

# Will John Elway's scrambling nature be a blessing or curse to Broncos in the NFL draft?

By Mark Kiszla  
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Because the Broncos have spent so much time with Oklahoma quarterback Baker Mayfield, it pretty much tells me they're not drafting him. I don't think the Broncos really believe in Mayfield, and they're either trying to convince themselves of his worth, or they're bluffing in an attempt to spark a run on quarterbacks that will leave Penn State running back Saquon Barkley or North Carolina State defensive end Bradley Chubb to Denver with the No. 5 pick in the first round.

Big D, conspiracy theorist

Kiz: In the weeks prior to the NFL draft, if you're a general manager that's not lying, you're not trying. But when Elway admits he might not know what player the Broncos will take until draft day, I believe him. Whether that approach is an example of Elway's scrambling ability or his capricious nature, I'm certain I will be able to discern with 20/20 hindsight.

Yo, Kiz! All the advice heading John Elway's way about what to do with the No. 5 pick in the draft omits a critical factor: How far will an offensive lineman capable of filling the team's most-pressing need fall in the first round? If we can get a Ryan Clady with the 10th or 12th pick, Elway should trade down, no matter what quarterback might be available at the five spot. Elway's judgment on quarterbacks doesn't merit our trust.

Gary, a contextualist

Kiz: Contextualist? How many points is that worth in Scrabble? If the Broncos can trade back to the 12th pick, they could definitely find a talented offensive lineman. Unless, of course, you also think Elway's judgment on guards and tackles is a little shaky.

I read Kickin' It with Kiz as my first look at the Sunday paper.

Joe, connoisseur of fine banter

Kiz: Well, it's good to know at least one person in the Rocky Mountain Empire has his priorities straight. Humble thanks.

I've been a Rockies season-ticket holder from the start. The decision to play the home opener with the temps in the 20s was stupid and selfish. Sure, it's a hassle for management to staff the next-day doubleheader, so you chose to give the fans a sub-par performance? Since the game was a sellout, you didn't care the actual attendance was minuscule late in the game. You're treating the fans badly, and risking injury to the players. Is there any low temp limit? 20 degrees? 10? Zero?

D.J., steaming in the cold

Kiz: The Rockies turned what should have been a party into a joke. I was at Coors Field. It was cold. It was damp. It was bad baseball. All in all, I would rather have been in Philadelphia.

And today's parting shot takes exception to comparing one of the worst automobiles ever made to Bud Black's starting rotation.

Kiz, there's no reason to put down Ford Pintos because the Rockies can't pitch. I had a 1973 Pinto that I traded my '66 Mustang for. (Shows you how smart I was.) Actually, in '73, I could not afford the gas for my Stang.

Steve, pedal to the metal

# The Broncos' Futures program saved football in Denver Public Schools. But an even bigger impact of the feeder teams might still be seen

By Kyle Newman  
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By 2007, it became clear to coaches and administrators within Denver Public Schools that the district was on the path to cutting high school football unless a solution was found.

"All the head coaches knew that if we didn't do something, and something big, we were probably going to lose football in Denver Public," said John Andrew, the district's director of athletics. "It wasn't just one school with critically low numbers — there were a lot of schools that were really struggling. Everybody saw the kids getting filtered out to other programs at private schools and in the suburbs."

Many of the district's 10 traditional high schools struggled to field a varsity team, much less be competitive.

"I wanted to see D.P.S. not be the worst league in the state — and around 2005 we were kind of getting to that point," Andrew said. "I used to go to Denver West football games at All-City Stadium, and teams from suburban districts would come in with 150 kids. Denver West would have 14 kids, and we'd get mercy-ruled within the first two minutes. I knew we needed to start at the grassroots level with our middle schoolers and somehow attach them to our high school coaches and programs."

Andrew's concept became reality in 2009 when Broncos Charities accepted the district's pitch to fund Futures, a spring tackle football feeder program for seventh and eighth graders. Futures is in its 10th season, with the playoffs in May. Each Futures team consists of players who live in the boundaries of a district high school and is coached by that school's varsity coaches, a hands-on approach that has led to the substantial growth in players coming out for DPS programs over the past decade.

In 2008, before Futures began, the district had 605 total football players at its 10 traditional high schools. Compare that to the 2017 season, when D.P.S. had 826 players in those same programs — a 37 percent increase despite continued decreasing enrollment at the high schools.

"It gave the coaches a fighting chance to keep kids in district for high school, show them what their high school program is all about and — at the end of the day — it kept a lot of those kids in district," said Bobby Mestas, the Broncos' Director of Youth & High School Football. "I think Futures is pretty unique, because we can look back now and say Futures was significant in saving football at Denver Public Schools."

## Saving football at South

The effect of Futures was especially prominent at Denver South, where coach Tony Lindsay didn't waste much time in capitalizing on its benefits. Much of his first Futures team proceeded to start on varsity as freshmen, and then marched all the way to the Class 4A state title game in 2012.

It was Denver Public School's first football title game appearance since 1990, and the Rebels came up a score short of the district's first state championship since Thomas Jefferson's 4A crown in 1989.

