

Broncos' Bowlen and Bailey should be Hall of Famers in 2019

By Mike Klis

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Can the Pro Football Hall of Fame handle two Broncos in the same year?

It should as owner Pat Bowlen appears to be a lock as a contributor nominee after back-to-back near misses, and cornerback Champ Bailey becomes first-time eligible for election in 2019.

If Bowlen and Bailey do get elected next year, it would be the first time multiple Broncos would make the same Hall of Fame class.

Not that Bronco fans should have confidence in the Pro Football Hall of Fame voting process.

The Bias against Broncos among Hall of Fame voters cannot be denied. It's not an East Coast Bias.

The Chargers -- who have played in one Super Bowl and won none -- have six players in the Hall who have played since the late-1970s (Fred Dean, Charlie Joyner, Dan Fouts, Kellen Winslow, Junior Seau, LaDainian Tomlinson). The Broncos -- who have played in eight Super Bowls and won three -- have just four players in the Hall (John Elway, Gary Zimmerman, Shannon Sharpe, Terrell Davis) who have played since the late-1970s.

Flat-out, a Bias against Broncos.

How else to explain not one player from one of the most famous defensive units in NFL history -- the Orange Crush of the late 1970s -- is in the Hall of Fame? In fact, Denver, for all its great defenses over the years, doesn't have one defensive player bust bronzed in Canton. Not one. Randy Gradishar and Louis Wright should have been in long ago, instead of now wading in the enormous pool of senior candidates.

How else to explain that safety Steve Atwater has only been a finalist once in the 14 years he's been eligible on the HOF ballot?

Or that Karl Mecklenburg -- the only player before Clay Matthews III who would play Pro Bowl-caliber inside linebacker on first down and Pro Bowl-caliber pass-rush defensive end on third down -- has never been a finalist as he enters his final year of modern-era ballot eligibility?

Or that receiver Rod Smith -- a far greater winner than this year's enshrinees Randy Moss and Terrell Owens -- has never made it to the semifinalist round of 25?

These outrageous snubs have inflicted a Denver franchise that is the NFL's second-winningest in the regular season since 1975. (Only the Steelers have the Broncos' beat). Hall voters have a chance to address their Bias against Broncos in 2019. Bowlen finished third among the contributor nominees in 2016 when two were submitted -- Cowboys owner Jerry Jones and former commissioner Paul Tagliabue, who did not receive the final 80 percent of the vote for election.

And Bowlen finished second last year when one contributor was nominated – general manager Bobby Beathard.

There will be two contributor nominees in 2019 and it had better be Mr. B and someone else. Bailey should also be a first-ballot Hall of Famer.

“If he’s not, there’s something wrong,” said John Lynch, another former Bronco who has not been elected despite becoming a top 15 modern-era finalists each of the past five consecutive years.

By now, we know something is wrong. It’s the Bias against Broncos. A couple weeks ago, there was this headline by website, SB Nation: “Ed Reed, Tony Gonzalez headline list of newly eligible for Hall of Fame voting in 2019.”

How typical. And how wrong. Champ Bailey is a headliner. Ed Reed is a Hall of Famer, no doubt. But Bailey was a better player. Reed was a safety with 9 Pro Bowl appearances. Bailey was a lockdown corner with 12 Pro Bowls.

Bailey’s back-to-back seasons of 2005-06 – 19 interceptions, 401 return yards (including the 100-yarder in the playoff game against the Patriots) and three touchdowns – were so spectacular, no defensive back has come close to matching them since.

Possibly working against Bailey in 2019 is Hall voters just elected three, first-time eligible players in 2018 – Ray Lewis, Brian Urlacher and Moss – and two first-timers in 2017 – Jason Taylor and Tomlinson.

Will the Hall frown on giving three first-ballot nominees – Bailey, Gonzalez and Reed -- the nod again in 2019?

If so, it had better not jilt the Champ.

Here’s a dream scenario that would bust the Bias against the Broncos in 2019: Bowlen and Bailey get elected, as does either Gradishar or Wright as the senior candidate.

Mecklenburg, a top 25 semifinalist the previous seven consecutive years, becomes a finalist for the first time in his 20th and final year of modern-era ballot eligibility, a distinction Everson Walls was afforded this year.

Atwater, who has also been a top 25 semifinalist the previous seven years, becomes a finalist for a second time.

That’s three Broncos in one Hall of Fame class and five on the final ballot (six if Lynch makes it for a sixth consecutive year). And Smith makes it into the group of 25 semifinalists for the first time.

OK, so it’s unlikely the Broncos would receive such overwhelming support in one year. Which is why we called it a dream scenario to combat what has been a clear Bias against Broncos.

Snowboarder Arielle Gold, the biggest Broncos fan at the Olympics, wins bronze in the halfpipe

By Mark Kiszla
Denver Post
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Shout it from the top of Mount Werner: Gold wins bronze!

Arielle Gold added another medal to the long, rich Olympic legacy of Steamboat Springs by finishing third Tuesday in the highest-flying, most gravity-defying halfpipe competition that women have ever waged on snowboards.

“I’m sure Steamboat is proud ... To bring home a medal to a town that has given me so much is amazing,” said Gold, who’s 14-karat Colorado to the core.

Here’s all you need to know about her Rocky Mountain cred. When I walked up to Gold late last week to inquire about her Olympic dreams, she insisted on asking me a question before starting our conversation about snowboarding.

“So,” Gold said, her voice stern and direct, with a no-messing-around tone, “who’s going to be the next starting quarterback for my Broncos?”

She won Olympic bronze for Broncos Country, which, as we all well know, hasn’t had a lot of bright, shiny moments to smile about of late.

In a situation where it would have been oh-so-easy for Gold to fold, she was a rock star. And maybe that’s the real victory here.

While snowboarding is known for that easy what-up-bruh vibe, Gold is anything but a carefree kid at age 21. Truth be known, she’s a little hard on herself, with an inner voice that sometimes criticizes so pointedly that it drives out some of the joy in grabbing big air on a board.

“That’s just who I am,” Gold said. “I’ve always been hard on myself.”

The last place a competitor wants to be in a snowboard competition is first to drop in the pipe. Judges, being human, like to save their best scores for later. Gold batted lead-off among the 12 Olympic finalists. And the pressure showed on her first run, as Gold was unable to land the 1080, three-rotation trick essential to reaching the podium in a rapidly evolving sport.

Heading into her third and final shot at a medal, the scores posted on the board in front of Gold were daunting, with the best riders in the world, including Liu Jiayu of China, as well as U.S. teammates Chloe Kim and Kelly Clark with an iron grip on the top three spots in this competition.

Staring into the halfpipe, with all her Olympic dreams riding non a single run, Gold had a quiet, little talk with herself.

“Right before I was dropping in, things were pretty quiet up there,” she said. “But what I was trying to tell myself at the top were positive mantras: ‘Still got this ... One more run ... Leave it all out there ... No holding back.’”

With the pressure on, however, Gold did not blink. Her 1080 was big and beautiful, almost as magnificent as the triumphant smile she flashed when her score of 85.75 lit up the scoreboard. Kim won gold. Liu took silver. Gold refused to beat herself.

Gold had to go. There was a bronze medal to collect. A story of beating whispers of doubt, fear and negativity to be told 1,000 more times in front of television cameras. Toasts to be raised with family and friends.

Before marching away from the halfpipe she conquered, I had one more important question for Gold.

Who should be the next starting quarterback of her beloved Denver Broncos?

“Kirk Cousins,” said Gold, smiling like a champion.

Broncos still searching for their next Peyton Manning

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN.com

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It's not that the Denver Broncos haven't tried to draw up, and follow, a plan at quarterback.

It's not like they haven't written a big -- really big -- check or used premium draft picks to find a quarterback. But now in his eighth season on the job, John Elway still finds himself looking for the answer at the team's most important position.

So much so that he has consistently tied the chance for the Broncos to change their current state of affairs -- a 5-11 team that has now missed the playoffs in consecutive seasons -- to what happens in the coming weeks at quarterback.

"For us to have a chance to get better, we have to get better at that position," he said.

Elway's first major move at quarterback as an executive was to sign Peyton Manning to the team's biggest-ever contract at the time, an all-in bet for a future Hall of Famer coming off his fourth neck surgery. And what did Manning change about the Broncos? Well, everything.

In Manning's four seasons they won four division titles, went to two Super Bowls and won Super Bowl 50. Manning's presence changed the franchise.

"It puts you with those teams that always think they're in the mix, because with Peyton we're always going to be in the mix," Champ Bailey once said.

Manning's retirement left a huge hole the Broncos are still trying to fill.

Again, not that they haven't tried. Elway has used five picks over the past seven drafts on quarterbacks.

Last season one longtime general manager said he had "never" seen a situation like Denver's, rotating three quarterbacks in the starting lineup almost weekly with all three having been drafted by the team. The Broncos even had a fourth quarterback they drafted -- rookie Chad Kelly -- on injured reserve.

They've used premium picks -- Paxton Lynch was a first-round pick in 2016 and Brock Osweiler was a second-round pick in 2012. And they've used depth picks, grabbing Zac Dysert, Trevor Siemian and Kelly in the seventh round during Elway's tenure.

Siemian advanced enough after spending one season with Manning and Osweiler to have won the job in back-to-back training camps. But right now the Broncos are left trying to decide if they picked the wrong guys, had the wrong developmental infrastructure in place, were jamming square pegs into round hole because the coaches were stubborn, or all of the above. They need another franchise-altering decision to be made, and they need it to be the correct one.

Siemian, Lynch and Kelly are all under contract for the 2018 season, but it would be difficult to find anyone -- including those three -- who believes any of them will get more than tepid consideration for

the job. Elway and coach Vance Joseph have talked about the need to match the team's offense to its personnel better than the Broncos did this past season.

Elway has called it "giving us a chance."

