

With free agency and draft looming, Broncos face tough choices in manipulating salary cap

By Nicki Jhabvala

Denver Post

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For the last couple of years, the same story has followed the Broncos as they weigh their off-season needs with their options and, again, start to retool their roster.

They need a starting quarterback. They need help on the offensive line. They could use another playmaker on offense and depth on the defensive line. They need another reliable cornerback, help on special teams and they have to decide what they're going to do at inside linebacker in the coming weeks.

When the Broncos' season ended, general manager John Elway made one big decision in retaining head coach Vance Joseph, but he has remained coy about his other looming choices.

"I think that when you're 5-11, there are obviously some issues that we have to get handled," Elway said at the team's season-ending news conference in January. "But our goals have not changed for the Denver Broncos and what we want to do — and that's to compete for world championships. Now, we have to build towards that process. That starts now."

And it starts with a manipulation of their salary cap.

The Broncos have 59 players signed to contracts for the 2018 season. The NFL salary cap is expected to jump to around \$178 million for the 2018 season and, assuming it does, the Broncos will have around \$26 million in cap space, according to Over the Cap (OTC)

The good news is Broncos carry only \$365,907 in dead money, per OTC. (Dead money is cap space allocated to players who were cut or traded.) The minimal amount, which is the second-lowest among the 32 teams, is primarily from the Ty Sambrailo trade to Atlanta (\$264,265 of it), and affords the Broncos more flexibility in changing their roster.

Even better: The Broncos are expected to have 10 draft picks, some of which they might use in trades or to build depth. In addition to their own seven picks, they acquired the fourth-round pick from the 49ers in the Kapri Bibbs trade, and a fifth-round selection from the Falcons in the Sambrailo trade. Denver is also projected to land a third-round compensatory pick for the loss of Russell Okung.

Along with contracts of some current players that could be moved or restructured, Denver has the ability to create additional cap space should they want it to acquire, say, an expensive veteran quarterback.

"I think there is no doubt we have to get better at that position," Elway said.

The big cap hits

Since the Broncos re-signed linebacker Von Miller in 2016, the team has maintained an oddly skewed cap with its positional allocation. While many teams devote much of their cap to their quarterbacks and the offense, the Broncos spend the most on their defense. With the contracts currently on their books, Broncos will pay approximately \$95.3 million for their defense, trailing only the Jaguars (\$113.6 million) and Chiefs (\$107 million), per OTC. Denver's spending on the offense, however, ranks 25th in the league, at about \$64.8 million.

And only a fraction of that is tied to their quarterbacks.

The Broncos have only about \$5 million allocated to Trevor Siemian, Paxton Lynch and Chad Kelly. That's the ninth-lowest in total quarterback pay in the league, and that includes the performance escalator earned by Siemian that bumped his pay for 2018 up to \$1.9 million.

But if the Broncos do try to acquire a veteran quarterback, via free agency or a trade, that player will likely rebalance the Broncos' books and likely require significant cap alterations by Elway.

Currently the Broncos have five players with cap charges of \$10 million or more for next season.

Miller, who signed the largest contract for a non-quarterback in July 2016, has the highest number at \$22.5 million. Receiver Demaryius Thomas carries an approximate \$12 million cap charge, but his contract includes a \$1 million option that will trigger the final two years of his deal. Should the Broncos decline the option, they'd eat \$3.1 million in dead money and Thomas would be a free agent. Should the team exercise his option, it will face cap charges of about \$12 million and \$17.5 million over the next two seasons, unless the sides agree to restructure his deal. The Broncos have until the end of the league year, in mid-March, to exercise that \$1 million option.

Veteran cornerback Aqib Talib has a \$12 million cap hit, but if the Broncos were to release him, they'd reap an \$11 million savings (only \$1 million dead money from his prorated signing bonus). Though Talib is still considered one of the league's elite corners, he will be 32 when the 2018 season starts and will be one of three Broncos corners with hefty contracts. Bradley Roby, the team's first-round pick of 2014, will see his salary increase from about \$1 million to a fully guaranteed \$8.5 million, and veteran Chris Harris will have an approximate \$10.4 million cap number. The Broncos won't want to allocate about \$31 million to three cornerbacks.

Receiver Emmanuel Sanders will be 31 when the season begins and has two years remaining on the extension he signed in 2016. In 2018 and '19, he has cap hits of about \$10.9 million and \$12.9 million, respectively. Last season Sanders missed four games because of an ankle injury and, for reasons of durability and pay, Denver could look to put him on the trading block.

"We'll get back and once we get back we'll go through the week and talk about everybody," Elway said at the Senior Bowl late last month when asked specifically about the futures of Thomas and Sanders.

The decisions, of course, don't end there.

As Denver looks to improve its offensive line, it will have to find a tackle. The Broncos drafted Garrett Bolles last year to man the left side, but injuries and poor performance ravaged the right side of the line. Tackle Menelik Watson missed much of the season because of calf and foot injuries and has two years remaining on his contract with a dead money value of \$2.67 million for 2018. If he's on the roster in

March, his \$5.5 million salary becomes fully guaranteed. Meanwhile, his backup, Donald Stephenson, restructured his contract last year to void his 2018 salary. He will become a free agent.

