

A closer look at favored Bronco ownership successor Brittany Bowlen

By Mike Klis

9 News

June 4, 2018

When the Pat Bowlen Trust fired back at Beth Bowlen-Wallace's press-released proclamation that she's met all the criteria and she's ready to become controlling owner of the Denver Broncos, the trustees indicated in their strongly-worded response she was not the only child interested in succeeding their father.

A Bowlen daughter is getting closer to one day taking control of the team but it appears unlikely it is Beth.

Introducing, Brittany Bowlen.

Family and Trust sources – including the man himself, owner Pat Bowlen -- have been telling 9NEWS for years that Brittany Bowlen is the child with the best chance to one day lead the team.

The Trust, it should be noted, is not sitting on the team, but is working to identify a successor, per the wishes of Pat Bowlen, who has become incapacitated by Alzheimer's, a disease of progressive mental deterioration.

Not only does Brittany Bowlen appear to have strong interest in one day leading the Broncos, she is also taking significant steps to become qualified – at least as much as one can -- for the enormous responsibility that is controlling owner of a franchise that was most recently valued at \$2.6 billion.

Brittany Bowlen is 28 and on a career fast track as can be gleaned from the information below.

Earlier, 9NEWS looked at how Beth Bowlen-Wallace measured up against five of the major components the Trust has set forth to any of Pat Bowlen's seven children who are interested in eventually becoming the team's owner.

Here, we measure Brittany against the same criteria. For this report, Brittany declined comment. It appears she is going about her business with the same understated approach her father took during his 30-plus years of governing the Broncos.

*Education component where an advanced degree is encouraged

The Trust seems sensitive to the notion its criteria can be simplified into a checklist. If it was, Brittany could check off this box in bold marker.

She graduated from Notre Dame, a top 20 academic school according to Forbes Magazine, with a finance degree in 2013. She had a grade-point average of 3.8.

While at Notre Dame she interned for NBC Sports, whose chairman at the time, Dick Ebersol, has been Pat Bowlen's most vocal supporter for the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

In a Sports Illustrated article published Feb. 2, 2016 in advance of Super Bowl 50, Greg Bishop wrote: "For years, Pat told friends that his daughter Brittany, according to one, had a real chance to be the first significant female owner in NFL history."

Last month, Brittany finished her Master's and Business Administration (MBA) degree from the acclaimed Fuqua School of Business at Duke.

There is little doubt she meets the education guideline set forth by the Trust.

*Five years employment with the team or league

After getting her degree from Notre Dame, Brittany moved to New York where she worked full-time in the league office for two years, spanning the calendar years of 2013-15, as part of its rotational program. She worked six months each in four departments: Club business development; Business intelligence with media partnerships; corporate communication and community relations.

It was Brittany's work with the league office that made it a poorly-kept secret she became the clear frontrunner to one day sit in her father's chair.

Why? It's worth noting Joe Ellis similarly left the Broncos to work with the league office in a variety of departments in the late-1980s. Ellis was named by Pat Bowlen as one of his three trustees and also appointed him as the team's president and chief executive officer.

Titles aside, Ellis has essentially been Bowlen's right-hand man since the late-1990s. Ellis believes an understanding of how the league operates is vital to running a team.

After Brittany's two years in the league office, she returned home and worked with the Broncos as a business analyst during the team's Super Bowl 50 season of 2015.

She spent most of her time in the finance department, specifically in evaluating sponsorship contracts and arrangements and comparing them with other teams around the league.

Among her tasks, she created an initial proposal to bring the NFL Draft to Denver. In doing this, she worked alongside four city offices on draft logistics, media integration and overall impact in the community.

She also analyzed financial statements for the organization.

But that's only three years with the league and team when the Trust stated it prefers five years of experience.

Brittany, though, seems to understand she has more work to do before she's ready to assume command.

If she remains interested in the top job, Brittany is expected to return to work with the Broncos as perhaps her final step.

*Financial and business acumen

This is where Brittany hits a home run. Start with her finance degree at Notre Dame. Then she got finance experience at the league level. Move on to working primarily in the finance department with the Broncos.

In the midst of getting her MBA at Duke, Brittany spent the summer of 2017 serving an internship with McKinsey & Company, a global management firm that consults with businesses on projects and improving operations.

Forbes in 2017 ranked McKinsey as the No. 2 consulting firm in the United States.

Her internship included frequent travel to help consult on business and organizational structuring issues.

Brittany apparently impressed her McKinsey bosses during her internship: She has accepted a position with the company on a full-time basis.

Why not come back to work a few more years with the Broncos? Keep in mind, Ellis has four years remaining on the five-year extension. His extension received NFL owners' voter approval.

That will carry him through the league's collective bargaining negotiations with the players union in 2021.

In the meantime, Brittany will continue getting as much varied business experience as possible.

One reason why John Elway had so much immediate success as the Broncos' general manager was his extraordinary business acumen. His experiences in the automobile and restaurant industry carried over when it was time to fit talent into a payroll budget.

There may be another intangible Brittany has going for her: She grew up with her father at her mom and dad's home in Denver, as did four other Bowen children, Patrick, John, Annabel and Christianna.

*Hold positions of leadership

Brittany is getting experience in this area, and fast. While working in the NFL's business development department, she led staff on various projects related to fan engagement and in-stadium experience.

In the league's community relations department, she helped organize the 2014 Play 60 Challenge at Super Bowl 48 in New York (preceding a game that was otherwise forgettable to Broncos fans).

While pursuing her MBA at Duke, Brittany was involved in several campus leadership events.

Her role at McKinsey is expected to require her to work across many departments and businesses.

According to a trustee source, Brittany was very impressive in her ability to relate with others during the year she worked with the Broncos.

*An overarching, subjective component that calls for the trustees to make judgments on character, honesty and integrity

All indications are Brittany is strong in this key area. Various Trust and family sources say that while she is not quite ready, she's hard-working, humble, thoughtful and confident.

If Brittany's development continues at its current pace, there is a strong chance she could be ready to assume command of the Broncos early in the next decade.

While she would still be in her early 30s, go back and read Pat Bowlen's last comprehensive interview in August 2013 with a current 9NEWS Broncos Insider who at the time was working for the Denver Post.

One of the takeaways was whether you're in early 30s, or 40 – as Pat Bowlen was when he bought the Broncos – or 50 or 60, there are going to be growing pains with any new sports owner.

"When you get into this business, at an age when you're a lot younger than I am now, you don't really know what you're doing," Bowlen said five years ago. "It takes you a while to adjust. To me it was a real challenge. It was a fun deal. You have your disappointments. You have your losses and your wins. When you come in and buy a football team, you don't really understand the picture until you're there for a while."

The key, it seems, is how quickly one adapts. And some people either have that ability, or they don't. Given the many accomplishments and credentials Brittany has already achieved, it appears she has a chance. A real strong chance to one day succeed her father.

Best fits for 15 NFL free agents on market: Landing spots for Dez, more

By Bill Barnwell

ESPN

June 4, 2018

The most impactful signings of the NFL offseason aren't always the big-ticket deals we see in the first 48 hours of free agency. Last year, the Eagles waited out the market and signed the likes of Patrick Robinson and LeGarrette Blount to one-year deals at a fraction of the price of what other players got in free agency. Both were regular contributors all the way to the Super Bowl. The Vikings found Case Keenum for \$2 million. Cheap can be effective.

After a wild spending spree on wide receivers and offensive linemen in March, there are still plenty of veterans with track records of success wasting away on the free market. Even as recently as 12 months ago, the idea that players like Dez Bryant or DeMarco Murray would be available in free agency without any aggressive bidders would have seemed bizarre. Things are different now.

Some of these players are on their last legs. Others might suddenly look like useful contributors in the right scheme or in a more appropriately sized role. Finding that fit could be the difference in extending a player's career. Keenum was closer to being out of football than he was to a big-money contract last season; after finding a stable home in Minnesota, he was able to parlay a successful season into a two-year, \$36 million pact with the Broncos.

Let's run through 15 veteran free agents who are on the outside of NFL rosters looking in, and try to find them a new home. And let's start with the most prominent free agent left standing, and finish with a future Hall of Famer.

Dez Bryant, wide receiver

The market some might have expected to open up for Bryant hasn't really developed, and that really shouldn't be a surprise. The former Cowboys star became available only in mid-April, after most teams with wide receiver concerns had already signed replacements. Six wideouts then came off of the board across the first 51 picks in the draft, which further capped Bryant's ceiling. The only offer the 29-year-old has reportedly received is from the Ravens, who offered something similar to the three-year, \$21 million pact they handed Michael Crabtree.

Bryant declined that contract in the hopes of finding a one-year deal and potentially parlaying a big season into a more lucrative deal in 2019. He's going to find a roster spot, but it might not even hit that \$7 million mark in 2018. Bryant's big-play ability has been sapped since undergoing foot surgery, and while he's still a physical target capable of manhandling smaller cornerbacks, the same guy who had four 100-plus-yard games in 2014 has had just four such games over the three ensuing seasons.

