

Josh McDaniels fiasco, anthem protests are examples why the NFL misses Pat Bowlen right now

By Paul Klee

Colorado Springs Gazette

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Robert Kraft is the real villain in the Josh McDaniels-Colts fiasco. With great power comes great responsibility, and no owner uses his for self-serving interests more frequently than the Patriots'.

Some of the NFL's most prominent issues — national anthem protests, distrust between players and owners, the fallout from continued and necessary CTE studies, all that — are a direct result of the league's knee-jerk reaction to almost anything that threatens to tarnish the shield. I call it the CYA plan. Instead of working together to advance the greater good with a sensible solution, the men in charge seek to cover their own backside.

The anthem protests are the perfect example. The NBA quickly and successfully identified a solution in the form of a blanket decree that all teams must stand for the anthem. And when's the last time you read a report on anthem issues in the NBA? There haven't been any. There's been zero blowback from a league roster that's 70 percent black. The NBA's all good. This isn't hard.

Meantime, the wishy-washy NFL tried to appease this group ... and that group ... and that other group ... and the end result has been distrust from players and alienating a sizable chunk of its fandom.

Nobody follows the CYA plan — ignoring what's best for the league in order to help itself — better than Kraft. That brings us to McDaniels, who reneged on a promise to join the Colts as coach. Know who changed McDaniels' mind, according to reports? Bob "CYA" Kraft.

The whole ordeal was another bad look for the NFL.

Yes, McDaniels was a five-alarm fire here. His version of the Patriot Way — from tearing down photos of Broncos alumni (build your own future!) to the videotaping scandal, a Foxboro special — crashed and burned. But the Broncos' power structure at the time didn't help, either. Pat Bowlen's good health had begun to fade, Joe Ellis wasn't yet in an elevated position, and there was no clear power structure at Dove Valley. The Broncos were very much in a gray area and at a crossroads. Denver's mistake was not pairing a seasoned general manager with the 32-year-old McDaniels. McDaniels wasn't ready, but the Broncos weren't ready for him, either.

What I'm saying is McDaniels still could be an excellent coach, especially with a quarterback like Andrew Luck, and what's best for the NFL is sharp, innovative coaches. There's not a hotter commodity than a 41-year-old offensive mind who helped 40-year-old Tom Brady win league MVP.

But instead of doing the right thing — reminding McDaniels he had given his word and wishing him well in Indianapolis — Kraft did the CYA thing.

Just because you can do something, doesn't mean you should do something. The CYA plan is tackling the NFL, one self-serving decision at a time.

It's also another reminder how badly the NFL could use a reasonable voice like Pat Bowlen right now. His ability to galvanize the suits in charge, with an eye on the big picture, was a memorable trait.

Nuggets

Big week ahead for UCCS legend Derrick White: Tuesday, his Spurs visit the Nuggets, the first time White has played at Pepsi Center since "The Show" in 2012 (excluding a quick stop at the Nuggets' practice gym for a pre-draft workout last June). Saturday, White has his No. 14 jersey retired at Gallogly Events Center when the Mountain Lions host Metro State.

The 23-year-old CU grad is getting a look with San Antonio's veteran roster, which wasn't a given during his rookie season. He's played in 13 games for the Spurs' G League squad in Austin as the Spurs monitor how he handles the pick-and-roll. So far, so good: last week against the Suns, White played a season-high 12 minutes, made 3 of 3 3-pointers and scored 10 points.

Hey, Pop: how about some playing time for the local guy in his return home?

Broncos

I think it's fair to say no one on a football staff spends more time with the roster than the strength coach. So it's no surprise Broncos players were ticked when longtime strength guru Luke Richesson, who'd been around Dove Valley through three coaches, jumped ship for a promotion with the Texans.

"It makes me sad," linebacker Brandon Marshall told Troy Renck of Denver's 7News.

Well, guys, what did you think would happen when you lobbied for Vance Joseph's return? After a 5-11 season it was inevitable the Broncos would tweak — if not overhaul — the rest of the operation, with Joseph shaping his staff with "his" guys. Even though the Texans had blocked the Broncos from interviewing Wes Welker for the wide receivers gig previously held by Tyke Tolbert — another guy the outspoken players loved — the Broncos allowed Richesson to walk for two reasons: it's good business, and the Broncos sought to streamline all corners of the wellness program, most notably the strength program with the nutrition program. Can't have it both ways, fellas.

Rockies

April 6 — Coors Field's opening day — can't come soon enough for this Rockies season. Don't look now, but the season gets rolling this week: Monday the players report to Salt River Fields in Scottsdale, Ariz., and Tuesday they undergo physicals. Pitchers and catchers hold their first workout Wednesday.

Is Broncos' offense so bad quarterback Kirk Cousins would refuse to join it at any price?

By Mark Kiszla
Denver Post
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The Super Bowl reminded us back-up quarterbacks have proven to be a very important commodity in the NFL. The Broncos had three legitimate No. 2 quarterbacks in 2017. The pity was there was no coaching to help Trevor Siemian, Brock Osweiler or Paxton Lynch achieve at the level of a No. 1. Nick Foles of Philadelphia showed what can happen to the clay, given the right sculptor.

Gregory, coaching aficionado

Kiz: No, the real pity was Broncos general manager John Elway drafting Osweiler in 2012, ahead of Russell Wilson, Nick Foles and Kirk Cousins. But your point is well-taken. Whether Elway spends big money on Cousins or drafts Baker Mayfield at No. 5 in the first round, is Bill Musgrave the right offensive coordinator to get the most out of the new QB? From Rick Dennison to Mike McCoy, the Denver offense has recently been behind the league curve in innovation or imagination.

