

# Broncos TE Jeff Heurman faces make-or-break fourth season in Denver

By Kyle Frederickson  
The Denver Post  
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Jeff Heurman, by default, is the Broncos' most proven tight end on the roster — despite having everything to prove.

Denver picked the former Ohio State standout No. 92 overall (third round) in the 2015 NFL draft and Sports Illustrated opined the star of the Broncos' draft class "could turn out to be tight end Jeff Heurman." That has not happened. Heurman may have to fight to earn a spot on the roster this summer. That's partially due to injuries (torn ACL in rookie mini-camp) but mainly his performance when healthy. Heurman has just 18 catches for 293 yards and two touchdowns in his NFL career.

Now, after the departures of A.J. Derby and Virgil Green, Heurman is the most veteran tight end in Denver.

"Crazy," said Heurman. "Time goes by fast."

But unless he turns things around, his time in Denver might be running out, as the Broncos have two recent draft picks expected to push him, Jake Butt (2017) and Troy Fumagalli (2018), both fifth-round picks.

Heurman, 6-foot-5, 255 pounds, has flashed the promise of what made him a high-round draft pick with a few explosive plays, most notably last year at Indianapolis when quarterback Brock Osweiler connected with him on a deep slant. Heurman stiff armed the defender, spun and sprinted to a 54-yard score.

Consistency has Heurman's challenge. He recorded just one multi-catch game last season (two in a loss to the Giants) and was bothered at times with a knee injury. The Broncos' quarterback carousel didn't help, either, with Osweiler, Trevor Siemien and Paxton Lynch failing to establish a reliable connection with him.

"It's kind of like playing golf and not knowing any of your yardages," Heurman said. "Just kind of guessing."

The addition of quarterback Case Keenum from Minnesota in free agency has removed any doubt about who the starter at quarterback is and ramped up pressure for Heurman to deliver with Butt healthy after a year on the sideline due to injury and Fumagalli expected to push hard for playing time. Denver's roster also includes tight ends Austin Traylor, Matt LaCrosse and Brian Parker.

Heurman believes the key for his improved play hinges on getting in sync with Keenum.

"Playing with three different quarterbacks and going week to week last year, it's kind of tough sometimes getting into a rhythm and getting into the groove of things," he said. "Hopefully with Case we can get into a good rhythm and build on that week to week."

# Broncos' 4 biggest questions marks for 2018 season

By Mike Klis

9 News

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Let's assume all goes well with Case Keenum.

The Broncos have their quarterback who can play well enough to win and not commit the costly turnover.

Let's presume Bradley Roby makes a smooth transition in replacing Aqib Talib, Vance Joseph pushes a few more correct buttons in year two as head coach, Brandon McManus rebounds from an off year.

Bradley Chubb is indeed all that, and the receiver duo of Demaryius Thomas and Emmanuel Sanders return to form with Keenum as their quarterback.

The 2018 Broncos still have plenty of question marks and concerns.

On Tuesday, we listed three areas where the Broncos made significant improvements – one for each phase of special teams (Tom McMahon), offense (Keenum) and defense (Chubb).

Now we look at four major question marks: One, can Jeff Heurman and Jake Butt step up to give the Broncos a top 15-caliber tight end duo? Two, how much will Garrett Bolles improve in year two at left tackle and can veteran Jared Veldheer finally bring adequacy to the right tackle position? Three, can nose tackle Domata Peko continue to play at a high level at 33 years old? Four, given the addition of two rookie receivers and Jordan Taylor's offseason hip surgery, who will be the Broncos' returner?

Yes, we list one more concern than highlight. Why? 5-11. There are always more question marks than solutions for a team coming off a 5-11 season.

A look at the Broncos' Big 4 question marks or concerns heading into 2018:

**Tight end**

Either the good teams have a very good tight end or they're trying to get one. The Broncos have been trying to find one since Owen Daniels beat Jamie Collins twice for touchdowns in the 2015 AFC Championship Game.

Virgil Green was allowed to leave for free agency in part because the Broncos believe Heurman and Butt are ready to step up.

Heurman has been knocked for his disappointing production through his first three seasons but what can a third-round draft pick do when he tears up his knee during a rookie minicamp kickoff coverage drill?

He had 9 catches for 141 yards and 9 catches for 142 yards each of the past two years. He looked great while catching a 54-yard touchdown from Brock Osweiler at Indianapolis last year but he needs to flash a few more big plays to become a legit, No. 1 NFL tight end.

“I think just getting into a rhythm and getting into a groove,” Heuerman told a Denver media contingent Tuesday. “You were talking about playing with three different quarterbacks and going week to week last year. It’s kind of tough sometimes getting into a rhythm and getting into the groove of things. Hopefully with Case we can get into a good rhythm and build on that week to week. Hopefully it will take us deep.”

Butt was considered a top 50 player in the 2017 NFL Draft until he suffered his second, torn right ACL in Michigan’s bowl game his senior year. The Broncos drafted him in the fifth round but Butt missed his entire rookie season to recover from knee surgery.

It’s best to manage expectations for him this season, as 20 receptions may be more realistic than 45. It’s the 2019 season that the Broncos may get the best of Butt.

#### Offensive tackle

The reviews of Bolles’ rookie season are mixed. His 10 holding penalties tied Cleveland’s Shon Coleman for most in the NFL and his 15 total penalties were tied for second. Still, Bolles doesn’t threaten the league’s penalty lead if he didn’t start all 16 games against some of the NFL’s top pass rushers.

Then there’s the right tackle position, otherwise known as the Black Hole of the Broncos’ starting lineup. Since Orlando Franklin was moved from right tackle to left guard following the Broncos’ Super Bowl 48 debacle, right tackle starters have been Chris Clark, Paul Cornick and Louis Vasquez in 2014; Ryan Harris and Michael Schofield in 2015; Donald Stephenson and Ty Sambrailo in 2016; Menelik Watson, Allen Barbre, Cyrus Kouandjio and Stephenson in 2017.

That’s 10 right tackles in four seasons.

The Broncos made a small trade with Arizona this offseason in hopes Veldheer can solve their right tackle position problem this season.

#### Defensive tackle

It was a little surprising the Broncos didn’t reinforce this position during the offseason. Domata Peko did bounce back nicely after 11 years with Cincinnati and his release following the 2016 season. He was especially strong against the run in the first-half of the 2017 season.

The Broncos will need either his cousin, Kyle Peko, or undrafted rookie Lowell Lotulelei to make significant contributions this year.

#### Returner

After trying to hit a home run with rookie Isaiah McKenzie as a punt returner last year, the Broncos instead got too many strikeouts.

Taylor may have been a singles or doubles-type returner, but he never whiffed. If Taylor isn’t ready to go by week 1, will the Broncos return to McKenzie? The Broncos will also give undrafted rookie Phillip Lindsay a chance.

Kick returner Cody Latimer left for free agency and the New York Giants, leaving another opening. The 2018 Broncos still have plenty of question marks and concerns.

# NFL Insiders predict Defensive Rookie of the Year, more

By STAFF

ESPN

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Our panel of ESPN NFL Insiders is making its predictions for the 2018 NFL draft class throughout this week.

Next up: Bradley Chubb headlines this defensive class. Is he the favorite to win Defensive Rookie of the Year?

Our Insiders make their picks, plus dig into these topics:

Team with the most impactful rookie class

Picks for Offensive Rookie of the Year

Who's your pick to be 2018 Defensive Rookie of the Year?

Matt Bowen, NFL writer: Bradley Chubb, DE, Denver Broncos. I expect Chicago's Roquan Smith to be in the discussion, but Chubb gets my vote because of the sack numbers he can produce in Denver. Working opposite Von Miller, Chubb should see more one-on-one matchups. Also, his talent base is legit: strength, power and the counter moves to get home to the QB. Watch out.

Mike Clay, NFL writer: Roquan Smith, LB, Chicago Bears. Defensive coordinator Vic Fangio runs a 3-4 scheme, and his top two off-ball linebackers in recent years -- Danny Trevathan and Jerrell Freeman -- have both generally been near-every-down players. Smith is very young at 21, so a slow start is possible. But his combination of speed, athleticism and intelligence figures to land him an every-down role and high-end production in short order.

