

What it would take for Broncos to have football crush on one of draft's top QBs

By Jeff Legwold

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None other than John Elway has publicly said in recent days that the Denver Broncos, even with Case Keenum signed to be the team's starting quarterback, would still consider selecting a quarterback with the No. 5 pick in the NFL draft.

Elway, as the Broncos' chief football decision-maker, said it's "wide open." Four quarterbacks would be considered with that No. 5 pick, and they also are the four quarterbacks who have been the key figures in much of the pre-draft discussion both near and far -- Oklahoma's Baker Mayfield, Wyoming's Josh Allen, UCLA's Josh Rosen and USC's Sam Darnold.

And perhaps it's a moot point if quarterbacks are selected with the first four picks for the first time in the common draft era or if Elway is simply trying to entice one of the quarterback-needy teams to make him an offer he can't refuse for the pick. But, essentially, two things have to happen for the Broncos to use their first pick on a quarterback.

They, specifically Elway, have to be in football love with at least one of those quarterbacks. And that quarterback still has to be on the board.

So, here's what would it take for the Broncos to think enough of each of those top four quarterbacks to pick him at No. 5:

Mayfield

Crunch the numbers, watch the game video -- again and again -- and consider the Broncos signed Keenum already because Elway, as well as coach Vance Joseph, repeatedly said they want Keenum and the team's No. 2 quarterback to bring the same skill set to the team's offense. That makes Mayfield the best football fit.

Also, consider when asked what trait they were looking for in Keenum, the word Elway and Joseph both used was "grit." In this quarterback class, Mayfield has the grit. Toss in a career 68.5 percent completion rate, 131 career touchdowns, his ability to digest information, as well as his ability to rebound after on-field mistakes, and he fits the bill.

He would have to convince the Broncos an alcohol-related arrest last year was a one-time mistake and not a glimpse at something more and that he could handle the weighty expectations and scrutiny that come with the job.

Allen

Allen is the biggest project among the top four quarterbacks on the board, but he also is considered the most physically gifted by personnel evaluators around the league. In short, he can make throws few

others on the planet can and that opens a whole bunch of possibilities for those who draw plays up in the league.

But accuracy is king in the NFL, as is the ability to let the ball go with the timing to complete passes in much smaller throwing windows. Allen completed 56.2 percent of his passes during his college career against defenses with very few elite cornerbacks and against very little bump-and-run coverage overall.

He had almost as many games in his career with a completion percentage of 50 percent or less (nine) as he did of 60 percent or more (10). And history hasn't always been kind to those trying to go from 56-57 percent passers in college to 60-plus percent in the NFL.

Rosen

Rosen is a gifted passer with the footwork of a multisport athlete, a balanced delivery, and he throws with anticipation. In short, he is the most proficient, traditional pocket passer in the group.

But he also played in just six games in 2016 because of a shoulder injury and this past season missed time with concussion issues. And fair or not, beyond those injury concerns, Rosen would have to convince the Broncos that his narrative of being difficult to coach and not always popular among his teammates is not an issue.

It should be noted Rosen's teammates stood tall for him with their public comments at the scouting combine.

Darnold

Darnold presents evaluators with the most potential to grow from where he is now to what he might be. And where he is now is the first guy to have thrown for at least 4,000 yards in a season at USC, and he won't turn 21 until June.

Teams have come away from interviews impressed with his level-headedness about the whole process, and while quarterbacks should always flourish in the home cooking setup of a pro day, Darnold showed his willingness to compete in bad weather during his own. Darnold's issue is decision-making and what looked to be a general disregard for the ball at times with nine lost fumbles, including three against Ohio State, and 13 interceptions this past season alone.

That's 22 turnovers in 14 games on the quarterback -- 1.6 per game. To put that in perspective for the Broncos, they are in this position because of turnovers at the quarterback position as their three starters turned the ball over 25 times combined in 16 games -- or 1.6 per game.

Von Miller and Emmanuel Sanders scare Broncos fans on April Fools' Day by saying they're leaving

By Joe Nguyen

Denver Post

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Broncos fans had a rude awakening Sunday when Von Miller and Emmanuel Sanders announced on Instagram that they were leaving the team.

Miller posted on Instagram that he was being traded to the Cleveland Browns, while Sanders posted an illustration of him in Washington Redskins gear.

Rest assured, Broncos Country: They're not. It's April Fools' Day and the Denver stars had some fun on social media.

It's not the first time Miller has done this. Last year, he also announced that he was being traded...

They weren't the only professional athletes to indulge on the prankster holiday. Pelicans forward Anthony Davis posted a video of him shaving off the middle of his trademark unibrow.

Mason's Mailbag: Trade for Su'a Cravens doesn't prevent Broncos from looking at draft ILBs

By Andrew Mason
DenverBroncos.com
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You can tweet questions to me with the hashtag #AskMase or use the submission form to your right (if you're viewing on a standard browser) or at the bottom of the page if you're on the mobile site.

With the Broncos adding Su'a Cravens, do you think they will still consider a linebacker in the first two rounds?

-- Cailen Marks

If the value is there, absolutely. Cravens told KOA-AM 850 this week that he expects to be used in the team's sub packages, but that doesn't address short- and long-term depth behind starters Brandon Marshall and Todd Davis, which took a hit when Corey Nelson left for the Eagles in free agency. Further, the team could look to bolster its outside-linebacker corps with a strong edge rusher in free agency. The addition of Cravens bolsters the Broncos' primary sub package (dime personnel with a safety working at linebacker), but it doesn't keep them from considering anything.