"Futures was how we got strong," said Lindsay, now the head coach at Far Northeast. "At South, there's no feeder and there's no (youth) teams around South at all. That was definitely needed by us more than anybody, because a lot of the kids that were coming to us before were actually coming from playing youth in far northeast Denver and in Aurora."

Having seen the success of Futures in reinvigorating football in Denver Public Schools, the Broncos worked with Aurora Public Schools to start that district's feeder program in 2015.

In all, this spring's Futures season features 11 teams in the D.P.S. league and five in the A.P.S. league.

And even in the first three seasons, Vista Peak Prep football coach John Sullivan said Futures has been critical in putting his varsity program on the map in an open enrollment landscape.

"Being a newer school, even some of our feeder schools didn't know what we had to offer," Sullivan said. "Talk to any coach from Denver, any coach from Aurora — we lose a ton of kids to Cherry Creek, to Mullen, to Valor. It's that constant battle to keep your own kids and show what you've got, and the Futures program has helped us with that."

Low cost to play helps

Both Denver and Aurora district officials said the low cost of the program — the registration fee is \$40 and players are provided with equipment and uniforms — also has played a role in participation growth. Broncos Charities picks up the rest of the tab, which Andrew said boils down to about \$465 per player annually in addition to coaching and officiating costs.

Plus, the beyond-the-field requirements of Futures — maintaining academic eligibility as well as completion of the Project PAVE course designed to "empower youth to end the cycle of relationship violence" — have a way of stabilizing athletes for their transition into high school.

"Last year, we did a community outreach program with the Broncos called Team Catch, which is all about community advancement through character," said Mike Krueger, district athletic director for Aurora Public Schools. "And this year, without a doubt, there's been a lot of positive influence that Project PAVE and Derek McCoy, who runs that program, have had on our kids. So there's a lot more to the success of Futures than just the football aspect."

Other non-Denver or Aurora high schools are seeing that, and they want in.

This year, the Broncos considered four teams for expansion, but ultimately selected just one in order to leave room for future growth that could include adding struggling programs from other district high schools into the current leagues, as was done this spring with Jeffco Public School's Arvada.

“The future would be to expand very slowly — maybe looking at adding a couple teams every few years — because this isn’t just a band-aid, check-the-box type of program,” Mestas said. “This is a program that involves a lot of resources and time, and it takes several years to show its benefits and value.”

And even if that value isn’t necessarily in the form of 10-win seasons and a state title appearance as Denver South enjoyed, Futures, above anything else, gives dying high school football programs a breath of fresh air.

“The biggest success is a program like Denver West, where the year before Futures started we had 14 kids in the entire program, and now we have 66 kids,” Andrew said. “The kids don’t go out on the field feeling inadequate — they feel like they’ve actually got a chance at being competitive.”

# Sacco Sez: Automatic Otto

By Jim Saccomano  
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The National Football League is inching closer and closer to two big events: the 2018 NFL Draft and the celebration of 100 years in the 2019 season.

This year's draft is loaded with quarterback prospects, and there is virtually unlimited conversation and speculation about where they will all land.

And the centennial anniversary of the game gives me cause to take a look back at some of the greatest players of the first 100 years, particularly at the quarterback position.

When NFL Films did a list of the league's best players ever back in 2010, Otto Graham was listed at No. 16 among the greatest players ever.

While some of the individuals evaluating this year's crop of quarterbacks may have barely any knowledge of Graham, that does not in any way diminish his accomplishments.

His nickname was "Automatic Otto," which should give one a pretty good hint of his body of work.

In the early 1940's, Graham played football and basketball at Northwestern, and he spent more time at running back than quarterback for the Wildcats.

But when he joined Paul Brown's Cleveland Browns after graduation, the Hall of Fame coach immediately announced that Graham would be his quarterback.

But before his first season with the Browns, Graham actually played a year of pro basketball with the Rochester Royals, who won the National Basketball League (forerunner of the National Basketball Association) championship in 1945-46, and Graham actually won his first pro sports ring in basketball.

To this day, Graham is the only NFL player to have won championship rings in both pro football and basketball.

When he reported to the Browns after the basketball season, he played 10 legendary seasons.

No legitimate list of the greatest quarterbacks of all time can be made without mention of Graham among names like Elway, Unitas, Manning, Brady, Montana, Marino and Baugh.

One of his teammates on the Browns was defensive back and future Hall of Fame coach Don Shula, who says to this day, "Otto Graham was my idol."

Shula adds, "Every season in which he played, the Browns played in the league championship game. How else do you judge a quarterback better than by championships? He won seven in ten years."

Graham was so good as a quarterback that he had a role in pro football expanding to the West Coast.

With Graham leading the Browns to championships all four years of the All-American Football Conference (a first class NFL rival league in the 1940's), Cleveland Rams owner Dan Reeves (no relation to Broncos coach Dan Reeves) concluded that his Rams, despite having just won the NFL title themselves, could not compete with Graham's Browns.

So Reeves moved his Rams to Los Angeles following a season in which they won the NFL title in Cleveland.

Graham was named to the third Hall of Fame class in 1965, but he also made his mark as a coach, mostly at the United States Coast Guard Academy and as the coach of the College All-Star Game in Chicago, in which college stars played the NFL champions each year to kick off the season.