Mina Kimes, senior writer: Bradley Chubb, DE, Denver Broncos. In a less quarterback-centric draft, Chubb could've easily landed in the top two; his athleticism and football IQ will enable him to wreak havoc in the NFL from the jump. Transitioning to the Broncos' 3-4 scheme shouldn't be too challenging for the NC State defensive end, who will benefit from offenses' double-teaming Miller.

Mike Sando, senior NFL writer: Tremaine Edmunds, LB, Buffalo Bills. Coach Sean McDermott seems to be able to develop players and feature them properly. The role Edmunds plays should give him ample opportunity to make some splash plays.

Aaron Schatz, editor-in-chief of Football Outsiders: Derwin James, S, Los Angeles Chargers. I like Roquan Smith to lead rookies in tackles, but James should have a lot of playmaking opportunities on the Chargers' schedule. They could face a series of first-time starting quarterbacks, with two games against Patrick Mahomes plus an early matchup with Buffalo and games against Arizona and Baltimore late in the season, when Josh Rosen and Lamar Jackson could be in the lineup.

Kevin Seifert, national NFL writer: Bradley Chubb, DE, Denver Broncos. Let's face it: These types of awards are often based on tangible statistics such as sacks or interceptions. Chubb has every chance to rack up the sack numbers while playing opposite Von Miller. Will he be the every-down force that many expect

Roquan Smith to be? That's less certain. But the kind of gaudy stats that Chubb has a chance to collect will generate national attention.

Who's your pick to be 2018 Offensive Rookie of the Year?

Bowen: Derrius Guice, RB, Washington Redskins. Saquon Barkley should be considered the preseason favorite. But let's not forget about Guice in Washington's offense. His physical, balanced running style is a fit for the NFL game. He can bring it on contact. That 4.49 speed will show up when Guice hits the second level. He should handle the touches on early downs and on the goal line for the Redskins, and I see a skill set on film that will allow the rookie to contribute as a receiver on underneath throws.

Clay: Rashaad Penny, RB, Seattle Seahawks. The Seahawks have been extremely pass-heavy the past two seasons, but the offseason change to offensive coordinator Brian Schottenheimer and subsequent personnel moves suggest a move back to the run. Those moves included taking San Diego State's Penny in the first round of the draft. He led the nation in rushing yards last year (2,248) and has good size, terrific elusiveness and post-contact ability as well as good receiving chops. He's a candidate to push for well more than 250 touches as a rookie.

Dan Graziano, national NFL writer: Saquon Barkley, RB, New York Giants. The Giants have been starved for a run game for years, and they locked in on Barkley with the No. 2 overall pick for a reason. You'll hear all the right things all summer about how he's going to earn his way and they don't want to lean too hard on him as a rookie, but you heard the same things about Ezekiel Elliott two years ago in Dallas. This is the guy, and he'll get the ball a ton for the Giants. When he does, he offers potential for the spectacular.

KC Joyner, NFL writer: Sony Michel, RB, New England Patriots. Barkley has the inside track to this award, but Michel led all Power 5 running backs in percentage of carries of 10 or more yards (22.1 percent, minimum 100 carries). Put that kind of ball carrier in a high-powered offense with an offensive line that ranks fifth in my preseason rankings and it could give Michel a very good chance to bypass Barkley.

Field Yates, NFL Insider: Saquon Barkley, RB, New York Giants. Not overthinking the obvious here. Barkley is just that good, and the opportunity is just that rich. It would be no surprise to see him breeze past 320 total touches as a predominant part of the Giants' rushing attack and passing game. There is no certainty of a rookie quarterback starting out of the gate, and there isn't a receiver in this year's class that is widely viewed as a transcendent talent at the moment. Barkley is the pick.

Which team's rookie class will be the most impactful in 2018?

Bowen: Chicago Bears. It starts with linebacker Roquan Smith. He's a blue-chip talent with the speed and natural instincts to find the ball. Great fit for Vic Fangio's defense. Up front, Iowa center/guard James Daniels has the athleticism and pro-ready technique to compete for a starting job. Wide receiver Anthony Miller should find a role as a slot target for quarterback Mitchell Trubisky. The quicks are there, and so is the playmaking ability.

Graziano: Cleveland Browns. Is there any team that needs an impact from its rookie class more than the one that's 1-31 over the past two seasons? We don't know when No. 1 overall pick Baker Mayfield will take over as the starter, but it's a safe bet it'll happen at some point this season. The Browns will give No. 4 pick Denzel Ward significant opportunity right away as a starting cornerback. Second-rounders Nick Chubb and Austin Corbett should help the run game. Opportunities abound in Cleveland, for rookies and everyone else.

Kimes: Denver Broncos. I'm a big fan of the Cowboys' draft class as well, but I think Denver's first three picks -- defensive end Bradley Chubb, wide receiver Courtland Sutton and running back Royce Freeman - - could all become immediate contributors. Sutton, a big-bodied receiver from SMU, stands out as a potential red zone threat for Case Keenum.

Sando: New England Patriots. Other teams' rookies will play more snaps and earn greater honors. As for impact? New England could emerge with a starting left tackle (Isaiah Wynn), a rotational running back (Sony Michel) and perhaps a Danny Amendola replacement (Braxton Berrios) on a championship-caliber team.

Schatz: Tampa Bay Buccaneers. There's opportunity on the depth chart. Vita Vea slides right into the starting defensive line next to Gerald McCoy. Ronald Jones II should slide right into the starting running back spot. Given the weakness at cornerback and the age of No. 1 CB Brent Grimes, who turns 35 in July, second-rounders M.J. Stewart and Carlton Davis could play a larger role than expected early.

Seifert: Indianapolis Colts. It won't be as flashy as some other classes, but the addition of two guards and two defensive linemen among the first 64 picks will significantly enhance the Colts' long-standing trench weakness. Guard Quenton Nelson, especially, will give the Colts a much better chance of keeping their most prized asset, quarterback Andrew Luck, upright.

Yates: New York Giants. Here's the bottom line: A single player can dramatically impact the perception of a team's collective draft class. Along those lines, no player is better equipped to contribute immediately - - factoring in his own ability plus the opportunity ahead -- than Saquon Barkley. Beyond that, second-rounders Will Hernandez projects as a Day 1 starter. Should Barkley produce (and I expect a massive rookie season), it will be a positive reflection on the offensive line as well.

# Lions owner, front office 'continue to support' coach Matt Patricia despite 1996 sexual assault allegation

By Michael Rothstein

ESPN

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Detroit Lions owner Martha Ford, team president Rod Wood and general manager Bob Quinn released a joint statement late Wednesday expressing support for head coach Matt Patricia after a sexual assault charge against him from 22 years ago resurfaced in a Detroit News story.

Patricia, in an accompanying statement, denied the accusation, made by a woman while Patricia was a student at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute on spring break in South Padre Island, Texas, in 1996.

"As someone who was falsely accused of this very serious charge over 22 years ago, and never given the opportunity to defend myself and clear my name, I find it incredibly unfair, disappointing, and frustrating that this story would resurface now with the only purpose being to damage my character and reputation," Patricia said in the statement. "I firmly maintain my innocence, as I have always done. I would never condone any of the behavior that was alleged and will always respect and protect the rights of anyone who has been harassed or is the victim of violence.

"My priorities remain the same -- to move forward and strive to be the best coach, teacher, and man that I can possibly be."

The joint statement from the team's leadership read, in part, that the charge against Patricia "was dismissed by the prosecutor at the request of the complaining individual prior to trial. As a result, Coach Patricia never had the opportunity to present his case or clear his name publicly in a court of law. He has denied that there was any factual basis for the charge. There was no settlement agreement with the complaining individual, no money exchanged hands and there was no confidentiality agreement. In discussions today with Lions management, the reporter involved acknowledged that the allegations have not been substantiated.

"As an organization, the Detroit Lions take allegations regarding sexual assault or harassment seriously. Coach Patricia was the subject of a standard pre-employment background check which did not disclose this issue. We have spoken to Coach Patricia about this at length as well as the attorney who represented him at the time. Based upon everything we have learned, we believe and have accepted Coach Patricia's explanation and we will continue to support him. We will continue to work with our players and the NFL to further awareness of and protections for those individuals who are the victims of sexual assault or violence."

Charges were filed in the case, and Patricia and his friend, Greg Dietrich, were indicted by a grand jury of one count of aggravated sexual assault, but they were never tried in the case.

