

# Royce Freeman to compete immediately for Denver Broncos' starting running back job

By Ginza Mizell  
The Denver Post  
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Royce Freeman had no idea the Broncos were interested in selecting him in the NFL draft. But the former Oregon star running back acknowledges he scoured various rosters leading up to the weekend in an effort to gauge which teams could be in the market for a running back.

The Broncos snagged Freeman in the third round and introduced him Saturday afternoon. Up next? Immediately challenging for the starting job after the Broncos released 1,000-yard rusher C.J. Anderson earlier this month.

"I am definitely coming in trying to compete," Freeman said. "That is definitely a big factor ... To contribute is definitely my No. 1 goal, however it may be."

Broncos coach Vance Joseph described Denver's position-group status as an open competition between Freeman, Devontae Booker and De'Angelo Henderson. The Broncos added depth Saturday by drafting Arkansas' David Williams in the seventh round and signing former Colorado star Phillip Lindsay as an undrafted free agent. And the physicality required to play the position means the Broncos will need two or three reliable running backs.

But Freeman is the flashy pickup after a decorated career at Oregon. The school's all-time leading rusher (5,621 career yards) with a 6-foot, 240-pound frame blends the size and power to churn forward in short-yardage and goal-line situations, as well as the speed to break long runs. Broncos general manager John Elway called Freeman a "big banger," while offensive coordinator Bill Musgrave lauded his "eye-popping production."

Yet outside concerns swirled about the multitude of carries — and hits — Freeman has already acquired. It reminds some of Montee Ball, whose Broncos career fizzled out after he put up massive numbers at Wisconsin.

Freeman and Elway stressed the big output highlights Freeman's durability and how he learned how to take care of his body and handle a heavy workload. And Freeman calls returning to Oregon for his senior season "one of the best decisions in my life, to be honest." He learned under new position coach Donte' Pimpleton who taught him about playing with a "violent tenacity."

"(He) always emphasized that we needed to go inflict pain on the defender, especially as a bigger back," Freeman said. "They are going to try to come at you, come at you low and come at you different in different directions and all kinds of ways."

"I feel like if I take it to them and put that on film, the team prior to playing us watches the film is going to think twice once in the game."

As Freeman made the media rounds inside the Broncos' indoor practice facility Saturday, he stopped just under Terrell Davis' Hall of Fame banner.

Achieving that level of success is a pipe dream now. But Freeman will begin his NFL career by immediately competing for Denver's starting job.

# Courtland Sutton ready to learn from Denver Broncos' veteran receivers

By Gina Mizell  
The Denver Post  
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Courtland Sutton understands if Demaryius Thomas finds him annoying.

Ever since Thomas reached out to Sutton on Friday night to welcome the Broncos' second-round draft pick to the team, Sutton has continued to pepper Thomas with text-message questions.

"When are we going to be able to get on the field and start working?"

"How did you get to the point that you're at?"

"How are you elevating that to continue to be great?"

It makes sense that Sutton would want to pick Thomas' brain. Sutton, the headliner of the group of offensive playmakers the Broncos drafted last week, is already drawing comparisons to Thomas, Denver's two-time all-pro receiver. Sutton is 6-foot-4, 220 pounds and, according to general manager John Elway and coach Vance Joseph, possesses a "special skillset" that should enable him to develop into the Broncos' future top pass-catching target.

"He has No. 1 traits," Joseph said. "I am excited about a guy like that."

The Broncos gave Sutton a first-round grade, impressed with the SMU product's versatility to play outside or in the slot, as well as his smooth route-running and knack for making highlight-reel catches. Last season, Sutton had 68 receptions for 1,085 yards and 12 touchdowns.

But perhaps Elway most likes Sutton's still-untapped potential. Sutton entered college as a safety before flipping to the offensive side of the ball. Though Sutton believes his time in the secondary helps him understand how to find holes when the defense tries to disguise coverage, he acknowledges he's still fine-tuning his skills as a receiver. He credits his season playing for Larry Brown on the SMU basketball team — when he was tasked with boxing out opposing players close to 7-feet tall — with helping him develop the physicality he now applies while battling defensive backs for contested balls. And when Sutton gets on the field, his jovial personality and wide smile flips to an intense mentality that "demands respect."

"I am not going to be a guy who sputters and makes plays every now and then and disappears during game time," Sutton said. "... I have been that presence on the field."

Sutton is already acquainted with two of his new pass-catching teammates. He trained at the same Florida facility as DaeSean Hamilton, the Broncos' fourth-round selection out of Penn State. And while in college, Sutton occasionally reached out to fellow SMU alumnus Emmanuel Sanders, asking for advice on how he reached the NFL from a smaller school.

Now Sutton is excited to observe how the Broncos' receivers work. He plans to ask a bevy of detailed questions about how to best set up cone drills or catch balls out of the jugs machine. He wants to know the "why," not just the "what," in his quest to improve his game.

Naturally, several of those questions will be directed at Thomas. And Sutton can't wait for when those interactions — annoying or not — move from their cellphones to the field.

"We do have some of the similar traits to play this position," Sutton said of Thomas. "But I'm still trying to get some of those little traits that make him the great player that he is. I was sending text messages, just asking questions (like), 'What makes you, you?' I'm going to continue to do it once I get into the same locker room as him."

# How 10 analysts graded the Denver Broncos 2018 NFL draft class

By Kyle Frederickson

The Denver Post

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Denver Broncos general manager John Elway was thrilled with his team's 2018 NFL draft class. But did league analysts agree with his glowing assessment?

Below is a breakdown of how 10 prominent media organizations graded the team's 10 additions, its largest draft haul since 1999, with analysis from each.

## THE PICKS

- 1 (5) Bradley Chubb, DE, NC State
- 2 (40) Courtland Sutton, WR, SMU
- 3 (71) Royce Freeman, RB, Oregon
- 3 (99) Isaac Yiadom, CB, Boston College
- 4 (106) Josey Jewell, LB, Iowa
- 4 (113) DaeSean Hamilton, WR, Penn State
- 5 (156) Troy Fumagalli, TE, Wisconsin
- 6 (183) Sam Jones, G, Arizona State
- 6 (217) Keishawn Bierria, LB, Washington
- 7 (226) David Williams, RB, Arkansas

## THE GRADES

Mel Kiper, ESPN

Grade: B+

"We thought Denver might take a quarterback at No. 5, but with Baker Mayfield and Sam Darnold off the board, they went best player available. Bradley Chubb is the best pass-rusher in this class by far. He's not a perfect fit for Denver's 3-4, but you have to find a way to get him on the field next to Von Miller. He's too talented. ... There's a lot of value in this class, and Elway & Co. deserve credit for taking the best player available in spots while also filling needs."

Pete Prisco, CBS Sports

Grade: B+

"They landed the best edge rusher in the draft by taking Bradley Chubb with the fifth pick in the first round. He will be an immediate force off the edge opposite Von Miller. I wasn't as high as some on second-round receiver Courtland Sutton, but I do like the pick of fourth-round receiver DaeSean Hamilton. He runs great routes. I also liked the pick of fourth round of Iowa linebacker Josey Jewell. He will be a special-teams force right away. "

Chad Reuter, NFL.com

Grade: A

“Chubb was the best value on the board for this team. Putting him and Von Miller on the same defense makes them dangerous again, like when DeMarcus Ware and Miller were doing their thing. Case Keenum’s two-year deal took QB out of the equation here, and Paxton Lynch still has an opportunity to grow into a starter.”

Sam Monson and Steve Palazzolo, Pro Football Focus

Grade: Average

“Bradley Chubb is one of the draft’s best all-around players and he’ll continue to the pipeline of productive edge rushers in Denver. He’s outstanding in the run game, playing with good leverage and technique and as a pass-rusher, he attacks offensive tackles with a full array of moves.”

Nate Davis, USA Today

Grade: A

“GM John Elway must be living right with a gift like pass rusher Bradley Chubb sitting there at No. 5. He could restore this defense to dominance. Third-round RB Royce Freeman could make Broncos Country forget C.J. Anderson, and second-round WR Courtland Sutton may eventually do the same to Demaryius Thomas. Elway appeared to find a lot of potential contributors in the middle rounds. And given how well QB Case Keenum has apparently fit into this locker room, probably wise for Elway to resist the urge to draft another quarterback.”

Ian Wharton, Bleacher Report

Grade: A

“The Denver Broncos had arguably the best draft haul in the league. Few expected defensive end Bradley Chubb to fall to No. 5, giving the Broncos an elite pass-rush rotation of Von Miller, Chubb, Shaquil Barrett and Shane Ray. Although it may have made sense to add a quarterback, the staff has entrusted Case Keenum to compete for a Super Bowl, and spending a premier pick on a backup quarterback wouldn’t have helped the team this year. ... Only the right guard position remains a question mark entering training camp.”

Andy Benoit, Sports Illustrated

Grade: A-

“John Elway understands what a perplexingly large number of fans and media do not: Denver’s Super Bowl window is still open. This defense is not much different than the one that brought home a Lombardi Trophy in 2015, especially now that Bradley Chubb is filling the void left by DeMarcus Ware. With Chubb joining Von Miller, Shane Ray and Shaquil Barrett, Denver has four dynamic, flexible pass rushers, whom you’ll see all on the field together in certain passing situations.”

Frank Schwab, Yahoo Sports

Grade: A

“The Broncos had a pretty easy pick when Bradley Chubb fell to them at No. 5. Home-run pick. The draft might turn, good or bad, on whether size-speed receiver Courtland Sutton develops into a No. 1 receiver out of the second round. That could happen. ... Just because the Broncos drafted a lot of big names doesn’t mean they’re good picks, but the Broncos got plenty of players who we know can play well on a high level. This group should be ready to contribute immediately.”

Dan Kadar, SB Nation

Grade: B+

“Getting Bradley Chubb and to go along with Von Miller sets Denver up with one of the best pass rush pairs in the NFL. It was a surprise that Chubb was still available at fifth overall. He’s a player who is just as good against the run as he is rushing the passer. Maybe more importantly, he can keep some double teams off Miller. ... The knock on this draft class is that the offensive line wasn’t really addressed.”

Vinnie Iyer, Sporting News

Grade: A

“John Elway resisted the urge to move down or go for a quarterback, and it paid off with a stellar draft. Chubb was a steal to pair with Von Miller, and they still got their offensive help for Case Keenum with Sutton, Freeman and Fumagalli. Sutton and Hamilton also give them present support and future alternatives to Demaryius Thomas and Emmanuel Sanders. Yiadom can be groomed as an Aqib Tailb replacement, and they unearthed a 3-4 tackling gem in Jewell. Denver’s needs were met, and nothing close to a reach was made.”

# Former Colorado State coach put QB Nick Stevens in position to capitalize two NFL rookie mini-camp invites

By Kyle Frederickson

The Denver Post

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Nick Stevens always knew he'd get the call. The former Colorado State quarterback just didn't know when or from what team. But finally, with seven rounds of the NFL draft over Sunday, the phone rang.

Twice.

"Any opportunity I can get, I'm down," Stevens said. "It's going to be great having both."

Stevens, CSU's record holder for career touchdown passes (70), has accepted invitations to a pair of NFL rookie mini-camps; first with the Green Bay Packers this weekend and then with the Washington Redskins the next. While Stevens admits going undrafted without signing a free agent contract stung, calling it, "one of the most stressful days of my life," the chance to compete for roster spots with two franchises was welcomed and unexpected.

Stevens' quarterback coach in the East-West Shrine Game was Packers' receivers coach David Raih; however, Stevens said he had limited contact overall with Green Bay coaches. Same goes for the Redskins, whose interest was developed through Stevens' agent, he said. The teams that showed Stevens the most pre-draft love went in other directions.

But Washington called Stevens first, and one day later, Green Bay was on the phone.

"Having that ability to have two different tryouts, that's going to be huge," Stevens said. "It definitely has instilled a lot of confidence. It shows that there are teams out there that think I can make it. That means a lot."

Stevens' prolific CSU career — 638 completions for 8,554 yards over four seasons — finished on a sour note with a New Mexico Bowl defeat highlighted by several missed connections with star receiver Michael Gallup, a third-round draft pick by the Cowboys. Stevens' mission since has been to "show that I've improved from the last game to now," he said.

Stevens enlisted the help of Steve Fairchild, the Rams' former head football coach (2008-11), who now runs the Fairchild Quarterback Training program out of Denver. The pair has met about twice a week since January to work on the finer mechanics of Stevens' game.

