

Jimmy Garoppolo signed a massive contract with the 49ers. He also reset the QB market.

By Nicki Jhabvala
Denver Post
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There's a new No. 1.

The 49ers signed quarterback Jimmy Garoppolo to a five-year deal worth a reported \$137.5 million that tops the league in total value and average per year. Per ESPN's Adam Schefter, Garoppolo's deal includes the largest three-year cash total — regarded as the most important part of NFL contracts since they're typically not fully guaranteed — of about \$90 million.

Lions quarterback Matthew Stafford held the previous contract record in total value and per-year average with \$135 million spread of five years (\$27 million per year).

Though it seemed inevitable the 49ers would spend big to get their guy, whom they acquired from the Patriots last season, the implications of Garoppolo's deal are far-reaching.

His \$137.5 million contract has reset the quarterback — just in time for Kirk Cousins to hit free agency. The 29-year-old seems poised to hit the open market after the Redskins agreed to a trade and contact extension for Alex Smith, and it's expected that Cousins will become the next highest-paid player in NFL history, likely securing close to \$30 million a year.

"At the end of the day, I want to win," Cousins told Sirius XM NFL in Minneapolis last week. "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."

Cousins' increasing value could give the Broncos pause as they try to balance their current roster with needed help. Denver already has the largest non-quarterback contract on its books with Von Miller's \$114.5 million deal. Taking on the largest contract overall could cash-strap them for years to come.

But they do have space, and they do have plenty of options this offseason.

The Broncos are armed with nearly \$26 million in projected cap space, possibly 10 draft picks (including the No. 5 selection) and a number of contracts they could move or restructure to clear additional space. And should they choose to spend top-dollar on a quarterback, the structure of the deal — how much is fully guaranteed at signing and the player's annual cap charges, among other things — would be more important than the total value.

The Broncos have needed a franchise and consistent starting quarterback for two years, since Peyton Manning's retirement in 2016, and general manager John Elway will consider every option ahead of the draft.

Cousins is a target. One of many targets on the Broncos' list.

And his price tag just went up.

QB Money

The top contracts in the NFL, including Jimmy Garoppolo's new five-year agreement with the 49ers.

Player	Team	Length	Value	Average	Guaranteed
Jimmy Garoppolo	49ers	5 yrs.	\$137.5M	\$27.5m	?
Matthew Stafford	Lions	5 yrs.	\$135M	\$27M	\$60.5M
Derek Carr	Raiders	5 yrs.	\$125.025M	\$25.005M	\$40M
Andrew Luck	Colts	5 yrs.	\$122.97M	\$24.594M	\$47M
Drew Brees	Saints	1 yr.	\$24.25M	\$24.25M	\$24.25M
Kirk Cousins	Redskins	1 yr. (tag)	\$23.9436M	\$23.9436M	\$23.9436M

As scouting combine approaches, Broncos need a throwback performance

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN.com

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As the eighth NFL scouting combine of John Elway's tenure as the Denver Broncos chief football decision-maker approaches, the team is in similar trouble as it was in his first year on the job.

And Elway, as well as the Broncos, could sure use a draft class at the end of the run-up like 2011's. That's because Elway's first draft class is still likely his best, and the Broncos again need exactly that kind of infusion.

Six-time Pro Bowl selection Von Miller topped that class as the No. 2 pick overall -- the Broncos have the No. 5 pick overall this year -- but in the nine-player class the Broncos got seven players who played in at least 30 games for the team, topped by Miller's 104.

Of the nine players, seventh-round pick Jeremy Beal, who spent the 2011 season on the Broncos' practice squad, was the only player selected by the Broncos that year who never played in a regular-season game for the team. Mike Mohamed, a sixth-round pick, played in three over two seasons.

But that draft still represents the best combination of players who fit the Broncos both athletically and in terms of football IQ. The Broncos have found impact players in the years that have followed, but have not found as good an overall balance in a draft class since.

And Miller is currently the only Broncos draft pick in Elway's tenure who has been named to the Pro Bowl and is also still on the roster. In short, while what the Broncos do in free agency, especially at quarterback, will have a significant impact on how the offseason goes, the Broncos need to re-capture the sense of draft purpose they had in 2011.

At the Senior Bowl, Vance Joseph put it like this:

"I want players to be a good fit for us. That is in terms of loving football and being smart players. Smart players give you an opportunity to play guys in different areas. I want smart players. I want guys who love football on top of having ability. Once you get to this level, as far as the physical ability, it's very close. The things that separate players is the mindset, the love of football, how he learns, what kind of teammate he is going to be and leadership skills."

Peyton Manning's tenure -- 2012-2015 -- changed the dynamic a bit for the Broncos. Not only did they consider themselves Super Bowl contenders, they were, making two trips in those four years.