The Broncos haven't had a pick as high as the No. 5 pick they have in April's draft since they selected Von Miller at No. 2 in Elway's first year on the job in 2011. They also haven't been in position to spend big in free agency on a quarterback since they signed Manning in 2012.

Elway paired the draft and free agency in 2012 when he signed Manning and then weeks later used the 57th pick on Osweiler. But, when Manning retired after the 2015 season, Osweiler was also poised for free agency.

There were some hard feelings in Osweiler's camp because when Manning returned from injury that season, Osweiler was pulled from the regular-season finale and Manning started through the Super Bowl 50 win. And in the end Elway stopped bidding when the Houston Texans kept piling on the money in their offer to Osweiler.

So Manning was gone, the developmental prospect groomed to replace him was also gone and now, two playoff misses later, the Broncos are staring at the draft and free agency again as they try to find the right guy to lead their offense.

If Broncos don't get a QB in free agency, they should draft Rosen or Allen

By Woody Paige

KMGH

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The Broncos' quarterback contenders should be 2K and Josh3.

And neither available ex-Sooner should be a candidate.

I've been begging the Broncos to draft specific players since 1975, and they, especially John Elway since 2011, never have listened to me.

But I've been right on occasion, and the franchise, obviously, has been wrong.

Allow me to cite a few examples on both sides:

On April 16, 2017, I wrote a column for The Colorado Springs Gazette recommending that the Broncos select Tennessee quarterback Josh Dobbs in the third round. They didn't – preferring Chad Kelly, late of Ole Miss, with the final pick in the final round.

I added: The Broncos also should draft Alvin Kamara, the Tennessee running back they've interviewed, in the second round. He could be the best of the bunch.

The Broncos didn't draft Dobbs or Kamara.

Kamara was picked by the Saints in the third round, and Dobbs, who has a degree in aerospace engineering and was the MVP in the Senior Bowl, was chosen by the Steelers in the fourth round.

Dobbs didn't play a down in the regular season as a backup to Ben Roethlisberger and Landry Jones.

But he could be Pittsburgh's QB of the future.

Kamara was the league's offensive rookie of the year with 728 yards rushing and 826 yards in receptions, and 13 touchdowns.

Instead of those two, the Broncos drafted defensive end DeMarcus Walker in the second round and wide receiver Carlos Henderson in third. They didn't factor at all as rookies. Walker was recast for a while as an outside linebacker, then became a healthy inactive. Henderson was unhealthy the entire season.

In 2016 I pushed hard for the Broncos to draft quarterback Dak Prescott. They decided to draft quarterback Paxton Lynch, who I didn't like.

However, Elway poked fun at me after the 2011 draft because I wanted the Broncos to select LSU cornerback-returner Patrick Peterson, who I believed was the best over player in the process. Cam

Newton went 1, and Von Miller was No. 2. The Cardinals selected Peterson with the fifth pick. Newton and Miller played against each other in the Super Bowl, and Miller has been one of the most dominant NFL defensive players after marijuana issues (and a suspension).

Peterson had four touchdown returns as a rookie. He has 32 interceptions and fumble recoveries in seven seasons.

And he has earned a place in the Pro Bowl every season.

Edge to Elway, but I still like my guy Peterson.

Before accepting the sports columnist job in Denver in 1974 (after the NFL draft), I was a columnist for The Commercial Appeal in Memphis. In 1972 I wrote about a young running back for Jackson State who was the most sensational I'd ever seen. He scored seven touchdowns, and two two-point conversions, and rushed for 279 yards in one game. He finished his college career with 3,500 yards and 65 touchdowns.

In 1975 I pleaded in the Rocky Mountain News that John Ralston do whatever he could to trade up and draft the kid from Mississippi, who the Broncos coach had seen in the Senior Bowl.

The Broncos stayed at No. 17 and made a great, but controversial, pick in cornerback Louis Wright, who should be in the Hall of Fame. At No. 4, the Bears selected Walter Payton, who ended his Hall of Fame career with the most rushing yardage in NFL history – 16,726 – and 110 touchdowns. He scored six touchdowns (running, receiving, returning) in one game.

Then, during the NFL strike season of '82, as the sports columnist for The Denver Post, I spent every weekend on the road watching the best college players – including Eric Dickerson, Jim Kelly and Dan Marino. Following one game, I strolled into the office of Broncos' coach Dan Reeves and said: "I've just seen the future of the NFL, and his name is John Elway. You've got to get this guy."

"Doesn't matter. There's no chance at our spot (No. 4 overall)," he said. The Colts drafted Elway first overall. The Broncos picked guard Chris Hinton. Hinton was a great pick. He would play in seven Pro Bowls and was a starter for 13 years in the NFL with three teams.

The Broncos traded Hinton (and other items) to the Colts for Elway. In December 2017, writing for thedenverchannel.com, I implored the Broncos to pursue two veteran quarterbacks – Kirk Cousins, first, and Case Keenum second. Both will be free agents.

2K.

But, if they can't get one, they must draft at No. 5 (or higher via trade) Josh Rosen or Josh Allen, and sign veteran Josh McCown as the bridge starter or backup quarterback, and mentor to the rookie.

Josh3.

And the Broncos must not draft Sam Arnold, who belonged in school for another year, or Baker Mayfield, who won't become an extraordinary NFL quarterback. That's my opinion, and I'm sticking to it.

Broncos offseason makeover extends beyond new starting quarterback

By Troy Renck

KMGH

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Stare into the darkness.

It's OK Broncos' fans. Time to make an honest assessment. While the quarterback position remains the top priority -- either through free agents like Kirk Cousins, Case Keenum and Tyrod Taylor or the draft -- the roster requires construction that would make Chip and Joanna Gaines blush.

I watched a chunk of Super Bowl 50 on Sunday, and the Broncos bare little resemblance to that team. The offense scared no one, but featured Peyton Manning. His ability to wring out the best in teammates, to create accountability and to put the group in the right play stayed strong even as his skills deteriorated. A MacGyver offensive line -- patched together with chicken wire and duct tape -- took pride in finishing the season strong. Only one starter remains, restricted free agent center Matt Paradis.

All other grunts and the two tight ends (Vernon Davis and Owen Daniels) retired, were cut or signed elsewhere.

Defensively, five starters no longer play for the Broncos: outside linebacker DeMarcus Ware, defensive end Malik Jackson, nose tackle Sylvester Williams, linebacker Danny Trevathan, and safety T.J. Ward.

Championships come with erosion. Teams can't keep everyone in a league with a salary cap. I raise this point for two reasons. First, the Broncos are not one quarterback away from a deep playoff run, though solidifying the position would restore optimism. Secondly, they need a draft bonanza to compensate from last spring's misses, and to land an impact player in free agency beyond quarterback.

Under center, the options, according to multiple sources, start with Cousins and include Keenum and Taylor. It is, of course, a fluid situation that could require a pivot if a team overwhelms Cousins with an offer or the Vikings retain Keenum. If the Broncos don't land a quarterback selecting one with the fifth pick becomes likely. Josh Rosen, Sam Darnold, Baker Mayfield and Josh Allen -- not necessarily in that order -- sit on the list. It is impossible to know which one is their favorite given the smokescreens associated with the draft process.

In talking to a half dozen players over the last few weeks, their preference is for the Broncos to sign a veteran. Makes sense. They know the window can close quickly, and they want to win now. Securing Cousins will require creativity. The Broncos have roughly \$25 million in salary cap space. That's barely enough to force their way into the Cousins' derby.

It is expected the Broncos will ask multiple players to restructure and/or take paycuts. If the Broncos remain a strong candidate for Cousins, they are expected to keep veteran receivers Demaryius Thomas and Emmanuel Sanders. Miss on Cousins, then Thomas or Sanders become vulnerable through trade or as a salary cap casualty.

Even if Thomas and Sanders stay, the Broncos need weapons. They can no longer count on Carlos Henderson, Jeff Heurman, and the like, at this point. Landing a tight end in free agency to pair with Jake Butt could change the complexion of the offense in the red zone. A vet like Austin Seferian-Jenkins is an intriguing fit.

Signing an experienced quarterback opens up the possibility of drafting an offensive lineman with the fifth pick like Notre Dame guard Quenton Nelson or Irish tackle Mike McGlinchey. If the team does not choose a guard in the first round, UTEP's Will Hernandez will be worth a second-round pick, if available. Then again, if Georgia running back Sony Michel remains on the board in the second I would be hard-pressed to pass him over. He and Oregon's Royce Freeman, who could be available in the third or fourth round, have been repeatedly linked to the Broncos in mock drafts.

The draft exists as a boost, not rocket fuel. However, the Saints proved how the right selections can change a team dramatically as evidenced by the contributions by cornerback Marshon Lattimore, tackle Ryan Ramczyk and running back Alvin Kamara.

The Broncos' offense needs an identity, and a heavy dose of talent.

Defensively, issues exist, too. The Broncos face the possibility of moving on from cornerback Aqib Talib to make room for Bradley Roby. It would free up \$11 million in salary, but the driving force behind this change, if it happens, would be Roby's potential as a starter, not Talib's salary.

It means the Broncos could need a nickel cornerback, though I am bullish on Marcus Rios, who zoomed past third-round pick Brendan Langley over the final month of last season.

Denver should add a linebacker. There's no guarantee Todd Davis returns in free agency. Heck, there's no guarantee any of the Broncos unrestricted free agents re-signs (Davis, Allen Barbre, Jamaal Charles, Brock Osweiler, Virgil Green, Cody Latimer, Donald Stephenson, Corey Nelson, Billy Turner, Billy Winn and Jared Crick).

Improving coverage against tight ends is a must with a speedy linebacker. The Broncos have intriguing young safeties in Jamal Carter and Dymonte Thomas, which could make Darian Stewart expendable.

