

A Broncos' first-round option: Trade back, take a corner or linebacker

By Mike Klis

9NEWS

April 11, 2018

Might as well put Denzel Ward and Roquan Smith on the Broncos' list of first-round possibilities.

Most draft mocksters would suggest the Broncos' No. 5 overall draft spot is a tad rich for Ward, the Ohio State cornerback, or Smith, the Georgia linebacker.

But who says the Broncos have to stay at No. 5?

To date, almost all speculation has the Broncos taking an offensive player with their No. 5 draft pick. It's been either one of the Big 4 quarterbacks – Josh Allen, Sam Darnold, Baker Mayfield, Josh Rosen – or guard Quenton Nelson, or running back Saquon Barkley.

There hasn't been much consideration given to defensive players because the consensus top two in this draft – defensive end/outside linebacker Bradley Chubb and safety/corner Minkah Fitzpatrick – don't necessarily address the Broncos' needs.

The Broncos took a second-round tweener like Chubb last year in DeMarcus Walker. Adam Gotsis is a defensive end taken two years ago in the second round. At the outside linebacker position opposite

Von Miller, the Broncos have first-round pick Shane Ray going into his fourth season and Shaq Barrett, who was extended a second-round, \$2.9 million restricted free-agent tender last month.

Chubb would crowd out one of the Broncos' hefty recent investments.

Fitzpatrick is considered somewhere between a cornerback, where he played at Alabama, or safety. If he's a safety, the Broncos are pretty well covered with Justin Simmons, Darian Stewart and newly acquired Su'a Cravens.

One possible option for the Broncos to consider: Trading back a few spots and taking a corner or inside linebacker. Remember, the Broncos used a first-round pick in 2014 on Bradley Roby, who was their No. 3 corner for four years. With Roby moving up to replace former All Pro Aqib Talib as a starter, the Broncos could use a first-round talent to fill their No. 3 corner role again.

The 5-10 Ward is considered the best cornerback prospect, providing Fitzpatrick is projected as a safety. John Elway didn't lead a Broncos' contingent to the University of Colorado Pro Day on March 7 merely as a goodwill gesture. They were checking out projected first-round cornerback Isaiah Oliver.

The Broncos were hoping Oliver would attend their local Pro Day on April 3, but the cornerback had a prior commitment with another team. If Oliver stops by Broncos' headquarters this week, it would count as a local visit and not against one of the team's 30 official pre-draft visits.

NFLDraftInsider reported the Broncos are also planning to visit with LSU nickel cornerback Donte Jackson.

It's also clear the Broncos hope to select a 3-4 inside linebacker in the draft. The team has visited Ohio State's Jerome Baker, Washington's Keishawn Bierria, Iowa's Josey Jewell and BYU's Fred Warner, who are projected to go somewhere in the third to fifth rounds.

If the Broncos wind up trading that No. 5 pick to closer to the middle of the first round, they may consider Smith, Boise State's Leighton Vander Esch, Virginia Tech's Tremaine Edmunds or Alabama's Rashaan Evans.

The Broncos are currently set at their two inside linebacker spots with Brandon Marshall's \$5 million salary fully guaranteed and Todd Davis re-signed to a deal that fully guarantees \$6 million this year. But they need a third-down linebacker to replace Corey Nelson and the Broncos may balk at paying \$7 million to Marshall in 2019.

Trading back is a strong option for the Broncos, especially if Elway decides against taking a quarterback with his No. 5 draft pick.

It's possible Josh Allen, Sam Darnold and Baker Mayfield could all go within the first three picks – especially if Buffalo trades up into the New York Giants' No. 2 spot.

Such a scenario could leave the Broncos in the enviable position of having other teams seeking their No. 5 pick to nab the likes of Rosen, Chubb or Nelson.

The Broncos could trade back a few spots, pick up an extra second-round draft pick, and still be able to take the best cornerback or inside linebacker in the draft.

Broncos visit with receiver Wims, tackle Rankin

By Mike Klis

9NEWS

April 11, 2018

Javon Wims went from Miami to Jacksonville in high school, from a rebounding basketball to football, from Juco to Juco to Georgia.

To favorite receiver specializing in the high-point catch for Bulldogs freshman quarterback Jake Fromm.

To within four minutes of winning the national championship.

To visiting Tuesday with the Broncos at the UCHHealth Training Center.

Late-bloomers like Wims are why the NFL Draft doesn't stop after the first round.

Wims was a basketball standout in Miami Gardens, Fla., before transferring to Jacksonville and Ed White High School in Jacksonville, where he played football and basketball his senior year.

He bounced between two junior-college football programs before catching a Bulldog-best 47 passes for 720 yards and seven touchdowns in his senior year at Georgia. The Bulldogs were leading Alabama, 13-0, at halftime of the national championship game before losing in overtime.

Wims is similar to Broncos' receiver Jordan Taylor in that he is tall (6-4), thin (215) and is adept at going up to get the jump ball-type passes thrown down the sideline.

After Bennie Fowler III and Cody Latimer were allowed to hit free agency, Taylor is projected to be the Broncos' No. 3 receiver in 2018, providing he sufficiently heals from offseason hip surgery. Carlos Henderson, taken in the third round last year, will also compete for a backup receiver position.

But the Broncos are expected to draft a receiver within the first five rounds.

The Broncos also visited Tuesday with Mississippi State offensive tackle Martin Rankins. While Wims is projected to go in the middle rounds, Rankins could be selected in the second or third round.

King gets \$500,000 guaranteed

Marquette King must have really wanted to play twice a year against Jon Gruden and his former Oakland Raiders. And he must have really wanted to play in the "punter's paradise" that is Denver.

King received a two-year, \$4 million contract from the Broncos that also has a third-year option for an additional \$2 million. Only his \$500,000 signing bonus is fully guaranteed. King is also expected to draw a \$1.5 million salary in 2018 and \$2 million salary in 2019. There is also a \$2 million salary option for 2020 that must be triggered a year earlier. The deal is substantially less than what King had been kicking on. He had been one of the league's five highest-paid punters -- making \$7.75 million his previous two seasons with Oakland and scheduled to make another \$3 million in 2018 -- until he was released by Gruden, who returned as the Raiders' head coach in January.

Raiders' Bruce Irvin seemingly looks forward to on-field meeting with Broncos' Marquette King

By Paul Gutierrez

ESPN.com

April 11, 2018

Oakland Raiders linebacker Bruce Irvin seemed to issue more of a promise than a threat to former teammate Marquette King on Twitter on Tuesday, potentially setting himself up for a fine and possibly a suspension.

In a series of tweets during the second day of Oakland's offseason training program, Irvin first posted that he "asked to play punt return today against Denver."

Irvin was evidently implying that if he is on the Raiders' punt return team, he would go after King. The punter was released by Oakland on March 30 and then signed with the archrival Denver Broncos six days later.

Tweeting that he had fine money ready for whatever he plans to do to King will not be looked upon favorably by the NFL, hence the potential for a suspension for premeditation.

Irvin also tweeted on the day King signed with Denver.

King responded by posting a link to the video of Drake's song "God's Plan." King, though, has yet to respond to Tuesday's tweets.

The 6-foot, 195-pound King has 172,000 Twitter followers. The 6-3, 250-pound Irvin 306,000.

The Raiders had no comment on Irvin's claims that he will be on the punt return team or on the social media beef, which apparently stems from the Pro Bowl in 2017.

It was there where King posed for a picture with Aqib Talib, re-enacting Talib snatching Michael Crabtree's gold chain during the 2016 season. (Talib did it again in 2017, starting a Broncos-Raiders brawl that resulted in one-game suspensions for both players.)

King posted the picture on social media and it raised hackles in the Raiders locker room. King deleted the photo upon the request of a high-profile teammate, but screen shots are forever.

As are, apparently, feelings in certain corners of Oakland's locker room about King and his outsized social media presence.

Broncos draft needs include offensive guard

By Troy Renck
KMGH
April 11, 2018

The Broncos' presence on the clock with the No. 5 pick in the NFL draft is not because of some rub of a genie's bottle -- it's because they were not very good last season.

They dropped to five victories and endured an eight-game losing streak, their longest in 50 years. As coach Vance Joseph said, "We don't want to pick here again."

It makes finding the right player critical. That could be a quarterback, if general manager John Elway decides there's one he cannot live without when Denver's turn comes around. That could be a running back, if Saquon Barkley remains on the board because of a run on signal-callers. That could be a defensive end, if Bradley Chubb's pass-rush grade remains impossible to ignore for a Broncos team that finished with 33 sacks, 22nd in the NFL last season. That could be a guard, if history is disregarded and the Broncos go with safest pick in the top 10, Notre Dame's Quenton Nelson.

The latter is unlikely, but a need exists, nonetheless.

Nelson impressed me at the combine. He appeared as if he were a 1980s villain: big, bold and brief. "I want to break my opponent's will," he uttered. Anyone who watched the Broncos' offensive line struggle can appreciate Nelson's blunt physicality.

I maintain he goes eighth to the Chicago Bears. So what does that mean for the Broncos at the 40th pick overall, or later on? My look at starting right guard candidates:

Will Hernandez, UTEP: Hernandez won one-on-one battles at the Senior Bowl and dropped jaws. He is a mammoth of a man, who can impose his will in the running game. He lacks some length, making him vulnerable in pass protection against stunts. But his size and athleticism are intriguing. Pair him with Ron Leary at left guard, and the middle of the field feels protected and sturdy.

Isaiah Wynn, Georgia: Wynn plays with an edge. Offensive linemen need not apologize for being nasty. The Broncos lost their confidence and swag. Wynn brings attitude and reliability in the passing game.

James Daniels, Iowa: The Broncos hosted him on a visit. He is extremely athletic and versatile. His size draws concern, as he would likely have to add weight at the pro level. But he has good quickness and never seems to be out of position and reaching, which leads to penalties at the next level.

Why the Broncos should ... pick a quarterback at No. 5

By Andrew Mason
DenverBroncos.com
April 11, 2018

To pick a quarterback at the No. 5 selection -- if one the Broncos like is available -- would be to take advantage of the draft's most accurate window to find long-term answers at the quarterback position.

Although there is a fixation on the early-round busts at the position, your chances of finding a long-term starter are by far at their best in the first five picks. Since 1990, 18 of 33 quarterbacks taken in the first five choices became Pro Bowlers, with eight eventually starting in the Super Bowl. Those percentages of 57.6 percent and 24.2 percent, respectively, are by far the highest in the draft.

For picks 6-32, comprising the rest of the first round, the Pro Bowl percentage drops to 19.4, while the Super Bowl starting rate descends to 16.7. The general trend goes downward from there.

That doesn't mean you should just pick any quarterback at No. 5, nor does it mean you should reach for one. But this year could see four quarterbacks selected in the first five picks, and all bring something in terms of elite talent to the NFL: arm strength and measurable (Wyoming's Josh Allen), accuracy, leadership and quick processing ability (Oklahoma's Baker Mayfield), arm, size, mobility and downfield accuracy (Sam Darnold) and pocket presence, poise under pressure and ability to run a pro-style offense (Josh Rosen).

In the top five, there will be a quarterback for almost every taste and style.

Another reason to consider a quarterback at No. 5 is the cluster of elite prospects at the position makes this an unusual year, one that comes along every generation or two. Next year's quarterback class lacks the same depth of top-five-caliber talent, at least based on the trajectories of potential passers in the 2019 NFL Draft.