It made the draft-and-develop strategy that builds rosters for the long haul slightly more of a back-burner affair. Manning's presence attracted free agents and also covered potential problems.

Now the Broncos, after a 5-11 finish, are in a similar spot as in 2011 when they were coming off a 4-12. Their first two draft classes of the post-Manning era -- 2016 and 2017 -- are filled with athletic prospects who finished at, or near, the top of the pre-draft rankings on the physical side of things.

But safety Justin Simmons, a third-round pick in '16, is the only one of the group to have elevated himself to unquestioned starter for a team that has missed the playoffs in two consecutive years. The Broncos haven't had enough players in those past two draft classes to turn their physical attributes into football performance the way Simmons has.

The Broncos hope tight end Jake Butt, who spent this past season on injured reserve, can be one of those success stories as well in his return to the field. They have been decidedly non-committal about where the highest-profile pick of the past two drafts -- quarterback Paxton Lynch, a 2016 first-round pick they traded up in the round to acquire -- fits in their plan at the moment.

The question the Broncos must answer is whether their issues come in developing players or from selecting players without enough on-field awareness or game-speed instincts. To that end, Elway has been out front since the season's end, having appeared at a bowl game or two to watch top prospects as well as the practice week at the Senior Bowl.

Elway, too, has already spoken of the importance of this offseason to regaining some kind of balance for the team and his role in it.

"We need those answers," Elway said. "We have to learn, grow, that's me too."

Quarterbacks will dominate the 2018 NFL offseason

By Arnie Stapleton
Associated Press
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Quarterbacks will rule the NFL's offseason.

Beginning with Alex Smith going to Washington when the league's new year starts next month and Jimmy Garoppolo agreeing to a record-breaking deal with San Francisco on Thursday, several quarterbacks will find new riches and many teams will land new QBs in 2018.

Tom Brady may have been denied another championship but not his coordinator, and some believe Josh McDaniels' sudden change of heart this week in spurning the Indianapolis Colts was related to doubts about Andrew Luck's health.

Either way, McDaniels is staying in New England to help the Patriots bounce back from their 41-33 loss to Philadelphia in Super Bowl 52.

The Eagles aren't just celebrating their first championship since 1960, but also an abundance of talent at the position in franchise QB Carson Wentz and Super Bowl MVP Nick Foles.

Should Wentz's recovery from knee surgery go well, the Eagles will have a huge bargaining chip to help restock their roster.

Wentz's injury rehab will be closely watched this offseason, just like Aaron Rodgers' repaired collarbone in Green Bay and DeShaun Watson's torn ACL in Houston.

Those teams figure to be contenders for Super Bowl 53 in Atlanta if their quarterbacks are healthy. A dozen other teams will either jockey for their next star or dole out big bucks to keep the one they have.

Kirk Cousins and Drew Brees lead an exceptionally large group of veteran quarterbacks lined up for big paydays and possibly new opportunities that includes the Minnesota Vikings' trio of Teddy Bridgewater, Case Keenum and Sam Bradford.

Garoppolo, Brady's longtime backup, got a five-year contract from the 49ers that will pay him a reported \$137.5 million to keep him off the free-agent market without forcing the team to use the one-year franchise tag.

NFL Network first reported the terms of the contract, which is worth \$27.5 million per season to top the previous record set by Detroit's Matthew Stafford last year by \$500,000 per year — but presumably will soon be surpassed by Brees or Cousins.

San Francisco acquired Garoppolo from New England before the trade deadline for a 2018 second-round pick. He led the 49ers to five straight wins to end the season, pushing his record as a starter to 7-0.

Teams that miss out on one of the prized free agents can look to the draft, which features Baker Mayfield, Josh Allen, Sam Darnold, Josh Rosen, Lamar Jackson and Mason Rudolph.

The quarterback carousel began in the days before the Super Bowl when Kansas City agreed to trade Smith to the Redskins.

The deal, which cannot be finalized until March 14, spells the end of Cousins' time in Washington and hands the Chiefs' job to Patrick Mahomes III, the 10th pick in last year's draft out of Texas Tech.

So, Smith, the No. 1 overall pick in the 2005 draft, moves on to his third team just as he's coming off the best season of his 13-year career.

"I think Washington is getting a phenomenal player, a great leader," Rodgers said last week while discussing the league's current quarterback commotion.

"Now you've got Kirk Cousins, what's going to happen with him? You've got probably five guys that are going to get drafted in the first round, Jimmy Garoppolo and his situation.

"There's a lot of moving pieces."

In the not-too-distant future, Rodgers could find himself one of them.

Rodgers, 34, has two years left on his contract and if he stays healthy in 2018, he'll be in line for a mega payday that could obliterate any of the deals that will be signed.

Rodgers told the AP last week that he wants to play well into his 40s and might have to finish his career in another team's uniform as Brett Favre did.