"(Fairchild) helped me add more velocity on my ball by working on my mechanics," Stevens said, "and bringing my lower half along more and throwing with my whole body."

Added Fairchild: "I don't think there's anything (Stevens) can't do from a physical or mental standpoint that you would say, 'Hey, this has got to get better to make an NFL team.' I do think, like all quarterbacks, it's a very small window of opportunity and he's got to play his best when given the chance."

Stevens' success leading a pro-style offense under CSU coach Mike Bobo developed a wealth of knowledge and experience Stevens can fall back on through the course of two rookie mini-camps, or possibly just one, should the Packers extend a contract offer after this weekend. Either way, Stevens understands what will be expected by both teams.

"Everyone needs to show that they have the ability to pick up a playbook on a fast pace," Stevens said. "I feel confident that I'll be able to do that well."

# Broncos sign eight college free agents; and no, this isn't the same as a rookie minicamp invitation

By Matt Stephens, Joe Nguyen, Jeff Bailey

The Denver Post

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Consider the Denver Broncos' 2018 offseason roster officially full. For now.

The Broncos made official yesterday the signing of eight college free agents (often referred to as "undrafted free agents"), and headlining that group is former CU running back Phillip Lindsay, a person we apparently cannot write enough about given the incredible web traffic our two stories about him this week have gathered. (Here and here.) The other college free agents are: John Diarse, WR, TCU; Austin Schlottmann, OG, TCU; Jeff Holland, OLB, Auburn; Leon Johnson, OT, Temple; Lowell Lotulelei, NT, Utah; Trey Marshall, DB, Florida State; and Jimmy Williams, WR, East Carolina.

It's important to note that these eight players are college free agents who've actually signed with the Broncos. They're guys Denver is making an investment in, even if they didn't draft them. This is different than a player who was invited to a rookie minicamp — someone like Nick Stevens, the former Colorado State quarterback who received minicamp invitations from the Packers and Redskins.

Stevens is essentially being offered a tryout. There's no real financial commitment made to him by Green Bay or Washington at this point, even though he'll be going through the same camp as those teams' draft picks and college free agent signings. Whereas a player like Lindsay will usually receive a three-year deal with a team worth up to \$1.7 million (maximum of \$480,000 in 2018), should he be able to land a spot on the roster, although little money is guaranteed.

Navigating the road from undrafted player an NFL roster is difficult, but it can be done (at least one undrafted Bronco has made it out of training camp in 13 of the last 14 years). Last year, former Northern Colorado quarterback Kyle Slotter made it so far as to throw a touchdown pass in a preseason game with the Broncos before he was cut and then signed to the Vikings' practice squad. And of course, no one here in Denver can forget that Broncos cornerback Chris Harris, ranked as the No. 86 best player on the NFL Top 100 list that came out Monday, went undrafted out of Kansas, and linebacker Shaquil Barrett was undrafted out of CSU.

There's hope for Lindsay to make the Broncos' roster, and for Stevens and the other locals who received minicamp invitations to do the same. But a three-day minicamp is hard to show whether you have what it takes to play at the highest level. There's no room for error.

# It appears unlikely Broncos will pick up Shane Ray's option

By Mike Klis

9 News

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The Broncos are not expected to exercise the \$9.232 million option for outside linebacker Shane Ray in 2019, a team personnel source told 9NEWS.

Ray's injury-riddled, one-sack season in 2017 and the Broncos' first-round selection of Bradley Chubb in 2018 appears to be conspiring against keeping Ray under team's control in 2019.

Ray is scheduled to make \$1.68 million this season in what may be the final year of his rookie contract. If the Broncos don't exercise the fifth-year option on Ray by the 2 p.m. Thursday deadline, it could be the best thing for him as it would give him the leverage of unrestricted free agency after this season. If Ray has a big year in 2018, he could command a multiyear contract for well more than \$9.232 million a year.

First-round draft picks in 2015 are subject to a fifth-year team option that must be exercised before the player's fourth season. So far, more than half of the 32 first-round draft picks have reportedly been told their fifth-year option will be exercised.

Although the \$9.232 million option would be guaranteed only against injury, the Broncos may not want to take that risk after using their No. 5 overall draft pick on Chubb, who plays Ray's position, and because Ray is coming off a wrist injury.

Ray was the No. 23 overall selection in 2015. He was the Broncos' first pick even though the team already had DeMarcus Ware and Von Miller starting in front of him. Ray had 4.0 sacks in his rookie season of 2015 and 8.0 in 2016 while serving as Ware's back up.

After Ware retired prior to the 2017 season, Ray was set to have a breakout year as a starter, but he got a bum break on the first day of training camp when he suffered a torn left wrist ligament that required surgery.

Ray missed the first six games of last season, then had trouble getting to the quarterback while playing with a cast on his left hand. He was placed back on injured reserve for the final two games after the Broncos were eliminated from playoff contention.

All in all, the Broncos were expecting more than 13.0 sacks through three seasons from their first-round draft pick.

To date, the Broncos have a mixed record in picking up the fifth-year options on their first-round draft selections. They exercised the option on Von Miller (first round pick in 2011) and Bradley Roby (2014) but declined it on Sylvester Williams (2013). The team did not have a first-round selection in 2012.

At about this time next year, the Broncos will have to make a decision on whether to pick up the fifth-year option on quarterback Paxton Lynch, their first-round draft pick in 2016.

# Why Broncos' John Elway values defense, pass-rushers

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN

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John Elway earned the gold jacket hanging in his closet with passes thrown into the smallest of spaces in the biggest of moments. As a quarterback, he led two-minute drives and scored a pile of touchdowns on his way to the Hall of Fame.

In Elway's work as a team executive, he has showed another side of his football personality. Elway has now led off the Denver Broncos' draft class with a defensive player in six of his eight years on the job, including the selection of Bradley Chubb with the No. 5 pick Thursday night.

In three of those drafts, including 2018's, that first pick was a pass-rusher, which continues to be one of Elway's most highly valued positions.

"You can never have enough pass-rushers," Elway said. "In this league, the teams that can get to the quarterback can influence games."

It's why Von Miller was Elway's first draft pick -- the No. 2 overall selection of the 2011 draft -- in his current job as the Broncos' top football executive. And it's why the Broncos selected Shane Ray in the first round of the 2015 draft, when Miller and DeMarcus Ware were already on the roster. Ray was the SEC's defensive player of the year in 2014.

It's why in a year when the pre-draft conversation around the league centered around the top five quarterbacks on the board, Elway was happy to swoop in to select Chubb.

"We thought that he was one of the best defensive players in the draft, if not the best defensive player in the draft," Elway said. "He really was the best pass-rusher, in our opinion. We really didn't want to pass on him, so we didn't."

Denver's Super Bowl victory after the 2015 season was fueled by the pass rush and an overpowering secondary. The Broncos were a migraine-in-waiting for opposing quarterbacks, as six players finished that season with at least four sacks and then-defensive coordinator Wade Phillips had a variety of options in lining up his personnel.

The Broncos see that potential with the addition of Chubb, who will line up at outside linebacker and join a position group with Miller, Ray and Shaquil Barrett.

"He fits perfect," coach Vance Joseph said. "He's a good football player, obviously, a great rusher. Also, he's a good player versus the run game. ... He's a great fit. We have a plan for him as an outside linebacker, so we're excited."

As an outside linebacker, Chubb will stand up and play out of two-point stance much of the time for the Broncos. And while game video at NC State showed he did that at times for the Wolfpack, he was primarily a defensive end who played out of a three-point stance.

But Chubb showed well-honed technique in the pass rush no matter how he began the play, closing out his career with 44 tackles for loss and 20 sacks over his final two seasons. He was also active when he wasn't punishing quarterbacks, with three seasons of at least 56 tackles.

"I would describe myself as relentless," said Chubb, who weighs 268 pounds. "That motor came from always wanting to make plays. I always wanted to be around the ball. It was just something I was raised with."

Asked to name a play or two that would show the kind of player the Broncos have added, Chubb's brother, Brandon, who is a second-year linebacker for the Detroit Lions, quickly cited a game against Louisville and Cardinals quarterback Lamar Jackson this past season.

"Lamar Jackson is the best athlete in the draft," Brandon Chubb said. "And Lamar is running out to Bradley, and Bradley outweighs him by 60 pounds and Brad's tracking him down. He did it twice."

Elway has collected pass-rushers because he believes the Broncos have already proved what they can do when they follow that path.

"His motor is as big as anybody's in the draft," Elway said of Chubb. "That's definitely one of his biggest qualities, his motor, and also his strength, his ability to rush the passer and ... whip around the edge. He has that, and I think that what he's going to bring [in] his leadership. ... He's all football. He loves football, and he's going to be a great influence on our football team."

# NFL not expecting spike in ejections with new helmet rule

By Kevin Seifert

ESPN

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The NFL is anticipating only a handful of ejections this season as part of a new rule that prohibits players from lowering their helmets to initiate contact -- one of the primary takeaways Tuesday from the first day of a player safety summit at league headquarters.

A review of 40,000 plays from recent seasons revealed less than five instances of what would be considered a flagrant, and thus ejection-worthy, violation, according to NFL executive vice president Troy Vincent. One was a hit by Chicago Bears linebacker Danny Trevathan on Green Bay Packers receiver Davante Adams last season in Week 4, for which Trevathan was later suspended.

Penalty flags for the expanded rule -- which replaced a previous prohibition on using the crown of the helmet to initiate contact -- are expected to increase in 2018. But during the meeting, as well as in side conversations, Vincent and other league officials sought to downplay the possibility of the kind of mass ejections that characterize the NCAA targeting rule.

"We want officials to enforce the rule," Vincent said. "I don't want to say it's going to be two, three, five [penalties per game] or whatever. If they see it, call it. ...But there were four plays that we saw today that would rise to the level of ejection based on the new rule. That's it."

League owners hastily approved the rule in March before it was fully fleshed out. As written, it calls for a 15-yard penalty and a potential ejection on any player who "lowers his head to initiate and make contact with his helmet against an opponent." It will apply whether the player hits an opponent's helmet or any other part of his body, but it is "not to include bracing for contact," according to the verbiage.

That caveat generated animated debate among the more than 50 owners, coaches, executives, officials and former players in the room. A handful of reporters sat in on portions of the meeting, as the group watched video of various plays to learn what the league considers legal and illegal plays.

Representatives of the competition committee pointed out that officials will draw a distinction between simply lowering helmets -- which happens on every play -- and the intentional act of lowering it to initiate contact with the opponent.

"I'm here because I wanted to get clarity on this," Los Angeles Chargers coach Anthony Lynn said afterward. "I can watch this stuff on video, and I asked six times: Can you rewind that? I don't have that option on the field. I just want to see how they're going to officiate it when its full speed on the field."

Lynn said he finished the day "clearer" than when he began. But group consensus on some plays was difficult to reach. Most notable was a run last season by New England Patriots tailback Dion Lewis. On the play, both Lewis and Atlanta Falcons safety Ricardo Allen lowered their heads into each other. Should Lewis have been penalized? Allen? Neither? Members of the competition committee and officiating department disagreed during the discussion.

Coaches in the room included Lynn, Dan Quinn (Falcons), Mike Tomlin (Pittsburgh Steelers), Todd Bowles (New York Jets), Mike Vrabel (Tennessee Titans) and Matt Patricia (Detroit Lions). Several of them voiced concern about whether running backs will be held to the same standard, and whether they would need to be taught new techniques on the fly. The same is true for, say, pulling guards and running backs who are blocking blitzers.

Quinn made a suggestion that was quickly adopted: Head coaches throughout the league will collaborate on a position-specific teaching video for teams to study during training camp. The coaches would provide the voice-overs to distinguish from standard NFL videos.

"I'm close to 90 percent clear on this," Quinn said. "The thing that's keeping you up at night is the way to get it taught at each position. [With the coach videos], that way we're all teaching under the same guidelines. This isn't a team issue. It's an issue of how we're trying to make the game better. It's time for all of us to share the right examples. It has nothing to do with Team X's technique being better than Team Y's. It's more like getting all 32 teams to be on the same page and talk the same way."

League officials will use Tuesday's discussion to finalize a set of standards for ejection. Owners also must approve the use of replay to review ejections, likely during the May 21-23 spring meetings. Most people in the room Tuesday agreed that replay should be a mandatory safety net for officials tasked with ejecting players who flagrantly lower their helmets to initiate contact.

