

Why Darian Stewart believes the 2018 Broncos defense can finish top-five in all categories

By Kyle Frederickson

The Denver Post

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Retooling or rebuilding?

No question looms larger this offseason for the Denver Broncos' defense. So many key pieces from its 2015 Super Bowl juggernaut are gone, and following a 5-11 season, the pressure burns hot for veterans like safety Darian Stewart to lead the unit back into the playoffs.

Beneath sunny skies Tuesday at Dove Valley, though, Stewart was all cool. His declaration to reporters: Denver can finish top-five in every defensive category in 2018.

"I think we're hungrier than ever," Stewart said. "We added the pieces in place to help us contend again and win the AFC West."

Stewart's faith in a rejuvenated defense starts with the draft, and more specifically the Broncos' No. 5 overall pick of defensive end Bradley Chubb. If the former North Carolina State star can be a pass rushing force alongside Von Miller, it should allow for increased productivity from the rest of the unit — which includes free agent additions in safety Su'a Cravens (Washington), defensive tackle Clint McDonald (Tampa Bay) and cornerback Tramaine Brock (San Francisco).

"We still have key players in place," Stewart said. "With (Chubb), he's going to boost that pass rush and we're going to be able to make more plays on the ball."

Stewart also claims the Broncos weren't far off from elite status last fall despite the lackluster win total. And statistics back it up. Denver finished inside the top-five, league wide, for yards allowed per game (290; fourth), opposing first downs (266; third), third-down percentage (31.6) and total penalties against (89).

Stewart recorded 63 tackles, five pass deflections and three interceptions in 2017.

However, the Broncos fell noticeably flat in one area specifically. Denver allowed opponents to score touchdowns on 24 of 40 trips to the red zone, including 18 passing touchdowns. To fix that problem, Stewart said the defense, himself included, needs to become more detail oriented. Stewart, entering his ninth career NFL season, added that it's his job in the red zone to make sure everyone gets the call and is lined up correctly.

"If you want to win, you're going to help your young guys," Stewart said. "I'm always willing to help any way I can with those guys and give them any information I can, because it doesn't do me any good holding anything back if we want to get better as a team."

Broncos QB Case Keenum shows off impressive golf swing

By Kyle Frederickson

The Denver Post

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Several Denver Broncos showcased their golf swings Tuesday to promote the 2018 USPGA Senior Open later this month at The Broadmoor, and if you ask around Dove Valley, one player stands above the rest on the links.

QB 1, Case Keenum.

“We played the other day, his first time out here at Cherry Hills (Country Club),” said kicker Brandon McManus, “and he shot a 78.”

Keenum didn’t chat with reporters Tuesday when he took a few iron swings at a red flag planted 140 yards down the other side of the Broncos’ practice field with McManus, safety Darian Stewart, tight end Jeff Heurman and 2017 Senior Open winner Kenny Perry. But Keenum’s golf ball did the talking as he landed one shot about 15 feet from the pin. McManus said Keenum carries just a 0.8-handicap on the course.

McManus said “you can learn a lot” about a person by playing 18 holes together — and that applies to his budding relationship with Keenum. Topics included: “Where he’s from and his childhood growing up. Case is married just like me, so about his wife, how they met and everything. We know a lot of similar players, as well, so we’ll talk about them and the friendships,” McManus said.

“I’m not asking him about a corner blitz.”

Denver Broncos in the middle of the pack to win AFC, according to oddsmaker

By Joe Nguyen
The Denver Post
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The Denver Broncos have as good of a chance to win the AFC as the Baltimore Ravens and the Oakland Raiders, according to an oddsmaker.

At 15-to-1 odds, the Broncos are tied for seventh to win the AFC this coming season, according to Bovada.

The New England Patriots are the favorites to advance to the Super Bowl at 23-to-10, followed by the Pittsburgh Steelers at 9-to-2 and the Houston Texans at 10-to-1.

In the NFC, the defending Super Bowl champion Philadelphia Eagles lead the way at 5-to-1 odds, followed by the Green Bay Packers (6-to-1), Los Angeles Rams (7-to-1) and Minnesota Vikings (7-to-1).

To win the Super Bowl, Denver has dropped a bit, falling from 30-to-1 after the NFL draft to 40-to-1. The Patriots are favored to win it all at 5-to-1, followed by the Eagles and Rams at 9-to-1 apiece. The New York Jets are at the bottom at 200-to-1 odds.

AFC favorites

According to Bovada on May 8:

New England Patriots: 23/10

Pittsburgh Steelers: 9/2

Houston Texans: 10/1

Jacksonville Jaguars: 11/1

Los Angeles Chargers: 11/1

Kansas City Chiefs: 14/1

Baltimore Ravens: 15/1

Denver Broncos: 15/1

Oakland Raiders: 15/1

Tennessee Titans: 16/1

Indianapolis Colts: 30/1

Cincinnati Bengals: 35/1

Cleveland Browns: 35/1

Buffalo Bills: 40/1

Miami Dolphins: 50/1

New York Jets: 65/1

NFC favorites

According to Bovada on May 8:

Philadelphia Eagles: 5/1

Green Bay Packers: 6/1

Los Angeles Rams: 7/1

Minnesota Vikings: 7/1

New Orleans Saints: 10/1

Atlanta Falcons: 11/1
San Francisco 49ers: 11/1
Carolina Panthers: 14/1
Dallas Cowboys: 14/1
Detroit Lions: 20/1
Seattle Seahawks: 20/1
New York Giants: 22/1
Washington Redskins: 26/1
Tampa Bay Buccaneers: 28/1
Arizona Cardinals: 40/1
Chicago Bears: 40/1
Super Bowl 53 favorites
According to Bovada on May 8:
New England Patriots: 5/1
Los Angeles Rams: 9/1
Philadelphia Eagles: 9/1
Minnesota Vikings: 12/1
Pittsburgh Steelers: 12/1
Green Bay Packers: 15/1
New Orleans Saints: 18/1
San Francisco 49ers: 18/1
Jacksonville Jaguars: 20/1
Houston Texans: 22/1
Los Angeles Chargers: 22/1
Atlanta Falcons: 25/1
Dallas Cowboys: 30/1
Kansas City Chiefs: 30/1
New York Giants: 30/1
Carolina Panthers: 33/1
Baltimore Ravens: 40/1
Denver Broncos: 40/1
Oakland Raiders: 40/1
Seattle Seahawks: 45/1
Tennessee Titans: 45/1
Detroit Lions: 50/1
Tampa Bay Buccaneers: 60/1
Indianapolis Colts: 65/1
Washington Redskins: 66/1
Cleveland Browns: 90/1
Arizona Cardinals: 100/1
Buffalo Bills: 100/1
Chicago Bears: 100/1
Cincinnati Bengals: 100/1
Miami Dolphins: 150/1
New York Jets: 200/1

Broncos should improve thanks to three major offseason upgrades

By Mike Klis

9 News

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They should be better.

While such a proclamation is about as risky as a money market deposit for a team coming off a 5-11 season, the Broncos did compile an offseason trilogy of significant upgrades with their coaching staff, offense and defense.

The first move was to replace special teams coordinator Brock Olivo with Tom McMahon.

The second was to spark the offense by signing Case Keenum, who was one of only four quarterbacks to start in a conference championship game last season.

The third was to heat up the Denver D's pass rush by selecting Bradley Chubb with the No. 5 overall pick in the draft.

One, two, three should add up to the Broncos improving to at least 8-8 in 2018.