With fewer potential top-five quarterbacks next year, it might cost you more to move up if a need arises at the position than it would to stand pat -- or move up one or three slots -- to select a quarterback that you have identified as a long-term option.

With Case Keenum, Paxton Lynch and Chad Kelly on hand, the Broncos' situation also mirrors that of the Eagles in 2016.

Two years ago, the Eagles had starter Sam Bradford emerging from a solid season, leading them to give him a two-year extension. Philadelphia followed that by signing veteran backup Chase Daniel to a three-year contract. Combined, Bradford and Daniel were scheduled to make \$25 million for the 2016 season.

The Eagles, sitting with the No. 13 pick in the first round, were not initially in position to draft either of the top two quarterbacks in the 2016 class: Cal's Jared Goff and North Dakota State's Carson Wentz. But after two trades -- one with Miami to go from 13 to 8, and another with Cleveland to leap from 8 to 2 -- Philadelphia found themselves in position to take Wentz, even though quarterback was not a pressing need.

Moving up from 13 to 8 cost the Eagles linebacker Kiko Alonso and cornerback Byron Maxwell. The trade with Cleveland saw the Eagles give up their third- and fourth-round picks in 2016, a first-rounder in 2017 and a second-round choice in 2018.

But when Wentz developed faster than expected, the Eagles had a surplus, and they just had to wait for the right opportunity. That arrived when Teddy Bridgewater suffered a season-ending injury in a preseason practice, allowing the Eagles a window to trade Bradford to Minnesota for first- and fourth-round choices in 2017 and a 2018 fourth-rounder.

Philadelphia's trade of Bradford illustrates a point about quarterback: If you eventually have a surplus of starting-quality passers, you can trade it, because of the premium on the position and the dire need some teams have for it. The Eagles did, and they are reaping the benefits.

MORE WHY THE BRONCOS SHOULD ...

April 12: Pick a defensive player at No. 5

April 14: Pick an offensive lineman at No. 5

April 18: Pick a running back at No. 5

April 20: Trade down from the No. 5 pick

Roundtable: Four ex-Broncos weigh in on what Denver should do in the 2018 draft

By Nicki Jhabvala

The Athletic

April 11, 2018

Every draft year is deemed the most important. Remember 2011, John Elway's first as head of the Broncos' football operations? Not only was his first draft pick a table-setter for his career as an executive, but it also laid the foundation for the Broncos' eventual Super Bowl 50 win. Von Miller was a very important pick.

Remember 2016? Undoubtedly the most significant in Elway's tenure to that point as he searched for the quarterback who would guide the Broncos into the post-Peyton Manning era. The findings from that search haven't panned out yet.

But 2018 is unique. The Broncos own a top-five pick for only the third time in the Pat Bowlen era and, after two playoff-less seasons, the urgency is perhaps greater than ever to get this draft right. The Broncos are at a crossroads, and a wrong turn in April could lead them down a path of more losses, more frustration and more uncertainty.

"It's kinda funny; everyone thinks they know where we're going," Elway said at the NFL owners meetings. "I don't know where we're going yet. We'll have to wait and see. We got a lot of good options, which is a good thing."

But everyone does seem to have an opinion, including some former Broncos who played for or alongside Elway in Denver. The Athletic reached out to four of those players to get their take on team's looming draft decisions. Let's meet the players.

— Brandon Stokley, a 15-year receiver, played with five NFL teams and is the owner of two Super Bowl rings (XXXV, XLI). Drafted by Baltimore in the fourth round in 1999 from the University of Southwestern Louisiana (now the University of Louisiana at Lafayette), Stokley joined the Broncos in 2007 after four seasons each with the Ravens and Colts. He played three years in Denver, then returned in 2012 and reunited with quarterback Peyton Manning. Stokley retired in 2013 and is now a co-host with Zach Bye on 104.3 The Fan.

— Ray Crockett, a 14-year NFL cornerback, played seven seasons as a starter on the Broncos' defense (1994-2000). He led the team in pass breakups for five of those seasons, won a pair of Super Bowl rings (XXXII, XXXIII) and was named a second-team corner on Denver's 50th-anniversary team. Drafted by the Lions in the fourth round in 1989, Crockett spent the first five years of his pro career in Detroit, then closed it out with two seasons in Kansas City. He is now a co-host on Orange and Blue 760, the Broncos' partnering radio station.

— Ryan Harris, a tackle and third-round pick by the Broncos in 2007, played nine NFL seasons and was a part of five NFL teams. Harris was a Bronco in three stints in his career, and his final go-round included a Super Bowl 50 win. The former Notre Dame standout ended his NFL career in Pittsburgh and announced

his retirement in March 2017. He is a host on Altitude Sports Radio (950 AM) and a soon-to-be-published author.

— Tyler Polumbus, an offensive tackle and Denver native, played football at every level in Colorado — Cherry Creek High, the University of Colorado and the Denver Broncos. He signed with the Broncos as an undrafted free agent in 2008 and played two seasons before bouncing to four other NFL teams. In 2015, he returned to Denver for one more season and capped his career with Super Bowl 50. He announced his retirement shortly after and is now a sideline reporter for Broncos games and a host on Orange and Blue 760 radio.

Jhabvala: Now that the Broncos have Keenum, should they use their No. 5 pick on a quarterback?

Stokley: I say they're not going QB at No. 5. But if I was going quarterback at five, Sam Darnold. I think he has the biggest upside. I also like Josh Allen a lot. Those two are my favorite and pretty much a coin flip between both of those guys. Either one of those I think would be good picks.

Polumbus: Well, it has not been the sexiest of offseasons for the Broncos in terms of free-agent acquisitions. However, John Elway has done a good job of putting a viable starter in place at the major positions of need. Case Keenum is certainly a very viable starter, and if he plays the way he did last year, he could even be our long-term guy. Now we have the luxury of truly taking the best player available and they should stick to it. If a QB is their best player available when on the clock, then take him. If not, go get yourself one of these generational-type players like Saquon Barkley, Quenton Nelson or Bradley Chubb.

Crockett: With us getting Case Keenum, I feel that we should trade out of No. 5 because I don't think any of the quarterbacks would really save your organization or really lift your organization up. Your organization has to be in a situation where it's stable and has good players around him and has a good system before they would have an opportunity to perform well. I think all these quarterbacks have shown that unless they have good people around them — good systems, good coaching — that they're not above-average quarterbacks or definitely not franchise quarterbacks. And it's going to take them a while, so I think with Case Keenum being there, we should take this opportunity to build our organization and build our team around him, so we could trade out of No. 5 and get two or three players that could be really special for a number of years for the Broncos.

Harris: No. The point of free agency is to fill glaring needs. They did that by signing Case Keenum. The Broncos finished 18th in rushing last year with 4.05 yards per attempt and finished 22nd in the NFL in sacks with 33. The numbers tell you the Broncos need a sack-happy defender.

Jhabvala: If they don't draft a quarterback at No. 5, what is their best option?

Stokley: Saquon Barkley. I think he would be the biggest impact player that they could get, besides possibly a quarterback. That's an instant three-down back that can do it all. I don't know what the Giants are going to do. I think they could take him if they don't trade out they don't take a quarterback. It's tough to say what they're going to do. If he's available at four, I think the Browns are forced to take him. I don't think they trade that pick. If Saquon moves to two, I think the Browns trade four.

If Saquon is off the board before the Broncos are up, I think they trade their No. 5 pick. If their quarterback is not there at five and Saquon Barkley is gone, I don't see Elway taking Quenton Nelson. I don't see Elway drafting a guard with the fifth pick. I think they end up trading the pick.

Polumbus: If you stick to your board, then the draft is honestly not overly complicated. You take the best player available according to your grades of all the players. That said, if I had my druthers and Nelson, Chubb and Barkley are all on the board I don't know how you pass on Barkley. He truly looks like he is going to be the next Ezekiel Elliott and could immediately change the identity of any offense.

Crockett: If Barkley falls, that would be a great addition, considering they don't know what they want to do with C.J. Anderson. At the end of the day, we know what C.J. Anderson is: At best, he's a 1,000-yard rusher, but I wouldn't consider that to be special. So what we're looking for now is an explosive back. If you look at most teams that are doing well, from the Rams with (Todd) Gurley and things of that nature, you need an explosive back to really make a difference. Even with the New England Patriots, they had a number of explosive backs with the way they used them and made them very unique.

Of course, Chubb, he's a special talent there. The problem with Chubb is, with Shaq (Barrett) and Shane Ray and Von, I think we're good there. So I don't know if that would be overkill. But I think Chubb is going to be a special talent.

Minkah Fitzpatrick is another guy at that slot that could be a very special game-changer, but with us picking up Su'a Cravens, I feel that kind of fills that void for us, that safety/linebacker hybrid.

I think if we trade out, especially if we traded with Buffalo — 12 and 22 — you could pick up some really good players there.

Harris: Bradley Chubb, a player with consecutive double-digit sack seasons, could be just what the doctor ordered. He could be there at No. 5. I got to see him up close when they played at Notre Dame. He's an NFL pass-rusher today. Additionally, more pressure up front can cover for a secondary that will be tested early and often with the departure of Aqib Talib. If he's not there, it would be hard to pass up a talent like Quenton Nelson.

Jhabvala: Is a guard — Quenton Nelson, to be specific — worth a top-five pick?

Stokley: I don't think in the Broncos' situation that it is. I think there are some other good guards in the draft. Top five, that's really high. Maybe if you had the seventh or eighth pick I could see possibly taking a guard. I need to see more of an impact player. I need to see a guy that can be possibly a Super Bowl MVP, so quarterback, running back — that type of impact player.

Polumbus: It used to be incredibly rare for a guard to even get drafted in the first round, let alone the top 10. However, that has begun to change over the last few years. Not necessarily change as in drafted in the top 10, but first round has been in play. Quenton Nelson is easily one of the best offensive linemen I have seen coming out of college ever. I would definitely say he is worth a top-five pick. I think he is the safest pick in the draft. There are guys with more upside that can impact your team quicker, so safest doesn't necessarily mean that you have to take him if he is available. But, yes, he is worth a No. 5.

Crockett: Even though he's a really good guard, at the end of the day, I don't think you want to pay a guard that type of first-round money. Even the veteran guards, they're not making that kind of money. If

you look at how guards are transitional guards, you really get guards and then you get some right tackles to play guard, as well. To pay a rookie that kind of money, I just don't feel a guard is really worth that.

Harris: Yes. Early in his season, I saw it at Notre Dame. Scouts on the field thought I was crazy. Sure enough, by Week 8, two different scouts came up to me and told me I was right. Nelson reminds me of former teammate David DeCastro of the Steelers. Nelson has size, strength, flexibility (read: low injury risk) and quickness that will make him an all-pro. Plus, Notre Dame linemen are the best and brightest college football can offer.

Jhabvala: What is the Broncos' biggest need entering the draft?

Stokley: The biggest need is tight end. Looking at the roster right now, the running back situation is OK, the offensive line is pretty solid. Obviously, both of those spots could use upgrades, but the biggest need and the biggest hole for the Broncos is tight end. I mean, who do they have? Are you going to rely on Jake Butt, who didn't even practice last year? Is that how you're going to into the season? I think the biggest need entering the draft is tight end, but that needs to be filled in free agency, not the draft. You possibly could see a trade, maybe, a draft-day trade for a veteran tight end. I don't know who that would be, but there are not many viable options out there that get me happy, anyway.