"I think you have to be humble enough to realize if it could happen to Brett, it can happen to you," Rodgers said.

Among the teams looking for an upgrade are the Denver Broncos, who haven't been back to the playoffs since Peyton Manning retired a champion two years ago.

Super Bowl 50 MVP Von Miller said he trusts general manager John Elway to fix that in the next few weeks: "We have a Hall of Fame quarterback running the show who's going to get the right guy," Miller said.

Miller has a tip for his GM, too.

"No disrespect to Trevor Siemian or Paxton Lynch, but I would love to play with Kirk Cousins," Miller said. "When Peyton came to Denver, we just took off. Kirk's an elite starter, too. I could roll with that."

With eight trips to the Super Bowl and five rings, Brady is the gold standard of quarterbacks.

Yet, this time he was outdueled by Foles, who showed just how important it is for teams to also have depth at the position.

"To get in a shootout with that guy on the other team is probably not ideal for anyone — ever," Eagles tight end Zach Ertz said. "The guy is the best quarterback to ever play the game. That team is phenomenal. They are coached amazingly."

Yet, the Patriots were beaten by a journeyman QB who contemplated retirement not long ago after he kept losing his starting job with his employers in perpetual search of a better option.

Foles turned into a flawless fill-in after Wentz got hurt in December, stepping in to deliver Philadelphia its first Super Bowl title.

Foles has one year left on his two-year deal, and his Super Bowl performance bumped his name up on the long list of coveted quarterbacks.

"He's amazing," Ertz said. "The past three weeks he's been playing out of his mind. People panicked when Carson went down. Nick, we had all the confidence in the world in him."

Garoppolo's \$127.5 million deal is bad news for quarterback-needy Denver Broncos

By David Ramsey
Colorado Springs Gazette
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Quarterback Jimmy Garoppolo signed a five-season, \$127.5 million contract with the 49ers. This is, certainly, good news for Garoppolo.

And, just as certainly, bad news for the Broncos, who will be quarterback shopping during the NFL offseason.

Garoppolo showed promise this season, winning all five of his starts with the 49ers. His reward was a \$27.5 million annual payday.

If Jimmy G. is worth \$27.5 per season, how much is Kirk Cousins worth? Garoppolo has only shown hints of what he can do. Cousins has thrown for more than 4,000 yards for three straight seasons. Cousins has proven himself.

I'm thinking Cousins will earn \$30 million in 2018.

At least.

Cousins has all the leverage. He can squeeze every last dollar from the Broncos, or any other quarterback-needy franchise. He will likely seek more than \$100 million in guaranteed money.

To me, the question has never been if the Broncos should pursue Cousins.

Of course they should.

The question is:

Can the Broncos, working under the NFL's salary cap, afford Cousins?

The team that signs Cousins will secure a quality quarterback who hovers either just inside or just outside the NFL's top-10 list.

But the team that signs Cousins will face severe trouble in finding the money to pursue and retain talent. In other words, adding Cousins might threaten the team's future.

Today, Garoppolo is a rich man. And that's bad news for the Broncos.

Jimmy Garoppolo's monster contract reflects NFL's reality for paying QBs

By Mike Jones

USA Today

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The quarterback market continues to soar.

The San Francisco 49ers have locked up Jimmy Garoppolo to a contract that, per multiple reports, will pay him \$137.5 million over five years – a new record for the highest average annual salary in NFL history.

This deal comes just six months after the Detroit Lions set the record with a five-year, \$135 million contract for Matthew Stafford, which surpassed the previous high water mark set in a five-year, \$125 million deal that the Oakland Raiders gave Derek Carr last June.

Critics can proclaim that the NFL is dying, pointing to declining ratings, protest backlash and concerns about concussions. But the salary cap continues to rise, and players – especially quarterbacks – are still getting paid at epic proportions. Business is booming.

It's remarkable that Garoppolo could command such a handsome payday after making just seven starts in his entire career. Five of those starts came this year as he led San Francisco to a 5-0 finish to the season while throwing seven touchdown passes and five interceptions, with the other two coming in 2016 as he filled in for the suspended Tom Brady. His career numbers consist of a 7-0 record, 67.3% completion clip, 2,250 passing yards, 12 touchdowns, five interceptions and a 99.7 passer rating.

Garoppolo does indeed look like the real deal. He has the "it" factor. He operates well from the pocket, can extend plays with his legs and throws with anticipation. He has the confidence to make the tough passes and the mental fortitude to shrug off mistakes.

But is he really worth \$27.5 million per year, ahead of the likes of Aaron Rodgers (\$22 million), Cam Newton (\$20.76 million), Matt Ryan (\$20.75 million) – not to mention Brady (though the New England Patriots quarterback is famous for taking team-friendly deals)?