A look at the Broncos' three biggest upgrades:

Coaching staff

It's one thing to lose more than you win. It's another to lose in embarrassing fashion.

Nothing makes an NFL team appear poorly coached more than special teams' blunders. It's the phase of a football team that fans should take care for granted.

Too often, special teams' mistakes were a factor in Broncos' defeats. The botched fake punt at Buffalo.

The punt return for a touchdown by the Chargers' Travis Benjamin. The McKenzie Muffs. The McManus Misses.

The Broncos' poor special teams play last year wasn't all Olivo's fault. It was a mistake to mesh a first-year head coach in Vance Joseph with a first-year special teams coordinator in Olivo. Each would have been better had the other had experience.

Joseph will be a better head coach in year two because McMahon will be a better special teams coordinator. McMahon is in his 10th consecutive season as an NFL special teams coordinator and players on his most recent team, the Indianapolis Colts, raved about him.

It will help that the Broncos replaced Riley Dixon with Marquette King, who should be able to do a better job in flipping field position.

Offense

For the most part, the Broncos' hierarchy blamed their woeful 2017 season on turnovers. And most of the harmful turnovers were committed by quarterbacks Trevor Siemian, Brock Osweiler and Paxton Lynch.

Siemian and Osweiler are gone. Keenum is in. While posting an 11-3 regular-season record with the Minnesota Vikings last year, Keenum threw for 22 touchdowns and only 7 interceptions. He also was clutch in delivering a second-round playoff win against New Orleans that put the Vikings in the NFC Championship game.

The Broncos also added young talent at the No. 3 receiver position (Courtland Sutton and DaeSean Hamilton) and running back (Royce Freeman, David Williams, Phillip Lindsay). And they picked up veteran Jared Veldheer to be their next Great Right Tackle Hope.

But mostly, if the Broncos are to be better on offense in 2018, they will need a good year from Keenum.

Defense

The No Fly Zone had too many touchdown passes piercing through their air last year. Sure, it held opposing offenses to the fourth-lowest passing yardage total with 201 per game. But why pass downfield when you're up two touchdowns against the offensively-challenged Broncos?

More indicative was Denver's D allowed a 91.9 opposing passer rating that ranked 20th in the league.

And their 29 touchdown passes allowed ranked 28th while their 10 interceptions tied for 24th.

That's below average. The back-end wasn't very good because there wasn't enough heat applied up front. Not to Broncos standards, anyway. Denver only recorded 33 sacks last year, 22nd in the league. The Super Bowl 50 defense of which all subsequent Denver teams are measured? No. 1 in the league with 52 sacks.

Von Miller needs help. After registering 7.0 sacks through the Broncos' first six games, he had just 3 more in the final 10 games. Bradley Chubb was the best pass rusher in the draft and the Broncos got him with their No. 5 overall pick.

The question is whether Chubb can become a dominant pass rusher right away or will it take him a year. Chandler Jones, who led the NFL with 17.0 sacks last season, had 6.0 as a rookie. Khalil Mack had 4.0 sacks as a rookie. J.J. Watt had 5.5 sacks as a rookie; 20.5 in year two.

Then there was Miller, who had 11.5 sacks in his Rookie of the Year season of 2011; a career-best 20.5 in year two. Joey Bosa had 10.5 sacks in just 12 games as a rookie in 2016.

Know this: Chubb will be counted on to beat the combined 5.0 sacks Shaq Barrett and Shane Ray had in 2017.

10 NFL rookies who landed with the perfect teams

By Matt Bowen
ESPN Insider
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With the 2018 NFL draft wrapped and teams transitioning to offseason OTAs, let's take a look at some of the best rookie fits.

Starting with the upper-tier athletic traits of Derwin James in the Chargers' defensive scheme, here are 10 first-year players who landed in the right spots to produce this season.

Derwin James, S, Los Angeles Chargers

We know that James has a freakish combination of size and athleticism at the position. The 4.4-second speed is there, too. But I'm looking at the scheme fit in Los Angeles because it's a perfect match for James' skill set. With defensive coordinator Gus Bradley, James projects in that Kam Chancellor role underneath. The closing speed is there, and so is the explosive power on contact. He can hit and track the ball in space. Plus, James has the traits to play over the top as a deep middle-third defender. You want upside and versatility in a defense that caters to the player? Man, this is it with James. I'm still shocked he was on the board at 17.

Bradley Chubb, DE, Denver Broncos

With Chubb and Von Miller, the Broncos have two bookend rushers to create chaos in passing situations. For starters, that's going to boost the secondary play in Denver. Remember, that ball has to come out when the quarterback begins to feel heat on the edge. And it's also going to impact protection schemes. Slide the running back or chip on Miller? I get it. But that leaves Chubb in a one-on-one matchup opposite the All-Pro rush linebacker. The NC State product graded out as one of the top overall prospects in this class. He's an impact guy. His arrival in Denver will allow the Broncos to work toward dictating the flow of the game from a defensive perspective once again.

Christian Kirk, WR, Arizona Cardinals

It's the route running and toughness with Kirk. He can get open from the slot, and there is enough long speed there (he ran a 4.47 40) to get on top of defensive backs in coverage. Smooth player on film. The Texas A&M star also brings top-tier return skills to Arizona in the kicking game. As a rookie, look for Kirk to benefit from playing opposite veteran Larry Fitzgerald in Mike McCoy's offense. But as we take a peek at the future, Kirk can become that reliable, consistent target for quarterback Josh Rosen. I believe Kirk will pile up receptions in this offense working in the short-to-intermediate passing game.

Sony Michel, RB, New England Patriots

Michel might not log 20 total touches per game in the Patriots' backfield rotation, but we can't deny the fit in New England, given his running style and projected role as a pass-catcher. The Georgia star has that quick-twitch, downhill speed. Hit the hole, slice through gaps, and cut -- instantly -- to make defenders miss at the second level. Plus, I see upside here as a receiver out of the backfield. Get Michel involved on flat routes and angle routes, and use the screen game. The ability is there with Michel to beat linebackers after the catch, and those are the high-percentage throws we see from Tom Brady in Josh McDaniels' offensive system. Work the ball underneath, and move the sticks. This is a good match for Michel's talent.

Roquan Smith, LB, Chicago Bears

With the athletic skill set to fit today's NFL game, Smith is a plug-and-play linebacker for defensive coordinator Vic Fangio. Just look at the natural instincts to find the ball. Or check out the 4.5 speed in space. Smith can close in a hurry. And don't forget about his tackling technique. Wrap up, and put the ball carrier down. Smith should line up inside in the Bears' 3-4 base scheme, but I believe his biggest impact comes in their nickel packages. That's where Smith can get sideline to sideline, match running backs in the passing game or drop as a zone defender. Read the QB and go. The Bears got a blue-chip talent here.

D.J. Moore, WR, Carolina Panthers

Moore will need some time and game reps to fully develop in an NFL route tree, but I like the fit here for quarterback Cam Newton and the passing attack under new coordinator Norv Turner. Feed Moore the ball underneath, use quick screens, and cater to his low 4.4 speed in vertical concepts. With the toughness and physicality to run after the catch, Moore is a solid complement to the big body of Devin Funchess. Moore is aggressive with the rock, and Turner can put the rookie in position to use the playmaking ability he showed on his college tape at Maryland.