Again: Decisions.

The free agents

The Broncos have 11 unrestricted free agents, including receiver Cody Latimer and starting inside linebacker Todd Davis. On the open market, Davis is projected to receive close to \$5 million a year, but the Broncos are also paying that amount in salary to fellow inside linebacker Brandon Marshall, who signed a four-year extension in 2016. Marshall's salary becomes fully guaranteed in March.

The Broncos have a shorter list of restricted free agents (RFAs), players with fewer than three years of accrued service who are often undrafted players. Teams can place one of three tenders on RFAs, which are essentially tags that allow the incumbent team to match offer sheets the players sign elsewhere or receive draft compensation. There are three tenders — original-round, second-round and first-round — and, like franchise tags, the tenders are fully guaranteed, one-year deals.

Center Matt Paradis, who has played every offensive snap for the Broncos the last three seasons, is an RFA. Shaquil Barrett, a backup outside linebacker who played for an injured Shane Ray often last season, is another. Bennie Fowler, an undrafted receiver out of Michigan State, is the third.

It's seems likely the Broncos will place second-round tenders on both Paradis and Barrett, at a projected cost of \$2.916 million apiece.

It's a different year, but a similar story for the Broncos: plenty of decisions, plenty of needs, plenty of options. And very high expectations.

"They haven't changed, and they shouldn't," Broncos president/CEO Joe Ellis said recently. "Our fans should always expect greatness out of this organization. If we don't deliver it, then we better figure out each and every year how to."

Broncos strength coach Luke Richesson to join Houston Texans' staff

By Nicki Jhabvala
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Vance Joseph will have to make at least one more hire to his coaching staff for 2018.

After six years with the team, Broncos strength and conditioning coach Luke Richesson is headed to the Houston Texans, likely to oversee their strength program, an NFL source confirmed. Richesson had one year remaining on his contract with the team but was granted permission to accept the job in Houston.

In his time in Denver, Richesson helped to revamp the team's conditioning program and instilled a reliance on new technologies to monitor players' exertion and recovery.

To replace him, the Broncos could look in house and tab one of Richesson's assistants — Mike Eubanks, Anthony Lomando or Cedric Smith.

Eubanks had been with Richesson since 2007 when Richesson trained college prospects at Athletes' Performance (now EXOS) in Arizona and followed him to Jacksonville for three years before coming to Denver in 2012.

Lomando followed a similar path and has worked with Richesson since 2006, at Athletes' performance, Jacksonville and then Denver since '12.

Smith joined the Broncos last year, shortly after Joseph was appointed head coach. The former NFL fullback was previously an assistant on the Broncos' staff (2001-06) and head strength coach for the Chiefs' (2007-09). In 2010, he was hired to Gary Kubiak's staff in Houston, where he ran the Texans' strength program for four seasons and was named the NFL Strength and Conditioning Coach of the Year in 2012.

Out of house, the Broncos could try to lure Loren Landow, the owner of Landow Performance who is the go-to offseason trainer for many Broncos players, as well as Panthers running back Christian McCaffrey and Olympic swimmer Missy Franklin, among many others.

9News first reported Richesson's exit.

Luke Richesson: "I loved being a Bronco" but couldn't pass up Texans' opportunity

By Mike Klis

9NEWS

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The Denver Broncos began the offseason by making several assistant coaching moves in an effort to improve Vance Joseph's staff.

It turns out, they're not done. The Broncos will be looking for a new strength and conditioning coach after allowing Luke Richesson to move on and accept a significant position with the Houston Texans.

"It's bittersweet. I loved being a Bronco," Richesson said. "It was so rewarding working with the players. Going to two Super Bowls and winning the world championship, that's what we work for. Nothing beats that.

"But the Texans gave me an opportunity I couldn't pass up. A huge thanks to John Elway and (director of player personnel) Matt Russell. There's some great people working on the staff there, people like (PR director) Patrick Smyth – people don't understand how invaluable he is to that organization."

With the Texans, Richesson will not only run their strength and conditioning program but he will also oversee player nutrition and be involved in physical rehab.

Elway, the Broncos' general manager, showed class in allowing Richesson, who had one year left on his contract, to take the new position with the Texans – especially after Houston blocked Wes Welker from interviewing for the Broncos' receiver coach position that was later filled by Zach Azzanni.

In his six years overseeing the Broncos' strength and conditioning program, Richesson modernized the weight room, training and movement techniques for the elite athlete.

After flying in on the same plane with new defensive coordinator Jack Del Rio from Jacksonville to Denver in February 2012, Richesson's training methods helped solve what had been the Broncos' long-standing problem with soft-tissue (hamstring, quad, groin) injuries.