The 49ers say yes, and that's all that matters. Garoppolo's agent Don Yee sold the team on his client's potential, and San Francisco general manager John Lynch and coach Kyle Shanahan bought in after being pleased with the passer for whom they gave the Patriots a second-round pick.

Both Lynch and Shanahan understood the importance of the quarterback position and the huge challenge of finding the right fit. After seeing Garoppolo in action, they were determined not to go back to the days of scraping by with someone like C.J. Beathard or Brian Hoyer, not did they want to start over by drafting a passer. When teams find someone like Garoppolo, they seldom let him out of the building. Now, the 49ers can continue to build and compete in an ever-changing NFC West.

But the implications of this deal extend beyond Garoppolo and San Francisco. This is a win for NFL quarterbacks, period.

At least six to eight teams need quarterbacks this offseason, and not all of them have the luxury of owning a high enough draft pick to select a potential Day 1 starter. Other teams are in win-now mode and just need a quality passer to put them over the top.

Whatever the case, there will be no shortage of teams willing to spend in March.

Kirk Cousins is viewed as the top quarterback set to hit the free agent market. It was already believed that he would draw around \$28 million to \$30 million. Now, with the far less experienced Garoppolo having landed this deal, that projection looks more like a certainty.

Garoppolo's payout will serve as the new floor for many quarterback negotiations. Established passers are sure to demand more, as they will point to a lengthier track record and the continually escalating salaries at the position.

Teams will pay. They have almost no other recourse. It's the most important position in football.

And just imagine how this sets up the likes of Rodgers and Ryan, who are nearing the ends of their deals and will soon command extensions.

Their squads would probably love to scramble and get something done now to save a few bucks. But their agents likely will hold off. They'll let the free agent market – led by Cousins, Drew Brees, Sam Bradford, Case Keenum and others – shake out. And then they'll get to work and land their clients new deals.

Garoppolo's record won't stand for nearly as long as Stafford's.

Baker Mayfield's 10 Potential Landing Spots

By Robert Klemko

MMQB

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In the quest to land a franchise quarterback, the Browns are doing their homework. Less than three days after the final whistle blew on a monstrously entertaining Super Bowl, the Browns requested a private visit with Baker Mayfield, his first such invite, two league sources tell The MMQB.

New general manager John Dorsey and head coach Hue Jackson are continuing the seemingly perennial search for the player who will lead the Browns out of a more-than-two-decade stretch without a playoff victory. Mayfield figures to be a topic of intense scrutiny for not only the Browns, but a handful of other teams working to evaluate one of the 2018 NFL draft's biggest wild cards.

Mayfield, the Heisman Trophy winner, will be the topic of a weekly series examining numerous aspects of his life and career, from his harried introduction to the NFL draft landscape two weeks ago at the Senior Bowl, to his development as a passer over three seasons at Oklahoma, to those Johnny Manziel comparisons which seem to follow him around lately. As I've conferenced with NFL evaluators over the past three weeks, three major questions emerged:

1. How well and how quickly can he learn an NFL offense after tremendous success in the Air Raid at Oklahoma?
2. Can he become one of the few successful 6-foot quarterbacks?
3. How will his mercurial personality manifest at the next level?

Our series will effort to answer those questions and more, with one important caveat—we won't be sharing the opinions of anonymous scouts and evaluators. As far as teams go, the Browns will get the first crack at finding answers, on a date to be determined. In the meantime, Mayfield is working out in Southern California in advance of Oklahoma's Pro Day (March 14) and the NFL Combine (Feb. 27-March 5).

What follows is my ranking of the 10 most-likely landing spots for Mayfield, after taking the temperature of numerous scouts, coaches and general managers across the league. This ranking is a marriage of that intel and my judgment of the best fits for Mayfield and a team's ability to land the player based on draft position, draft capital and a regime's tendency to deal draft picks. Each team's evaluation of Mayfield will take shape over the course of the spring, and I have no doubt several of these teams will fall out of the running while others vault up the list.

1. Cleveland Browns

Where they pick in Round 1: Nos. 1 and 4

Key player: Hue Jackson, head coach

The Browns have the draft capital to make this happen on their terms, either by trading back deeper in the Top 10, or by pulling the trigger with one of their existing picks. When Hue Jackson has had success with young quarterbacks, they've been guys with tons of experience coming out of college and the advanced football aptitude that comes with that. Think Joe Flacco in Baltimore, Andy Dalton and AJ

McCarron in Cincinnati; all three attempted more than 900 passes in college and the latter two were four-year starters. Jackson values scheme above all, and he believes his scheme can beat any defense in football with the right brain on the field. Mayfield might just be that brain. He played for three different head coaches over his college career yet improved his production year over year without fail. Jackson's biggest criticism of former Notre Dame quarterback DeShone Kizer last season was a telling one; Jackson said it was fair to wonder if Kizer would "ever get it." Likewise, Jackson's new boss, John Dorsey, puts a high value on football IQ when drafting quarterbacks—he said one of the major factors in the decision to draft Patrick Mahomes out of Texas Tech was his ability to retain playbook information during a six-hour visit with the Chiefs staff. Former coaches say Mayfield has something like a photographic memory, and when he showed up at OU's campus to battle with Trevor Knight for a starting job, players remarked after the first practices that Mayfield seemed to have a better grasp of the playbook than Knight, the incumbent starter. My only hesitation: Having known Jackson for five years and met Mayfield for about five minutes, this armchair psychiatrist wonders if the two big, brash personalities could coexist with all that brutal honesty flying back and forth. My hunch is they'd either love each other, or kill each other.