What do you think about the Broncos drafting Shaquem Griffin in the third round or do you think they should just stick with the LBs they have?

-- Aidan Marin

Head Coach Vance Joseph said during his question-and-answer session Tuesday that inside linebacker would "definitely" be an area that is addressed in the draft. I'm sure they'll scout Griffin, as they'll take a look at myriad inside linebackers. The allure of Griffin is his sideline-to-sideline speed and his potential to provide an immediate contribution on special teams, an area that will look different in the wake of free-agent departures like those of Nelson and Cody Latimer. As with any position, whether you pick a player there depends on the value; you want the right fit, but you don't want to reach.

What do you think about Mike Gesicki?

-- Eric Price

I think I speak for all of us on "First and Ten at Ten" -- me, Ryan Edwards and Ring of Famer Steve Atwater -- when I offer nothing but praise for Gesicki's potential. He possesses all of the necessary tools to be an effective inside and intermediate target as a "move" tight end -- i.e. one that operates in space from a stand-up alignment. We've probably talked about Gesicki at least three or four times per week since watching him at the Senior Bowl.

What's more, Gesicki could not have embraced his chance to work with Broncos Tight Ends Coach Geep Chryst any more, based on how well he did at the Senior Bowl and how effusive he was talking about Chryst at the Combine over a month later.

"Oh, man. Coach Chryst is an unbelievable dude. Loved working with him," Gesicki said. "He kind of set the standard for tight end coaches in the NFL really high."

After posting the best Combine workout of any tight end -- and one of the best all-around workouts of any player at any position -- Gesicki could be picked as early as the final 10 picks of the first round, and should be off the board no later than the first 10 picks of Round 2.

Hey, do you have any idea of the steal you could get in Nebraska's receiver, Jordan Westerkamp? Similar in size to Julian Edelman. Check him out. No one will take him due to his size, but look at Edelman. He broke all kinds of receiving-yard records at Nebraska. Check it out.

-- Cindie Eckley

Actually, someone did take him last year; Miami signed him on July 30 after he had non-roster tryouts with the Browns and Buccaneers that did not result in a contract offer. (Furthermore, at 6 feet and 200 pounds, size is not the issue; a 4.73 40 time during his pre-draft workout is, even though it came after knee problems in the previous months.) While with the Dolphins, he dealt with a hamstring issue and was waived 19 days later.

Westerkamp is now with the CFL's Toronto Argonauts, and if he wants to get a lengthy NFL shot, his best bet is to have a terrific season this summer and fall and use that to re-open doors.

On Draft QBs, Trade Rumors and a New Rule That Might Change Football Forever

By Peter King

MMQB

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Rumors, factoids, league-meetings leftovers and draft niblets 24 days before the start of the NFL draft:

I know the first question I'd ask Josh Rosen in Cleveland this week. The UCLA quarterback travels to Cleveland to meet with Browns brass this week. (He has seven team trips scheduled by mid-April— Browns, Jets, Giants, Cards, Broncos, Bills, Chargers). Cleveland owns the first and fourth picks in the first round and will use one of the picks on a quarterback. You know that Cleveland GM John Dorsey at some point is going to ask Rosen: What's up with you and your coach at UCLA? Last week, Jim Mora, fired as Bruins coach last fall, said on NFL Network that he'd take USC quarterback Sam Darnold over Rosen with the first pick in the draft if he were running the Browns. Mora said it was "because of fit" and cited Darnold's "blue-collar, gritty attitude." My jaw dropped when I heard that. And I can tell you the jaws of more than a few NFL people at the meetings in Orlando last week dropped too. Mora did go on to say that if he were the Giants or Jets at two and three in the draft order, he'd have the card with Rosen's name on it, ready to turn in. But that didn't get much attention.

Mora coached Rosen for three years. Rosen and Darnold are competing to be the top player picked in this draft. Oh, and Darnold played for UCLA's arch rival. Was Mora trying to slap the free-spirited Rosen with some tough love? Was Mora taking this TV analyst neutral-party thing very seriously and simply telling the truth as he sees it? Or was Mora trying to help his old quarterback avoid Cleveland and land with the Giants and a quarterback mentor he trusts, Pat Shurmur, at number two?

I spoke with Mora on Sunday, and he understands the tornado his words created. But he stood by his point that Darnold and his don't-worry, be-happy ethos (my words, not his) would be a better long-haul fit for a Cleveland team that likely will take a while to win. "I put it in the context of 'fit,'" Mora told me. He strongly emphasized the word "fit" in our conversation. He said Darnold has "the underdog mentality that I think will fit so well in Cleveland, a franchise that's really been down."

Of his own quarterback, Mora said: "Josh, I think, without a doubt, is the number one quarterback in the draft. He's a franchise-changer. He's got the ability to have an immediate impact. His arm talent, intelligence, and his ability to see the game and diagnose the game is rare. He'd come to the sidelines after a play and it was uncanny—he could right away say exactly why he made every decision.

