

Lunch Special: Should the Broncos try to trade for QB Nick Foles?

By Nick Kosmider

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The Denver Post's Nick Kosmider on Monday answered questions from readers about the Super Bowl and the Broncos offseason. Here are the highlights:

After the Eagles' Super Bowl victory, should the Broncos be in the market for Nick Foles? What do you think it'd take to land him in a trade?

Nick: There is no doubt the Eagles have a valuable commodity in Nick Foles. I was texting with a friend last night who is an Arizona Cardinals fan and was giddy about the idea that his team may be in pursuit of the Super Bowl LII MVP. And he's not alone. As we know, there are roughly 10 teams in need of QB upgrades, and they are hard to come by. Foles' incredible playoff run has put him in the pursuit plans of some of those teams. And given how valuable a commodity a starting QB is, it's not absurd to think the Eagles could fetch a first-round pick for Foles. That being said, the Broncos pick of No. 5 overall might be too steep a price to pay. Also, I wouldn't say it's a foregone conclusion that Foles gets traded. Philadelphia just won the Super Bowl because it had the best QB situation in the league. Perhaps they don't want to mess with that, especially given that Carson Wentz is coming off an ACL injury and has an indeterminate return table.

So great to see the Patriots lose, but do you think the refs got the calls right on those touchdowns?

Nick: Let's start with Zach Ertz's fourth-quarter touchdown first. Some compared it to the non-catch by Steelers tight end Jesse James at the end of the regular season against the Patriots. The difference there was that James caught the ball and his first move was to descend across the goal line. When he hit the ground, the ball came loose. Because he had not established any other move, it was ruled incomplete. The difference with the Ertz catch was that he caught the ball at the 5-yard line and took several steps, thus establishing himself as a runner. Therefore, as soon as he put the ball over the goal line, it was a touchdown. In his case, it didn't matter that the ball moved when it hit the ground. I think the refs ruled correctly there.

As for the Corey Clement catch in the third quarter, that was the one that was a bit more controversial, in my view. When he first catches the ball, his left foot hits the ground. But before his right foot hits down, the ball appeared to come loose in his arms. If that's the case, he must then establish two feet in bounds, and the second time his left foot hit, it appeared the toe was on the line. The officials ruled that he had control throughout. Again, these catch/incomplete calls continue to be a source of controversy for the league. Players, coaches and fans are all hopeful it's something that be addressed in a clearer way this offseason.

It looked to me like Clement dragged the second foot in the end zone before it stopped out of bounds. You can see a black line of turf pellets materialize behind his foot on one angle of the replay. I'm not so sure it was such a controversial call, but maybe I'm the only one here?

Nick: Eagles fans were not happy with NBC color analyst Cris Collinsworth for his opinion during the game that both catch calls we talked about earlier, in his view, should have been overturned. I think it speaks more to the inconsistency we saw this year in how those calls were addressed. When the NFL altered its rules after the Calvin Johnson catch several years ago, the move was an effort to more clearly define what a catch was. The result, in my opinion, has been more confusion than ever. I know it's a big priority for the league this offseason to take another look at the catch rule. You are never going to fully get rid of controversy with these kinds of plays, but the NFL has to find a way to get rid of some of the gray area.

Which QB path do you think makes most sense for the Broncos to take this offseason? Free agency, draft or trade?

Nick: To borrow a line from Malcom Butler after the Patriots cornerback was asked Sunday about his future as a unrestricted free agent: "I'm not Ms. Cleo. I can't tell the future." What I mean by that is "sense" in this case is clouded by the uncertainty among the top four quarterbacks in this draft class. I don't think there is a slam dunk in terms of knowing one of these guys will be a quarterback to lead your franchise for the foreseeable future. With a guy like Kirk Cousins, you would have a known commodity. There is no mystery as to what he can do. As far as upgrading the quarterback position — perhaps the highest goal on Denver's offseason priority list — that would be close to a surefire way to do it. Of course, making that move may limit the Broncos' growth in other areas of need. So there are pros and cons to all these approaches. But if it was me making that decision, I would be looking to make a move that could give me a known commodity at quarterback, something the Broncos have thirsted for since their Super Bowl 50 parade ended.

What was your favorite Super Bowl commercial?

Nick: I wasn't blown away by the overall group of them, but as a big fan of hip-hop, I was definitely into the Doritos-Mountain Dew hybrid spot in which Peter Dinklage and Morgan Freeman had a lip-sync rap battle with the help of Busta Rhymes and Missy Elliot. I rewatched that one a few times.

If the Broncos draft a QB, which one do you think they like most at this point? And which one would you go for if you were picking?

Nick: This is keep-it-close-to-the-vest season for teams like the Broncos. When you are drafting at the fifth spot, giving away who you are really targeting can dramatically reduce leverage. So if Denver does have a favorite in the running, they aren't letting it be known. What we do know is they've spent a lot more time evaluating Baker Mayfield and Josh Allen than they have Sam Darnold and Josh Rosen, the other two of the four highest-projected QBs. That's not to say Denver doesn't have interest in the two Pac-12 QBs. They will be doing ample homework on them as well. And their QB decision in the draft could be dictated by players taken in front of them and who they do or don't sign as a free agent in March.

Any updates on Chad Kelly? Will he be ready or even get a shot come OTAs and training camp?