The defensive line improved significantly with the addition of Domata Peko, Shelby Harris and improvement of Adam Gotsis. It would help if DeMarcus Walker followed Gotsis' career arc in his second season. No one questions Derek Wolfe's toughness, however, his injuries demand the Broncos add depth at defensive end.

The aforementioned concerns articulate why the Broncos own seven wins in their past 22 games. They spiraled last season, but are not doomed. They have provided their fans a reluctant look at how the other half lives. The Broncos are accustomed to championships, not rebuilding projects.

They face a tall order this offseason. Without certainty at quarterback, it's hard to believe in a rebound. Even with a decision there -- and there will be a new starter either through free agency or the draft -- multiple right choices are required.

The puzzle is scattered. But there are enough pieces available this offseason to put it back together and make the Broncos a contender.

Looking forward: NFL partners remain bullish

By Terry Lefton and John Ourand
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Mark Shapiro smiled and gave a hearty laugh.

Sitting in a warm, hip hospitality lounge on a cold Minneapolis day, the co-president of WME and IMG was asked whether the NFL's popularity had peaked. It was a question that dominated conversations during Super Bowl Week, coming after a season where the league couldn't seem to get out of its own way. From anthem protests and concussions to its frustrating rule book and public dispute between Cowboys owner Jerry Jones and NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell, stories that held the NFL in a bad light dominated news cycles throughout 2017.

Super Bowl week always has been about celebrating the league and the sport. This year, however, the NFL spent the week on the defensive, culminating in a Wall Street Journal headline just two days before the Super Bowl that declared that the "NFL is losing its core audience."

The mere thought that the league's best days are behind it — that, maybe, some other sport was lying in wait to take the mantle as the biggest sports brand in American culture — felt so farfetched to Shapiro, that he sat back in his chair and laughed.

"It's cyclical," he said. "I have no doubt that the NFL will create stars and bounce back."

To Shapiro's eye, the NFL has lost a lot of star power over the past two years. Some of the league's most bankable stars, like Peyton Manning, retired. Other bona fide stars spent much of the season on injured reserve, like Aaron Rodgers, J.J. Watt and Odell Beckham Jr.

Plus, some new, appealing faces being groomed as the next generation were hurt and spent more time in the trainers' room than on the field, like Carson Wentz and Deshaun Watson.

The funny thing about all the angst surrounding the NFL right now is that none of it is coming from anybody that does business with the league. Sure, the NFL's TV ratings are down, but so is everything else on television. And NFL games still make up the most popular programming on television — by far.

It's the same for sponsors. The 2017 season may have been a little rough. But, they say, nothing produces like an association with the NFL.

Business is good enough for Fox to buy "Thursday Night Football" rights. The NFL also was able to close new business (Amazon Web Services and Sleep Number) and renew business (Microsoft, which now includes laptop rights, along with tablets and sideline branding), Verizon, and Procter & Gamble.

"While we obviously assess traditional measures such as ratings, we are focused on whether the NFL is a platform that allows our clients to drive brand and business results — and the answer to that is a resounding 'absolutely,'" said CAA Consulting head Greg Luckman, whose NFL clients include Bose, New Era and EA Sports.

Perhaps some of the negative storylines, like fan boycotts, have cut into some sponsor profits and brand equity. But sponsorship executives insist that the NFL is the surest bet in sports.

Fanatics founder and Executive Chairman Michael Rubin had a similar reaction as Shapiro when asked if the league was past its prime. The NFL, which is an investor in Fanatics, remains the biggest draw for the company.

"I'm sure the NFL hasn't peaked," he said. "There's no secret the NFL had a challenging year, and a lot of things contributed to that. We know that the anthem stuff was a challenge. We know that the [perennially top-selling] Dallas Cowboys went from having an extraordinary year to a challenging one. And apparel in general has some challenges now. All that said, we grew our NFL business in 2017 mid-single digits compared to our business in 2016."

League sponsors in developing categories were even more bullish on the question of whether the NFL has peaked.

"Far from it," said Verizon Executive Director Chris Paul, who said his company had invested enough to improve network coverage by more than 500 percent in and around Minneapolis. "As fans want to access the NFL in new and different ways, we will enable that. The script hasn't even been written yet for that, but we're moving it far beyond traditional sponsorship."

Even the league's television ratings, which have been the source of much negativity, look much better when they are put into context, said David Schwab, an executive vice president at Octagon.

"When people talk about the NFL's problems, the first thing they refer to are TV ratings," Schwab said. "Outside of the NBA, all sports are seeing ratings challenges."

Schwab pointed to NBC's "Sunday Night Football," which ended 2017 as television's most-watched prime-time series for the seventh consecutive season — even in a down year. "Interest is huge," Schwab said. "The gap between the NFL and everybody else is staggering."

That's the same message the NFL delivers to sponsors who bring up falling TV numbers, NFL sponsorship chief Renie Anderson said.

"I tell them that the NFL is still the best content on television," she said. "Ratings drops are not an NFL thing, they are a television thing. Remember, we don't sell ratings, we sell the ability to leverage our rights. TV is an important place for that, but so is retail. It's not like the sky is falling. Even with all the off-the-field stuff this season our [sponsorship] business is strong."

Anderson's message seems to be getting through, at least to some sponsors.

"You can see the NFL's headwinds in its viewership numbers, but they are still gigantic, compared to everything else in U.S. sports," said Dean Evans, CMO of NFL sponsor Hyundai, who cited declining youth participation numbers and a shrinking TV audience among the desirable 18-34 male demo as concerns. "It still wins the night. We'll see over the next five to 10 years where it's heading. When we can get past the kneeling thing and get back to football, I think the game will seek and find its natural level again."

Getting past “the kneeling thing” may not be as easy as it seems, some sponsors say. The hope is that player protests, and the backlash to them, aren’t damaging the NFL’s shield long term.

“I don’t think it’s as simple as, ‘Trump is upset, so I’m not buying a jersey,’” said a senior executive at a large NFL licensee. “But all the negativity leads to a less robust fan base. It’s the same thing with TV. Most fans didn’t stop watching NFL games; they’re just watching less. Both licensing and TV will rebound because nothing’s even close. For all the negatives, it’s still an unbelievable property, with no rival, as far as American sports.”

The NFL’s Anderson recalled leaving a Sunday church service to deal with the Trump issue as it was blowing up one weekend.

“Clearly, it is a very difficult subject, one that’s very personal,” she said. “We don’t want to talk about politics. We want to talk about football. We bring people together around a TV or a tailgate. Moving forward, you’ll see us talking more about the game and the fan and positioning the NFL as a unifying agent.”

Nick Kelly, who heads U.S. sports marketing for Anheuser-Busch InBev, said that executives at his company liken the NFL’s market position to that of Bud Light. It is still the world’s top-selling beer and available at every retailer that sells beer. However, its market share has been declining for a decade.

“We ask that question internally all the time, and while some NFL measures, including ratings, are down, no other sports property is close,” said Kelly, whose company hosted around 400 wholesaler and retail guests during Super Bowl Week. “It’s still the biggest game in town.”

Super Bowl audience trend

YEAR	SUPER BOWL	NETWORK	RATING	NO. OF VIEWERS (000S)	MATCHUP
2018	LII	NBC	43.1	103,391	Eagles-Patriots
2017	LI	Fox	45.3	111,317	Patriots-Falcons
2016	50	CBS	46.6	111,864	Broncos-Panthers
2015	XLIX	NBC	47.5	114,442	Patriots-Seahawks
2014	XLVIII	Fox	46.7	112,191	Seahawks-Broncos
2013	XLVII	CBS	46.3	108,414	Ravens-49ers
2012	XLVI	NBC	47.0	111,346	Giants-Patriots
2011	XLV	Fox	46.0	111,010	Packers-Steelers
2010	XLIV	CBS	45.0	106,476	Saints-Colts
2009	XLIII	NBC	42.0	98,732	Steelers-Cardinals

Sponsors support NFL's response to recent challenges

By Terry Lefton
Sports Business Journal
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It was an uncomfortable year to be an NFL corporate sponsor.

Just count the ways: The president's anti-NFL tweets, player protests, league sponsor Papa John's blaming unmet sales goals on its league association and Dallas Cowboys owner Jerry Jones feuding with Commissioner Roger Goodell were among the high-profile headlines most partners would want to avoid.

Still, many praised the league for the way it handled a trying situation — especially considering the lack of ownership consensus on the troublesome player protest issue.

"We're one of the most scrutinized [NFL sponsors] because we are so visible," said Nick Kelly, Anheuser-Busch InBev head of U.S. sports marketing, who lauded the league for its constant communication and making executives as senior as the commissioner available to A-B senior management. "It was so much better handled this time around than during the Ray Rice situation. ... There may have been some residual damage to us early, but the feeling always was they were doing everything they could."

Added Hyundai CMO Dean Evans: "NFL fans are still more favorably disposed to our brand and we're still getting store and web traffic based on our NFL association. That didn't change. It always seemed like an untouchable force, but I wouldn't bet that it has peaked, just based on what I know about the people running it."

If there was any stigma for marketers considering the NFL, it seems to have been dispelled. The league announced a new deal with mattress retailer Sleep Number in Minneapolis that was followed last week by a five-year extension with a marketer as conservative as any, Procter & Gamble.

"With everything that's gone on, our [sponsorship] revenues keep going up," noted Renie Anderson, NFL senior vice president of sponsorship and partnership management.

With that in mind, it's already on to the next sales season.

Categories of interest include QSR, where McDonald's ties have lapsed, and where Papa John's has been a league sponsor since 2010, but its position seems less than stable, even with 18 team deals and a league affiliation that was renewed in 2016.

With more than 14,000 U.S. locations, McDonald's is an attractive target for the NFL. But the company already has dropped its longtime Olympic sponsorship. McDonald's also doesn't sync beverage-wise, since it pours Coke — and Pepsi is one of the NFL's biggest sponsors. Some synergy could be found with Buffalo Wild Wings, which pours Pepsi, even if it's not the same scale that a McDonald's or YUM Brands could bring.