"He needs to be challenged intellectually so he doesn't get bored. He's a millennial. He wants to know why. Millennials, once they know why, they're good. Josh has a lot of interests in life. If you can hold his concentration level and focus only on football for a few years, he will set the world on fire. He has so much ability, and he's a really good kid." It sounded like Mora thinks Rosen would be well-served to be pushed by quarterback mentors like Shurmur (Giants) or Jeremy Bates (Jets), and to learn for a year or so from Eli Manning (Giants) or Josh McCown (Jets).

Much of what Mora just said in the last two paragraphs is what he'd tell an NFL GM if he called to ask about Rosen. Curiously, Mora said: "None of them have called, which is interesting."

There's time, of course, and Mora figures the calls will come. I'd be surprised if they didn't, after the hubbub around his NFL Network comments. Rosen, by the way, got an explanatory text from Mora before Mora said his piece on air but I'm told Rosen still was stunned by what his coach and neighbor said on TV. (Rosen lived in the same L.A. neighborhood as Mora, and Rosen is friendly with Mora's daughter.)

I have never heard of anything like this, even with the Giants/Jets note following what Mora said first. When Mark Sanchez declared for the draft after the 2008 season at USC, coach Pete Carroll was critical of the decision, saying he thought Sanchez should stay in school. That's a little different, though, than saying the quarterback of your arch-rival should be picked above your own guy. That's not going to help Rosen's cause at the top of the draft. It will also be noted by teams that Mora says you need to "hold Rosen's concentration level." It'll be fascinating to see which team takes the plunge with Rosen, and how they process the information they're hearing out of UCLA.

"One thing I do want teams to know," Mora said. "It's desperately important for Josh to be a great player."

Noted.

FOD (Friend of Dorsey) thinks Browns will go Allen-Saquon at 1 and 4. What would an April MMQB be without another draft rumor?! This friend of Cleveland GM John Dorsey believes he'll go Wyoming quarterback Josh Allen over Sam Darnold with the first overall pick, keep the fourth pick, and take Penn State running back Saquon Barkley. "I would be surprised if he traded down," FOD told me. "This would be his chance to take his two offensive cornerstones for the next eight or 10 years." The most interesting thing there? That FOD thinks Dorsey will not trade. I think that's great. Cleveland's been very good at trading and stockpiling, and not very good at drafting, in the last few years. I hope Dorsey's more about the (relatively) sure things instead of Cleveland leading the league in draft picks.

The next step in the controversial lowering-the-helmet-ban rule is a month away. It's now going to be a penalty for an NFL player to lower his head to initiate helmet-to-opponent contact, and the devil will be in the details on this one. The NFL has seven weeks to write the rule the right way; the league wants it done by the NFL spring meetings beginning 49 days from today, May 21-23 in Atlanta. About three weeks before then, the NFL will invite some eight or 10 people to New York for a summit meeting—four to six coaches, a couple owners or top club officials, and a two or three players—to get the language of the rule right. The other interesting parts of this new rule:

- Replay. Still to be determined, but it's highly likely replays of the helmet violations will be handled by VP of officiating Al Riveron in the officiating command center in New York. The league does not want to add the element of delay into the system that would come if the referee in the stadium had to review the play on his tablet. The likely scenario is if there's an infraction or ejection, Riveron and his New York crew will review (quickly, the hope is) and inform the referee on site whether the call is upheld or reversed without any sort of coaching challenge.
- Frequency. The league is hesitant to project how many helmet-lowering fouls per game will be called; after instructing teams in the exact rule this offseason, it'll be up to the coaches to teach it right and the players to live by the rule. But last year there were 2.65 offensive holding infractions walked off per game, and 1.08 defensive pass interference penalties accepted. The best guess, one league official said,

is probably between those numbers, between one and two fouls per game. Ejections? I'll be surprised if there's more than a dozen in 2018. "I think we won't be ejection-happy," said Competition Committee chairman Rich McKay. "We'd eject only with the obvious infractions. We will make it clear what the standard for ejection will be when we meet with the teams. We [the Competition Committee members] were actually caught off guard that coaches wanted ejection to be an immediate part of the rule."

- The big change. One of the major boosters for the new rule was John Madden, who is the league's co-chair of the Player Safety Advisory Panel and the head of the Coaches Subcommittee of the Competition Committee. "Coach Madden said he thinks this could be the final step to get the helmet out of the run game," McKay said. Currently, helmet-to-helmet contact is allowed on running plays, the theory being it's just too hard in close quarters of running plays to police when players bash helmets. The other area of adjustment will be in open-field collisions. When the NFL studied its 291 documented concussions in 2017, many players were seen lowering their heads to deliver a blow in the open field. That was a factor in making this a rule for 2018.

- Coaching it. "I don't feel like this is going to be a revolutionary change to the game," said Saints coach Sean Payton, a member of the Competition Committee. "I've got a big note here [to relay to his coaches]—our job is to teach the fundamentals. I learned a lot about teaching during my one-year suspension, coaching my son Conner's team when he was in sixth grade: eyes up, heads up, wrap up. When we coach taking on blocks, it's eyes up, heads away. It'll become our dialog throughout the team."

- Officiating it. This is the bugaboo. Calling this consistently is going to be very hard. As former officiating VP Mike Pereira said on SiriusXM NFL Radio: "I think it will be impossible to officiate." That'll be the biggest thing to watch. Along with the new catch rule, the officials are going to struggle making the helmet call, and they may struggle for years.