Polumbus: They will draft a QB relatively high. Could be at No. 5, but regardless of when he is drafted, it will be a guy that they feel can be a starter within two years. They need to get a starting-caliber offensive tackle, although I would not expect him to start this year with the (Jared) Veldheer pickup. They need to pick up a linebacker and interior defensive lineman, as well.

Crockett: Now that we've gotten the tackle from the Cardinals (Veldheer), I think the biggest hole is an explosive difference-maker at running back. Someone that really puts fear in your eyes. Right now, the running backs that we have from a pass-catching and running standpoint, they're good running backs, but they're not game-breakers. You look at C.J. Anderson, you look at (Devontae) Booker — neither one of those guys I feel are game-breakers. But you look at someone like (Sony) Michel from Georgia, (Nick) Chubb, Barkley — those are the game-breaker-types.

Especially if you have a quarterback like Case Keenum — you don't have a transcending franchise quarterback — having an explosive running back can take a lot of pressure off him and he can just turn around and give it someone for 20, 25 carries a game and big things can happen.

Then I think our third receiver. We need a receiver with some wiggle. Emmanuel Sanders is getting older, Demaryius Thomas is not that guy and if we keep those two outside, we need someone, even if it's a big-time tight end. We hope Jake Butt is that guy, but right now we don't know that. But the game is really played from hash to hash now. The rule changes have allowed you to attack hash to hash, whereas before you didn't want to attack hash to hash because those safeties would knock your head off and you didn't want to take that punishment. But now with the rule changes, with them playing touch football in between the hashes, you have to draw up an offense that attacks that. That's what we were lacking last year. From the tight end position and the slot receiver position, we didn't get many plays made in between the hashes.

Harris: Defensive pass rush, corner, a quarterback like Kyle Lauletta in the second round would be extremely appealing. Also, with so many picks the first two days, the Broncos could trade for a quality NFL starter to fill a hole.

Jhabvala: What is the hardest aspect for rookies as they transition from college to the pros?

Stokley: There are so many things, but just trying to learn a new playbook and just the jump from college to the NFL — it's such a huge difference in talent. So you're trying to learn this huge playbook and know all these different things that you didn't know before, and on top of it, you're competing against the best of the best and the game is so much faster, the talent is so much better. You have so much going on in your head trying to just remember what to do and remember the different concepts because of coverages, how you have to adjust your routes off the offensive linemen, the different fronts you see and all of a sudden, the ball is snapped and you gotta go out there and you gotta be ready to compete against the best of the best.

For me, I got hurt my rookie year and so it was probably not until the end of my second year (when I felt comfortable). I didn't play a lot my rookie season, I was inactive my second year for the first eight, nine, 10 games, something like that. And then it took me probably toward the end of my second year before things started slowing down and I started feeling comfortable. You gotta get out there and be able to play, not only in practice, but it's another thing to do it when the lights are on and it's game time.

Polumbus: You hear people say all the time that the speed of the game is the biggest shocker. That is true, but for me, that was mostly due to the complexity of the game rather than the athletes I was facing. I had no idea how little I knew about football coming in, and that caused me to play slow on the field. Once you get confident in your playbook knowledge, you can start playing quicker and everything on the field slows down. So, for me, the shock was the amount of classroom time spent in the NFL and how much I needed to learn.

Crockett: The biggest challenge, even for myself, coming into the game is adapting. You have to be able to adapt really quickly to the next level of football. It takes all rookies some time. Some of them take a whole year, some get it really quickly. But it's the ultimate transition from being a part-time football player to a true professional, from every aspect of the game — your study habits, your sleeping habits, your eating habits, your practice habits, your film-watching.

You have to transition to where football is "what I have," and everything else is "if I get to it." That's the hardest part, is from a mental aspect. We're all physical talents. But the NFL is played, I would say, 60 percent from the shoulders up.

Harris: Learning how much work it takes to be a pro. Trying to figure out the balance of hours watching film, paying attention to blitz meetings, keeping family and friends in their lane, oh, and getting your own groceries. All this is happening while some of the fiercest, fastest and most physically dominant athletes in the world try to embarrass you daily. It's a unique onboarding process, to put it mildly.

Be Accountable: Broncos hope new faces, new mindset boosts winning culture

By Nicki Jhabvala

The Athletic

April 11, 2018

Isaiah McKenzie sat at his locker in a daze as tears began to well up. The Broncos' rookie receiver, apparently traumatized by what had transpired on the practice field moments earlier, was inconsolable.

Across the room, a veteran fumed. A few did.

Thanksgiving week last year was one no Bronco wants to remember. They lost to the Bengals at home (then their seventh-consecutive loss), fired their offensive coordinator, released a former draft pick (Lorenzo Doss) for failing to show up to meetings on time and then, during their holiday practice, two fights broke out, one of which included McKenzie and veteran cornerback Chris Harris.

"You always respect the vets," Harris said after the incident.

Less than two years removed from their Super Bowl 50 victory, the Broncos had come unglued. Losing can do that. But Denver's issues ran deeper than its record.

Peyton Manning was long gone. DeMarcus Ware, too. And although the Broncos retained a slew of veteran leaders and examples for the younger players to follow, the generational divide in the locker room seemed to widen by the day.

"Every team goes through that, having young guys who don't understand what it takes versus veteran guys who have won games and are trying to catch the young guys up to help us win," coach Vance Joseph said. "There's a draft every year and there are young guys every year, so we have to do a better job of keeping those guys up to speed so they can help us win."

While last season was one to forget, it was also a catalyst for change in the offseason to improve not just the on-field product for the Broncos but also their development off the field.

At one point late last year, the team only had one of its eight drafted rookies contributing on game day: first-round pick and starting left tackle Garrett Bolles. Three picks (receiver Carlos Henderson, tight end Jake Butt and quarterback Chad Kelly) were on injured reserve for the year; defensive end/outside linebacker DeMarcus Walker, a second-round pick, was used sparingly and even benched for a stretch until he improved on special teams; third-round cornerback Brendan Langley was burned badly in his limited time; fifth-rounder McKenzie was benched twice because of fumbles; and sixth-round running back DeAngelo Henderson wasn't really used until the season was all but over.

As the Broncos' record tanked, tensions between veterans and the active younger players seemed to rise. Thanksgiving was the breaking point.

"These young guys, they're not as hungry as I was," Harris said late last season. "I hope to see that. I mean, that's what we need."

So the Broncos' latest roster remake was seemingly geared to try to close the gap.

John Elway's first order of business was to sign quarterback Case Keenum, a player who plugged the biggest hole on their roster, fit their salary-cap constraints, and just so happened to scrap his way from the pool of undrafted players in 2012 to become a coveted NFL starter by 2018. Joseph labeled him a "winner" who has "battled his way through everything."

Elway then re-signed Todd Davis, another undrafted player turned starting linebacker, whose grit and leadership has been praised often by the staff.

Next, Elway signed defensive tackle Clinton McDonald and traded for offensive tackle Jared Veldheer, both captains of their former teams.

"Anytime you're 5-11, you're lacking something right?" Elway said. "Obviously your leaders got to be able to pull you out of those streaks we got on last year. No. 1, we didn't play very well, but I think we just got to get some guys in leadership positions that can take over a little bit more."

The Broncos also altered their coaching staff, bringing in new faces and a new structure to improve technique and to focus on development.

The team's new mantra for 2018 is a throwback to the days of Gary Kubiak, who installed "BE ACCOUNTABLE" in big blue lettering inside the Broncos' meeting room when he was hired as head coach in 2015. When Kubiak stepped down and Joseph took over, the decor throughout the Broncos' building was altered, and Kubiak's bold reminder was replaced with "TRUTH."

"We want to stress this spring having more accountability," Joseph said. "That's where it starts with getting better. Everyone doing their job better. Myself, the coaches, the players — everyone diving in and doing a better job than we did last year. That's a simple message."

With the bulk of free agency in the rear-view mirror and the draft straight ahead, the Broncos put out a mission statement to "change the culture," a vague, catch-all that really isn't about change at all; owner Pat Bowlen established the culture long ago and they say their quest to "be No. 1 in everything" is still in place.

But the approach has changed. The outcome, the Broncos hope, will too.

"Absolutely it's going to be a different approach," Joseph said. "We won five games. So I have to figure out a way to reach our football team better and get us on a winning track."

After a lost rookie season, Jake Butt maintains his sense of humor and belief he'll thrive in NFL

By Nicki Jhabvala

The Athletic

April 11, 2018

You can't hide or ignore a last name like Butt, so the only alternative is to cherish it.

Jake has.

Prior to the draft last year, the Broncos' second-year tight end and former Michigan star inked an endorsement deal with Charmin that included a load of toilet paper. A blue dump truck with Charmin's logos stamped on the sides rolled up to Pickerington, Ohio, Butt's hometown, and dropped off the supply. Jake shared the moment on social media with the hashtag #bestdumpever.

On game days at Michigan, the Butt clan could always be spotted by their No. 88 T-shirts with custom names on the back. There was "Papa Butt" and "Headbutt," Butt of Steel" and "Kick Butt," "Black Butt" and "I Like Big Butt, " among many other Butts wearing navy and yellow.

But last week, the Butt family's fame reached new heights with a cameo on "The Ellen DeGeneres Show." An image of Jake standing with his back turned on the sideline next to former Michigan teammate Kevin Gross — "Gross Butt" — became the latest joke for an audience of millions, and Butt shared it with his Twitter followers:

DeGeneres promptly agreed with Butt's comment. "Yeah, you did," she replied. After professing the Butt family's love for her, DeGeneres sent Jake a heart emoji.

Yep. Made it.

"I got not one but two tweets back from her," Butt beamed. "That's pretty cool."

Butt, the 2016 John Mackey Award winner as the nation's best college tight end, has a history of this, of finding the fortune in the weird and unlucky. He did it with his name, he did it during the draft and the plan is to do it again this year as he makes his return from a season on the sidelines.

After suffering a torn ACL in the 2016 Orange Bowl, Butt spent the entirety of his rookie season in recovery. The start of his pro career certainly wasn't what he envisioned some 16 months prior, but his stroke of bad luck fortuitously landed him in Denver as a fifth-round pick.

And his months of work and rehab has stoked a fire he so often hides.

"The thing that I look at most and, take this however you want it, it's just I see a lot of people that doubt me," he said. "There are a lot of people that talk about, oh he's injury-prone, or he's this or he's that. I got very unlucky with my knee. It's not like I have bad knees. I just got hit in the wrong way. Here I am working like nothing's ever happened."

Butt knew immediately what hit him as he lay on the ground. He felt the same sensation two years earlier — a terrifying numbness. The pick play Michigan had planned went bust, so Butt sprinted out to the flat to receive the ball, then headed upfield as Florida State defenders rushed in. He spun off one but was immediately met by a safety, who went low for the tackle and slammed his helmet in Butt's already once-repaired knee.

Butt didn't need the trainers to tell him what happened. The best tight end in college football was out and would be for at least nine months — just as his NFL courtship was supposed to begin.

"I didn't really look at my injury like it should affect my draft stock at all, because I felt like I was going to come strong, healthy, even better than I was," he said. "So I had high expectations."