"It all boils down to being able to teach movement," Richesson said. "Football is no longer three yards and a cloud of dust. The game is played in space and you use whatever means necessary to improve movement, whether it's strength, flexibility, agility. You still have to approach it that the game is played man-on-man, bone-on-bone so you have to be strong, you have to be powerful. But that to me is the separator – can you teach movement? If you can't teach movement, then you can't improve someone's performance."

Richesson was especially instrumental in helping quarterback Peyton Manning rebound from neck surgeries that forced him to miss the 2011 season and left him with nerve damage down his right throwing arm. Manning threw 131 touchdown passes against just 36 interceptions in his first three seasons with the Broncos while averaging 4,954 yards a year and posting a 48-10 record.

With Richesson working for three head coaches in John Fox, Gary Kubiak and Vance Joseph, the Broncos consistently ranked among the league leaders in fewest games missed because of injury. The team won four division titles, two AFC championships and one Super Bowl title during Richesson's term.

It won't be easy for the Broncos to replace Richesson, who oozes energy. In their search, Elway and Joseph can start with in-house candidates Anthony Lomando, who has worked with Richesson since 2006, Mike Eubanks, a Richesson assistant since 2007, and Cedric Smith, who has previously been the head strength coach with the Kansas City Chiefs and Texans. Former Broncos' assistant strength coach Jason George, who recently was made available following the Chicago Bears' coaching staff shakeup, could be another possibility.

It's unclear whether Denver-area sports performance coach Loren Landow, a finalist for the Broncos' strength and conditioning position in 2012, would be a candidate this time.

Chiefs new starting QB Mahomes gets support from godfather LaTroy Hawkins

By Mike Klis

9NEWS

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Colorado sports fans know LaTroy Hawkins as a Rockies relief pitcher during the extraordinary Rocktober season of 2007.

Two years after he retired following an incredible 21-season big-league career that included two stints with the Rockies, Hawkins has gained another slice of fame as the godfather of one of the hottest players in the NFL, Patrick Mahomes II.

Where were you in the summer of 1995?

Hawkins was breaking into the majors as a starting pitcher with the Minnesota Twins. His mentor was Patrick Mahomes, who was in his fourth season as a Twins' starter.

Both pitchers struggled early that year, and a close bond formed.

One day, Mahomes revealed his wife, Randi, was pregnant. Would Hawkins be his son's godfather? Patrick Mahomes II was born Sept. 17, 1995.

As he did as a pitcher, Hawkins paid his dues in his role of spiritual influence.

"We didn't do the ceremony but I changed his diapers and everything else from knowing him," Hawkins said here last week while hanging out with his godson on Super Bowl LII radio row at Mall of America. "Been knowing him since before he was in this world."

During one short walk from one radio station table to another, the Chiefs' new starting quarterback stopped to shake hands and deliver a man hug to the Rockies' former closer.

"Yes, Rockies!" Mahomes II, who was 12 during the Rockies' magical run in 2007, said in an interview with 9News. "Yeah, LaTroy's been around forever, I love him. Great role model for me to look up to and an awesome pro and an even better person."

Sales of Kansas City Chiefs' No. 15 jerseys no doubt spiked in the days since starting quarterback Alex Smith was traded to Washington, leaving Mahomes II to take over.

"For me I know there's been a lot all over Twitter and everything like that but for me it's all about working hard and getting ready for next year," Mahomes said in what became his canned response during his radio row tour.

The decision made to trade Smith away means Chiefs head coach Andy Reid believes Mahomes is ready to assume the full-time quarterback job. This was understood, not said.

“All I saw was all the stuff all over Twitter,” Mahomes said. “Everything’s kind of been said. Nothing’s official, yet, so I’m just doing the same thing, working out, throwing the football. Getting better every single day. Learning as much as you can. And being ready whenever your opportunity comes.”

It was the final game of the regular season against the Broncos at no-longer-named Sports Authority Field at Mile High that no doubt helped convince Reid. With the game having no playoff bearing, Reid benched many of his top players, including Smith.

Mahomes made his NFL debut and after a shaky start, made a couple eye-popping throws while leading the Chiefs to a 27-24 win.

Mahomes completed 22 of 35 for 284 yards and directed a game-winning field goal drive in the final 2 minutes, 23 seconds.

Not only was the game not meaningless to Mahomes, it can now be called a career changer.

“You got to go out there and compete a full game,” Mahomes said. “Those experiences are awesome to get. Get to do the 2-minute drive at the end of the game and it was a win. To go out there and get a win in your first start it’s always a good thing.”

“He did all the little things he’s supposed to do for his first NFL start,” said Hawkins, who now works in the Minnesota Twins’ front office. “Made some good throws, made a couple not-so-good throws. But you know what, when you have a strong arm like that you have to trust in it. He’s one of those guys that he definitely trusts his arm that he can put the ball in tight windows and he’s very confident when it comes to throwing a football.”

Hawkins can offer a unique perspective, even if he admits he wasn’t much of a football fan until Mahomes II started lighting it up as a quarterback his freshmen and sophomore years at Texas Tech.