2. New York Jets

Where they pick in Round 1: No. 6

Key player: Mike Maccagnan, general manager

The biggest question Mike Maccagnan would have to answer in evaluating Mayfield would be whether he could thrive in a media environment like New York, given his short but distinguished record of impulsive behavior on and off the field. Players transitioning from the friendly media environments typical of college football usually experience some degree of culture shock in the two New York locker rooms. And putting aside the destination, the football side of things is something of a mystery. Jeremy Bates replaces John Morton as offensive coordinator after one year as quarterbacks coach. Prior to that he spent four years out of football (in 2014 he hiked the 2,900-mile Continental Divide Trail from Mexico to Canada). Bates figures to continue with Morton's take on the west coast offense, which most NFL types agree is the best fit for Mayfield's skill set. On the other hand, one could see the Jets making a big push for Kirk Cousins, given the franchise's disastrous record in drafting quarterbacks and the \$73 million in salary cap space burning a hole in their pockets. Plus, Bates spent his formative years as a coach under Mike Shanahan in Denver, who later drafted Cousins to Washington (if you can't tell by now, this is where I think Cousins will land). As for Mayfield, I think his propensity to speak his mind will give head coach Todd Bowles some pause as he searches for a quarterback/CEO to lead a locker room that has struggled to insulate itself from the noise in years past.

3. Arizona Cardinals

Where they pick in Round 1: No. 15

Key player: Mike McCoy, offensive coordinator

Is this the year general manager Steve Keim finally drafts a quarterback? In five seasons at the helm of the Cardinals, Keim has drafted one passer—Logan Thomas, fourth round in 2014—despite Carson Palmer turning 34 during Keim's first season. This draft will be tenure-defining for Keim now that Palmer is retired. The Cardinals don't exactly have the cap space to make a big splash for someone like Cousins (though that could change if Larry Fitzgerald calls it a career). Of all the offensive coordinators who will have a hand in the evaluation and drafting of quarterbacks in the first round, Mike McCoy figures to have the most sway, with Keim's lack of experience drafting the position and new head coach Steve Wilks coming from a defensive background. McCoy's best years came while working with Philip Rivers, a swaggering, boisterous gunslinger who loves talking trash. Remind you of anyone?

4. Miami Dolphins

Where they pick in Round 1: No. 11

Key player: Adam Gase, head coach

I've heard from two people close to Adam Gase who say he's a Mayfield fan. He likes the attitude, and obviously, the results. That's not to say the Dolphins are any more likely than any other team on this list to draft Mayfield; plenty of coaches pass on players who they judge have the right intangibles but don't fit other requirements. But the Dolphins got in the running early with an extended meeting with Mayfield at the Senior Bowl (along with the Saints, Bills and Jets) and they're in a precarious situation at quarterback. With Ryan Tannehill coming off a torn ACL, it's entirely possible the team chooses to invest in the veteran's health by selecting an offensive lineman. It's also possible Gase lobbies general manager Chris Grier to give him an opportunity to develop a passer from scratch after inheriting Tannehill. I don't think the Dolphins get aggressive about drafting a quarterback in terms of moving into the Top 10, but if Mayfield is sitting there at No. 11 and he passes all their pre-draft tests, I think they take a shot.

5. New Orleans Saints

Where they pick in Round 1: No. 27

Key player: Sean Payton, head coach

The Saints' sudden evolution from a diverse, high-flying passing attack into a dynamic, power-running offense feels like preparation for life after Brees, the most prolific 6-foot QB to ever play the position. New Orleans would be higher on this list of likely destinations for Mayfield if they had a draft pick high enough to ensure the Heisman Trophy winner would be available. On the other hand, Mickey Loomis and Sean Payton have never been shy about trading into the first round to get their guy, most recently dealing Brandin Cooks to the Patriots for the 32nd overall pick last spring (which they used on Wisconsin offensive tackle Ryan Ramczyk). Cooks himself was brought to New Orleans via trade that sent the 27th and 91st overall choices to Arizona in exchange for the 20th pick in 2014. If—and this is a big if—Payton and Loomis fall in love with Mayfield, one could see them dealing for the Colts' third overall choice, or the Bucs' No. 7 pick for the right to draft him.