Wood told the Detroit News that he and Quinn were not aware of the allegation in Patricia's past when they hired him. Wood later told the newspaper that he was "comfortable" with Patricia on staff.

"I am very comfortable with the process of interviewing and employing Matt," Wood told the News. "I will tell you with 1,000 percent certainty that everything I've learned confirmed what I already knew about the man and would have no way changed our decision to make him our head coach."

The News reported that APG Security, a private investigation firm with corporate headquarters in South Amboy, New Jersey, and offices in 21 states including Texas, requested the court files for Patricia's case in January. It is not clear whether the Lions contracted the firm to run a background check on Patricia or someone else did.

The News reported that the case against Patricia and Dietrich fell apart when the alleged victim did not respond to attempts to contact her in the weeks following the incident and decided she would not testify.

As of Wednesday night, Patricia, 43, was scheduled to talk with the media Thursday before the Lions open their rookie minicamp this weekend.

# Broncos tight end Jeff Heurman makes candid admission about offense

By Troy Renck

KMGH

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Jeff Heurman lacks stats, but not confidence or candor.

After a battery of powerful golf swings, Heurman took at a question that hung over the Broncos last season. Four months removed from the 5-11 debacle, which included eight straight losses, how much did the dizzying quarterback carousel impact the offense?

"It was definitely very challenging. I guess it would be kind of like playing golf without knowing any of the yardages, and kind of guessing," said the Broncos tight end, who has 18 receptions and two touchdowns entering his fourth season. "You were talking about playing with three different quarterbacks and going week-to-week last year. It's kind of tough sometimes getting into rhythm."

For those keeping score at home, the Broncos started Trevor Siemian, Brock Osweiler and Paxton Lynch, going through the lineup twice. Only Siemian won a game, going 5-5, though Osweiler deserves credit for the relief effort in Denver's lone road victory at Indianapolis.

The Broncos realized after back-to-back playoff absences that the quarterback drama needed an expiration date. With apologies to Katy, Luke and Lionel, no more "American Idol" competition in training camp. It became a distraction. And, as players become more blunt with their words this offseason, they admitted it undermined leadership from the position. It is hard to lift teammates when you are not playing well, and, worse, don't know if you will be playing at all.

"Thank God," receiver Emmanuel Sanders said last week about no more indecision at the most important position.

When Keenum signed for a guaranteed \$25 million, he knew the landscape. The Broncos wanted a rudder, a strong personality and a quarterback capable of taking chances and taking care of the ball. Keenum promised to lead organically. You don't give yourself a nickname or place a C on your chest in sports. It is earned.

Keenum has ingratiated himself with teammates through his work ethic, off-field gatherings (at Coors Field for a Rockies game) and rounds of golf.

"You can learn a lot about a guy (when shooting 18 holes)," said kicker Brandon McManus, who has played with Keenum. "You learn about his family, how he met his wife, what he likes to do."

Keenum, at his core, is a competitor. Peyton Manning endorsed him last month, in part, because of the trait. Keenum's past failures also make the Broncos believe in future success. His skin matches an elephant's for thickness. He has lived as an afterthought, a backup, a failed starter and a miracle worker. The latter transpired in Minnesota last season. Despite never gaining the full confidence of coach Mike

Zimmer, Keenum posted a 12-4 record, counting the playoffs. Only Drew Brees proved more accurate than Keenum's 67.6 completion percentage.

Keenum leaned on a successful running game to riddle teams inside the 20. The Vikings completed 19 red zone touchdown passes. Compare that to the Broncos, who finished with 12. Broncos quarterbacks were sacked 12 times in the red zone, worst in the NFL. The Vikings? Try three. It speaks to better line play, of course, but also explains Keenum's athleticism.

He can make plays with his feet. But as Heuerman admitted, the significant improvement with Keenum is not mobility, but stability.

"The biggest thing is just the veteran quarterback presence," Heuerman said. "We haven't really had a whole lot of that the past couple of years. Just having that presence, and how he leads and manages things, is huge."

# Who will be NFL's first \$20 million defender? Rams' Aaron Donald, Raiders' Khalil Mack best bets

By Nate Davis

USA Today

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Quarterbacks aren't the only NFL stars who cash in handsomely. Eventually, a defender — a logical guess would be Los Angeles Rams lineman Aaron Donald — is going to break into the \$20 million-per-year pay scale, a stratosphere once reserved for the men with the golden arms. But in today's pass-oriented league, the ability to plant a QB into the turf is nearly as valuable as being able to spray touchdown passes.

Here's a look at the salary ceilings at each defensive position with a look at who might break through next:

## Defensive tackle

The standard: Donald's new teammate, Ndamukong Suh, signed a six-year, \$114 million deal in 2015 but only made it halfway through the contract before Miami cut him this year. Suh had averaged slightly over \$19 million per year, but now finds himself playing for \$14 million in 2018. Among active defensive tackle deals, Philadelphia's Fletcher Cox leads the way on a six-year, \$102.6 million package that includes more than \$63 million guaranteed.

2018 franchise tag: \$13.9M

Who's next: Donald is the NFL's reigning defensive player of the year and a first-team all-pro each of the past three seasons. He's been angling for his payday since last year, when his training camp holdout caused him to miss the regular-season opener. Loaded with cap space in 2019, it's basically a foregone conclusion the Rams will soon make Donald, who's set to hit free agency after this season, the best-compensated defensive player in league history.

Suh won't set that bar again but could rake in serious dollars next year if, as expected, he flourishes anew while playing alongside Donald. Cincinnati's Geno Atkins, Green Bay's Mike Daniels and Minnesota's Sheldon Richardson will also be eligible for free agency (and nice raises) in 2019.

## Defensive end

The standard: J.J. Watt landed his \$100 million package (over six years) in 2014, but the Giants' Olivier Vernon received \$52.5 million in guarantees — slightly more than Watt — two years ago. However neither's average salary will top the \$17.1 million that Dallas' Demarcus Lawrence and Detroit's Ziggy Ansah, both franchised earlier this year, are scheduled to pull down in 2018.

2018 franchise tag: \$17.1M

Who's next: Lawrence and Ansah will closely monitor the other's negotiations. Ansah seems likelier to be rewarded sooner given his more impressive body of work, while Lawrence could find the upcoming season serving as a prove-it crucible after his breakout 2017 (14½ sacks). Vets Carlos Dunlap of Cincinnati and

Brandon Graham of Philadelphia should still be coveted in free agency a year from now, when the Vikings' Danielle Hunter should profit significantly for the first time.

Ultimately, Oakland's Khalil Mack will eventually take the cake here for a good while. A three-time Pro Bowler and defensive player of the year in 2016, Mack's next deal — which should arrive before he reaches free agency in 2019 — could eclipse Donald's, depending on who signs first.

#### Linebacker

The standard: Among all defensive players, Denver's Von Miller remains king of the hill, the six-year, \$114.5 million deal he banked two years ago the industry standard for defense in terms of total and average value (\$19.1M) as well as guarantees (\$70M).

2018 franchise tag: \$15M

Who's next: The franchise tag value applies to both outside and inside linebackers, but only a pass rusher like Miller is going to command premium dollars. Just ask Panthers all-pro MLB Luke Kuechly, who averages nearly \$7 million fewer than Miller in annual pay. Seattle's Bobby Wagner and Atlanta's Deion Jones have two years left on their deals and Baltimore's C.J. Mosley only one, but their sights should be set on Kuechly's numbers, which include \$34.4 million in guarantees, not Miller's. The same goes for Minnesota's Anthony Barr (a potential free agent next year), who plays outside but records few sacks from the Vikings' 4-3 front.

The most intriguing case will be Jadeveon Clowney. The Texans list him as a defensive end — he'd surely seek that tag figure next year if his contract expires — but Clowney frequently toggles to outside linebacker in a hybrid front. He only has 20 sacks in four seasons, but the 6-5, 270-pounder's unique combination of skills — he can rush the passer, set an edge and stop the run — and potential to further improve could allow him to approach Miller money at a time when the salary cap continues to substantially expand.

#### Cornerback

The standard: Good luck finding a shutdown guy like Deion Sanders or Darrelle Revis (in his prime) in today's NFL, but lesser corners are still major earners — none better than Washington's Josh Norman, a Pro Bowler just once, but the beneficiary of a five-year, \$75 million pact (\$50M guaranteed).