The following April, Butt watched the draft start to finish alongside friends and family in Ohio. He watched as his Michigan teammates flew off the board. First Jabrill Peppers to Cleveland. Then Taco Charlton, Butt's high school rival turned roommate, to Dallas. He sat as Chris Wormley went in the third round, along with Jourdan Lewis and Delano Hill and Amara Darboh. He watched as Ben Gedeon went in the fourth round to Minnesota. Then Ryan Glasgow and Jehu Chesson, at Nos. 138 and 139.

Michigan had 11 players selected in 2017, the most of any school that year. Butt was taken second-to-last among them.

"It's the best weekend of your life, but it's also the most stressful," he said. "I knew I wasn't going to go first round, second round most likely. I was watching to see where my guys were going, which definitely added to the stress a little bit. But I found some positivity in watching those other guys hear their name called."

When the phone finally rang and Butt saw the Denver area code, celebratory screams erupted around him. All he heard on the other end was, "Hey, I'm going to pass the phone to (John) Elway."

"He passed it to Elway and he said, 'We're taking you with the first pick of the fifth round.' It was awesome," Butt recalled. "Obviously when the Broncos call you, deep down you're like, 'Yes!'"

That's how it started. A tumble and a strike of fortune.

That's how it continued.

Former Broncos tackle Ryan Harris once said that transitioning from college to the pros is like learning a new language. If the college game is in Spanish, the NFL is in Italian. Some similarities, but not much. The game is faster, the players bigger and better, the playbooks larger and more complex, the humiliation frequent.

Throw in a season-ending injury and the narrative changes.

"You're trying to become a part of the team. Being injured, I was kind of off to the side," Butt said. "The team goes out to practice, I go to the weight room to lift. The team's lifting, I'm doing my rehab. The hardest part is being away from the team. Everyone's out there, they're practicing, they're doing what they love, they're playing on Sundays and, for the first time in my life, I'm really on the sideline."

He wasn't completely alone, though. Not for the start, anyway. Center Matt Paradis was on the mend from two hip surgeries at the start of last year and was on a similar schedule before the start of the regular season.

Paradis, a former practice squad player who worked his way into the starting lineup and has become one of the league's top centers, became a mentor to Butt, much like former tackle Ryan Clady was for Jeff Heurman in 2015. Heurman tore his ACL during rookie minicamp three years ago and spent his first season on IR alongside Clady, another in ACL recovery.

"He's just a world-class dude all around. He was awesome," Butt said of Paradis. "He was a good mentor for me, not just from a rehab standpoint, but what it looks like to be a professional, what it looks like to be a leader, to be a hard-worker. A lot of credit to him."

The hope and the expectation were that Butt would make it onto the field at some point.

That point never came.

After six weeks, the Broncos reached the window when they had to decide whether to leave Butt on injured reserve for the rest of the season or add him to the active roster. Those 21 days were Butt's brief opportunity to prove himself as a pro, as the guy the Broncos envisioned as their No. 1 tight end.

A few days of practice, however, resulted in soreness that held him back. He was fine before and fine after, and had he not been recovering from a serious knee injury — his second serious injury to that knee — he could have easily pushed through.

"I wasn't out there on the field being careful with my cuts. I felt great," he said. "I was out there going full speed in and out my cuts. I felt like I was making an impact and having a really good practice.

"It was just the soreness happened in the one window I could showcase what I could do. From there on out, I haven't had any trouble with it."

Since Julius Thomas defected to Jacksonville in free agency three years ago, the Broncos have been on a fruitless hunt for help at tight end and for a true red-zone threat.

The tight end room has expanded and shrunk with players who tried their hand at becoming the go-to target the offense has sorely needed. Vernon Davis, Owen Daniels, Garrett Graham, John Phillips, A.J. Derby, Henry Krieger-Coble — all have come and gone. Virgil Green, one of the most tenured Broncos, was the latest to leave.

The group is now down to Heurman, Butt, Austin Traylor, Matt LaCosse and Brian Parker, who collectively have 12 NFL starts and more unknowns than receptions.

Butt is well aware he holds most of those. He also knows he was taken with 145th pick last year to be the difference-maker.

"We drafted him to be that guy," coach Vance Joseph said. "Obviously Heurman has made some strides, but we are hoping Jake Butt becomes that guy that we hoped he was going to be."

When the Broncos' dismal 2017 season ended, Butt headed west for nearly two months of training at EXOS in San Diego, a 16,000-square-foot offseason home of numerous pros.

He returned to Colorado last weekend to resume training in altitude, received his team-issued iPad mere days ago and will soon dive head-first into Bill Musgrave's offense that will feature a new quarterback and new faces on the line.

Upon hearing Joseph's comments about his high expectations, and after hearing similar ones from Elway, the general manager, in recent months, Butt only shrugged.

It's great and all. Really.

"But it means nothing until I go out there and do it," he said. "The pressure is not going to be added on by anything that's said from the coaching staff or organization. I put pressure on myself because I want to be a good ball player."

But what rings louder are the words of those who last saw him on a football field reeling in pain.

He knows what they're thinking.

"That doubt, it's always been a motivator for me," he said. "It's an easy way to light a fire in somebody, especially myself. It's been awhile. I miss football."

Telling stories that are often lost or twisted in the daily grind of a season

By Nicki Jhabvala

The Athletic

April 11, 2018

One of my favorite stories over the last four years in covering the Denver Broncos was also one of the hardest to write. There was a lot to this story but limited time with my deadline and the player's schedule, so we kept it basic.

We talked. And then I wrote.

Derek Wolfe, the Broncos' menacing defensive end known as much for his grit as his passion for the game, sat down with me inside the office of his trusted trainer, Loren Landow, one evening after practice. He told me about his battle with injuries — many quite serious — and a rage that burns inside him when he's on the field. He opened up about his past and his relationship with his parents, about his new wife and stepdaughter, about the protests during the national anthem, about opioids and pain management — about anything I asked, really.

It was December 2016 and I was wrapping up my third year on the beat, so he knew of me. He saw me every day. But he didn't have a lot of reason to trust me with his story or his honest opinions. Yet he shared them with me anyway, unfiltered.

After about an hour of talking and another half-hour for photos and some follow-up interviews, I headed home to write Wolfe's story — one that was raw but real and so often lost or twisted amid the daily grind of a season.

Although our meeting was brief that evening, I felt like I learned something after talking to him. I learned what fueled his drive and, in turn, why he played the way he does and why Wolfe is, undoubtedly, one of the most complex characters in Denver's locker room.

That story is, in large part, why I joined The Athletic, where reporting and storytelling are the prizes. My piece on Wolfe stripped journalism to its purest form and, from what I've read, that's what The Athletic is all about.

The subscription model is a shift from the traditional platforms, but one I believe is necessary in the current climate of journalism. The product isn't dependent on the ads, or the things no one wants but needs to keep the lights on. With an all-star cast of writers and reporters (I may be the odd one out here), the content truly is king. I'm excited by what The Athletic has done in only a short time of existence. I'm even more excited to bring it Denver.

Broncos Film Room: Inside Bill Musgrave's "Swipe"

Concept

By Ted Nguyen
The Athletic
April 11, 2018

Though Chip Kelly's time in the NFL was ultimately a failure, his influence on the NFL is still being felt. Some of Kelly's staple concepts are being used in the NFL today, kept alive by his former players and assistant coaches.

The Athletic's Sheil Kapadia did an awesome breakdown of Kelly's mesh concept. Kapadia detailed how Sam Bradford, who played for Kelly, suggested adding that play to Doug Pederson's playbook. Pederson listened and it would pay huge dividends down the road. Coincidentally, Nick Foles, who took over for the injured Carson Wentz, had experience running it under Kelly. The Mesh concept and Foles' familiarity with it ended up playing a major role in the Eagles' Super Bowl run.

Pat Shurmur, who is now the head coach of the Giants, and Bill Musgrave, who took over as offensive coordinator for the Broncos last year, saw their offensive philosophies evolve during their time as Kelly's assistants in Philadelphia. Both coaches are still calling plays on Sundays and will continue to keep Kelly's philosophies alive.

In 2016, Musgrave led the Oakland Raiders offense to sixth in total yards using a blend of Kelly's spread system with a heavy under-center run game. One of the Raiders' best plays that year was the switch verticals concept that he learned from Kelly. In Musgrave's playbook, the play is called "swipe".

Here are Oakland's 2016 stats when calling the "swipe":

21/27 (77%)

317 yards (11.7 yards per attempt)

2 TDs 0 TOs

1 Drop, 1 Missed Pass

Converted 2/2 on 3rd down

These stats show that the play was both efficient and explosive. Of course, the personnel running the plays affects how well it's executed but you'll see in the clips below how the play put stress on defenses and led to open receivers.

"Swipe" made its way into the Broncos playbook early in the season. Presumably, Musgrave, who was the quarterback coach at the time, suggested it to Mike McCoy. Musgrave continued to call the play after he took over as offensive coordinator. The "swipe" concept will likely become a bread-and-butter play for the Broncos in 2018.

The actual switch verticals are usually run to the boundary (short side of the field). In the diagram, the Z and Y are running the verticals. The quarterback's first progression is the Y, who expands outside the numbers and runs a fade. The second progression is the Z, who lines up outside of the numbers and runs inside of the numbers, into the seam. The T (tailback) is the third progression and he runs a swing from the backfield.

Kelly ran the play as a “mirrored concept,” meaning that receivers on both sides of the formation all ran switch verticals. Musgrave added his own twist by adding a separate concept opposite of the switch verticals. The inside receiver runs what is called a “hinge” route or deep hitch, while the outside receiver runs a “now slant” or one-step slant. The quarterback has the option of going to this side against two-deep coverage but this hardly ever happens — quarterbacks like to get greedy and hit verticals whenever they are called.

This play could be run out of multiple formations and different personnel groupings. Musgrave is extremely creative when it comes to adding window dressing to plays. He could have 10 ways of running “swipe” so defenses can't key on it.

With the Raiders, Musgrave even ran it with receivers Michael Crabtree and Amari Cooper in the backfield. I could see him doing something similar with Emmanuel Sanders in the backfield running the swing and Demaryius Thomas and Jake Butt running the switch verticals.

“Swipe” is especially tough on the cover-3 match coverage that Pete Carroll made so popular in Seattle. It forces defenders to be flawless in their communication.

In the clip, the immediate swing from tailback Latavius Murray (25) took the attention of the flat defender Phillip Wheeler (41) — leaving cornerback Desmond Trufant (21) to defend both verticals himself. Trufant went too far inside with Amari Cooper (89) and left tight end Clive Walford (88) wide open down the sideline. This made it easy on Derek Carr because Walford is his first progression. He saw Walford and hit him perfectly for the long touchdown.

As mentioned before, Musgrave took over as offensive coordinator late in the year so the Broncos didn't have a lot of time to refine the details of the play.

Here, the Broncos ran “swipe” out of the shotgun with Thomas lined up in the slot to the left of the formation. Thomas motioned over to the right and ran the sideline vertical. Because the tailback has to leave immediately on a route, Brock Osweiler knew that he only had 5-man protection and had to get rid of the ball quickly against the blitz.

However, the defense only blitzed five and the offensive line picked it up. Osweiler had time to look at his first progression, which was Thomas, who was wide open running down the sideline. Instead, Osweiler rushed the throw hot to his running back, who should have been running the swing with more speed. With a full offseason to install and practice “swipe”, the play should be executed at a higher level next year.

In Musgrave's playbook, he also has a variation of “swipe” called “sweet” that is run out an I-formation.