"I think we're going to have to have replay for ejections," Lynn said.

The second day of this two-day summit will focus on the future of the kickoff. Vincent said Tuesday that the league is not planning to eliminate the kickoff for 2018, but instead hopes to make heavy modifications to make it safer. Wednesday's meeting will feature a brainstorming session as well as an attempt to build a consensus for writing a new rule, one that could also be approved by owners in May.

# From Mr. Irrelevant on up, each team's best (non-Round 1) draft pick

By Chris Burke  
The Athletic  
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The hallmark of this year's draft class was depth. There were potential superstars available in Round 1, especially at quarterback, but a few teams went so far as to stockpile picks on Days 2 and 3 of the draft instead because of what was going to be on the board later.

With that in mind, as we drift toward the conclusion of the draft-reaction season, here's a look at my favorite pick made by each team beyond the first round.

Arizona: Christian Kirk, WR, Texas A&M (Round 2, No. 47)

He's drawn positive comparisons to Detroit's Golden Tate, not just because of style but because he can thrive outside or in the slot. The former is where it seems he'll start his Arizona career, because Larry Fitzgerald remains an outstanding slot weapon. Kirk's value as an explosive punt returner only adds to the likelihood that he makes waves early.

Atlanta: Deadrin Senat, DT, USF (Round 3, No. 90)

There has been a bit of a rush to pigeonhole Senat as a two-down, run-defending presence, but he had 6.0 sacks last season at USF and shows enough quickness off the snap to make an impact vs. the pass, too. Even if the Falcons only use him on early downs, though, his power game should make him a force. Falcons coach Dan Quinn tends to know what to do with talent up front.

Baltimore: Mark Andrews, TE, Oklahoma (Round 3, No. 86)

I almost didn't include Andrews because he was the second tight end Baltimore drafted within the first two days. However, he's actually a terrific complement to first-rounder Hayden Hurst — a more traditional TE option, whereas Andrews is a glorified slot receiver. And Andrews is downright dangerous as a weapon in the passing game. He could have been taken in Hurst's slot (No. 25) and you wouldn't have heard any objection here.

Buffalo: Harrison Phillips, DT, Stanford (Round 3, No. 96)

Phillips (pictured up top) might cut a figure similar to Kyle Williams, but he's more of a strict nose tackle than the longtime Bills DT, who bounces between the 3- and 1-tech spots. Either way, this was a theft in Round 3. Phillips was ultraproductive playing over the ball last season, thanks to his combination of strength and effort.

Carolina: Ian Thomas, TE, Indiana (Round 4, No. 101)

In, say, Round 2, Thomas would've been a major reach. In Round 4, he's exactly the type of player you want to find: high-upside, translatable physical traits. When his feel for the intricacies of his position (see:

route running) catch up to his 6-foot-3, 259-pound frame, Thomas has a chance to be a very productive slot option.

Chicago: Anthony Miller, WR, Memphis (Round 2, No. 51)

Both of the Bears' Round 2 picks (Miller and guard/center James Daniels) should see the field early. The organization continues to talk up the eternally banged-up Kevin White, but a top three of Miller, Allen Robinson and Taylor Gabriel is much more likely at wide receiver. That trio would push Miller to an outside role, where he's fully capable of succeeding. He's advanced at setting up routes to find space.

Cincinnati: Sam Hubbard, DE, Ohio State (Round 3, No. 77)

Considering Hubbard was productive at a premier program and then tested well at the combine, I'm surprised he slipped out of the second round. He stands to be an obvious fan favorite after landing back in Ohio. Hubbard might never be a consistent double-digit sack producer, but he should be good for 5-6 per year plus can help against the run. Quick bonus mention here of QB Logan Woodside, a sharp, quick-trigger passer whom Cincinnati should stash and develop.

Cleveland: Genard Avery, LB, Memphis (Round 5, No. 150)

The Athletic's Scott Bischoff took an extremely deep dive into Avery's game, so check that out if you're interested. Certainly, by Round 5 he was a solid value. The huge, lingering question mark with him is if he has the chops to hold up against the run. If not, though, his sub-4.6 speed should let him carve out a role as a rotational chip off the edge.

Dallas: Connor Williams, G/T, Texans (Round 2, No. 50)

The rest of the league might regret letting this one happen. Injury issues led to a rocky 2017 and he wasn't viewed as a franchise left tackle, hence his slight fall. The Cowboys happily will plug him in as a starting guard from the day he steps into the locker room. He's an animal in the run game, burying opponents whenever he has a chance.

Denver: Josey Jewell, LB, Iowa (Round 4, No. 106)

Brandon Marshall and Todd Davis still stand as Denver's projected starting inside linebackers. The latter might not want to get too comfortable. Jewell is an excellent fit for the Broncos' 3-4 attack, with his ability to find the football and pick through traffic. Don't be shocked if he's pushing 100 tackles by 2019 or '20.

Detroit: Tyrell Crosby, OT, Oregon (Round 5, No. 153)

Injury concerns had to fuel Crosby's slide, because there is no other viable reason he should have been on the board this long. On a team with a less stable OT situation, he'd be a plug-and-play option as a rookie. In Detroit, he represents a significant upgrade as the swing lineman — the Lions rolled through a hodgepodge of underwhelming options when injuries hit last year — and he might be viewed as a competitor for a starting guard spot.

Green Bay: Oren Burks, LB, Vanderbilt (Round 3, No. 88)

While it was a little surprising to see the Packers trade up for Burks (Carolina used one of its return picks on Ian Thomas), his skill set fits current NFL trends. Burks was a safety-turned-linebacker at Vanderbilt, and the versatility he displayed handling that swap will allow him to handle a variety of roles for the Packers. He also tested as an elite athlete in this class.

Houston: Duke Ejirofor, DE, Wake Forest (Round 6, No. 177)

Were it not for the labrum surgery Ejirofor required after the '17 season — surgery that could keep him sidelined through much of the summer — he might have pushed up into Day 2 range. His technique is far enough along that he won't require a ton of seasoning once he is healthy; his hand usage, in particular, is impressive. If nothing else, the Texans can give him some run as a pass rusher and expect results.

Indianapolis: Darius Leonard, LB, South Carolina State (Round 2, No. 36)

Leonard was the fourth pick of Round 2, which makes it easy to highlight him here. Flip side: There were plenty of people who questioned his value that high in the draft. Don't listen to 'em. Leonard didn't test well, but he shined at the Senior Bowl and has the rangy game to handle whichever matchup comes his way as a weak-side linebacker.

Jacksonville: Ronnie Harrison, S, Alabama (Round 3, No. 93)

The rich get richer. Jacksonville's already-loaded defense picked up another impact player in Harrison, who will further open up possibilities for the Jaguars to mix and match at safety. It's also pretty easy to see him as Barry Church's successor in short order. Harrison's big-hitting, aggressive style drops right into what the Jaguars have cooking.

Kansas City: Armani Watts, S, Texas A&M (Round 4, No. 124)

Watts started at both free and strong safety for the Aggies, so he — like Harrison — offers flexibility. This is a Chiefs defense that often has leaned on three-safety looks, and there wasn't a lot of meaningful depth in tow. Watts also plays faster than he tested. His coverage game makes him a fit for the free safety role; his knack for finding his way into the backfield (10.0 tackles for loss last season) trends the other direction.

Los Angeles Chargers: Dylan Cantrell, WR, Texas Tech (Round 6, No. 191)

A bit of enigma because he has the size (6-foot-2, 226) of an outside receiver, but the game and quickness of a slot guy. Some analysts even have pegged him as an H-back option, if he shows he can hold up as a blocker at all. What I really love is the combo of his game with what Philip Rivers and offensive coordinator Ken Whisenhunt do well. Cantrell could see a lot of balls thrown his way, his size making him a difficult cover from the slot.

Los Angeles Rams: John Kelly, RB, Tennessee (Round 6, No. 176)

Absent picks in Rounds 1 and 2, the Rams loaded up on pieces over the remaining rounds. Several of them project as Kelly does: a second-team cog as a rookie, but with potential. There is not much standing between the tough-running Kelly and the backup role behind Todd Gurley. His competent receiving (37 catches last year) will help him get on the field.

Miami Dolphins: Durham Smythe, TE, Notre Dame (Round 4, No. 123)

I've been telling anyone who would listen throughout draft season that Smythe was one of this class' most underrated prospects. As with Baltimore's Andrews, Smythe was the second tight end taken by his team in 2018, but he offers a different skill set than the first — Mike Gesicki is a pure receiving tight end; Smythe is a throwback, inline guy. His blocking will get him on the field. His ability to make plays in the passing game will keep him there.

Minnesota Vikings: Colby Gossett, G, Appalachian State (Round 6, No. 213)

Several general managers — including Detroit's Bob Quinn — spoke about how important Senior Bowl week is toward scouting players. Gossett took full advantage of his opportunity in Mobile, Ala., putting up a great three days of practice. With 46 career college starts under his belt, Gossett should be able to handle meaningful reps within a short window. He moves well and pops defenders when he gets his hands on them.

New England Patriots: Christian Sam, LB, Arizona State (Round 6, No. 178)

Let's skip the obvious option: sixth-rounder Braxton Berrios, who looks like he was cloned in the Patriots' secret slot receiver lab. Sam, taken 32 picks earlier in the same round, has a real chance to stick on this roster. At 6-foot-1, 244, a bit smaller than New England linebackers typically are, but his playmaking abilities make up for it. Sam has three-down potential as an inside 'backer.

New Orleans Saints: Tre'Quan Smith, WR, UCF (Round 3, No. 91)

Clearly a best-player-available pick over needs for the Saints. Nevertheless, Smith has the dynamic deep game to be a big-play option for Drew Brees. If all goes according to plan, he'll also be a lot more. His body control and hands are what you want in a reliable, possession receiver, and his ability to get over the top of a secondary can force cornerbacks to allow him a cushion.

New York Giants: R.J. McIntosh, DT, Miami (Round 5, No. 139)

Look, the correct answer here is guard/human brick wall Will Hernandez, taken at No. 34 overall. In an effort to dig deeper, though, let's head down to the Giants' final 2018 draft pick. McIntosh is interesting because the Giants have a couple of run-stuffing tackles (notably, Damon Harrison), so he can tuck in as a sub-package interior pass rusher. So long as he's working upfield, McIntosh is a disruptive player.

New York Jets: Nathan Shepherd, DT, Fort Hays State (Round 3, No. 72)

My guess is that Jets fans are going to love this guy. There were concerns about his competition level (DII) and age (he's about to turn 25), but he destroyed his opponents in college and then did the same thing at the Senior Bowl, albeit briefly before a hand injury forced him from practice. His size projects well to a 3-4 DE in Todd Bowles' scheme; he also offers the upfield push for Bowles to turn him loose.

Oakland Raiders: Maurice Hurst, DT, Michigan (Round 5, No. 140)

I mean, come on. This had to be the choice for Oakland, right? It goes without saying that Hurst (heart) comes with a substantial health risk, but this was well past the point where he was worth the gamble. His

baseline will be as a penetrating 3-tech on passing downs, with a much, much higher ceiling if he proves he can move around and hold up against the run.

Philadelphia Eagles: Dallas Goedert, TE, South Dakota State (Round 2, No. 49)

Not only did the Eagles score Goedert in Round 2, they did so by trading ahead of the Cowboys, thus preventing their division rivals from considering the talented tight end. Goedert plays downfield like a wide receiver but in a 6-foot-4, 256-pound body — he's brilliant in the air. His all-around game, though, is what had him chalked up as a borderline Round 1 option. Able as he is catching the ball, Goedert is not afraid to block.

Pittsburgh Steelers: Jaylen Samuels, RB, N.C. State (Round 5, No. 165)

I am fully on Team Samuels, so once we got into Day 3 he was a virtual lock for this list no matter where he went. All the better that he landed with a team that's proven quite willing to keep its backs and tight ends involved in the passing attack. Samuels isn't someone who can replace Le'Veon Bell long-term, but rather a playmaker who could benefit from being on the field at the same time. Good luck covering him with a linebacker one-on-one while everyone else worries about Bell and Antonio Brown.

San Francisco 49ers: D.J. Reed, CB, Kansas State (Round 5, No. 142)

No doubt because Reed (5-foot-9, 188) projects strictly as a slot corner, he drifted into the middle of Day 3. Not exactly a forward-thinking approach by the league, because slot corners are on the field — and in difficult matchups — extensively these days, and Reed could be one of the league's best. His footwork and ability to find the football in the air are that good.