I find it ironic that in the wake of the passage of this rule, the majority of players who have spoken out hate it. They think it will change football as we know it. It's ironic because part of the reason for the rule—maybe the biggest part—is to minimize the kind of blows that could lead to brain issues for players later in life, and here are so many players against what should be good for them. Ironic, too, that Payton is one of the biggest supporters of the rule. Payton spent lots of time before and during his Bountygate suspension at absolute loggerheads with the league on sanctions. Not now. Even though the final version of the rule is still cloudy, Payton thinks this is a vital change for the next generation of players.

"We owe this to the game," Payton said. "Ten years from now, people will look at this moment and say, 'That was a big deal.'"

There's too much smoke around the Odell Beckham Jr.-to-the-Rams trade story to dismiss it. First it was Giants CEO John Mara saying in Orlando: "I want him to be a Giant. I can't promise that's going to happen." Then it was the Rams doing nothing to debunk the rumors of their interest. Then it was Beckham, according to the New York Daily News, telling Rams players he would like to play there. Here's what I think now: The Rams are definitely interested. The price tag—likely two first-round picks plus a contract averaging at least \$18 million a year—is daunting and could eventually roadblock L.A., but that's not happening now. If the Giants move Beckham, the Rams will be in the game till the end.

There's no way Giants coach Pat Shurmur would want Beckham traded; Shurmur took the job in January believing he'd have Beckham as his biggest weapon. Shurmur's desire isn't going to be what decides this, but it's a factor. On the other hand, Rams coach Sean McVay isn't afraid of taking on the mercurial Beckham.

This isn't an easy one to decipher. The Giants already have a short fuse with the immature Beckham. He lives in Los Angeles in the offseason and could make it very hard on the Giants and their rookie head coach by not showing up for any of the offseason work, and holding out well into the summer. They may decide he's not worth the trouble, and take two low first-rounders for him, and save all that cap money they'd have to pay him long-term—realizing full well it's a deal they could soon regret. Look at GM Dave Gettleman's history in Carolina. He had a big veteran star, Josh Norman, about to be a contract-related distraction for the Panthers in 2016. Gettleman's solution was simply to cut him loose. If you told Gettleman he could get two first-round picks for a huge headache ... well, I don't have to draw you a map.

I'd feel more confident that the Giants would dump Beckham, except for one thing: I covered the Giants in the eighties, and I remember how Giants scion Wellington Mara, John's father, overlooked all the headaches the great Lawrence Taylor gave the franchise for years, because of his transcendent talent. I saw Wellington Mara get emotional with Taylor after he played a heroic 1987 game. Mara knew how important Taylor was to his team. John Mara is very much like his father. So there's that. This one's a conundrum.

Yes, Beckham is worth two ones. The narrative in some NFL quarters that Beckham is not worth two first-round draft picks in trade—especially two late first-round picks, as would likely be the case if the Giants traded with the Rams. Check out the first-round receivers in the last three years, many of whom have “bust” written all over them:

		Overall	Average per-season stats		
	Team	Pick	Rec.	Yards	TD
2017					
Corey Davis	Tennessee	5	34	375	0
Mike Williams	Chargers	7	11	95	0
John Ross	Cincinnati	9	0	0	0
2016					
Corey Coleman	Cleveland	15	28	359	3
Will Fuller	Houston	21	38	529	5
Josh Doctson	Washington	22	19	284	3
Laquon Treadwell	Minnesota	23	11	116	0
2015					
Amari Cooper	Oakland	4	68	968	6
Kevin White	Chicago	7	7	64	0
DeVante Parker	Miami	14	46	636	3
Nelson Agholor	Philadelphia	20	40	472	4
Breshad Perriman	Baltimore	26	14	192	1
Phillip Dorsett	Ind./NE	29	21	316	1

Beckham was hurt in game four last year, his fourth NFL season. His average season for the first three years—96 catches, 1,374 yards, 12 touchdowns—was historic.

My point about Beckham's value isn't that because 12 of the 13 receivers picked in the last three first rounds have been underwhelming the Rams should overpay for Beckham. It's that recent history says the value of first-round receivers is not good. And if you're desperate for a receiver, and Beckham, 25, is in the pool, why wouldn't you consider paying two low first-rounders—as the Rams would have to—in order to make a serious bid for a premier player?

"I think the quarterback class is a hair overrated." So says former NFL quarterback Chris Simms, now a Bleacher Report analyst. I asked him to rate this class of quarterbacks, in first-round order, and he had some interesting thoughts. His list:

1. Josh Allen, Wyoming
2. Josh Rosen, UCLA
3. Baker Mayfield, Oklahoma
4. Lamar Jackson, Louisville
5. Sam Darnold, USC

Notable, obviously, is Darnold's placement. "The most confusing thing to me is that Sam Darnold is definitely the number one or two pick by everyone," Simms said. "I am not trying to be a jerk to the kid, but the skill set I see on the field doesn't relate to a can't-miss prospect. I don't think there's anything he does elite physically. He's toward the bottom as a thrower of the football, and he's careless with the football."

Simms on Allen: "He's got elite arm talent, a [Brett] Favre or [Pat] Mahomes arm. Elite athlete for his size, like Carson Wentz. People talk about his accuracy, but his pass-protection was poor, and he had the worst talent around him of any of these guys." He likes Jackson, but, as most draft observers say, he's hurting himself by not being available to do the pre-draft things franchise quarterbacks need to be available to do. "But he's got the biggest upside of anyone in the class," Simms said.