Ironically, the team that could use Dez the most is Dallas, but that bridge has been burnt, mortared, demolished, engulfed, sabotaged and blown to smithereens. Most of the other candidates are out of the running. The Ravens, who already have a player with a similar skill set in Crabtree, appear to be out. The Bills had a need for a wide receiver with Zay Jones out indefinitely, but general manager Brandon Beane said Buffalo doesn't expect to make Dez an offer. Jason Witten suggested on The Adam Schefter Podcast

that the Saints could be in the running for Bryant, but they have less than \$4 million in cap space and would be blocking newly acquired wideout Cameron Meredith by adding Bryant. The Seahawks went in an alternate direction by signing Brandon Marshall. The 49ers apparently aren't interested.

There aren't many other options for Bryant out there. The Cardinals could theoretically find a spot for Bryant if they don't think second-year wideout Chad Williams is ready for a bigger role. The Giants haven't expressed much interest in Bryant and don't want to go three-wide as frequently in 2018, which would mean that Bryant would be taking snaps away from Sterling Shepard if he signed. They also gave Cody Latimer a one-year, \$2.5 million deal, suggesting they think the former Broncos disappointment can contribute in three-wide sets. The Steelers could carve out a part-time role for Bryant at the expense of Justin Hunter, but with \$5.2 million in cap space, they'll probably want to put the money they have toward pass-rushing help.

We're left with the other team Witten suggested might be in line to add Bryant: the Packers, who seem to fit Bryant's desires. Green Bay has a hole in their three-wide lineups after letting go of Jordy Nelson, and while they could promote Geronimo Allison into that spot, Bryant would be an upgrade. They have Aaron Rodgers, whose résumé does not need to be reiterated here. The Packers are likely to be a playoff team and have more than \$10 million in cap space, which would allow them to fit Bryant in for a one-year deal in the \$4 million range while retaining some flexibility. Bryant's long-term future probably isn't in Green Bay, but he could certainly fit in the short term.

Jeremy Maclin, wide receiver

The former Eagles standout likely hoped to parlay his one-year deal with the Ravens into a new contract, but Maclin continued to decline during his lone season in Baltimore. The 30-year-old saw his receptions, receiving yards and yards per catch fall for the fourth consecutive season. Over the past two years, among 94 qualifying wideouts, Maclin ranks 71st in catch rate and 89th in average yards after catch, which is a bad combination for a player who averaged just 11.6 yards per reception over that timeframe.

At this point, Maclin is realistically best as a slot receiver who can use his experience to create space and throwing lanes. He could fit in Oakland, where the Raiders have spent the offseason stockpiling veterans and could use an upgrade on Seth Roberts, whose 7.7 percent drop rate over the past two seasons is tops among wideouts. Maclin also has plenty of experience playing underneath Gruden chum Andy Reid in the West Coast offense, so he should be a quick study in Gruden's scheme.

Eric Decker, wide receiver

Titans fans will always have Decker's game-winning touchdown catch during last season's playoff victory over the Chiefs, but the 31-year-old never seemed to settle under Mike Mularkey in Tennessee. Decker's season was downright boring; he had seven games with three catches totaling between 10 and 40 yards, which tied for the second most in any single season since the merger. After racking up 51 touchdowns in 81 games over his first six seasons as a starter in the NFL, Decker had just one during his 16 games in Tennessee before the game-winner in the wild-card round.

It makes sense that Decker would look up one of his former coaches from his time in Denver. Adam Gase probably isn't a good fit given how much the Dolphins have invested at wide receiver, but a logical landing point would be with the Cardinals, who have a relatively middling wide receiver depth chart and former Broncos offensive coordinator Mike McCoy taking over in that same role. Decker might not be able to beat out Chad Williams or Christian Kirk for regular snaps, but it's probably worth a try for Arizona.

Bashaud Breeland, cornerback

Breeland started 58 games for Washington over his four-year rookie deal and had struck a three-year, \$24 million deal to join the Panthers this offseason, but a foot injury Breeland suffered on vacation resulted in a failed physical and a silent free-agent market. Breeland recently met with the Colts and Cardinals, each of whom are desperate for cornerback help, and the fact that the two sides weren't able to consummate a deal might in itself be telling.

At this point, Breeland's probably looking at a one-year deal in advance of hitting the market again in 2019. Rashaan Melvin was able to parlay a successful season with the Colts into a larger contract with the Raiders, but even that only became a one-year pact for \$5.5 million. A better fit might lurk with the Chiefs, who are perilously thin at cornerback after trading Marcus Peters and could give Breeland a chance to shine in a more productive defense before seeking a long-term deal again next offseason.

Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie, cornerback

It's a surprise to see DRC still on the market, but the 10-year vet doesn't appear to be in much of a rush. In March, Rodgers-Cromartie said he hoped to sign in April. Last month, Cromartie set a target for training camp. It's fair to wonder whether the two-time Pro Bowler is yet to see an offer worth signing, but Rodgers-Cromartie can also afford to be choosy and wait until camp. Nobody in the pass-happy NFL ever says it has too many cornerbacks.

It seems likely that Rodgers-Cromartie, 32, will wait for someone to get injured or for a contender to realize that its cornerbacks aren't any good in training camp. Failing that, DRC already met with Washington, which lost Bashaud Breeland and Kendall Fuller this offseason and only replaced them by adding Cowboys veteran Orlando Scandrick. Rodgers-Cromartie would be an upgrade on Scandrick, especially if Washington tries to play Scandrick outside of his usual home in the slot.

Delvin Breaux, cornerback

Once the bright spot in a turgid Saints defense, injuries have limited Breaux to just six games over the past two seasons. The breakouts of Marshon Lattimore and Ken Crawley and the return of Patrick Robinson led the Saints to non-tender the former Louisiana high school star this offseason, and he has yet to find a home in free agency.

The risk-reward ratio for Breaux is enormous. Given his injury history, it's difficult to imagine Breaux commanding more than a one-year, \$2 million deal. His upside, though, is as a legitimate starting cover corner in a league in which those often cost \$10 million per season in free agency. The Patriots have a track record of taking shots on similarly talented players, and while they traded for Jason McCourty and drafted Duke Dawson this offseason, Bill Belichick has a way of finding uses for talented cornerbacks.

Kenny Vaccaro, safety

Breaux's former teammate has had an up-and-down career since being selected with the 15th pick of the 2013 draft, and that includes last season. Vaccaro was benched early in 2017 before finding his way back into the lineup and carving out a role at multiple positions, including everything from safety to slot cornerback to sub-package linebacker.

Vaccaro's best role is as a box defender, where his athleticism and physicality can play up. The Saints have moved on after replacing Vaccaro in their rotation with Kurt Coleman, but there's a landing spot in the division that might make sense. The Panthers are relatively thin at safety after releasing Coleman, and while they could sign one of several former Carolina players in Tre Boston or Mike Mitchell, the Panthers

would be able to upgrade on 38-year-old Mike Adams or former Titans backup Da'Norris Searcy by adding Vaccaro.

Robert Ayers, defensive end

Arguably the best edge defender left in free agency, Ayers has been a useful two-way defender over the past several seasons, albeit while missing four games in each of the past four seasons. A Broncos first-round pick in 2009, he averaged a credible six sacks per season from 2013 to '16, only to see that total fall to two sacks last season. A closer look suggests that that drop-off was unlucky. In 2016, Ayers generated seven sacks on 19 quarterback knockdowns. Last season, Ayers knocked opposing passers down 16 times, but those hits generated only two sacks. Edge rushers usually turn about 45 percent of their knockdowns into sacks, so typically, Ayers would have come away with seven sacks for his efforts.

At worst, Ayers should be a useful reserve defensive end in a league in which the Eagles just rode their defensive line rotation into the Super Bowl. Half of the league could use a player like that. The Saints have former Broncos defensive coordinator Dennis Allen running things and drafted Marcus Davenport to play across from Cameron Jordan, but they could use depth at the position with Alex Okafor returning from a torn Achilles. The Chargers might have the league's best one-two punch on the edge with Joey Bosa and Melvin Ingram, but there's precious little behind their two stars if one of them gets hurt. Ayers would be a high-quality reserve.

If anyone needs help on the edge, though, it's a Rams team that's in win-now mode and bereft of talent at defensive end after trading away Robert Quinn. Ayers probably wouldn't be an every-down player in Los Angeles, but he could easily give the Rams 500 valuable snaps at a position of need for less than the \$4.3 million the Rams currently have available on their cap.

Johnathan Hankins, defensive tackle

For the second offseason in a row, the league hasn't shown much interest in the former Giants defensive tackle. Last year, Hankins sat in free agency for a month before signing a three-year, \$27 million deal with the Colts. After Indy changed schemes this offseason, they released Hankins one season into his deal. The 26-year-old has taken a number of visits since, but he hasn't yet caught on with a new team.