Derrius Guice, RB, Washington Redskins

Bring those big-boy pads if you want to square up Guice in the hole. The LSU star has a violent running style to push through the wash at the pro level, plus the footwork is there to slip defenders and find daylight. Guice should emerge quickly as an early-down/goal-line back in Washington, and don't discount his ability to provide some versatility as a receiving option in Jay Gruden's offense. With 4.49 speed, I believe Guice's game is a better fit in an NFL offense compared to the system at LSU. And there is no doubt on his talent level. He's a Day 2 pick with a first-round grade.

Jaire Alexander, CB, Green Bay Packers

Green Bay's second-round pick, cornerback Josh Jackson, is also part of the Packers' blueprint to upgrade the secondary under new coordinator Mike Pettine. The former Iowa Hawkeye has crazy ball skills at the point of attack. But I'm focusing on Alexander because of his press-man skills and the competitiveness he shows in coverage. Yes, his technique will be tested early this season, but I love that he will challenge routes. Plus, the 4.3 speed is there to recover. Playing up in the grille of opposing wide receivers or getting his eyes on the quarterback in zone to drive on the ball, Alexander has a ton of upside in Pettine's scheme, along with Jackson and 2017 draft pick Kevin King.

Ronald Jones II, RB, Tampa Bay Buccaneers

Jones has the one-cut, slashing style to fit in multiple NFL offenses. That jump-cut is nasty, and there is home run ability on his USC tape, too. Hit the edge and go. Plus, Jones has the traits to emerge as a dual-threat back in the Tampa system. While Jones' smaller frame (6-foot, 205 pounds) could limit his total touches in the game plan, he filled a major need for the Bucs and brings the upside of a back who also can contribute quickly as a receiving option for quarterback Jameis Winston.

Harold Landry, OLB, Tennessee Titans

Landry slipped to the second round of the draft, but the fit works for new coach Mike Vrabel and the Titans. Yes, Landry fills a need here for Tennessee as a nickel edge rusher. But don't sleep on the upside with the Boston College prospect. His 2016 tape is legit. Natural speed off the ball and the flexibility to turn the corner as a pass-rusher. That first step can shock offensive tackles. Although Landry battled injuries and a drop in production last season, I see a prospect who can carve out a role in passing situations while developing his overall game.

The anti-Roethlisberger approach: Broncos veterans praise the importance of mentoring younger players

By Nicki Jhabvala

The Athletic

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Broncos safety Darian Stewart was unofficially put on notice when John Elway acquired 22-year-old Su'a Cravens, a former Redskins second-round pick who arrived in Denver to the tune of "A Whole New World." Cravens, a hybrid linebacker-safety, has a chance to vie for playing time if not a starting gig as nickel backer and strong safety, a position Stewart has locked down the past three seasons.

Stewart knows how the game works. He knows the NFL is a business — often a cold one — and believes mentorship is a necessity. Even it means teaching your replacement.

"If you want to win, you're going to help your young guys," he said. "That's how I look at it. I'm always willing to help any way I can with those guys and give them any information I can. It doesn't do me any good holding anything back because we won't get better as a team. I think me helping them as much as I can, as well as the coaches, that's going to make us that much better."

Consider it the anti-Ben Roethlisberger approach.

The Steelers' quarterback made headlines following the draft when he said in a recent radio interview that he was surprised Pittsburgh used a third-round selection on quarterback Mason Rudolph, Roethlisberger's potential successor.

"Nothing against Mason; I think he's a great football player. I don't know him personally, but I'm sure he's a great kid. I just don't know how backing up or being a third (string) — well, who knows where he's going to fall on the depth chart — helps us win now," Roethlisberger said.

"But, you know, that's not my decision to make. That's on the coaches and the GM and the owner and those kind of things. If they think he can help our team, so be it, but I was a little surprised."

Roethlisberger, who publicly considered retiring last season, went on to say that if Rudolph seeks his advice "I may just have to point to the playbook. I think the biggest thing is that I need to get myself prepared to play; that's first priority. In the past, I've helped Landry (Jones) with stuff, I've helped Josh (Dobbs) if he's had questions. But the first priority was getting myself ready to play because, as far as I know, I'm still the starter. So I need to get myself ready to go, ready to play to win a championship."

His comments set off a firestorm, with many criticizing his seeming unwillingness to help a teammate.

And when it comes to the Broncos veterans, many of them align not with Big Ben, but with Stewart's approach.

Last year, the divide between Broncos veterans and rookies grew as the season progressed. There were scuffles in practices and direct comments from veterans, many of whom believed the younger players weren't as eager as they were to work and to win.

But after two playoff-less seasons and a 5-11 dud last year, the Broncos have only 17 players remaining from their Super Bowl 50 roster and a widespread belief that mentorship is not only the right thing to do, but vital.

Cornerback Chris Harris, an undrafted veteran who learned under the wings of Champ Bailey and Brian Dawkins, has corralled his fellow defensive backs for workouts in Texas this offseason with his trusted trainer, Ronnie Braxton.

“I’m just trying to get these guys mentally ready for the season, being out there every snap of the play and getting your mind right,” Harris said. “That’s what our trainer does out there, he gets you mentally ready.”

After the draft, when the Broncos selected a pair of receivers, Courtland Sutton and DaeSean Hamilton, veteran Emmanuel Sanders said he planned to play the role of teacher — even if it means teaching his potential successor.

“I’m going to teach those guys everything that I know. That’s my job,” he said. “You see a lot of these cats, when they get up in age, they kind of shy away from the rookies. I will never, ever be that type of receiver that says, ‘No, I’m not going to teach this guy.’ I’m going to teach you everything that I can possibly do. Regardless of if (Sutton) is from SMU or not, I want to see everybody successful. I want to see him making plays and going to the Pro Bowls and winning Super Bowls. I’m going [to teach] him as much as I can.”

Von Miller, the backbone of the Broncos, held his first pass-rush summit in California last year, with the primary goal of sharing trade secrets and helping younger defenders learn from vets and retired greats, including DeMarcus Ware.

The second summit is already in the works.

“I don’t plan on letting that go anytime soon. Whenever you can get the rookies in there and the vets with guys like DeMarcus, (Pro Football Hall of Fame DE) Bruce Smith and (former NFL DL) Warren Sapp, all these guys, they want to come back and help,” Miller said. “Whenever you can get all of those guys in a room and we can just share knowledge, it’s a magical thing.”

Even kicker Brandon McManus, who currently faces no competition on the roster for his job, said he embraces helping younger players. Last year, McManus said he had two primary goals off the field: one was to get a new contract. The other was to be voted a special-teams captain.

He earned both. He hopes to keep both.

“I’m a crazy visual learner. Once I see something once, I’m able to remember it almost the rest of my life. So I barely take notes in these meetings but I know everything about punt returns, punts, kickoffs and kickoff return and I’m barely even paying attention,” he said. “These guys, whenever I’m there and I’m on the field, I’m able to remember and I’m able to teach them on the field as well. And a lot of them have come up to me asking questions about certain looks.”

For Stewart, who was an undrafted safety in 2010, his past serves as a reminder of the value of veteran leaders. With the Rams that year, Stewart said he turned to veterans O.J. Atogwe and James Butler for guidance. With the Broncos this year, he hopes to provide the same for the younger guys.

“Those guys took me under their wing as a young safety,” Stewart said, “and I’m just paying it back.”

Broncos' Case Keenum shows off golf skills

By Troy Renck

KMGH

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The golf bug infected Case Keenum long ago. After a lifting session, he walked over to the far east corner of the Dove Valley practice field and made quick conversation.