The Josh McDaniels rule should not be called the Josh McDaniels rule—and I doubt it'll ever pass anyway. I could never figure this out. McDaniels, the New England offensive coordinator, and the Colts had an understanding in mid-January that he'd become their coach after the last Patriots' game of the year. When he jilted Indianapolis on Feb. 6 and told them he wanted to stay in New England, the Colts were ticked off. But as GM Chris Ballard told me at the time, "We're glad we found out now. I wouldn't have wanted a guy who wasn't all in." So at the league meetings, it was bizarre to me that owners wanted to pass a rule that would allow teams to hire head coaches before the end of a coach's season, using the Colts' situation as a spur. The Colts didn't want the rule; they would have voted against it had it come to a vote.

Suppose this rule existed this year, and suppose the Colts and McDaniels announce they had a deal ... and then, after the last game of the season, McDaniels decided he'd rather stay with the Patriots. Then you'd have had a real mess.

Neither solution is ideal. But I think the current rule is better than a coach signing with a new team, then continuing to coach his team through the playoffs.

The debate on this was interesting in Orlando. As someone in the meeting told me, 10 coaches spoke, and nine supported keeping the rule the way it is. Bill Belichick was the leader of the status-quo, according to my source. “Bill said, ‘We work hard to get to the playoffs. We tell our fans we’re doing everything possible to win the biggest games of the year, and we do everything to eliminate distractions. And then, in the middle of that, we announce one of our coaches is now the new coach of another team? And he’s going to coach for us till the end of the year?’ Bill also made a very good point about being employed by two teams at once. ‘If you’ve been hired by one team, you’re continuing to coach your original team, and you talk to some of the assistant coaches you work with about joining your staff—shouldn’t that be tampering?’”

The process needs to slow down anyway. It’s ridiculous that coach-seeking teams spend three or four hours interviewing the hot coach of the postseason, do some investigation into the guy, and then see other teams drooling over the same guy, and get pressured into making a deal with the coach. As one club exec told me in Orlando, the Yankees took four or five weeks to pick their manager last fall. Who knows if Aaron Boone’s the right guy? But the Yankees had plenty of time to figure it out.

QUOTES OF THE WEEK

I

“Those guys have been in the war room a lot longer than I have. They’ve done an excellent job so far in the offseason. I keep seeing Sam Darnold’s name up there for the number one pick. But I think they’re gonna do what’s best. We got one and four [the first and fourth overall picks]. Lotta great players in this draft. Saquon Barkley’s one of them. Minkah Fitzpatrick, oh, lotta guys.”

—LeBron James, to sideline reporter Adam Schefter of ESPN, when Schefter asked James, “What should the Cleveland Browns do with the number one pick?”

II

“It’s a place where quarterbacks go to die.”

—Former NFL quarterback Ryan Leaf, the second pick in the 1998 draft, on Cleveland, to FS1.

III

“There were times when I was on the sideline and I just wanted to go up to Belichick or Matt Patricia and just say, ‘Is this how we’re gonna end this?’ I grew up in the Patriots system ... I was close to going up and saying what I wanted to say to Matt or Belichick ... I really wanted to go ask ‘em, but I didn’t.”

—Malcolm Butler, on his reaction to being benched for every defensive snap in the Super Bowl, from a new video about Butler’s free-agency trek from the video team at Sports Illustrated.

You can watch this video and others in the SI series in a new subscription service. It is really good. I watched the episode, and Butler emotes.

IV

“The Giants are NOT getting rid of OBJ. He will be a New York Giant!”

—ESPN’s Darren Woodson, per Dianna Russini of ESPN.

You sure?

V

“It’s not meant to fix minutiae. Just as players make mistakes, officials are going to make mistakes and coaches are going to make mistakes. This is not a video game. It is a game played, officiated and coached by humans. It is what it is. We need to think about replay as something that makes sure we get the obvious error corrected but not destroy what is the game by making it a video game.”

—Retiring referee Jeff Triplette, on instant replay, to Jonathan Jones of The MMQB in our “Exit Interview” series.

That is about as common-sense a view of replay as I’ve heard.

VI

“I would imagine Deacon Jones was pretty unhappy when they outlawed the head slap. That’s how he learned to play the game—it was a technique then. But that was change that was necessary at the time. This is change now. Change is hard. It’s not for punishment, it’s for protection.”

—Competition Committee chairman Rick McKay, on the rule passed at the NFL meetings last week outlawing a player lowering his helmet and using it to strike another player.

STAT OF THE WEEK

There’s a lot of pressure on Chiefs sophomore quarterback Patrick Mahomes, with the departure of the reliable Alex Smith in trade and the signing of projected Kansas City backup quarterbacks Chad Henne and Matt McGloin.

In the last four seasons, Henne and McGloin have combined to start four games. Their record in those games: 0-4.

The only quarterback on the Chiefs’ roster to have won an NFL game in the last four years is Mahomes. He has won one.

FACTOID THAT MAY INTEREST ONLY ME

Comments from the 32 NFL coaches and GMs in the league’s general session when the ballyhooed catch rule was presented for discussion at the NFL meetings, and then passed by a 32-0 vote: zero.