2018 franchise tag: \$15M

Who's next: The Jets' Trumaine Johnson just landed a five-year, \$72.5 million package after twice being franchised by the Rams. He's never made the Pro Bowl, yet almost took Norman down. It's going to be a few more years before an elite talent like the Jags' Jalen Ramsey truly breaks the bank. But in the interim, the Rams' Marcus Peters, who's entering his prime, is the best bet to unseat Norman.

#### Safety

The standard: Kansas City's Eric Berry spent most of 2017 sidelined with an Achilles injury. Fortunately, he collected the most lucrative safety contract (6 years, \$78M, \$40M guaranteed) before the season.

2018 franchise tag: \$11.3M

Who's next: Seattle star Earl Thomas turned 29 Monday, but his stellar game has shown little slippage. His four-year, \$40 million deal is up after this season, so he's primed to reclaim his previous standing as the top-paid safety from Berry. But Thomas will be challenged next year by Giants Pro Bowler Landon Collins, who can't match Thomas' ranginess and impact as a deep safety, but is a do-it-all type who, more importantly, is only 24.

Keep an eye on the Rams' Lamarcus Joyner, who's currently carrying the franchise tag, Houston's Tyrann Mathieu, who's on a prove-it deal this year, as well as Green Bay's Ha Ha Clinton-Dix and Chicago's underrated Adrian Amos, both starting the final year of their rookie contracts.

# Peyton Manning considering joining ownership bid for Carolina Panthers

By Jason Owens  
Yahoo! Sports  
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A billionaire bidder in the mix to buy the Carolina Panthers has reached out to Peyton Manning to join his ownership group, the Charlotte Observer reports.

Ben Navarro, the Charleston-based CEO of Sherman Financial Group, is the leading bidder for the team with an offer of \$2.6 billion, the New York Times reports.

According to the Charlotte Observer, Manning, a five-time NFL MVP and two-time Super Bowl champion quarterback with the Indianapolis Colts and Denver Broncos, is considering Navarro's offer to become a limited partner.

## Peyton Manning in high demand

Manning, 42, has reportedly turned down multiple offers to be involved in the NFL since he retired after the 2015 season. Sporting News reports that ESPN and Fox were each willing to pay Manning \$10 million annually to work in their broadcast booths.

CBS Sports reported in November that Browns owner Jimmy Haslem recruited Manning for a front office role in Cleveland.

## Panthers ownership bidding down to a few serious groups

The Panthers are available for purchase in the wake of owner Jerry Richardson's alleged sexual and racial misconduct while on the job. Richardson stepped away from his day-to-day operations duties and announced his plans to sell the team in December.

Since then, multiple groups have surfaced with an interest in purchasing the team, including reported early interest from rapper Diddy and NBA star Stephen Curry.

While Curry and Diddy are reportedly no longer in the mix, there are three known active bidders remaining with serious interest in the Panthers, according to the Observer. Pittsburgh Steelers part-owner David Tepper and Brooklyn-born mining and metals billionaire Alan Kestenbaum are also considered to be serious bidders.

## Peyton Manning has money to join Panthers ownership bid

According to Forbes, Manning retired with \$249 million in NFL earnings in addition to approximately \$150 million in endorsement money for his multiple roles promoting Papa John's, Nationwide and Buick among others. He presumably has the funds to become a minority partner in \$2.6 billion-plus investment. How interested he truly is has not been reported.

Former Panthers president Mark Richardson, Jerry Richardson's son, has endorsed the Navarro bid as his favorite and said he would consider taking on a role with the team if Navarro wins.

“I’m sure there are multiple people that could be the right next owner,” Richardson told the Observer. “I personally know Ben and I know what he stands for. I know where his heart and his head is, and what his commitments are. And I can’t imagine a better person being the next owner than him.”

Adding Manning to the mix would almost certainly be a plus for Navarro’s bid effort.

NFL owners will hold spring meetings from May 21-23 and could approve the sale of the Panthers then.

# NFL Cheerleading Can Still Be Saved

By Kalyn Kahler

MMQB

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Bailey Davis couldn't wait for the calendar reveal party. This was her second year as a member of the Saintsations, the New Orleans Saints cheerleaders, and she'd worked so much harder on toning her body for the calendar shoot than she had as a rookie. She'd been eating clean, going to Pure Barre and CrossFit and she'd even won a plank competition by holding the pose for 33 minutes. The result was her very first six-pack, a tangible sign of her discipline. She hoped that six-pack would help her make the cut—her own month on the calendar.

Davis arrived at New Orleans' Royal Sonesta Hotel with her teammates, all dressed in black cocktail dresses for the formal event. They greeted team sponsors and Saints employees, but mostly they whispered about who might get a month this year. The first sign of trouble was the team photo—four rows of smiling women in white bikinis—projected across the backdrop of the ballroom stage. Davis's eyes were stuck on the middle of the second row, on the altered version of herself. Her breasts had been noticeably enlarged, and the change wasn't subtle; teammates (some of whom have actually had breast augmentation) teased her about her double-Ds. "I was super embarrassed," Davis says. "It was the first thing you saw when you walked in."

Throughout the course of the night, each page of the 16-month calendar was revealed for the first time, January 2017 through April 2018. Davis, who had a page as a rookie, sat through 11 months, growing anxious as she waited to see if she had made the cut. Relief came with the reveal of December; her photo flashed on screen, in a red bikini, posing on a waterbike. Her chest was back to its normal size—an obvious difference from the group shot plastered on the backdrop of the stage. But the moles on her stomach were missing, and her six-pack had been erased.

Davis was annoyed at her smoothed-over stomach, but she wasn't completely surprised. Airbrushing away all traces of masculinity had been a trademark of the Saintsations swimsuit calendar long before Davis joined the team.

"No one had a six-pack in the calendar," she says. "I wanted a rip-tuck picture for the calendar, but they smoothed it over because someone said, Guys don't like six packs on girls."

(In a statement to The MMQB, outside counsel for the Saints said that until June 2017 the Saintsations were outsourced to a third party-organization, St. All-Star LLC, including the 2015 and '16 seasons, Davis's first two years with the team. The Saints discontinued the calendar after the 2016 season.)

Growing up, Davis had an especially close connection to the Saintsations—her mom worked for them as a field director, one of several assistants for the squad—and always dreamed of dancing on the sideline in black and gold. She joined the dance team at Jones County Junior College and tried out as soon as she was old enough for the Saintsations. She expected it to be the height of her dance career and push her to improve her technique. But once she made the team, the reality was much different. "Routines got watered down to look better for the girls who couldn't really dance," she says. "If you gained a little bit of weight or if you didn't sell enough calendars, you weren't going on the field. Everything but your ability determined whether you got to dance or not."

At most high school and college programs, cheerleaders and dancers are considered part of the athletic program and treated like any other student-athlete. But the image and role of a cheerleader changes drastically in the professional ranks. The women who were considered athletes in college are presented as little more than over-sexualized male fantasies in the pros. “I don’t know why we get to the professional leagues and it’s like, Oh, you’re just eye candy.,” Davis says.

Davis was fired from her Saints job in January over rumors that she was at the same party as a Saints player (the rulebook forbids any fraternization with players) and a photo posted on her private Instagram account. In the photo she is wearing a one-piece lace bodysuit, deemed to violate the team’s rule of no nude, semi-nude or lingerie shots. (Her mother has since voluntarily resigned.) “They said I had a ‘dirty face’ in the picture,” Davis says. “It was a serious face, the same face I make in the photo on all the posters we give to kids.”

NFL cheerleading teams are on the hot seat. The New York Times published a disturbing report of a swimsuit calendar shoot for Redskins cheerleaders, which some team members said turned into a topless shoot in front of sponsors and suite holders. Davis and Kristan Ann Ware, a former Miami Dolphins cheerleader, recently filed gender-discrimination complaints with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission against the Saints, the Dolphins and the NFL. With their legal action, the NFL cheerleading industry, which to this point has operated outside the realm of the #MeToo movement, is now forced to recognize and confront its unfair treatment of the women it employs. Sara Blackwell, who represents Davis and Ware, sent the NFL a settlement proposal: If commissioner Roger Goodell and the NFL’s lawyers agree to a four-hour meeting with her clients to prepare a set of regulations for all NFL cheer teams, they will settle all claims for \$1 each. Earlier this week, the NFL (though not Goodell himself) agreed to meet with the group, and Blackwell plans to suspend the complaints for now.