Mahomes was a promising high school pitching prospect who could throw 92 to 95 mph and he briefly played baseball and football at Texas Tech before he realized quarterback was an all-consuming endeavor.

Godson was committing full-time to football as Godfather was finally hanging up the spikes.

“I’m definitely not that big of a football fan but over the last four or five years I’ve become fans of the quarterbacks because that’s the position he plays,” Hawkins said. “Try to study them and understand how difficult their jobs are and what he’s about to take on when he entered the draft last year.”

The minute the Chiefs surprisingly traded up in the first round to select Mahomes II with the No. 10 overall draft pick last year, even Smith stated he knew he was on borrowed time. But then Smith had a terrific 2017 season, beating New England in the opener and leading the league in passing rating.

The timing of the Smith trade to Washington on January 30 – teams are allowed to talk to each other but no transaction is official until the start of the league season March 14 – was surprising, if not the deal itself.

"I guess like everybody else you kind of knew it was going to happen. You had an idea," Hawkins said. "But I just told him it's your time now. You've got to be the first one in the locker room, you've got to be the last one to leave. You've got to put in your work, you've got to earn those guys' respect because you're working with grown men and you've got to continue to get better each and every day."

Now that's what Godfathers are for. Is Mahomes ready?

"Oh, I'll be ready," he said. "I'm excited for whenever the opportunity comes and I'll be ready to go out there and hopefully get wins."

Jimmy Garoppolo deal frames contract for Kirk Cousins

By Troy Renck
KMGH
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Aaron Rodgers. Matt Ryan. Kirk Cousins.

Not even sandpaper could wipe the smiles off their faces. Thanks, Jimmy G.

It's hard to figure who is the most pleased with Jimmy Garoppolo's five-year, \$137.5 million contract with the San Francisco 49ers.

Rodgers, Ryan, and, more specifically, Cousins are up next.

Garoppolo's contract takes your breath away given his limited resume -- 7-0 as a starter with New England and San Francisco. However, it should not come as a surprise. Good quarterbacks never make less when teams identify them as the face of the franchise.

Garoppolo emerged as a star at the right time for the right team. His season-ending finish convinced the 49ers he was The Man, and investing in him makes them a destination for future free agents.

Money matters here when considering the Broncos' pursuit of their top target Cousins. According to Spotrac, Garoppolo received a \$35 million signing bonus with \$74.1 million guaranteed. His average annual value calculates to \$27.5 million with a \$37 million cap hit in 2018. Cousins should rightly expect a similar deal and guarantees over the first three seasons. However, if winning is his top priority -- and he has indicated as much -- Cousins would need to reduce his cap hit the first two seasons. If he absorbs the cap like Garoppolo, the Broncos would be sinking nearly 30 percent of their payroll into Cousins and Von Miller. That makes no sense.

If Cousins goes to a contender I believe he will show flexibility with his contract. Remember, numbers cannot be discussed until March 12, with deals becoming official on May 14.

Cousins is a solid quarterback. He ranks in my top 10. He has shown the ability to lead and work with a varying stable of receivers, while exhibiting much-needed durability despite a shaky offensive line. And, oh yeah, he can lead a fourth-quarter comeback drive as well as any current quarterback.

The Broncos' offense needs a caffeine drip, requires a lobotomy, or at least an identity. Cousins' skill and personality would be a welcomed addition.

Denver has as good a chance as any to land the quarterback, who will likely be pursued by the Jets, Browns, Cardinals, Jaguars and the sleeper Vikings. If the Broncos sign Cousins, I expect them to keep veteran receivers Demaryius Thomas and Emmanuel Sanders.

If not Cousins, then what? Broncos players wonder if the team will rebuild if they don't sign the veteran, going younger across the board. In that scenario, one of the veteran receivers could become a casualty, among others.

It remains an understandable concern for older players, but the Broncos never use the word patience. I will believe in a youth movement when I see it.

There is, however, no guarantee the Broncos sign Cousins. What are the other options?

Minnesota's Case Keenum is on the radar, according to multiple sources. Front office executive Gary Kubiak knows Keenum well, having coached him in Houston. The issue with Keenum remains simple: Can the Broncos justify a Brock Osweiler-type contract -- four years, \$72 million -- for a player who was 9-15 as a starter with 24 touchdowns and 20 interceptions prior to last season?

After Keenum, the conversation appears to change. The next alternative? A placeholder for a top draft pick. Tyrod Taylor fits the bill, just not the Bills. They have been looking to move on from him for two seasons. Taylor takes care of the ball (51 touchdowns, 18 interceptions as a starter), and has unique scrambling ability.

Taylor played one of his best games in a win over the Broncos last September, acting like a point guard. He drew in the defense with his mobility and dished to open receivers, befuddling the safeties. As the Broncos head coach, Kubiak tried to bring Taylor to Denver after he impressed him when they worked together for one season in Baltimore.