One of my good friends in this game is Larry Pasquale, who coached in the NFL for 22 years and in college for 16 more.

Larry has his own unique Otto Graham story.

"I was a sophomore starting quarterback at the University of Bridgeport in 1960, and we had a scrimmage against the Coast Guard Academy. I was having a lot of trouble with my reads, and before the game Coach Graham approached my head coach, Bob DeSpirito, and said, 'Bob, do you mind if I give your quarterback a few tips?'"

"My coach said yes, and the next thing I knew, the other team's coach [Graham] was going over my plays with him and suggesting how I should read and attack his defense! I followed his advice and took us right down the field for a touchdown against what was an outstanding Coast Guard defense," Pasquale recalls.

It always comes down to quarterbacks, and former quarterback Pasquale eventually coached Denver Broncos Ring of Famer Frank Tripucka's son Mark at the University of Massachusetts.

So as we watch this year's draft of quarterbacks and admire the careers of so many veterans, including the Broncos' own Case Keenum, it is worth looking back for a moment at some of the all-time greats in the NFL's first 99 years of play, including Otto Graham, "Automatic Otto" of the seven-time champion Cleveland Browns.

# Would Jordan Palmer Draft Sam Darnold or Josh Allen With the No. 1 Pick?

By Tim Rohan  
MMQB.com  
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For two and a half months from January to March, Jordan Palmer rented a beach house in San Clemente, Calif. where he tutored two of the top quarterbacks in this year's NFL draft—USC's Sam Darnold and Wyoming's Josh Allen—along with Houston's Kyle Allen.

When the prospects weren't working out with elite trainer Ryan Flaherty on the nearby beaches of California, Palmer—the younger brother of recently retired NFL QB Carson Palmer—put Darnold and Allen through hours and hours of film work, going through the basics of installing an NFL offense and dissecting a defense. In essence, he taught them how to watch film like a pro.

So what was the experience like for everyone involved? The MMQB quizzes Palmer on what he's learned about these future NFLers.

The MMQB: How do Darnold and Allen get along after two and a half months together?

Jordan Palmer: Dude, they're like best friends. They are super tight, all three of them. I mean, they wanted to make sure that Kyle [Allen] got one of their tickets to the green room. So Kyle is literally going to the draft, and his girlfriend. They're going with Sam and Josh, because they're so tight.

The MMQB: What was the atmosphere like at the house?

Palmer: Well, they were freaking grinding. So when they were at the house and [not working], they were laying on the couch, you know? Playing Fortnite and watching movies. These guys quote every single movie that's ever existed. It's pretty hilarious. I think they golfed a little bit, got in the water a little bit, ate. Just kinda did what college students do, minus the partying. This is not the time when you sit around and drink beers.

The MMQB: Fortnite—that's the video game, right?

Palmer: Yeah, it's the dumbest thing ever. I used to love video games, but this one looks so stupid and everyone's so addicted to it.

The MMQB: A big issue with Darnold is his turnovers the last few years. How did you work on that with him?

Palmer: I'm not going to strip him in the pocket, but we did some things to make sure he's always keeping two hands on the ball. ... Basically what I had him do—for two and a half months, no matter what, he always just held the ball in his left hand. And so, his left hand became his dominant hand in terms of just, gripping the ball. His first [instinct] was to grab the ball with both hands, and then I never had to say, 'keep two hands on the ball' again.

The MMQB: What about Allen and his accuracy?

Palmer: I've seen his tape as much as or more than anybody ... I think 56 [percent] was pretty good, given his situation.

The MMQB: What do you mean 'his situation?'

Palmer: I mean, I don't want to smash on Wyoming, but—there's a lot of issues that lead to completions or incompletions. One is the accuracy, what's the quarterback doing? And the other is, what's happening on the other end?

It's hard to put a lot of weight into Josh's tape. ... because he's not playing with or against a single person who's playing in the NFL. [It's comparable to] an eighth grader playing on a sixth-grade team. You can't evaluate that. His completion percentage number is less relevant to me. I think the guy is really accurate. I watched him throw for three months.

Now, I also know that he doesn't care about getting hit, so it's not going to change a lot. The speed of the game, sure. He's never even thrown to an NFL [receiver]... yet.

The MMQB: It came out recently that Josh scored a 37 on the Wonderlic.

Palmer: I didn't even know that.

The MMQB: Yeah?

Palmer: What did Sam get?

The MMQB: I think Sam had a 28. He was in the high 20's.

Palmer: Oh, yeah.

The MMQB: If you're hearing it for the first time, does a 37 on the Wonderlic help Josh Allen's case? Does it mean anything?

Palmer: I don't know. With Josh, it's about teams trying to figure out whether they're going to take him one, or if they're going to take him two, if they're going to trade to two. If he's a mid-first-round, I think there's pieces that help come together. But I think teams are going to fall with other things before they fall in love with [his high score] on the Wonderlic test. I think it's pretty irrelevant.

The MMQB: Was there a moment when the players were in the beach house when they made a leap physically or made a leap mentally?