He introduced himself to Kenny Perry. He knew Perry at a glance before Perry recognized him.

"I saw you win at the Colonial in 2005," Keenum said of one of Perry's big wins. "It was cool."

With that, Keenum picked up a pitching wedge and walked into his first pressure moment as a Bronco. Let's just say if he can sling it like he swings it, the Broncos' offense should improve significantly.

Cameras rolling and teammates Brandon McManus, Jeff Heurman and Darian Stewart watching, Keenum dropped a shot roughly 15 feet from the flag 140 yards away.

"He's really good," said McManus, who knows his way around the course as an 8-handicap. "He's the best on the team."

The United States Golf Association arrived at Dove Valley to promote the U.S. Senior Open held June 25-July 1 in Colorado Springs. Broncos general manager John Elway will serve as the honorary chairman and attempt to qualify on May 28 for the event, which Perry has won twice. Elway admitted draft preparations have left him with low expectations, saying he was focusing on "the mental side" of his game.

"He's going to need (tips)," Perry said with a smile. "I have never played with John. I have seen him swing the golf club. He's OK. But the Broadmoor, he's going to have his hands full."

Golf provides a competitive outlet for many athletes. It also lends itself to analogies. And as the Broncos players took their swings -- Heurman floated a wedge 180 yards off a back retaining wall, befitting a man whose longest drive is 440 yards -- they discussed why 2018 won't be another double bogey.

"I think we are hungrier than ever," said Stewart, one of 17 players remaining from the Super Bowl 50 team. "We added the pieces to help us contend again and win the AFC West. It's about owning up to our responsibilities. (Bradley Chubb) is a great pick. He's going to boost this defense, boost the pass rush, and we are going to be able to make more plays on the ball. I look for us to be in the top 5 of categories again."

Improvement in special teams is needed. And won't be hard. The 2017 season served as a dumpster fire of poorly covered punts and kicks, six muffed punts, and mind-boggling penalties (12 men on the field on a kickoff). Even McManus did not escape unscathed, missing eight field goals after missing a combined 10 kicks the previous two seasons. However, after a slow start, he finished strong, never misfiring on back-to-back kicks or an extra point.

"Obviously I didn't have a great year, and I hold myself accountable," said McManus, who continues to transition well to new holder Marquette King, who is adjusting to working with a right-footed kicker. "We are looking to create a half-court offense and a full-court defense where hopefully the (opponent) has to

drive the whole field. One thing is, we have a lot of core guys still here. Defensively, they were still pretty good, and we didn't do a good job of giving them good field position. It's up to the (players left from Super Bowl) to teach the young guys how to get back to that point, to get that swagger back."

Heurman, whose own career has been marred by injuries and ineffectiveness, now represents the veteran in his position room. He believes he is ready to take a step forward, and admitted the endless quarterback carousel undermined the sputtering offense.

"The biggest difference is having that veteran quarterback presence. How Case leads and manages everything is huge," Heurman said. "It was definitely challenging (last year). It was like playing golf and not knowing any of the yardage. It was definitely challenging (from week-to-week). We are really excited to work with Case. Knowing he's going to be the guy to take snaps on Week 1, you are able to do a lot with that."

Saquon Barkley, Roquan Smith top list of 32 NFL rookies who'll make an instant impact

By Chris Trapasso

CBS Sports

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The 2018 NFL Draft is over and there is a lot of talk about which team had the best draft haul, but in most instances it will take a few years before we know exactly how a team fared. There are some players, however, who are in a position to make a difference right away.

Here's a look at which draft picks have the best chances to make an instant impact on their new teams as rookies. The selections below are from different rounds of the draft, not just the first -- quality players who find themselves in situations where they'll be asked to be important contributors in their debut seasons.

Arizona Cardinals

Josh Rosen, QB: The Cardinals may take it slow with Rosen, but I think he'll beat out Sam Bradford in camp and the preseason and start in Week 1. Rosen is surgical in the short-to-intermediate ranges and has Larry Fitzgerald and David Johnson at his disposal. Don't forget about second-round pick Christian Kirk either. He should be a slot target Rosen will look for often.

Atlanta Falcons

Deadrin Senat, DT: To single out one Falcons 2018 pick for this article is difficult, because I really like what Atlanta's front office did in the draft. Grady Jarrett desperately needs a quality running mate on the interior, and Senat is a bowling ball with a high motor and active hands. He likely won't duplicate Jarrett's pass-rushing production, but the former USF standout will thrive against the run right away. The sleeper here is not Calvin Ridley, but fourth-round running back Ito Smith.

Baltimore Ravens

Orlando Brown, OT: The Ravens have a young left tackle with elite traits in Ronnie Stanley, and while Brown doesn't possess the same athletic prowess, his film speaks for itself. After losing Ricky Wagner in free agency last offseason, the right edge of Baltimore's offensive front became a liability. Brown is a road-grader in the run game, and his length makes edge-rushers take a wide arc to the quarterback.

Buffalo Bills

Tremaine Edmunds, LB: Behind a bolstered defensive front with new pieces Star Lotulelei, Trent Murphy and Harrison Phillips -- the latter could've been the "instant impact" pick -- along with steady veterans like Kyle Williams and Jerry Hughes, Edmunds is going to spend much of his time roaming free at the second level, a scary proposition for opposing offenses. At nearly 6-foot-5 and 250-plus pounds, the former Virginia Tech star absolutely flies to the football and has the length and athleticism to cover out of the backfield. He's in line for the starting middle linebacker gig next to Matt Milano, another fine athlete who quietly turned in an impressive rookie campaign a season ago.

Carolina Panthers

Ian Thomas, TE: No, Pete Prisco didn't force me into this selection, although this is Pete's guy. Thomas is an above-average receiver for the tight-end position with NFL size and some moments of high-caliber

blocking. While I expect Cam Newton to look Greg Olsen's way most often in 2018, I can see Thomas emerging as a big-play target after the first month of the regular season.

Chicago Bears

Roquan Smith, LB: Smith was a top-5 prospect on my Big Board, he'll be an immediate starter and he landed with respected defensive coordinator Vic Fangio, someone who's coached a number of stud linebackers at the professional level. Smith does everything you need from a linebacker in today's NFL, and he covers like a safety. He's penciled in for 125 tackles as a rookie.

Cincinnati Bengals

Billy Price, OC: I have concerns about Price's lateral quickness, which hurt him against the speedy one-gappers and when facing twists up front. Everything else with his game checks out. He's a nasty, run-blocking stalwart and while he can get off balance when dealing with counter moves, the longtime Ohio State starter works hard to recover in pass protection. With a big hole at the pivot, Price should start from Day One and will be a big upgrade from Russell Bodine.

Cleveland Browns

Baker Mayfield, QB: Although Cleveland traded the first pick in the third round to get Tyrod Taylor and is paying him \$16 million in 2018, I can't see him starting for very long -- if at all -- this season. Mayfield was the No. 1 pick in the draft and finds himself on a club with an solid group of pass-catchers.

Dallas Cowboys

Michael Gallup, WR: Gallup was a first-round prospect in my estimation, a smooth pass-catcher proficient in every skill necessary to thrive in the NFL. He's in the ideal situation in Dallas, as the Cowboys seemingly want someone who can stretch the field at times and also move the chains on critical third downs. Per Sports Info Solutions, Gallup caught 17 passes on third down that went for a first down in 2017, the fifth-most in the nation.