The quarterback conversation dominates the Broncos offseason. This is not talk radio goosing the topic. General manager John Elway admitted the team has no chance to rebound without improvement at the position.

Cousins sits atop the wish list. He could change the Broncos' fortunes. And with Garoppolo secured in San Francisco, Denver knows the price of doing business.

Broncos strength coach Luke Richesson leaves for Texans

By Troy Renck
KMGH
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Broncos strength coach Luke Richesson formed a reputation as a leader in his industry, as an open-minded thinker embraced by players because of his ability to reduce soft-tissue injuries.

Friday, he exited for a significant position with the Houston Texans, similar to one held with the Broncos but with added responsibilities. Assistant Anthony Lomando is considered a possibility for a promotion to the top spot. Mike Eubanks, a longtime assistant, and Cedric Smith are likely candidates as well.

Richesson had one year remaining on his contract, but the Broncos granted him permission to talk with Houston. As recently as 2013, Richesson won NFL Strength Coach of the Year honors. He arrived in Denver in 2012, bringing in new technology, while incorporating new ways to strength players and monitor their workouts.

"Love Luke," cornerback Chris Harris Jr. told Denver7 on Friday. "I feel like he was huge in keeping us healthy."

Added linebacker Brandon Marshall to Denver7, "It makes me sad. Luke helped me develop my body from my practice squad days. Great coach. Even better man."

Richesson joined the Broncos after three seasons with the Jacksonville Jaguars and seven working at Athletes Performance in Arizona. Lomando and Eubanks arrived with Richesson. The Broncos hired Smith last season, coach Vance Joseph's first with the team.

What's up with Walker?

The Broncos have yet to decide where DeMarcus Walker will play next season. Defensive coordinator Joe Woods told Denver7 recently that the final determination of Walker's position would likely arrive after the draft. Walker was selected in the second round a year ago as an inside pass rushing defensive end. However, when Shane Ray tore ligaments in his left wrist in training camp, Walker shifted to outside linebacker. He never gained traction, often inactive on game day. Walker registered a sack in the season finale.

Walker told Denver7 he dropped nearly 30 pounds from his college weight of 272 after switching positions and dealing with food poisoning. While a decision has not been made on his spot, Walker will need to add weight regardless. He could play outside linebacker at 255 or so, and then add from there if he shifts back inside.

Jets, Broncos should be favorites for Kirk Cousins, and who he should pick is clear

By Jason La Canfora

CBSSports.com

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With Jimmy Garoppolo already signed and Drew Brees making it clear he only wants to dance with the Saints, and Alex Smith already traded, Kirk Cousins and Case Keenum are now the most interesting quarterbacks in the world. At least their future will create the most intrigue between now and February 20, when franchise and transition tags can be placed on players.

I am going to assume for the purposes of this column that Washington doesn't truly go rogue and place a tag on Cousins. Therefore, I am assuming -- as is everyone in the football world I've talked to about this over the last week -- that Cousins is an unrestricted free agent. And I am going to assume that the Minnesota Vikings, with no quarterback under contract for 2018 who has ever thrown an NFL pass, will decide between now and March 6 (the deadline to tag a player) to place a tag of some sort on Keenum and, at worst, rent him for \$21 million next season, rather than get into the \$30 million-per-season stratosphere that it will require to secure Cousins' services long-term.

Should the Vikings end up not getting something secured with Keenum prior to the start of free agency, to say nothing of Teddy Bridgewater, then obviously the Cousins market could change drastically. But under these parameters, I would anticipate Cousins opting between the Jets and Broncos in the end. And if that is the case, assuming the money being offered is relatively similar, then which is the better gig? Where would a quarterback be better off going? Which situation might feel the most like home? What are the pros and the cons?

Ultimately, the money could render this a moot point (it's never about the money ... only its always about the money). But if it doesn't, would you rather be making around \$30 million a year the next five-to-six years for the Jets or the Broncos? Personally, I'd lean hard to the Jets. Let me explain why.

We'll start with ownership. From everything I have heard, life has been more pleasant and productive around Florham Park since Chris Johnson took over as acting owner in New York, with Woody Johnson serving as an ambassador abroad. Of course, you never know how long that gig will last given the problems facing the current presidential regime, but Woody's brother has earned high marks for his stewardship and leadership, and his commitment to the team within that building and around the league. As for the Broncos, Joe Ellis has done good work serving as the acting owner, though it remains to be seen which of Pat Bowlen's heirs eventually takes over as the acting owner of the Broncos with that franchise placed in a trust. The timeline for any transition remains murky.

As for the coach, Vance Joseph was clearly under heavy consideration to being fired after just one year on the job. The Broncos fell well below expectations, and the defense started showing signs of slipping. In the end, his job was spared, but the coaching staff was overhauled below him, and he enters 2018 as someone who will be on most hot seat lists. That's where Jets coach Todd Bowles found himself going into 2017, when many were predicting the Jets would flirt with 0-16. Instead they exceeded expectations and Bowles was rewarded with a contract extension a few months ago.