The timing category remains an elusive target.

“Our officials wear watches that are specific to the game, so could we have a partner build one that’s even better?” asked Anderson. “Everything about our game is built on time, starting with the draft, where every team is on the clock.”

The league is also trying to sell either a presenting sponsor for the playoffs, or sponsorship for its menu of Thanksgiving Day Games, likely a retailer, which would use it to kick off the holiday shopping season.

Other category targets: gaming console, no longer part of Microsoft’s league package rights; oil and gas; financial services; additional technology partners; and performance eyewear, like an Oakley, a deal that could get interesting if it included on-field exposure rights.

Among the larger renewals are those of Ford and Hyundai; both have a year remaining.

“Are we getting the ROI out of it? Is the NFL what it was four years ago? I understand all the concerns, but the counter argument is that the NFL just towers over everything else in sports. So, we’ll see,” said Hyundai’s Evans.

Can NFL have fresh start after tumultuous season?

By Abraham Madkour
Sports Business Journal
Feb. 13, 2018

The conversations I had in Minneapolis for the Super Bowl focused on three main themes:

Has the NFL's popularity peaked?

What does Fox's "Thursday Night Football" deal mean for the league's media landscape?

Who will be the next ESPN president?

As this is a year in review, let's focus on the NFL.

I'm not selling stock in the NFL; I'm holding. Yes, all week going in to the Super Bowl, a seasonlong narrative reached a crescendo: The NFL's place in American culture is eroding and it will never have its lofty status of years ago. Those were the themes prior to a fabulous game for Super Bowl LII and will continue during the offseason.

The NFL has immense challenges: Player health and safety is a chronic concern; a 20 percent ratings erosion over two years is surprising and significant; player activism has turned off a segment of its fan base; the league's brand has lost public trust; youth participation is at risk; and the on-field product is marred by complicated rules, penalties and pace of play. I have never had so many sports executives or casual fans express their frustration or dismay with the league than I have this year, and the league is clearly losing the PR battle.

The headlines going into the NFL's marquee game further fueled the narrative: Reliable Sources' weekly podcast asked, "Has The NFL Peaked?"; Bloomberg went with "NFL Advertisers Pay Record-Breaking Prices Even As Ratings Drop." The Atlantic had "Why NFL Ratings Are Plummeting: A Two-Part Theory — Televised football has a problem with both form (television) and content (football)." On the Friday before the Super Bowl, The Wall Street Journal stated, "Ahead of Super Bowl, Poll Shows NFL Is Losing Its Core Audience." On the Thursday before the Super Bowl, The New York Times' Mark Leibovich had a 5,900-word piece on, "Where Does The NFL Go After A Season Of Division?" And on Super Bowl Sunday, The New York Times' headline over Joe Drape's column read, "'The American Dilemma': Why Do We Still Watch Football?" Now, that's a tough media narrative.

I'm still a believer in the brand and the game. The sky is not falling, and the league still plays from a significant position of strength. Yes, its decision-making and crisis management should be questioned, and each year a new crisis seems to slow the league's growth and hurt its brand. But every issue the league faces is intensely magnified unlike any other sports property in America.

The bottom line is no other U.S. sports property has such a reach or hold on the American public, and the public reaction to the Eagles' captivating win over the Patriots showed how the sport can dominate the mainstream and social conversation in this country. And while television ratings have seen double-digit drops over the last couple of years, Rupert Murdoch feels so bullish on the brand and the immense value of its programming that he made an aggressive and shocking five-year deal for "Thursday Night Football" as one of the first moves for his "new Fox." That's quite an endorsement.

My colleagues say I'm a spoiled NFL fan because I'm from Vermont and maintain my strong allegiance to the Patriots. It's easy to be a fan when your team has had an 18-year run of excellence, and you weekly watch the best coach/quarterback tandem of all time. I get that. They complain of a boring, unwatchable product — and it's clear the product on the field must be the focus of a league office that for too long focused on reaching \$25 billion in revenue.

The NFL won't return to the viewership numbers of its heyday, but to say the league is on a swift downward spiral and in grave peril strikes me as heavy hyperbole.

In my talks with sources, here are issues that could come up over the offseason or areas the league could focus on:

LEAGUE/TEAM DYNAMIC: The undercurrent in Minneapolis was to expect changes at 345 Park Avenue over the offseason. This shouldn't come as a surprise, as during the debate over the contract extension of NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell, owners expressed concern about the size of the league staff — both in head count and salaries. A number of longtime employees have had the option of taking buyouts and some have, while others, like high-profile communications executive Joe Lockhart, will leave on their own. But this is an issue to watch.

The league has been on the defensive for the past couple of years over various issues, which has fed a notion of an unsettled work environment. That would be unfortunate, because a job at the NFL has long been seen as aspirational and at the pinnacle of sports. While certainly demanding, it still should be a fun, prideful place to work.

Which leads me to Commissioner Goodell, who I found comfortably in command yet consistently close to the vest during Super Bowl week. With a new five-year contract extension in hand, can Goodell somehow pivot to become a more trusted partner with the players and a more engaging face of the league? It's too bad he didn't agree to appear on NBC's Super Bowl coverage, because while he would have faced difficult questions, he has proved he can handle that situation and could have used the massive platform to tout all that the league is doing. I don't understand why he wouldn't do that with a network partner on the game's biggest day of the year. Also, when he is relaxed and comfortable, his personality comes through and it's a side fans, partners, media and players should see more of.

GET PAST THE POLITICS: All of the team executives I spoke with sang from the same hymn sheet. "We have to get the anthem issue behind us." That's paramount to the league putting its difficult 2017 behind.

I disagree with the notion supported by many that the anthem protest didn't hurt interest in the league or its bottom line. It did. I have countless stories of fans who turned away from the league because of the anthem issue and players protesting. I know it had a negative impact on the shield, and surveys during the season showed how the NFL had become one of the more divisive brands in American culture. Who would have believed that?

This issue has to be a priority, and with no players kneeling at the Super Bowl, it seems as if the league and players can move on. But if that story line continues to creep into next season — from the Colin Kaepernick lawsuit to what happens if outspoken free-agent Eric Reid doesn't get a contract offer or if the U.S. president continues to make it a point of emphasis — all bets are off on the league's return to normalcy.

BE COOL: The league is in the unenviable position of trying to market its product to everyone — looking to be relevant to its entire fan base. It's understandable, but the marketing partners I talked to all hope the league focuses its marketing, especially on the next generation of fans. There is understandable concern of a graying fan base, so the league must work with its youth-specific partners — EA Sports, Nike, Xbox and Bose come to mind — to be more progressive in product diversification and segmented marketing.

Conversations over Super Bowl week were dominated by what EA and the league could do to tap into the esports and gaming community, and transfer the equity of that youthful demographic into other areas of their team business. Team executives differed if they support hosting live esports events on site, as one told me, "The last thing we should do is plan another event like a draft party around esports." But using team IP digitally or through Twitch to target a younger generation is high on their wish list. It's a new space and they admit they don't have the answers on next steps or execution.

In another example to target youth, the jersey culture is clearly back and is a statement of social cool — look at the value the NBA and Nike have generated from its "City Edition" uniform selection, which have become a hip product segment, and one the NFL could replicate.

One final point: I can't tell you how much the name Odell Beckham Jr. was brought up from people looking to connect with the young demo — he has real street cred in reaching today's youth -- so the NFL hit a home run by featuring Beckham with Eli Manning on its much-praised "Dirty Dancing" ad on Super Bowl Sunday.

WHAT ELSE WAS HEARD: Ticket sales was brought up by nearly every team executive as a vital area of emphasis and focus, with many hoping the league's new deal with Ticketmaster and StubHub providing a more open platform helps drive sales. Executives will continue to seek more information and assistance from the league office on best practices and fan identity. ... A number of partners I talked to stressed the NFL needs more "stars" and "more healthy" stars — and point to the NBA's current dynamic state. "There you have LeBron, Durant, Steph, Harden, Westbrook, all going at each other and all engaging with each other on social media — good and bad — and it just drives the interest," one said. I see the point, but I still feel the NFL has a massive amount of star power: Brady, Russell Wilson, OBJ, Aaron Rodgers, Cam Newton, Zeke and Zak, among others. They may not be actively engaging each other as the NBA stars do, but there are still some great stories to tell here. ... Not surprisingly, the sale of the Carolina Panthers was also a part of every conversation. More talk of price than of potential bidders, with speculation ranging from \$2.3 billion to the wildly optimistic \$3 billion. The sale comes at a very interesting time considering the state of the league, so it's a story you'll want to watch closely.

Five players, including Case Keenum, who should be given transition or franchise tags

By Jason La Canfora

CBSSports.com

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The franchise tag, once again, will be sparsely used in 2018. As the salary cap continues to grow in wider percentages and teams pump more of that money into extending their own top talent off of team-friendly rookie contracts, fewer blue-chip players are hitting the open market.

NFL free agency is fool's gold, and the word is out. So more teams are being proactive about securing their best talent before they play out their fifth-year options (in the case of first rounders) and therefore the tag isn't required nearly as often as in years past. The numbers have been down for several years and when the tagging period begins Feb. 20 – it's right around the corner! – I suspect we see perhaps less than a half-dozen clubs actually utilize it.

Most teams have no reason to even consider it, as the quality of their free agents – or lack thereof – makes it a no brainer not to apply a franchise tag. I do believe, however, that the transition tag could become a little more in vogue this offseason. The reality for this class is many of the players who teams will hotly debate tagging have either significant injury concerns (Ziggy Ansah and Sammy Watkins come to mind) and/or some big red flags off the field (Sheldon Richardson). That's where the rubber is hitting the road for these big-money decisions, as by and large clean best-of-breed players are reaching this point in their careers without having already secured a second contract.