Palmer: There was a period when, about three weeks in, when Josh Allen went from respectful and humble and hard working—just a great guy—and switched from that to just one of the funniest dudes I've ever been around. ... He's not shy or nervous ever. ... Everyone had been telling him [at Wyoming] that he'd be the top pick in the draft or whatever, but what are you supposed to do with that? He's 21 years old. I want to see that up against somebody. I think it was just the idea of him living with two

other players who are really good, who are going to be starters, and him going, whoa, I can totally do this, I am enough. I think he got so comfortable a couple weeks in.

The MMQB: It seems like all of the mock drafts have either Darnold or Allen going No. 1 over all. What have you heard? What kind of contact have the Browns had with you on those guys?

Palmer: I can't answer that. [laughs] You know.

The MMQB: Well, I think it's just the image. Everyone freaked out seeing Jimmy Haslam hanging out with Darnold's parents at his pro day.

Palmer: Jimmy met with both sets of parents, yeah. That is something they do. You flew all the way there to evaluate, I want to evaluate everything. I want to talk to the parents, I want to talk to the girlfriend, I want to talk to coach, I want to talk to the equipment manager. I think it's because it was live and on ESPN and NFL Network, it was an easy story.

The MMQB: You've said that Allen is the most talented quarterback you've ever worked with. It seems you believe he's worth the No. 1 pick just as much as Darnold?

Palmer: Yeah, the one thing I will tell you is, I honestly don't know who I would take [No. 1 overall]. It just depends on the situation and the personnel. But even still, I think both of these guys have really high ceilings.

You know, talent is tied to potential and ability, those types of words. And so, when I say that about Josh being the most talented dude I've seen—I mean, that's a fact for me, and it's an opinion. It doesn't guarantee anything. In terms of his ceiling and what he's capable of doing, he can throw the ball further and higher and harder, and he can run faster. He's got all of these things that allow him to play at another level.

No matter who the rookie is ... everybody, when they leave from college to pro, they have a long way to go. All the No. 1 picks do. I think Deshaun [Watson] still has a long way to go, and he just lit the league on fire last year.

So, it's not a knock, right? It's a big jump, going from college to pro. I've been around a lot of top picks, from my brother, or I've played with them or whatever. Friends with them.

Josh's talent and ability is very, very unique. But Sam has done it. He's played with and against NFL guys a lot more, and so there's just more data there. So that's why I go, man, this is a hard one. These guys both—the floor is really, really high. The Browns are in a position where I don't think they can screw this up.

# Josh Rosen the best QB in 2018 draft; Don't count out Cowboys

By Bucky Brooks

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Former NFL player and scout Bucky Brooks knows the ins and outs of this league, providing keen insight in his notebook. The topics of this edition include:

-- How big is the gap between the Cowboys and Eagles?

-- The Ravens are the perfect spot for Robert Griffin III.

-- How will the Pats use their bundle of draft picks?

But first, a look at why the biggest knock on Josh Rosen is actually a major strength ...

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Josh Rosen is the best quarterback in the 2018 class.

I might be on an island with my assessment of the UCLA star, but I really believe he has all of the tools to be the most successful quarterback prospect from this class. From his A-plus arm talent and flawless mechanics to his exceptional intelligence and football aptitude, Rosen has always checked off all of the boxes as a potential franchise quarterback. He is the quintessential player at the position, and we should be celebrating his arrival as the NFL's next great quarterback.

Now, I know I'm fueling the hype train by suggesting No. 3 has the potential to be one of the elite quarterbacks in the game, but my eyes tell me that he is the most polished quarterback to enter the league since Andrew Luck. I've outlined why in full detail in my scouting report on Rosen, and I'm sticking with him as the top quarterback prospect in this class.

You can @ me all you want for suggesting Rosen is a superior prospect to some of the other talented passers in this class, but I'm dying on this hill because I believe the best quarterbacks in the game are not only MLB pitchers with a wide array of pitches at their disposal, but they are tactical surgeons capable of dissecting defenses with their minds.

That's why I can't understand the backlash Rosen's received for supposedly being very inquisitive during the game planning and practice process. Quarterbacks need to understand the whys behind what they're asked to do. While coaches craft schemes on notebook paper or whiteboards, where the Xs and Os don't move, players are the ones really involved in the chess match on grass, needing to adjust in real time to the unexpected changes that happen on the field. Whether it's a different coverage or an exotic blitz or a misread by a defender, quarterbacks have to make split-second decisions that require a mix of instinct and intelligence.

With that in mind, I continue to believe a talented, high-IQ quarterback should be celebrated instead of chastised in the scouting community. Remember, Peyton Manning, Tom Brady, Drew Brees, Aaron Rodgers and others entered the VIP club primarily due to their ability to crack the defense's code at the line of scrimmage. They are able to decipher pre-snap disguise to accurately assess coverage, and their superb mental recall allows them to quickly come up with the right answers to counter every tactic.

Thus, I believe Rosen's intelligence and inquisitiveness will serve him well in the NFL, particularly with a team that has a solid supporting cast in place on the perimeter. If he has a few veteran pass catchers with the capacity to make "hot" reads and sight adjustments, Rosen should be able to handle the responsibility of pre- and post-snap route conversions as a young quarterback. At a time when a number of quarterbacks are spoon-fed information from their coaches on the sideline via placards and hand signals, Rosen's acumen should make old-school coaches comfortable since they are obsessed with verbiage, tags and conversions.