What a Super Bowl! There were 74 points, 54 first downs, 1,151 yards of offense, one punt, one interception and one fumble. It looked as if both the Philadelphia and New England defense adopted the Ferris Bueller philosophy of taking the day off

Ralph, Englewood

Kiz: Not to brag, but the crack analytical team here at Kickin' It Headquarters told you the Eagles would win. And not that you asked, New England's Tom Brady still doesn't crack our ranking of the top three quarterbacks in pro football history: 1) Joe Montana; 2) Otto Graham, and 3) Johnny Unitas.

Does the Nuggets' trade for Devin Harris mean Will Barton as the team's back-up point guard is an experiment that's ending?

Diesel, working on the rotation

Kiz: Will is the Thrill when he's freelancing, rather than being a facilitator. So I prefer to look at it this way: Adding Harris should give Barton more room and time to operate on the wing, rather than reducing his role as a point guard.

Looking forward to reading about the Olympic Games, our Colorado athletes and your hot take on the fringed buckskin gloves that members of the U.S. team wore in the opening ceremonies.

Mike, no slave to fashion

Kiz: Don't know what mountain you ride, but if a skier showed up wearing those \$995 gloves by Ralph Lauren, he would get laughed off the lift by my crew. No poseurs allowed. All the guys with serious game on the hill go buy their suede gloves at the local hardware store for 30 bucks.

With all the negative things protested about in the United States these days, Kiz, did you have any reflections on being a man free to return to our country when you stood on the North Korean side of the DMZ during your trip to the Olympics?

Greg, grateful American

Kiz: I am blessed to live in a country where we're not only free, but free to air our grievances with aspects of our country in need of improvement.

And today's parting shot is a special request to Kim Jong-un.

Dear North Korea: Please keep Kizsla. Sincerely, Denver sports fans.

T.B., representing the 303

Ed McCaffrey joins select group of Broncos

By Jim Saccomano
DenverBroncos.com
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With the announcement Tuesday that former Broncos wide receiver Ed McCaffrey is the new head football coach at Valor Christian High School, "Eddie Mac" joins a small but distinguished list of former Denver players.

Most players begin other careers after football, but some stay in the game as mentors to young players in the sport.

After congratulating Ed, I began to think of other Broncos who have gone on to be head coaches either at the high school or collegiate levels, and I thought it is a list worth sharing.

Of course, there are some who have been left off this list, just because it is hard to keep track of all ex-players in all 50 states, but since a football team has eleven players, here is a list of eleven, including McCaffrey.

Jim McMillin was a defensive back for the Broncos on the original team in 1960, playing here through 1962 and then in another stint from 1964-65. But after he finished his playing career McMillin was the coach at Brighton High School. His record with the Bulldogs is unknown.

Jim Fraser was a reserve linebacker for the Broncos from 1962-64, and while he was not notable as a defensive player, he was a tremendous punter and was named an American Football League All-Star three times as a punter. Fraser was an East Coast native and like many players, he returned closer to his roots after concluding his playing career, becoming coach at the prestigious Middlesex Academy in Concord, Massachusetts. It is not known how long he coached there, or what his record was, but I have always been fascinated that the sports teams at Middlesex are the "Zebras," one of the more unique nicknames in the country.

A player who was in training camp with the Broncos but did not make the regular season roster was Tony Lindsay, and he went on to become the head coach at Denver South High School, where he took the Rebels to the Colorado Class 4A state championship game in 2012.

Until Montbello High School was consolidated and had its final graduating class in 2014, the head football coach was Ring of Famer Louis Wright, a Hall of Fame-quality cornerback who gave his time and effort teaching and coaching young people in the Denver area.

Scottie Montgomery played wide receiver for the Broncos from 2000-02 and then went into the coaching profession. Scottie is current the head coach at East Carolina University, where he is going into his third season coaching the Pirates.

One of the most notable coaching careers by a former Bronco is that of cornerback Steve Wilson, who played here from 1982-88. After his fine seven-year career with the Broncos, including Super Bowls XXI and XXII, Wilson got into coaching and had the distinction of eventually becoming the head coach at his alma mater, Howard University.

The Howard University Bison began play in 1893 and in more than a century of football their longest tenured and winningest head coach is Steve Wilson. He coached there for 13 years (1989-2001) and had a 78-67 record while leading the Bison.

The current head coach at Purdue University is not only a rising star in the college coaching profession but a former Broncos practice squad quarterback.

Jeff Brohm was a great quarterback at Louisville who was on our practice squad in 1999. Since becoming a coach he has steadily moved up, and he took Western Kentucky to consecutive Conference USA championships in 2015 and 2016. As the head coach at Purdue, Brohm led the Boilermakers to a win over Arizona in the 2017 Foster Farms Bowl.

Stretching my list to semi pro, I have to include Dan DeRose. Dan DeRose was a linebacker in camp with us in 1984 but did not make the team. However, Dan was the defensive captain of the New York Giants replacement unit under coordinator Bill Belichick in 1987, and he then went on to be the head coach of the Pueblo Crusaders semi-pro team that won the league championship in 1989.

By far the most notable careers in high school and college coaching belong to the final three men on this list.

One is of course Dave Logan, certainly one of the greatest athletes ever produced at the University of Colorado and one of just three people to be drafted in football, basketball and baseball.

Logan is the head coach at Cherry Creek High School and has 256 total prep victories and seven state championships. His titles came at four different schools and he is the only head coach in national history to win seven state titles, all at the highest classification of play, at four different schools. The second place individual is long retired and won three at three schools in North Carolina.

My opinion is that Logan's astonishing national record will never be broken.

Billy Joe was the AFL Rookie of the Year as the Broncos' fullback in 1963 and played here until being traded to Buffalo in 1965, where he made the AFL All-Star team.