So before I get into the handful of players I would place a tag on, let me address a few high-profile situations where I would let the market speak. Jarvis Landy is a very productive slot receiver who excels at yards after the catch. That he can make something out of nothing is a valuable weapon, for sure, but no way in hell am I placing a tag on him worth \$16 million-plus. For a true outside, No. 1 receiver with ideal height and speed? Sure. But not here. Look at how many dynamic, uber-productive slot guys the Patriots have run their offense through for years (Wes Welker, Julian Edelman, Danny Amendola) without ever having to pay anything close to that kind of money. This is too steep for my blood.

And Watkins, to me, is an \$8-\$10 million receiver, maybe, but not close to this number. His foot has to remain a significant concern, as it has long hampered him. He is someone a Bills team sorely lacking skill guys eagerly traded away. Head coach Sean McVay's potent scheme can get guys open, and with a massive Aaron Donald extension a need, and the Rams trying to find a way to keep corner Trumaine Johnson after tagging him twice (yeah, that happened), well, this is a luxury they best not try to afford. Had Watkins had a monster year with McVay and Jared Goff last year, perhaps I'd consider more, but 39 catches for 593 yards and eight TDs isn't doing it for me. McVay can find an outside receiver in the draft.

Also, if I am the Carolina Panthers, I am trying like heck to tag guard Andrew Norwell, but I am not sure in the end they'll pull the trigger. They are already paying Trai Turner big money at guard, the offensive-line tag – \$14 million-plus regardless of position (center/guard/tackle) – is super steep, and paying two top guards is next to impossible (see: Ravens signing Marshal Yanda then losing Kalechi Osemele to free agency). Ideally, I am tagging him to try to sign him long-term this summer – Cam Newton needs all the help he can get up front – but they have other needs, too.

As to which players I would tag:

Vikings: Case Keenum, QB (transition)

This is the quintessential use of a transition tag. Keenum is an anomaly, having a breakout season so late in his career. And he just lost his offensive coordinator/play caller, and the Vikings have no QB under contract who has thrown an NFL pass. No way I am getting to March 6 without still being tethered to an NFL passer, and no way am I considering Minnesota's other options (Sam Bradford and Teddy Bridgewater) for the spot. Save a few million bucks with the lower transition tag and rent Keenum for another year at \$21 million (a touch more than what guys like Brock Osweiler and Mike Glennon earned last season) and see if the market speaks. Give Keenum, after such a career year, the chance to talk to other teams and see what else is out there; if someone offers something nuts, he walks. And if they don't, it may help facilitate a 2-3 year bridge contract by July 15 that offers some stability. It's too risky, to me, to wait til mid March and enter the Kirk Cousins sweepstakes – and with this defense and potential run game, a \$30M quarterback might not be what Mike Zimmer needs, anyway.

Steelers: Le'Veon Bell, RB (franchise)

Total no brainer. Pittsburgh's long-term offer from last summer already included more money in the first two years of the deal than what it would cost the team to tag him in 2017 and 2018. Running backs tend to get hurt, mileage accrues quickly and Bell has faced suspensions for off-field behavior before, too. I'm not giving him \$17 million a year on a long-term deal and no way in hell I am letting him hit the open market, either. Maybe his price tag comes down a little by July 15 this year and we can work out a longer deal. Maybe we get creative by then and try to work a three-year pact with him. But the tag has always been coming and it will be applied barring the sides working out an extension in the next few weeks.

Cowboys: Demarcus Lawrence, DE (franchise)

Young, potentially dominant pass rushers coming off impact years get tagged. Period. You have to do it. Dolphins should've kept Olivier Vernon, but that is the exception to the rule, with young, blossoming pass rushers like Melvin Ingram getting tagged recently, and even older ends like Jason Pierre-Paul, too. The Cowboys have holes on that defense already. Yes, Lawrence has had injury issues and suspension issues – which complicates a long-term deal – but for a team that believes it is in win-now mode (I'm not personally totally convinced), you have to pay this man his \$17.5 million in 2018 to keep him off the open market. That's what a 14.5 sack-season in your walk year does for you. Jerry Jones has a way of wearing guys down over time and getting his deal at his price. Oh, and yeah, Dallas only has about \$18 million in cap space, but I'll cut Dez Bryant to create ample room to carry Lawrence all season at \$17.5 million against the cap if I have to.

Lions: Ziggy Ansah, DE (franchise)

The injury issues have been acute. And lingering. He hasn't been right in a couple of years. I get all of that ... But he has flashed as an elite pass rusher and true difference maker in the past. And having just hired a rookie head coach in Matt Patricia who doesn't have too many blue-chip guys on his side of the ball, I'm not letting Ansah leave the building. I'll eat the \$17.5 million against my cap if I have to. I don't take the chance on a transition tag. I am hoping there is a multi-year deal out there for us this summer, but at this stage for this franchise, I can't let a player with this sort of upside leave at a critical position when I have nearly \$50 million in cap space.

Seahawks: Sheldon Richardson, DT (franchise)

Seattle gave up a decent haul to land him, to say the least. I want to do more than just rent him for one season – a season in which my team missed the playoffs, to boot. I'm shedding Kam Chancellor and Richard Sherman and Cliff Avril and some older players on defense, and I am keeping Richardson, at age 27, for at least one more year. He can be too much of an impact player – able to push the pocket inside or outside – to let him leave now. I would flirt with transitioning him at \$11.7 million, but with his talent (and yeah, he has major warts off field and I have trepidation about a long-term deal) spend the other few million and get to \$14.5 million to keep him. They'll have enough space once the purge begins and this kid in their scheme could be dominant. I have to keep someone over there.

Broncos could end up losing Emmanuel Sanders, Demaryius Thomas this offseason

By Will Brinson
CBSSports.com
Feb. 13, 2018

The Denver Broncos are heading into a pretty pivotal offseason under John Elway. Despite winning the Super Bowl just three years ago, the Broncos are a team in transition. We don't know who their quarterback is: prominent scuttlebutt indicates Elway will be interested in Kirk Cousins or perhaps Case Keenum despite investing a first-round pick in Paxton Lynch in the last few years.

And the receivers, a strength of the offense, might not be around for long either. An offseason preview of the roster and salary-cap space by Nicki Jhabvala of the Denver Post makes it clear there could be plenty of transition at the skill positions for Denver this offseason too.

Specifically, with Emmanuel Sanders, the Broncos "could look to put him on the trading block," Jhabvala reports. Asked about Sanders and Demaryius Thomas this offseason, Elway was typically cryptic.

"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.

Sanders inked a contract extension with the Broncos in 2016 that now has two years left on it. He has a \$10.9 million cap hit in 2018 and a \$12.9 million cap hit in 2019.

We discussed this on the Pick Six Podcast during Monday's episode, but it doesn't feel like the Broncos are going to get some huge haul for Sanders, who will be 31 during the upcoming season. If they're capable of pulling in a fourth-round pick, that's a pretty nice little exchange.

It would also significantly weaken the Broncos' receiving corps, as would the decision not to retain Thomas. Thomas has a \$1 million option in his deal, per Jhabvala, that would trigger the final two years of his contract. Those two years have cap hits of \$12 million and \$17.5 million, whereas passing on the option would result in only a \$3.5 million dead-money hit in 2018.

Calling the decision to pass on Thomas' option obvious wouldn't be fair, but freeing up \$8.5 million in cap space would be a positive, even if Thomas has quietly been one of the most consistently productive receivers in the NFL over the last half decade or more.

Long story short: the Broncos could end up losing both Sanders and Thomas this offseason.

Considering that just a few years ago Denver was shattering offensive records with Peyton Manning under center and Thomas, Sanders, Julius Thomas and Wes Welker helping to dominate opposing secondaries, it would be pretty stunning to see the 2018 Broncos featuring none of those guys.

Windows are short in the NFL and players age just like normal humans, but the reality of the situation in Denver could set in very quickly this offseason as those guys and other players (cornerback Aqib Talib) end up being shipped out of town.

The NFL's top 10 offseason priorities: Catch rule, concussions, anthem, more

By Kevin Seifert

ESPN.com

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The games are over. The Eagles have paraded through Philadelphia. Quarterback movement already has begun.

The NFL is in full offseason mode, a time that can challenge the most dramatic parts of the regular season for news and pace. While teams prepare for roster overhauls of varying degrees, let's check in on what big-picture things league executives will -- and/or should -- be paying attention to over the next six months leading into 2018 training camps.

Enhance concussion policy

This must be an annual task for the NFL as technology improves and scrutiny increases. There is no more existential threat to the league than brain health.

Reported concussions rose to their highest total (281) since the NFL began releasing data in 2012. Most of the rise was attributed to a spike during training camp practices. League executives, led by chief medical officer Dr. Allen Sills and executive vice president of health and safety initiatives Jeffrey Miller, will individually advise teams on strategies to lower that training camp number.

The league already made material policy changes to its game-day protocol in late December, adding a third independent neurologist to the stadium site and a fourth watching from a centralized position in New York City. The league said it conducted more than 600 concussion tests during preseason and regular-season games. But after three high-profile reviews, and several noteworthy instances of players diagnosed after the end of games, the league probably will consider other adjustments as well. Among them: Should players who pass an initial concussion test be subject to a waiting period to guard against delayed onset?

Unify the anthem experience

The league needs an unambiguous policy for all team personnel during the national anthem, as the current guidelines only say players "should" stand. It's not mandatory, and a protest carries no required discipline.

A new approach could take one of three forms: (A) The NFL could voice a clear support for players making social and political statements during the anthem; (B) it could expressly prohibit all anthem demonstrations and require a strict stand-at-attention; or (C) it could scrap the platform altogether and keep teams in the locker room until after the anthem is played.

Some owners were angry that commissioner Roger Goodell didn't squash the 2017 protests, but many were upset that the league was caught flat-footed a year after Colin Kaepernick began the initial movement. Owners want the uncertainty resolved, one way or another. And the third option is probably the most painless.