Nick: Chad Kelly had a brief window this fall when he, like tight end Jake Butt, practiced with the Broncos before the team ultimately decided to leave both players on injured reserve. Who knows? At the rate the Broncos were going last season, they may have given Mr. Irrelevant a chance to become the team's fourth starting QB if he had made it off IR. That said, I think Kelly will be fully healed and ready to

throw during OTAs and certainly during training camp. Does he get a “shot” to be the starting QB. That’s not something I see happening, but I have no doubt the Broncos will be eager to see him healthy and participating in practices. But he’s a developmental QB at this point.

I’m curious how you think Ed McCaffrey will do as a head football coach.

Nick: I can’t portend to hold too much insight on this one, unfortunately. I’ve not spent any time around Ed or seen him interact with players, so it would be difficult for me to judge. That said, the Valor Christian job is a good one to step into for a first-time head coach. They have among the most — if not the most — Division I talent in the state year after year. His son is expected to start at quarterback, so there’s obviously familiarity there. But there’s also no high school job in the state that comes with higher expectations.

Do you think giving Kirk Cousins \$30 million a season is a good idea or bad idea?

Nick: I think it is important not to conflate “good or bad” investment with market value. Teams like the Broncos desperately need stability at the quarterback position. Good ones are hard to get a hold of. When they are available, the market dictates that they are expensive. Were the Broncos to sign Kirk Cousins, I think the structuring of the contract and how it was designed to give the team flexibility elsewhere, would be more important than the actual dollars. That said, I think a long-term contract wouldn’t quite hit the \$30 per season range. Think it will be a little lower, but we’ll have a much better idea of that in March.

How much of a priority is it for the Broncos to re-sign Shaq Barrett?

Nick: Shaq Barrett is a restricted free agent, so the Broncos will show how much value they place on Barrett with the type of tender they give him. My guess is that the Broncos will place a second-round tender on Barrett, just as they did for Todd Davis and Brandon Marshall ahead of the 2016 season. They eventually reached a long-term deal with Marshall while Davis signed his one-year qualifying offer and is now an unrestricted free agent. How they approach Barrett is yet to be determined, but I know they liked his production this season after he missed most of training camp, and I wouldn’t be surprised to see him back next season. The Broncos will hold all the cards in that case.

I believe Shaq Barrett to be more of a play maker than Shane Ray? Do you agree or disagree? We need Barrett back.

Nick: Shane Ray would be the first to tell you that 2017 was a very frustrating season for the former first-round pick. He was ready to step into a big role in the wake of DeMarcus Ware’s retirement and felt that he had had a big offseason, only to need wrist surgery during the first week of training camp. He simply was never himself once he returned to field. He lost a lot of weight because he couldn’t lift, and it affected his ability to get to the passer. So I just wouldn’t use last season to definitively say he doesn’t bring as much to the table as Barrett. Ray has an explosive physical ability that is unique. And if he gets back to full strength, there’s no reason to believe he can’t regain the form he showed earlier in his career that pointed toward so much promise.

Of the four QBs currently on the Broncos roster, who will be left when training camp starts?

Nick: We won't know that until free agency begins playing out, but I don't foresee the Broncos bringing back Brock Osweiler, who is now an unrestricted free agent. I think there are teams, following in Philadelphia's footsteps, who will be in the market to spend on a quality backup like Osweiler, and I just think the Broncos have bigger financial needs elsewhere. In the same mold, that could make Trevor Siemian a trade candidate. It wouldn't surprise me if those two went elsewhere. I expect Paxton Lynch and Chad Kelly will still be on the roster when camp begins.

Do you have any idea on what shape the Broncos are in regarding cap space for next season?

Nick: Assuming a projected salary cap of roughly \$178 million in 2018, the Broncos are looking at roughly \$24.7 million in free cap space, according to Spotrac. Of course, that doesn't take into account several moves the Broncos could make in an effort to shed salary. In short, they can get to whatever number it would take to pay a guy like Cousins next season.

With the Collegiate RPO seeming to be accepted in the NFL, is it a stretch to consider that Paxton Lynch would be more successful with a more RPO friendly offense?

Nick: I don't think it's a stretch to say that a lot of QBs coming into the league will have an easier transition if NFL teams at least incorporate spread concepts. We saw them a lot more in the NFL this season, and I think that's the direction things are going. It is a way to develop quarterbacks while also giving them some familiarity off the bat. I think Paxton Lynch certainly could have benefited from some of those concepts in his first two NFL seasons.

Broncos' Super Bowl 53 odds? Denver looks like a long shot in 2018.

By Daniel Boniface
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The NFL season just ended. The Broncos are still looking for a new quarterback for 2018. What better time to look at their odds of winning Super Bowl 53?

According to analysts at MyTopSportsbooks.com, the Broncos are opening the 2018 offseason with 39-to-1 odds of winning the Super Bowl. That places them 14th overall, however, they are the highest-ranked team from the AFC West (tied with the Los Angeles Chargers).

The Patriots are listed as the favorites for Super Bowl LIII at 7-to-1 odds of returning and winning the big game. Meanwhile the Eagles have a 10-to-1 shot of repeating, while the Cleveland Browns are bringing up the rear at 124-to-1 odds.