Many have argued that the NFL just shouldn’t employ cheerleaders anymore. That’s the wrong idea—eliminating a role for women in the predominantly male world of professional football is the opposite of empowering them. “When a cheerleader complains, the organization will say, fine, let’s just get rid of the cheerleaders,” Ware says. “That’s not the point. That’s abusive and manipulative.”

And when you take away the sexualization of NFL cheerleaders, the job is empowering. The women who make the team are not just pretty faces. They must pass an arduous audition process that often includes a test about the organization’s history and the game of football, and an interview segment where hopefuls dress in business attire and answer questions from local professionals to prove they can handle the responsibility of representing the organization in the community and abroad. They log hours of community outreach, and many have been involved on USO tours.

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#### 1. PRIORITIZE DANCE ABILITY, NOT BODY TYPE. NO MORE WEIGH-INS.

“We should be able to have muscular bodies,” Davis says. “If we don't have boobs, we don't have boobs. We shouldn't be so worried about being a man's idea of an NFL cheerleader or perfect body.”

In her third and final year with the Dolphins, Ware says the image of the team's cheerleaders shifted dramatically. She says she heard a Dolphins executive say that he wanted women on the team to look like Victoria's Secret models, not dancers. “We saw really talented dancers get cut at auditions, and we're wondering, wait, what just happened?” Ware says. “And then we saw a really pretty model make the team who had no dance background. You start to scratch your head. Are we dancers, or are we models?”

(In a statement to The MMQB, a team spokesperson for the Dolphins said: “Ms. Ware brought some things to our attention when she was a cheerleader and they were addressed at that time. Some of her recent statements are new information to us and in some cases we believe they are misunderstandings. For example, SI Swimsuit and Victoria's Secret was referenced in terms of the artistic vision of our cheer brand. We wanted to take it to another level of photography and quality, but this wasn't a factor in our cheerleader selection process.”)

Says Davis: “Some of the best dancers I know don't want to be NFL cheerleaders because it is degrading and it's not an actual dance job. The emphasis needs to be on what it is in college and high school, where dance team is a sport.”

Part of changing that emphasis is changing the outfits. Bedazzled push-bras and spandex booty shorts doesn't portray the image of a serious athlete. At the risk of sounding like a cranky old lady: These women need to wear more clothes. The uniforms should take the form of the classic college cheerleading look, skirts and crop tops that highlight their six-packs without revealing major cleavage.

If NFL cheerleaders are no longer objectified, teams will have no reason to hold women to unhealthy body standards. Both Davis and Ware say they were subjected to weekly weigh-ins to make sure they were at or below the weight they had auditioned at. (Through counsel, the Saints said they have never required cheerleaders to submit to weekly weigh-ins.)

Ware says many teams, like the Dolphins, had a three-pound leniency rule. Anything heavier is grounds for suspension, and in some cases, termination. Ware says laxative abuse was common, and Davis says teammates would often sweat themselves out in their cars and starve themselves to make weight. The severe consequences of failing a weigh-in create an environment where eating disorders are normal.

At the end of Ware's rookie season, a teammate was called into the coach's office during practice. Ware watched in horror as her teammate exited the office crying, packed her bags and left the building. A team captain told Ware the woman was fired because the coaches thought she was overweight, and that she was on the last week of a medication that had caused her to gain a few pounds. (In reviewing questions for this story, the Dolphins did not specifically respond to a question about this incident, or about weigh-ins.)

## 2. ELIMINATE THE CULTURE OF FEAR

Each team operates under its own set of rules, so experiences vary, but Davis and Ware both experienced a culture of intimidation. Both were frequently reminded by coaches that if they stepped out of line or complained, there were hundreds of other women waiting to take their spots. "You're reminded of that every single week," Ware says. "You're seen and not heard."

This culture of fear is the reason why NFL cheer teams have been able to largely avoid the #MeToo reckoning until now. Ex-cheerleaders feel comfortable speaking out because they are free from the threat of losing their spot. Current cheerleaders are trapped in the system. When Davis was fired, she says her teammates were sad to lose her, but reminded her that she knew the rules, so she shouldn't have posted the picture to Instagram in the first place. And when she announced her lawsuit, the reaction was worse. Her closest friend on the team no longer speaks to her.

"If you went inside the locker room and you said, girls, is there anything going on? They would all smile at you and say everything is fine," Ware says. "I've been there. I've watched the cheerleaders lie about that because they are too afraid that they are going to lose their job."

## 3. MAKE IT A FULL-TIME JOB

These women are part-time employees of the teams they cheer for. Most of them hold full-time jobs and serious careers outside of cheerleading. Last year's Patriots cheerleading squad included an attorney in the D.A.'s special investigations office and a second lieutenant in the Air Force. Ware worked three other jobs in Miami, and Davis was a full-time student.

During her three years on the Saintsations, Davis was required to show up to every practice with full hair and makeup done, because the team practiced in a public gym. She was only paid \$9.25 an hour for game day, practice time, and for up to four hours of time for each community appearance. The Saintsations practice twice a week for roughly four hours each, but are also expected to practice on their own. The women call this "practice for practice" because they are not guaranteed a spot on the field. They have to earn their position every week. Davis drove two hours each way to practice while she was attending college in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. She wouldn't get home until past midnight, and had to get up the next morning early to go to class. Last Halloween, she pulled all-nighters for three days in a row because she was in charge of making her field group's Halloween costumes. At night, she hot glued Peter Pan and dwarf costumes together, and during the day she struggled to stay awake in class. "I came to class one day and my eyes were bloodshot, and people were like, are you on drugs?" Davis says. "I was so obsessed with Saintsations that I put it before school."

Both Ware and Davis were expected to pay for most of their own beauty treatments—most teams require manicured nails and spray tans, among other appearance rules, for games and community appearances.

The Saints provided a stylist on game days, but Davis paid for semi-monthly manicures, a makeup set for community appearances, an annual spray tan membership, false eyelashes for every game and appearance and 20 pairs of tights each year. Add that all up, and she paid roughly \$2,240 each year to maintain her look. While listing all the associated expenses, Davis confesses, “You’re probably looking at it and I made no money.”

In Miami, Ware says that coaches told them they were the highest paid cheerleaders in the NFL. She’s not comfortable disclosing her hourly wage, but she says it still wasn’t enough to live on. She worked three other jobs, as a fitness instructor, resort activities manager and at a massage therapy studio. “I felt like I was paying to be a cheerleader,” she says. “We would all say on the Dolphins that it is a full-time job and part-time pay.”

Dolphins cheerleaders practiced three times per week in Miami, plus an added practice on Saturdays during weeks when they had a performance during a home game. On top of that, she was frequently requested for appearances in the community, which she loved doing. Between appearances and practice, NFL cheerleading could easily become a full-time job if teams added a morning practice, or a shift working in the team office before evening practice.

If this was a full-time job, or even just a better-paying part-time job, the women wouldn’t have to balance multiple jobs and drive themselves to exhaustion working a full day and then rushing to a full night of practice. Cheerleaders should also receive a stipend or be reimbursed for the expensive beauty regimen and accessories required.

#### 4. PROPER MEDICAL TREATMENT FOR ALL CHEERLEADERS

Ware struggled with several injuries and says she was pressured to perform through her pain and didn’t receive proper medical treatment. She says she danced on four broken bones, two sprained MCLs, two sprained meniscuses, a left shoulder injury and a right hip injury. She says that when she’d ask about resting her injuries, Miami’s cheerleading directors repeated a familiar threat: If you don’t perform, there are 100 other women who will take your position. Ware left the team nearly a year ago and she says her foot is still broken. She currently does not have health insurance and is trying to do her own physical therapy exercises at home.

Cheerleaders shouldn’t have their injuries used against them, and considering the physical demands of the job they need much more than that. They should have a dedicated athletic training staff for their care.

#### 5. USE LAST NAMES

Every NFL cheerleading team refers to their cheerleaders by first name only. Bailey Davis was just Bailey, Kristan Ann Ware was just Kristan Ann. Taking away their last names takes away a piece of their credibility—they’re ambassadors for a professional football organization. I can’t think of another serious female athlete or performer who isn’t known by her last name. Some teams tell women that this is for their protection from would-be stalkers, but when I perused the cheerleading websites for the 26 NFL teams that have squads, I found a lot of information in the cheerleader bios (college, hometown, industry she works in).