But Billy Joe's greatest success came after pro football when he coached in college from 1972 through 2010, including 33 years as head coach.

His schools included Central State University, where Joe's teams won NAIA National Football Championships in 1990 and 1902 and made regular playoff appearances. He also won five straight black college national championships at Central State and one with Florida A&M.

Billy Joe was inducted into the College Football Hall of Fame in 2007, finishing his career with 243 wins and 133 losses.

Bob Wade was a reserve cornerback for the Broncos in 1970. He had one interception for the Broncos that year and bounced around with a few NFL teams, but really made his mark when he became a basketball coach.

He was the legendary head coach at the equally legendary Baltimore Dunbar High School from 1975-86, where he compiled a 341-25 record as a prep basketball coach, and then he moved on to the University of Maryland, where he coached from 1986-89.

While at Dunbar, Wade was the USA Today National Coach of the Year in 1983. In his two best seasons at Dunbar (1981-83) Wade's teams were a combined 60-0.

And now Ed McCaffrey joins the list of former Broncos in coaching. He always had great organizational skills and discipline as a player who was a three-time Super Bowl champion, twice with the Broncos and one with the San Francisco 49ers.

He has always been greatly interested in the value of school. On many occasions I have praised him and his wife Lisa for the athletic accomplishments of their sons, and Ed always turns the topic to hard work, academics and perseverance.

I have no doubt that he will make his mark at Valor in joining this list of former Broncos who have succeeded in coaching and molding young people at the high school and college levels.

After Jimmy Garoppolo's deal, is it smart for teams to still be overpaying QBs?

By Frank Schwab

Yahoo.com

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On Thursday the San Francisco 49ers signed quarterback Jimmy Garoppolo, with his seven career starts, to a record five-year, \$137.5 million deal. That's \$27.5 million per year.

The Eagles signed nine free agents last year from other teams who stuck on the roster and all of them contributed to a Super Bowl win: receiver Torrey Smith, quarterback Nick Foles, receiver Alshon Jeffery, offensive lineman Stefan Wisniewski, defensive end Chris Long, safety Corey Graham, guard Chance Warmack, running back LeGarrette Blount and cornerback Patrick Robinson. Total cost, based on per-year averages in those nine deals? \$30.1 million.

Not everyone can hit as many home runs as the Eagles did in free agency last offseason. And the 49ers weren't going to let Garoppolo go. Quarterback still is the most important position, and always will be. Just wait until the Eagles have to pay Carson Wentz. They'll pay because they have to.

But we've reached a point in which the quarterback market is entirely out of whack with the rest of the rosters. Teams are probably better off not paying exorbitant prices for quarterbacks like Garoppolo or 2018 free agents Kirk Cousins and Case Keenum. The top 16 contracts in the NFL on the books already for 2018, on a per-year average, are quarterbacks. Alex Smith, Joe Flacco and Ryan Tannehill make more per year than any non-quarterback in the NFL. Nobody would pick Tannehill over Aaron Donald or Von Miller, yet he's paid that way.

Most of the quarterback madness doesn't make logical sense, but teams can't help themselves. No team wants to be the one to draw the line in the sand and let their good quarterback go once he's ready to cash in big. The only reason Cousins is available is because the Redskins tried stringing him along on franchise deals and handed him leverage. Then seeing Cousins was on his way out, Washington traded a ton for Smith and then gave him a four-year, \$94 million deal.

It's a never-ending conundrum. Quarterback is the most important position, and the market is set well above where it probably should be for them. The Detroit Lions paid Matthew Stafford \$27 million and the Oakland Raiders paid Derek Carr \$25 million because that's the price tag. If they didn't pay them like that, someone else would. But think of it this way: Stafford and Carr make more than two Luke Kuechly (Kuechly per year: \$12.4 million). Teams fear losing good quarterbacks, so they pay them like great quarterbacks, even if they know that makes their path to a championship much, much tougher in a salary-cap league.

Certified agent and OverTheCap.com writer Zack Moore's research showed that of all Super Bowl champions since 1994, the highest percentage of cap space taken up by the quarterback was Peyton Manning's 12.21 percent in 2015. Most championship quarterbacks are below 10 percent.

Wentz and Foles combined accounted for about 4.5 percent of the Eagles cap.

If the NFL salary cap is between \$175-180 million per team this season (it was \$167 million last season) then Garoppolo's first-year cap hit of \$37 million is more than 20 percent of the 49ers cap. It's historically unprecedented in the salary-cap era to build a championship team with a quarterback taking up anywhere near that much of the cap. The 49ers smartly front-loaded the deal, but cap numbers of \$26.6 million, \$26.9 million and \$27 million the final three years of the deal are still harsh. The 49ers had a ton of cap space, so it made more sense for them. Teams that aren't flush with cap space still have to pay huge prices for any moderately good quarterback. Whoever signs Cousins or Keenum (unless it's the Browns, who have more than \$100 million in cap space) will be practically mortgaging their cap for one player.

But it goes back to the quarterback conundrum. If you don't have a good quarterback you chase one constantly. The Denver Broncos went from a Super Bowl champion in 2015 to a 14-18 team that missed the playoffs two seasons in a row due in large part to their mess of a quarterback situation. They're expected to be in on the Cousins sweepstakes. The Broncos need a better quarterback. Paying for the best quarterback on the market probably means Denver can't build a championship team around him. Round and round we go.

"This position is key," 49ers general manager John Lynch said in the press conference to announce Garoppolo's deal. "If you don't have one, you're looking for one."