Hankins might end up looking at a one-year deal, but there's a team could take advantage of its opportunity to sign a talented young player for something less than his typical market value: the Browns, who have typically been forced to pay premiums to attract talent to an organization that has gone 1-31 over the past two seasons. New general manager John Dorsey traded away Danny Shelton this offseason without adding any help at defensive tackle, so Hankins could be a viable piece of an emerging defensive line.

NaVorro Bowman, linebacker

Bowman got relatively good reviews for his brief stint with the Raiders, but Oakland showed what it thought of the three-time Pro Bowler by signing Tahir Whitehead and Derrick Johnson this offseason. It seemed likely that Bowman would be able to help as a run defender, but the Raiders were slightly worse with Bowman on the field. Oakland last season averaged 4.1 yards per carry and a 22.2 percent first-down rate on the ground with Bowman in the lineup and 3.9 yards per rush with a 20.1 percent first-down rate while he was in San Francisco or off the field.

Even if Bowman isn't the superstar linebacker we saw before his serious knee injury, it's a surprise that there isn't more of a market for a veteran with his level of leadership. There's one contender with a huge

weakness on the interior: the Steelers haven't really added anyone to replace Ryan Shazier, who won't be able to play in 2018, besides special-teamer Jon Bostic. Pittsburgh could still bring back Lawrence Timmons, but Bowman's probably a better player at this point.

Antonio Gates, tight end

The Chargers announced that they didn't intend to re-sign Gates as part of their plan to finally give No. 1 reps to Hunter Henry, but Henry tore his ACL in OTAs and will miss the 2018 season. You can imagine how awkward it might be for the Chargers to go back to their longtime stalwart, hat in hand, but there's not really a better option for them on the market. Gates, who will soon be 38 years old, is essentially limited to drag routes and pick plays at this point, but he's still a better option than Julius Thomas or Brent Celek.

Matt Moore, quarterback

The second-best quarterback available on the market outside of Colin Kaepernick, Moore has been effective in a reserve role for the Dolphins but didn't help his case with two ugly starts last season. Moore averaged 9.6 yards per attempt and threw three touchdowns against one pick in two games as a reserve, but in starts against the Patriots and Ravens, Moore averaged just 5.0 yards per pass and racked up four interceptions against his lone touchdown.

Across 214 pass attempts over the past two seasons, Moore posted an 87.8 passer rating and a 56.6 Total QBR, the latter of which ranks 19th in the league. The Dolphins have moved on by signing Brock Osweiler, but Moore is still good enough to justify a roster spot. Truthfully, he might be better than a few of the league's starting quarterbacks.

The Jaguars clearly committed to two more years of Blake Bortles by extending their quarterback this offseason, but what happens if Bortles gets hurt or suffers a serious downturn in performance? Jacksonville's backup is Cody Kessler, who was barely capable of getting on the field for the Browns last season. Their third-stringer is sixth-round pick Tanner Lee. Moore is just ineffective enough to not spook Bortles, but solid enough to fill in if Bortles is unable to play.

Alfred Morris, running back

After his yards per carry declined for four consecutive seasons, Morris finally took a leap back toward effectiveness by averaging 4.8 yards per rush across his 115 attempts. Some of that was thanks to a 70-yard run, but Morris finished 10th in DVOA and seventh in Success Rate, suggesting he was a consistently effective back. Ezekiel Elliott was better in both categories, so the offensive line clearly helped out Morris, but there's a useful zone runner in here.

Morris' most impressive season came as a rookie in Washington under Kyle Shanahan, so you can probably guess where I'm suggesting he could head. The 49ers made a major investment in Jerick McKinnon this offseason, but McKinnon wasn't an effective back in Minnesota and hasn't carried the ball more than 20 times once in a single game as a pro. After losing Carlos Hyde in free agency, the primary backups to McKinnon are Matt Breida and Joe Williams. Morris could figure in as an insurance policy and change of pace for McKinnon.

DeMarco Murray, running back

After a return to form in 2016, Murray fell off of a cliff in Mike Mularkey's exotic smashmouth scheme last season. The Oklahoma product was dramatically outplayed by Derrick Henry and became a bit of a cause celebre for Titans fans, who weren't particularly upset when Tennessee cut Murray during the offseason and replaced him with Dion Lewis.

Murray probably shouldn't be a team's primary back, but he still offers enough as a pass protector and occasional receiver to justify a roster spot as a team's RB2. He famously prefers to get the ball from a quarterback under center, so ideally, we would be able to find him a team who operates from center in need of a reserve halfback.

I'm trying to limit teams to one addition here, but I'll make an exception and throw the Rams out as a natural home for Murray. Los Angeles ran the ball 388 times from under center last season, which ranked second in the league behind the Saints. Todd Gurley is obviously going to get the bulk of those carries, but if Gurley gets hurt, Los Angeles's primary backup is Malcolm Brown, who has averaged 3.6 yards per carry without showing much as a receiver at this level. Murray might not be needed for more than 60 carries if Gurley stays healthy, but he would be a much-needed insurance policy for a back with a history of knee issues.

Adrian Peterson, running back

The future Hall of Famer had two wildly productive games with the Cardinals, but AD ran the ball 93 times for a mere 236 yards in his other eight games, an average of just 2.5 yards per rush. He also didn't score in any of those eight appearances, finishing the season with just two touchdowns on 167 touches. You can squint and maybe make a case for Peterson's struggles -- he never found a steady role behind two superior backs in New Orleans and was playing behind a beat-up, replacement-level offensive line in Arizona -- but it's clear that we're coming close to the end of Peterson's career.

If this is it, perhaps now is the time for a long-rumored dalliance to come into existence. The Cowboys are left with just Rod Smith behind Elliott, and while Smith has been a reasonable backup, it seems plausible that Peterson could still be an upgrade as a 100-carry back while playing a couple of series per game. At the very least, he would sell plenty of jerseys for a team that isn't exactly teeming with skill-position weapons behind Elliott.

“It’s pretty much all different”: Breaking down the Broncos’ wholesale changes on the field and off

By Nicki Jhabvala

The Athletic

June 4, 2018

The last time the Broncos sunk this low, Tim Tebow was their quarterback (sort of), Josh McDaniels their head coach (not for long) and John Elway had yet to get his corner office.

The Broncos finished their tumultuous 2010 season 4-12 with an interim head coach and plenty of reasons to make sweeping changes to the front office, coaching staff and roster.

They Broncos had plenty of reasons to make sweeping changes after going 5-11 last season, too.

“Absolutely it’s going to be a different approach. We won five games,” coach Vance Joseph said in March. “So I have to figure out a way to reach our football team better and get us on a winning track.”

The changes started almost immediately as six coaches — including Eric Studesville, who cleaned up the mess left by McDaniels in 2010 — were let go and new faces were added. On the field, the Broncos found a new starter and offensive leader in quarterback Case Keenum, and added many new targets around him that have the potential to contribute immediately.

But over the last five months, the Broncos have continued their offseason-long renovation, building a new offense, tweaking a defense, trying to revive special teams and keeping the messages fresh from veterans and future Hall of Famers alike.

At the start of OTAs, Howard Mudd, a renowned offensive line coach who was with the Colts for Peyton Manning’s first 12 seasons, made the rounds to meet with the Broncos’ linemen and coaches. Last week, former pass rusher DeMarcus Ware slipped on his orange-and-blue gear and took to the field to coach up the Broncos’ front seven, including first-round rookie Bradley Chubb. Thursday, Manning joined him on the sidelines to observe practice and address the team afterward about professionalism.

“A pro is a guy who takes care of his business every day,” Manning told them, using Ware as an example. “When he’s tired, when coach is not around, when no one is looking, he’s doing the things to get him ready to play. He’s getting the right amount of sleep, he’s eating right. He has a schedule for the entire offseason, the entire season of what he needs to do to get ready to play. So I encourage you all to take that same mind-set.”

Behind the scenes, bigger adjustments have been made in nearly every phase as the Broncos try to right the recent wrongs of two playoff-less seasons. Systems are wholly different or altered, and a sense of urgency that was seemingly missing for much of last season has returned in full force.

Though the offseason is still young, the Broncos have begun to peel back the curtains on their makeover.

“We’re trying to make it concise.”

Bill Musgrave, who was appointed interim offensive coordinator last season when Mike McCoy was fired, returned full-time to the position. And it was widely expected that the simplified system he ran late in the season would return in some capacity.

But with a new starter in Keenum, Musgrave said the system would be new, too. New plays. New terminology. New emphasis to fit their quarterbacks' needs and strengths.

"Yeah, it's pretty much all different," Musgrave said. "... We have our framework that I'm comfortable with and that I can teach and call in a timely manner. And then our staff has put together what we feel is a great system for our players, especially our QBs.