Don't make catch rule worse

Goodell's repeated comments on the catch rule make it clear he has made it an offseason priority. That's the easy part. Who doesn't want to eliminate the mind-numbing analysis of whether a receiver gained and maintained control "throughout the process of the catch"? Goodell wants to rewrite the rule from scratch, but smart people who have spent years studying it have encountered new -- and perhaps equally exasperating -- consequences in every proposal.

Would some incompletions turn into fumbles? Would officials struggle to judge possession without the "bright line" of the current rule? Calls to return to what the NFL "used to do" ignore the fundamental change prompted by HD television and replay technology. An HD view of a 1980s game would reveal more (previously unnoticed) shaky catch calls than fans realize. The current rule leads to a handful of head-scratchers in return for a vast majority of clarity. A perfect change -- one that purges controversy while preserving simplicity -- might not exist. The NFL could be left to decide whether to exchange one set of shortcomings for another. Breaking even might be the best it can do.

Re-standardize replay

Inconsistency in replay was one of the NFL's biggest stories last season, the result of an unexpected transition at the top of the officiating department just as replay decisions were centralized in the league office. It took a while before new senior vice president of officiating Al Riveron, and replay vice president Russell Yurk, found their way to the NFL's "clear and obvious" standard for reversals.

Replay is good for the NFL when used in the appropriate context -- i.e., correcting obvious mistakes -- but will ultimately be drummed out if it's used to re-officiate close plays on a frame-by-frame basis. The decision to uphold a touchdown by Philadelphia Eagles tailback Corey Clement in the Super Bowl, on a play in which the ball moved as he tried to get his feet in bounds, suggested Riveron and Yurk are in a better place. But earlier discrepancies must be ironed out permanently over the offseason.

Get the (ownership) house in order

It was only three months ago that the NFL's most powerful owner was openly pressuring his partners to reject Goodell's contract extension. In the process, the Dallas Cowboys' Jerry Jones revealed he harbors some of the same criticisms Goodell has absorbed from outside the league. The league has survived ownership discord throughout its history, and this episode will prove no different. But some of Jones' complaints -- inefficient staffing in the league office, a failure of proactive leadership and ineffective crisis management -- have registered.

Some within the league expect structural changes, and it's worth noting that there already have been a handful of departures from the league office via buyouts and resignations. Goodell isn't going anywhere. Neither is Jones. But the seeds of their clash will cascade through the offseason.

Smooth (and lucrative) transition for the Panthers

The Carolina Panthers are for sale -- a long-anticipated decision that was accelerated by allegations of workplace misconduct by owner Jerry Richardson.

The looming transaction comes at a fascinating time for the NFL. To this point, evidence of rising revenues has muted narratives about diminishing interest in the game and league. (Most recently, owners coaxed a \$660 million annual expenditure from Fox to broadcast Thursday Night Football.) The Panthers are likely to be sold for a record price, eclipsing the \$1.4 billion Terry and Kim Pegula paid for the Buffalo Bills in 2014. Many around the league will be watching. Nearly half of its primary owners are

older than 70. Seven are at least 80, including Richardson. Some owners plan to pass a franchise to their heirs, but others could be motivated to sell based on the Panthers' price.

Assess roots of viewer/audience data

NFL broadcast ratings fell 9.7 percent in the regular season, just a year after falling 8 percent. The audience for a dramatic Super Bowl, one played by two large-market teams, was the smallest in nine years. There was no presidential election to blame for luring viewers in 2017. Already, the NFL has attempted to accelerate the pace of game to produce a crisper broadcast.

Meanwhile, a recent Wall Street Journal/NBC News poll suggested fan deterioration among important demographics. Those numbers could be overlaid with a drop in high school football participation -- 4.5 percent since 2010, according to the National Federation of High School Sports -- to form an existential trend. In other words, the decline in key data points can't be considered a blip.

It's true the NFL remains television's ratings leader, but its dominance is of a shrinking pie. If they haven't already, owners must make a frank assessment of not just their product, but why its consumption trends have slowed.

Turbocharge global presence

The upside of domestic stagnation is that about 95 percent of the world's population lives beyond United States borders. There are plenty of new customers available. In the past decade, the NFL has taken moderate steps to establish a foothold in the United Kingdom and, more recently, in Mexico.

The gaping hole, however, is Asia -- particularly, China. The NFL has mused vaguely about playing a regular-season game there, but nothing is imminent. One path is to encourage more players to make offseason visits, as Tom Brady and Russell Wilson did in 2017, to promote the game (and their brands) abroad. That's how the NBA expanded its popularity across Asia over the past two decades, starting with Kobe Bryant's first trip in 1998. Whether the NFL is actually facing an existential crisis, its global outreach has never seemed more important.

Consider a targeting rule

NFL executive vice president Troy Vincent went on record in December saying "we have to consider" a targeting rule, in response to a particularly violent game between the Pittsburgh Steelers and Cincinnati Bengals in Week 13. In essence, the rule would call for a mandatory ejection of a player who hits a defenseless receiver in the head or neck area. At the college level, an instance occurring in the second half of a game mandates suspension for the first half of the following contest. The rule has had mixed success for the NCAA, and to be fair, the primary function of the rule might be to assert a commitment to minimizing dangerous plays.

But in the NFL, it also would clarify and elevate the consequences for players, who are subject to ejection by rarely used official discretion but usually are penalized 15 yards. If anything, the league's concussion protocol could have increased incentive to take head shots, because of the greater chance that it would knock a player out for the game at minimal cost to the opposition. But it wouldn't work if not subject to replay; current rules do not make hits to the head reviewable. And the prospects of additional ejections would have to be weighed in the context of a 2017 season that produced 18 disqualifications for various other reasons, believed to be an NFL record. At the very least, targeting will be the subject of intense debate this winter and spring.

Rethink Rooney Rule

The Oakland Raiders' virtual snub of the rule brings an old question into new light: How militant does the NFL want to be on imposing a genuinely diverse search process for its teams? Raiders owner Mark Davis, by his own admission, had been honed in on hiring on Jon Gruden for years. That made two minority candidates a backup plan at best, and a prop at worst. Were their interview experiences alone, cursory as they were, enough to say that the Rooney Rule had served a purpose? Will the NFL ever be able to prevent similar situations? Should it? In scenarios in which owners have pre-chosen candidates -- yes, it happens and will continue to -- is there a way to further the cause of diversity without forcing meaningless interviews? These are questions that at least some in the NFL will address this offseason.

Where injured NFL stars' rehabs stand, and their outlook for Week 1

By Staff

ESPN.com

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The NFL seasons of many teams -- both real and, in some cases, fantasy -- were derailed by major injuries to star players in 2017. But those players are on the mend this offseason with a lot riding on their recovery.

NFL Nation reporters update the status of many star players working their way back from injury and provide some insight on their chances for being ready for Week 1.

Cliff Avril, DE, Seahawks

Injury: Suffered a neck/spine injury in October.

Where he stands: As with Kam Chancellor, the question isn't whether Avril will be ready by Week 1 but whether he'll ever play football again. Avril said in a recent radio interview that he plans to reassess his situation in the spring, at which point he'll be about six months removed from surgery. Avril was considered a potential salary-cap casualty before his injury. So even if he does decide to continue playing and is medically cleared to do so, the Seahawks may release him and thereby save as much as \$6.5 million against the 2018 cap. -- Brady Henderson

Odell Beckham Jr., WR, Giants

Injury: Fractured left ankle in Week 5.

Where he stands: Beckham is in Los Angeles working out with his trainer Jamal Liggin again this offseason. He recently told reporters he's doing well and fully expects to be ready for the start of the season. His concentration is on Week 1, not OTAs or the offseason program. -- Jordan Raanan

Eric Berry, S, Chiefs

Injury: Tore Achilles tendon in September.

Where he stands: Berry's injury happened in the season opener so he should have little trouble returning by the start of next season. The Chiefs lost linebacker Derrick Johnson and defensive end Mike DeVito with similar injuries in the season opener in 2014 and both were in the starting lineup when the 2015 season started. Berry's agent, Chad Speck, posted a video on Friday of the Pro Bowl safety working out and wrote, "That achilles is looking good. He will be back better than ever." -- Adam Teicher

Kam Chancellor, SS, Seahawks

Injury: Suffered a neck/spine injury in November.

Where he stands: Coach Pete Carroll said at season's end that Chancellor and Avril "are going to have a hard time playing football again" because of their neck injuries, though he later walked that comment back a bit and said that their futures are uncertain. Chancellor didn't have surgery. The team has been vague about his injury, and Chancellor himself hasn't publicly commented on his situation, making it difficult to further assess his long-term outlook. Chancellor posted a cryptic Instagram photo that could have been interpreted as a hint at retirement, but that doesn't seem likely anytime soon for reasons explained here. -- Henderson

Jack Conklin, RT, Titans

Injury: Had surgery two weeks ago to repair a torn left ACL.

Where he stands: Conklin, who was voted to the AP All-Pro team as a rookie in 2016, is facing a tight recovery to be back by Week 1 of the regular season. He's expected to begin training camp on the PUP list, and the Titans may need a solid backup option to step in for Conklin in September. The curveball to his recovery is the Titans are expected to transition to a zone-blocking scheme, which will require more movement and different blocking disciplines under a new coaching staff. -- Cameron Wolfe

Dalvin Cook, RB, Vikings

Injury: Tore his ACL in October.

Where he stands: General manager Rick Spielman said the Vikings have no reason to believe that Cook "won't be stronger than he was before the injury" when he makes his expected return in time for training camp. The Vikings' top running back returned to jogging in January and is on pace to be ready for the 2018 season. But with the possible departure of Jerick McKinnon in free agency, Minnesota will need to find a No. 3 rusher in case Cook isn't 100 percent by Week 1 and Latavius Murray has to shoulder that load. Spielman likened Cook's rehabilitation to that of Adrian Peterson's when the former Vikings running back returned from the torn ACL he sustained in 2011 and rushed for 2,097 yards the following season. "We don't see any reason where he's not going to be where Adrian Peterson was when he came off his knee [injury]," Spielman said. -- Courtney Cronin

Nick Easton, LG, Vikings

Injury: Fractured his right ankle in December.