"[Josh] needs to be challenged intellectually so he doesn't get bored," former UCLA coach Jim Mora told The MMQB. "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."

To that point, I believe Mora's comments about his quarterback should be received positively from teams looking for a franchise quarterback. The UCLA head coach basically told potential coaches that his former quarterback embraces being overloaded with information and responds to being given a lot of responsibility as a quarterback.

Now, I'm sure people will take issue with the last part of Mora's comments because they suggest that Rosen isn't an "all in" guy, but there are plenty of quarterbacks who've succeeded while maintaining other interests. Manning, Brady, Brees, and Rodgers have all been involved in various off-field endeavors (business ventures, 7-on-7 leagues, TV shows, etc.) and those activities certainly haven't taken away from their brilliance or greatness as players. That's why it's a little presumptuous to assume that Rosen's outside interests will detract from his focus on football. Remember, each of these guys grew up as accomplished student-athletes in the classroom and on the field, so it's possible to succeed at the position without being a one-dimensional guy.

This brings me back to my original point about Rosen being the best quarterback in the draft and why it's foolish to downgrade him for his inquisitiveness. The top guys at the position want to know the ins and outs of their scheme because it allows them to know all of the answers to the test before they step onto the field on Sunday.

When I look at Rosen, I see the combination of talent and intelligence that separates good from the greats at the position. If I had a chance to grab that player as my franchise quarterback, I'm getting him and I'm not worried about the "Whys" that he will pepper my coaches with over the next decade. It'd be up to me and my staff to make sure we have all the answers.

**JERRY JONES IS RIGHT: Cowboys are legit contenders in NFC**

The football world snickered earlier this week when Jerry Jones suggested that the Dallas Cowboys weren't that far away from the Philadelphia Eagles, but the bodacious owner's assessment of his squad is on point.

"I think that if the gap is defined as them winning the Super Bowl and [us] not even getting in the playoffs, then we've got to close the gap," Jones said recently, via ESPN's Todd Archer. "I think that we should've been in the playoffs. We weren't. But I don't believe that us not being in the playoffs this past year is the size of the gap."

Guess what? He's right. The Cowboys are legitimate contenders in the NFC, with Ezekiel Elliott and Dak Prescott buoying their chances of making a run at the title this season. Now, I know the Cowboys' overall performance is tied to more than just the play of No. 21 and No. 4, but the dynamic duo has the capacity to mask all of the flaws on the team's roster when they're on the field together. Just look at the numbers.

In 2016, the Cowboys surged to a 13-3 record behind an offense that averaged 26.3 points per game, surrendered just 19.1 points per game and owned a plus-5 advantage in turnover differential. Those numbers dipped in 2017 when Elliott missed six games due to suspension. The team finished with a 9-7 mark, scoring just 22.1 points per game, allowing 20.8 points per game and posting a minus-1 turnover differential.

Those numbers support the notion that the Cowboys are an offensive-minded squad fueled by the play of their QB1 and RB1. When Prescott and Elliott play well, the Cowboys are nearly unbeatable, and that's why the Jones isn't off base when he suggests his squad is right there with the Eagles.

"They've got a team that mirrors us in a lot of respects," Jones said. "I like a lot of things that we have that they have. We've got a running game, offense and quarterback that I'm so proud of for looking ahead and building off of. They probably have more, to say the least, they probably have more names on defense. When I say names, just say they probably have what we'd like to continue to get to. But we've got some guys that I think we can get to there."

Say what you want about the saltiness of his commentary, Jones hit the nail on the head when assessing his squad. If the Cowboys' offensive stars show up in 2018, Dallas could be the last team standing at the end of the tournament.

Looking at Prescott's performance the past two seasons, it is apparent the Cowboys' young QB1 is capable of getting it done. He won the 2016 Offensive Rookie of the Year after posting a 104.9 passer rating and a 23:4 touchdown-to-interception ratio. Although Prescott's production declined a bit in 2017, he certainly didn't play as poorly as the narrative suggests, posting a respectable 86.6 passer rating and 22:13 TD-to-INT ratio. Sure, those numbers aren't exactly eye-popping, but he played without his RB1 and left tackle for a significant portion of the season.

Think about it this way: If you take the top offensive threat and blindside protector away from most of the NFL's QB1s, they would struggle. Prescott is no different. He needs No. 21 behind him to dictate the terms to the defense, particularly in a scheme that wasn't designed with Prescott in mind. Remember, Stephen Jones referenced this point early in the offseason when he said the Cowboys were going to make the offense more "Dak-friendly."

"Everybody here is all-in in terms of their belief that Dak can be a great player in this league and will be," Stephen Jones said on 105.3 The Fan's Ben and Skin show. "How do we put concepts in place, how do we put a system in place that fits his skills? Obviously, it worked out great even though we were

predominantly running a Romo-friendly offense with a few wrinkles that took advantage of Dak being young and fresh-legged and being able to have the mobility that he had.

"We were able to do that, but I think as we move forward, we have to really go in and critique and make sure that our concepts and what we're doing offensively give Dak every opportunity to utilize his skill set and get the most out of him."