When Davis taught at dance camps and workshops and chose to use her full name, she wasn't allowed to say that she was a Saintsation. Davis wants to build a career in the dance world, and not being able to reference a job as a professional dancer when trying to book other jobs didn't help.

"They say, this is going to be the best years of your life, you're going to do so much networking and you are going to get a great job after this," Ware says. "But when you meet someone and you can't use your last name, how are they going to find you?"

The suits filed by Davis and Ware aren't demanding million-dollar contracts or the kind of treatment given to players. They are simply asking to be treated like valued members of the organization: more pay, more security, better treatment, more recognition of their talent.

At Northwestern, the cheerleaders weren't half as important as the football team (nor did we think we should be). There were certain rules that we knew to follow. We always boarded the charter plane at the back entrance, while the football players boarded at the front. We'd ride in the last bus, and we'd wait to grab our post-game meal until after the players got theirs. We were viewed as "half-letes" by many of the other student-athletes because we weren't a competitive team.

But we still got to travel comfortably to the games, we still received varsity letters, and we still had a coach who cared for us. We were treated with respect and felt like we mattered. Our athletic director and football and basketball coaches would often thank us after games for creating a great home-game environment.

In 2014, several former members of the Buffalo Bills cheerleading team, the Buffalo Jills, sued the Bills for not being paid for the majority of the hours they worked. Faced with the lawsuit, the Bills suspended operations for their cheerleading team; the Jills have not been revived. Instead of fixing the problems, the team chose to just avoid them altogether.

"If the NFL does away with us, then we are just taking a step backwards," Davis says. "It shows the rest of the world that the NFL does not care about women, that we have no voice. I surely hope that a dad would not bring his daughter to an NFL game if they did away with cheerleaders because they didn't want to deal with women."

NFL teams devote plenty of resources to dealing with the athletes who perform on the field. It's past time for them to re-think how they treat the athletes who work on the sidelines.

# Lions' Patricia indicted, not tried in '96 sex assault

By Robert Snell  
The Detroit News  
May 10, 2018

She told police they met on a Texas beach, fellow college students visiting South Padre Island during spring break 1996.

She was a 21-year-old college student at a large university; they were two football players and Theta Chi fraternity brothers at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in upstate New York.

On the evening of March 15, 1996, the woman told police that two men burst into the upscale hotel room where she was sleeping and took turns violently sexually assaulting her, according to court records and a news account at the time. They were arrested, charged and later indicted by a grand jury on one count of aggravated sexual assault — but they never stood trial and were not convicted.

One of the indicted men was 21-year-old Matt Patricia, who was hired as the head coach of the National Football League's Detroit Lions in February. The other, his friend and captain of RPI's football team, Greg Dietrich, 22.

Although both men have gone on to successful careers, the relevance of even old and untried charges raises questions for the Lions at the height of the "Me Too" movement, which has brought new scrutiny to sexual misconduct allegations.

The indictment remained an untold part of Patricia's past during his rise in the coaching ranks, and the Lions said it eluded them during a background check that only searched for criminal convictions.

When approached by The Detroit News, team president Rod Wood initially said "I don't know anything about this" — but hours later said his review of the situation only reinforced the team's decision to hire Patricia.

"I am very comfortable with the process of interviewing and employing Matt," Wood said. "I will tell you with 1,000-percent certainty that everything I've learned confirmed what I already knew about the man and would have no way changed our decision to make him our head coach."

Wood also said the woman recanted the sexual assault allegations multiple times — a claim not substantiated by existing records or lawyers for Patricia and his fraternity brother.

Team owner Martha Ford, lauded by Detroit Police in 2016 for her stance against domestic violence and commitment to changing the culture in the NFL, also did not know about the allegations.

One of Patricia's defense lawyers said he believes the alleged assault never happened.

"In my opinion, it was a fabrication," attorney Jeff Wilson said. "I'm telling you it was a 'he said, she said.' I don't know what type of problems the girl was having; I don't know why she made that allegation. We vehemently denied that he was doing anything wrong or did anything wrong."

There are no legal prohibitions against requesting or considering past criminal charges for employment in Michigan, although federal civil rights guidance discourages holding an unsubstantiated charge against an applicant.

Patricia, 43, and Lions general manager Bob Quinn were not available for an interview about the indictment Wednesday.

Many details of the alleged attack are unclear. The police report was discarded, and several figures involved said they could not recall the case — not the police chief, lieutenant, grand jury forewoman, prosecutor, assistant prosecutor or defense attorneys.

The woman who identified Patricia and Dietrich to police as the perpetrators did not respond to multiple attempts to contact her over several weeks. The News has a general policy against identifying alleged victims of sexual assaults.

She ultimately concluded that she would not testify, court records show.

“Victim does not feel she can face the pressures or stress of a trial,” reads a hand-written note above the signature of Cameron County Assistant District Attorney Jacqueline Reynolds-Church in the Jan. 28, 1997, motion to dismiss the case.

Cameron County District Attorney Luis Saenz, also the district attorney at the time of the indictment, said he did not recall the case.

“It’s extremely frustrating,” Saenz said of dismissals prompted by a reluctance to testify. “Sometimes we get angry about it, get mad about it and pull our hair out. We don’t like to do this. It just sends the wrong message and is something that hurts all sexual assault cases.”

Theta Chi fraternity brothers Patricia and Dietrich

Assailants ‘burst in’

The assault case dates to Patricia’s time at RPI, where the 5-foot-11, 227-pound offensive lineman played center and guard. Dietrich was a team captain and president of the Theta Chi fraternity.

The men were in South Padre Island during Texas Week, an annual celebration that lured more than 100,000 people to the Gulf Coast island just north of the Mexican border.

“We referred to Texas Week as the week from hell,” said E.E. Eunice, South Padre Island’s police chief at the time.

He does not remember Patricia or the alleged assault.

Five days after the alleged attack, Eunice was quoted in a March 20 newspaper article carried in the Brownsville (Texas) Herald and at least one other newspaper.

“She told us she had palled around with them for a few days,” Eunice told the newspaper at the time.

At approximately 6 p.m. on Friday, March 15, the men arrived at a room at the Radisson hotel where the woman was sleeping, the newspaper reported.

Patricia and Dietrich “burst into” the room and awoke the woman before taking turns sexually assaulting her, according to the newspaper.

Not true, Patricia’s lawyer said.

“His alibi is this was a false accusation,” Wilson said. “He didn’t do anything.”

The accuser identified Patricia and Dietrich, who were arrested later that night and released on \$20,000 bond, according to the story and court records.

Dietrich’s criminal defense attorney at the time, Sheldon Weisfeld, said he doesn’t recall the case.

“You’re talking damn near 22 years ago,” Weisfeld said.

Months later, an indictment

Eunice said it was customary for his department to take sexual-assault accusers to an area hospital so medical staff could search for evidence of sexual assault.

After the alleged incident, a secret grand jury of Texas residents heard evidence presented only by prosecutors. To return an indictment in Texas law, nine of 12 grand jurors must vote that probable cause exists that the defendants committed a crime.

An indictment requires grand jurors find sufficient evidence to believe someone committed a crime, said Peter Henning, a Wayne State University law professor and former federal prosecutor.

“It’s a fairly low standard,” Henning said. “It is certainly not proof that the person committed the crime. Especially if the evidence changes.”

On Aug. 14, 1996, the grand jury indicted Patricia and Dietrich, each on one count of aggravated sexual assault, a felony that carries a maximum sentence of up to life in prison, according to Texas statute.

“The defendants compelled the victim to submit and participate by the use of physical force and violence ...,” it reads.

“It would have never gotten to that level if it was a weak case,” said Robert Rodriguez, a South Padre Island Police lieutenant at the time of the alleged sexual assault.

John Tasolides, a lawyer who responded to messages left for Dietrich this week, disagreed.

“If your complaining witness is not willing to come into court and testify, a case doesn’t get any weaker than that,” he said.

“(Dietrich) pled not guilty; he denied any responsibility for this, and the charges were dismissed,” he said. “Once an indictment is dismissed, you’re as innocent as the day before you were accused.”

The accuser likely did not testify in front of the grand jury, assistant district attorney Reynolds-Church told The News.

The grand jury likely was presented with the accuser's statement, witness statements and any physical evidence, Reynolds-Church said.