The main difference on “sweet” is that there are three receivers on one side of the formation. The Z receiver, the tight end, and fullback are lined up on the boundary.

The Z receiver still runs the inside vertical but the tight end runs a deep “over” route and the fullback runs the outside vertical from the backfield. The tailback still runs a swing.

Ironically, the Broncos scored on a version of this play against the Raiders in their first meeting of 2017.

McCoy likely added his own twist with the play action, and “orbit” motion but the main concept remained the same. It was smart to heavily disguise “sweet” against an opponent that was so familiar with the concept.

The Raiders were in man coverage. Tight end A.J. Derby lined up as the fullback and he ran the outside vertical after pretending to lead block for a run. Linebacker Marquel Lee was supposed to have Derby man-to-man but he bit hard on the play-action fake. Thomas ran the inside vertical and took the attention of the free safety, which left no one within a country mile of Derby. Once again, the outside vertical was Trevor Siemian's first read, which made it easy for him to find Derby for the touchdown.

“Swipe” made it's way from Oregon to the NFL because of how effective and explosive it was. Musgrave took it, tweaked it, and got tons of mileage out of it in Oakland. Now, it'll likely be a staple in the Broncos' offense in 2018.

2018 NFL Draft: What Bill Belichick and the Patriots Will Do ... (We Think)

By Peter King

MMQB

April 11, 2018

This is (probably) terrifically phony, but follow the plot line:

Let's fast-forward two years, and walk into the New England Patriots' draft room. It's two weeks before the 2020 NFL Draft in Green Bay, and head coach Josh McDaniels and GM Nick Caserio are tweaking the draft board, trying to get everything just right for their first draft together. After 20 years with Bill Belichick and Tom Brady on the team as coach and quarterback, they've both retired, and now McDaniels and Caserio have to find a way forward. Franchise cornerstone Rob Gronkowski is retired too, and defensive leader Devin McCourty is likely headed into his last season, playing 2020 at age 33.

McDaniels and Caserio look at their board, and consider who they have as their nucleus players entering years four through 10 of their careers. It's a thin group.

On offense, it's guards Shaq Mason and Joe Thuney, who will each play 2020 at 27; right tackle Marcus Cannon (32), center David Andrews (28), and running back James White (28). On defense: tackle Malcom Brown (26), pass-rusher Trey Flowers (27), cornerback Stephon Gilmore (29) and linebacker Dont'a Hightower (30). And Hightower is no sure thing.

As McDaniels and Caserio have said to each other, it's a good thing the franchise had those four high picks in 2018.

"Thank God for that 2018 draft," McDaniels says to Caserio. "Where would we be without that draft?"

Back to reality.

Once you realize the Patriots, as of today, are in the bottom half of the league (and probably the bottom third) in cornerstone players for the next three to six seasons, you realize what a huge draft this is for the franchise. If McDaniels indeed succeeds Belichick when the legendary coach decides to retire—I'm betting Belichick has two or three years left—it's the kind of draft McDaniels will appreciate the day he takes the job. Certainly, some of McDaniels' success or failure in the coach's chair depends on what happens with this year's picks. New England has the 23rd and 31st picks in round one, and the 43rd and 63 picks overall in round two. Then they have but one choice in the next three rounds.

I would be surprised if the Patriots packaged some of the draft choices, or a high one this year and next, to move up for a quarterback. First: They don't have the ammo to move up for one of the top ones; the top four will likely be gone in the top 10 picks, and maybe in the top five. Second: Their needs elsewhere are too acute to go all-in for a quarterback this year. So, barring a big surprise, the Patriots won't mortgage these picks to move up for a passer.

New England's draft prep is always shrouded in secrecy, but let's think about their last couple of months. They come back from a crushing Super Bowl loss, and Belichick and owner Robert Kraft are able

to talk McDaniels out of taking the Indianapolis head-coaching job. In so doing, Belichick, according to multiple reports, agrees to take McDaniels behind the curtain and give him the inside story of what it takes to build and care and feed a great team. We have to assume that's happening now. If so, McDaniels is likely playing a role in draft prep, particularly at the quarterback position. The only way—in my opinion—that the Patriots will go outside the box and trade a cadre of picks to move up for a quarterback is if McDaniels and Caserio and Belichick feel one of the top five (including Louisville's Lamar Jackson) has championship potential. Then and only then would the Patriots mortgage the future to get Brady's successor. I still think it's a long shot. Not impossible, but a long shot.

The Patriots shouldn't be that picky. They have needs all over the roster, except perhaps for the interior offensive line. The biggest need is at left tackle, with the free-agent loss of Nate Solder to the Giants. But there isn't a position outside of guard or center that would be a mistake to target in the first two rounds. The Patriots almost certainly will let the draft come to them, not reaching for any position except perhaps left tackle in round one.

Here's what I think they will do:

1. (23rd overall) Josh Jackson, CB, Iowa, or Leighton Vander Esch, LB, Boise State. With the pick obtained from the Rams in the Brandon Cooks trade, New England can target a sideline-to-sideline linebacker with speed in the 4.6s to key a needy unit, or take Malcolm Butler's successor. Also a chance neither would be around by pick 23.
2. (31st overall) Kolton Miller, T, UCLA, or Connor Williams, T, Texas. Gil Brandt's Pats pet pick. After losing Nate Solder in free agency, left tackle is the biggest need on the roster. Miller's more of a project, but also has a bigger and more athletic upside.
3. (43rd overall) Hayden Hurst, TE, South Carolina, or Cortland Sutton, WR, SMU. One of these ready-to-produce pass-catchers should be there at 43. Hurst is the kind of blocking-receiving tight end who would appeal to Belichick.
4. (63rd overall) A quarterback. All of these are guesses, of course, but let's put Mason Rudolph of Oklahoma State or Luke Falk of Washington State here. Excellent students, and room to grow for a year or two behind Tom Brady.

The Patriots will be smart to make four picks, or turn one of these into two players in the top three rounds. That's what I think they'll do.

Now onto your email for the week...

CONFUSED ABOUT FREE SPEECH

You wrote: "If San Francisco safety Eric Reid does not get signed, it sends a chilling message about free speech to every NFL player who would think about protesting anything." I don't understand where you and other members of the media are coming from. Why do NFL players have the "right" to: A) protest on the job, in uniform, on national TV; B) anger many Americans who take respect of our national anthem seriously and the unity it represents; and C) not have to risk any consequences for their controversial decisions.

—Adam L., Boise, Idaho

That's a common view, Adam, and one many readers had this week. I understand it. My view is simple. I have been at baseball games before—one at Citi Field in New York last summer, for example—and seen people not stand for the national anthem. It's not common, but it happens. Why is it such a big deal if someone does not stand for the anthem? And why must a player who does not want to stand be forced to stand?

ON "KEEPING POLITICS OUT OF FOOTBALL"

Playing the Star Spangled Banner and having uniformed military members wave the national flag before a game is a political act. When John Elway of the Broncos, Bob McNair of the Texans and others advocate "keeping politics out of football," they clearly mean politics with which they do not agree. If the powers of the NFL are so gung-ho for the flag, why do they display the flag so disrespectfully? The U.S. flag is never supposed to be displayed horizontally like some sort of tarpaulin.

—Jonathan R., Los Angeles

I don't know about that. But the NFL has gotten so over-the-top patriotic that the next thing you know some stadium will be called American Flag Stadium, with uniforms red, white and blue and no fans allowed in the stadium without wearing flag pins on their shirts. It's like the league, to compensate for the 10 or 15 guys who don't want to stand for the anthem, is becoming the National Patriotic League. It'd be nice, once in a great while at least, to see some organized league honor firefighters or police officers or teachers or nurses or caregivers or some walk of life other than the military. Not that I'm trying to slight the military; we all owe those who serve a tremendous debt. I just think the military shouldn't be honored at the exclusion of every other service employee who works for the greater good.

ERIC REID'S STATUS

According to PFF, Reid had the 30th highest grade in the NFL for 2017 and that was his highest graded season ever. His 2016 season was poor (50.8) and he had trended downward in PFF grades in each of his first 3 years in the league from "good" (80.6) down to "average" (75.6 and 72.6 in years 2 and 3). While I have little doubt that he has the physical abilities of a starting safety in the league, let's not pretend he is a top 10 or top 20 player at his position in the league and that him not being signed can only be due to his political protest. I get that you lean left in your political views but not everything is a conspiracy when things don't turn out the way you think they should.

—Thad S.

I am looking at the safety rankings on Pro Football Focus right now. Reid was the 21st-rated safety (among 89 strong/free safeties) graded by PFF in 2017. He was ranked ahead of Devin McCourty, Eric Weddle, Tony Jefferson, Jamal Adams, Ha Ha Clinton-Dix, Malik Hooker and Reggie Nelson in 2017. Do you believe that if any of those players were on the free-agent market right now they would not have had gotten offers four weeks into free agency?

WILL BOYCOTT IF REID DOESN'T GET SIGNED

If Eric Reid does not get signed, I'm joining the growing list of black professionals that will boycott the NFL. As a corporate executive, I recognize the importance of diverse perspectives and respectful disagreements. It's just good business sense to get a broad perspective before making decisions. As a military veteran, I served so these players could freely enjoy their Constitutional rights—rights that came at the cost of lives so blacks could have those rights. Flying the confederate flag bothers me more—as the South attempted to secede from the same Union that the flag represents. If it's about respecting the American flag, I'd expect these owners to support the removal of Confederate monuments from public property. But they won't. Please pass on to the plantation owner Bob McNair

that there are two sides to this debate. And while he seems intent on crafting his response for one group, there is a growing number on the other side more than willing to speak with our dollars and viewership, too. Count me as one if Reid is not signed.

—Jeff B., San Antonio

Thanks for your email, Jeff.

HI JENS

I read your MMQB column about Jens Vinther from the Faroe Islands with great joy. It happens to be that I was one of the NFL commentators doing color for Danish television when Jens was watching. Many viewers had never experienced football before we introduced it to the viewers in October of 2000. Just wanted to tell you a little different NFL story from the other side of the pond.

—Jesper

Great to hear from you, Jesper. Jens is a good man and I'm sure he would echo what I'm saying here in thanking you for spreading the interest in our football.

A THANK YOU FROM YOUR NEIGHBORS TO THE NORTH

Hope these sentiments reach you. Your touching words on the Humboldt Broncos and your kind words about your neighbours to the north were all truly appreciated. Thank you.

—Brett, Ottawa

Brett, I'm still heartsick over this, and I can only imagine what it feels like to be a Canadian. What really struck me was the raw emotion of the radio color man, Dan Ukrainetz, on the other team, Nipowin, when we spoke on Saturday. "The hockey rink is the gathering place for our people throughout Canada," Ukrainetz said. "You want to know what's going on in town? Go to the rink. We've got no movie theater in Nipawin, no casino. We've got a hockey rink. That's how so much of Canada is. That's why this hits us so hard."

WE WILL GRIEVE FOR A LONG TIME UP HERE

Peter, on behalf of all Canadians, all hockey fans and all sports fans, thank you for telling the story. We are feeling pretty raw up here right now; there aren't many of us who haven't been friends with someone who either rode a bus or had relatives who rode a bus to go to away hockey games somewhere in this vast country. We are grieving hard for those 15 people and for the 14 who lived and will live with the aftermath, and the town of Humboldt and all the other towns where the young men and coaches and media people who were there came from and come from.