Then one must evaluate the rosters and the course of the franchise over the next few years. The Jets went through their purge in the last 15 months or so, making difficult decisions, paring down the roster, creating a ton of cash as well as cap and roster flexibility for the next two offseasons. They already dealt with the PR fallout and consternation about parting with recent legends like Darrelle Revis, Nick Mangold and David Harris, and cut the cord with guys like Ryan Fitzpatrick and Brandon Marshall and Sheldon Richardson, who created a stir in their final year with the team. It's only a matter of time before they part with Muhammad Wilkerson, their highest-paid player who was a healthy scratch under duress late last season, and create more room to add talent.

The Broncos are trying to trade their top corner, Aqib Talib, who has worn out his welcome with on- and off-field issues. Chris Harris might not be around there more than another year or so, and their recent drafts have been light on replacements. Offensive line has been a bit of a blindspot for John Elway, and protection is an issue. You could make the case they a descending team more in line for a purge coming off their Super Bowl cycle, while the Jets are more of a blank slate prepared right now to build around a capable quarterback.

On paper, Denver would have a big advantage given the talent of receivers Demaryius Thomas and Emmanuel Sanders, but are they what they once were? There were rumblings about some tumult in that receiver room last season and guys looking lethargic, being not as motivated as they once were, running sloppy routes and hanging young QBs out to try at times. Both will likely be gone within two years anyway.

One could make the argument that having to toggle between Trevor Siemian, Paxton Lynch and Brock Osweiler would be more than enough to suck the life out of any veteran receiver, but its worth noting that Cousins shares an agent with Siemian, so he'd probably have the scoop on that situation. Oh, and he also shares an agent with Josh McCown, who was having a career year prior to getting injured in New York, so he'd have fairly intimate knowledge of that locker room and the direction of the team as well.

As for a scheme fit, both of these teams have been churning through offensive coordinators. The Broncos are run by Elway, who has Gary Kubiak on his personnel staff, and they know and love the Mike Shanahan version of the West Coast offense that Cousins was drafted into and thrived under in Washington. Bill Musgrave is currently running their offense.

The Jets are building in the same mold. Their offensive coordinator, Jeremy Bates, was also promoted from within like Musgrave. Bates is a Shanahan disciple as well who knows how the passing game functions, while the Jets I'm told are bringing in Rick Dennison to operate the run game. Guess what? He's a Shanahan disciple as well and part of his and Kubiak's old staffs. So the Jets, too, have the pieces in place to run the offense Cousins has already mastered, and with \$80 million in cap space they can add offensive talent through trades and free agency (keeping blossoming tight end Austin Seferian-Jenkins would be a boost, too, and I wouldn't bet against it).

Then there is the prospect of expectations. The last time the Broncos added a big-money, veteran free-agent quarterback he was named Peyton Manning, he quickly took them to two Super Bowls and won one Lombardi Trophy there. This is a team that has a very recent pedigree of playoff success -- though one that's now seemingly in decline -- with a fanbase that believes it should be deep in the postseason more years than not. In Denver, can you ever really escape the ghosts of Manning and Elway?

The Jets, um, notsomuch. They haven't had a competent quarterback for multiple seasons in forever. Chad Pennington was the best they've had in decades, and there were always concerns about his arms. He's been gone for a decade. Before that, they got some good late years from Vinny Testaverde and, like, Richard Todd before that in the 1980s. That's where the bar is set. Cousins coming in and duplicating what he did in Washington would go down by far as the most prolific passing seasons in franchise history. Period. Just keep being himself, and he's set up to be a legend. Add in the fact that Bill Belichick and Tom Brady can't stick around forever (right?), and the AFC East might actually -- finally -- open up in a year or two (Andy Reid and Jon Gruden being in the AFC West isn't great new for the Broncos).

Size it all up, and I'm going to the Jets, who played over their heads last season and seem like a young, energetic team. Yeah, they went 5-11, but were competitive all season until McCown got hurt, while the Broncos were prone to blowout losses and sideline tempests. New York managed to beat Kansas City, Jacksonville and Buffalo -- all AFC playoff teams -- and have multiple high picks and tons of money to spend.

I anticipate they come at Cousins hyper-aggressively with a holistic approach to how they plan to build around him. He'll be the center of it all in a way Washington never displayed. Strip away whatever the nicknames of the teams connotes -- forget their past glories, or ignominies, which really don't have anything to do with this exercise -- and you could make a very strong argument for Cousins launching his next phase of his career in The Big Apple.

Ten offseason storylines that will shape the 2018 NFL season

By Marc Sessler

NFL.com

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As the glow of Super Bowl LII dims, the beat goes on.

The NFL Scouting Combine, free agency and the draft will vastly reshape all 32 teams into new creations.

Just look at the Eagles. A year ago, Chase Daniel sat as the understudy to a work-in-progress Carson Wentz at quarterback, while Nick Foles pondered his future as a soon-to-be-released backup to Alex Smith in Kansas City.