With that in mind, Prescott will likely regain his Pro Bowl form in an offense designed to accentuate his strengths as a dual-threat playmaker. He can torment opponents executing RPOs, play-action passes, options and quarterback-designed runs with the threat of Elliott running between the tackles. The thought of No. 21 running inside is enough to make a handful of defenders pause, which creates bigger passing and running lanes for Prescott.

That brings me back to Elliott and his importance to the squad. The 2016 NFL rushing leader averaged 108.7 rushing yards on 21.5 attempts (5.1 yards per carry) with 15 rushing touchdowns as a rookie. Although his production dipped in 2017, he still averaged 98.3 rushing yards per game on 24.2 rushing attempts (4.1 yards per carry) with seven rushing touchdowns in 10 games. Elliott's rushing yards per game led the league, with Todd Gurley (87.0), Le'Veon Bell (86.1) and Kareem Hunt (82.9) well off the pace.

Thus, it's not a coincidence the Cowboys' offensive performance suffered when he served a six-game suspension from Weeks 10 to 15. During that span, the Cowboys' offense not only averaged 6.1 fewer points (from 24.4 to 18.3) but fewer total yards (from 354.7 to 294.0), rushing yards (from 144.2 to 121.3) and passing yards (from 210.5 to 172.7) when compared with the 10 games Zeke played.

That huge dip in production explains why Jones is so optimistic the Cowboys are right there with the Eagles. With Elliott on the field, the Cowboys are a more explosive and dynamic offense. No. 21 sets the table for the entire unit, including the QB1, and allows the team to employ a keep-away strategy (dominate time of possession and reduce the defense's exposure) that led to plenty of W's in 2016.

While everyone has pegged the Eagles and others as the runaway winners in the NFC East, the Cowboys are more than capable of winning the division if they lean on their offensive stars and stick to the blueprint that neutralizes the so-called talent disparity between them and their rivals.

THREE AND OUT: Quick takes on big developments across the league

1) Why change what's not broken, Bill?

Why in the world would Bill O'Brien want to overhaul the Houston Texans' offense after watching DeShaun Watson shred the league as a rookie?

That's the question that I asked anyone within earshot at the NFL Media newsroom when I heard NFL Network's James Palmer's report on "NFL Up to the Minute" last week from the Annual League Meeting. Palmer disclosed a conversation he had with O'Brien during which the Texans' head coach shared plans to install an entirely different offense from the version Watson operated in as a rookie when he lit up the league.

Now, I certainly understand wanting to stay one step ahead of the creative defensive coordinators who are spending their offseasons crafting plans to stop a Texans offense that averaged an NFL-best 34.7

points per game with Watson at the helm, but the collegiate-like scheme from last year produced fireworks that we've never seen in NRG Stadium under O'Brien. No. 4 helped the team amass 18 passing touchdowns while averaging 266.2 passing yards (6th) and compiling a 108.4 passer rating (4th) during his brief stint as a starter.

Think about that. A rookie passer who some questioned as a passer and playmaker was not only leading the NFL in passing touchdowns at the time of his injury, but he was shattering NFL records at every turn. He has the most touchdown passes of any NFL quarterback in his first seven career games since 1970 and became the first NFL player with 400-plus pass yards, four-plus touchdowns and 50-plus rushing yards in a single game. In addition, Watson is tied for the most three-plus passing touchdown games by a rookie in a single season in the Super Bowl era.

Looking at the All-22 coaches' footage, Watson's early success as a quarterback was partially due to the Texans scrapping the scheme they started the season with in favor of a game plan that featured a number of concepts that were prominently featured in Clemson's offense and other schemes designed around dual-threat quarterbacks in recent years. The Texans blended a mix of RPOs, option plays, movement passes and traditional play-action concepts to showcase No. 4's unique talents as a dynamic playmaker. With the team also featuring an extensive number of quick-game passes from spread and empty formations, the Texans' offense was essentially an upgraded version of a spread offense ripped from a high school/college playbook.

I don't mean to be dismissive when I make that characterization; I'm actually complementing the Texans' coaches for their creativity in crafting an offense that not only suited their rookie passer but also accentuated the talents of their top playmakers on the perimeter. Remember, each of the team's skill players (DeAndre Hopkins, Will Fuller, Braxton Miller and Bruce Ellington) played in a version of the spread offense as collegians, and their individual and collective success with No. 4 running the unit should prompt O'Brien to continue featuring a non-traditional offense.

"It's a player's game," an AFC head coach told me. "You should always build your scheme around the strengths of your players, particularly the quarterback. If you can make him comfortable, he will make the rest of the players better. That's why everything that you do [offensively] should be done with the QB in mind."

To that point, I asked O'Brien at the Senior Bowl about building an offense around Watson and he told me that he and his staff spent a lot of time studying what the Washington Redskins did with Robert Griffin III during his spectacular rookie season. He raved about Kyle Shanahan's creativity with the former No. 2 overall pick, and how misdirection and the option kept the defense on its heels. O'Brien also told me that he spent a lot of time talking to Watson about the concepts and tactics that he liked at Clemson.

Naturally, any reference to Watson's college offense and his role as a dual-threat playmaker leads to a discussion about his health and durability (he's suffered two ACL tears), but he has shown an uncanny ability to avoid big hits on the perimeter.