Odds to win Super Bowl LIII, according to MyTopSportsbooks.com

New England Patriots: 7/1

Philadelphia Eagles: 10/1

Pittsburgh Steelers: 14/1

Los Angeles Rams: 15/1

Minnesota Vikings: 16/1

Green Bay Packers: 19/1

New Orleans Saints: 19/1

Houston Texans: 24/1

Atlanta Falcons: 24/1

Dallas Cowboys: 24/1

Carolina Panthers: 29/1

Jacksonville Jaguars: 29/1

Seattle Seahawks: 29/1

Denver Broncos: 39/1

San Francisco 49ers: 39/1

Los Angeles Chargers: 39/1

Indianapolis Colts: 49/1

Kansas City Chiefs: 49/1

Baltimore Ravens: 49/1

Tennessee Titans: 49/1

Oakland Raiders: 59/1

Detroit Lions: 59/1

Arizona Cardinals: 59/1

Washington Redskins: 64/1

Miami Dolphins: 74/1

New York Giants: 74/1

Tampa Bay Buccaneers: 74/1

Buffalo Bills: 84/1

Cincinnati Bengals: 84/1

Chicago Bears: 99/1

New York Jets: 99/1

Cleveland Browns: 124/1

Odds could certainly change for Denver, based on who GM John Elway lands as his new quarterback. Could that play caller be Nick Foles for the Broncos? The same analysts gave the Broncos a 12-to-1 shot of landing the Super Bowl MVP.

Odds on Nick Foles' team in Week 1 of the 2018 season, according to MyTopSportsbooks.com
Eagles: 3/2

Cardinals: 8/1

Jets: 9/1

Broncos: 12/1

Bills: 12/1

Vikings: 19/1

Jaguars: 24/1

FIELD: 11/2

Valor Christian names former Broncos WR Ed McCaffrey its new head football coach

By Kyle Newman

Denver Post

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Former Broncos star Ed McCaffrey was named head football coach at Valor Christian on Monday morning, Eagles athletic director Jamie Heiner said in an email.

McCaffrey is the third coach in the history of the program and takes over for Rod Sherman, who stepped down Dec. 22. Sherman was 57-11 in five seasons with the Eagles, including three Class 5A state titles. McCaffrey has never coached at the high school level.

McCaffrey, 49, played 13 seasons as a wideout in the NFL. He was a part of three Super Bowl-winning teams and has been a public face of the Valor Christian program for years as his four sons have played for the Eagles.

The older three brothers each won multiple state titles with Valor Christian and went on to achieve greater football success as well. Max is a wideout for the San Francisco 49ers, Christian is a running back for the Carolina Panthers and Dylan is a quarterback at Michigan.

McCaffrey's youngest son, Luke, was also a part of title teams as a freshman and sophomore, and the two-time All-Colorado selection is projected to be the team's starting quarterback as a senior this fall.

McCaffrey beat out another former NFL player, Colorado State graduate John Howell, to get the job. He will be officially introduced to players and parents in a private meet-and-greet Tuesday evening at the school.

Red carpet choice: Do Broncos go Cousins for \$30 million a year or Keenum for \$18 million?

By Mike Klis

9NEWS

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They sauntered through the red carpet wearing the usual look of glamour and glitz.

This wasn't Hollywood, though. This was the strut leading into the NFL Honors program.

I asked one past and current NFL player after another the same question: Should the Denver Broncos pay \$30 million a year for Washington quarterback Kirk Cousins, or \$18 million a year for Minnesota's Case Keenum?

To about half the group, I added a third option: One of those hot-shot quarterback prospects with the No. 5 overall pick in the draft.

The results: Five went with Kirk Cousins, two went with Keenum. Deion Sanders was the only one who went draft pick. Roger Staubach and Steve Young had plenty to say about the top two options but wouldn't commit.

Case Keenum was interviewed and talked up Broncos' front-office advisor Gary Kubiak, but he wasn't given the survey.

What was he supposed to say?

There were three past and present Broncos players who strolled through the red carpet: Von Miller, Shannon Sharpe and Terrell Davis. All three went with Kirk Cousins.

Here's what the NFL celebrities said, in order of red carpet appearance:

Sterling Sharpe: The former Green Bay Packers receiver great and older brother of the Broncos' Hall of Fame tight end, Sharpe has done extensive NFL analyst work. He was asked if the Broncos should go \$30 million a year for Cousins or \$18 million a year for Case Keenum.

"That's a tough one. I would lean toward Kirk. I'm only leaning toward Kirk because he's done it longer. He's had to prove himself longer. I think based on what he has been asked to do, being franchised every year, having to prove himself, I think Kirk will definitely be valued as far as hearing different information, being coached by a different group of guys, being in a different city -- I think he would do very well.

"I would lean a little bit towards Kirk."

Shannon Sharpe: The best tight end in Broncos history and TV sports debate champion was asked whether his former team should take Cousins for \$30 million a year, Keenum for \$18 million, or go with the No. 5 overall pick in this year's draft.

It was hardly a surprise Sharpe came through with the most thorough response.

“You try to win the way the Broncos are built, they’re trying to win right now. You don’t have the luxury of trying to groom – we’ve not seen a rookie quarterback take a team and win a Super Bowl. So, the likelihood of that happening in the 98-year history is very small.

“I believe Kirk Cousins. The 98-year history says if you take a quarterback 6-foot-7 or taller he’s not going to be very good. Not only did we take one, we took two.”

He refers to Brock Osweiler with a second-round pick in the 2012 draft and Paxton Lynch with a first-round selection in the 2016 draft.

“That’s the history at that position,” Sharpe said. “But to me if you give Kirk that money – it’s going to take a boatload of money. But we’ve never seen a quarterback at this age, 29, be totally free with no tag. Kirk Cousins is free. He’s 29 years of age, he’s had three straight 4,000 yard passing seasons.