Denver Broncos

Bradley Chubb, DE: Von Miller has needed help on the opposite end of Denver's defensive line since DeMarcus Ware retired, and the Broncos have a big, strong, multi-faceted edge-rusher in Chubb, who should mainly find himself in one-on-one situations as a rookie. Probably not 15 sacks for the former NC State stud, but he should near double-digit sacks, and he'll be a stalwart against the run.

Detroit Lions

Frank Ragnow, OC: The Lions running game wasn't going to take off simply with a talented ball-carrier. Detroit needed to get stronger up front, and the club's front office has spent the last two years prioritizing the offensive line. Ragnow isn't flashy. He's NFL strong right now, rarely impacted by counter moves and a bulldozer for the ground game.

Green Bay Packers

Jaire Alexander, CB: New defensive coordinator Mike Pettine will mix coverages -- like every coach -- but he'll mostly lean on man behind his array of exotic blitzes. Alexander can be a ball-hawk in zone, and he has the supreme athleticism and tenacity to thrive in man coverage. He'll lock down even some of the quicker wideouts in the league.

Houston Texans

Justin Reid, S: Reid is a heady, versatile safety who can cover bigger slot receivers and has the awareness and athleticism to make plays peeling off his coverage down the field. He's not the most reliable tackler against the run, but he's typically one of the first defensive backs to get his helmet near the line of scrimmage. Reid and Tyrann Mathieu formulate one of the most fun and interchangeable safety tandems in the AFC.

Indianapolis Colts

Darius Leonard, LB: The Colts were in dire need of speed on their defense, especially at the linebacker position as they transition to principles of a 4-3 alignment as their foundation in 2018. Leonard is high-cut but flies all over the field and is a gifted man-to-man coverage linebacker. He'll be productive in a three-down role as a rookie.

Jacksonville Jaguars

D.J. Chark, WR: The Jaguars don't have a lot of open starting spots on their roster, and while I don't believe he's a natural hands catcher, Chark should be able to hit some big plays for Blake Bortles as a rookie. Even if he's a low-volume player, the deep connections will go a long way for Jacksonville's ground game.

Kansas City Chiefs

Dorian O'Daniel, LB: I loved O'Daniel as a prospect, a sleek linebacker/safety hybrid who plays with urgency, powerful hands against blockers, and elite-level agility to mirror the jukes of ball-carriers. He was a late first-rounder on my Big Board. He'll add speed to a linebacker group in need of a player who can quickly get from the middle of the field to the sideline and feels comfortable sinking in coverage.

Los Angeles Chargers

Derwin James, S: James roaming behind Los Angeles' impressive pass-rush should be a frightening thought for opposing running backs and quarterbacks alike. The 6-3, 210-plus pound safety is a dynamic athlete, recognizes play designs quickly, and lays the lumber as a tackler. He'll be a 75-tackle, three-interception, three-sack player as a rookie.

Los Angeles Rams

Ogbonnia Okoronkwo, DE: I didn't understand the "undersized" label for Okoronkwo during the pre-draft process. He was three-eighths of an inch under 6-2, and he tipped the scales at 253 at the combine ... plenty big enough to be a stand-up rusher. Anyway, his film is loaded with speed-rush wins, plays in which he controls bigger offensive tackles with hand usage, and an awesome bend and dip around the corner. He's going to eat in Wade Phillip's system with Aaron Donald and Ndamukong Suh on the inside.

Miami Dolphins

Mike Gesicki, TE: Gesicki has All-Pro talent mainly because he's a reliable pass-catcher with freakish athletic talents and traits that'll help him score touchdowns inside the red zone in the NFL. The Dolphins don't have a ton of threatening perimeter pass-catchers, but this former Penn State star should thrive between the tackles and could even line up on the outside, as he has the body type of a big wide receiver.

Minnesota Vikings

Ade Aruna, DL: Going deep in the draft here with Aruna, a size/burst specimen at nearly 6-5 and 262 pounds who quietly ran 4.60 at the combine. Mike Zimmer will put Aruna in clearly defined, one-gap spots in sub-packages, and the former Tulane standout will be an important role player along the Vikings' defensive line as a rookie.

New England Patriots

Sony Michel, RB: Michel is a sudden, make-you-miss air back who fits the mold the Patriots love at their running-back position. Yes, Rex Burkhead and James White are in New England, but Michel has fresh legs and should be more involved in the inside running game more than his veteran counterparts.

New Orleans Saints

Tre'Quan Smith, WR: While Marcus Davenport is in a similar situation across from Cam Jordan as Bradley Chubb is to Von Miller in Denver, I think Smith will be more "instant impact" for the Saints as a rookie. Coverages will roll toward Michael Thomas this year, and we know Drew Brees is capable of turning secondary and tertiary targets into consistent producers. Smith is a springy athlete who can win after the catch and down the field.

New York Giants

Saquon Barkley, RB: Never mind for a second that the Giants didn't get the best draft value with Barkley at No. 2 overall. He's on the team, and New York did draft Will Hernandez in the second round to create a bulldozing left side along with Nate Solder. Barkley should be a 15-20 carry per game creator and will create plenty of highlights in the screen game.

New York Jets

Parry Nickerson, CB: Had Nickerson been an inch or two taller, he'd have been a first- or second-day selection. He ran sub 4.40 at the combine and showcased aggressive ball skills throughout his illustrious career at Tulane. He's likely to be on the field often as a rookie, even if it's covering slot receivers. That role has become a full-time position in the modern NFL.

Oakland Raiders

Maurice Hurst, DT: Hopefully Hurst's heart issues are behind him. On the field he's a Geno Atkins type of upfield penetrator, and he's not totally reliant on quickness of the snap. He uses his hands extremely well, and because he's not 6-3, Hurst normally wins the leverage battle on the inside. He's set up to dominate on the inside with Khalil Mack garnering major attention on the edge.

Philadelphia Eagles

Dallas Goedert, TE: Goedert will find himself as TE2 behind Zach Ertz in Philadelphia; however, the departed Trey Burton did catch 60 passes for 575 yards with six receiving touchdowns over the last two seasons with the Eagles. Goedert is a matchup nightmare out wide and has the long arms and strong hands to make difficult catches outside his frame look routine.

Pittsburgh Steelers

James Washington, WR: OK, so Antonio Brown and JuJu Smith-Schuster will be the primary receiving targets among the receiver group in Pittsburgh, yet someone needs to fill Martavis Bryant's role. That can be Washington, a faster-on-the-field-than-at-the-combine player, the former Oklahoma State superstar was the best deep threat in the 2018 draft and tracks the ball extraordinarily well. He won't be a 75-catch player as a rookie ... he could average close to 20 yards per reception.

San Francisco 49ers

Fred Warner, LB: The BYU tackling machine quietly flew under the radar as one of the more athletic, refined linebackers in this draft. Playing behind a defense with three former first-round talents, Warner is a prime position to fill up the stat sheet as a rookie.

Seattle Seahawks

Rasheem Green, DL: This is the type of versatile, pass-rushing defensive lineman the Seahawks love. While I won't call him Michael Bennett 2.0, Green is a similar type of player, someone built to rush from the inside in nickel packages. He uses a devastating swim move and has outstanding burst off the snap. While he's not a productive run-defender, Green will pressure the quarterback often as a rookie.

Tampa Bay Buccaneers

Ronald Jones, RB: Jones is a one-cut slasher with jets that flip on immediately once he's through the line of scrimmage. The Buccaneers really needed a reliable feature back, and they now have one in the former USC star. The improved offensive line means Jameis Winston's crew will be able to lean on the ground game more than it has been able to recently.