For football people, changing the rule that has tormented the game for so long was easy, because everything had been said. There was such a miniscule chance to stand in the way of the freight train that was the new catch rule that no one wanted to waste his breath.

Still, no comments? No discussion? Noteworthy.

TEN THINGS I THINK I THINK

1. I think the NFL, which treated any mention of anthem-related protests like the plague at the league meetings, is going to continue to have issues no matter how thoroughly the discussion of it is swept under the rug.

2. I think it's only going to get worse if no team signs Colin Kaepernick friend and fellow protester Eric Reid, who is an above-average player with opinions. Let him have them. And let him play.

3. I think I wish Mike Ornstein, a longtime league staple and the most colorful character I've met covering this game, the best as he fights an infection stemming from a kidney stone at Cedars Sinai Hospital in Los Angeles. He's had some starry visitors in the past few days—Sean Payton and Isaiah Thomas on Friday. Ornstein was at one point Al Davis' right-hand man with the Raiders and lately a great friend to the Saints.

4. I think the fight for Jim Kelly goes on—a 12-hour surgery Wednesday in New York to remove his cancerous jaw and lymph nodes, and reconstruct the jaw using one of his femur bones. Three times in four years Kelly has thrown haymakers at this insidious disease. All of western New York, and the rest of the football world, hopes this is the time that doctors got it all.

5. I think, by the way, we've got an excellent series of draft preview shows available on Amazon—"The MMQB Draft Preview Show with Pro Football Focus." I watched the running back show over the weekend, and until seeing it, I thought Saquon Barkley was flawless. He is not, our PFF panelists say. Interesting, too, how much they love Michigan defensive lineman Maurice Hurst, his health issues and all. Really good education here.

6. I think the Marquette King cut by the Raiders was stunning—he's one of the top five punters in the NFL—until you realize the cash-strapped Raiders can save \$2.9 million in cap money this year. I think GM Reggie McKenzie figures, and probably correctly, that of all the moves he could make, cutting the punter and paying a young punter the NFL minimum is the best of some bad alternatives.

7. I think this is the Good NFL Nugget of the Week, from Tom Pelissero of NFL Network: Desperado quarterback Paxton Lynch of the Broncos has enlisted the training help of Tom Brady body guru Alex Guerrero to prepare him for the 2018 season. Smart of Lynch to pull out all the stops to evade the bust label. This season is it for him in Denver.

8. I think it's not probable but certain possible to think that the Giants could make two trades before the draft: with the Rams for Odell Beckham Jr., and with Buffalo for the second pick in the draft. Let's say New York did that. And let's say New York, in return, got two first-round picks from the Rams and three first-round picks from Buffalo. Three? Three! For Buffalo to move from 12 to two in this year's first round, and to get a top quarterback prospects, the Bills, I believe, would have to deal the 12th and 22nd picks this year, plus their first-rounder next year. How interesting would that be? It would give the Giants quantity, and allow them to own the next two first rounds. As you see here:

- In 2018, the Giants would have Buffalo's 12th and 22nd overall picks, and the Rams' 23rd. So three picks in the top 23.

- In 2019, the Giants would have their own first-round pick, Buffalo's first-round pick, and the Rams' first-round pick.

Obviously, in order for the Giants to even consider doing these deals, they'd have to believe they could eschew a drafted quarterback this year and Eli Manning would give them two more strong years (he's slipped in recent seasons), and they'd have to have a willing partner in the Bills. Buffalo would have to be willing to denude the top of its next two drafts to get the quarterback it wants. I don't expect both things to happen, but the Giants could do something historic this year.

9. I think teams should not be afraid of Baker Mayfield.

10. I think these are my other thoughts of the week:

a. Video of the Week: From the digital arm of the Arizona Republic ... Of everything I saw or read in the past week, this had the most impact on me. It's a teacher in Arizona, with two masters degrees, protesting her pay. It's heartbreaking. We have to pay teachers a good, sustainable, living wage with the chance for some savings that reflects their incredible value to our society. Watch and share.

b. Story of the Week: Wow, wow, wow, Michael McKnight and Greg Bishop of Sports Illustrated. What a story about internet trolls trolling players and officials viciously.

c. This is a great paragraph in the McKnight/Bishop story, concerning a troll from Kentucky who wrote to the Facebook page of the wife of NCAA basketball ref John Higgins after the ref's performance in a University of Kentucky basketball loss, blasting the ref. SI found the troll and reached out to him by phone. Contacted at work and asked if he has a few moments to discuss the Higgins matter, he lowers his voice to a whisper and, retreating beneath his figurative bridge, says, "No. No, I don't."

d. When I grow up, I want to be able to write a paragraph like that.

e. Great job by KHQ-TV in Spokane, with a revealing, startling look at the mental health issues suffered by former NFL quarterback Mark Rypien. The most emotional stuff is about how Rypien encouraged his daughter Angela to be a quarterback, and she played, and she's been having issues of her own, perhaps because of the head trauma suffered in the game. Well worth your time.

f. Really good work by KHQ anchor Stephanie Vigil. That's a tough interview to do, and she asked the right questions.

g. Rypien to Vigil: "If I can save one life by this interview, then I feel like I am doing my legacy."