Seattle Seahawks: Jamarco Jones, OT, Ohio State (Round 5, No. 168)

No mystery as to why Jones fell: He had an abysmal testing performance at the combine, one that might have drawn more jeers had Oklahoma's Orlando Brown not been tanking at the same time. Jones' numbers, though, don't mesh with his on-field performance. For the Buckeyes, he was an effective tackle who rarely lost battles to superior athletes. Whether he sticks at tackle or moves to guard, Jones can compete for a starting job.

Tampa Bay Buccaneers: Jack Cichy, LB, Wisconsin (Round 6, No. 202)

I mentioned Cichy as Tampa Bay's sleeper in The Athletic's team-by-team superlatives, so I'll double down. His health is a legitimate concern (torn ACL last year, among other issues), hence his availability in Round 6. When he's played, he has been a force — instinctive and active, both against the run and pass. Cichy can shoot a gap and get into the backfield, too.

Tennessee Titans: Dane Cruikshank, DB, Arizona (Round 5, No. 152)

Cruikshank took a flurry of official visits (including to Detroit, after which he did a Q&A with The Athletic). He seemed destined to be picked earlier than this, due to his experience playing both cornerback and safety. The Titans made him their third key defensive addition, behind Rashaan Evans and Harold Landry. Cruikshank's best role probably is pulled up near the line, maybe even covering the slot. Just get him out there somewhere, and he'll make something happen.

Washington Redskins: Trey Quinn, WR, SMU (Round 7, No. 256)

The 2018 draft's Mr. Irrelevant ... and also arguably one of the most talented players ever saddled with that "honor." Quinn is a legit slot receiver with suction-cup hands. He easily could have come off the board a round or two before this, based on his production at SMU. He's not an eye-popping athlete, but he gets open and finishes.

# Broncos draft class grade, impact potential in 2018 season

By Troy Renck  
KMGH  
May 2, 2018

An invitation followed the 5-11 humiliation.

The Broncos coaching staff received and accepted the opportunity to work the Senior Bowl. It allowed a deeper dive into the prospects, a chance to learn the nuances of players not afforded during 15-minute NFL combine interviews. Only bad teams are afforded this chance, almost like a coupon for their draft shopping cart.

"I will say this: We don't want to coach that for a long time," said Broncos general manager John Elway. "We had a great time at the Senior Bowl but we are good not coaching it for a while."

The Broncos' posture this entire offseason remained consistent. Elway focused on a rebound in 2018, on preventing back-to-back losing seasons for the first time since 1972. The draft reflected the desire to return to the playoffs after a two-year absence.

Denver passed on a quarterback. When the fourth pick arrived, Josh Rosen and Josh Allen were available. The Broncos didn't hesitate to take defensive end Bradley Chubb, a gift in their lap after the Browns turned heads with their selection of cornerback Denzel Ward fourth overall. When Chubb became available, a trade dissolved. Denver pulled the plug on a deal with Buffalo, which would have netted the Broncos the 12th and 22nd overall selections.

The Broncos were prepared to take Chubb or quarterback Sam Darnold (The Jets scooped up Darnold with the third pick). The danger of going with the best defensive player -- I see minimal risk -- is that Rosen or Allen develop into franchise quarterbacks.

As I said for weeks in this space, on TV and over the 104.3 The Fan airwaves, taking a quarterback failed to make them better this season. And my read on the Broncos since Jan. 1 was an overriding determination to bounce back. In covering the team for eight seasons -- 1996-2000, 2014-2018 -- I have never heard anyone at Dove Valley use the word "patience."

So Chubb arrives, welcomed with open arms by veterans, including All-Pros Von Miller and Chris Harris Jr. and stalwarts Derek Wolfe and Domata Peko, who want to win now.

"I love the pick," Peko told Denver7, echoing identical comments from his teammates. "He's going to help us immediately. He is a playmaker. A gamechanger."

If Peko is right, the Orange Rush is back. The Broncos defense will return to elite status and carry the team into the playoffs. It won't happen without a rocket fuel boost from this draft class. Snapshot grades often prove fruitless -- "We will be graded on wins," Elway said -- but I give the Broncos a B-plus with the 10 picks, a grade elevated by Chubb.

My look at the potential impact and fits of the 10 players selected:

1. Bradley Chubb, DE, North Carolina State, 6-5, 270: Chubb became a disruptive player as a junior -- he owned a first-round grade -- but returned to school. He became better, making him more prepared to contribute early. I look for the Broncos to create two packages for Chubb -- one where he rushes inside and one outside. Keep it simple early in the season. Let him benefit from the focus on Von Miller and Derek Wolfe. Remember Malik Jackson's final season in Denver? I expect Chubb to be that good as a rookie.

2. Courtland Sutton, WR, SMU, 6-3, 218: Sutton profiles as Demaryius Thomas' future replacement. Because he will play behind Thomas, Sutton might fight for snaps. Receivers struggle to make impact in their rookie seasons because of the complex offenses and limited chances. However, Sutton is a sponge. He wants to be great, already pestering Emmanuel Sanders and Thomas for tips. Also, he brings an interesting perspective. Sutton is a former basketball player and safety. He knows how to use his body in space and understands coverages from his days on defense. The Broncos need to learn from the failed Cody Latimer experiment. Find a way to get Sutton and his 36-inch vertical leap on the field in the red zone.

3. Royce Freeman, RB, Oregon, 6-0, 229: Freeman is a propane tank with legs. If the Broncos' scouts are right, he is a faster version of C.J. Anderson. Freeman rushed for 5,621 yards and 60 touchdowns in four seasons. How much tread is left on the tires? That's a fair question, but will not come into play the first few years of his career. Freeman should immediately challenge Devontae Booker for the starting role. He runs with violent intentions. That attitude should bode well as the Broncos emphasize a more physical blocking scheme.

3. Isaac Yiadom, CB, Boston College, 6-1, 190: Yiadom brings attitude and intelligence. His former college teammate, Broncos safety Justin Simmons, believes in Yiadom. "Ike is a physical press corner. He's going to be a great fit in our system, especially learning from Chris (Harris Jr.) and Bradley (Roby)," Simmons told Denver7. Yiadom should push for nickel snaps with projected starter Tramaine Brock, while putting last year's third-round pick Brendan Langley on notice. In his rookie year, Yiadom needs to be a successful gunner on special teams. He embraces the role.

4. Josey Jewell, LB, Iowa, 6-1, 234: Jewell was a tackling machine in college. Yiadom raved about Jewell's play when their teams faced off in a bowl game. Jewell brings a high football IQ -- an unmistakable trait in this year's draft class -- and terrific instincts. However, he must show he can make up for a lack of speed after running a concerning 4.82 40 at the combine. He should serve as a backup and a special teams stalwart as a rookie.

4. DaeSean Hamilton, WR, Penn State, 6-1, 205: Hamilton brings a resume of production, catching 214 passes with 18 career touchdowns. He stood out at the Senior Bowl. Former Broncos defensive back George Coghill, a member of the Broncos' first two Super Bowl championship teams, served as Hamilton's high school position coach. Hamilton grew irritated as other receivers were picked in front of him. Hamilton is one of my picks to click. He's a mature route runner on a team that desperately needs production from the slot receiver spot. Everything in his game -- smarts, speed, experience -- suggests he should contribute early.

5. Troy Fumagalli, TE, Wisconsin, 6-5, 234: Fumagalli's Wisconsin coach Paul Chryst knows the Broncos tight ends coach well, it's his brother Geep. Fumagalli is a willing blocker. He had to at Wisconsin. Like

Hamilton, Fumagalli arrives at a position of need. With Virgil Green gone, the Broncos need a functional blocker and a third down target. Fumagalli has improved as a blocker over the past two seasons. The idea of Fumagalli pairing with Jake Butt seems possible, if not likely as the roster is currently constructed.

6. Sam Jones, G, Arizona State, 6-5, 295: Jones, a former ThunderRidge High School star, brings versatility. He will need it to make the team. The ability to play guard and center is important. Jones brings good feet to the position. To stick in the pros, he must embrace competition and continue to add strength. Ideally, he plays closer to 310 pounds, or he could become a candidate for the practice squad.

6. Keishawn Bierra, LB, Washington, 6-1, 223: Bierra is the type of athlete who could upgrade special teams. He will fight for time as a reserve inside linebacker. Is he an upgrade over Zaire Anderson? That could determine if he makes the roster.

7. David Williams, RB, Arkansas, 6-1, 229: Another physical running back. He joins Freeman in the room as the Broncos look to add depth and bigger bodies. Hard to say how he fits. If Freeman delivers, the Broncos could decide a reserve like undrafted free agent Phillip Lindsay fits as a punt returner and special teams contributor.

# Denver Broncos need more exclamation marks on roster than checks and question marks

By Woody Paige  
Colorado Springs Gazette  
May 2, 2018

!'s, v's, ?'s

Now what, Broncos?

Although the veteran and collegiate free agent signing period is over and the NFL draft done, the roster and the depth chart are set in wet cement, not hard concrete.

Only 131 shopping days remain until the Broncos open at home against the - Five Seasons After.

So, let's examine the Broncos position-by-position and apply exclamation marks, check marks and question marks.

? - Quarterback: The Broncos didn't pick one of the dozen selected in seven rounds - or the eight undrafted quarterbacks who signed afterward. They are going with what they got - Case Keenum, Paxton Lynch and Chad Kelly, who will cost the Broncos \$17,080,000 (\$15 million to Keenum). But they (Lynch) have a 1-3 record with the Broncos. Is Keenum a one-hit wonder or a star starter, Lynch a first-round flop or a late bloomer, Kelly a budding backup or a dreadful dud?

? - Running back: The Broncos let go of their 1,000-yard runner; they drafted two (Royce Freeman and David Williams) and signed hometown favorite Phillip Lindsay. But can any or all replace and improve upon C.J. Anderson? Despite the Broncos' love for Devontae Booker and the uncertainty about De'Angelo Henderson and his One Big Play, Freeman should have immediate impact.

! - Wide receiver: There are 10. The Broncos filled a need by choosing two - Courtland Sutton and DaeSean Hamilton. Jerry Rice wanted the 49ers to pick Sutton. Strong endorsement. He will be the third receiver to Demaryius Thomas and Emmanuel Sanders, and Hamilton will compete with wayward Carlos Henderson at slot receiver. Jordan Taylor will stick again, Isaiah McKenzie won't if he doesn't learn how to play.

? - Tight end: If, ands and Jake Butt. The Broncos drafted their third tight end from the Big Ten (Wisconsin's Troy Fumagalli) in four years. Will they ever get it right?

v - Offensive tackle: Garrett Bolles made the all-rookie team and the all-penalty team. He should be developed in '18. Jared Veldheer was a valuable addition. What's Menelik Watson still doing here? The Broncos are thin.

v - Offensive guard: I was in between this and ?, but the Broncos have moved Ron Leary back to the left side, which will help them and Bolles. Connor McGovern was rather average in five starts at right guard. Max Garcia was inadequate as a starter, but should be adequate as a backup.

! - Center: Matt Paradis is one of the NFL's premier centers, and McGovern is a better center than guard.

√ - Defensive end: Derek Wolfe is terrific when healthy. He plays hurt, which he often is. Adam Gotsis is a major ? because of the sexual assault allegation. Shelby Harris was a rare, and cheap (\$705,000), find by the Broncos and can be a starter. Second-round pick DeMarcus Walker was ruined by the coaches in 2017 and his own ambiguity. He should be more of a factor.

√ - Defensive tackle: Domata Peko is a player and a presence, but there's a serious falloff with backups and his cousin Kyle Peko. The Broncos didn't draft anybody for the defensive line.

!!!! - Outside linebacker: Bradley Chubb put the "D" back in "enver," "efense" and "ege" for the Broncos, who possess the most superb collection of outside linebackers in all of football with Chubb joining Von Miller, Shane Ray and Shaq Barrett, and even undrafted free agent Jeff Holland, projected as a fifth-round pick.

√ - Inside linebacker: Brandon Marshall and Todd Davis are the team's tackle masters, but their coverage, when on the field for pass plays, is shaky. Josey Jewell was an exceptional grab at 106th.

√ - Cornerback: Chris Harris is top five, and Bradley Roby was a quality nickel back, but he can't match Aqib Talib. And Tramaine Brock probably can't equal Roby as the third cornerback. Brendan Langley was a third-round bust, and the Broncos hope that Isaac Yiadom, picked in the third round, isn't.