Tennessee Titans

Harold Landry, DE: Many saw Landry as a clear-cut first-rounder due to his speed and dip around the edge, and while I didn't hate him as a prospect, I thought he needed to go to a team that wouldn't ask him to be the alpha rusher as a rookie so he'd have time to develop some counter moves. In Tennessee, with Brian Orakpo and Derrick Morgan flying around the corner, Landry won't have to be the No. 1 guy right away. He should still make some game-changing plays in obvious passing situations in his debut season.

Washington Redskins

Derrius Guice, RB: Guice was a first-round talent the Redskins nabbed in the middle of the second round due to some teams' concerns over maturity or off-field issues. If those aren't problems, Washington has their feature back of the next three-to-five seasons. Guice is a violent, surprisingly elusive runner with immense power.

On Saquon Barkley, Matt Millen and Readers' Response to Monday Morning QB News

By Peter King

MMQB

May 9, 2018

I found an interesting 2018 NFL opinion Tuesday, in a pasture. Here, in this postcard of a northeastern Pennsylvania village, home of a retired Super Bowl linebacker and former NFL general manager and current NFL analyst, Matt Millen told me something that indicated he might have been the first draftnik to declare nationally what the Giants should—and would—do four months after he said it.

You may have heard of Millen's plight. He's likely to need a heart transplant in the coming couple of years. He's the victim of a rare disease that took six years to diagnose, and I'll be telling his story in the coming days at The MMQB.

But now, there was a current NFL issue that really interested Millen. Some history:

Millen did the Giants' last game of 2017 for FOX, with Sam Rosen: Washington at the Giants, on New Year's Eve. Two days earlier, the Giants hired Dave Gettleman to be the GM and re-invent the team, and Millen loved the hire. Still loves it, because Gettleman is the kind of meat-and-potatoes, better-be-able-to-run-the-ball team architect Millen admires. Millen, as you may know, is a Pennsylvania guy, and a Penn State guy.

"You can go back and listen to the tape," Millen told me, in the yard of his lovely home 85 miles west of Manhattan. He's a little weak these days, which is very unlike him, but the verve is still very much there.

"On that FOX telecast, I said, basically, 'Dave Gettleman's got experience. He's been here before. He knows how to build a team. With this draft coming up, it's a big draft. If I was them, I'd take Saquon Barkley, the running back from Penn State. He will change the offense.'

"I would like Saquon for every team. I've been following him, I know him, I watched him at Penn State, and he could always make you miss. I kept hearing, You gotta get rid of Eli, he's done. Ridiculous. He had no line. He had no running game. Odell [Beckham, the wide receiver] was hurt. How do you judge a quarterback on that?

"What Dave was gonna do was fix the offensive line, which he's done some of now, with Nate Solder [at left tackle] and the UTEP kid [Will Hernandez] in the draft at guard. Saquon's gonna have to calm down on his make-you-miss. But his receiving is really gonna be a huge factor. He's not to where Marshall Faulk was in the passing game yet, but he opens your offense up. He changes how a defense has to address you. Eli and [coach] Pat Shurmur can manipulate that. That's an advantage for New York. To me, now, Eli can beat you with his arm, but he can really beat you with his head."

Millen and I talked about how much the Giants have done in one offseason to remake their offense. Two-fifths of the offensive line, at least, will be new. The backfield will be remade with the most versatile back the Giants have had since Tiki Barber. Beckham will be back, presumably. Tight end Evan Engram, a

budding star, will be much better in his second year now that Manning will have some time for him to develop his routes.

The key, to me, is Manning. If Millen is right and Manning still has it, the Giants could be playing in January, and could be threatening the Eagles for NFC East supremacy. If he's not, the Giants better hope Davis Webb or Kyle Lauletta has something in relief.

Now for your email:

BIG BEN'S MISSTEP

Ben Roethlisberger's life is littered with unintelligent steaming piles. I am not surprised at another fetid comment from this coddled, abusive narcissist. By all means, Ben, retire. That act, alone, would add to the plus side of your karmic ledger.

—John K.

I think Roethlisberger wishes he had a do-over on his Mason Rudolph draft comments, but I am not wishing retirement for him. He's still a top quarterback. When he wants to go, he should go.

ANOTHER ANTHEM SOLUTION

I don't think it'll ever happen, but it seems to me the best solution to the anthem dilemma is to just not play the national anthem before games (in all sports). Why is it necessary? We need to remember that these are sporting events for entertainment purposes. What does patriotism and military pride have to do with a football game? If it were up to me, perhaps it would only be played at the Olympics/World Cup/international sporting events, when it's countries competing against other countries.

—Brandon, Pittsburgh

Lots of you feel exactly this way, and I could see this as a solution when the owners meet this month to discuss.

RICHARDSON'S SALE

Your commentary about Jerry Richardson is, well, crazy! He should take "a couple hundred million dollars" less to make a buyer guarantee the team will stay in Charlotte to hold onto a shred of his legacy? First, as you mentioned, his transgressions against women are the reason he has to sell and rightfully so. That won't be forgotten by most when they think of him regardless of how much he sells or doesn't sell the team for. If the buyer of the team moves the Panthers eight years after the sale, I guarantee you nobody will think one second about Jerry Richardson being at fault for a move or his already tarnished legacy. The new owners will be responsible, 100% in the court of public opinion. So why should he take less at this point in his life?

— Ryan

It's pretty simple. Jerry Richardson is 81. He's made it clear that he loves the Carolinas. I remember him telling me with great prides about his stadium in Charlotte that the north half of the stadium was ringed

with plants and trees indigenous to North Carolina, and the the south half population by vegetation from South Carolina. Every time I've spoken to him about his franchise, the pride of the NFL in the Carolinas dots every paragraph. He's already going to be a vilified figure because of the scandal that forced him to sell the team. I can tell you that he would be aghast if, sometime after he died, the franchise moved. Jerry Richardson is a legacy guy. He cares deeply about what he is leaving the Carolinas, even after this ugly scandal. So, knowing all that, you can think what you will about sale prices and how much money Richardson will take to his grave.

Here is what I think: Jerry Richardson would much rather die with \$7.7 billion knowing the Panthers would stay in Charlotte than die with \$8 billion and not being sure where the team would play in perpetuity.

THANK YOU PETER

I don't have the adequate vocabulary to express what you've accomplished with The MMQB. The most impressive being the incredible writing staff you've assembled. That's why I see you leaving as a plus. Not only will we still get The MMQB that's been left in great hands but we'll get your new column as well. You can basically write off my Monday mornings entirely now. Best of luck.

—Joe, Toronto

Now that's exactly what I had in mind, Joe. You're going to be able to read great football content with or without me. Thanks for seeing that.

SWEDEN CHECKS IN

I guess I shouldn't be too bummed, considering your Monday morning column will continue in some other form on NBC's website. Nevertheless, I find myself already lamenting your absence on The MMQB. Few things over the course of the last two decades have been as routinely satisfying as reading your column after a week of glorious and/or ugly football; and this from someone who rarely, if ever, agrees with you! Nevertheless, your writing, research and access has always been excellent, as was your dedication to reporting on the sport as passionately (if not objectively) as you knew how. I appreciate that, Peter, and know that I'll be reading the next iteration of MMQB every Monday here in Stockholm, Sweden, whenever it's ready. I hope we can keep on amicably disagreeing for the next 20 years.