It's not impossible to win with a high-priced quarterback (the Eagles proved it's not impossible to win with a bargain quarterback either). The 2016 Atlanta Falcons came as close as you can to a title without actually winning it, and they didn't lose Super Bowl LI in overtime because Matt Ryan took up 15.4 percent of their cap. But paying more than 10 percent of your cap to a quarterback makes it harder. The Seattle Seahawks won big when Russell Wilson was on his rookie deal, and now their depth is diminished after Wilson's mega-deal and they aren't the same team. Wilson getting paid and the Seahawks' gentle decline seem to be directly correlated. Yet, it's impossible to believe the Seahawks would be better off without Wilson, and nobody suggested they not sign him to an extension. It's an impossible puzzle to solve.

Nobody is saying the 49ers screwed up signing Garoppolo. They had to sign him, for many good reasons. He looks like the real deal, and they weren't going to let him go after trading for him and watching him play well. The 49ers were also in an advantageous position of having way more cap space than anyone but the Browns. Not all teams are in that spot. They just spend big on quarterback, even though they know that contract will likely will become the biggest obstacle to the ultimate goal of a Super Bowl.

Ranking the NFL's Neediest Teams

By Andy Benoit

MMQB.com

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1. NEW YORK JETS (5–11)

FIRST-ROUND DRAFT PICK: 6

PRIMARY NEED: BEST PLAYER AVAILABLE

The Jets wildly surpassed expectations by winning five games... which says everything about this roster. There are enough glaring needs that GM Mike Maccagnan can draft his board's top player in the first four rounds and trust that each rookie will immediately have a major role. Quarterback is the most significant need. After that: interior O-line, tight end, linebacker, cornerback.... How each spot is filled could influence the others. Coach Todd Bowles is known for blitzing, but he's disciplined about playing to personnel. A stud corner would allow Bowles to use more pressure packages, but if there's a pass rusher New York loves, the coach could rework around him.

2. CLEVELAND BROWNS (0–16)

FIRST-ROUND DRAFT PICK: 1, 4 (VIA TEXANS)

PRIMARY NEED: SLOT RECEIVER

The Browns are more talented than their 0–16 record suggests. They could use another playmaker or two on D (what last-place team couldn't?), but more than anything, they need to redesign their O. Part of DeShone Kizer's struggles at QB can be attributed to coach Hue Jackson's asking the rookie to make deep, full-field progression reads out of spread formations. It doesn't get more challenging than that. Jackson is a shrewd offensive strategist; his unit can be better—especially if he has a true slot receiver around whom he can build shorter route combos, increasing the ways versatile receiving back Duke Johnson and nimble tight end David Njoku are used.

3. BUFFALO BILLS (9–7)

FIRST-ROUND DRAFT PICK: 21, 22 (VIA CHIEFS)

PRIMARY NEED: EDGE RUSHER

The Bills' biggest need is at QB, but that's true for just about any team without a franchise guy in that spot. Digging deeper, look to the D-line. Coach Sean McDermott is a creative, effective blitz schemer. But he more often plays traditional zone coverages, which require a potent four-man rush. Buffalo had just 27 sacks last season, tied for third fewest in the NFL, and you can see that reflected on film: Their front four rarely controlled games. This roster's only viable pass rusher is defensive end Jerry Hughes, who can go quiet for stretches. The Bills need an edge bender opposite him, as well as a penetrator inside, especially if 34-year-old free agent Kyle Williams does not return.

4. CHICAGO BEARS (5–11)

FIRST-ROUND DRAFT PICK: 8

PRIMARY NEED: WIDE RECEIVER

The offense that new coach Matt Nagy coordinated under Andy Reid in K.C. prospered despite mediocre receivers. But that was a function of Reid's passing-game creativity with running backs, plus the presence of multi-tooled tight end Travis Kelce. Nagy can employ his backs in the air (especially the electrifying Tarik Cohen), but tight ends Dion Sims and Adam Shaheen are neither dynamic nor flexible. In his second year, quarterback Mitchell Trubisky will need more talented receivers. Cameron Meredith, coming off a left-ACL tear, can fill one spot—but that leaves three more. Just about any style of player will work here, as long as he's a proficient enough route runner to aid the timing and rhythm throws that Trubisky's success will hinge on.

5. INDIANAPOLIS COLTS (4–12)

FIRST-ROUND DRAFT PICK: 3

PRIMARY NEED: EDGE RUSHER

Everyone derides the Colts' offensive line, but third-year center Ryan Kelly and guards Jack Mewhort (entering year five) and Joe Haeg (three) form a solid, improving interior; and Anthony Castonzo is a quality left tackle. The real problem: Injuries have kept these guys from playing together. Chemistry can develop once they stay healthy. Instead of meddling there, expect second-year GM Chris Ballard to use his cap space (\$84 million) and early draft picks to restock a defense that ranked 30th last season and needs work at every position except tackle and free safety. The fastest way to improve a defense is to add an edge rusher who can influence an opposing offense's blocking scheme and make the quarterback play hastily.

6. CINCINNATI BENGALS (7–9)

FIRST-ROUND DRAFT PICK: 12

PRIMARY NEED: QUARTERBACK

This is as much about a franchise philosophy as it is about Andy Dalton in particular. The Bengals' approach has long been to pay for a middle-tier QB and surround him with talent, investing early picks at receiver, running back, tight end and offensive tackle. With Dalton there have been ups and downs (dictated largely by how well he moves within the pocket), and all but one of his seven campaigns have ended somewhere between 6–10 and 11–5. That's respectable but ultimately unfulfilling. If owner Mike Brown is unwilling to change leadership at the coaching level, he at least needs to evolve Cincinnati's on-field identity. This year's draft offers at least four first-round QBs, and Dalton would count just \$2.4 million in dead money against the cap if he was released.