He’s passed for more yards than any Redskin quarterback that’s in the Hall of Fame (a group that consists of Sammy Baugh and Sonny Jurgensen).

“But if you give up that kind of money to sign him – and I think he’s going to work it – what are you going to sacrifice? Who do you have to release? Kirk Cousins is not coming to Denver if you have to give up Demaryius Thomas and Emmanuel Sanders. What are you selling him?

“Case Keenum, I think Case has had a great seven, eight, nine games but that’s a small sample size. And you saw what happened in the NFC championship Game. It went from 7-0 to 38-7 in a hurry. You can’t ignore that so is Case Keenum on the rise? Or has he plateaued? Those are questions only John Elway can answer. That’s why he makes the big bucks. That’s why he got that extension.”

Von Miller: He is very much active as a Broncos outside linebacker and is one of the most dominant defensive players in the league. OK, Von: Cousins for \$30 million a year, Keenum for \$18 million or draft your quarterback with the No. 5 pick?

“I like all the guys out there but if we could get Kirk that’d be great. If we get solid play (from the QB position) that’d be great. And we got to get better on defense as well.

“But since you asked me the question I would like to have Kirk. I would rather have Kirk.”

Mike Zimmer: Minnesota Vikings was told the Broncos would have interest in his quarterback, Case Keenum, then asked his thoughts.

“Good for them,” Zimmer said, then abruptly walked away.

Roger Staubach: The former Navy Midshipman and Dallas Cowboys Hall of Fame quarterback would not pick between Cousins and Keenum.

“I tell you what, those are two good choices. I met both of those guys here. Cousins has played a little bit more than Keenum. They’re both possibilities, yeah. If they don’t get one of those guys, then John Elway needs to come out of retirement or something. I’m an Elway fan.”

Why's that?

"He was a fantastic football player. I just loved watching him. And he ran a little bit like I did."

What about guys like Baker Mayfield in the draft?

"I like Mayfield. He's not tall, but he's got a good arm. Drew Brees is here, Russell Wilson and Baker is in that category."

Brees and Wilson walked by quickly without stopping to talk. They must have been A-listers. Maybe they stopped at the NFL Network set at the end of paparazzi row but not with us credentialed common folk.

Joe Theismann: The former Washington quarterback is also a color commentator on the team's preseason broadcasts. So, he can be accused of bias towards Cousins.

"I think Kirk Cousins would be a wonderful match for the Broncos. I would say of all the teams that are looking to add a quarterback, I think Kirk could be something that John (Elway) really needs. He's a veteran quarterback who has had some success, who could run the offense the way he wants it to be run.

"(Elway) brought Peyton Manning in, and that turned out pretty well so when you bring a veteran into Denver, good things happen."

But \$30 million a year?

"You know the number's going to be between \$120 (million) and \$140. I mean, I don't even think about those kind of numbers. I hear about them, I read about them but they don't really compute with me. But I think that's what the marketplace is when you look at what Matthew (Stafford) is getting and Derek (Carr) is getting, it's going to be \$25 to \$30 a year. With Kirk, that's going to be a bottom number for him."

So far, it was a 4-0-1 landslide for Cousins. But then the red carpet started bringing in Keenum supporters.

LaDainian Tomlinson: The Hall of Fame San Diego Charger running back was the first to not ride the Cousins' bandwagon.

"I think I take Case Keenum. Case has proven he's a winner. What he's done this year has been tremendous. He can get guys to fall in. Not that Kirk Cousins can't, but I just think right now Case Keenum is playing terrific football and he has a lot that he can offer a team."

Case Keenum: The Vikings quarterback went from often-dumped NFL journeymen to surprise Minnesota miracle man in 2017.

He has played out his one-year, \$2 million contract with the Vikings and he is scheduled to become a free agent on March 14.

His value of \$18 million a year was based on the contract Brock Osweiler received two years ago after just seven starts with the Broncos in 2015.

Keenum was told his name has come up quite a bit in Broncos Country since the regular season ended.

“I’ve come up? Who knows, man? I’m not really experienced at this free agent thing. I was before (last year) but the phone wasn’t ringing so if the phone rings a little bit more, it’d be nice.”

Is it accurate to say Gary Kubiak was the one who discovered Keenum, or at least believed in him as a potential NFL quarterback? Kubiak was the Houston Texans’ head coach in 2012 when Keenum was signed as an undrafted rookie out of the University of Houston.

“He gave me a shot. No one in the NFL called after the draft besides the Texans. That was coach Kubiak. The amount of football I learned those first two years I can’t even put into words how much he’s meant to me in my career.”

Make no mistake, Kubiak is the Broncos’ top recruiting tool for Case Keenum.

Cameron Jordan: The New Orleans Saints’ defensive end is one of the league’s most underrated players – probably because the Saints are known for Brees and his high-powered offense.

Jordan, though, had 13.0 sacks in 2017, which was his third, double-digit sack season. He’s averaged 9.75 sacks the past six seasons.

Cousins for \$30 million a year or Keenum for \$18?

“You think \$18 (million) is going to be able to get Case out to you after a year like this? Come on, man. Ryan Tannehill is making \$20 million, right? Blake Bortles is making \$19. Come on.

“Either way it’s going to be expensive. I’m just saying the quarterback markets are high.”

So, who do you pick?

“After a year like Case Keenum had, I don’t know how you don’t go Case. We beat Kirk. We didn’t beat Case.”

The Saints thought they did. Then came the Minnesota Miracle.