"We're trying to make it concise. We don't want long-worded plays in the huddle. We've got three or four ways to go no-huddle, and a lot of those are one-word calls. We'd love for guys to know it like the back of their hand, then they can just cut it loose and play. That's what we're trying to get done. That's why we've kind of brought the language from Atlanta or Minnesota or Oakland. I've had time on task where I feel like it could be teachable, it could be learnable, and then guys can execute it and cut it loose out there on the field."

The addition of Keenum sparked a change, but so too did the failures of last season as the Broncos' rotation of starting quarterbacks struggled with turnovers and an unwieldy playbook. Trevor Siemian, Brock Osweiler and Paxton Lynch combined for 22 interceptions — second-most in the league behind Cleveland — while the offense as a whole ranked 27th in offensive scoring efficiency.

The benefits of having a clearly appointed starting quarterback from Day One has been acknowledged and felt by nearly every player on the field. But positional battles will ensue at many other key positions, including running back, where the Broncos added three rookies to vie for time with Devontae Booker and De'Angelo Henderson; at guard, where a rotation of linemen will compete for a starting gig alongside tackles Garrett Bolles and Jared Veldheer, guard Ron Leary and center Matt Paradis; at receiver, where drafted rookies Courtland Sutton and DaeSean Hamilton have already impressed; and at tight end, where Jake Butt returns to high hopes and high expectations after a season on injured reserve.

Musgrave said the new system was a staff-wide endeavor, as he relied on the help of new positional coaches, as well as the defensive coaches. He's also been consulting with another former Broncos quarterback who has had a hand in all three of Denver's Super Bowl titles.

At the end of last season, Elway promoted Gary Kubiak to have him evaluate not only offensive talent in the draft, but also in free agency. Kubiak's connection to Keenum from their days in Houston was key to the quarterback's arrival in Denver. But Kubiak's experience has also, apparently, played a key role in the latest offense changeover.

"I talk to Gary every day. I'm always picking his brain," Musgrave said. "If they don't get him going with too much scouting duties, I'm looking forward to consulting with him each and every day like we have this spring. He's at practice and we'd love to get his insight and his feedback. It's invaluable."

"Now we're on to level two."

Amid the offensive struggles last season, the Broncos' defense still ranked among the top five in passing yards, rushing yards and total yards allowed. But it was far from flawless.

Miscommunication issues contributed to 14 big-play touchdowns (20 yards or more) allowed, tied for third-most in the league. The Broncos allowed only six the season prior.

When Joseph, a former defensive coordinator, was hired as head coach and Joe Woods elevated to defensive coordinator, the two added a layer of changes to Wade Phillips' 3-4 defense. Though Woods is hopeful the communication issues are ironed out in year two, he said the work of last season was only the start.

"It was kind of level one," Woods said. "Now we're on to level two. There's some more things we're going to add with the defense. We actually had a little plan in mind if we were to get Bradley Chubb, so it worked out. There are some different things we're going to do with our front to take advantage of him and Von (Miller) and all of our pass rushers."

Last season Miller was double-teamed and chipped among the most — if not the most — of any edge rusher in the game. In Chubb, the Broncos have another versatile weapon to add to their arsenal of pass rushers, and his presence opposite Miller is expected to free up the Super Bowl 50 MVP more; offenses will have to reallocate resources to try to contain both Miller and Chubb.

For now, Chubb is a SAM, or strong outside linebacker, but the Broncos interchange their linebackers and Chubb can also be used on the line in certain packages.

"The problem is you have to make sure when you do things to be creative, obviously to move Von around, sometimes it creates issues," Woods said. "Because if they say, 'If he's always over there, we know he's coming.' The thing I want to do this year is we've added some more pressures. We've added some different packages. But I just want to create more balance. So, they can't always say 'He's over here, he's always coming.' Sometimes he's coming, sometimes he may not be coming. And then now they'll have to be able all of our rushers. Him, Chubb, Shane Ray, and Shaq (Barrett)."

Miller's role on the Broncos is unique and his coaching will be too. His former outside linebackers coach, Fred Pagac, was among the six coaches let go in January. Instead of hiring another, the Broncos rearranged the linebackers staff and paired Miller with defensive line coach Bill Kollar. The other outside backers will work with Reggie Herring, the inside linebackers coach.

"But when we go to our sub-defense, which we're in majority of the time, they work together," Woods explained. "What we're doing is when we're doing everything with our dime personnel or our dime front, they're all in the same room. Actually, the things we're doing stunt-wise, all the pressures, now all those guys are hearing all that teaching together. Then once we get that, then we move on and we separate and we go to outside linebackers. Then they specifically focus on outside linebacker play. So, really I feel like it's better the way we're doing it now."

The Broncos' Super Bowl season created a blueprint of sorts, as Denver relied heavily on the tandem of its pass rush and secondary. Miller and Ware on the edge aided the play of the defensive backs, and vice versa.

This year, the secondary sports a new look with Aqib Talib gone, Bradley Roby taking over the No. 2 spot, and Tramaine Brock and Su'a Cravens joining the mix. The Broncos are working with Cravens, a hybrid

linebacker/safety, to hone his coverage skills so he can play deep safety and afford them even more creativity with sub-packages.

One constant in the secondary, however, is Chris Harris Jr., the Broncos' heralded slot corner. To his chagrin, perhaps, Harris will remain the do-it-all corner, but his impact could be even greater.

"Just new techniques that we've added to let me be a little bit more aggressive, be able to jump some routes more, blitzing more.

"I don't think anybody can go in the slot and play straight man (coverage) and be asked to do what I'm asked to do, even in the league. What Joe Woods wants me to play in the slot and how I have to play man and be able to take them all over the field — nobody can do that. It's looking like I'll be inside for sure."

"The best player of all time ... is the 12th man."

Special teams coordinator Tom McMahon is nicknamed "Midge" for his small frame, but his plans for the Broncos' special teams are anything but.

Last year under first-year coordinator Brock Olivo, the Broncos' special teams were notorious for their head-scratching gaffes, often in succession (see Nov. 12, 2017, vs. New England), and poor field position.

The Broncos' average starting position after kickoffs last season was the 24-yard line, which was the seventh-worst average in the league. The average starting line of their opponents was 26.4 yards, second-worst.

Riley Dixon recorded a net punting average of 40.2 yards (24th) and three touchbacks (tied for 21st), and kicker Brandon McManus made 75 percent of his field goals, well below his 85.3 percent and 85.7 percent the previous two seasons.

Dixon was traded to the Giants, while McManus was retained and seeks a rebound season.

"I did self-reflection during the season. I started off terribly," McManus said. "Then throughout the year I continued to make more and more kicks, so I was happy with that. This year I'm looking forward to a huge rebound year. I want to hold myself to being one of the best kickers in the NFL. Coming up short as I was last year motivates me more than ever. I'm excited, I have a new holder this year and I'm excited to get him here early, work with him and enjoy a great season with him."

His new holder is Marquette King, one of the game's top punters who was surprisingly released by the Raiders and joined his archrival days later.

"He's the quarterback," McMahon said. "I think everybody was in seventh-grade math and that was about as far as I got. But, $A^2 + B^2 = C^2$. If you really think about it, the hypotenuse of that triangle is his punt. Our gunners are running the fade now. That has got to help them. We can get them running a shorter defense. Now we should be pretty good with it. Can't put it down the middle. Put it down the middle, they're running the hypotenuse. We're all screwed."

In the return game, McMahon has his work cut out for him, but he also has more depth and options to consider. Joining receivers Isaiah McKenzie and Jordan Taylor in the mix to return punts, are rookie backs Royce Freeman, Phillip Lindsay and David Williams, as well as Hamilton.

“If you watch us after practice, we have seven punt returners back there that are rookies,” McMahon said. “I don’t know who that guy is. I learned my lesson a long time ago with trying to think this is going to be the guy and not the guy. A year ago, (Colts receiver) Chester Rogers popped out for us in Indy. Nobody thought he could do it. We’ve got great talent here. We’re going to have a great returner, whoever it is. And they’ll develop.”

For wholesale changes, McMahon kept his new plans close but offered one detail.

“When we punt the football, we’re going to always try and play just a small rectangle,” he said. “Everybody can see the red line out there for example that is on the field right now. We’re going to try and punt the ball outside of the red line on every single play.

“The best football player of all time, a guy that we’re going to use that you might not have heard the other special-teams coaches use, is the 12th man. The best player in the history of the world who gets screwed every single year in the Hall of Fame is the white line. Never missed a tackle, so you start punting the ball outside of the red line. You have in kicking off out there another player all of the time: that red line. ... We’re going to use the heck out of that red line.”

Brittany Bowlen Has Best Chance to Be Owner of Broncos

By Tylor Walden

Fansided

June 4, 2018

The Denver Broncos ownership saga has been an interesting one. One Bowlen child that has the best chance to be the owner is Brittany Bowlen.