Where he stands: Easton is still utilizing a scooter to get around after undergoing surgery to repair his broken ankle. He told ESPN during Super Bowl week that he anticipates being able to participate in some capacity during the Vikings' offseason workouts and is undergoing intensive rehab so he'll be ready in time for training camp at the end of July. Easton's fracture was the first season-ending injury he has had in the NFL. He'll become a restricted free agent in a couple of weeks but is expected to re-sign with Minnesota. -- Cronin

Julian Edelman, WR, Patriots

Injury: Tore his ACL in August.

Where he stands: Edelman appears to be making solid progress. In the week after the AFC Championship Game, he showed that progress when working out in the team's indoor practice facility. He then attended the Super Bowl and indicated that everything was on a positive course. While Edelman could be brought along with a cautious approach in offseason camps and maybe into training camp, there is little reason to think he wouldn't be ready for the start of the 2018 season. -- Mike Reiss

Tyler Eifert, TE, Bengals

Injury: Had micro-disk surgery on his back in October.

Where he stands: Eifert made it back for training camp after undergoing a different procedure on his back at the end of the 2016 season. There's no timetable for his return this time around, but Eifert said the doctors feel he will make a full recovery. However, Eifert is set to become an unrestricted free agent, and that could cloud his future in Cincinnati. -- Katherine Terrell

Pat Elflein, C, Vikings

Injury: Fractured his left ankle in NFC Championship Game.

Where he stands: Elflein underwent successful surgery on his left ankle the Monday of Super Bowl week. It's still too early to tell what (if any) work he'll be able to do with the Vikings this spring, but he's expected to be on schedule to return at the start of training camp. -- Cronin

Dont'a Hightower, LB, Patriots

Injury: Tore his pectoral muscle in October.

Where he stands: There haven't appeared to be any setbacks in Hightower's recovery, but that doesn't mean the Patriots won't adopt a cautious approach to have him ready for the 2018 season. Given some of the wear and tear that Hightower has endured, it wouldn't be a surprise if there is a "less is more" approach adopted with him, but the target of having him ready for the 2018 regular season is realistic. -- Reiss

Malik Hooker, S, Colts

Injury: Torn ACL in Week 7.

Where he stands: As with Andrew Luck, the Colts are not putting a timetable on Hooker's return. The Colts' 2017 first-round pick has been off crutches for several months and is continuing to go through the rehabilitation process. -- Mike Wells

David Johnson, RB, Cardinals

Injury: Fractured his left wrist in Week 1.

Where he stands: All signs point to Johnson being completely healed and ready to go for Week 1. He was out of a cast by the end of last season, but he said multiple times last season that the only thing

holding him back was movement and flexibility in his wrist. Photos on various social media platforms show he looks to be fully functional and ready to play Week 1. -- Josh Weinfuss

Kyle Long, RG, Bears

Injury: Coming off ankle surgery in 2016, Long played last year with a torn labrum in his shoulder and a finger injury, until he underwent neck surgery in December that ended his season. Long also recently underwent a procedure to repair the torn labrum that he originally suffered in the 2016 preseason.

Where he stands: There is no official timetable for Long's return, but Bears general manager Ryan Pace said last month that he was confident Long's health was headed in the right direction. Long downplayed the severity of all of his injuries during a recent appearance on ESPN 1000. Long could still be ready by the start of the regular season. -- Jeff Dickerson

Andrew Luck, QB, Colts

Injury: Right shoulder surgery in January 2017.

Where he stands: GM Chris Ballard, while optimistic, has maintained his stance that there's no timetable on Luck's return. He has not thrown a football since the middle of October. He spent six weeks in the Netherlands rehabbing his shoulder in November and December. What's key at this point for Luck, who said he expects to take part in the team's offseason workouts in April, is that a second surgery is not needed on his shoulder. The quarterback, who missed all of the 2017 season, is working with a throwing expert in California. -- Wells

Jason Peters, LT, Eagles

Injury: Tore his ACL and MCL in October.

Where he stands: Peters is moving around well. One player leading up to the Super Bowl said he saw Peters working out and that he looked like he was ready to play in the game. He should be good for the start of next season, and coach Doug Pederson has already made him the favorite to be his left tackle in 2018. -- Tim McManus

Adrian Peterson, RB, Cardinals

Injury: Suffered a neck injury in late November.

Where he stands: There hasn't been an update on the condition of his neck, but Peterson said in December that he needed rest to fully recover and that's what he has been getting. While he may be healthy for Week 1, it's unsure who he'll be playing for since it's possible the Cardinals may release him before the start of free agency. -- Weinfuss

Allen Robinson, WR, Jaguars

Injury: Tore his left ACL in Week 1.

Where he stands: Robinson is on pace to be able to play in the 2018 season opener. He began running with his full weight earlier this month and has been working with weights to strengthen the muscles above and below his knee since the end of last season. The biggest question right now is about Robinson's contract. His rookie deal expires March 14, so the Jaguars have to either sign him to a new contract or use the franchise tag on him (first day that can happen is Feb. 20). -- Michael DiRocco

Richard Sherman, CB, Seahawks

Injury: Ruptured his Achilles in November.

Where he stands: Sherman's prospects of returning for Week 1 appear strong based on his comments and the typical recovery period for his injury. He is out of the walking boot and off the knee scooter he was still using at season's end, and he told ESPN.com recently that he expects to resume running in mid-April or early May. He's also having a minor cleanup procedure to remove bone spurs from the same part of his other foot, which has to wait until his surgically repaired Achilles is sufficiently healed. "I could probably be fully ready to go in minicamp, but they won't let me do anything," he said. "So I'll probably have to be out there running and training ... but they won't let me practice until training camp." -- Henderson

Ryan Tannehill, QB, Dolphins

Injury: Tore the ACL in his left knee.

Where he stands: After surgery in late August, Tannehill attended practices and meetings while working through his rehabilitation program. He was throwing 40-yard passes pregame in December. Dolphins coach Adam Gase said Tannehill will be the starter in 2018, barring any setbacks.

Joe Thomas, LT, Browns

Injury: Tore his triceps tendon in October.

Where he stands: Thomas said his rehab is going well and is the "easiest" rehab he has had because it basically consists of lifting weights, something he'd be doing anyway. Thomas is on track and should be ready for the 2018 season opener -- if he's playing. Thomas continues to ponder if he will return for his 12th season or retire. -- Pat McManamon

Jason Verrett, CB, Chargers

Injury: Suffered left knee injury in September

Where he stands: Chargers GM Tom Telesco said Verrett has started running and should be healthy enough to participate in the team's offseason program when it begins in the spring. Verrett reinjured the same knee he had ACL reconstructive surgery on in October 2016. However, Telesco said that Verrett did not tear his ACL again. Verrett said his knee feels much better after the second surgery and he's hopeful to return to his Pro Bowl level as a player. -- Eric Williams

Deshaun Watson, QB, Texans

Injury: Tore his right ACL in November.

Where he stands: Watson is ahead of schedule in his rehab, according to coach Bill O'Brien, and on Feb. 5 ran for the first time since his November surgery. The quarterback was initially given a timeline of eight to nine months before he could be back on the field, which would have put him back by training camp. Now, Watson has the chance to participate in some capacity during the Texans' OTAs, which go from mid-April to mid-June. Even though he will not be 100 percent healthy by then, that will give him plenty of time to be ready for Week 1. -- Sarah Barshop

J.J. Watt, DE, Texans

Injury: Broke his left leg in Week 5.

Where he stands: In mid-January, Watt ran for the first time since his October surgery and is still on schedule to be back on the field by training camp. There's a chance the three-time Defensive Player of the Year could be on the field during OTAs, but the Texans won't push him to be back by then, as they want to give their star defensive end as much time as he needs to heal. -- Barshop

Carson Wentz, QB, Eagles

Injury: Tore his left ACL and LCL in December.

Where he stands: Wentz has ditched the cane and is walking under his own power but was still wearing a brace at last check. Wentz intends to be ready for Week 1. Whether he's able to fulfill that goal depends on how rehab goes from here on. It could be close. -- McManus

Marshal Yanda, RG, Ravens

Injury: Fractured left ankle in September.

Where he stands: Yanda, one of the toughest players in Ravens history, will be ready for the start of the 2018 season. He was walking around the locker room without any limp by the end of the season, when he was still rehabbing the injury at the Ravens' facility. "I won't do anything with Marshal until training camp, probably," coach John Harbaugh said a day after Baltimore's season ended. "But Marshal will be ready long before that, and he's already moving and doing some things." -- Jamison Hensley

Eagles, Redskins, Seahawks head NFL's best pass-rushing units

By Matt Harmon

NFL.com

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To win in the NFL, you have to not only carry an efficient passing game, but you must be able to stop the opposing team's aerial attack, as well. That effort starts up front. Many of the best defenses in modern NFL history were constructed on the foundation of a strong pass rush -- and the 2017 season was no exception, with a number of the elite stop units in the league boasting a relentless group of defensive linemen.

Here we will use the unique Next Gen Stats tracking data provided by the microchips in every player's shoulder pads to measure the best pass-rushing teams from the 2017 regular season. Overall sack totals are one way to measure a pass rush's effectiveness, but these often paint an incomplete picture of just how much a defense disrupts opposing passing games. Tracking pressures can help reveal the true productivity of a defensive front. These rankings were compiled using total pressures recorded by each team this past season.