6. New York Giants

Where they pick in Round 1: No. 2

Key player: Pat Shurmur, head coach

If you're Mayfield, or any other quarterback in this draft, you could do worse than playing for Pat Shurmur, the guy who turned Case Keenum into a legitimate NFL starter in Minnesota. Yet the same warnings about the media environment around the Jets applies to the Giants, with the caveat that any rookie quarterback would likely spend at least a full season on the bench watching Eli Manning. People who have played for and worked with Shurmur rank him among the calmest, most reserved coaches they've ever been around, with an emphasis on a level-headed response to stressful situations. How that coaching style would mesh with Mayfield's personality is anybody's guess.

7. Los Angeles Chargers

Where they pick in Round 1: No. 17

Key player: Tom Telesco, general manager

At 17, I believe the Chargers represent the floor for Mayfield; he's not dropping past this pick. With Philip Rivers turning 37 next December, now is the time for the franchise to start looking ahead after passing on quarterbacks since 2013, when they chose Brad Sorensen in the seventh round. Offensive coordinator Ken Whisenhunt once built an offense to the skillset of Marcus Mariota, borrowing college spread concepts to suit his first-round draft pick as head coach of the Titans in 2015. Now he's had two seasons to think about what went wrong and how to transition a rookie passer into the NFL. Along with Washington and New Orleans, the Chargers offer Mayfield the opportunity to sit and learn behind an

experienced starter while he transitions to a pro-style offense. The Chargers also have an attendance problem, and while the fan excitement factor won't be a concern of the football staff, the higher you go up the organizational ladder, the more important it gets.

8. Buffalo Bills

Where they pick in Round 1: Nos. 21 and 22

Key player: Brandon Beane, general manager

I could see head coach Sean McDermott falling in love with Mayfield's origin story—the two-time walk-on who won the Heisman. New offensive coordinator Brian Daboll oversaw a run-heavy offense as Alabama's coordinator last year but has a great deal of familiarity with the offensive concepts employed at Oklahoma and across the college football landscape. In McDermott's first year in Buffalo's war room, they demonstrated a willingness to deal picks at any juncture, in any direction, moving back 17 picks in the first round, then moving up seven picks in the second round to draft wide receiver Zay Jones, and moving up 12 picks into the bottom of the second round to select offensive lineman Dion Dawkins. If they're kicking themselves for not using last year's 10th overall pick (traded to Kansas City) on Patrick Mahomes, they can use the capital acquired in that deal to trade up and draft another former Texas Tech quarterback in Mayfield. Tyrod Taylor said in January the team has yet to inform him of his status going into 2018, but it's safe to assume they're in the market for a replacement after benching him for Nathan Peterman at one point last season.

9. Washington

Where they pick in Round 1: No. 13

Key player: Dan Snyder, owner

Washington had ample opportunity to draft a quarterback while the relationship between Kirk Cousins and management deteriorated, and all they did was take Nate Sudfeld in the sixth round of the 2016 draft (he's a backup in Philadelphia now). They just traded their best asset from that draft, cornerback Kendall Fuller, along with a third-round pick, for Alex Smith. A reported contract extension will likely make Smith, 34, their quarterback of the near future. But if Mayfield is the top player on their board when the 13th pick comes up, he'd be tough to pass on considering he fits nicely with the current offensive philosophy. Play-action was a staple of Jay Gruden's gameplan with Cousins, and figures to remain so with Smith under center. Mayfield figures to be most effective in the NFL when the offense is committed to creating passing lanes with misdirection and moving pockets, a la Russell Wilson in Seattle. Historically, roster-building in Washington has been heavily influenced by the business side thanks to a team owner with an evident devotion to the whims of an on-again, off-again fanbase (Dan Snyder), and a lead executive with fantastic job security and marginal authority (Bruce Allen). Beyond potentially being the best player available when they pick, Mayfield would also move a ton of jerseys and tickets, reversing the bad will brought about by the Smith trade.

10. Denver Broncos

Where they pick in Round 1: No. 5

Key player: John Elway, general manager

Yes, the Broncos coaching staff got an up-close-and-personal look at Mayfield at the Senior Bowl and, from what I hear, liked what they saw, but I just don't see Mayfield ultimately fitting with what John Elway values in a quarterback. We now have a long enough track record of Elway quarterback picks to search for a trend, and boy is it easy to find. Regardless of whether Elway drafts a QB in the first two rounds (Paxton Lynch, Brock Osweiler) or takes a flier on a passer in the seventh round (Chad Kelly, Trevor Siemian, Zac Dysert) every one of them has been at least 6' 2" (and sometimes 6' 7") with a quick release and cannon arm being their biggest assets. A sampling: "His shining asset is his arm strength; he

