scrambled for a key first down and was flipped and spun airborne in a circle parallel to the ground, a play known in Broncos lore as "the helicopter" play.

The stadium erupted when Elway made the first down and stood up, and from that point on the already raucous crowd cheered loudly for the Broncos. Momentum had chosen its team and Davis capped the drive with another 1-yard score.

After a Denver interception, Green Bay moved 85 yards in just four plays to tie the game at 24 early in the fourth quarter.

But after the Denver defense turned back the Packers on their next two possessions, the Broncos set up shop at the Packers 49-yard line for their game-winning drive. Elway, of course, was famous for his late-game heroics, so everyone on the Broncos' sideline could see this one coming.

Five plays later, Davis scored again from 1 yard out, becoming the first player ever to rush for three touchdowns in a Super Bowl, breaking the tie with 1:45 left to play.

He had run for 157 yards on 30 carries, capping one of the greatest postseasons ever for a running back, and he headed to a euphoric Broncos sideline with playoff totals of 581 rushing yards and eight touchdowns, both records for a single postseason.

His three touchdowns and 18 points scored tied Super Bowl records.

Denver's defense, which had been brilliant all day against the great Packers quarterback, stopped him and Green Bay one last time, with linebacker John Mobley knocking down a fourth-down pass to secure the win.

All that was left was every coach's favorite play — taking a knee in victory formation. Elway knelt down and all of Denver figuratively stood up to dance in the streets.

Elway, who would go on to win Super Bowl MVP honors himself the following year, said, "We were very confident going in, and there was an unbelievable feeling of satisfaction to bringing that title to our great organization, fans and to owner Pat Bowlen. That win showed the resilience and determination of our entire team."

Denver ran the ball so well that it not only controlled the game offensively but limited Green Bay's ability to use their extensive blitz packages against Elway. Coaches love dominating with the run, and after the game Shanahan told a horde of media members, "We won it with the running game, and that is most pleasing."

The Broncos had vanquished the 13-year NFC curse and every demon in franchise history in winning the first of their three Lombardi Trophies. They also became just the third team to win a Super Bowl without winning a division title (the first two were Kansas City in Super Bowl IV and Oakland in Super Bowl XV).

Denver would go on to put four members of that offense into the Hall of Fame and be regarded as one of the most consistent annual championship contenders in the NFL.

But in living for the moment, there have been few Broncos moments as great as winning Super Bowl XXXII, which is celebrated both forever, and twenty years ago this week.

# NFLPA's DeMaurice Smith: 'We prepare for war' on negotiations with NFL

By Mike Jones

USA Today

Feb. 3, 2018

The current collective bargaining agreement between the NFL and the NFL Players Association doesn't expire for another three years, but the union's leadership group already is bracing for a long fight when the time comes for the next round of negotiations.

"We prepare for war," NFLPA executive director DeMaurice Smith said when asked if he expected smooth negotiations and an easy resolution on a new CBA.

That statement came after Smith emphatically shot down the notion of simply extending the current deal.

"This collective bargaining agreement was painfully negotiated at a time where the league secured a \$4 billion war chest to put us out of business," Smith said while speaking at the NFLPA's state of the league press conference.

In 2011 – while negotiating the current CBA and hammering out agreements on a variety of issues, including revenue sharing, salary cap and contract structures – the NFL and its players endured a lockout that lasted just more than four months.

League revenue and player salaries have steadily increased. But Smith said the players see a need for an overhaul of the current agreement, and he anticipates that the owners do as well.

"There's a lot of great things about the collective bargaining agreement, but whether it's the great things or the things that we don't like, collective bargaining agreements are grinding, exhausting elements that come out of two parties that want fundamentally different things," Smith said. "So, I could never imagine a world where you simply put a page on the back of it that says, 'This document is extended until 2035.'"

Smith didn't, however, rule out the possibility of engaging the league's owners in potential negotiations before the expiration of the current CBA. NFLPA president Eric Winston agreed.

"I've always said that we'd be open to talking," Winston said, "but there's a whole lot of conversations that need to be had and there are a whole lot of things that we have to go through the idea of what that might look like. Again, we have been preparing that this is going to be another long, arduous process, and whether it happens now or in 2019 or 2021, or on from there, that's what's going to happen, but there are a lot of guys that have been preparing and understanding exactly what's currently in this one and understanding the possibility that this could be long."

Neither Smith nor Winston provided a specific list of the most pressing areas of the current CBA that need to be revised.

However, the current fine system, player health care, contract structures (especially those of first-round draft picks), revenue sharing, the length of the season, and the scheduling of Thursday Night Football games rank among some of the areas that will garner attention.

“There’s no top five issues,” Smith said, “There’s just a series of issues where I think this group of player leaders and leaders that are going to come after them are going to be interested in, and how are we going to make this deal more equitable.”

# Kirk Cousins doesn't think trade hurts his value

By Darin Gantt  
Pro Football Talk  
Feb. 3, 2018

Things changed considerably for Kirk Cousins this week, but he doesn't think his market has.

The Washington quarterback will hit free agency after his team traded for Alex Smith, but Cousins disagrees with anyone who think he's worth less on the open market now.

"I don't think so," he said in a video interview with USA Today, via NJ.com. "It shouldn't. I think the tape is what you go off of. If you're not going off the tape, I really wouldn't want to be there anyway. I want to go to a team that's going to evaluate the tape, watch the film, know football, and make those decisions based off that."

Cousins had worked the last two years under the franchise tag, and they struggled to try to find a long-term solution. So Washington opted to trade a third-round pick and cornerback Kendall Fuller for the right to lock Smith in for the next four years, giving them some cost-certainty.

It also turns Cousins into a market full of suiters which could include the Jets and Broncos and others.

"Each year, I've gotten better as a player, and I think that bodes well for the future, because I'm only going into year seven," Cousins said. "I expect to continue to improve. I'm excited about what the future holds. . . ."

"It's just about winning. It doesn't matter where you live, the other variables. If you're not winning, the rest doesn't matter. Ultimately, it will be: Can we win? That'll be the No. 1 factor."

Cousins said he was working out in his hotel in Minneapolis when he got the news, and called his impending free agency an "exciting process."

It already has been.