Deion Sanders: Prime Time indisputedly had the best “cover” skills in NFL history. He also might have been the league’s best-ever returner.

Sanders has had a long run as an NFL analyst.

Come on over here, Deion. Should the Broncos go Cousins for \$30 million a year, Keenum for \$18 million a year, or take a quarterback with the No. 5 pick in the draft?

“Baker Mayfield or Lamar Jackson. Why doesn’t anybody talk about Lamar Jackson (with the No. 5 pick)?”

Fair point. Jackson was the Heisman Trophy winner as a Louisville sophomore when he compiled 3,543 yards passing, 1,571 yards rushing (really?) and 51 combined touchdowns.

He threw for 3,660 yards as a junior with 1,601 yards rushing (seriously?) and 45 combined touchdowns.

He is listed at 6-foot-3, 211 pounds. He was a 57 percent passer, which is why he's not getting stronger consideration as a top 10 pick. But no player in the country has more all-around athletic talent than Lamar Jackson.

Steve Young: The Hall of Fame quarterback and former 49ers' great has long been an NFL analyst. I initially deciphered his elaborate answer as a lean towards Cousins. Then as I went back over his answer, Young might have been leaning toward Keenum.

In the end, I decided he didn't decide.

Cousins for \$30 million or Keenum for \$18 million?

"Is that what it has to be, \$30 (million)? You can get a long-term contract for less than that, right? It's hard to know if Case is a late bloomer, someone who can carry the water, or – you can't fake what Case did. If he can replicate that, Case is fine.

"Kirk seems like a guy that's not going to not cause grief. You can win some games, play some good defense. You can't have your quarterback struggle. This is Denver, you know? They got to do something."

How about taking a quarterback with the No. 5 draft pick?

"OK, are we good at that? Someone has to be honest, you have to be honest with yourself. Do we know what we're doing when we're picking young quarterbacks for the pros? That's a roulette wheel."

I thought Osweiler was a nice second-round selection by Elway in the 2012 draft. Paxton Lynch has yet to come on as a 2016 first-round pick. But, I get Young's point.

"Seeing Case, you know what Case did, get someone competent who can win some games.

"The quarterback issue is such a hard one. I think it's a generational question. You don't have to answer it in one day. But you've got to have one to get you through. If you don't have your quarterback, it hurts."

Terrell Davis: The former Bronco running back great finished up the red-carpet stroll of celebrities as a Hall of Famer.

Cousins for \$30 million a year or Keenum for \$18 million?

"You're making it hard. Case played so well this year. But if you look at the body of work I don't know if you can feel confident with that. I'm probably going to roll with Kirk. Yeah, I want Kirk."

One can conclude from this red-carpet survey that you get what you pay for. If the Broncos have the financial wherewithal, Cousins can solve their quarterback position for a good five years. There are a few more unknowns with Keenum and a rookie.

It may be worth nothing, though, that Elway nor Kubiak walked on the red carpet Saturday night.

Nielsen says 103.4 million watch Super Bowl

By David Bauder
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An estimated 103.4 million people watched the Super Bowl on NBC, a 7 percent drop from last year that indicates that television's biggest event may have peaked in popularity.

The Nielsen company said it's the smallest Super Bowl audience on television since 2009 despite the underdog Philadelphia Eagles beating the New England Patriots in a thrilling game that was close from start to finish.

Last year's Patriots-Falcons game reached 111.3 million viewers. The all-time Super Bowl record — and record for any television event in the United States — was the 114.4 million who watched the Patriots against the Seahawks in 2015.

The NFL's viewership has been down this year, with experts citing factors like increased injuries, some confusing rules changes and anger at players protesting police brutality by kneeling during the national anthem. Similarly, fewer people have cable than they did a few years ago, with streaming onto hand-held devices becoming more popular.

The dip was also telegraphed by a poll conducted last week by Seton Hall University, which found that 54 percent of Americans were preparing to watch the game. That's down from the 68 percent that said the same thing two years ago, according to the poll, which wasn't done in 2017. The poll has a margin of error of 3.8 percentage points.

Despite that prediction, the poll's director said he thought the game's quality would lift the numbers beyond what was actually seen.

"If you turned the game on at any time to say, 'I wonder what's going on,' or a friend texted you to say you should watch this, you're going to watch and get hooked," said Rick Gentile, director of the poll, also sponsored by the Sharkey Institute.

NBC said that if you add in people who followed the game online, viewership increased to 106 million. And Nielsen said it has not yet counted the number of people who watched the game outside of homes — in a bar, for instance. Some perspective: despite the decrease, Sunday's game ranked as the 10th most-watched television even in U.S. history.

Soothing any hurt for NBC was Kantar Media's estimate that \$414 million was spent on advertising for the Super Bowl telecast. That's second only to the \$419 million spent last year, a figure that Kantar said exceeded 2018 only because last year's game went into overtime, meaning there was more time to sell ads.

The network was able to remind millions of people that the Winter Olympics, which will also be televised by NBC, begin on Thursday.

Justin Timberlake's halftime show, despite tepid reviews, drew an audience of 106.6 million people, Nielsen said.

NBC's post-game telecast of "This is Us" was a winning choice. Nielsen said 27 million people stayed for the drama, the most-watched post-game entertainment show in six years and sharply above the 17.6 million people who watched the premiere of "24: Legacy" on Fox last year.

And extra kibble is being handed out over at Animal Planet. The cable network's annual "Puppy Bowl" of cute animals, shown opposite NBC's pregame show, reached 3.05 million people. That was the show's biggest audience in its 14 years of existence.