! - Safety: The S&S Twins are solid. Justin Simmons is a playmaker, and Darian Stewart has still got game. Su'a Cravens could be a special acquisition, and Will Parks can be very good.

The Broncos must achieve more !'s and fewer √'s and ?'s between May and September.

# Broncos sign eight college free agents

By STAFF

DenverBroncos.com

May 2, 2018

The Denver Broncos on Tuesday signed eight college free agents, President of Football Operations/General Manager John Elway announced. The team is currently at the maximum 90-player roster limit.

A college free agent has made Denver's active roster out of training camp in 13 of the last 14 seasons. Overall, 20 rookie college free agents have made the Broncos' active roster out of camp since 1997.

The following eight players signed with the club on Tuesday (click on each player's name to see college bio):

Name	Pos.	Ht.	Wt.	College
John Diarse	WR	6-1	214	Texas Christian
Jeff Holland	OLB	6-2	249	Auburn
Leon Johnson	T	6-6	300	Temple
Phillip Lindsay	RB	5-8	190	Colorado
Lowell Lotulelei	NT	6-2	310	Utah
Trey Marshall	DB	6-0	217	Florida State
Austin Schlottmann	G	6-6	300	Texas Christian

# NFL draft's instant impact rookies: Saquon Barkley should make big splash

By Lorenzo Reyes

USA Today

May 2, 2018

For NFL teams, taking the long-term view is essential in executing a draft plan. But developing a first-round pick can take many different forms.

Some of the most prized selections in this year's draft might be in for a gradual introduction into the league, as teams look instead to rely on established veterans at the position for the time being. Yet other first-year players are in line to take roles as starters right away and could have the skill set to find success against a higher level of competition.

Here's a look at nine rookies sure to make an instant impact in 2018.

Saquon Barkley, RB, New York Giants, No. 2

As a potential focal point of the Giants' offense, he's the runaway favorite for offensive rookie of the year. Barkley is an every-down back who demonstrates speed, elusiveness, vision and power as a runner. He also will comfortably create mismatches in the passing game and should be a frequent target of Eli Manning. In both impact and output, he could set a high bar for this class.

Quenton Nelson, G, Indianapolis Colts, No. 6

Colts quarterback Andrew Luck must have rejoiced when he found out about Indy's selection. Nelson projects to step in right away at left guard and should be counted on as a stabilizing force inside the interior of the Colts line. Though he should make a difference in pass protection (Indianapolis gave up an NFL-worst 56 sacks), his best asset early on for Indianapolis may be his comfort opening holes for a ground game game that generated only 103.8 yards per game last season.

Roquan Smith, LB, Chicago Bears, No. 8

With excellent instincts, range, coverage skills and hitting ability, Smith projects to be an early contender for defensive rookie of the year. He should start alongside veteran Danny Trevathan from Day 1. And with Bears defensive coordinator Vic Fangio's propensity to move inside linebackers around the formation in different blitzes, Chicago may utilize Smith all over the field.

Josh Rosen, QB, Arizona Cardinals, No. 10

Rosen was widely considered the quarterback in the class most ready to play right away, and he might get the chance to show why if Sam Bradford falters or has more knee issues. He's accurate and displays refined mechanics and footwork – all of which are essential for rookie passers to get on the field and play well. With the Cardinals in a bit of a rebuild, the new coaching staff may opt to get that transition kick-started early if Rosen shows he's up to the task.

Derwin James, S, Los Angeles Chargers, No. 17

Many mock drafts projected James to go far earlier than he did, but he might have the best fit of any rookie defender despite his slide. Defensive coordinator Gus Bradley was seeking a hard-hitting, swift and versatile safety for a unit already replete with young talent. He helped Kam Chancellor shine in Seattle, and James – who has a very similar skill set to that of the Seahawks standout – could blossom into a star in Los Angeles.

Dallas Goedert, TE, Philadelphia Eagles, No. 49

The Eagles still have Zach Ertz, but Philly loves using two-tight-end sets. Filling in for Trey Burton, Goedert will have plenty of opportunities in the passing game. He is a dynamic threat who should be able to create mismatches for a deep and varied offense.

Derrius Guice, RB, Washington Redskins, No. 59

Guice tumbled to the second round, but he lands in a spot where he likely becomes the starter right away ahead of incumbent Robert Kelley. Many saw as the class' second-ranked running back behind Barkley, and coach Jay Gruden has already talked about using him on first and second downs as Washington emphasizes improving a 28th-ranked rushing attack.

Royce Freeman, RB, Denver Broncos, No. 71

Though he registered 1,026 touches at Oregon, Freeman should still have plenty left in the early part of his career. He was slowed by a knee injury in 2016, but he has the power, vision and speed to make plays in Denver's offense. With only Devontae Booker as his main competition for the starter's role, Freeman should see plenty of work early and could become one of the surprises of the draft.

Harrison Phillips, DT, Buffalo Bills, No. 96

Veteran Kyle Williams turns 35 in June, and Buffalo drafted his eventual replacement late in the third round with Stanford's Harrison Phillips. With a wrestling background, Phillips was ultra productive at Stanford. Don't be surprised if he plays a significant role as the Bills look to elevate their 29th-ranked run defense.

# NFL ponders future of kickoffs, but it's clear they must go

By Nancy Armour

USA Today

May 2, 2018

The kickoff's days in the NFL are numbered.

Oh, I know what Troy Vincent, the NFL's executive vice president of football operations, said. With kickoffs among the topics of discussion at this week's league meetings, Vincent insisted Tuesday morning that the NFL is looking to modify the play, not eliminate it.

"Absolutely not," Vincent said.

But whether the league eliminates kickoffs or simply changes the rules to the point where they become irrelevant, it doesn't really matter. The result will be the same.

And it's long overdue.

While the NFL remains stubborn in its refusal to acknowledge a definitive link between football and neurodegenerative diseases such as chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) – There could be other factors! More research needs to be done! – it is at least making an effort to take the head out of the game. Violent hits that were once celebrated on DVDs and SportsCenter have been outlawed. Defenseless receivers now get virtually the same protected status once reserved for quarterbacks.

But the kickoff remains by far the most dangerous play in football. You remember those videos with the crash-test dummies, right? Kickoffs are football's equivalent.

After the owners meeting in March, Green Bay Packers president Mark Murphy told ESPN that the league's medical staff had presented data showing concussions were five times as likely to happen on kickoffs as on an average play. No surprise, given that it involves collisions of 200- and 300-pound men who have been running at full speed for half the length of the field or more.

The NFL has already tried to limit the carnage. In 2011, it moved kickoffs up five yards, the idea being it would result in more touchbacks. At that March meeting, owners voted to put touchbacks at the 25-yard line, further reducing the incentive for returns.

But that, Murphy warned, would not be enough.

"If you don't make changes to make it safer, we're going to do away with it," Murphy, a member of the competition committee, said then. "It's that serious."

The alarm bell has apparently been heard. While Vincent didn't say what the proposals are that will be considered Wednesday, a look at what the NCAA did last month could offer a clue. College teams can now call for a fair catch anywhere inside the 25-yard line and it will result in a touchback.

When you consider that touchbacks have been moved up to the 25-yard line, it makes the idea of returning a kick as silly as going for a two-point conversion in the first quarter. Why bother?

Sure, there are the occasional kicks that get returned for touchdowns, but they are fast taking on unicorn status. Out of more than 1,000 kickoffs in the NFL last season, seven were returned for touchdowns.

More likely is that a return gets you somewhere between the 20- and 25-yard line. Of the 32 NFL teams, Atlanta was the only one to average better than 25 yards on kickoff returns last season, and the Falcons averaged 26.2 yards.

That's a lot of risk for little reward – especially if the NFL would adopt the NCAA rule change or something similar.

This also would still allow for onside kicks. While rare, and usually not occurring until late in a game, the possibility would address the league's concern of kickoffs becoming, as Vincent said, "ceremonial."

Traditionalists might balk at the changes, muttering something about the game becoming too soft. But safety concerns surrounding football are real, and they aren't going away. The NFL has to adapt, or it will eventually become extinct.

Making kickoffs irrelevant won't make a marked difference in the game, but it will reduce injuries and head trauma. By protecting the future health of its players, the NFL is protecting itself, too.

# One Question, 32 Answers: What Do You Think About Every Team's Offseason?

By Peter King

MMQB

May 2, 2018

I didn't do a good job on 32 teams Monday, so I thought I'd answer this question for all 32 this morning: In brief, what do you think of every team's offseason? By division, here we go...

## AFC EAST

Buffalo. The entire goal of the off-season was to get the long-term quarterback, and the fact that the Bills worked for 13 months to stockpile enough picks to get in position to do that worked out well. It cost GM Brandon Beane two low second-round picks to move up five spots to get quarterback Josh Allen. We'll see how that works, but the bonus was getting the uber-athletic Tremaine Edmunds in the first round. But the offensive line continues to be a big need group.

Miami. I loved getting the bargain safety/corner/nickel linebacker Minkah Fitzpatrick 11th overall. Tremendous value. Penn State tight end Mike Gesekki will give Ryan Tannehill a good weapon in the intermediate passing game. And good for Miami, getting Danny Amendola out of Super Bowlville to play the slot as the heir to productive Jarvis Landry.

New England. I get the weirdness of the Baker Mayfield story. I get why everyone loves it. But what does it matter, thinking maybe New England would have traded to number two overall to pick up Mayfield? First: For five weeks the Browns have known they were going to use the number one overall pick on him. Second: Would New England have really traded all four ones and twos this year, plus maybe something in 2019 to the Giants to pick up the second overall pick this year? I doubt it.

New York Jets. Some in the organization wanted Sam Darnold, some wanted Mayfield. I don't know who will be better in the NFL, so it's probably fine the way it worked out. Darnold is in the best position of any of the young quarterbacks, with the underrated Jeremy Bates his tutor and play-caller, and terrific mentor Josh McCown in place to show him the ropes. If Darnold doesn't make it, he can't blame his support system.

## AFC NORTH

Baltimore. The story of the offseason: The leash on a Super Bowl-winning quarterback, Joe Flacco, has tightened considerably with the drafting of Louisville quarterback Lamar Jackson with the final pick of the first round. Smart move by the Ravens, because Flacco is in Eli Manning's league in recent years—one of the lowest-rated quarterbacks in the game over the last half-decade. Maybe it's not all Flacco's fault, but something has to be done about it. Jackson is that something. For better or worse, Hayden Hurst and Orlando Brown should be offensive starters by Halloween, at the latest.

Cincinnati. I've seen a lot of people fall in love with the Cincinnati draft, but I'm not buying it. The Bengals should have picked Lamar Jackson, and put legit pressure on Andy Dalton to play better. As a Bengals' fan, do you really have faith that Dalton is going to take the next step and propel the Bengals over the Steelers? Billy Price is a nice pick, but I cannot fathom how he was chosen over Jackson.

Cleveland. As I said in my stories about the Browns this week, if you hire John Dorsey, and you put faith in him to assemble a staff, and you ask them to pick your quarterback of the future, and he has been part of two teams with good-to-Hall-of-Fame quarterbacks, and they think Baker Mayfield is the clear choice, well, you've got to let it play out. And Denzel Ward is going to spend the next couple of years blanketing Antonio Brown and A.J. Green. If he fails, that defense will fail. No pressure or anything.

Pittsburgh. Mason Rudolph is an intriguing Roethlisberger heir, and there were plenty of mixed reviews on the Oklahoma State passer, but it's good to let him sit for a couple of years and learn behind an oak tree of a quarterback. Not bad value for the 76th overall pick. Terrell Edmunds was an interesting first-round pick, an underachieving college safety in a unit the Steelers seem to be forever fixing. My biggest miss for the Steelers: Where was the heir to Ryan Shazier? Big hole there.

#### AFC SOUTH

Houston. The Texans' draft was last year—when they dealt a 2018 first-rounder for Deshaun Watson, and when they dealt a 2018 second to get rid of Brock Osweiler. The Texans got a Mike Mayock fave with their first pick, Stanford safety Justin Reid early in the third round. What an odd draft overall, picking three tight ends in eight picks.