Beyond the quarterbacks, a trio of key cogs on offense -- power back LeGarrette Blount and wideouts Alshon Jeffery and Torrey Smith -- would all arrive through free agency, while Super Bowl hero Corey Clement was nabbed in the spring as an undrafted free agent. Receiver Nelson Agholor, meanwhile, was tossed about as possible trade bait after two underwhelming campaigns in Philadelphia.

On Super Bowl Sunday, Foles, Jeffery, Smith, Blount, Clement and Agholor combined for 414 of Philadelphia's outrageous 538 total yards in a stunning win over New England.

It's another reminder that title-winning teams are built in the quiet winter months and springtime weeks that slowly wind toward September.

With this in mind, here's a look at 10 offseason subplots primed to shape the 2018 NFL campaign:

1) Indy's coaching search, Andrew Luck's shoulder and what comes next: Colts general manager Chris Ballard faced the music Wednesday morning, less than 24 hours after the team was jilted by Josh McDaniels. "Let me make this clear. I want, and we want as an organization, a head coach that wants to be all in," Ballard said, calling for "someone that's 100 percent committed."

McDaniels' decision to stay in New England as offensive coordinator -- and potentially as Bill Belichick's successor -- rather than coach the Colts triggered a domino effect that could directly impact, among others, the world-champion Eagles. Philly play-caller Frank Reich reportedly sits high on a list of candidates for Indy's top job. The Colts could also send Kansas City into shuffle mode by plucking special teams ace Dave Toub.

Whoever takes the job will suddenly be forced into the same role that plagued Ballard on Wednesday and all of last season: answering questions about the status of Andrew Luck. "He doesn't need surgery," Ballard said point-blank, but the status of Luck's shoulder remains a hot-to-the-touch talking point for the second straight offseason. Stay tuned.

2) The Cousins ripple effect: About to be replaced in Washington by Alex Smith, former Redskins starting quarterback Kirk Cousins is set to become the hottest free-agent prize since Peyton Manning was cut loose by the Colts in 2012. Will Broncos football czar John Elway -- playing super-recruiter once again --

put an end to Denver's tedious quarterback carousel by luring Cousins west? Whoever wants Cousins will be asked to pay nearly \$30 million per year after Jimmy Garoppolo inked his massive five-year, \$137.5 million contract with the Niners on Thursday. Quarterback money is prepped to blow through the roof this offseason, making Philly's combined salary for Wentz and Foles -- south of \$10 million combined for 2018 -- the steal of the decade.

3) Blowing up the catch rule: Commissioner Roger Goodell knows the NFL's hyper-vague catch rule has pushed fans to the brink. "I'm not just somewhat concerned. I am concerned," Goodell said of the drunkenly layered set of rules around what constitutes a catch. "From our standpoint, I would like to start back, instead of adding to the rule, subtracting the rule. Start over again and look at the rule fundamentally from the start." These are the most promising words yet about the possibility of stripping away and simplifying the overwritten rulebook. On a hopeful note, the playoffs -- especially the Super Bowl -- were imbued with fewer ponderous reversals from New York. Don't hold your breath for major changes, but at least Goodell sees what we all see.

4) Who plays quarterback for the Vikings? Speaking of Cousins, the Vikings loom as another juicy suitor, especially with the Jaguars potentially tied to a fifth-year option on Blake Bortles if the passer's surgically repaired wrist isn't fully healed by March 16. Minnesota is about to watch Case Keenum, Sam Bradford and Teddy Bridgewater hit free agency. There's still a chance that Bridgewater's contract could toll for another year, keeping him on the roster -- but the Vikings are preparing for every one of their arms to become available. My guess on who stays? It's Teddy. Head coach Mike Zimmer loves Bridgewater, who's still just 25 years old and was seen as the clear-cut franchise answer before the catastrophic knee injury that struck in August of 2016. There's a scenario where Keenum sticks, too, but his contract is tricky in a ballooning free-agent market for passers. It's also fair to wonder if Keenum could wind up in New York with ex-Vikings play-caller and new Giants coach Pat Shurmur. As for Bradford, his lengthy injury history puts him in last place for a long-term deal with the Vikings.

5) The college quarterback pecking order: In his first mock draft, NFL Network's Daniel Jeremiah, along with the rest of our experts, projected Sam Darnold of USC to become Cleveland's choice with the top overall pick. Browns draft consultant Scot McCloughan, though, came out strong (before being hired in Cleveland) for Baker Mayfield, while new Browns general manager John Dorsey also praised the Oklahoma passer. Simultaneously, a league scout told The MMQB's Peter King there is "no way" the Browns will pass on Wyoming's Josh Allen.