—John W., Edmonton

Just know you've got a lot of people just south of you feeling for you and thinking of you. I couldn't take my eyes off the CBC feed of the vigil Sunday night, and I know I'm not alone. Good luck to Canada, and especially to Humboldt.

8-MAN FOOTBALL TO THE NFL

Leighton Vander Esch wasn't the only player from a school that plays 8-man football. Rashaan Salaam also played 8-man high school football at La Jolla Country Day high in California.

—Adam Z.

Thanks, Adam. Paul, from Liberty, S.C., pointed out that the late Gaines Adams, a top 10 pick in 2007, was an 8-man football player in high school too. Appreciate you reading so closely.

UNIFORM UNVEILING

As a long time Titans fan, I enjoyed the uniform unveiling. With a new coach, a young GM, and lots of quality players, we're more excited than we've been in a long time about this team. I appreciate the team showing the fans some love and taking a page from the Predators' hype-book (Go Preds!) on how to generate some enthusiasm in Nashville and Tennessee.

—Erin C., Pulaski, Tenn.

Well, maybe I'm wrong. I don't get headlines for a uniform, and days of anticipation for the unveiling of it. But if you enjoy it, who's to say I'm in the right?

NFL deposes Colin Kaepernick in grievance battle

By Charles Robinson

Yahoo.com

April 11, 2018

After weeks of sitting for depositions in the Colin Kaepernick collusion complaint, the NFL's powerbrokers will finally get some of their own questions answered as the league's lawyers are set to depose the former San Francisco 49ers quarterback on Tuesday in New York.

It's the first witness the NFL has deposed in Kaepernick's complaint, marking a significant moment in the proceedings. It's unknown what information the league will be seeking, although a league source familiar with the complaint said the NFL is likely to concentrate on Kaepernick's mental outlook once he entered free agency in March of 2017, and whether he corrupted his free-agent market through a series of factors relating to football skills, contract expectations and motivation to play.

Among the inquiries that are believed to be on the agenda for NFL lawyers in some form or fashion:

- Whether Kaepernick expected to be signed as a starter once he opted out of his contract with the San Francisco 49ers.
- What salary demands he or his representation had in mind early in free agency.
- Whether Kaepernick's capacity to play diminished due to past injuries.
- How Kaepernick related to coaches or teammates while playing for the 49ers.
- Whether Kaepernick expressed a willingness to continue his professional football career anywhere outside of the NFL.
- Perhaps most pressing (and obvious), whether Kaepernick has ever discovered or been presented with tangible proof that NFL teams or executives sought to eliminate him from playing in the league again.

The deposition is expected to last several hours, and could dive into instances where Kaepernick appeared to make negative proclamations about law enforcement on social media or during practices, such as his wearing of the now infamous pigs in police hats socks during training camp in 2016. Essentially, the league's lawyers are expected to walk Kaepernick down a path suggesting how he (and not NFL employees or owners) tangibly tainted his value across the league as a quarterback and/or teammate.

While his appearance before the league's lawyers is a significant marker in the collusion case, a source familiar with the proceedings said it doesn't signal that an end is near. Indeed, a multitude of league executives, owners and team personnel remain on a deposition list that could stretch far into the summer or beyond, making it conceivable that the collusion complaint could drag into 2019.

The NFL's Wide Receiver Crisis

By Conor Orr

MMQB.com

April 11, 2018

It's the first day of organized activities and the quarterback enters the huddle with a play call: Twins right, scat right, fake zoom, seam 678 Y flat drag.

For a coach working with rookie wide receivers, it's a thrilling moment to see a new dimension in the offense. It's also a common frustration to see them bailing out after the first section of the first play call.

"They're sitting there going, 'What the hell is that?'" says Ricky Proehl, a 17-year NFL wideout and Panthers position coach from 2011-16, who currently trains college prospects. "They're sitting there, they heard twins right and are still trying to line up. First thing they say: Twins right? O.K., I'm the Z, so I line up on the right. They didn't hear any of the other s--- because they're trying to figure out, 'Where do I line up?'"

Proehl is definitely buying into the theory that the wide receiver position is in a bit of a crisis at the college level. It's hard to believe, just four years removed from the Sammy Watkins/Mike Evans/Odell Beckham Jr./Brandin Cooks/Kelvin Benjamin class, we are entering a draft that may only contain one or two first-round picks at the position. Since 2014, only Amari Cooper has been picked in the first round and gone on to a Pro Bowl. Kevin White, DeVante Parker, Breshad Perriman, Nelson Agholor, Phillip Dorsett, Corey Coleman, Will Fuller, Josh Doctson, Laquon Treadwell, Corey Davis, Mike Williams and John Ross have all been slowed by injuries or slow to lift off.

The reasons are three-pronged, and could be why some of your favorite NFL teams are drafting receivers specifically out of the few pro-style offenses remaining in college, like Alabama, Georgia, LSU and Florida State (under Jimbo Fisher, who took the Texas A&M job last winter).

1. Collegiate offenses reduce wideouts to one side of the ball with limited responsibilities.

"They say hey, you're going to be the A receiver. The A receiver lines up on the left. The B receiver lines up on the right. And then this receiver lines up slot right because the tight end is on the left," Proehl says.

The issues at play: The receiver is often in his own world. He splits out and checks with his coordinator or position coach, who reads the coverages for him, and then directs the receiver to one of a few routes that correlate.

"They don't worry about motion," Proehl says. "They don't worry about snap count. They don't hear anything else and the coach holds the board up and they know I got one of five plays where I'm running a go, post, slant or a comeback. That's all they're running. If he's off I'm running a hitch. Man, I'm running a go."

2. Coaches are starting to teach routes differently, and perhaps less effectively.

Take one of the most basic components of the NFL route tree: the curl. For years, the receiver was taught to run 12 yards, plant hard and work back to the quarterback at a 45-degree angle. This allows the quarterback to throw a split-second early—like when the receiver digs his heel in to turn.

Now, receivers are coming out of school running the curl as a continuous semicircle, which creates myriad problems at the next level.

“When you’re running a semicircle, you’re keeping your arms moving and chopping, some coaches think its great because you’re playing fast, you’re not stopping,” Proehl says. “But a guy running a semicircle, if I’m running it and a guy like Kelvin Benjamin is running it, our circles are going to be different. The quarterback has to wait for you to come out and square your shoulders. That takes more time.”

That extra time means defensive backs have a window to undercut the route.

“When you come to him, plant your foot in the ground and come back at an angle, you’re boxing him out. He’s behind you. You create and maintain separation with your angle coming back to the QB.”

3. The use of the ‘fingertip method’

Proehl says some receivers are now taught to catch the ball with their fingertips, or are at least enamored by the prospects of it—the silent woosh, the aesthetic of it.

The problem is that there is little strength in those muscles, which could cause a batted pass from a defender or an outright drop. Proehl, who now works with agencies like powerhouse Rep 1 sports to prepare their draft-eligible wideouts and maintains a stable of NFL clients at his PSP training facility in North Carolina, prefers an attacking method.

“Try and hold a ball with your fingertips and see how easy it is to strip out of your hand,” Proehl says. “Put your whole surface of your palm and your fingers on the ball. That’s how you catch a ball. Every part of your hand. The more of your hand you have on the ball, the more you have to maintain an attack from a DB when he tries to strip it.

“Fingertips? There are 10 little points on the ball. Guys say it’s so cool. Man, I want my guys to be aggressive.”

One more damning comment...

I asked Proehl if, before he left the Panthers after the 2016 season, there was a sense among NFL scouts and coaches that receivers were diminishing in value, at least enough to invest serious draft capital. His answer:

“We heard that more with running backs at the time, that they’re a dime a dozen, that you don’t take them in the first round. When I was coaching, there were classes with Julio Jones, A.J. Green, Odell Beckham. That never came up before, but I have heard that this year. The receivers coming out just didn’t impress at the combine—no true route runners, and there may not be a whole lot [going in the first round].”

So who might gamble on a first-round receiver this year?

Keep your eyes on the Cardinals, who visited privately with Texas A&M wideout Christian Kirk; the Seahawks, who are in geographical proximity to Washington's Dante Pettis; and the Saints, who have had multiple connections with fringe first-round prospects throughout the pre-draft process. The Bears might have no choice but to keep swinging and have had contact with consensus No. 1 receiver Calvin Ridley out of Alabama. But the Cowboys might be the safest bet. With Dez Bryant in decline, they spoke with Ridley and Maryland's D.J. Moore at the combine. Their local pro day also provides access to a ton of talent, including Courtland Sutton from SMU.

THAT KYLE LAULETTA-JIMMY GAROPPOLO COMPARISON

In a draft cycle with four potential star—some might even argue generational—talents at quarterback, it's hard for a prospect like Richmond's Kyle Lauletta to stand out.

However, this is also a draft cycle where a ton of teams need quarterbacks. Lauletta happens to be the son of a Naval Academy quarterback and, like Jimmy Garoppolo in 2013 and Carson Wentz in '16, is the star of the Football Championship Subdivision. Is Lauletta the next Garoppolo, or are we just nearing that point in the draft where anything thrown against the wall that sticks is halfway interesting?

We reached out to Towson University head coach Rob Ambrose for assistance. Ambrose and the Tigers beat Garoppolo in an epic FCS semifinal back in 2013 and fell to Lauletta and the Spiders this season. He had both of his scouting reports queued up for the afternoon.

"I think Jimmy might be a little bit better, his release is quicker and he has the ability to be accurate from multiple release points," Ambrose said by phone this week. "Jimmy is like a 2-guard in basketball. He is truly a pure shooter and ungodly talented.

"Kyle is a great passer and his release is still quick, but with Kyle, he's as fundamentally sound as I've seen anyone play the position in college. Tremendous student, and that's what I know for sure.

"The one thing that is the same about both of them is who they are. As famous as both of them became during their careers, they're just as humble as two guys could be."

Ambrose said that Lauletta's strength is in dissecting defenses. His belief—which is something I've heard about Lauletta during the pre-draft process—is that he'll be able to climb up draft boards during the visit phase (despite our insistence that risers are largely a myth). His knowledge of each of the four—four!—offenses he played in at Richmond is "encyclopedic," and he'll be able to play white board games with coordinators and coaches.

This season, Ambrose created a few defenses specifically to trip up Lauletta, presenting bluff coverages or blitzes on third downs, then sending something different after the snap. It took just one rep for Lauletta to counter it the next down.

"He's still physically talented, but he is a surgeon mentally... he's so efficient. Look at the gaudy numbers of all the (FBS) quarterbacks have. They also have draftable wide receivers. These guys don't have that. They don't have three guys going to the combine. When you're a 1-A guy, all you have to do is get it near these guys. What Kyle has is incredible accuracy.

"You take any tough ballplayers who are extremely accurate, that's what matters."

I asked Ambrose, who called Garoppolo the best quarterback he's ever faced, if he got a similar feeling from his matchup with Lauletta back in October.

His response: "Oh God, yeah."

So where could Lauletta end up? The Patriots connection is thrown around because of their investment in Garoppolo, but there is a lot of interest around the league in Lauletta. He'll end up getting drafted by a team that prioritizes quick decision-making, fast release and defensive recognition. To me, that would put the Giants and Cardinals in the mix, and I would put the New Orleans Saints as a serious suitor. (The Giants and Cardinals, by the way, have come up multiple times when asking around about second- and third-round quarterbacks.)