7. TENNESSEE TITANS (9–7)

FIRST-ROUND DRAFT PICK: 25

PRIMARY NEED: WIDE RECEIVER

Sure, the Titans drafted Corey Davis with the No. 5 pick last year. But he has yet to show the transitional quickness or top-end speed to stretch the field. Barring a sudden turbo boost (which we might see once he acclimates more to the NFL), Davis will most likely build his career on contested catches and possession targets. In other words: Tennessee doesn't have anyone who can threaten a defense deep,

and that makes every part of the passing game more difficult. (There's also the matter of Eric Decker's free agency in 2018, and Rishard Matthews's in '19.) Finding a speed receiver with upside to pair with Davis and fellow '17 rookie Taywan Taylor (a quintessential slot man) would be prudent.

8. ARIZONA CARDINALS (8–8)
FIRST-ROUND DRAFT PICK: 15

PRIMARY NEED: OFFENSE

New coach Steve Wilks inherited the defensive talent to run his blitz-intensive scheme. On the other side of the ball, there's barely the personnel to run any scheme. There's no quarterback under contract; starting guards Alex Boone and Earl Watford are both free agents; so is wide receiver Jaron Brown; and Larry Fitzgerald's return is up in the air. Cardinals general manager Steve Keim, in other words, has plenty of work to do. The silver lining: New offensive coordinator Mike McCoy is an adaptable play-caller with a strong grasp of modern passing concepts. Arizona can mold its system to fit just about any quarterback. If Keim can't get in on the rookie QB action through this year's draft, he'll find a bridge guy and draft men to block and catch for whichever passer comes next year.

9. WASHINGTON REDSKINS (7–9)
FIRST-ROUND DRAFT PICK: 13

PRIMARY NEEDS: WIDE RECEIVER, LINEBACKER

Alex Smith is a downgrade from Kirk Cousins, but he can be serviceable with the right weapons. The Redskins need to find those. Wide receiver is the top priority, especially if free agent Ryan Grant is not retained. If he returns, then linebacker becomes the top need. Speed demon Zach Brown was the only constant in 2017. Fans love him, but his performances are sometimes marred by misreads. It'll be fascinating to see what kind of money he's offered in free agency. Washington, a zone-based D, has no long-term depth around Brown, so linebacker will be addressed even if he sticks around.

10. TAMPA BAY BUCCANEERS (5–11)
FIRST-ROUND DRAFT PICK: 7

PRIMARY NEED: PASS RUSHER

It will be tempting to pursue a replacement for disappointing running back Doug Martin, especially considering that Charles Sims is also a free agent. But it's far more important for the Bucs to get some teeth on a D that had no bite in 2017. This season was essentially lost when second-year end Noah Spence separated his shoulder in Week 3. He was the only edge-rushing threat; without him, Tampa's pass rush floundered and its zone coverages were exposed. The Bucs need an infusion of pass-rushing talent to ensure a single injury doesn't scuttle their D again. Currently, Gerald McCoy and—once or twice a game—Robert Ayers are the only forces who flash up front.

11. SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS (6–10)
FIRST-ROUND DRAFT PICK: 9/10

PRIMARY NEED: OFFENSIVE LINE

For Jimmy Garoppolo to be the QB savior that so many pundits imagine, he needs to be protected. Center Daniel Kilgore and right guard Brandon Fusco are free agents (and probably backups on most teams). At left guard, Laken Tomlinson has size and strength, but maybe not the ideal agility for Kyle Shanahan's outside-zone running scheme. Something else to consider: Left tackle Joe Staley is 33. He was strong in pass protection last season, but he wasn't impermeable. Shanahan often asks his tackles to block one-on-one, sending all five eligible receivers out in routes. That helps his QB throw quickly, which Garoppolo thrived doing in 2017. Because of this, the Niners don't necessarily have to invest hugely in the O-line—but it wouldn't hurt.

12. DENVER BRONCOS (5–11)
FIRST-ROUND DRAFT PICK: 5

PRIMARY NEED: RIGHT TACKLE

Next year's QB is anyone's guess. Paxton Lynch? Kirk Cousins? Some first-round prospect? Whoever lands the job will need better pass protection than the Broncos' passers got in 2017. Right tackle is the spot of greatest concern: The talented but unrefined Menelik Watson was a turnstile, and long-armed Donald Stephenson (another nice player who has never put it all together) couldn't stick in the starting lineup. Now: Stephenson's a free agent and will most likely walk; Watson, who's due \$7.1 million, will probably be cut. Finding a reliable replacement would aid Denver's undefined passing attack. (And if Watson somehow re-returns too? He could become a utility backup or guard, where he's better suited.)

13. OAKLAND RAIDERS (6–10)
FIRST-ROUND DRAFT PICK: 9/10

PRIMARY NEED: WIDE RECEIVER

With his propensity for drops, Michael Crabtree and his \$7.7 million cap number are not worth keeping. Two years ago, Crabtree's fellow starting wideout, Amari Cooper, looked like the Next Big Thing—but injuries and his own slippery hands have been problematic. Also concerning: the way that Cooper, one of the league's quicker and more nuanced route runners, struggles against press coverage. If his 2018 is like the second half of his '16 or any of his '17, his long-term role will be, at best, as a No. 2. The Raiders can make Cooper's (and QB Derek Carr's) life easier by finding a topflight bookend. One with size and the fearlessness to go inside would best fit in new coach Jon Gruden's system.