—Jean-Paul, Stockholm

Sweden! I vow that one of my next international trips will be to your country. Let's have a beer. Thank you.

THIS EMAIL MEANS A LOT TO ME

I am a 62-year-old native Texan who has read your column since, it seems, the beginning of the internet. You have been my sporting rock for 20 years. I am more conservative than you in a few ways, perhaps because of economics and finance degrees. But I hate assault rifles, I am terrified of Donald Trump and I love my gay son and his husband. You are braver than me because you have the courage to write openly about your daughter. I helped pay for my son's Palm Springs wedding but, because of perceived pressure and prejudice in south Texas, I did not have the courage, or pride, to tell anyone here about the wedding. I regret my silence every day. If you were to print this note, you would help me announce to a small part

of the world how much I love and support my son. Thank you for your knowledge, passion and perspectives over the last two decades.

—Ira K.

I got misty reading this email, Ira. I totally understand why it's hard to acknowledge a gay child in some places in the United States. I hope, a generation from now, it's not hard at all, and you stand with your son and his husband with pride in Texas and everywhere in this country. Don't knock yourself out over this. It took a lot for you to write this email. Thank you.

DON'T TELL ME YOU READ THIS TO YOUR SON!

I have been reading your column for almost its entire run, a time frame that spans through college, two dogs, a divorce, and the birth of my now 7-year old son. I read your column to him now Wednesdays before bed, and he always enjoys the stories you tell. Other than Pokemon, football is his great love. I just wanted to say thank you for being part of our lives, and best of luck in your new endeavor.

—Matt P.

My gosh. I don't know what to say. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

GORDIE WAS NOT NICE

Good comment about Brad Marchand antics, but your choice of Gordie Howe as an old-time hockey player who would have been offended by it is inadequate. Howe may not have licked anyone but he sure was a vicious cheap-shot artist, using his elbows and the butt end of his stick to hurt opponents. If you want to invoke a classy old-time player, you would be on firmer ground with Jean Béliveau.

—Yves L., Montréal

I love getting hockey tips in a farewell column. Truly. Thanks a lot.

2018 All-Rookie Team: Josh Rosen, Bradley Chubb will thrive

By Bucky Brooks

NFL.com

May 9, 2018

After intensely studying all of the top prospects leading up to the 2018 NFL Draft, I'll admit to having a little football withdrawal at the moment. The draft has been in the books for almost two weeks, but it's never too early to project which players will emerge as stars on their new teams. While everyone expects first-round picks to make an immediate impact based on their exceptional talent, there are plenty of players drafted outside of the first round who also make their mark as rookies.

With that in mind, here's an early look at my All-Rookie Team for the 2018 season:

OFFENSE

Quarterback: Josh Rosen, Arizona Cardinals (Round 1, No. 10 overall). Despite being the last of the Tier 1 quarterbacks to come off the board, Rosen lands in the best spot to showcase his talents as a natural passer.

Running back: Saquon Barkley, New York Giants (Round 1, No. 2). Barkley not only lives up to the hype as the best player in the draft, but he immediately emerges as the "go-to guy" on the NFL's most explosive offense.

Running back: Royce Freeman, Denver Broncos (Round 3, No. 71). Just because Freeman enters the league as a third-round pick, that doesn't mean he's not positioned to be an immediate impact player. The ex-Oregon standout spits out 100-yard games like an ATM machine as the perfect companion to Case Keenum in the Broncos' backfield.

Wide receiver: James Washington, Pittsburgh Steelers (Round 2, No. 60). AFC North opponents quickly learn that Washington is more than capable of torching one-on-one coverage as an explosive big-play threat.

Wide receiver: Christian Kirk, Arizona Cardinals (Round 2, No. 47). The Cardinals' new WR2 should pile up big numbers opposite Larry Fitzgerald as the designated "chain mover" in the team's new scheme. Kirk shows the skeptics that he is more than a slot receiver by ringing up yards and scores as a perimeter playmaker.

Tight end: Dallas Goedert, Philadelphia Eagles (Round 2, No. 49). Eagles coach Doug Pederson quickly finds a way to take advantage of Goedert's playmaking talents as a "jumbo" slot receiver.

Offensive tackle: Isaiah Wynn, New England Patriots (Round 1, No. 23). Despite lacking prototypical dimensions as a blind-side tackler, Wynn more than holds his own against elite rushers off the edge.

Offensive tackle: Mike McGlinchey, San Francisco 49ers (Round 1, No. 9). The ex-Notre Dame standout shines as a plug-and-play starter on a vastly improved offensive line.

Offensive guard: Quenton Nelson, Indianapolis Colts (Round 1, No. 6). GM Chris Ballard quickly changed the tone of the offensive line by plugging the ultra-rugged interior blocker into the starting lineup. The Colts not only improve the pass protection around Andrew Luck, but they show more grit and grime as a running squad.

Offensive guard: Will Hernandez, New York Giants (Round 2, No. 34). The G-Men become a more physical running team behind Hernandez's stout presence at the point of attack.

Center: James Daniels, Chicago Bears (Round 2, No. 39). The revamped Bears' offensive lineup features not only a more explosive set of perimeter playmakers, but a punishing O-line spearheaded by Daniels in the middle.

DEFENSE

Edge: Bradley Chubb, Denver Broncos (Round 1, No. 5). Chubb is a lock for 10-plus sacks playing opposite Von Miller. He is an explosive rusher who flashes violent hands and powerful combat skills turning the corner on the way to the quarterback.

Edge: Harold Landry, Tennessee Titans (Round 2, No. 41). The ex-Boston College star can turn the corner like a sports car while also flashing an array of moves that could make him an immediate difference maker as a situational rusher.

Defensive tackle: Da'Ron Payne, Washington Redskins (Round 1, No. 13). The Redskins' defense surges up the charts with a rock-solid run-stopper in the middle, plugging holes at the point of attack.

Defensive tackle: Vita Vea, Tampa Bay Buccaneers (Round 1, No. 12). Vea gives the Bucs a destructive 1-2 punch on the defensive interior. He doesn't impact the game as a pass rusher, but his ability to clog holes on early downs sets the table for Gerald McCoy's pass-rush exploits in obvious passing situations.

Linebacker: Josey Jewell, Denver Broncos (Round 4, No. 106). With Von Miller and Chubb controlling the game on the edges, Jewell sucks up running backs like a vacuum cleaner as the Broncos' designated hitter in the middle.

Linebacker: Roquan Smith, Chicago Bears (Round 1, No. 8). Coordinator Vic Fangio unleashes Smith as a sideline-to-sideline playmaker in the middle of the Bears' defense, and Smith quickly becomes the centerpiece of what suddenly looks like a championship-caliber unit in the Windy City.

Linebacker: Tremaine Edmunds, Buffalo Bills (Round 1, No. 16). Sean McDermott needed to find an athletic, blue-collar player on the second level. Edmunds fits the bill as a versatile defender with a no-nonsense attitude and an NFL-ready game.

Cornerback: Jaire Alexander, Green Bay Packers (Round 1, No. 18). The ultra-competitive cover corner thrives in defensive coordinator Mike Pettine's blitz-heavy scheme. He gets his hands on a ton of balls and makes a run at the interception title as a rookie.

Cornerback: Denzel Ward, Cleveland Browns (Round 1, No. 4). It's hard to lock down elite receivers as a rookie, but Ward shows the football world that his speed, athleticism and technique make him the exception to the rule.