h. Coffeenerdness: I respected the kind of reporter Peter Schrager is, and the stories he has broken in his time with FOX and "Good Morning Football," before he showed up in my hotel room in Orlando on Tuesday afternoon to record this week's podcast. But I did not realize what a bloodhound he is, and how dogged and resourceful he is, until he reached out when I opened the door and handed me a coffee from Starbucks. "Wh-wh-what?" I stammered. That was certainly thoughtful. But then I find that's not just just drip coffee—it's my new usual, a triple grande smoked butterscotch latte. I demanded to know how he knew. "I'm a reporter," he said. He wouldn't give up his source, a practice of good reporters. Darn impressive, Mr. Schrager.

i. The Miami Marlins have eight uber-attractive home games this season: four against the Cubs, two against the Red Sox, two against the Yankees. Six will be finished tomorrow: the four Cubs games that

opened the season and the two against Boston that followed. That leaves two against the Yankees, on Aug. 21 and 22, remaining.

j. Interesting scheduling.

k. You go, Nick Ahmed.

l. You go, Joe Panik.

m. I see the Dodgers have their hitting shoes on.

n. Happy Easter and Happy Passover, everyone.

o. I miss malted milk eggs, the greatest Easter candy in history.

p. I'll miss Loyola, but the right two teams are in the championship game tonight. Give me Villanova 62, Michigan 57.

THE ADIEU HAIKU

The Gronk returneth.

Patriot Nation, joyous.

Vince McMahon. He's blue.

Everyone seems to hate NFL's new helmet hitting rule – and the knee-jerk reactions are wrong

By Eric Adelson

Yahoo

April 2, 2018

For many years, the NFL has faced righteous indignation for failing to do enough to respond to the risks of brain injury. Last week, the NFL took a strong step in the hopes of reducing head trauma, and the result was ... more indignation.

The new tackle rule, which the league says will be clarified in meetings next month, reads as such: “It is a foul if a player lowers his head to initiate and make contact with his helmet against an opponent. Penalty: Loss of 15 yards. If the foul is by the defense, it is also an automatic first down. The player may be disqualified.”

Much of the response has been less than positive. San Francisco 49ers cornerback Richard Sherman called the rule “ridiculous.” Washington Redskins corner Josh Norman wondered how defenders are supposed to play.

But from the lowest levels of the game, players are supposed to be taught heads-up tackling. Failure to legislate that forcefully at the top level of the sport is dangerous to both the tackler and the target. And it's not just about preventing concussions and subconcussive hits; we all know how a lowered helmet can lead to a catastrophic spinal injury. It has happened too often.

Some of the outrage about the proposed change is understandable: how will this be regulated fairly? Tacklers already get penalized for hitting defenseless receivers. They already get unfairly flagged at times for the inability to change direction at the last split-second when a receiver crouches or shifts to withstand a blow. Now this. Detractors say we're well on the slippery slope to a sport without hitting.

Yet the fears of the rule implementation are likely overblown. Does anyone really think Tom Brady is going to be ejected from a game for lowering his head and running into the pile on a quarterback sneak? Sure, this can technically be called foul on any play, but holding can be flagged on any snap. The league wants to keep its players on the field – sometimes at the expense of player safety – so it's unlikely there will be a sudden rash of ejections.

Will it be a smooth implementation? No. There will be reckless hits that get missed, and borderline hits that get called. Targeting in college football is inconsistent to put it kindly. However, it was not smooth when the defenseless receiver rule came into play, and that is still a regulation worth enforcing. After several seasons, it has become clear that defenders are calibrating their hits better, and the game is better off for it. There is no way to know how many brain injuries have been averted from this rule. Maybe it's only a few. Maybe it's many. But it's probably more than zero.

“We [the NFL] don't sing the song enough in my opinion of the quality things we've done to improve the health and safety of our players,” Pittsburgh Steelers coach Mike Tomlin said last week at the owners meetings, before the new rule was announced. “It seems like we have a bunker mentality on the

subject. I don't believe we should. I don't think we need to. We have been aggressive in improving in those areas. We should state it as such."

The truth is that a lot of people don't want to give the NFL credit for anything safety-related. Past sins have allowed many to cast the NFL as the Big Tobacco of our era, always putting dollars before health. Certainly there are steps the NFL isn't taking to make the game safer, most notably cutting preseason games. Even lopping off one exhibition game of four would reduce concussions. Then there's Thursday night football, which could be banished with hardly a squawk from fans or players.

Still, this new rule is more than lip service. That deserves acknowledgement.

There was also a little-heralded note of emphasis last week that officials will place the ball at the spot where a runner (usually a quarterback) gives himself up on a play. This will actually help defenders, who are trying to avoid hitting a sliding quarterback. Spotting the ball after the completion of a slide gives the quarterback a few free yards to tumble to a stop. It's not fair to a tackler, who is forced to make another difficult decision at top speed. This way, a defender can start to slow himself a split-second sooner if a quarterback begins to slide. (It also prevents quarterbacks from faking a slide and then darting ahead for more yards.)

There are those who will say the new tackling rule will cause more knee injuries, as defenders will go still lower to make a hit. The head vs. knees dilemma is one that isn't new and isn't ever going away. But most would agree the head (and the spine) is more vital to a player's long-term health. And if the goal is to improve youth football by holding the pros to a better tackling standard, heads-up tackling is vital.

"As a parent, as someone whose children play football, I'm comfortable with where the game is," Tomlin said. "Can we do more? Certainly. We will continue to do more. But it's not a negative in my eyes."