How far are Broncos away from Super Bowl?

By Troy Renck
KMGH
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In the moments after one of the most breathtaking Super Bowls in history, a Philadelphia kid watched with appreciation and envy.

"I want that feeling. Gotta have that feeling," tweeted Broncos safety Will Parks. "Everlasting championship fever. LETS WORK."

Teammate Chris Harris responded with candor.

"Gotta get you in the playoffs. Lol," he said.

As the Eagles celebrate their first modern title, the Broncos front office returns to work, mapping out plans for free agency and the draft. Parks' reaction and Harris' response illustrate the Broncos' challenging position. They are only two years removed from winning Super Bowl 50, but their roster spawns sobering questions about the road back.

Simply put: How far are the the Broncos from contending?

Las Vegas does not hate their chances. They are considered a middle-of-the-pack combatant to win the Super Bowl at 33-to-1 odds, slight optimism considering last season's 5-11 dumpster fire. It is clearly based on the wise guys believing Denver will add a new quarterback.

What are the keys to clawing back into the hunt?

1) Find a quarterback

The Broncos will aggressively pursue Kirk Cousins. Their chances remain strong if he becomes a free agent. According to reports, Washington is considering placing the franchise tag on Cousins in order receive trade compensation. Good luck. It seems like posturing. Cousins could refuse to sign it, delaying the process, and eliminating suitors before threatening to take the deal. That would leave Washington with two quarterbacks counting in excess of \$50 million against the salary cap. If Washington complicates the process, the Broncos might have to move on. They need clarity before the draft.

If not Cousins, then perhaps Case Keenum? Minnesota is a sleeper favorite to land Cousins which could leave Keenum a Broncos target. He has a history with the Broncos executive Gary Kubiak. As for Super Bowl MVP Nick Foles? I suggested him as an option two weeks ago, and was laughed off Twitter. How do you like him now?

He produced one of the greatest postseasons ever. However, he's under contract for one more season. I would be surprised if the Eagles trade him. He provides a safety net to allow Carson Wentz to recover on a conservative time table following knee surgery.

If the Broncos don't land a free agent -- the bidding and unofficial signings begin on March 12 -- they will likely use the fifth pick over all to draft one.

Without better quarterback play any talk of challenging for titles is foolish.

2) Caffeinate the offense

Step back. Be honest. When you watch the Eagles and Patriots, do you any see any resemblance to the Broncos offense? The answer is no. The Broncos lack receiving tight ends, have no slot receiver production, don't use their running backs in passing concepts, and are left rudderless if Emmanuel Sanders or Demaryius Thomas struggle.

The first priority is obvious: Upgrade the skill position talent and the offensive line. The Broncos need to sign a free agent tight end -- Trey Burton or Austin Seferian-Jenkins would be good fits -- to pair with Jake Butt.

Even if Cody Latimer re-signs -- he remains valuable on special teams -- the Broncos need to draft a receiver to push Carlos Henderson in training camp. If last season taught them anything it is that the recent draft class members should be guaranteed nothing. Make them earn roster spots.

3) Figure out O-Line

The building blocks exist. Guard Ron Leary, center Matt Paradis and left tackle Garrett Bolles provide a nice core. I would move Leary back to left guard to help Bolles' development. And this is where it gets interesting. If the Broncos sign or acquire a veteran quarterback, it opens up the strong possibility of drafting a guard or tackle in the first two rounds. They can no longer keep striking out on bargain-priced right tackles. Stability is desperately needed at the position to improve the team's overall pass blocking.

4) Add a linebacker, cornerback

It can be argued the Broncos will not re-sign any of their unrestricted free agents. Linebacker Todd Davis has shown promise, but another suitor could price him out of Denver's budget. Regardless, Denver needs to draft or sign a linebacker to help in pass coverage. And adding a corner is necessary with the possibility Aqib Talib is traded this offseason. I like Brendan Langley's potential, but he has to prove it, and nothing pushes athletes like competition. Marcus Rios is an interesting prospect.

5) Coach better

Vance Joseph remains in a difficult spot. He is essentially operating on a one-year contract, his job spared in January because of the team's poor quarterback play. Joseph must improve, must become more assertive and must coach his coaches better. Under Tom McMahon, sanity should return to the special teams. Bill Musgrave, as the full-time boss from the jump, intrigues me. He appears flexible and willing to incorporate run-pass-option concepts and show creativity. He needs to be for Denver to bounce back. Defensive coordinator Joe Woods showed progress after getting outcoached against superior opponents like Kansas City, Philadelphia and New England. I expect him to simplify schemes to create a better gameday product.

In 2017, the Broncos suffered through one of the worst seasons in franchise history, including an eight-game losing streak and seven road defeats. And yet, hope flickers. The AFC West is wide open, especially with Alex Smith no longer in the division.

At this point, confetti seems a pipe dream, but contending should not be.