14. MIAMI DOLPHINS (6–10)
FIRST-ROUND DRAFT PICK: 11

PRIMARY NEED: CORNERBACK

The Dolphins could fall in love with some quarterback, running back or receiver—but they ought to prioritize corner. Xavien Howard, a polished, agile second-rounder from 2016, is on the cusp of stardom, and across from him, coaches appear comfortable with '17 third-round pick Cordrea Tankersley. But coach Adam Gase, a trips-formation evangelist, knows better than anyone that today's NFL demands a solid slot corner too. Bobby McCain is decent, but his contract expires after '18, and there's no depth behind him. Miami should find a corner who has the spatial awareness to play zone inside but also the size to move outside as insurance for Tankersley. Someone fitting this description will cost a first-or second-round pick.

15. DETROIT LIONS (9–7)
FIRST-ROUND DRAFT PICK: 20

PRIMARY NEED: DEFENSIVE END

It's funny. In 2016, Ziggy Ansah looked so much better on film than his two sacks suggested. In '17 he had 12 takedowns but looked markedly worse. His playing time diminished and he slid into a pass-rushing-specialist role later in the year. Long and limber, Ansah has the potential to be elite, especially on stunts and D-line slants. And, yes, some of his inconsistencies can be attributed to knee and back injuries. Still, the Lions must think long and hard before applying the \$18 million franchise tag to this free agent. If they don't, another team will almost certainly overpay for him. Even if Ansah stays, a zone-based defense like the Lions' can never have too many pass rushers. Detroit could definitely use another.

16. CAROLINA PANTHERS (11–5)
FIRST-ROUND DRAFT PICK: 24

PRIMARY NEED: OFFENSIVE LINE

It's a mystery how left guard Andrew Norwell—sturdy but by no means spectacular—earned first-team All-Pro. (No one on this line was All-Pro-worthy; that's partly why the Panthers' backs rushed for the second-fewest yards in the NFL.) This perplexing nod might beef up Norwell's market value, and his franchise-tag number is already inflated by the NFL's asinine practice of lumping all linemen into the same pricing category. Re-signing him could be tough, and while he's the only 2018 free agent on this line, right tackle Daryl Williams will be up in '19, as will center Ryan Kalil. Carolina must replenish its depth up front.

17. NEW YORK GIANTS (3–13)
FIRST-ROUND DRAFT PICK: 2

PRIMARY NEED: RUNNING BACK

If the Giants fall head over heels for one of this draft's QBs, fine. But Eli Manning has shown little sign of decline. His poor 2017 should be resolved, partly, by a healthy receiving corps and a revamped system under new coach Pat Shurmur. Any scheme is stronger with a dynamic back, which New York hasn't had since Ahmad Bradshaw in '12. Last year's fourth-round pick, Wayne Gallman, is intriguing, but not enough to build around. Orleans Darkwa, a better pure runner, could test free agency. So could Shane Vereen. If he leaves, the Giants will need a three-down weapon. If Vereen returns, they ought to get a first- and second-down bell cow, which shouldn't be too expensive.

18. KANSAS CITY CHIEFS (10–6)
FIRST-ROUND DRAFT PICK: NONE

PRIMARY NEED: INTERIOR RUN DEFENDER

The Chiefs' defensive front seven has had some rich individual talent, but collectively that group has finished 25th and 26th against the run the last two years. Part of the problem is coordinator Bob Sutton's preference for a three-safety, three-corner dime package on second or third down when facing

a three-receiver set (which is common in today's NFL). Here the Chiefs almost always align in a light 4-2, and against agile runners they get gashed. If Sutton keeps this up, he must find an imposing every-down 'backer (Derrick Johnson, 35, is no longer that guy), plus another dynamic D-lineman in the mold of third-year pro Chris Jones.

19. LOS ANGELES RAMS (11-5)
FIRST-ROUND DRAFT PICK: 23

PRIMARY NEED: SECONDARY

The Rams' best DBs—corner Trumaine Johnson and free safety LaMarcus Joyner—are free agents, but there's enough cap room to re-sign both. If that doesn't happen, any vacated position there becomes priority No. 1. Nickell Robey-Coleman is also headed for the open market, and his slot corner position could be hard to fill. If the Rams somehow return all three DBs, they'll refocus on the edge. Connor Barwin is a free agent. Robert Quinn could be cut next year. (He isn't as swift as he was in 2013, when he had 19 sacks, and he doesn't have a refined array of pass-rushing moves.) L.A. needs more juice on the edge.

20. SEATTLE SEAHAWKS (9-7)
FIRST-ROUND DRAFT PICK: 18

PRIMARY NEED: DEFENSE

Four end-of-year starters are entering free agency: DT Sheldon Richardson, OLB Michael Wilhoite, SS Bradley McDougald and CB Byron Maxwell. More important, a trove of stars—DE Cliff Avril, SS Kam Chancellor and CB Richard Sherman—each suffered what are most likely career-altering (or -ending) injuries in 2017. Plus, DE Frank Clark, OLB K.J. Wright and FS Earl Thomas all become free agents in '19. Retaining all three is unlikely; replacing even one will be hard. Coach Pete Carroll's replacing coordinator Kris Richard with Ken Norton Jr., (who was Seattle's linebackers coach from '10 through '14), suggests that he wants to get back to a Cover 3 foundation. And that suggests speed is the attribute he'll look hardest for in rebuilding.

21. BALTIMORE RAVENS (9-7)
FIRST-ROUND DRAFT PICK: 16

PRIMARY NEED: EDGE RUSHER

THE INTERIOR O-line was the Ravens' biggest weakness in 2017, but with Marshal Yanda (ankle) and Alex Lewis (shoulder) returning, guard should be set. Center Ryan Jensen (a free agent) improved greatly and is worth re-signing. Receiver is a position of need, and if Baltimore's brass feel it's time to give up on '15 first-rounder Breshad Perriman, they'll draft there. (Mike Wallace and Jeremy Maclin are an average duo.) But don't be surprised if they focus on bolstering a D that's already among the NFL's best. You can never have too many edge rushers—especially if your only consistent one soon turns 36. Hello, Terrell Suggs! If an instant threat isn't available in the draft, Baltimore needs a developmental replacement who can learn from Suggs.