can hit nearly any NFL-caliber throw at this point in his career.” (NFL.com on Brock Osweiler); “Made a few ‘wow’ throws at intermediate and deep levels with perfect accuracy.” (Pro Football Focus on Paxton Lynch); “His arm is strong enough to fling the ball 40 yards downfield on the run...” (NFL.com on Zac Dysert); “We saw the arm. There was no doubt about the arm. You knew that he had that ability. Now everything else, you’ve got to see.” (Gary Kubiak on Trevor Siemian); “Good arm talent. Will make ‘wow’ throws, especially early in games.” (NFL.com on Chad Kelly). Bill Musgrave, who is being retained as offensive coordinator with Kubiak (now a front-office exec) and Elway looking over his shoulder, had the most success of his career with an unpolished young quarterback who boasted a cannon arm: Derek Carr in Oakland. The point is: This is a building full of people who believe they can take raw arm talent and ideal size and build a quarterback. Barring a dramatic about-face from the top down, Mayfield isn’t for them.

Jimmy Garoppolo deal set to have impact on QB market

By Marc Sessler

NFL.com

Feb. 9, 2018

Jimmy Garoppolo became a dangerously wealthy man on Thursday. He's about to have company.

Garoppolo's massive five-year, \$137.5 million contract with the San Francisco 49ers made him the richest player in NFL history -- a feat destined to be topped by Kirk Cousins when he hits free agency next month.

Garoppolo's \$27.5 million annual earnings -- after just seven pro starts under center -- sets the floor for Cousins and his camp as they haggle with suitors pining after the former Redskins starter.

"That's the difference between being on the open market and not on the open market," NFL Network's Mike Garafolo said Thursday. "And we saw that at other positions, too. I mean look at [defensive lineman] Olivier Vernon getting \$17 million per year from the Giants a couple of years ago when guys that were [franchise] tagged were getting somewhere in the area of \$15 million."

The Garoppolo pact provides a crystal-clear baseline for quarterback pay, but Garafolo noted that "people around the league already expected the Cousins deal to be in the area of \$30 million anyway."

Free agency lends itself to open-market bidding wars, but Garoppolo's money -- and what Cousins is about to earn -- won't go unnoticed by a flock of longtime, Super Bowl-winning starters whose latest deals have a prehistoric feel amid this new money.

Green Bay's Aaron Rodgers, arguably the finest passer league-wide, is slated to make \$19.8 million next season and just \$20 million in 2019. Tom Brady's base salary next autumn? A dainty \$14 million. In Philadelphia, meanwhile, the combined salary for Carson Wentz and Nick Foles -- south of \$10 million combined for 2018 -- looks like the steal of the decade. There's also the cases of Drew Brees and Matt Ryan, both in line for new contracts in the near future.

Still, recent deals for Matthew Stafford (\$27.0 million annually) and Derek Carr (\$25.0 million annually) circle close to a Garoppolo contract that will fall back into the pack as new superstar arms get theirs.

As cap room continues to expand, the pay scale for reliable starting quarterbacks is set to skyrocket into new hemispheres.

Long underpaid in comparison to, say, even marginal baseball players, the NFL quarterback -- the most important position in sports -- is entering a golden age of cash-earned glories.

2018 Free Agency Preview: Denver Broncos

By Cam Mellor
Pro Football Focus
Feb. 9, 2018

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

The revolving door that was the Denver Broncos quarterback situation this past season was, and will be widely-spoken about for some time. Whether it was Trevor Siemian, Brock Osweiler or Paxton Lynch at quarterback, Denver long became an afterthought in 2017. Unfortunately for Broncos' fans however, quarterback was not the only position of weary last year. They had just seven players with qualifying snap counts on offense grade positively for the season and their once-vaunted defense struggled at times.

Typically an elite defense, the Broncos became a mediocre unit and, analytically speaking were below average in stopping opposing offense's passing attacks. With a limited amount of cap space and quarterback a pressing need, they may not have the room to target a top notch player at the position in free agency this year with the Jimmy Garoppolo deal in place (five-year, \$137.5M) so there is no doubt prioritizing needs will be paramount for the Broncos this offseason.

SALARY CAP ROOM

\$19,119,447 (20th in the NFL, as of 02/06/18)

BIGGEST NEEDS

Quarterback
Wide receiver
Offensive tackle
Linebacker

NOTABLE FREE AGENTS

Todd Davis, linebacker, 77.1 overall grade
Cody Latimer, wide receiver, 76.1 overall grade
Jamaal Charles, running back, 51.0 overall grade
Brock Osweiler, quarterback, 47.7 overall grade

MUST RE-SIGN

Shaquil Barrett, Matt Paradis

This one is a bit different, as both of these players are restricted free agents, and both could deserve long-term extensions. Paradis has proven to be more-than-capable at center for the Broncos even though he didn't reach his career year from 2016 in terms of overall grade this past season. Paradis still finished as the eighth-highest graded center including the seventh-highest pass-blocking grade and 13th-highest run-block grade. Barrett on the other hand, finished with the highest grade of his career at 82.1 and racked up 43 total pressures opposite Von Miller.