Indianapolis. Everyone was stunned at Quenton Nelson over either a trade or Roquan Smith at six. I get it, though. Chris Ballard is bound and determined to protect Andrew Luck for the next five years, or more, and Nelson was the surest thing of any player in this draft. The most important pick, other than Nelson, could well have been guard Braden Smith in the second round, with one of those freebie picks from the Jets. Smith, from Auburn, should be one of two new starters on the line opening day.

Jacksonville. Isn't it amazing what's happened to the Jags? They're drafting for luxury, not need. Taven Bryan should be an excellent disruptor in the middle of the defensive line, where the Jags were already very good. But the key to this draft could well be the receiver in round two, D.J. Chark, who walks into Jags camp as the fastest receiver (4.34 in the 40) on the team. He's a vital piece, even more important than Bryan.

Tennessee. The Titans spent \$81 million to pilfer two valuable Patriots—cornerback Malcolm Butler and running back Dion Lewis—and they are significantly more important than the players in the draft. Linebacker Rashaan Evans of Alabama, the first-rounder, is an impressive player from a great program, but some in the league are skeptical he can be the three-down linebacker Mike Vrabel and the Titans think he'll be.

#### AFC WEST

Denver. We may never know if John Elway would have picked Baker Mayfield with the fifth pick in the draft if the Oklahoma quarterback was there ... but the benefit to the lack of Mayfield is the best two-man edge rush in football: Bradley Chubb and Von Miller. Elway, and Broncos Nation, are counting on the \$36 million the team spent on two years of Case Keenum to be a wise investment.

Kansas City. Until he proves otherwise, Sammy Watkins will go down as a vastly overpaid (\$16 million per) player. Think there's a reason that, at 24, he's on his third NFL team already? Pat Mahomes is a big part of the 2018 crop, because dealing the first-rounder last year brought Mahomes in trade—and allowed the Chiefs to import their best off-season acquisition, cornerback Kendall Fuller, in the Alex Smith trade from Washington.

Los Angeles Chargers. Best value pick in the first round: Derwin James, the safety from Florida State, with the 17th pick. If he'd been picked sixth overall, no one would have beefed. That's how good he is. Center Mike Pouncey, the free agent from Miami, is a vital cog to the Chargers' offensive chances.

Oakland. Jordy Nelson plays at 33 this year, and the Packers basically gave him a red carpet out of town. The interesting thing about the Jon Gruden offensive additions? It's an aging wideout in Nelson, a head-case wideout in Martavis Bryant, and a couple of draft-pick tackles (Kolton Miller, Brandon Parker) who need seasoning. There'll be a premium on coaching and development this summer at camp in Napa.

#### NFC EAST

Dallas. This draft is about the play-making ability of rangy linebacker Leighton Vaner Esch of Boise State. Dallas hopes he can be the long-term defensive centerpiece they'll miss when Sean Lee is gone. Much depends on the plans of tight end Jason Witten, because Dallas would be lacking at both wideout and tight end if Witten leaves for ESPN. Talk about pressure: The 137th pick in the draft, Stanford tight end Dalton Schultz, might have to produce early and often.

New York Giants. Three huge offensive pieces should make life tolerable for Eli Manning: left tackle Nate Solder, the highest-paid tackle in NFL history; angry and edgy guard Will Hernandez, the second-round pick who should start opening day and who generated the best quote of the draft weekend from Mike Mayock ("He just doesn't like people."); and, of course, the franchise back from Penn State, Saquon Barkley, who has been GM Dave Gettleman's preferred picks for weeks.

Philadelphia. Two players are atop the Eagles' off-season menu, and neither was a draft pick. Cornerback Sidney Jones was a second-rounder last year, recovering from an Achilles tear that never allowed him to be the real Sidney Jones all season. He and Ronald Darby should be the Eagles' long-term hopes at corner. And Michael Bennett, in what may be his last NFL season, looks for one last hurrah on a really strong defensive front.

Washington. Kirk Cousins out, Alex Smith in. Even trade if you ask me. Da'Ron Payne will be the biggest draft pick in the middle of a defensive line that needed reinforcements. We'll see if Jay Gruden can get the most out of risky running back Derrius Guice, who joins a backfield needing a jolt.

#### NFC NORTH

Chicago. Overall, the Bears had the best offseason of any team in football. GM Ryan Pace totally revamped the wideout corps, with vet Allen Robinson and rookie Anthony Miller the keys there. On defense, there's a new-style monster of the midway, a rangy 235-pound sideline-to-sideline force, linebacker Roquan Smith. The Bears were fortunate to get him eighth overall, and he should be perfect in the middle of Vic Fangio's defense.

Detroit. The hottest player down the stretch in the draft, Arkansas guard-center Frank Ragnow, might have been a Patriot today if the Lions didn't steal him three picks ahead of New England at 20 in round one. He should be a three-position player (left guard, center, right guard), a luxury for new coach Matt Patricia. The Lions got a bunch of middle-class free-agents (LaGarrette Blount, Devon Kennard), typical of a Patriot alumni team, which this is.

Green Bay. Jimmy Graham and Muhammad Wilkerson in free agency, Jaire Alexander and Josh Jackson in the draft. All four should play early and often for the Pack. My biggest question about the short-term

future for the Packers: Will Aaron Rodgers' state of mind—he seems not very happy with the Packers' player moves these days—have much impact on the team's play this year?

Minnesota. Nice value for the Vikings with the 30th pick, cornerback Mike Hughes of Central Florida. Minnesota hasn't steered clear of dangerous players recently, and all indications are that rehabbing 2017 draftee Dalvin Cook will be a huge player for the Vikes this year. The biggest off-season acquisition, of course, is Kirk Cousins, the highest-paid player in NFL history. He'll have to play like it for the Vikings to play deep into January.

#### NFC SOUTH

Atlanta. Weird off-season. No essential pieces to add. And the Falcons, trumped for the defensive linemen they liked and trumped by Tennessee for Rashaan Evans, plucked a falling wideout, Calvin Ridley, with the first-round pick. Second-round pick Isaiah Oliver should be an early contributor at cornerback.

Carolina. How often does a team have the 24th pick and its choice of any wide receiver in the draft? Maryland's D.J. Moore gave GM Marty Hurney that luxury—and the Panthers will be trying to buck history. Eleven of the 12 first-round receivers have flopped since 2015, so the Panthers will be counting on Moore to buck the trend.

New Orleans. Gutsiest, riskiest, most profligate decision of the year: The Saints dealt next year's first-round pick to move up to take an edge rusher from Texas-San Antonio, Marcus Davenport. He's a solid, but raw prospect, and the Saints are making a big gamble that he can team with Cam Jordan to give the Saints the consistent defensive pressure they want.

Tampa Bay. The offseason has been all about the defensive front: Jason Pierre-Paul in trade from the Giants and Vinny Curry in free agency from the Eagles; they should be the bookend ends. And Vita Vea with the 12th pick in the first round to play next to Pro Bowler Gerald McCoy. How many defensive fronts will be better?

#### NFC WEST

Arizona. I love this: In the last two months, the Cardinals have gone from zero quarterbacks under contract to having Sam Bradford, Josh Rosen and Mike Glennon as their 1-2-3 on the quarterback depth chart. In his last season (presumably), Larry Fitzgerald should be able to break in a second-round receiver, Christian Kirk, who grew up in Arizona rooting for Fitzgerald.

Los Angeles Rams. The Rams picked about 10 minutes ago. The last team to make a first pick in the draft picked swing tackle Joseph Noteboom 89th overall. Of course, the Rams' off-season was Brandin Cooks, Ndamukong Suh, Marcus Peters and Aqib Talib. If they fail, the Rams fail.

San Francisco. The drafting of Mike McGlinchey ninth overall allowed the GM John Lynch to move Trent Brown (not a system fit for the Niner offense) to New England. The off-season centered around vet cornerback Richard Sherman leading the secondary, center Weston Richburg anchoring the offensive line, and Jerick McKinnon being the all-purpose back coach Kyle Shanahan craved.

Seattle. We'll see if safety Earl Thomas, a trade target of Dallas through the draft, will be a Seahawk when training camp opens. Jimmy Graham left in free agency, which hurts; the low-cost replacement, Ed

Dickson, will have big shoes to fill. One of the interesting rookies in the NFL will be Seattle first-round running back Rashaad Penny. All he did in college was average 7.5 yards per rush—over three years.

Now for your mail...

#### ALLEN'S TWEETS SHOULD NEVER HAVE BEEN A STORY

In reading your take on Josh Allen's tweets, I was wondering if the media ever stops to consider just how dumb a story is before they run it. In this case, the most appropriate headline probably should have been: "Professional Journalist Searches 14-Year-Old's Twitter Account." In what walk of life would it ever be appropriate for an adult to comb through a child's social media account and publish an article about it? When would an employer ever hire a person and, on day one of his employment, require him to address his coworkers regarding his comments as a 14-year-old? The answer to both questions is never. I'm incredibly disappointed that the Bills management didn't act like adults and immediately tell any reporter asking about it to grow up. I'm more disappointed that the media felt the need to even research this.

—Richard, Atlanta

Couldn't disagree more. Let's clarify a couple of things: The tweets in question happened when Allen was 15, 16 and 17. I couldn't call that "child" age. Think of this: You're an NFL general manager, in charge of finding a long-term quarterback, and you're considering trading three draft choices to move up to draft your quarterback of the future, and, as a late teenager, the prime candidate sent some racially insensitive tweets. You're asking a locker room with the majority of African-American players to wipe out of their minds that the quarterback drafted to lead the team sent out these tweets when he was in high school. I certainly do not think it should eliminate Allen from consideration. But I certainly do think an investigation into them is warranted, and if GM Brandon Beane didn't look into the story, I'd have significant questions about his vetting process for this player.

#### A FIX TO THE ROOKIE WAGE SCALE

I understand that you feel that the cheap rookie deals give an extra incentive to tanking, and this is a problem for the football fan. Perhaps the alternative is to have rookie contracts significantly more incentive laden than veteran contracts. A team doesn't have to risk paying a bust like Aaron Curry, Jamarcus Russell, or Jason Smith a \$60 million rookie contract. But if a player like Russell Wilson outperforms his contract he can either be paid for incentives or break free of the contract in a player option. As long as he meets the performance incentives, the team has the option to pay up for his performance, but if they do not meet incentives, the player has the option to either keep the smaller rookie deal, or enter free agency. The player has some contract protection on the smaller back end, but they also get rewarded for performance. Just a common sense idea without too much thought, but maybe there's some merits to it.

—Jon K.

A good idea, Jon. Potentially very good. I think the biggest problem with it is, from the NFL's point of view, the cost uncertainty that would come from it. They would have a hard time budgeting for the long-term if a drafted player didn't have the cost certainty that he does now. But in fairness to the player, it is a good idea.

#### WHAT'S THE POINT OF CLEVELAND'S SECRECY?

I'm wondering what the point of Cleveland's secret was. If they had the first pick in the draft, what difference does it make that everyone knew? And because they kept it a secret, they never really knew

what someone might offer for the number one pick, and didn't give teams the reality of knowing that Mayfield would not be available at number four, and thus cobbling together an offer for that.  
—Brian, Washington D.C.

Interesting point. I agree that, in theory, there's no good reason to be so secretive about who you're picking first overall. But in practical terms, a month ago, how did John Dorsey know the preferences of the Giants (at two) and the Jets (at three)? What if he finds out reliably that the Giants want Sam Darnold and would be willing to ensure getting him by trading a second-round pick to Cleveland to move to number one? In that case, it would be a big advantage for the team picking number one to not show its hand before the draft. Now, it turned out the Giants and Jets never seriously tried to move up. But how did Dorsey know that in March, when he was pretty sure he was taking Baker Mayfield?

#### DORSEY'S SILENCE IS TELLING

It seems like a bad sign that the Cleveland GM doesn't trust his core staff enough to tell them his top quarterback, and when he finally does the news is immediately leaked. Same old Browns.  
—Stephen W.

I'm amazed at the reaction from your emails and my text inbox at all of the people who think draft secrecy is silly and unnecessary. Do you think Dorsey is alone in keeping his first-round pick from his staff? He's not. Mike Shanahan did it with Jay Cutler, telling no one in the building till an hour or so before the draft. GM Dave Caldwell of the Jags told no one in the building till just before the draft that he was taking Blake Bortles in 2014. Last year, when I was in the 49ers draft room, they were talking trade with the Bears; San Francisco was picking second and Chicago three. The Bears wouldn't tell the Niners who their target was; the Niners wouldn't tell the Bears what they were thinking either. Do you think Bill Belichick shares his internal draft plans with his staff? I can tell you (from a former Patriots scout) that their jaws would drop sometimes when they heard who Belichick was picking.