Lauletta, I'm told, is in the middle of the "Tier 2" section. So if you think about Sam Darnold, Josh Rosen, Josh Allen, Baker Mayfield, Lamar Jackson and Mason Rudolph as Tier 1 quarterbacks, Lauletta is in the mix with Washington State's Luke Falk and Western Kentucky's Mike White.

Why does that matter? Backup quarterbacks and developmental second- to third-round quarterbacks are a crucial part of a team's foundation. The free agent market is outrageously expensive, and netting a passer who could develop into a capable starter—or even a trustworthy No. 2—while on his rookie deal is a significant score.

MORE FCS QB LOVE...

In case Lauletta isn't far enough off the radar for you: Princeton's Chad Kanoff (6' 4", 215), has already visited with the Patriots in Foxboro and had about a half-dozen on-campus workouts. The quarterback-needy Cardinals and Giants were both at the Tigers' pro day.

That pro day was during a Nor'easter back in early March—the same day as Rutgers' pro day workouts, which sent scouts scrambling all over South Jersey in bad weather. Princeton and Rutgers were supposed to combine their efforts, but Rutgers needed room for 300 guests, which exceeded the fire code in Princeton's indoor bubble. The Scarlet Knights went to Florham Park (the Jets's facility) and the Tigers were left to show off for the diehards.

Princeton head coach Bob Surace is a former Bengals assistant and one of the brightest minds in college football. His offensive meeting room is a laboratory, a history that includes a three-quarterback system (that's right) and a dual-quarterback system that switched passers inside both 20-yard lines.

In 2016, Kanoff handed the ball off to another, more mobile passer inside the 20 and compiled just 1,741 yards, six touchdowns and six INTs. In 2017, after taking control of the Tigers' offense, he logged 3,474 yards, 29 touchdowns and nine interceptions—the best statistical season for an Ivy League QB in conference history (better than Harvard's Ryan Fitzpatrick, Dartmouth's Jay Fiedler or fellow Princeton alum Jason Garrett ever had).

"In 2016 some scouts didn't give him a grade, and when you don't give a guy a grade, they often refuse to change it [the next year]," Surace told me. "They're afraid their [college scouting director] is going to be like, 'Did you even talk to that school?'"

“Watch Jared Goff. Watch his pro day. It was outstanding. Watch our guy and tell me—the body type, the athletic ability, the accuracy, the arm strength—that you’re not seeing a similar guy. Jared Goff is one of the best in the league, I’m not knocking Goff, but I’m saying Chad, when you watch these things, they’re similar. If teams just close their eyes and think, ‘Oh, we’re at Ohio State,’ at worst, he’s a second-day pick.

“He was challenged here. And he graduated in January, so all he’s done is live, eat, sleep and breathe football.”

Here’s one thing to keep in mind about Surace: I understand that some reading this column will think “Oh, a college coach talking up his QB, what a surprise.” But these are the things Surace has been telling NFL teams, and as a former NFL coach, he knows not to bang the table for someone that is going to waste a coach’s time at the next level. That’s not how an Ivy League coach (or FCS coach, or mid-major coach) gets players drafted. He did the same for linebacker Mike Catapano in 2013 (seventh-round pick of the Chiefs), Caraun Reid in 2014 (fifth round, Lions; now with the Colts) and Seth DeValve in 2016 (fourth round, Browns). All ended up getting drafted.

Pro Cheerleaders Say Groping and Sexual Harassment Are Part of the Job

By Juliet Macur and John Branch

New York Times

April 11, 2018

Cheerleaders for professional sports teams are often dancers with backgrounds in ballet, jazz, modern, hip-hop and tap. After beating out dozens of other dancers for the job, they have a chance to show off the athletic and dancing skills they have honed for years.

But they quickly learn that performing during sporting events is only a small part of their job description. They are also required to fulfill what often becomes the unsavory side of the job: interacting with fans at games and other promotional events, where groping and sexual harassment are common.

In interviews with dozens of current and former cheerleaders — most of them from the N.F.L., but also representing the N.B.A. and the N.H.L. — they described systematic exploitation by teams that profit by sending them into pregame tailgating and other gatherings where they are subjected to offensive sexual comments and unwanted touches by fans.

“When you have on a push-up bra and a fringed skirt, it can sometimes, unfortunately, feel like it comes with the territory,” said Labriah Lee Holt, a former cheerleader for the Tennessee Titans in the N.F.L. “I never experienced anything where someone on the professional staff or the team said something or made me feel that way. But you definitely experience that when you encounter people who have been drinking beer.”

Team officials are aware of the situation, the cheerleaders said, but do little to prevent harassment. Cheerleaders for most professional sports teams are required to mingle with fans at games and promotional events where encounters with intoxicated people can be harrowing. A former cheerleader for the Redskins recalled a particularly uncomfortable assignment: She and five teammates were sent to a fan’s home, where several men were drinking and watching a football game.

When venturing into tailgate areas of parking lots, cheerleaders sometimes go in pairs or small groups to feel safer.

“There wasn’t any protection from it,” Ms. Holt said. “You have to run around the tailgates, go to the tents, mingle with fans and shake the pompoms. And you sometimes get the disgusting old men who have been drinking and will say something inappropriate. It is common, and the industry knows that.”

A longtime cheerleader for the Dallas Cowboys recalled a home game when her squad walked near a group of Philadelphia Eagles fans. “We were walking by, waving and smiling, and one guy caught my eye,” said the cheerleader, who requested anonymity because she, like many others, was forced to sign a nondisclosure agreement. “He looked at me and said, ‘I hope you get raped!’ That’s the kind of stuff we’d have yelled at us. Even from our fans, once they get drunk, they yell things, and you’re like, ‘Really?’ It’s part of the job. It comes with it. You’re supposed to take it.”

The Cowboys and the Titans did not respond to requests for comment. The N.F.L. declined to address cheerleaders' specific claims. In a statement, a spokesman for the league said: "The N.F.L. and all N.F.L. member clubs support fair employment practices. Employees and associates of the N.F.L. have the right to work in a positive and respectful environment that is free from any and all forms of harassment."

Some teams, recognizing the problem, address harassment in training and in handbooks given to cheerleaders and dance team members. It does not stop the teams from sending women into tailgate parties, suites of high rollers or the stands.

The Dallas Cowboys taught their cheerleaders and dancers what to say to people who said offensive things or touched them inappropriately. The women were told never to upset the fans.

"We were taught, if someone's getting handsy on you, how to navigate that," said the former longtime Cowboys cheerleader. "We were told what to say, like, 'That's not very nice,' To be sweet, not rude. Say, 'Can I ask you to step over here?' Use body language to help deter the situation. Never be mean. Never. Always courteous. Because if it's not for the fans, we wouldn't be here — that's how we were supposed to think of this."

"Now I'm like, no, we shouldn't be trained on how to handle that situation. We should be trained how to raise our hand and say, 'Security, get this man away from me!' I wish I could tell my 20-year-old self that."

The cheerleaders and dancers in Dallas, as in most N.F.L. stadiums, were required to visit tailgate parties outside and areas that are essentially standing-room-only bars. They visited high-priced luxury suites, and came to dread certain ones.

"You knew the alcohol was flowing and that they would be handsy," she said. "Arms around the waist, kisses on the cheek. You knew they would, and you couldn't say anything."

If they did object?

"You'd be dismissed from the team."

Most fans were polite, recalled Lisa Kelly, who spent a season with the Carolina Panthers about a decade ago while working full time as a paralegal. But moving through rowdy crowds, she said, usually meant trouble.

"Some of the fans' behavior was stunning, even for me," she said, crediting the Panthers with keeping security nearby. "What shocked me was that people said things even with the presence of security."

Possible Legal Ramifications

Debra Katz, a Washington lawyer who for three decades has been bringing sexual harassment cases, including ones against politicians for both parties, said professional sports teams have a legal obligation to protect their cheerleaders from unwanted contact with fans.

"When they're selling their looks and that's part of what's being promoted, it's not unexpected that these employees could be subject to unwelcome touching, grabbing and the like," Ms. Katz said. "The

employers knew or reasonably should have known that the employee would be harassed, and so they have liability. They have an obligation to protect their employees.”

The fact that some teams require their cheerleaders to sign nondisclosure agreements, or N.D.A.s, raises a red flag in these situations where harassment is likely to take place, Ms. Katz said.

“When employees with little power sign N.D.A.s, it creates an environment where sexual harassment or improper pay can proceed because people are fearful of speaking out,” she said. “Anytime you have a profession or an industry where sexual harassment can be anticipated, putting someone under an N.D.A. is designed to clearly protect the image and the team.”

Cheerleaders rarely report harassment cases, either because they feel it is an expected part of their job or out of fear of being removed from the team for complaining. For countless women who have worked for teams over the years, the statute of limitations, which varies by state, has most likely expired.

Handbooks and contracts provided to cheerleaders rarely have detailed information on how to handle or report harassment from fans beyond legal boilerplate. The San Francisco 49ers, who outsource oversight of their Gold Rush cheerleaders to a third party — another possible complication to claims made against some teams — included this line in the 2016 contract:

“If there is ever a case where you feel uncomfortable or sense a fan that is acting inappropriately, please get immediate assistance or contact your director immediately and she will notify the security authorities.”

But few women report the situations to supervisors out of fear of retribution.

“Every employee is afraid to report sexual harassment — this is the problem,” said Minna Kotkin, a professor in employment law at Brooklyn Law School. “The courts have not been sympathetic to that argument, unfortunately. You really do have to report it, unless you can prove that reporting it is futile.”

Women who say they have been harassed by fans said that there is inherent pressure to keep quiet.

“We beat out hundreds of other girls for this position,” the former cheerleader for the Cowboys said. “It was very apparent, always there — there is always somebody else who can do this job. We never talked about these things, never questioned them.”

The attitudes of some teams were laid out in the handbooks, which further squelched complaints. Those cheering for the Cincinnati Bengals, for example, were warned sternly about insubordination, with bold, capitalized letters and underlines.

“Insubordination to even the slightest degree **IS ABSOLUTELY NOT TOLERATED!!!** You will be benched or dismissed!!!” said the handbook, which was submitted as part of a 2014 lawsuit. (A spokesman for the Bengals said that language was no longer in the handbook.)

“That is really shocking language,” said Joanna L. Grossman, a law professor at Southern Methodist University. “For the handbook to say you can’t question anyone in authority is to say, ‘Shut up and do as you’re told.’ You’re telling them, in essence, don’t bother complaining, because you may get fired.”

'Like Calling for an Escort'

Cheerleaders are sent to hospitals, birthday parties, bar mitzvahs, office parties and supermarkets to help promote their teams. Often, they are sent without security.

A former cheerleader for the Washington Redskins recalled one especially unusual assignment.

Several years ago, she said, she and five teammates were told to drive to an address the Redskins had given them. To their surprise, it was not a business — it was a house. Inside, there was no party, no charity event, or even a large gathering of people. There were seven men in their 40s who quickly sized up the cheerleaders.

"O.K., who's single and who's married?" said the homeowner, according to the former cheerleader.

The men were drinking and asked the women to join in, but they declined. Then the women did a two-minute dance for the men in the basement and spent the rest of the afternoon walking around the house or having awkward conversations with the men while they were watching an N.F.L. game on TV.

"It was sketchy because we were in some dude's house, some random house, and it was physically uncomfortable to be there," the cheerleader said.

The way this cheerleader saw it, it was unfair that the team was making money off its cheerleaders who were paid so little. Someone just had to call the team and the managers would ask, "How many girls do you want for how many hours?" and "Do you want the girls to dance, or not?"