Case is dismissed

Five months after the indictment, in January 1997, the case collapsed.

Wilson, Patricia's lawyer, said he remembers preparing for trial in his hotel room on Jan. 26, 1997. The television was on — Patricia's future employer, the New England Patriots, were playing the Green Bay Packers in Super Bowl XXXI — but Wilson wasn't watching.

The next day, Wilson said he arrived in court to pick a jury.

"She didn't show up," Wilson said of the accuser.

Prosecutors stood up and asked to dismiss the case, Wilson said, a request that was granted.

The dismissal was prompted by a request from the accuser, according to court records.

"Victim is unable to testify and can not give a date certain when she will be available," the dismissal reads. "Victim may request that the case be refiled at a later date."

Last-minute dismissals are dramatic but not uncommon in criminal sexual conduct and domestic violence cases, Henning said.

"This does happen, in part, because of the stigma attached," Henning said. "It reflects on them personally, and that's very difficult for the victim."

Patricia felt a great sense of relief after the dismissal, his lawyer said.

"It was a freakin' nightmare for Mr. Patricia and his friend," Wilson said. "Imagine if you're innocent and charged with something like that — which nowadays would be worse.

"It was a pretty serious charge, man."

A victim's inability to testify can destroy a case, said Saenz, the Cameron County District Attorney in 1996 and today.

"It's almost next to impossible in a sexual assault case where the jury wants to hear what happened," he said.

According to the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network, in 1,000 sexual assaults, all but six perpetrators will walk free.

“It is fairly common for a survivor to not want to testify,” said Ted Rutherford, spokesman for the Texas Association Against Sexual Assault. “There is a fear of retaliation, fear that if they do report and if things go public with the story, their personal lives will be on display and picked apart.”

The case is unusual in one respect.

“(They) were immediately arrested, and that’s pretty rare,” Rutherford said.

There is nothing unusual about the case, said Dietrich’s lawyer, a former prosecutor.

“The people who make immediate outcries are false accusers many times,” Tasolides said.

No finding of guilt

At the time of the alleged assault, Patricia was an aeronautical engineering student. The criminal case was pending when he graduated from RPI in 1996 and took a job as a graduate assistant for his college football coach. He later worked as an engineer at an air and filtration systems company in Syracuse, New York, before eventually joining the Patriots.

After being charged, Dietrich, now 44, graduated with an engineering degree from RPI and received a master’s degree from Columbia Business School before working for IBM, GE and serving as a managing director of Credit Suisse in New York City, according to online biographies. He is a vice president of a Virginia-based technology company and lives in New York.

In a 2017 interview with the Theta Chi alumni magazine, Patricia said he and Dietrich remained close.

“We still talk all the time,” Patricia said.

Greg Dietrich

An indictment is merely an allegation, and since the case was never prosecuted, Patricia and Dietrich are considered innocent, said Keith Corbett, a veteran defense attorney and former federal prosecutor.

“But on a personal level, it’s a brand that stays with you forever,” Corbett said. “There’s no way to get around it. (They) never had a chance to defend against it, and there was no finding of guilt but from a public-perception standpoint; this is a thing that may follow them for the rest of their lives.”

Quinn did not know about the indictment before Patricia was hired, Wood said. Quinn is a former Patriots scout and executive who worked with Patricia for 12 years.

On the day of his introductory press conference in 2016, Quinn said that character would be a point of emphasis for players.

“That’s definitely going to be taken into account on every draft pick, every free agent signing that we take,” Quinn told reporters. “The two things that are zero tolerance are domestic violence and dangerous weapons. Those are the two things I’m not going to stand for.”

He later signed little-used tight ends Orson Charles and Andrew Quarless, who were both accused of gun-related crimes.

After the signings, Quinn clarified his zero-tolerance policy.

"I think every incident and every situation is different," Quinn said last year. "Looking back, I probably should not have said that, because the more you do research on each individual incident, what you read in the newspaper and the Internet is sometimes not accurate."

#### Background check conducted

The month before the Lions hired Patricia, the New Jersey-based private investigations firm APG Security requested copies of the indictment and dismissal from the county prosecutor's office, The News has learned. When contacted by The News, an APG official said he was unaware of anyone requesting the court records.

The NFL's personal conduct policy for players states athletes, coaches and employees all must avoid "conduct detrimental to the integrity of and public confidence in" the league or be subject to discipline.

"It is not enough simply to avoid being found guilty of a crime ... even if the conduct does not result in a criminal conviction, players found to have engaged in any of the following conduct will be subject to discipline," it reads. The prohibited conduct includes sexual assault, but it is ambiguous about the implications of a previous allegation.

The NFL hired four women to help shape league policy relating to domestic violence and sexual assault in 2014 amid complaints about how the league punished players, particularly former Baltimore Ravens running back Ray Rice, who was suspended for two games for a domestic violence incident with his then-fiancee. Rice later was suspended indefinitely after video emerged showing Rice knocking her unconscious, discipline that was later overturned on appeal by an arbitrator. An assault charge against Rice was dropped, and he underwent counseling, but no team ever signed him again.

Laws allowing employers to conduct background checks and hold people accountable for prior arrests and convictions vary from state to state. But in practice, employment decisions are routinely made during informal checks of court databases, social media and sex-offender registries available online, labor experts said.

"Studies show that once you get past seven years after a crime was committed and the person hasn't engaged in any other criminal conduct, they are no more likely to engage in criminal conduct than you or I," said Stacy Hickox, an assistant professor at Michigan State University and expert on employment law. "Others say 'I don't care how long ago it was,' if it was a significant crime like the one you're describing, then we're going to look back as far as we want to look back."

Michigan employers are allowed by law to ask prospective employees about arrests for felonies, but not misdemeanors. In Massachusetts, where Patricia worked for the Patriots from 2004 until earlier this year, state law bars employers from asking about arrests that did not end in a conviction.

Federal law does not prohibit employers from asking about criminal histories but an arrest, by itself, may not be used to discriminate against someone, according to the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.

“We did a complete background check,” said Wood, the Lions’ president. “Our background check was limited to employment matters only and does not disclose any criminal matters that don’t result in a conviction or a plea agreement.”

After being hired by the Lions on a reported five-year deal, Patricia said he favors giving a second chance to players facing arrests or convictions.

“Obviously, depending on the degree of the issues. But let’s just say just in general, I think it’s important to work with all those guys,” Patricia told reporters during an NFL meeting in Orlando earlier this year. “We’ll go through the process and if we feel that there’s someone that would be good for us and a good fit for our organization and what we need, then that’s my job as a coach to go in and do everything I can to try to make them the best player they can be or the best people they can be.

“I really look at it as we’re educators, we’re trying to teach these guys. And one of the reasons I left engineering and got into coaching was for that reason, to be able to have that human element of trying to make a difference in people’s lives.”

# Peyton Manning considering offer to join Panthers ownership group

By Mike Florio  
Pro Football Talk  
May 10, 2018

A guy who spent plenty of time in North Carolina in connection with his playing career could be spending plenty more time there as part of his post-playing activities.

Joseph Person of the Charlotte Observer reports that future Hall of Fame quarterback Peyton Manning is considering an offer to become part of the potential Panthers ownership group led by billionaire Ben Navarro.

Yes, the Panthers. The last team Manning ever faced, beating them for a walk-off Super Bowl in.

It's the latest opportunity that has been presented to Manning since retiring from the NFL more than two years ago. He has consistently rejected overtures and opportunities to do something other than pitch products and live life, but many believe he'll eventually resurface as a member of an ownership group.

While playing, Manning often worked out at Duke University in Durham. The city became a location of major interest in 2012, as teams were lining up to sign the then-free agent.

The question likely will be whether Navarro offers the still-free agent executive a chance to not just be involved in owning the team but to run the show. With Manning, there's no part-time, half-assed move. If he's in, he's all in. And if the offer is anything less than a chance to own equity coupled with a charge to run the franchise, it's hard to imagine Peyton being interested.

Why should he be? Whether it's Navarro or someone else, eventually an owner will give Peyton the power to write his own ticket, and he will.

# NFL struggles in survey of game-day experience

By Mike Florio  
Pro Football Talk  
May 10, 2018

As the at-home viewing experience gets better and better, the NFL has struggled in recent years with the challenge of luring fans to the stadium. The results of a new survey demonstrate the depths of the NFL's struggles to give fans the same kind of game-day experience that other sports provide.