Broncos' mock draft roundup: Feb. 5, 2018

By Ben Swanson
DenverBroncos.com
Feb. 6, 2018

Bucky Brooks, NFL.com: QB Josh Rosen, UCLA

The Broncos could elect to snag a veteran signal-caller, but the UCLA star could tickle John Elway's fancy as a polished pocket passer. [Jan. 30, 2018]

Lance Zierlein, NFL.com: G Quenton Nelson, Notre Dame

The Broncos need a guard, and they might have stumbled into an All-Pro with the powerful Nelson. [Jan. 30, 2018]

R.J. White, CBSSports.com: QB Josh Rosen, UCLA

The Broncos seem to be doing their due diligence on Baker Mayfield at the Senior Bowl, but if Rosen falls into their laps I think he has to be the pick, provided the quarterback situation isn't resolved by draft day. [Jan. 26, 2018]

Dan Kadar, SB Nation: G Quenton Nelson, Notre Dame

This pick continues to be made with the opinion that the Broncos will sign Kirk Cousins this offseason. Though you do have to wonder what Denver will do if they think Rosen will be available with the fifth overall pick. [Feb. 5, 2018]

Chris Trapasso, CBS Sports: RB Saquon Barkley, Penn State

Surprise pick of the top 10. In this scenario, John Elway finds a veteran quarterback in free agency or via trade, as he doesn't want to roll the dice on another rookie quarterback two years after he seemingly whiffed on Paxton Lynch. Barkley can be a versatile workhorse right away. [Jan. 31, 2018]

Matt Miller, Bleacher Report: QB Josh Allen, Wyoming

Josh Allen isn't a Day 1 starter despite rare physical tools. Like Mahomes last year, he needs to work on correcting some mechanical issues with his feet to improve his accuracy. But also like Mahomes or Cam Newton, Allen can make some amazing things happen with his arm and his feet. [Feb. 5, 2018]

Luke Easterling, Draft Wire: G Quenton Nelson, Notre Dame

Quarterback is a popular pick here in most mock drafts, and for good reason. John Elway could easily spend this pick on another young gun to accomplish what Paxton Lynch hasn't, but whoever ends up under center, he could use some better protection. Nelson might be the best overall prospect in this class, regardless of position. [Feb. 1, 2018]

Here is the first edition of the Broncos' mock draft roundup, including picks from ESPN's Mel Kiper Jr. and Todd McShay.

2018 NFL Free Agency: Kirk Cousins, Drew Brees headline a top-heavy QB class

By Will Brinson
CBSSports.com
Feb. 6, 2018

There is no more important position in football than quarterback, and this year quarterbacks are going to be a critical piece of the offseason puzzle. It all starts and ends with Kirk Cousins, freed from the franchise tag shackles of Washington (we think) and set to potentially take the salary market to a new level.

Things get a little dicey after that, with a bunch of players from the Vikings flooding the market, along with two potentially huge names who will not actually get a sniff anywhere else (we think). If Jimmy Garoppolo or Drew Brees somehow managed to find a market with other franchises, things would get real weird.

One more name to watch who is not included below: AJ McCarron. He's a restricted free agent (maybe), and probably will not be hitting true free agency. But if he wins his grievance with the league, he could be a UFA. Dave Richard has a great breakdown how these guys will affect your Fantasy Football league during the offseason, but let's take a gander at what might happen with some of these guys in free agency. We're not going to make predictions for everyone because that would be absurd, but there are a few below, with the full list/contract info rolling in courtesy of the fine folks at Spotrac.com.

The golden goose: Kirk Cousins

It is widely believed Kirk Cousins is going to hit free agency, after Washington decided to trade for Alex Smith, but rumors have been circulating about the Redskins wanting to use the franchise tag on Cousins anyway. In that unlikely scenario, Washington would trade Cousins and control his next destination, removing him from free agency.

It feels deeply personal and more like a spite move than anything. If it happens -- and it probably won't, unless the Redskins really want to play chicken with about \$35 million in salary cap space -- the quarterback landscape would be dramatically altered.

Cousins has been the subject of much skepticism over the years, with some questioning if his production was largely about empty stats. 2017 proved that narrative to be false: Cousins overcame the departure of his top two targets (DeSean Jackson and Pierre Garcon), myriad injuries on the offensive line and struggles/injuries to his current targets (Jamison Crowder, Terrelle Pryor and Jordan Reed namely) to produce his finest season to date. If he looked like a quarterback who needed his surrounding cast to elevate him prior to this year, Cousins looked like a quarterback capable of elevating those around him in 2017.

One of two things is going to happen with Cousins in free agency: he is either going to sign one of the largest deals we've ever seen and join a struggling franchise with tons of cap space (New York Jets, Cleveland) or he is going to sign a really big contract and join a contending club with a quarterback need (Jacksonville, Minnesota, Arizona).

Prediction: Jets (signs five-year, \$140 million deal)

Franchise QBs who probably aren't available: Jimmy Garoppolo

Technically Jimmy G, who was acquired from the Patriots for a second-round pick in the middle of the 2017 season, is going to be a free agent. But the 49ers will not be allowing him to hit the market.

Garoppolo played in just five games this past season, but when he played he looked great. He drew rave reviews from his teammates/coaches/fans/GM and he looks and sounds a lot like Tom Brady when he's out on the field winning games. It sounds as if the 49ers and Garoppolo will work out a deal before this ever becomes a real issue, but it is entirely conceivable they have to use the franchise tag on him before proceeding with contract negotiations.

He is on this list, but it would take some kind of clerical error for him to actually become a free agent. At just 26 years old and having spent years learning behind Brady and under Bill Belichick/Josh McDaniels, Garoppolo would probably earn the largest contract in NFL history if he was allowed to negotiate with multiple teams in this market.

Prediction: 49ers (franchise tag; five-year, \$125 million extension before July deadline)

Drew Brees

This is going to be a really fascinating situation to watch, because Brees is going to be a free agent. He cannot be franchise tagged again after negotiating that out of his last contract. He has said publicly multiple times he wants to be back with the Saints, and the Saints have said publicly they want Brees to stick with them.