In an offseason that is projected to be a quiet one for the Denver Broncos, the biggest story to surface in the last few days has been about ownership. Beth Bowlen Wallace expressed interest owning the Denver Broncos. Ultimately, she was turned down by the Pat Bowlen Trust. So, is there any Bowlen child that can succeed what their father did for the team? Brittany Bowlen has been a name that has popped up.

Mike Klis over at 9News has put together a measurement of where Brittany Bowlen stands as far as the key components the Pat Bowlen Trust has put together. These components will help to see if she could be qualified to become the owner of the Broncos.

One major thing that stuck out to me was that she helped lead the idea of having the NFL Draft in Denver, Colorado. It is a shame that the wishes to have the draft in Denver for 2019 did not come to fruition, but hopefully it will come to be true in the future.

Brittany Bowlen has quite a bit of credentials to her name. She could become the clear cut winner to own the Denver Broncos someday. The best part is that there is no rush. It appears that Brittany is willing to gain more experience while Joe Ellis runs the show.

It will be a few years before Brittany Bowlen is ready to take the reigns of her father's work. But it appears she is willing to put in the work before making that big step. She appears fully engaged in how NFL teams work and providing good experiences for the fans.

Keep an eye on Brittany Bowlen. You do not want to sleep on her abilities.

Don't jump to too many conclusions from OTAs

By Andrew Mason
DenverBroncos.com
June 4, 2018

With DeMarcus Walker moving back to the D-Line, can we expect his number to change?

-- Dustin Lee

Not necessarily. There is no reason for his number to change from No. 57; defensive linemen are allowed to wear jersey numbers in the 50s. He had No. 57 in the 2017 offseason before he was moved to outside linebacker, anyway.

This is such a fun time of the year. After spending so much time thinking about personnel moves during free agency and the draft, it's exciting to get a glimpse into how things are playing out on an actual football field. From being right there at OTAs, what about the team looks or feels different that's getting you excited for the season?

-- Ben Mahrer

The offense is moving at a crisper pace, the special teams looks to be more on point and the quarterbacks are making quicker decisions, but in general I would advise you not to look too much into the form during OTAs. While the work is on an "actual football field," as you note, the players are not in full pads, and contact is limited, per regulations stipulated in the 2011 collective-bargaining agreement.

I've seen teams that had a shaky series of OTAs that flourished in the season that followed. I've seen teams that looked sharp in the spring, then flailed in the fall. Thus, I can't really say I'm "excited" about anything other than the chance to watch a football practice for the first time since the Senior Bowl.

I am intrigued by the potential of rookies such as Bradley Chubb, Courtland Sutton, Royce Freeman, DaeSean Hamilton and Phillip Lindsay. But in those cases and all others, I want to see what they do as more nuances of the scheme are tossed at them and then, in training camp, how they fare in full pads and at full speed.

My radio partner, Ring of Famer Steve Atwater, is a native of Missouri and was inducted into the St. Louis Sports Hall of Fame this week. Being a Missourian, he occasionally holds off on ebullient praise, reminding us, "You have to show me," and I'm with him. So I will offer muted praise now, and save the bigger stuff for later.

Can you please tell me why we picked 40, 71 and so on instead of 37 and 69 and so on in this year's draft?

-- Bruce Hinman

Because draft slots among teams that finish the previous season with the same record are rotated in the manner of a snake-style fantasy-football draft, so the team with the first choice of those tied clubs has the final pick of that group in the next round.

The Broncos had the first pick of the four 5-11 teams in this year's draft -- No. 5 overall -- which meant they had the last pick (No. 40) among that group in Round 2, then the third pick (No. 71) among those in Round 3, the second pick (No. 106) in Round 4, and then finally the first pick of those four clubs in Round 5, when the cycle began again (the Broncos traded this selection to Washington, who eventually dealt it to San Francisco).

Why don't the Vroncos hire Pro Bowl players to come back and be position coaches -- for example, Champ Bailey at DB coach? Tom Nalen as interior line coach?

-- Marc Aguirre

Because many players do not want to move into coaching in retirement. The extensive hours and often-crushing demands of coaching -- particularly at the NFL level -- are not for everyone.

Furthermore, playing talent doesn't necessarily translate to coaching. Some of the best coaches in the game never played beyond high school or a small-college level. While it is splendid to see DeMarcus Ware back around the Broncos' pass rushers offering tutelage, not every former Pro Bowl player wants to do that.

Mase, daily follower, that dad joke (from last week's Mailbag) made me question every decision you have ever made.

-- Josh

That's fine, just as long as you do not question my decision to close this piece with your comment.

Broncos OC feels new offense will be 'great' for QBs

By Kevin Patra

NFL.com

June 4, 2018

The Denver Broncos not only have a new quarterback in 2018, they are installing an entire new offense under returning coordinator Bill Musgrave.

"Yeah, it's pretty much all different," Musgrave said last week, via Mike Klis of KUSA-TV in Denver.

Added Musgrave: "It's a new system for everybody."

Musgrave took over with a half-dozen games remaining last season when the Broncos fired Mike McCoy amid a six-game losing streak. In the throes of the season it's nearly impossible for a coordinator to make wholesale changes to the playbook. When general manager John Elway retained coach Vance Joseph this offseason, it gave Musgrave another chance to install his system in Denver.

"It's really a system that we built as a staff this offseason," Musgrave said. "We had wholesale changes on the offensive staff. We have our framework that I'm comfortable with and that I can teach and call in a timely manner. And then our staff has put together what we feel is a great system for our players, especially our QBs."

Denver represents the sixth stint for Musgrave as an NFL offensive coordinator, most recently with the Oakland Raiders from 2015-2016 before he was let go by coach Jack Del Rio following a playoff appearance.

For a plethora of reasons, the Broncos' offense was statistically worse under Musgrave than McCoy. Much of those struggles had to do with the problematic quarterback situations and offensive line issues. One area Denver improved under Musgrave's play-calling was an enhanced running game, something the Broncos hope will continue in 2018.

As he reformats the offense with new signal-caller Case Keenum, Musgrave is installing a system the Broncos hope is more player friendly, especially for the quarterback.

"We're trying to make it concise," Musgrave said. "We don't want long worded plays in the huddle. We've got three or four ways to go, 'no huddle.' And a lot of those are one-word calls. We'd love for guys to know it like the back of their hand, then they can just cut it loose and play."

As the Broncos continue their organized team activities this week -- the final sessions run Monday through Thursday with mandatory minicamp kicking off next week -- Musgrave will get his final chances to install his offense before training camp ramps up in July.

While most of the offseason focus in Denver has been on the quarterback, last season's OC change will have just as big of an effect on the Broncos' 2018 brand of offensive football.

Dolphins Reset, Patriots Regroup, NFL Recharges

By Albert Breer

MMQB

June 4, 2018

Adam Gase knew that the offseason plans he and rest of the Dolphins brass were putting in place would shake things up in the building. And he first wanted to make sure that the plans wouldn't mess too much with his rehabbing quarterback.

So just before the Senior Bowl in January, the Miami coach sat down with Ryan Tannehill and explained how in the months ahead, no matter the final result, it may look an awful lot like Miami was gearing up to replace him.

"He was well aware of everything we were doing," Gase said of Tannehill, as he drove home from the team facility on Friday. "He was good, never batted an eye. He focused on himself, he focused on making sure he was healthy for the spring. We wanted to make sure he'd be able to participate in everything. He didn't have any setbacks. Everything went really smooth. At the end of the day, he's focused on doing what he needs to."

You know how the story played out. The Dolphins hosted Oklahoma's Baker Mayfield, UCLA's Josh Rosen and Wyoming's Josh Allen in the weeks leading up to the draft. Buzz persisted that Miami was in play for some combination of those three quarterbacks. The Jets traded up. The Bills traded up. The Cardinals traded up. The Dolphins wound up with a defensive back, Minkah Fitzpatrick, rather than a QB.

During the process, Gase would give Tannehill—who suffered an ACL injury in August 2017 that cost him the season—a heads up before the team would have one of those players in or go out to see them, just so the quarterback wouldn't hear about it somewhere else. And Tannehill kept working and rehabbing as he went from six months off surgery to seven, then seven to eight, and the team's offseason program began.

After all that, Tannehill is back in command in Miami. Not that he ever wasn't.

"I really think his thought was—don't waste the draft pick," Gase said. "He focused on work and bringing the same intensity he does every day. He's very competitive. He's not going to bat an eye at any of those things. He just keeps going. If there's some kind of internal thing going on, you're not going to know. He's not going to show his cards. So I never worried about it.

"Just being around him, this being my third year [as head coach], the guy competes as hard as anyone I've been around, especially at that position. And it's a good feeling as a coach when we've got him back out there."

The end result: The one major element that many people expected to change this offseason in Miami hasn't. And maybe that's good, since so much else on the roster, in the locker room and throughout the building in Miami has.

Welcome to the first post-Peter King Monday Morning Quarterback column. As I'm sure you've all heard by now, Peter's final day as part of the SI family was Friday, and that brings us into a new era of The

MMQB. I'm pumped to see it unfold, but I know that most of you want to know what will happen with the Monday column itself. The truth is, we're still working through the details.