"It's literally like you're calling for an escort," the cheerleader said, recalling that she was paid \$100 for a promotional event, while the team would charge \$1,200 per cheerleader.

"It's not like somebody grabbed my boobs, and nobody told me, 'Have sex with me right now.' It's a lot more nuanced," the former Redskins cheerleader said. "It's like every other abuse dynamic. You don't feel like you have the liberty to say, I'd prefer not to do this. In turn, you're treated poorly and are paid hardly anything and are ragged on in rehearsal for not wearing the right lipstick. The whole thing is so messed up."

In an email statement, a spokesman for the Redskins said: "The safety and security of all of our employees, including our cheerleaders, is now and has always been a top priority for our organization.

"We are unaware of any reports of any promotional appearances that made Redskins cheerleaders uncomfortable. We take such reports very seriously and will continue to take all steps necessary to ensure the safety and security of our cheerleaders."

Uncomfortable Fan Interactions

For many cheerleaders, intoxicated fans at games create the most objectionable situations.

Bailey Davis, a former cheerleader for the New Orleans Saints, initiated the recent reckoning in cheerleading when she filed a complaint with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, the federal agency that enforces civil rights laws, over her treatment by the Saints.

“They tell us that we’re celebrities and to present ourselves well, but then they throw us out there with these drunk fans,” she said.

She added: “You have to take pictures with anyone who asks. You can’t refuse a picture with anyone. If there’s a sloppy drunk who you know just wants to put his hands on you, you just have to deal with it and do it.”

Like others, she became accustomed to nasty comments and unsolicited touches.

Sara Blackwell, a lawyer representing Ms. Davis in her discrimination case against the Saints, agreed that teams and leagues might argue that women did not complain. “The response would be that you bullied them into not complaining,” Ms. Blackwell said.

In response to Ms. Davis’s claims, the Saints said in an email statement: “The Saints organization does not tolerate harassment of any kind. The Saints want all of its employees to be treated with dignity and respect by not only their co-workers, but also by the fans. Ms. Davis is correct that the Saints want their employees to be good ambassadors for the organization and the community.

“At no time during the 8 months that Ms. Davis worked for the Saints did she ever report that she believed she had been harassed by anyone.”

Many cheerleaders, including one who recently worked for the Cleveland Cavaliers, said that most fans were respectful and that uncomfortable situations just came with the territory.

The Cavs cheerleaders, known as the Cavalier Girls, had security guards with them when they were posted at entrances to the arena, where they posed for photos or signed autographs. The Cavs cheerleader said there were times when male fans would put their arms around her waist and, because she was wearing a two-piece, would touch her bare skin. She would cringe a bit, even more so when some fans would give her waist a squeeze, she said, but she never felt threatened.

“I remember getting my butt grabbed by a 12-year-old who should’ve been kicked out of the game,” she said. “For whatever reason, fans think they own you.

“I was 19 and was just a baby,” she added, saying she was most upset with what she considered management’s disrespectful and substandard treatment of the Cavs Girls. “If I had more world experience, there’s no way I would’ve put up with all that. Now that I’m working in a professional environment, I realize that the way we were treated there was absolutely illegal.”

In an email statement, the Cavaliers said: “All of our game entertainment team members should be able to perform and engage with our fans without enduring harassment of any kind or inappropriate interaction or contact. We take that very seriously, have training elements and procedures in place to support their well-being when interacting with fans and will always strive to maintain a positive and secure environment for them.”

A spokesman for the N.B.A. said, “Team dancers are valued members of the N.B.A. family and, as for all employees, we work with our teams to ensure they’re provided safe, respectful and welcoming workplaces.”

Lacy Thibodeaux, who cheered for the Raiders from 2013 to '14, said the cheerleaders were taught to hold their pompoms in a way that would block fans from touching their bare waists or if fans' hands "got too close to our butts" during photos. The cheerleaders were empowered to walk away from a situation in which they felt that fans were going too far.

"If someone got too handsy, we could just turn around and leave," she said. "But we still had to be gracious and say, 'Thank you very much.'"

Study Finds Football Players Have Altered Brain Activity, But Not Necessarily From Concussions

By Max Rettig
Sports Techie
April 11, 2018

There's considerable discussion regarding how football players' brains are affected by minor, repetitive collisions that occur throughout a game, not just from the hits that result in concussions. But a new study out of Indiana University suggests that football players' brain activity may appear altered because of brain reorganization that occurs when mastering hand-eye coordinations unique to contact sports, and not necessarily because of subconcussive hits.

The study took 21 football players and 19 cross-country runners and scanned their brains using fMRI. The football players did not already have a history of concussions. Eleven students who were not athletes were also studied. All of the study participants underwent a simple visual assessment known as smooth pursuit, which is designed to use eye movements to probe brain functioning and has been demonstrated to show reduced performance in concussed patients.

No differences were found in how each group performed the task, but the fMRI results revealed differences in the brains of the football players compared to the cross-country runners and non-athletes, with the most visible differences in activity occurring in the part of the brain responsible for visual processing.

"We focused on these brain regions because physicians and trainers regularly encounter large deficits in players' ability to smoothly track a moving point with their eyes after suffering an acute concussion," said Nicholas Port, an author on the study and a professor of optometry at Indiana University Bloomington.

"Everyone from musicians to taxi drivers has differences in brain activity related to their specific skills. The differences in this study may reflect a lifetime exposure of subconcussive blows to the head, or they could simply be the result of playing a visually demanding sport where you're constantly using your hands and tracking the ball."

The report's conclusion noted two prevailing possibilities:

Greater cerebellar activity among football players while performing an oculomotor task could indicate that they are working harder to compensate for some subtle, long-term subconcussive deficits. Alternatively, top athletes in a sport requiring high visual motor skill could have more of their cerebellum and FEF devoted to oculomotor task performance regardless of subconcussive history. Overall, these results provide little firm support for an effect of accumulated subconcussion exposure on brain function.

Each of these findings, albeit incomplete, presents a unique approach to understanding the role of subconcussive hits in contact sports. The former could mean that as contact athletes sustain those hits, their brain adapts in a manner that changes their visual processing ability. The latter could mean that

even without repeated hits to the head, contact athletes practice hand-eye coordination so frequently that their visual processing centers show different activity compared to those of non-contact athletes.

You can read the full report of the study [here](#).

SportTechie Takeaway:

It's too bad the researchers compared football players to cross-country athletes, and not to athletes in another sport with less potential for head trauma but more demand for the type of hand-eye coordination they noted. Soccer, basketball and baseball come to mind. The report notes that a "possible method for surmounting this difficulty would be to repeat this study with a within-sport design, using accelerometer data to differentiate those who experienced greater and lesser hits to the brain during the season." A study including flag football athletes might provide the ideal "within-sport design" the researchers suggest.

Fan-Controlled Football League Unveils Multi-Year Streaming Deal With Twitch

By Mitch Reames

Sports Techie

April 11, 2018

The Fan-Controlled Football League (FCFL), a new football league that lets fans call the shots on game plays, announced a multiyear streaming deal with Twitch this week.

The deal makes Twitch the exclusive broadcaster of the FCFL through its 2019 and 2020 seasons.

The FCFL, which is an interactive football league that combines the control of the Madden video game with the physicality of professional football, will allow fans to download an extension in Twitch to watch the game and vote on what play the offense or defense should run. The play-calls are then sent to the quarterback and executed in real time on the field. Prior to the season, fans will also be able to vote on their teams' names, coaches and rosters.

This is the second year the FCFL has partnered with Twitch. It first began using the service near the end of its inaugural season in 2017.

"It was amazing what an experience it was for the Twitch viewers," Jason Chilton, the Head of Football Experience at FANchise, FCFL's parent company, said last month on a panel at SXSW. "We integrated it so you could call plays through the Twitch app itself."

Chilton said the Twitch deal is a great example of what he thinks is going to be a big wave of the future: "embedding interactivity into your streaming sports experience."

This season, the format of the games will be similar to the indoor Arena Football League (AFL), which the FCFL was initially born out of. Games will be seven-on-seven with 50-yard fields and will last an hour. FCFL isn't quite a videogame like Madden but it's also not quite professional football — it's somewhere in the middle, and the league is often referred to as "real-life Madden".

To call plays and have meaningful votes, fans will need to invest in and spend FAN Tokens, the in-app currency of the FCFL that's powered by blockchain technology. The FAN Token is technically a cryptocurrency, but the company stresses that users "won't have to know anything about cryptocurrency to easily and safely manage their FAN Tokens." The company believes an in-app currency will prevent people from abusing the system.

SportTechie Takeaway:

Twitch, the social video streaming service operated by Amazon, has long been a hub for the esports community. Recently the service started streaming traditional sports, such as the NBA's G League and NFL Thursday Night Football games. The addition of the FCFL, which as we said earlier can be likened to real-world Madden, seems like a natural fit for an interactive league that can draw in crowds from both gaming and traditional sports and use the interactive features of Twitch to enhance fan engagement.

Report: Dolphins nixed C.J. Anderson-Ja'Wuan James trade

By Josh Alper
Pro Football Talk
April 11, 2018

In March, Mike Klis of KUSA reported that the Broncos called the Dolphins about a trade involving right tackle Ja'Wuan James but the Dolphins passed on the chance to make a deal.

Now there's another report about what such a trade would have looked like had the two sides been able to agree to compensation. Troy Renck of ABC Denver 7 reports that the Broncos and Dolphins reached a verbal agreement to send running back C.J. Anderson to Miami for James, but that the Dolphins ultimately decided not to make the deal.

The prospect of revisiting that deal seems unlikely now that the Dolphins have signed Frank Gore to fill out their backfield. Renck suggests the door to trading Anderson could still be open in Denver, particularly if the Broncos were to draft a running back early in this month's draft. Devontae Booker and De'Angelo Henderson are the other backs currently on the Denver roster.

James is set to make \$9.3 million in 2018 under the terms of the fifth-year option on his rookie contract.

FOX: Color Rush uniforms are going away

By Mike Florio
Pro Football Talk
April 11, 2018

Color Rush has cut to black.

With FOX inhering the full Thursday Night Football schedule, FOX says that Thursday Night Football no longer will consist of alternative, monochromatic uniforms.

Via Jason Barrett of Barrett Sports Media, FOX Sports Executive Vice President of Programming, Research and Content Strategy Bill Wanger said Tuesday at the National Association of Broadcasters Show in Las Vegas that Color Rush uniforms will no longer be used on Thursday nights. Wanger explained that hardcore fans don't need gimmicks to watch.

Wanger also said that the game schedule for Thursday night will be stronger than it's been in the past. That may be news to CBS and NBC, which could see their Sunday slates become less potent if the NFL pushes "better" games to Thursday nights.

Many have complained about and/or lampooned the Color Rush concept, which was subtly downplayed last year with the league quietly allowing teams like Washington (which had a garish yellow-on-yellow getup) to not go through with it.

This won't stop teams from embracing the Color Rush concept on their own. Last week, the Titans unveiled an array of uniforms that includes the light-blue-on-light-blue Smurf look, specifically dubbed the team's "Color Rush" uniforms.

So while Color Rush may be dead as a mandatory, across-the-board program, it will still exist as a voluntary, periodic, alternate uniform program. And if Thursday night is going to become even more special, maybe that's when teams will choose on their own to wear them.