Obviously, this means Cleveland will turn around and pick UCLA's Josh Rosen, right? It's a fool's task, to be sure, but let's unfurl our DEEPLY UNRELIABLE SIGNAL-CALLING MATCHMAKER-BOT 1.0, which quickly and haphazardly pairs available veteran and draft-eligible quarterbacks with needy teams:

- » Browns: Baker Mayfield
- » Giants: Josh Rosen
- » Broncos: Kirk Cousins
- » Jets: Sam Darnold
- » Dolphins: Stay put with Ryan Tannehill
- » Cardinals: Josh Allen, Tyrod Taylor
- » Bills: Case Keenum
- » Vikings: Teddy Bridgewater

NOTE: If you don't like my list, feel free to ping Around The NFL news editor @David_Ely on Twitter. He'll be happy to rapidly process and reply to your complaints. Thx.

6) The evolving state of the Patriots: New England has done a nice job of bottling up its occasional frustrations and keeping mum with the media. Any in-house or outside-generated controversy has historically become fuel for the team en route to another 13-win season. But has the pattern finally been shaken? With McDaniels lured back to Foxborough, his return hints at a post-Belichick regime that will eventually forge on without the services of Tom Brady.

The odds are low, but I wouldn't be stunned to see Belichick suddenly retire in the coming weeks. The more likely scenario is one last go-around for the Patriots as we know them, but this looms as a fascinating offseason for a team that has operated as the most consistent superpower in professional sports since the start of the century.

7) Gruden's reshaping of the Raiders: The Silver and Black are either (A) a playoff-worthy team that lost its way last season, or (B) the remnant of a fluky postseason campaign in 2016. Either way, Jon Gruden faces immediate pressure to get Oakland back to the party next season. In what feels like a boom-or-bust scenario, Chucky will double as headline news every time he opens his mouth. It promises to be a wild ride for Raiders fans, but it's easy to forget Gruden's final years in Tampa Bay (45-51 with an 0-2 playoff record after winning Super Bowl XXXVII). Anything less than a double-digit-win season is bound to disappoint a fan base expecting its returning coach to act as a savior from the skies.

8) The growth of Patrick Mahomes: With Alex Smith out of the picture, the Chiefs have officially handed the offense to Mahomes, the cannon-armed second-year passer who gives coach Andy Reid a rare skill set to work with. Unlike the uber-experienced Smith, Mahomes owns just one NFL start and lingering questions about his raw skill set. A year ago, we were asking if Jared Goff could bounce back from a lost rookie season in Los Angeles, and if Wentz could iron out some of the mechanical issues that affected his first NFL campaign. After both passers made massive second-year leaps, Mahomes sits on the horizon as one of the NFL's next burgeoning stars. On a roster littered with offensive talent and strong coaching, he's in good position to shine.

9) NFC North facelift: Talk about an evolving four-pack of teams. With a healthy Aaron Rodgers back in the mix, the Packers have promised a more aggressive approach to free agency under new general manager Brian Gutekunst. Minnesota must replace a star assistant in Shurmur and figure out the quarterback position, but the club's core roster remains intact. In Chicago, first-time head coach Matt Nagy is charged with flipping the switch on second-year passer Mitchell Trubisky. It's been eons since the Bears were fun to watch on offense, but Chicago's decision to nab former Oregon head coach Mark Helfrich as coordinator makes this an attack to monitor all offseason. And don't forget about the Lions, who have a top-10 passer in Matthew Stafford and one of the game's more intriguing rookie coaches in Matt Patricia. After watching a legion of Belichickites flame out at the head-coaching level, can Patricia transform a Lions team that seemed content to go 9-7 for the rest of time under the last guy?

10) Who will make Saquon Barkley the center of their universe? The past two drafts have seen NFL teams completely revamp their attacks after picking plug-and-play star runners. The Cowboys did it with Ezekiel Elliott in 2016 before the Jaguars followed suit with Leonard Fournette in 2017. Alvin Kamara in New Orleans and Kareem Hunt in Kansas City also morphed into top-tier rainmakers. With Barkley mocked as high as No. 1 to the Browns, the Penn State wonder looms as one of the draft's most intriguing figures. The Giants (at No. 2) and the Colts (at No. 3) have gone without game-changing backs

for years on end. Barkley would be a welcome sight in both New York and Indianapolis, but it wouldn't be shocking to see a team trade up if it believes Barkley can match what Elliott and others have brought to the table.

Friends and lovers: Welcome to the offseason.

Texans hire strength and conditioning coach away from Broncos

By Josh Alper
Pro Football Talk
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The Texans denied the Broncos permission to speak to Wes Welker about becoming their wide receivers coach, but the Broncos were more willing to give the Texans a chance to speak to one of their coaches.

Mike Klis of KUSA reports that the Broncos allowed strength and conditioning coach Luke Richesson to move on to the Texans in the same position. Richesson had one year left on his contract.

Richesson completed his sixth year with the Broncos in 2017. Klis credits him with modernizing “the weight room, training and movement techniques” while working for Broncos coaches John Fox, Gary Kubiak and Vance Joseph. He came to Denver after working with former Broncos defensive coordinator Jack Del Rio in Jacksonville.

The Broncos have three assistant strength and conditioning coaches on their staff, so they could promote from within while Richesson gets to work in Houston.