What we know is that you'll still have a destination on Mondays, during the season and in the offseason, to devour all kinds of NFL news and information. So here's hoping you'll still steal some time out of your Monday, whether at work, at school, at home or wherever, to dive into the column. What I can't say is exactly what it will look like in four months or six months or a year—and that's part of the plan.

Tim Rohan's oral history of Peter and his career included a screenshot of the original Monday Morning Quarterback column from 1997. I actually remember reading Peter's column around that time, and remember how it evolved over the years. There's a pretty good lesson in there—to allow things to grow and change naturally. And that'll be our plan with the Monday column.

Also, before we dive into the Dolphins and Patriots, Khalil Mack and Aaron Donald, and all kinds of other nuggets during these sleepy days of the NFL calendar, I want to thank Peter for everything he's done, on behalf of our staff. I've been lucky to work with a lot of people I grew up watching or reading—like Rich Eisen, Bob Ryan, Rick Gosselin, Lenny Megliola, Steve Buckley, Tony Massarotti and Dan Shaughnessy.

I'll just say that working with Peter has exceeded the expectations I had when I joined SI and The MMQB two years ago—and my expectations were high to begin with. And now, let's get going ...

MIAMI ON THE REBOUND

It's mandatory minicamp season in the NFL, and four teams kick off this week, with the other 28 set to go next week. Two of the four, the Bears and Lions, have new coaches. Another, New England, has the most tenured coach in football. And in the middle, you've got Gase and the Dolphins looking for a reset, after the 14–8 start he boasted through 22 games in charge came undone in last year's 2–8 finish.

Gase knew a reset was coming by Christmas of last year, after he saw his team go from an upset of the eventual AFC champion Patriots on a Monday in Week 14 to playing like they had no interest in being in frigid Buffalo six days later.

"They basically drummed us, and it wasn't even really a game," Gase said. "That was disappointing. You knew that was a big game, and it was following a big game. We'd gone up there and won the year before. And we didn't show up."

Since then the Dolphins ...

- Cut Ndamukong Suh and Mike Pouncey, the second- and fifth-highest paid players on their roster, and traded the mercurial Jarvis Landry, who is now making more than any Dolphin not named Tannehill. This after Miami had dealt away Jay Ajayi in October, for fit reasons.
- Signed Danny Amendola, Albert Wilson, Josh Sitton and Frank Gore, and traded for Daniel Kilgore and Robert Quinn.
- Hired Dowell Loggains, who worked with Gase in Chicago, as offensive coordinator.

Gase is careful now to say that it doesn't mean that everyone coming in is great and everyone walking out the door was horrific. He just knew what he saw last year, and that was a team that struggled with adversity and prosperity—and needed leaders to steady the ship no matter how good or bad things might be at any given time.

To be sure, there was plenty that went wrong last year. There was the day in August when Tannehill and guard Ted Larsen suffered major injuries at the same practice. There was Hurricane Irma, and the resulting postponement of the team's opener and loss of its bye week. There was the bizarre AWOL of linebacker Lawrence Timmons in September, and the Sunday night in October when the video of ex-offensive line coach Chris Foerster surfaced.

It's hard to say how many teams could handle that. What we know, and Gase does too, is that the 2017 Dolphins weren't one of them. And he took something from that.

"I think it's that no matter what happens, we're gonna play Sunday," he said. "Even when our bye week got switched, we played that game—we just played it later in the season. Our job is to get ready for the game we're about to play. And I think what a lot of guys learned was, nobody's going to feel sorry for you. Our jobs are to put our heads down, ignore any kind of noise or distraction and find a way to win the game.

"A lot of guys tried to do that. Some guys might have gotten distracted. And so many of our young guys went through some stuff they never thought they'd experience. It's a good lesson for all of us on how to operate under adversity."

So what's different now? Gase says he can see it in practice—and not just the practice itself, but how prepared the vets are before each one. Amendola's competitiveness and Wilson's conditioning and Quinn's motor and Gore's grit are part of that, of course, and it's why those guys were offseason targets to begin with. "Old-school, put-your-head-down-and-work type players," as the coach describes them.

But it manifests itself everywhere. How these guys take notes. How they ask they ask questions. How they show up for everything prepared, no matter what it is. That can't help but set an example on the field.

"You can see the tempo is exactly the way you want it—they're staying off the ground, making sure they're doing the details of the job correctly, whether it be in individual periods or team periods or 7-on-7," Gase said. "Individual is where you really do see a difference. They treat those periods like it's a live period. They go on air, whether it's a route or a pass set or a schematic thing in the run game, and these guys are going through the work full-speed.

"All those little details that are behind the scenes, that people don't get to see, these guys set a great example, because it's full speed, it's game atmosphere, through the entire practice."

For Gase, this isn't so much a start as it is a reset. A year ago, he was seen like Sean McVay and Kyle Shanahan are now—a young offensive guru on his way up. Last year knocked him back a little bit. And the lessons he learned are written all over his roster.

Will it make a difference? We'll see.

Some talent went out the door, to be sure. The Dolphins need young guys like Fitzpatrick and 2018 second-round linebacker Raekwon McMillan—players Miami loved in part because they already have hints of the intangibles of Amendola and Gore—to grow up fast. Tannehill, who got full clearance from

his Texas surgeon the week before OTAs began and didn't even wear a brace the last few weeks at practice, has to re-acclimate quickly, too.

The upshot: With a minicamp looming that Gase's staff views as the final exam of the offseason program for players, Miami's in a better spot than it was a half-year ago.

"I've really enjoyed being around these guys, love the way they've worked, I love the energy they bring to practice," Gase says. "Every day there's a lot of juice, a lot of talking. I think both sides are doing a nice job competing ... Just a good start heading into training camp, and then we have to figure out where we're at with tackling, blocking with pads and how we're going to come together."

Which is really all he could ask for at this point.

PATRIOT GAMES

This most unusual of Patriots offseasons hits another checkpoint this week with the team's first mandatory activity, which is expected to coincide with the arrival of Tom Brady and Rob Gronkowski to New England's offseason program. After turning over a few rocks, here are five points I'd make on where the team stands:

One, the biggest question right now is how much the absence of Brady and Gronk has affected the first seven weeks of the program. And the answer I've gotten is that it really hasn't. Spring in Foxboro is for teaching, so most of the work the players are doing is individual anyway. And having Brian Hoyer, who's 32 and in his second stint as Brady's backup in New England, has helped assure that things wouldn't fly off the rails.

Ideal? No. But the work that got done for the others hasn't changed much, because the competitive phase of the Patriots' offseason really starts in July. In essence, the absences of Brady and Gronkowski up until this week were treated as if those players were unavailable with an injury.

Two, I don't think that means there is no fallout. Remember, Brady's the guy who famously would welcome teammates to the weight room at 6 a.m. by saying "Good afternoon." Bill Belichick's program has been enabled in part by the team's best player being willing to take hard coaching and buy into a demanding program. When he's doing everything asked, there's no room for anyone else to complain.

If Brady's not on board to the same level, and chafing against the program openly in his documentary series, would that have an effect on a younger player who might be upset with his place on the team, or who's going through a rough few weeks? Interesting to keep an eye on.

Three, the Pats' advantage has always been in the details. Remember that practice footage of the New England defense repping the Seattle play that Malcolm Butler would pick off in Super Bowl XLIX? That's a result of hours of work, and the Patriots put in that work at this time of year too. Where a lot of staffs get to work in the wee hours and leave around 5 p.m. during OTAs, the New England staff often works late into the night.

For 18 years, we've heard that that stuff matters. It can't suddenly be irrelevant now, that New England's two most important players missed seven weeks of the offseason program. So maybe that subtly costs them somewhere down the line.

Four, the stuff about how much “fun” New England’s program sure is interesting, but also a little much. Consider the sources. Eagles linemen Brandon Brooks and Lane Johnson never played in Foxboro. As for 49ers defensive end Cassius Marsh, I’m told he pitched a fit over playing time at halftime of the Patriots-Raiders game in Mexico City (he was in on two snaps that week), which contributed to his release days later.

I do think anyone trying to set up a program from scratch the way Belichick has in today’s NFL would have a really hard time. In fact, I’m not sure it would work at all anymore. But thanks to his results, Belichick’s methods are grandfathered in to a different world. And as is the case with anything demanding and difficult, those who get results from it will come to terms with it, and those who don’t (like Marsh) will rail against it.

Five, I still think the Patriots win 12 games, and that Brady will be an MVP candidate and Gronkowski will be the best tight end in football. But again, that doesn’t mean all this offseason drama couldn’t bite them down the line in the playoffs, when the margin for error shrinks. Or with how their young players develop over the next few years.

Everything clearly hasn’t been fine with the Patriots over the last year, nor has everything been fixed since the season ended. One thing’s for sure: The next few months won’t be boring.