"He has a really good instinct for maybe gaining the 5 or 6 yards and then going down before he takes the shot," O'Brien said recently, via Sarah Barshop of ESPN. "That's a big thing that young quarterbacks usually have a problem with. He seems to have an instinct for being able to stay out of harm's way."

It's hard to imagine O'Brien moving away from a game plan, even one rooted in high school and college concepts, that consistently put up 35 points per game in a league where topping the 30-point mark typically leads to wins. Sure, he may tweak the system to protect his QB1, but letting his franchise quarterback ball out in the system he prefers is the best way to keep the Texans in title contention in 2018.

## 2) Can RGIII find success in Baltimore?

Speaking of dual-threat quarterbacks, I'm looking forward to seeing if RGIII can rejuvenate his career with the Baltimore Ravens. The 2012 Offensive Rookie of the Year signed a one-year deal with the team Wednesday that gives him a chance to earn a spot on the roster as a QB2 to Joe Flacco. Although no one expects Griffin to challenge for the starting role in training camp, the Ravens certainly believe he upgrades their roster and gives them a chance to compete if they lose Flacco for a stretch of games. "He's a very talented quarterback who's had a lot of success in this league early on," Ravens coach John Harbaugh said. "So we're excited about it. We felt like we needed a No. 2 quarterback. You look at the veteran quarterbacks out there ... I mean, where we're at right now, I'm pretty excited about this player. I'm really feeling like we got a steal."

It's easy to dismiss Harbaugh's excitement as simply coach-speak, but I really think the Ravens are the perfect spot for RGIII to rediscover his game. From a coaching standpoint, the team has a pair of coaches in Marty Mornhinweg (offensive coordinator) and Greg Roman (tight ends) with a strong track record with mobile quarterbacks. Mornhinweg, in particular, has worked with the likes of Mike Vick, Donovan McNabb, Jeff Garcia, Steve Young and Brett Favre during his career, with each guy earning Pro Bowl honors under his tutelage. He understands how to help mobile passers master the footwork and fundamentals needed to succeed as passers (see Vick's play in Philadelphia after serving 19 months in prison), which is critical in RGIII's case.

With Roman also comfortable working with an athletic playmaker (he worked with both Tyrod Taylor and Colin Kaepernick as their offensive coordinator), the Ravens have the right coaches in place to nurture Griffin's talent and craft a successful emergency game plan if he's forced into action.

From a skills standpoint, RGIII is certainly talented enough to play in the league as a backup quarterback/spot starter. He flashes enough arm talent to make every throw in the book while also displaying above average athleticism as a runner. Although the former Pro Bowler has flawed mechanics and inconsistent footwork that impact his accuracy and ball placement, he is an adequate thrower from the pocket, particularly when he's able to make pick-and-stick throws without hesitation. He lacks outstanding anticipation as a thrower but has a good enough fastball to fire the rock past defenders when he sees the open window. Griffin is at his best hitting crossers at short and intermediate depths and firing the ball to receivers on isolation routes (hitches, slants and hinges) on the outside. In addition, he is an effective deep-ball passer (go routes and post routes) following hard play fakes in the pocket (full flow play-action).

With RGIII also showing promise as a passer on the move to either side, he is definitely worth a look as a developmental/backup option. As an experienced player with 40 career starts, he is more than capable of filling in as a short-term sub for a squad with a solid supporting cast on the perimeter. Given the Ravens need for a quality QB2, the decision to sign RG3 on a low-risk, high-reward deal could be a wise investment down the road if he rediscovers his game in Charm City.

### 3) How will the Patriots use their bounty of picks in the 2018 draft?

When the New England Patriots traded Brandin Cooks to the Los Angeles Rams for the 23rd overall pick in the 2018 NFL Draft, the team immediately became one of the power brokers of draft weekend. The team owns five picks within the first 100 selections, including a pair of 1s (Nos. 23 and 31) and 2s (Nos. 43 and 63) at their disposal. Plus, the Patriots have a third-round pick (No. 95) also available in their war chest.

With so much capital at their disposal, the Patriots are sitting in the cat bird's seat when it comes to controlling the board. They can package multiple picks to move up the board to snag a blue-chip player, or they can trade out and acquire more picks to fill out their roster with inexpensive talent whose specific skill sets match New England's scheme.

In theory, the New England has the ammunition to retool its roster to help them remain a contender for the foreseeable future. But with Tom Brady turning 41 in August, the Pats are really at a crossroads: Do they remain in "win-now" mode or use the 2018 draft to prepare for life after Brady. Often, teams in this position tend to take a step back, fall out of the playoffs, and then use this moment as an opportunity to build toward the future. But the Pats under Bill Belichick are unlike any other team we've ever seen, making 15 playoff appearances in 18 seasons, including nine straight tournament appearances to date.

"It's tough to remain in 'win-now' mode and build for the future," said a former NFL scout. "You want to keep chasing rings with TB12, but you also want to avoid getting caught holding the bag when he eventually retires."