Via the San Jose Mercury News, the Temkin Group collected data on fan feedback for the NFL, NBA, MLB, NHL, Nascar, the PGA, Major League Soccer, the WNBA, and ATP (which I think is tennis or something). The survey focused on nine different aspects of the game-day experience, and the NFL finished last in eight of the categories.

The topics were: (1) the ability to select and purchase tickets; (2) parking; (3) entry to the arena or stadium; (4) process of finding the seat; (5) bathroom access; (6) food purchases; (7) souvenir purchases; (8) watching the game; and (9) exit from the arena or stadium.

It's not a surprise, in large part because the NFL draws the biggest crowds. The more people who attend, the more of a pain in the butt it is to get tickets, park the car, get to the stadium, find the seat, get to the bathroom, buy stuff, have great sight lines, and get out of the building when the game is over.

Throw in the presence of drunk, profane, hostile, and/or violent fans, and who would choose to go to a game? To improve fan satisfaction, the NFL needs to continue to strive to give fans something more than can get at home, with the holy grail being access to the communications between the sidelines and the quarterback and/or the defensive player with the green dot on his helmet.

# New rule could lead to “more athletic player” on kickoffs

By Mike Florio  
Pro Football Talk  
May 10, 2018

It's clear that the NFL is experimenting with the kickoff in the hopes of making it safer, but without any specific goal beyond simply making it safer. The play also will be different, given the changes that are expected to become official later this year.

“I think you're gonna see less offensive linemen on this unit,” Saints coach Sean Payton, a member of the Competition Committee, explained during a visit to PFT Live. “I think you're gonna see a more athletic player on this unit. I think you're gonna have less space in the collisions, which the goal was at the beginning.”

The changes in the positioning (and possibly the composition) on the kickoff also could lead to various other unforeseen, by maybe not unwelcome, consequences.

“I'm not so sure that you're not gonna see a handful of unique returns now when you have eight [blockers] inside that initial 15-yard zone,” Payton said. “I think there's space and I also think there's also opportunities that present themselves for the kicking team. Whether it's not an onside [kick] but you know placing the ball in certain areas of the field maybe with the idea of trying to recover it.”

Whether the kickoff survives in this form ultimately depends on whether the play reduces the injury risk. Packers CEO Mark Murphy recently said players are five times more likely to suffer a concussion during a kickoff than a scrimmage play. So what reduced rate would be acceptable to the NFL?

“I don't know that there's been a rate we discussed,” Payton said regarding last week's safety summit. “I think clearly we discussed making it safer. I think to the league's credit having the group on hand that we did with the former players, special teams coaches, other head coaches to really have dialogue and discussion on improving our game and trying to improve the safety of a play like that. I think they did a great job and came back with some really significant changes that I think the fans will be excited still about. And yet I think we'll see a dip in this number [of concussions].”

Time will tell whether that's the case. If not, more changes could occur to the kickoff — including its possible elimination.

# Lions, Patricia issue statements in wake of report regarding 1996 indictment

By Mike Florio  
Pro Football Talk  
May 10, 2018

On Wednesday night, a story emerged regarding an indictment of Lions coach Matt Patricia for sexual assault in 1996. The Lions and Patricia have issued statements regarding the situation.

The Lions issued a joint statement from owner Martha Firestone Ford, G.M. Bob Quinn, and team president Rod Wood.

“Responding to a published report this evening from the Detroit News, the Detroit Lions are aware that a criminal charge involving sexual assault was brought against Matt Patricia in 1996,” the statement explains. “Matt was 21 at the time and on spring break in Texas. The charge was dismissed by the prosecutor at the request of the complaining individual prior to trial. As a result, Coach Patricia never had the opportunity to present his case or clear his name publicly in a court of law. He has denied that there was any factual basis for the charge. There was no settlement agreement with the complaining individual, no money exchanged hands and there was no confidentiality agreement. In discussions today with Lions management, the reporter involved acknowledged that the allegations have not been substantiated.

“As an organization, the Detroit Lions take allegations regarding sexual assault or harassment seriously. Coach Patricia was the subject of a standard pre-employment background check which did not disclose this issue. We have spoken to Coach Patricia about this at length as well as the attorney who represented him at the time. Based upon everything we have learned, we believe and have accepted Coach Patricia’s explanation and we will continue to support him. We will continue to work with our players and the NFL to further awareness of and protections for those individuals who are the victims of sexual assault or violence.”

In his own statement, Patricia strongly asserts his innocence.

“As someone who was falsely accused of this very serious charge over 22 years ago, and never given the opportunity to defend myself and clear my name, I find it incredibly unfair, disappointing, and frustrating that this story would resurface now with the only purpose being to damage my character and reputation,” Patricia said. “I firmly maintain my innocence, as I have always done.

“I would never condone any of the behavior that was alleged and will always respect and protect the rights of anyone who has been harassed or is the victim of violence. My priorities remain the same — to move forward and strive to be the best coach, teacher, and man that I can possibly be.”

Given that he was never tried, Patricia never lost the legal presumption of innocence. Given the current climate, both within the NFL and society at large, the fact that the allegation triggered an indictment require the Lions and Patricia to address the situation in a clear, firm, and confident way.

# Matt Patricia indicted but not tried for sexual assault in 1996

By Mike Florio  
Pro Football Talk  
May 10, 2018

The hiring of Lions coach Matt Patricia carries with it a surprising new caveat that, depending on the manner in which the dominoes fall, could threaten to end his tenure before it even really begins.

According to Robert Snell of the Detroit News, Patricia was indicted for sexual assault in 1996.

Both Patricia, then 21, and Rennselaer Polytechnic Institute teammate and fraternity brother Greg Dietrich, then 22, were charged by a grand jury with one count of aggravated sexual assault. They allegedly burst into the hotel room of a 21-year-old woman while on spring break at South Padre Island, Texas and “took turns violently sexual assaulting her.”

The case eventually was dismissed in January 1997, because the alleged victim did “not feel she can face the pressures or stress of a trial.”

One of the lawyers who represented Patricia at the time claims that the assault didn’t occur.

“In my opinion, it was a fabrication,” Jeff Wilson told Snell. “I’m telling you it was a ‘he said, she said.’ I don’t know what type of problems the girl was having; I don’t know why she made that allegation. We vehemently denied that he was doing anything wrong or did anything wrong.”

On one hand, that’s what a lawyer is supposed to say. On the other hand, false accusations do indeed happen.

But while the case was the subject of news reports and public records in the early days of the Internet, it appears that the Lions didn’t know about the allegations when hiring Patricia. According to Snell, team president Rod Wood initially said, “I don’t know anything about this.” Wood later provided a statement of support for Patricia and the manner in which he was hired.

“I am very comfortable with the process of interviewing and employing Matt,” Wood told Snell. “I will tell you with 1,000-percent certainty that everything I’ve learned confirmed what I already knew about the man and would have no way changed our decision to make him our head coach.”

That may be the case, but what if this allegation had emerged during the period of time between the firing of Jim Caldwell and the hiring of Patricia? Could the Lions (who seemed in hindsight to be destined to hire Patricia from the moment Bob Quinn became G.M.) have followed through with the hiring of Patricia if this story had emerged before he was announced as the head coach?

This isn’t a matter of legal guilt or innocence; it’s a matter of league and team P.R. in the era of the #MeToo movement. Ultimately, whether the Lions will be able to keep Patricia may depend in large part on the local and national reaction to the news. The story could quickly away, or it could snowball into a

controversy that forces the Lions to make a change — even if, as a matter of basic contract law, the Lions most likely would be forced to pay Patricia every dollar of his four-year deal if they decide to fire him.

The Lions could decide to try to shut off Patricia's right to a buyout, if they decide that they have no choice but to make a change. It's possible, for example, that paperwork completed or other information submitted by Patricia when he got the job contemplated full disclosure of the indictment. If he failed to do so, that could be grounds for a so-called termination for cause.

Before it ever gets to that point, the Lions would have to conclude that it's not practical to proceed with Patricia as the coach. And the league office, which has become ultra-sensitive to the public-relations consequences of allegations of violence against women, surely will take a position on what the Lions should do. That position definitely will be shaped by the extent to which it's believed that the situation creates a P.R. problem for the league office.