Brees just turned 39 years old, but he had another impressive season in New Orleans -- we didn't talk about his production as much only because he failed to lead the league in passing. Brees is much more available than Garoppolo and was almost worth putting in the Cousins category. At this point of his career, it would just be stunning to see him play for anyone other than New Orleans. It's interesting that Brees and Cousins will be free agents in the same year; Brees is the last true, young potential franchise free agent quarterback. (Peyton Manning would qualify, but he was older and coming off multiple neck surgeries.) There is a chance someone like Arizona or Jacksonville could chase after Brees with a massive contract and the Saints declined to match, causing him to leave for greener pastures. But the likely scenario is him getting a short, stout contract from New Orleans to keep the current core intact.

Prediction: Saints (signs two-year, \$50 million deal)

The Vikings quarterbacks

Case Keenum

Sam Bradford

Teddy Bridgewater

The Vikings have a strong defense in place and will get Dalvin Cook back to help the running game, but there should be concerns about offensive coordinator Pat Shurmur leaving and how it will effect the

three primary quarterbacks for Minnesota in the 2017 season, all of whom are free agents after this year.

Keenum, who provides the most stability of this group thanks to being healthy, is a total wild card in free agency. CBS Sports NFL Insider Jason La Canfora sees a situation unfolding where Keenum gets hit with a transition tag from Minnesota, who currently has three free-agent-to-be quarterbacks under contract. But the all-time NCAA passing yards leader also does not have a long track record of success at the NFL level (even if some people saw it coming sooner than others), although this season and these playoffs should provide proof you don't necessarily need to have a blue-chip pedigree to help a team succeed. If Keenum isn't tagged, it's easy to imagine the Broncos chasing him, considering his potential fit with a Shanahan/Kubiak-style system.

Bridgewater is the former first-round pick for this organization, but he was relegated to the third string for the playoffs in favor of Bradford. If his health checks out, he could see some action in free agency as a guy who will compete for a starting spot thanks to his high floor. But Bridgewater nearly had his career ended by a gruesome knee injury, basically hasn't played in two years and probably has a limited ceiling.

Bradford looked like he finally found his landing spot in Minnesota after Week 1, but ultimately ended up not playing another game when his knee injury flared up again. Anything is on the table here, from Bradford walking away, to Bradford taking a backup job with Shurmur in New York to Bradford landing a prove-it deal with someone like the Cardinals.

Prediction: \$19 million transition tag with Vikings for Keenum; two-year, \$24 million deal with Cardinals for Bradford; two-year, \$15 million deal with Bills for Bridgewater

Older guys who fit better as backups

Jay Cutler

Josh McCown

Ryan Fitzpatrick

Chase Daniel

Derek Anderson

Matt Moore

Drew Stanton

Chad Henne

A group of could-be starters who have seen significant starting snaps in the NFL the last two seasons, it's anyone's guess where these guys end up going. Cutler was retired and going to work for FOX last season when Ryan Tannehill suffered an injury, and he joined Miami at the last minute on a one-year, \$10 million deal. He seems like a good bet to bounce back to retirement after a tough season with the Dolphins.

McCown was outstanding for the Jets last year relative to expectations and is one of the best locker-room presences in the NFL, a veteran leader and a de facto coach for younger players. Even if he doesn't necessarily have the chops to be a starting quarterback for a contender, McCown should still see some action thanks to his impressive play with New York. You could do much worse than him as a backup.

Fitzpatrick backed up Jameis Winston last year and was pretty good for a couple of starts, but not anywhere close to "quality starting material." Fitz had a magic run with the Jets in 2015 but was a

disaster for New York the following year. He's a backup moving forward, although one with some nice floor to him. You can feel safe knowing he'll see some, not all, snaps in 2018.

Anderson profiles as a guy who will sign back with the Panthers, having established a pretty nice little spot in Carolina over the past few years. It's hard to imagine him landing a spot where he competes to start.

Moore is another high-floor veteran who has played well in spots recently, including when he helped the Dolphins make their playoff push in 2016, but expecting him to take over a team and have it work out as an experiment is not an ideal situation.

How on Earth is Stanton 34 years old at this point? It's hard to imagine him getting as much run as he has in years past without Bruce Arians around to champion for him, but teams can do worse as a backup.

Henne nearly beat out Blake Bortles before the 2017 season.

Guys with theoretical upside:

Austin Davis
Blaine Gabbert
Geno Smith
Tom Savage
Brandon Weeden
EJ Manuel
Brock Osweiler

Weeden was the toughest guy to pinpoint here, what with his status as a 34-year old. Mostly these are guys with high pedigrees or guys who were once drafted in high slots who have not panned out. It's unrealistic to expect Geno Smith or Blaine Gabbert to be a reasonable starter, even if Geno murdered Eli Manning's consecutive start streak last year and Gabbert drew praise from the Cardinals during the season. Do you want to be the team who takes the next chance on Osweiler or Manuel?

Full-blown backups:

Matt Barkley
Mark Sanchez
T.J. Yates
Kellen Clemens
David Fales
Tyler Bray
Joe Webb
Josh Johnson
Scott Tolzien
Ryan Mallett

None of these guys should be within range of the QB1 position on any depth chart at this point. Maybe I end up looking like an idiot for that, but it will be because something magical happens both from an opportunity and skillset standpoint.