To that point, the Patriots have to decide if 2018 is the time to snag their quarterback of the future with a top pick. Belichick can see if one of the top quarterback prospects unexpectedly slides out of the top 10 and parlay some of those picks to move up and land a prospect like Baker Mayfield or Josh Rosen if they're within range. Granted, the Patriots have typically snagged quarterback prospects in the second or third rounds, which would put players like Oklahoma State's Mason Rudolph, Richmond's Kyle Lauletta, Washington State's Luke Faulk and others in the conversation as developmental prospects with long-term potential.

If the Patriots opt to continue with their win-now approach, the team could stay put and pick a handful of solid players to address their biggest needs. Sitting at No. 23 and No. 31, the Patriots should be in range to take an offensive tackle, pass rusher and/or tight end to add some sizzle to their squad. Notre Dame's Matt McGlinchey and UCLA's Kolton Miller could fill the void at left tackle created by Nate Solder's departure. If the team looks for a complementary tight end to play opposite Rob Gronkowski, the Patriots could set their sights on South Carolina's Hayden Hurst, South Dakota State's Dallas Goedert or Penn State's Mike Gesicki.

Given the team's need for a pass rusher, Ohio State's Sam Hubbard, Boise State's Leighton Vander Esch and Georgia's Lorenzo Carter could draw interest at the bottom of the first round. Keep in mind, the Patriots could auction off a few picks to shoot up the board to snag an elite edge defender like N.C. State's Bradley Chubb to fill the void along the frontline.

Based on what the Pats do on April 26, we will get a better idea of how Belichick envisions the future playing out in New England.

# New league will go without kickoffs, and NFL will watch closely

By Michael David Smith

Pro Football Talk

April 8, 2018

The NFL seems to be moving toward eliminating kickoffs, and leading the way will be the new Alliance of American Football.

That upstart league, which will begin play in 10 months, will not have any kickoffs. The biggest obstacle to the NFL's desire to eliminate kickoffs has been figuring out what to do about onside kicks, and the new league will allow teams to try to keep the ball after scoring by running one offensive play, needing 10 yards to get the ball.

"The kickoff is the least popular play, so why do we still have it?" league founder Charlie Ebersol said on CBS. "If you want to go for an onside kick, we give you the ball on your own 35 facing fourth-and-10. If you can convert you get to keep the ball and go. If you don't, the other team gets the ball."

The NFL so far hasn't had anything to say about the Alliance of American Football, but you can bet they'll be watching how football without kickoffs works. If fans like it and injuries are reduced, which are the two reasons Ebersol cited for changing the longstanding rule, don't be surprised if the NFL follows suit.

# Gary Kubiak, Vince Young headline Texas Sports Hall of Fame inductees

By John McClain  
Houston Chronicle  
April 8, 2018

Houstonians Gary Kubiak and Vince Young headlined the Texas Sports Hall of Fame's nine-member class of 2018 that was inducted Saturday night at the Waco Convention Center.

Kubiak and Young excelled as quarterbacks in high school and college before embarking on NFL careers.

Kubiak, who works in the Denver Broncos' personnel department, starred at St. Pius X and Texas A&M. He has been to seven Super Bowls as a player, assistant coach and head coach and earned four rings.

As Denver's head coach, Kubiak led the Broncos to a victory over Carolina in Super Bowl 50.

Kubiak got his first head-coaching job with the Texans in 2006 before being fired with three games left in 2013.

"This is such an incredible honor," Kubiak said. "I'm a Texan, and this means so much to me. This is an impressive group of inductees, and I'm humbled to be part of it.

"Football has taken me a lot of places in my career, and it always brings me home to Texas. Tonight, I feel like I've come full circle.

"Being inducted into the Texas Sports Hall of Fame has caused me to look back over my career and all the people who have meant so much to me and have helped me get where I am. This is as much for them as it is for me."

Among Kubiak's former teammates and players to attend the banquet were John Elway, Case Keenum, Matt Schaub, Owen Daniels, Kevin Walter and Chris Myers.

"To know those guys made the trip means a great deal to me," Kubiak said. "I've been so excited and nervous about this night. I'm just so appreciative to be in the Hall of Fame with the greatest coaches and athletes in our state's history."

Kubiak was the Texans' second head coach, and he led them to their first AFC South title and playoff victory.

"I want to thank Bob and Janice McNair for bringing me home and giving me my first opportunity to be a head coach," he said. "Being able to do that in Houston meant so much to me.

Young was a star at Madison High School and was voted national player of the year before going to Texas, where he compiled a 30-2 record as a starter.

“I used to sneak into the Astrodome and watch the Oilers and think someday I wanted to be like those guys and to have a chance to play in front of my family and friends,” he said. “To know that I was able to do that and be here tonight is amazing.

“So many great players and coaches have come through Houston. It’s a blessing to be one of them and to be honored like this.”

Young led the Longhorns to the 2005 national title. Tennessee made him the third overall pick in the 2006 draft, and he was voted NFL Offensive Rookie of the Year. In his six seasons, Young made two Pro Bowls.

Kubiak and Young were joined by another Houstonian, the late Yates High School running back Johnny Bailey, Texas Tech coach and athletic director Gerald Myers, Texas Rangers infielder Michael Young, University of Texas swimmer and coach Jill Sterkel, Longhorns basketball player and coach Nell Fortner, Mary Hardin-Baylor football coach Pete Fredenburg and high school basketball coach Cathy Self-Morgan.