22. HOUSTON TEXANS (4-12)
FIRST-ROUND DRAFT PICK: NONE

PRIMARY NEED: OFFENSIVE LINE

THE DESHAUN WATSON hype is justified. He's a mobile out-of-pocket threat and has the potential to be one of the NFL's best downfield passers. Those traits elevate his ceiling—but a QB's floor is set by his capacity to play from the pocket. After Watson became the starter in Week 2, he grew more patient and polished from the pocket, but it's hard to see that continuing if the Texans don't shore up the NFL's least talented line. Foes eagerly attacked with stunts and inside blitzes, and that constant assault can erode a QB's pocket comfort. Houston must upgrade all five spots.

23. DALLAS COWBOYS (9–7)
FIRST-ROUND DRAFT PICK: 19

PRIMARY NEED: WIDE RECEIVER

Dez Bryant started slowing down in 2015. In '16 top corners often defeated him. In '17 defenses stopped giving those corners safety help, trusting that the 29-year-old Bryant—whose route tree was already limited to slants, posts and digs—could be handled one-on-one. (He was.) Dak Prescott is a quality QB, but his style and skill set require that he be surrounded by talent, and that starts with a perimeter receiver who can separate and influence coverages. Bryant, who averaged a little more than 50 yards per game since '15, and whose cap number is \$16.5 million, is not that receiver.

24. LOS ANGELES CHARGERS (9–7)
FIRST-ROUND DRAFT PICK: 17

PRIMARY NEED: FREE SAFETY

Defensive coordinator Gus Bradley's best years as a play-caller came with the Seahawks in 2009–12. There he had the NFL's rangiest free safety, Earl Thomas, which gives a coach (and 10 other defenders) the confidence to be aggressive. Bradley is mostly running his old Seahawks-style Cover 3 zone and single-high safety man-to-man in L.A. That demands superior personnel, which Bradley has in dominant edge rushers Melvin Ingram and Joey Bosa, plus a talented cornerbacking group led by Casey Hayward. A playmaking centerfielder would do wonders for this unit. Last year's starter, Tre Boston, had his moments, but he's a free agent—and not the type you break the bank to re-sign.

25. GREEN BAY PACKERS (7–9)
FIRST-ROUND DRAFT PICK: 14

PRIMARY NEED: CORNERBACK

From last year's roster, only 2017 second-round pick Kevin King is a bona fide starter at corner (and that's assuming he can build on a stellar rookie season). Davon House's contract is up, and Damarious Randall, a '15 first-rounder, has his peaks and valleys. A change at coordinator does little to assuage the need for a reliable cover corner opposite King. Dom Capers valued that role because it left more chess pieces for his pressure packages, and his replacement, Mike Pettine, thinks the same way. Pettine was the Jets' coordinator in the Darrelle Revis years, when New York played solo coverage outside while 'backers and DBs were used interchangeably on inside pressure concepts.

26. JACKSONVILLE JAGUARS (10–6)

FIRST-ROUND DRAFT PICK: 29

PRIMARY NEED: TIGHT END

Regardless of who's at QB, this will remain a defensive-minded, run-first team. That approach becomes infinitely stronger with quality every-down tight ends. Really, you need two, which diversifies your formation options and your running game. It also fortifies your aerial attack, especially over the middle in this play-action-intensive scheme. The Jags had a solid-but-unspectacular tight end for 12 years in Mercedes Lewis, but with his \$4 million contract now voidable, it's time to look forward. (A quality pass catcher would be an improvement on backups Ben Koyack and James O'Shaughnessy.) Some of the NFL's best developmental TEs have been drafted in the middle rounds.

27. MINNESOTA VIKINGS (13–3)

FIRST-ROUND DRAFT PICK: 30

PRIMARY NEED: DEFENSIVE TACKLE

Case Keenum is the QB the Vikings should re-sign. Sam Bradford can't stay healthy, and Teddy Bridgewater has limitations. In the end, only one of those guys will stick, and GM Rick Spielman's search will shift to the defense. The starting unit is rock-solid, so a luxury draft pick can be afforded if the right player is on the board. To plug future holes, the Vikes might also look to D-tackle, where free-agent rotational guys Tom Johnson and Shamar Stephen will most likely earn starter money on the open market. A project DT makes sense in the draft, given how successful Mike Zimmer has been at developing talent off his bench.

28. PHILADELPHIA EAGLES (13–3)

FIRST-ROUND DRAFT PICK: 32

PRIMARY NEED: OFFENSIVE TACKLE

Jason Peters was playing at a Pro Bowl level before tearing his right ACL and MCL in Week 7. Philly's left tackle will be coming off the IR at age 36. Peters's 2017 replacement, Halapoulivaati Vaitai, improved his pass-blocking technique through the back end of the year, but he still might be seen internally as a high-end backup. (He can play on either side.) Cutting Peters would save \$5.3 million in cap space, but it would also carry \$6.3 million in dead money. Optioning out of that contract a year later would save \$8 million and cost nothing. Either way: If Peters departs, All-Pro right tackle Lane Johnson can move to the left, but that'd still leave a need on the right. (Vaitai?) With franchise QB Carson Wentz to protect, the Eagles won't be chintzy in restocking the position.