Safety: Derwin James, Los Angeles Chargers (Round 1, No. 17). James immediately steps into the enforcer's role as the "MOF" (middle of the field) bully between the hashes. He pummels receivers running over the middle while also racking up sacks as a situational blitzer from the second level.

Safety: Minkah Fitzpatrick, Miami Dolphins (Round 1, No. 11). The Swiss Army knife in the Dolphins' secondary thrives as a safety/nickel corner during his rookie season. Fitzpatrick shines as a designated ball hawk in a scheme that allows him to attack the ball from a variety of spots on the field.

Five things you might not know about Keishawn Bierria

By Henry Chisholm

BSN Denver

May 9, 2018

The Broncos drafted Washington Huskies linebacker Keishawn Bierria in the sixth round of this year's draft. He doesn't have prototypical size or speed for the position, but his on-field production was enough to warrant a day-three draft pick.

With Brandon Marshall and Todd Davis the heavy favorites to return as the Broncos' starters at inside linebacker this year, Bierria will fight 25-year-old Zaire Anderson, fifth-round pick Josey Jewell and Jerrol Garcia-Williams, who spent most of his rookie year on the practice squad, for a roster spot and a place in the rotation.

Here are five things you might not know about Keishawn Bierria:

HE LOST HIS FATHER AT A YOUNG AGE

Bierria's path to the NFL wasn't simple.

His father died of cancer when Keishawn was eight, and he moved in with his grandparents while his mother battled grief.

Bierria also struggled with learning disabilities as a child, but was able to earn straight A's during his senior year of high school after realizing that his grades might be too poor to let him play college ball.

"All we wanted to do was play sports," he told UW's booster club magazine. "Then, when Division-I colleges started talking to my older brother and other high school athletes, they couldn't accept offers because their grades didn't qualify."

While at UW, Bierria worked with tutors and specialists, eventually earning degrees in sociology and American ethnic studies with a minor in anthropology.

"Every year, I took full credits. For the last football season, I was fully enrolled like I was a freshman," Bierria told the magazine. "It was important to me because I had the support to do it. I had a lot of younger teammates who looked up to me. I could set an example not just on the field but in the classroom. It was the right thing to do."

HE WANTED TO BE A TROJAN

Bierria was a huge USC fan. He grew up 20 minutes south of Los Angeles in Harbor City and dreamed of playing college football for USC.

But there was a problem: While Bierria went through the recruiting process, the NCAA was still docking USC 30 scholarships per year due to a "lack of institutional control" during the mid-2000s.

"Every kid in high school thinks about playing at USC," Bierria told ESPN during his senior year. "I went to a few camps there, and they were looking at me but, right now, it's not looking like it will happen."

HE HAS A NOSE FOR THE BALL

Ask a Huskies football fan about their favorite memories of Bierria, and you'll likely hear about his unbelievable turnover streak to start his junior year.

In the 2016 season opener against Rutgers, on the Knights' second drive of the game, quarterback Chris Laviano tried to use his legs to pick up a third down but was met a yard short of the line to gain by the left shoulder of a diving Keishawn Bierria.

The ball popped free and another linebacker dove on top of it.

The next week, the Idaho Vandals rolled into Seattle. On the opening kickoff, Budda Baker knocked the ball out of the returner's hands, and Bierria fell on it.

He recovered another against Portland State the next week, then versus Arizona, Stanford and Oregon.

All told, Bierria recovered fumbles in five of the Huskies' first six games and forced one in the other.

HE HAS THE RESPECT OF HIS TEAMMATES

Every year, the Huskies' football team votes for the winner of the Guy Flaherty Award, which is given to the most inspirational player on the team.

In 110 years, Bierria is just the fifth player to win it twice.

"I'm definitely stepping into a leadership role," he told Huskies New Era after his first win. "I've just got to be more on it, what I say and what I do, how I talk to my teammates. Everything is about encouraging them at this point."

In a piece for Sports Illustrated, Robert Klemko dug into one of the most common questions asked at the NFL combine: If you could take one teammate with you to your future NFL team, who would it be?

Huskies running back Lavon Coleman said that he named all six of his teammates who were invited to the combine—Bierria, Will Dissly, Dante Pettis, Coleman Shelton, Vita Ve'a and Azeem Victor—but that wasn't what the scouts were looking for.

"They make you pick one," Coleman told Klemko, "so I just picked my boy Keishawn [Bierria]. That's my dude."

HE HAS AN ATTITUDE

Great defenses need at least a couple of fiery leaders, and that's exactly the role Bierria filled for one of the best groups in college football.

Here's what Bierria told The Daily UW about his linebacking corps:

"We are crazy; we'll go all out, it doesn't matter who we are playing against. We don't back down, slow down for nothing. We hit anything we can."

And his career goals? "I want that jewelry, you know what I'm saying?" Bierria told The Seattle Times. "I want to make sure whatever we do, it lasts forever."

Elway has high hopes for Nebraska under Frost's guidance

By David Griek
NTV (ABC Nebraska)
May 9, 2018

One of the greatest quarterbacks to ever play the game made an appearance in Omaha today for the D.J.'s Hero Awards Luncheon.

John Elway was the keynote speaker at the 20th annual event.

After the ten high school seniors were awarded scholarships of \$10,000 a piece, the Denver Broncos general manager and executive vice president of football operations shared his familiarity with Nebraska's new head coach.

"With Scott coming in and having been at Stanford and having a career at Stanford and the year he had at Central Florida last year, to come in and take over the Nebraska job, with him being right next door, we always follow him closely," Elway said. "I'm sure he'll do a great job because of the history and tradition at Nebraska, so it will be interesting to see how he does. Hopefully he does great."

Elway graduated from Stanford and was a member of the vaunted 1983 quarterback NFL Draft class. Frost chose Stanford after he graduated from Wood River Rural High School before transferring to Nebraska and guiding the Huskers to the 1997 co-National Championship.

Frost was also in attendance at the Omaha luncheon, handing out football's signed by himself and Elway to winning bidders.

Broncos veterans fine with passing their knowledge to younger teammates

By Curtis Crabtree

Pro Football Talk

May 9, 2018

The reality of life in the NFL as a veteran player is that there is always a younger player that is trying to take your job.

But if you want to have success as a team, players must learn how to coexist and find a way to maximize their talents collectively even if it may come at the expense of a player's personal job security. However, the Denver Broncos seem far more open to working with and teaching their younger counterparts than Ben Roethlisberger is with his new rookie backup Mason Rudolph.

According to Nicki Jhabvala of the Athletic, Darian Stewart, Chris Harris, Von Miller, Emmanuel Sanders and others have made a point of working with their fellow teammates in effort to bring them along as quickly as possible.

"I'm going to teach those guys everything that I know. That's my job," Sanders said. "You see a lot of these cats, when they get up in age, they kind of shy away from the rookies. I will never, ever be that type of receiver that says, 'No, I'm not going to teach this guy.' I'm going to teach you everything that I can possibly do.

Harris has organized offseason workouts in Texas for the defensive backs. Miller will hold another "pass-rush summit" this offseason.

The Broncos lost some of that cohesion between its veterans and younger players last season, per Jhabvala, with in-fighting and resentment between the two groups. The hope is they can recapture the formula that helped lead them to a Super Bowl title three years ago.

"If you want to win, you're going to help your young guys," Stewart said. "That's how I look at it. I'm always willing to help any way I can with those guys and give them any information I can. It doesn't do me any good holding anything back because we won't get better as a team. I think me helping them as much as I can, as well as the coaches, that's going to make us that much better."