Now, about the "same old Browns" because the possibility of Mayfield leaked ... maybe. But Adam Schefter didn't report Mayfield was the pick. He reported he was in contention to be the pick two days before the draft, and then on draft day that some coaches in the league would be surprised if he would not be the pick. I'd hardly call that the news being immediately leaked.

#### IS THERE ANOTHER REASON FOR WITTEN'S RETIREMENT?

I find it very odd that Jason Witten would decide to retire from the Cowboys at this time and place during the offseason. He was a great Cowboy player throughout his career and he has supported the team over the years even during the hard times. I find it very odd that he would choose to retire now, with the Cowboys' draft board all put together and during the week of the draft with a limited chance to find a replacement. I realize the Cowboys have a few tight ends on their roster, but this move just seems odd for a stand up guy like Witten to leave the Cowboys at this point in time in the year. I love your writing and your columns. They are required reading every week as far as I am concerned. Keep up the great work!

—Sean, Clovis, N.M.

So nice of you, Sean. Thank you. If Witten retires, I can tell you he's likely not doing it an an odd time like this (and an inopportune time for the Cowboys) by his own choice. I'm pretty sure ESPN just recently offered him the deal and the timing of it was not in his hands.

#### IS NEWSOME A HALL OF FAME GENERAL MANAGER?

Great story on Ozzie Newsome today. I was wondering what you think about his chances to make the Hall of Fame as an executive.

—C.J., Chicago

The Pro Football Hall of Fame does not enshrine people twice. Newsome is not eligible to go into the Hall again, after being elected as a tight end.

#### SICK AND TIRED OF THE BROWNS

What a shock yet another story about the Browns at The MMQB. Cleveland, a fifth-rate city and a team no one who doesn't live within 100 miles cares about, gets its 35th story in a national publication. What gives? I don't get it. Could we please have a moratorium on Browns stories until they have a .500 record?

—Anonymous

A team with two of the top four picks in a quarterback-rich draft when the major need is quarterback—and you think we should not be writing about it? Glad you're not my editor.

#### SHAD KHAN'S PLANS

Jaguars owner Shad Khan's comments [about buying Wembley Stadium in London for the long-term future of the Jaguars in Jacksonville] make perfect sense. But perhaps more so for him than for Jacksonville, if one considers the following. The Jaguars are again a factor in both the conference and league championships. That results in a commensurate increase in both the fans' and the business community's (financial) support and interest. NFL franchises are valuable. The upcoming sale of the Carolina Panthers should underscore that fact. No community, especially one that has no other professional or college sports identity, wants to lose an NFL franchise ... Khan would be in position to pull a Modell Browns-Ravens-Browns move. Once the NFL is ready to place a franchise in London, he would immediately request to relocate his team under a new name to his own stadium. Given Khan's years of commitment to playing in London, it is difficult to imagine that the NFL would fail to approve his request. That relocation would then create the opportunity for new ownership groups to bid to fill the vacancy in Jacksonville, which would retain the Jaguars name. Khan never stated that the "Jaguars" would move to London, nor did he state that his team would stay in Jacksonville.

—George M., The Villages, Fla.

It still doesn't pass the sniff test that Khan buying Wembley Stadium strengthens the Jaguars' future in Jacksonville. I stand by that.

#### KHAN HAS BEEN A GOOD OWNER FOR JACKSONVILLE

For those who believe only actions and not words, Khan has twice invested in stadium improvements and built an indoor practice facility and an amphitheater on the stadium grounds. He has proposed a \$2.5 billion plan to develop the area around the stadium for business, residential, and recreational use. In each of these projects, Khan has or will share the expense with the City of Jacksonville. Intelligent businessmen do not invest hundreds of millions of dollars in a location they plan to abandon. We hear way too much about Khan's business interests in London, and way too little about his investments in Jacksonville.

—Roger B., Houston

I hope you're right.

# 24 Hours ... With Bradley Chubb and His Team at the NFL Draft

By Jenny Vrentas

MMQB

May 1, 2018

Bradley Chubb is wondering what's inside the oversized plastic Hobby Lobby bag his agent is toting down the hallway of The Adolphus Hotel.

"We're 23 and a half hours away," replies the agent, Erik Burkhardt, as Chubb opens the door to his suite.

It's 7:30 p.m. central time on the eve of the NFL draft, and uncertainty abounds. This is true of the draft every year, but especially this year, when the identity of the No. 1 pick was shrouded in secrecy from even Browns senior staffers until hours before they were on the clock. Chubb, who won the Nagurski Trophy for the nation's top defender during his senior season at North Carolina State, was regarded by many teams as the best defensive player, in a draft flush with quarterbacks. A year earlier a player at his position, defensive end Myles Garrett, went first overall. But this year, one day before the draft, the potential permutations are dizzying.

Chubb did his best to stay out of the fray over the three months leading up to the draft. He'd often change the channel from sports shows to something neutral; he replied in interviews that yes, he did believe he was the best player in the draft, but if a team didn't think he was a good fit for them, that's fine. He showed up to each team visit in a suit, whether the team was picking No. 2 (Giants) or No. 8 (Bears).

But now that the final countdown is here, it's time for what's inside that Hobby Lobby bag. Burkhardt pulls out a large pad of paper, a wooden easel and a black marker. Chubb's parents, Stacey and Aaron, knock on the hotel room door a few minutes later and take a seat on the couch. This is akin to a final team meeting before the Super Bowl—everything has been done that could be done, but you want to make sure everyone is on the same page before the big event.

"This is our final 'what I'm hearing' before tomorrow, so we know as much as we possibly can going in," Burkhardt says. "We're going to go through scenarios."

He starts writing each pick, in order, on the pad of paper. Chubb knows the draft order by heart, too, murmuring each team before Burkhardt writes it down. Browns ... Giants ... Jets ... Browns ... Broncos ... Colts ... Bucs ... Bears ... Burkhardt stops writing after pick No. 8.

"Niners," Chubb continues, saying the name of the next team on the board, picking ninth.

"We're going to stop there," Burkhardt says. In other words, You're not going to be waiting that long.

There's no other feeling in sports akin to the buildup to when an NFL hopeful's phone rings on draft night. "Its own unique experience," Chubb says. That was amplified this year, with more intrigue surrounding a first round than NFL teams, agents or media members could recall in quite some time.

What, exactly, is draft eve like for a top-five prospect, his agent and his family and friends? The MMQB spent time with “Team Chubb”—as the group text message Burkhardt started months ago is named—to find out.

For starters, it’s much different from what Chubb’s father or his older brother, Brandon, experienced. Aaron Chubb was working at RPS, a part-time job at the shipping company as he finished up his degree at the University of Georgia, the day he was drafted by the Patriots in the 12th round in April 1989. He called Stacey, then his girlfriend, who was unaware a draft was even going on. “Drafted into what?” they joke now.

Brandon Chubb, a linebacker who played at Wake Forest, went undrafted in 2016. The Chubb family watched the entire draft that year without hearing his name called. He signed a few days later as a free agent with the Rams and was released during roster cuts; he later landed in Detroit, where he’s now competing for a roster spot under new coach Matt Patricia. Burkhardt represents Brandon as well, and as Bradley’s college career began to take off, Bradley took note of how hard Burkhardt worked to find opportunities for his big brother. “I knew I wanted that guy in my corner, too,” he says.

Burkhardt spent much of Wednesday on the phone with executives from NFL teams, doing his best to read the tea leaves for Chubb and his other clients. Burkhardt’s agency, Select Sports Group, represented 16 players entering this year’s draft among its six agents. All day Burkhardt was carrying around a spiral-bound, pigskin-textured notebook with a handwritten chart inside listing draft grades he’d been given for his clients by 20 to 25 NFL teams. In past drafts Burkhardt has represented a No. 12 pick (D.J. Hayden), a No. 20 pick (Kendall Wright) and No. 22 (Johnny Manziel), but the conversations about Chubb have been different. Two teams with picks in the top 10 told Burkhardt they had Chubb rated one spot higher than where they were selecting, i.e., top six for a team picking seventh. It was their playful way of saying, He’s not getting down to us.

While Burkhardt was culling information, Chubb was handling some off-the-field business. In the morning he led middle-school kids from the Dallas area in football drills at an NFL-sponsored clinic; in the afternoon, he had promotional appearances with companies including Old Spice. About two hours before the easel session in Chubb’s hotel room, Burkhardt drives up to the hotel to pick up Chubb and his agency’s marketing director, Jacquelyn Davis, for a speed dating event with NFL sponsors such as Pizza Hut and Snickers. In the pocket of Chubb’s light brown suit is a handful of mini Snickers, part of a plan he and Davis hatched to make an impression on the reps from one of Chubb’s favorite brands. “Hungry?” he’ll ask, while offering the candy. He’s charming enough to pull it off.

On the rooftop of the posh Joule Hotel, Chubb and Davis work the room alongside other top prospects like Sam Darnold and Josh Allen, while Burkhardt texts with a scout, a national media member and a No. 2 personnel executive. General managers tend to go dark the day before the draft, but Burkhardt has talked to high-ranking officials on nine teams since this morning: How do you think the top five plays out? Where do you think your guy goes? Some conversations last three minutes; others go on for 20. It’s a cat-and-mouse game where everyone has a vested interest and no one can be sure how honest the other side is being. Agents want their clients to go as high as possible. Teams want the players they like to still be there when they pick.

“All you can do is fight for your piece of the pie,” Burkhardt says. “All these conversations could be meaningless. But I can’t live in that world. I have to have every conversation with conviction, while also being realistic.”

After two hours, Chubb and his team hop in Burkhardt's black Escalade, headed back to the hotel for the easel session with mom and dad. Burkhardt cops to usually being a distracted driver, but not tonight, with Chubb in the car. "Are we clear?" he asks twice before pulling out of the garage. Precious cargo.

"I'm very conservative about the floor," Burkhardt tells the Chubb family. "It's really about the floor."

Part of representing a client in the draft is helping him go as high as possible; the other part is keeping expectations realistic. The wait in the green room on draft night can be excruciating enough. Burkhardt stops his list at eight, confident that no matter what pre-draft smokescreens teams are putting up, Chubb will not be waiting past that pick.

For the next half hour, Burkhardt presents different scenarios like a teacher at a chalkboard, stopping periodically to ask if there are any questions. At this point, ESPN has reported that Mayfield is likely to be the No. 1 overall pick. The Giants were roundly impressed by Chubb (and his suit) on his visit to team headquarters, and GM Dave Gettleman loves his "hog mollies," but he drafted a running back in the first round in his previous draft at Carolina, and it's widely suspected that he'll go for Penn State RB Saquon Barkley. The Jets are taking a quarterback at three. Browns GM John Dorsey, picking again at four, and Broncos GM John Elway, at five, were keeping their intentions particularly close to the vest.

"Elway said last week this pick is for sale, unless, possibly..." Burkhardt says, pointing at No. 5. "Look, these guys have been really quiet, so I can't get much of a read. But I know Von Miller is going up there talking about Bradley, saying he's a mix between himself and Khalil Mack. If Von has him on the other side, Von is going to keep eating; way less double teams. He's advocating for him, right? That's what he's doing."

Both parents are nodding. The Chubbs had heard Miller's comments. Bradley did not believe Miller had actually said that about him, until a video confirmed it. He's been quiet through tonight's presentation. The idea of his name being called tomorrow night in front of 20,000 fans, of finding out where his next home will be, of potentially playing next to Super Bowl 50 MVP Von Miller seems to just now be setting in.

"I'm taking it all in," Chubb says. "It hasn't really hit me yet, to be honest with you."

"You have done everything the right way, times 10, through this whole process," Burkhardt says. "We can only control so much, and whether it's up here [1] or down here [8], we keep it cool, keep it smiling. Everything happens for a reason."

Stacey stands up to take a photo of the easel, just in case she wants to reference their own personal draft board tomorrow. She turns to her son.

"Really, I have been so impressed, Bradley, with your composure," Stacey says. "You have a good mixture of confidence but showing your humility. And that's hard to do."

Three hours later, in a private room at Morton's steakhouse in uptown Dallas, there's a rare crack in that composure.

Burkhardt is hosting what's akin to a wedding rehearsal dinner for Chubb's family and friends. A special menu is at each seat, with CONGRATULATIONS, BRADLEY! printed at the top. Also as at a wedding, Burkhardt stands up and asks everyone in the room to support Chubb on the journey ahead.