There will always be those who argue football is unsafe for the brain no matter what rules are made. It's a collision sport, after all. But after a long period when the league denied or ignored risks, the effort to lessen those risks is important. The new rule won't be perfect or popular, but let's face it: the number one threat to the future of the league isn't too many flags; it's too many brain injuries.

New catch rule could result in more collisions

By Mike Florio
Pro Football Talk
April 2, 2018

When changing its playing rules, the NFL always worries about unintended consequences. The new catch rule has a potential unintended consequence that would run counter to the league's obsession with player health and safety.

Consider this example: Offensive player catches ball with two feet down. Ball comes out. Official blows the whistle and makes the signal of an incomplete pass. The ball bounces around on the ground. What happens next?

Here's what happens next: Anyone in the vicinity of the ball dives for it.

If the ruling on the field is overturned, the incomplete pass most likely becomes a completed pass and a fumble. Which most likely means that, if there's a clear recovery by the defense, the defense will end up with the ball.

The league office did not respond to request for comment made on Friday morning as to whether that scenario would result in a change of possession, but as a source with thorough and extensive knowledge of the rules told PFT, "[They] would have to give it to the defense in that situation."

While this won't happen with a high degree of frequency, it definitely will happen. And if indisputable visual evidence of a third step or a reach/extension of the ball before the ball comes out, senior V.P. of officiating Al Riveron will have no choice but to overturn the ruling of an incomplete pass to a completed pass and a fumble. Followed by a change of possession, if it's clear that the defense recovered it.

So, yes, players will be diving for the ball. That's what they'll be coached to do, and that's what they'll be expected to do. And good luck doing that without lowering the helmet to initiate contact in the process of, you know, diving head first.

While it's unlikely (hopefully) that diving head first for a loose ball will constitute a violation of the new helmet rule (at this point, who knows?), the sudden, secret passage of such a significant safety rule brings into focus the safety aspects of all rule changes. And the new catch rule definitely has a safety risk that was overlooked, disregarded, or affirmatively assumed by the owners when voting 32-0 to change the catch rule.

Mora explains his Darnold/Rosen remarks

By Mike Florio
Pro Football Talk
April 2, 2018

Last week, former UCLA coach Jim Mora suggested that former USC quarterback Sam Darnold, not former UCLA quarterback Josh Rosen, would be a better choice for the Browns “because of fit.” The comment made waves, even though Mora also said that the Giants and the Jets should each want Rosen at No. 2 and No. 3, respectively.

So Mora scraped up some toothpaste and jammed into the funnel in comments to Peter King of SI.com.

Strongly emphasizing, per King, the word “fit” as it relates to the Cleveland comments, Mora praised his former pupil: “Josh, I think, without a doubt, is the number one quarterback in the draft. He’s a franchise-changer. He’s got the ability to have an immediate impact. His arm talent, intelligence, and his ability to see the game and diagnose the game is rare. He’d come to the sidelines after a play and it was uncanny — he could right away say exactly why he made every decision.”

So what’s the issue as it relates to Rosen and the team that holds the No. 1 overall pick?

“He needs to be challenged intellectually so he doesn’t get bored,” Mora said. “He’s a millennial. He wants to know why. Millennials, once they know why, they’re good. Josh has a lot of interests in life. If you can hold his concentration level and focus only on football for a few years, he will set the world on fire. He has so much ability, and he’s a really good kid.”

Here’s my two cents, which may be worth a little less than that: Rosen doesn’t want to play for the Browns, Mora knows it, and Mora’s comments were his way of saying it without saying it.

Remember the November Sunday Splash! report that Rosen would hesitate leaving UCLA if he knew the Browns would take him at No. 1? The report emerged before Rosen declared for the draft or hired an agent, so the universe of potential sources was small: Rosen, a close family member, a close friend, or Mora, the two-time former NFL coach whose number surely resides in the phone of the ESPN reporter who published the impractical claim that nevertheless may have had the same practical impact that Mora’s on-the-record comments were intended to have: To scare the Browns away from taking Rosen.

Also, remember this from Rosen, which came in late December of 2017? “I’d rather be a lower pick at the right team than a higher at the wrong team.” Those remarks came when it was far more clear that the Browns would be holding the pick that every player typically aspires to be: The first one. So it was, and still is, fair to interpret Rosen’s comments as another message regarding his lack of interest in playing for the Browns.

Considering the full range and scope of the developments in recent months, it’s definitely fair to conclude that Rosen: (1) doesn’t want to play for the Browns; and (2) wants to send that message more subtly, without having to make a “don’t draft me” power play. If the Browns don’t draft him, he gets what he wants. If they do draft him, Rosen then will need to consider whether to initiate the “trade me” ploy, or whether to just deal with the hand he’s been dealt.

Either way, it's safe to assume Rosen doesn't want to play for the Browns, but that he doesn't want the public ridicule and criticism that would come if a guy who already is perceived to be a certain way acts precisely that way as it relates to the Browns or any other NFL team.

Thus, the premise of King's item — that Rosen may be dismayed with Mora's comments from last week — presumes that, in reality, Rosen isn't delighted by them. The truth may be that he is.

So why is Rosen visiting the Browns this week, you ask? Again, he's sufficiently self aware to know how others regard him, and he doesn't want to be regarded as a guy who is trying to engineer the draft process in his favor. Even if he is.

My guess: He is.