THE DONALD/MACK PROBLEM

When Atlanta’s Matt Ryan signed his five-year, \$150 million deal in May, the NFL crossed a significant divide in the way its quarterbacks are compensated compared to how everyone else is paid. The \$30 million average-per-year barrier was crossed by a quarterback before any other position saw a player hit \$20 million APY.

That’s one reason why the Raiders and Rams find themselves in a sticky situation with the league’s last two Defensive Players of the Year. I’d be stunned if Aaron Donald reports to the Rams’ facility absent a new contract anytime soon. Things are a little less certain as to Khalil Mack’s plans on showing up to acclimate to new Raiders coach Jon Gruden’s program.

But this much is clear: These deals won’t be easy to do. And if Aaron Rodgers get his new deal with the Packers, which could have an APY north of \$32 million, before Mack and Donald get theirs, it’ll be even tougher.

There are a few reasons why these deals pose problems, starting with the gap between what quarterbacks make and everyone else does.

THE DIVIDE

When free-agent Ndamukong Suh signed his six-year, \$114.3 million deal with the Dolphins in 2015, the APY, \$19.06 million, was 86 percent of what Ravens QB Joe Flacco, then the highest-paid player, was making (\$22.13 million APY). When Texans star J.J. Watt signed his six-year, \$100 million extension in 2014, with two years left on his rookie deal, the APY (\$16.67 million) was 76 percent of what Rodgers (\$22 million APY) got.

Why does that matter?

Because contracts for defensive players haven't really moved since Suh got paid. Von Miller's 2016 deal, coming on the franchise tag, was largely the same as Suh's, and landed at 78 percent of what Andrew Luck was making then. Quarterback contracts, meanwhile, keep moving up.

Let's say, based on those numbers, that Donald and Mack get 80 percent of what the top quarterback is getting. Right now, based on Ryan, that would \$24 million per year, with \$80 million guaranteed. If Rodgers gets done at \$32 million per and, say, \$110 million guaranteed? Then, 80 percent is \$25.6 million annually and \$88 million guaranteed.

Yes, those numbers are staggering. But that's a result, again, of the fact that the numbers for defensive players haven't moved like they have for, say, receivers (Sammy Watkins just got \$16 million per) or guards (Andrew Norwell is making \$13.25 million). So how to square all that? Good question.

TEAM PRECEDENTS

Both the Rams and the Raiders are among teams that have, as a rule, stayed away from full guarantees of late, citing the NFL's funding rule (which I wrote about in March) that forces teams to put into escrow every fully guaranteed dollar that doesn't go straight to the player. Recent Rams deals for Andrew Whitworth and the since-traded Alec Ogletree reflect the influence of that rule, as does Derek Carr's deal with Oakland.

Donald's generational production as an interior lineman would seem to peg him as an outlier. Mack's place as a premier edge rusher, given how such players are compensated, makes him different from most, too (although the Raiders stuck to these rules for a quarterback). Both guys could wind up in Canton.

The flip side is that teams generally hate going against precedent, especially if they're the ones purposefully setting it.

THE TAGS

If the tags go up at the same rate this year as last, it would cost the Raiders \$17.4 million to tag Mack and the Rams \$15.1 million to tag Donald in 2019. Those are bargain prices. And if Donald doesn't report by August 11, he'll lose the accrued season, and the Rams could put a restricted free agent tender on him next year, which, at the first-round level, would cost around \$4 million (though another team would likely come in and poach him at that rate).

Usually, these numbers can serve to set the framework for a deal. But because of the lag in the elite defensive market, they don't work here. Which could lead to ...

THE FIGHT

Say Mack or Donald show up. Now, everyone in the locker room is watching how the players—both of whom have been beyond reproach over four-year as pros—conduct themselves. What if they're doing the bare minimum? What if other guys see it as a green light to do the same when the team hits a rough patch?

There's risk for the teams, for sure, in exacting leverage against players like this. IT's all part of what should make for an interesting summer in how these guys are handled.

... OF THE WEEK

TWEET

Damarius Randall

@RandallTime

If the Cleveland Cavaliers win the 2018 NBA finals I'll buy everyone who retweet's this a jersey...

I'm not sure I've ever seen a tweet cross over a million retweets before, but here we are, proving yet again this self-evident truth about America: We love free stuff.

QUOTE

"I was trying to help a guy up out of the pile, and he wanted to say some foul stuff. Listen, I'm not here to be pushed over. You can come at me because my name is in the papers or on TV, so you can come at me. I'm not backing down. I'm here for a reason. I'm here to play ball, and I'm not going to be treated like [expletive]. It is what it is."

That's Hamilton Tiger-Cats backup quarterback Johnny Manziel, and it's good that this is part of his re-entry into competitive football, because there's no question he'll get his share of lip from opponents if he makes it back to the NFL. Oh, and by all accounts, he looked pretty good in his preseason debut as he tries to make a case for playing time behind starter (and ex-Oregon star) Jeremiah Masoli.

OFF-FIELD ISSUES

1. You think about how football coaches drill even the most unlikely situations, and you wonder about all that time they spend on it ... and then you see what JR Smith did with the ball the other night and you remember why. I'm not saying, to be clear, that an NFL player wouldn't forget the score during a game. It absolutely could happen. I am saying there are a number of teams that I believe it almost certainly wouldn't happen to.

2. Watching Alex Ovechkin's flying goal on Saturday night in the NHL finals was another reminder of how crazy it is that he didn't make it to this stage, or even within a round of this stage, until after his 32nd birthday. The guy has been a top-two or top-three player in his sport for most of the last decade.

3. Tiger Woods contending at the Memorial through three days reminded me of when I was in college in Columbus and he absolutely owned that tournament—which mattered to him because it was Jack Nicklaus's tournament on Jack's home course. And it seemed a foregone conclusion then that he'd wind up catching Jack's mark of 18 majors. Which makes that seem like a long time ago.

4. The Sixers/Twitter story was absolutely incredible. Good job by the guys at the Ringer, which is an "online media outlet", per the team.

5. So I have 10 days to figure out what's happening in soccer, right?

S/O TO ...

Chiefs G Laurent Duvernay-Tardif, because the idea of being a pro athlete and completing medical school at the same time gives me awful flashbacks to nights at Ohio State with an exam 14 hours ahead that I hadn't started studying for. And by the way, I still have weird dreams about that anxiety.

TEN TAKEAWAYS FROM THE WEEK

1. We'll hit the other two teams opening minicamp this week here that we didn't touch on before, and we'll start with the difference I'd expect you'll hear about regarding the Lions this week, which is based on the way people in Detroit are thinking after five months under Matt Patricia. The main factor is that going from Jim Caldwell to Patricia isn't the sea change that some might think it would be. For one, offensive coordinator Jim Bob Cooter and special teams coach Joe Marciano remain. For another, it's not as if Caldwell didn't lead disciplined groups. Those Lions played a clean brand of football, and his emphasis on how guys conducted themselves showed in how Detroit's off-field issues vanished over the last four years. Really, the biggest differences under Patricia to this point have come in the ramped-up tempo and efficiency of practice, and the delivery of the message. While Caldwell was hesitant to use the word "shoot," Patricia isn't afraid to drop a few four-letter bombs. And where Caldwell would fine guys to the moon if they weren't with the program, Patricia's style is more confrontational. So you'll probably hear some of that coming from that camp this week.

2. Three magic letters you'll hear from Bears minicamp: R-P-O. We know new Chicago coach Matt Nagy will be implementing run-pass option concepts for quarterback Mitch Trubisky (and that's good, since he ran some in college). I noted a couple weeks ago in the Game Plan that Minnesota will be doing it behind new coordinator John DeFilippo. And you'll see it with Indy and new coach Frank Reich too. All that makes sense, since Kansas City (Nagy) and Philly (Reich, DeFilippo) ran more RPOs, per Pro Football Focus' numbers, than anyone else in the league, and all these guys, including Eagles coach Doug Pederson, branch off the Andy Reid coaching tree. What's more interesting? As I've heard it, coaches all over the NFL are tapping into their connections in college football to learn more about RPO concepts, both in an effort to learn to implement them (with the main concern being protecting your quarterback) and defend against them.

3. There've been questions about fit regarding Carolina's new offensive staff, behind coordinator Norv Turner and QBs coach Scott Turner, and Cam Newton. I'll say this: If you're worried about the Panthers jamming a square peg into a round hole, don't be. As I understand it, there's no makeover of Newton going on right now. Instead, the offense is being worked to Newton's strengths as a guy who was the MVP just two years ago. The quarterback and his coaches have focused on the details of individual plays being installed—from start to finish. The idea is to get investment on each one, so that Newton is playing quarterback, and not just playing football. If there's a difference you'll see, I'd say it may be a little like the makeover Ben Roethlisberger underwent about five years ago in learning to play the game a little more like a point guard, to get the most out of the guys around him. But I don't have much question that the Panthers offense will be tailored to what Newton does well.