"This is his squad," he says. "There's going to be good days, bad days, some hard times, injuries and everything else, and this is the group he's going to lean on to get through it with him. Here's to big No. 9 and a huge day tomorrow. His last night before he turns pro."

Burkhardt asks everyone in the room to take a turn giving a toast: Chubb's parents; his girlfriend, Bria; his sister-in-law, Cassidy; Burkhardt's wife, Kari; four other Select Sports Group employees who have been preparing Chubb for the draft; and seven friends from back home in Marietta, Ga., some of whom have been playing football with Chubb since they were on the 105-pound Milford Warriors. The year Chubb tore his ACL as a junior in high school, "the team went into panic," one of his high school friends tells the room. But Chubb stayed on the sideline, helped them get ready for games as if he was playing, and returned as a senior to lead the team to the state quarterfinals. Another of the seven buddies vows there will be seven stadium employees holding them back if Chubb goes first overall—or if he goes 31st.

The one person missing is Brandon, who is in Detroit for Lions minicamp. Missing practice time with his new head coach was a non-starter for a player fighting to make the roster, so he's booked on a commercial flight from Detroit to DFW after practice ends Thursday and is scheduled to land at 5:45 p.m. Not willing to risk rush-hour traffic, and wanting to be sure he'll make it on time, he'll out \$1,600 to rent a helicopter—cheaper than chartering a private flight to Dallas—to take him from DFW airport to AT&T Stadium. "I already know he loves me," Bradley says, "but the measures he went through?"

All day long, Chubb's phone has been pinged, well-wishers sending him the ubiquitous "You ready?" texts and others passing along articles speculating about his future. (The Athletic's Raiders writer reports, "A trade up? Bradley Chubb is a target if they can get to him.") But now he puts his phone away, focusing on the people in this room. He stands up and thanks each one, coming to his parents last.

"Everything you see right now is because of y'all two," Chubb says, suddenly unable to finish his sentence. His voice fades into sobs. He leans the weight of his 6'4", 269-pound frame on his chair, unable to get out another word for the next 60 seconds. "Let it out, man," a few in the audience say encouragingly. Stacey leaps up to hug him.

"Mom, you made us stay up until like 2 a.m. for school projects, but I needed that," he continues. "You were a perfectionist, but that pushed me to be who I am right now, because I always wanted to make you proud." His voice is breaking now. "Dad, you were always hard on us, but we needed that. They all said you raised us right. We needed that structure in our lives, and I'm so glad you all did that, because without y'all, I wouldn't be here." As Bradley fights back tears, Aaron rises to embrace his son, and Stacey joins them.

On every team interview, Chubb says, he was asked what motivates him. He always said his mom and dad. When he tore his ACL in high school, and thought his football career was over, Stacey encouraged him to pick something to help him get through it (he chose the Bible verse Jeremiah 29:11, "For I know the plans I have for you..."). Aaron coached Bradley and his friends in middle school, and many of them still consider him their life coach. Together as a family, they took on the risk he made in deciding to return to North Carolina State for his senior year—a gamble that is about to pay off.

“It was probably one of the hardest things I had to do, because you never know what is going to happen,” Chubb says, voice faltering again. “I appreciate y’all being there for that, keeping my head on straight and making sure I stay humble, never let me get on my high horse. Everything I’ve been doing is because of you. I love y’all so much.”

Both parents are standing next to him now, his dad rubbing his back, waiting until he finishes to wrap their arms around him. Vegas has 8:1 odds on Chubb being the first player to cry on draft night, but the safer bet was tonight. There’s not a dry eye in the room.

The high school buddies are in their seats in Section 203 of AT&T Stadium. Brandon’s self-described “Mission Impossible” is complete—he touched down on Jerry Jones’ landing pad nearby the stadium with less than 30 minutes to spare. Bradley is seated between mom, dad and Brandon, and across the table from Burkhardt, waiting for his phone to ring.

Twenty-five minutes before the Browns go on the clock, Burkhardt receives a text confirming what has been widely speculated: Mayfield is going No. 1 to the Browns. Eight minutes before the start of the draft he receives another text from a source, planting the seed that the Browns might take a DB at four. The source estimates it’s 50/50 between Chubb and a DB, whom he does not name. Sitting at their table inside the green room, behind the stage on the field of AT&T Stadium, Burkhardt relays both pieces of information to Chubb.

Mayfield goes 1. The Giants pick Barkley at 2. Jets go QB, USC’s Sam Darnold, at 3. With the Browns on the clock at 4, it’s quiet in the green room for several minutes as time ticks down. Burkhardt receives two texts from officials on teams picking lower in the top 10, asking, “Are the Browns going to take him?” He doesn’t reply. Then, suddenly, the cameras rush over to a table in the corner—the pick is Ohio State cornerback Denzel Ward.

“My agent told me right before I went out, don’t be surprised by anything,” Chubb says, “so I wasn’t surprised when that happened.”

Others were. The NFL Network set gasps when commissioner Roger Goodell announces Ward’s name. The two teams picking later in the top 10 text Burkhardt again, now wanting to know if the Broncos are calling. Also surprised are the Broncos, who in none of their mock scenarios had Chubb still available to them at 5. They were ready to trade down—ESPN’s Adam Schefter reported Denver had a deal worked out with Buffalo, which was trying to move up for Josh Allen—but quickly scrapped those plans. “We didn’t trade,” Elway said at a press conference, “because Bradley was there.”

Chubb hadn’t taken a visit to the Broncos facility. He met with them only once, at the combine, and hadn’t had any communication since. And that’s why the 24 hours before the draft are like no other: No one knows exactly what will happen. When the call from the 303 area code comes in, Chubb is even-keeled as expected—while mom leaps up to do a little dance. The Broncos had Chubb rated as the top defensive player in the draft, and they can’t wait to pair him with Miller.

“The organization really wanted me,” Chubb says, “and I know it’s genuine.”

The next 12 hours would be a whirlwind: nearly two hours of media interviews, signing his first autographs as a member of the Broncos, an after-party at a lounge downtown. While in flight to Denver on the team’s private plane Friday morning, Stacey pulls up the photo she took of the easel on

Wednesday night and notices something: whether by a hunch or a hope, the Broncos were the one team Burkhardt had circled.

# John Elway: Broncos not giving up on Paxton Lynch

By Chris Wesseling

NFL.com

May 2, 2018

Now that Denver's draft has come and gone without a marquee quarterback addition, general manager John Elway insists former first-round pick Paxton Lynch has a new lease on life with the Broncos.

Although Lynch has faceplanted in multiple opportunities to beat out Trevor Siemian -- now banished to Minneapolis as Kirk Cousins' backup -- Elway isn't prepared to throw in the towel on a major investment.

"We are not kicking him to the curb," Elway said, via Mike Klis of KUSA in Denver. "He can still develop. When we drafted him two years ago, as I said, we knew it was going to take some time."

The coaching staff is running out of development time, however, as Elway has just one more year to decide whether to pick up the fifth-year option on Lynch's rookie contract.

Entering his third season since the Broncos thwarted the Cowboys' attempt to trade up for his services, the rocket-armed former Memphis star has no shot to unseat Case Keenum for Denver's starting job. In fact, Lynch must hold off Chad Kelly -- the final pick in the 2017 NFL Draft -- just to earn the visor and clipboard this year.

"Paxton is going to compete with Chad for that backup spot," Elway added. "We are not going to bring another one in for OTAs. We will take a peek at that. It will be those two and Case."

Lynch has managed an anemic 76.7 passer rating on 128 career attempts, showing a disturbing penchant for taking sacks and failing to move the chains. Even if Elway's offensive line merits an ample portion of the blame, we now know that sack totals tell us as much about the quarterback as the blocking. Lynch has simply looked lost under center in five NFL appearances.

After reviewing Lynch's game film early this offseason, the Broncos' brass aggressively recruited Keenum, handing over \$25 million in guaranteed money.

Elway can't be blamed for maintaining a public display of faith in a first-round draft bust, but his actions speak louder than his words.

# NFL looking into modifying, not eliminating, kickoffs

By Kevin Patra

NFL.com

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In an effort to make football safer, the NFL is looking at modifying the most dangerous play: kickoffs.

NFL executive vice president Troy Vincent, speaking at the league's two-day coaching summit on new proposed rule changes, emphasized the NFL is not looking to get rid of kickoffs, but rather revise them in hopes of making the play safer, per NFL Network's Judy Battista.

Vincent said he hopes to exit this week's meetings at the league office in New York with a kickoff proposal to bring to the owners meeting later this month. Any proposed modifications could be applied to the 2018 season.

The NFL has been tweaking the kickoff rule in an attempt to make the most dangerous play less hazardous. The league previously changed the spot of the kickoff (from the 30 to 35-yard-line) and brought touchbacks out to the 25-yard-line from the 20 to incentivize teams downing the ball. Both moves have had minimal positive effects on injuries on kickoffs.

More tweaking is coming.

The desire to change the kickoff has led to speculation the NFL will do away with the play at some point. We aren't there yet. One key is figuring out how to minimize kickoffs while keeping some semblance of an onside kick opportunity in late-game situations, so teams trailing have a chance to get the ball back.

Judy Battista

@judybattista

Troy Vincent was clear on kickoffs: they do not want this to become a ceremonial play. But they still see huge, dangerous hits, even on kicks that result in touchbacks. Trying to eliminate those hits.

Per Battista, the first day of the NFL's session will focus on the new helmet hit rule -- mainly on interior line play, how play will be impacted by the new rule, and how it will be enforced. Wednesday's discussion will focus on kickoffs.

# John Dorsey: Chubb and Ward graded equally on Browns board

By Darin Gantt  
Pro Football Talk  
May 2, 2018

The reason so many people were stunned when the Browns took cornerback Denzel Ward instead of defensive end Bradley Chubb with the fourth overall pick is that the consensus view was the Chubb was the better player.

But Browns General Manager John Dorsey said Thursday during a radio interview on 92.3 The Fan in Cleveland that he had the players graded equally on his board, which led them to make a needs-based pick.

“We’ve totally upgraded the secondary there with unrestricted free agent acquisitions and trades,” Dorsey said, via Mary Kay Cabot of the Cleveland Plain Dealer. “And then we attacked it also in the draft. I’m very pleased with Denzel Ward, great kid, loves the game of football, wonderful family. Now he’s got the physical features you look for in a shutdown corner.

“He’s got the long vertical speed, he’s got sudden-area explosive quickness that you like in those types of players, he’s got great ball skills. And I see his ceiling of growth, I see it as really high. You know when you get players from Ohio State University, you know you’re going to get guys that really like to play the game.”

That last little bit of pandering to the home crowd aside, what else is Dorsey going to say? After taking a player that flew in the face of what most people thought about the draft, he has to justify it back home. It’s impossible to know if anyone shared that view, because Broncos boss John Elway turned down chances to trade down so he could take Chubb, stopping a fall that lasted longer than anyone imagined.

# **Broncos sign eight undrafted free agents, including Phillip Lindsay**

By Charean Williams

Pro Football Talk

May 2, 2018

Colorado running back Phillip Lindsay was one of eight undrafted free agents the Broncos signed, the team announced Tuesday.

Lindsay rushed for 3,770 yards in his career, ranking second in school history. He gained 1,474 yards and scored 14 touchdowns on 301 carries last season.

Denver also signed Auburn outside linebacker Jeff Holland, Florida State safety Trey Marshall, TCU wide receiver John Diarse, Temple offensive tackle Leon Johnson, Utah nose tackle Lowell Lotulelei, TCU guard Austin Schlottmann and East Carolina wide receiver Jimmy Williams.

# **Broncos not expected to exercise option on Shane Ray's deal**

By Charean Williams

Pro Football Talk

May 2, 2018

While Shane Ray expected the Broncos to exercise the fifth-year option on his contract, it doesn't appear they will after drafting Bradley Chubb.

Mike Klis of Denver's 9News reports the Broncos are not expected to pick up the \$9.23 million option on Ray's contract for 2019. Ray is scheduled to make \$1.68 million this season and would become a free agent in 2019 without an extension.

The Broncos have until Thursday to make a decision on the option, which is guaranteed only for injury and can be otherwise rescinded.

Denver used the fifth overall pick on Chubb, who plays Ray's position. Ray played only eight games last season because of a wrist injury, and he made 16 tackles and a sack.