29. NEW ORLEANS SAINTS (11–5)

FIRST-ROUND DRAFT PICK: 27

PRIMARY NEED: TIGHT END

With Sean Payton as the architect, Drew Brees the orchestrator and Alvin Kamara the headliner, the Saints have one of football's most powerful offenses. A dynamic, versatile tight end—imagine the formations available alongside Kamara!—would make it borderline unstoppable. Saints fans will point out they once had this tight end: Jimmy Graham. And maybe they will again, given that his Seahawks

contract is up. Even so, New Orleans—which is at its best when balanced in the run and pass, and which plays a lot more base personnel than people realize—would also need to develop a quality in-line blocker. (Graham is not that.) Incumbents Josh Hill and Michael Hoomanawanui are entering contract years; Coby Fleener, who's pretty mediocre, can be released for a \$3.4 million cap savings.

30. ATLANTA FALCONS (10–6)
FIRST-ROUND DRAFT PICK: 26

PRIMARY NEED: GUARD

Even with first-and-second-down D-linemen Dontari Poe, Adrian Clayborn, Courtney Upshaw and Ahtyba Rubin hitting free agency, the Falcons' front is in fine shape. Every position on both sides of the line is set for the near future. Except guard. On the right, Wes Schweitzer, a sixth-round pick in 2016, improved late last year, particularly in pass protection, but he still has athletic limitations. Andy Levitre, 31, was solid on the left but finished the year on IR and now carries an \$8.4 million cap number (\$7 million of which can be scrapped with his release). Matt Ryan is at his best when climbing the pocket, so Atlanta will invest in that pocket's cleanliness. Whoever they acquire must be mobile, too, as that's critical in Atlanta's outside-zone running scheme.

31. PITTSBURGH STEELERS (13–3)
FIRST-ROUND DRAFT PICK: 28

PRIMARY NEED: INSIDE LINEBACKER

This defense wasn't the same after Ryan Shazier went down with a spinal injury. Shazier wasn't always disciplined, but his speed and athletic, multidirectional burst brought a unique ferocity to the front seven. The Steelers' No. 2 inside 'backer, Vince Williams, was one of the league's most improved players (including as a blitzer), but he's not quite an every-down guy. And much of coordinator Keith Butler's scheme requires two of those. (At the very least he needs one in order to run his complex dime-package blitzes.) In base and nickel situations, Pittsburgh's D-linemen often switch gap assignments after the snap. That high-risk, high-reward approach requires stable linebacking behind it.

32. NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS (13–3)
FIRST-ROUND DRAFT PICK: 31

PRIMARY NEED: CORNERBACK

Last year's \$65 million signing of ex-Bills corner Stephon Gilmore was a tacit declaration that Malcolm Butler wouldn't return in 2018. Butler, undrafted in '14, has made \$5.4 million as a pro—a fraction of what he'll be offered in guarantees as this year's top free-agent corner. He's one of football's rarest commodities: a cover artist who travels with smaller, agile receivers like Antonio Brown. He might not always shut them down, but the ability to even match up has lent coach Bill Belichick valuable coverage-design flexibility. The Patriots' depth at corner is iffy already, and Eric Rowe will be a free agent after next season. With no other roster holes, don't be shocked if New England, which plays a lot of man coverage, invests in multiple corners.

Will Kirk Cousins' next contract tie compensation to cap percentage?

By Mike Florio
Pro Football Talk
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Several franchise quarterbacks who previously received big-money contracts are seeing those contracts pale in comparison to more recent contracts, thanks to the consistent growth of the salary cap. So when will a franchise quarterback (or any other player) manage to tie his compensation to the growth of the cap?

Already, the various baseline franchise tenders flow each year from the percentage of the cap that past tenders have consumed, guaranteeing that, as the cap grows, the tenders grow. So why can't a player get similar protection in the third, fourth, fifth, or sixth years of his contract?

It's a simple concept, and the Collective Bargaining Agreement permits it. A contract can be written to provide, for example, that a player's salary in 2021 will be \$24.1 million or 15.2 percent of the cap, whichever is greater.

Those numbers weren't randomly selected; \$24.1 million is what Jimmy Garoppolo will make in year four of his new contract, and his \$27.5 million average represents 15.2 percent of the projected \$180 million cap for 2018. If the cap grows to \$200 million by 2021 (getting a Thursday night bump of either \$100 million per year or \$210 million per year, depending on which report is believed, will help), 15.2 percent of a \$200 million cap would equate to \$30.4 million.

It's unknown whether Don Yee (real or fake) tried to get a term like that for Garoppolo. Others have. Eight years ago, agents Neil Schwartz and Jonathan Feinsod attempted to secure a cap percentage for cornerback Darrelle Revis from the Jets. Two years ago, quarterback Kirk Cousins tried to get the same protection from Washington.

As free agency approaches, Cousins may be in the best position of any player to finally pull it off. Assuming Washington isn't dumb enough (that could be an ass-you-me proposition, given the team's history) to tag Cousins again, Cousins should be able to dictate terms to interested teams. It only takes two to generate real leverage. Cousins may have four or more chasing him.

So the message from Cousins and agent Mike McCartney would be clear: Don't submit an offer unless it ties every year after 2020 or 2021 to a percentage of the cap.

Of course, the rejoinder may be a two-word phrase ending in "you," especially if the Management Council gets involved. Even though the NFL consists of 32 independently-owned franchises that, in theory, compete in every way possible, the Management Council routinely tells teams what they should or shouldn't (or perhaps more accurately can or can't) do when it comes to player contracts.

Of course, all it takes is one team to direct that two-word refrain to the Management Council, if that team is more insistent on getting Cousins than it is on staying in the good graces of those who pull the strings at 345 Park Avenue.

If, in the end, Cousins pulls it off, he could set the template for all of the other quarterbacks and high-value players who could have, and arguably should have, been insisting on this type of protection in the past. Which would make Cousins a trailblazer in two different ways, given that he already has demonstrated to all current and future players the value of going year-to-year under the franchise tag.