4. One thing that should help there, and I mentioned this on the podcast last week, is that word is first-round Panthers wide receiver DJ Moore already looks like the real deal. Add him to big targets like Greg Olsen and Devin Funchess, slash-types like Christian McCaffrey and Curtis Samuel, and that Carolina offense should be fun to watch.

5. When I saw the story on Chiefs quarterback Patrick Mahomes turning down endorsement deals last week, I immediately thought of the best story I heard about the second-year phenom over the last few months. It's one that meshes right in with the idea that he'd say no to a local car dealership or two. Over

the course of the season last year, Mahomes would look to get extra work in after practice, since his reps became sparse when the real games began. But he'd never ask the front-line guys, like Tyreek Hill or Travis Kelce or Albert Wilson to go with him. Instead he'd get backups to run routes for him. Why? Because he didn't want to create any sort of appearance that he was gunning for Alex Smith's job, or playing politics. Those first-string guys were Smith's receivers, as he saw it. It's a little thing, of course. But I think it shows plenty about how conscientious Mahomes is.

6. There's some optimism out of Cincinnati that the Bengals may finally have their offensive line issues sorted out—which really have been the biggest reason why the team went from five straight playoff berths to 13-18-1 over the last two years. Losing Kevin Zeitler and then Andrew Whitworth didn't help; and the Bengals may finally have made up for it in trading for left tackle Cordy Glenn and drafting Billy Price. But just as big has been the addition of new position coach Frank Pollack, who helped build the Dallas line over the last five years, and it can be seen in some salvage work he's doing with veterans Cedric Ogbuehi and Bobby Hart.

7. Denver's ownership situation was in the news, so I figured it would be instructive to lay out how things have worked there over the last five years, since owner Pat Bowlen got sick. At the time, the decision was made that there wasn't one specific candidate out of Bowlen's seven children who was ready to run the franchise, so his ownership was turned over to a three-person trust made up of team president Joe Ellis, general counsel Rich Slivka and attorney Mary Kelly. Ellis was named controlling owner delegee, making his role roughly equivalent to the one Packers president Mark Murphy holds in Green Bay—he doesn't own the team, but he carries out the duties of an owner. And more recently, the league voted to approve the Denver arrangement for another four years (stretching past the expiration of the CBA) in 2017. So where does Beth Bowlen's move last week for controlling ownership play into all of this? It's unlikely to change anything in the short term. The trust isn't squatting on the team, but it is charged by Pat Bowlen to determine when there is a son or daughter ready and capable to take over. (Some have worked for the team, but none have been involved in ownership circles at the league level. The team would be sold only if the trust comes to the determination that Bowlen's kids will never be prepared to lead the franchise, and any such determination is still a ways off. Now, if there is one Bowlen child who's shown promise, it's probably 28-year-old Brittany Bowlen, a Notre Dame grad and Duke MBA. As for how the ownership situation has affected the team, the truth is, it really hasn't much. The Broncos renewed a league-high 98 percent of their season tickets for 2018 coming off a 5-11 season, and they won a Super Bowl a couple years back under this arrangement. So they'll probably be fine, despite all the drama.

8. In case you're worried about the Vikings getting cocky, I'm told the newcomers to the team have been pretty impressed with the way that Mike Zimmer's team practices. And two tempo-setters, as I've heard it, are receivers Stefon Diggs and Adam Thielen, who've taken quickly to new quarterback Kirk Cousins.

9. On the rules: I'd expect the new kickoff rule will lead to a ton of strategic experimentation in the preseason. Accordingly, one special teams coach said to me Sunday he thinks kickoffs in August will be a "s---show."

10. One ICYMI, from my May 24 Game Plan. We wound up updating the lead on the anthem discussion a few days later, after ESPN's Seth Wickersham reported that there wasn't a formal vote, to reflect how the decision went down in the room. So here, one more time, is how the vote was taken: Commissioner Roger Goodell simply asked the group if there were any no's or abstentions. That's when 49ers CEO Jed York stood up and said he couldn't vote for the new policy but wouldn't vote against it. So, since no one

said “no,” the policy was pushed through. It’s not the first time a vote has been done that way, but that it would happen like that on a significant issue like this on struck some in the room as pretty unusual.

FIVE-DAY FORECAST

This week will be the front end of a lot of commentary coming from defensive players on the new helmet rule—especially now that the language separating the 15-yard penalty from an ejection has been spelled out.

The ejection standard reads like this: a) Player lowers helmet to establish a linear body posture prior to initiating and making contact with the helmet; b) Player delivering a blow had an unobstructed path to his opponent; c) Contact was clearly avoidable; player delivering the blow had other options.

My feeling is that the third part of the rule, where intent will be legislated, is where players will have a problem, and where officials will be working through the kinks in September and October. And I was able to get some confirmation of that on Sunday night.

“I think it’s all idiotic,” 49ers cornerback Richard Sherman texted, when I sent him the language of the rule. “First ejection will be ridiculous, regardless of circumstance. If they don’t want people getting tackled, put flags on them.”

You can count on more comments like this in the days and weeks and months to come.

Peyton Manning's lawyer did more debunking than confirming of Charlie Sly's claims

By Mike Florio
Pro Football Talk
June 4, 2018

The Al Jazeera story about PED use in sports has resurfaced in recent days, thanks to the lingering defamation litigation filed by Ryan Zimmerman and Ryan Howard, two baseball players implicated in the documentary. And the effort by Al Jazeera to avoid liability has pulled Peyton Manning's name into the case.

More specifically, the effort by Al Jazeera to avoid liability has pulled Peyton Manning's lawyer into the case.

Manning originally was implicated by former Guyer Institute intern Charlie Sly, who was recorded without his knowledge making allegations about athlete PED use. Although the law establishes a much higher standard for defaming public figures like Zimmerman, Howard, and Peyton Manning, Al Jazeera still must be able to prove that it acted without knowledge that Sly's claims were false and without reckless disregard as to the truth or falsity of Sly's claims.

Enter Manning's lawyer, who provided during an in-person meeting a point-by-point refutation of the specific allegations that Al Jazeera had planned to make about Peyton Manning. As explained in a December 4, 2015 email message sent by Al Jazeera to Manning's agent, Tom Condon, Sly's comments included a claim that Peyton Manning bought HGH from the Guyer Institute, that he spent up to \$20,000 per month on HGH and used up to 20 IU's of it a day, and that excessive use of HGH resulted in "bone development" in Peyton Manning's forehead.

After meeting with attorney Matthew D. McGill, a partner with the law firm of Gibson Dunn & Crutcher, Al Jazeera DROPPED those allegations from the documentary, apparently because Al Jazeera had become convinced by McGill that Sly was not making credible claims about Peyton Manning. Al Jazeera claims that McGill became a "second source" who "confirmed much of what Sly had said."

McGill has responded to this contention, in an email sent Sunday to PFT.

"What Al Jazeera is saying is outrageous, baseless, and wrong," McGill said. "When Al Jazeera raised these false allegations about Peyton two and a half years ago, we went to their lawyers in good faith and explained that their source was a pharmacy intern who had unlawfully compromised private medical information to make up false and outrageous allegations about Peyton. We gave them very specific facts showing that every allegation about Peyton was a lie. Any notion that we confirmed Sly's veracity as a source is obviously false and beneath contempt."

The information from McGill surely had an impact on Al Jazeera. Beyond abandoning the specific contentions regarding Peyton Manning, Al Jazeera reporter Deborah Davies emphasized in a December 2015 interview on Today that the Al Jazeera documentary was making no claims about Peyton Manning.

“The only allegation in the program from Charlie Sly is that growth hormone was sent repeatedly from the Guyer [Institute] to Ashley Manning in Florida,” Davies said at the time. “We’re not making the allegation against Peyton Manning. . . . Let’s make it clear what the allegation is. The allegation in the program is very simple, that when Charlie Sly worked in the Guyer [Institute] doing part of his training . . . the clinic was sending out not one shipment but repeated shipments of growth hormone to Ashley Manning in Florida. That’s it.”

Now, Al Jazeera still hopes to bolster Sly’s credibility as it relates to the things he said about Zimmerman and Howard, claiming that McGill “confirmed much” of Sly’s allegations about Peyton Manning.

It’s accurate, but only if by “confirmed” Al Jazeera means “debunked.” While Al Jazeera did indeed use the allegation that HGH was shipped to Ashley Manning after meeting with McGill, McGill sufficiently shot down Sly’s allegations about Peyton Manning to get Al Jazeera to remove them from the documentary.

The end result arguably makes things worse, not better, for Al Jazeera. In using McGill’s comments as the basis for showing that Al Jazeera did not act with knowledge of the falsity of Sly’s claims, Al Jazeera opens itself up to the very simple notion that McGill’s explanation should have prompted Al Jazeera to ask itself whether, if Sly was making inaccurate claims about Peyton Manning, Sly was making inaccurate claims about Zimmerman and Howard, too?