NOTE: Next Gen Stats defines a "pressure" as a pass-rushing play in which a defender gets within 2 yards of the opposing quarterback at the time of the throw or sack. Other outlets collect pressures using different methods, and these have value. What is and is not a pressure will always carry some level of debate, but NGS provides us a unique advantage in that the numbers rely not on the subjective eye test, but rather on objective results that are consistent across all plays.

RANK 1 EAGLES

Total pressures: 291.

Top pass rusher: Brandon Graham (47 pressures).

The Eagles won the Super Bowl despite the loss of their MVP-caliber quarterback thanks in large part to a relentless pass rush. Outrageous depth was the theme of their front seven, as Philadelphia was the only team in the NFL with six defenders who recorded 20-plus pressures. Being able to cycle players like veteran Chris Long and rookie first-rounder Derek Barnett into the edge rotation with established starters Graham and Vinny Curry proved to be a massive trump card. Fletcher Cox (45 pressures) was one of the best interior disruptors this side of Aaron Donald. The 2017 Eagles were a prime case study in pressure being a far better measurement for pass-rush production than just raw sacks.

RANK 2 REDSKINS

Total pressures: 269.

Top pass rusher: Ryan Kerrigan (51 pressures).

Washington was one of 12 teams to clear 40 sacks on the season. The Redskins' underrated front seven offers a bevy of players who can get after the quarterback on a consistent basis, with Kerrigan leading the way. Third-year pass rusher Preston Smith is one of the more underrated young defenders in the league. He led all players with 200 or more pass-rush attempts in pressure rate, recording a pressure on

15.9 percent of his rushes. His sack totals (eight in 2017) simply don't do his play justice. Washington had three players finish inside the top 12 in pressure rate in 2017, with impending free agent Junior Galette joining Kerrigan and Smith. The team also has another young potential star on its hands in 2017 first-round pick Jonathan Allen. The rookie went down early with a Lisfranc injury, but he looked like the next great interior disruptor, with 16 pressures in just five games.

RANK 3 SEAHAWKS

Total pressures: 261.

Top pass rusher: Michael Bennett (59 pressures).

Injuries began to pluck well-known faces from the Seattle defense as the season wore on. However, the unit still boasted one of the top pass rushes in the NFL. Bennett was once again a force, finishing tied for sixth in the NFL with 59 pressures. Third-year defensive end Frank Clark ranked second on the team behind Bennett with 42 pressures -- and he has 19 sacks over the last two seasons combined. The Seahawks will face several decisions this offseason on players who have long been a part of their core. If there is turnover, watch for Dion Jordan as a sleeper, should the team renew his contract. Pete Carroll raved about Jordan in his postseason press conference -- the reclamation project recorded a pressure on 15.8 percent of his pass-rush attempts in 2017.

RANK 4 RAMS

Total pressures: 260.

Top pass rusher: Aaron Donald (65 pressures).

While the Rams' top-ranked scoring offense stole the headlines during the team's epic turnaround, their ferocious pass rush was just as big a factor in the team's playoff berth. Led by Defensive Player of the Year winner Aaron Donald, Los Angeles racked up 260 pressures during the 2017 regular season. Donald bullied through offensive linemen all season, posting 65 pressures. He trailed only Chandler Jones (66) for the league lead in pressures, despite playing two fewer games than the Cardinals edge rusher. Elsewhere in the front seven, Robert Quinn enjoyed a bounce-back campaign after two injury-plagued seasons. Quinn posted pressures on 14.2 percent of his pass-rush plays. Expect the Rams to hand over a MASSIVE contract to Donald this offseason.

RANK 5 JAGUARS

Total pressures: 248.

Top pass rusher: Yannick Ngakoue (60 pressures).

The Jaguars' formidable secondary was paired with one of the most dangerous front lines in the league. Free-agent addition Calais Campbell proved to be a dominant force for Jacksonville. Campbell's versatility was notable, as he totaled 28 pressures as an edge rusher and another 27 when lined up on the inside. Ngakoue fully broke out in his second NFL season, finishing the year with 60 pressures, fifth-most in the NFL. While Campbell and Ngakoue combined for 46 percent of the team's pressures, Jacksonville also got an excellent season out of 2016 free-agent addition Malik Jackson (41 pressures). Even former top-three pick Dante Fowler finally showed signs of life with 32 pressures in a part-time role. The Jags will likely return this entire group next season in an effort to once again dominate the league defensively.

RANK 6 PANTHERS

Total pressures: 246.

Top pass rusher: Kawann Short (47 pressures).

Under former general manager Dave Gettleman's watch, the Panthers prioritized adding waves of options to their defensive line. The prized possession remains defensive tackle Kawann Short. His 47 pressures trailed only Aaron Donald and Geno Atkins among interior defensive linemen. Mario Addison earned the contract extension he got following a breakout 2016 campaign. The former sub-package rusher finished second on the team in pressures with 46 while starting all 16 games. Carolina's reunion with Julius Peppers proved to be a wild success, as the future Hall of Famer totaled 30 pressures at 37 years old. Expect some turnover on Carolina's front line; even so, there is a strong core in place here to build on.

RANK 7 TITANS

Total pressures: 242.

Top pass rusher: Brian Orakpo (53 pressures).

Despite the offense falling well short of hopeful expectations, the Titans earned a playoff berth in the AFC. The pass rush was the lone unit that performed consistently well all season. Orakpo simply doesn't get enough credit for reviving his career in Tennessee. After injuries ravaged the end of his tenure in Washington, the veteran edge defender relocated to Tennessee in 2015 and hasn't missed a game since. He led the team with 53 pressures on the year. Intimidating interior defensive lineman Jurrell Casey -- who still seems slightly overlooked on the national stage for his all-around dominance -- finished second with 41. New head coach and former NFL linebacker Mike Vrabel has a core to build around in the front seven.

RANK 8 CARDINALS

Total pressures: 237.

Top pass rusher: Chandler Jones (66 pressures).

The Arizona Cardinals find themselves in the top 10 thanks in large part to the efforts of Jones. With so many guys offering seasons worthy of Defensive Player of the Year consideration and the Cardinals being such an underwhelming team, Jones' elite campaign didn't quite get the recognition it deserved nationally. Jones' 66 pressures led the NFL and accounted for 27.8 percent of Arizona's team total. Only four other players owned a larger share of their team's pressures. Rookie linebacker Haason Reddick was second on the team with 25. Arizona has to find complements for Jones in the offseason and hope Markus Golden (who notched 15 pressures in his four games before landing on injured reserve) returns healthy.

RANK 9 STEELERS

Total pressures: 230.

Top pass rusher: Cameron Heyward (42 pressures).

The Steelers are unique compared to other teams on this list, as both of their top two pass rushers are interior defensive linemen. Heyward led the team with 42 pressures, and Stephon Tuitt wasn't far behind, with 38. Despite playing traditional 3-4 defensive end roles, the duo totaled 34.8 percent of the team's pressures. As they search for more edge pressure next season, the Steelers can hope that the 2017 season for rookie T.J. Watt was just the beginning of what's to come. Watt racked up 33 pressures on 261 pass-rushing plays, leading the group with a 12.6 percent pressure rate. Pittsburgh also got plenty of use out of its inside linebackers as blitzers, with Vince Williams (16 pressures) and Ryan Shazier (seven pressures) putting heat on quarterbacks when called upon.

RANK 10 VIKINGS

Total pressures: 229.

Top pass rusher: Everson Griffen (62 pressures).

The Vikings owned the No. 1 defense in terms of both yards and points allowed in 2017, and their excellence began right up front, with the pass rush as a catalyst. A group whose core has been together for multiple seasons, the Vikings' defense totaled 229 pressures on the season. Griffen racked up 62 pressures from his right end position, leading the team and finishing fourth in the NFL among all defenders. His running mate, Danielle Hunter, has developed into a high-end complementary rusher and posted 46 pressures of his own. The Vikes cycle in several other names on the line, and they had three more players finish with 25 or more pressures on the season. Minnesota will look to get back to the NFC Championship Game again in 2018 -- and this team has the horses in the pass rush to do it.

BONUS NOTES:

-- The Denver Broncos finished outside the top 20 in total pressures with 184 on the year despite the presence of Pro Bowl linebacker Von Miller. Denver desperately needs to acquire further assistance for Miller, with several key rushers from the Super Bowl team no longer in town. Miller's 59 pressures accounted for 32.2 percent of the team total, the highest share for any defender in the NFL.

-- The Los Angeles Chargers boast one of the best pass-rushing tandems in the NFL in Joey Bosa (56 pressures) and Melvin Ingram (51 pressures). Los Angeles was one of just two teams that had two players finish with more than 50 pressures. However, Bosa and Ingram accounted for 56.9 percent of the team's total pressures, and no other player had more than 20 on the year. If the Chargers want to take the next step as a pass-rushing group, they need to acquire more depth up front to complement the all-star duo.

Pereira thinks Goodell told Riveron to change his standard on replay reviews

By Michael David Smith

Pro Football Talk

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The NFL appeared to change its standard for overturning calls in instant replay in 2017-2018, with head of officiating Al Riveron seeming to stray away from the “indisputable” standard in the regular season only to return to it in the postseason. One of Riveron’s predecessors believes the commissioner was behind that.

Former NFL head of officiating Mike Pereira said on the Talk of Fame podcast that from his conversations with people around the league, he thinks there were teams complaining to NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell about Riveron being too quick to overturn plays on instant replay, and Riveron adjusted accordingly.

“I talk to enough coaches and enough members of the competition committee that they weren’t happy, and so I think the word trickled to Goodell and Goodell probably sat down with Alberto, who he has a great amount of respect for, and just said, ‘Hey, you’ve got to realize you need to make an adjustment. You’re being too technical,’” Pereira said.

The Eagles may have benefited from that change in approach: Corey Clement’s touchdown catch was a very close call on which he may not have had full possession of the ball with both feet down, but Riveron decided to stay with the call on the field. During the regular season, that might not have been a touchdown.