Both of these two should be offseason priorities to keep talent in the building and key pieces on both sides of the ball with eyes towards growth next season.

DREAM SPLASH SIGNING

Nate Solder, offensive tackle, New England Patriots

Long the blindside protector for Tom Brady, Solder appears on his way out of New England this offseason and the Broncos have a big gap at one tackle spot, regardless of side of the line. Sure the Broncos brought in Garrett Bolles in the draft last season but opposite him, Denver struggled with Menelik Watson and even switched long-time guard Allen Barbre to tackle in an attempt to shore up the issues. In a free agent class depleted of top-end tackle talent, Solder, even at 30-years-old, is the best option on the market.

In this dream splash situation, Solder heads to Denver, revitalizes his career and creates a bookend tackle situation for whoever is under center next season.

2018 FREE AGENT PROSPECTS

Sam Bradford, quarterback, Minnesota Vikings

In what will be an extremely interesting offseason in Minnesota, Bradford may become the odd man out between him, Case Keenum and Teddy Bridgewater. Keenum's success this season is likely to land him decent money in this offseason's quarterback market and with their limited room to work with, a solid veteran quarterback who has injury concerns may not be the most attractive pick, but Bradford at his best and healthy, is better than any of the cast of characters in the Broncos' quarterback room right now.

Bradford's last two full seasons have been the best that we've seen from him, grading out with the two highest-graded seasons of his career and he has the ability to connect on special throws. A quarterback who can make tight-window, elite throws in Denver — not too far-fetched.

Nigel Bradham, outside linebacker, Philadelphia Eagles

Bradham finished with arguably the league's best season in coverage among off-the-ball linebackers, and certainly his best season in coverage of his career. He spent the most time in coverage this past season, 529 snaps during the regular season and despite being targeted at the fourth-highest rate per snap, limited receivers to the fewest receptions per coverage snap (13.6). Perhaps most importantly, he limited receivers to just 0.62 yards per snap in coverage, best figure among 4-3 outside linebackers.

Depending on what the Broncos do with their current situation (Todd Davis and Corey Nelson both UFAs), a veteran presence in the building who is solid in coverage, no slouch against the run and sports a new Super Bowl ring would be an ideal pickup this offseason.

DeMarcus Ware would like to mentor pass rushers

By Josh Alper
Pro Football Talk
Feb. 9, 2018

DeMarcus Ware said that a few teams contacted him about returning to action after he retired following the 2016 season, but he didn't have the desire to play again.

Ware wouldn't mind having a role with one of his former teams, though. Ware worked for NFL Network in his first year of retirement, but his contract is up and he said, via Todd Archer of ESPN.com, that he's "really trying to get back into mentoring the guys" by doing pass-rushing stuff throughout the week.

Ware spent one day working with Cowboys pass rushers last year, but said he is "talking about really making an impact this year" and thinks defensive coordinator Rod Marinelli would open to it.

"He loved it because he knows I'm a technician and that's what he predicates his game off of," Ware said. "It's about technique, knowing the strategy and that's what I do very well and he enjoyed when I was out there."

Ware will be working with the Cowboys as a draft ambassador when the event comes to Dallas in April and is expected to join the team's Ring of Honor at some point in the future. That will be a lasting testament to impact on the Cowboys that goes beyond tutoring the current players, but any help he can offer in that area would likely be appreciated.

Atlanta has stadium work to do before Super Bowl

By Darin Gantt
Pro Football Talk
Feb. 9, 2018

Minnesota's U.S. Bank Stadium provided a gorgeous setting for Super Bowl LII (a gorgeous, taxpayer-subsidized setting).

Now, officials in Atlanta acknowledge they have some work to be ready for next year's final game.

Via Tim Tucker of the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, Mercedes-Benz Stadium and Falcons officials admit they have some work to do over the next year to get the place where they want it to be.

The building's signature retractable roof was only open for one Falcons game last season, and one MLS match. They want to smooth out the kinks in that significant detail, improve the stadium's sound system and create a new green space in the hole next door where the Georgia Dome once stood.

"We're also meeting every week on all kinds of little things we're still finishing in the building," said Scott Jenkins, the stadium's general manager. "It takes two years (after opening), in my experience, to finish a building and get it running the way you want."

There are only two events scheduled for the building before the MLS season starts on March 11 (a monster truck show and a Supercross motorcycle race), so they have a relatively free schedule to get some work in.

They're also adding three more sets of double doors and an overhead rolling door to help ease congestion on the way out of events, and preparing the old Georgia Dome site for a new tailgating and parking area.