

Which Broncos draft pick from the last five years needs to step up the most?

By Mark Kiszla
The Denver Post
June 5, 2018

Which Broncos draft pick from the last five years needs to step up the most THIS season for the Broncos to be any good?

Kiszla: I don't like this question ... I love it. The reason? There are so many ways to go. The obvious choice: Bradley Chubb is earliest pick John Elway has made since Von Miller. Chubb has to be a Pro Bowler ... no later than 2019. But I do think the outside linebacker thingy is bigger deal than many Broncos observers. The critical choice: Bradley Roby. Can he adequately replace my man Aqib Talib? Roby is way better than I thought he was coming out of Ohio State (mea culpa), but I still like him better long-term at safety than corner. The diamond-in-the-rough choice: Justin Simmons/Will Parks. What if Simmons (3rd-rounder) or Parks (sixth-rounder), two pretty decent picks by Elway in 2016, continue to grow into a bona fide starter, perhaps even with Pro Bowl potential? Now that would be a big plus for the Broncos in their quest to get back to the top of the AFC West.

What is wrong with this Rockies bullpen and can it be fixed?

Kiszla: The first thing wrong with the Rockies bullpen is Bryan Shaw. He was signed for three years and \$27 million. But let's forget the money. He is pitching to (hard) contact. It's painful to watch. Can Shaw get it straightened out? If he doesn't, this team is in big trouble. The second thing wrong with the pen is the injury to Adam Ottavino. He was the team's best reliever until getting hurt. And the third thing wrong? Is it just me, or is Wade Davis showing signs of over-use? OK, let's forget No. 3 for now. Nos. 1 and 2 give us plenty to worry about.

Is it too early to start thinking about firing Rapids coach Anthony Hudson? I mean, 7 losses in a row, just saying. — signed, Soccer Guy

Kiszla: Love the futbol. Rapids are hard to watch, though. I don't think that's harsh, do you? Is it too early to fire Anthony Hudson? Well, if Rapids fire him now, I think that would be more an indictment on the team's management than the coach. Fire Hudson now and he was obviously a bad choice. But it's not too early to ask: Have players on the team bought what Hudson is selling? I have not watched Rapids enough to tell you for certain. But the first thing every first-year coach needs from his players is buy-in.

Who do you think is the most over-hyped Rockies player ever?

Kiszla: Well, that's kind of a negative question for such a beautiful spring day, donchya think? But that's not being critical on my part. It's more wondering: What's your motivation for asking? Any response can be interpreted as an ax I have to grind. But there's no agenda here. Think it's fair to say that when Troy Tulowitzki hit Coors Field, his impact and popularity was so immediate that many of us believed Tulo (clap, clap, clap) would be face of this franchise for many, many years. Blame injuries or whatever. But he certainly didn't live up to the hype (and blame the media for the hype, if you like.)

It was sad to see and hear so many Dodgers fans at Coors this weekend. Colorado will never be a baseball town but is there anything the Rockies can do, besides win, to nudge the locals into a stronger allegiance?

Kizla: That's a fascinating question. I have long maintained that Denver is a great sunshine town, but not so hot as a baseball town. The Broncos are Colorado. Liking the mountains and putting up with some snow, as well as Broncos talk 24/7 is part of the gig, whether you were born in this state or you move here. But with all the other major-league teams, as the population of Denver has grown, and traffic at the I-25 and Sixth Ave has grown worse, the allegiance in the stadium for the Rockies, Nuggets or Avalanche has actually gotten more divided. It's an interesting dynamic ... unless you are the type that slaps a "Native" sticker on your bumper. And then it's really, really aggravating. I don't think this is a unique situation to Denver. I think it's all part of a big little town morphing into a little big city. Thanks again for the question. This is the stuff I find far more fascinating to talk about over a cold one, as opposed to handicapping the chances of Chad Kelly starting a game for Denver in 2018. But that's just me.

Has any Olympics city been better off long-term for hosting?

Kizla: Denver has many of the things that the Winter Olympics really, really need, including three that South Korea did not: real mountains, real snow and real love for outdoor winter sports. But if you want to sell the Olympics to Coloradans (which I do), the No. 1 question the organizing committee must answer is: What's in it for me? The Olympics in Denver has to benefit everybody to some extent, not just the Olympics/outdoors fanatic (which is me). This is a topic I want to explore in length in the months ahead. Next question: How many people want to read about it?

It is of zero importance almost who owns the Broncos because that's nothing us fans can do a thing about. But reading between the lines it seems the Broncos like Brittany but she's 3-5 years away from having the hands on experience. But does she have the passion and instincts? Beth seems to be the older and more "ready today," but that's like drafting a 27-year-old QB out of college. You really want the 20 year old coming out early next year. Your to-the-point-input appreciated.

Kizla: I get the blow back from some fans about the brewing family spat over Broncos ownership. It's harder to keep score between Beth and Brittany Bowlen than between the Broncos and Raiders. But here's the deal: Few teams, in any sport, overcome rocky and/or bad ownership to win championships. It can happen, I suppose. But it's a very bad way to bet. So maybe Broncomaniacs don't care which Bowlen heir should own the team, but they should care very much about stable ownership committed to winning. Does Brittany have the instincts to be a good owner? I cannot say with any authority. But she has been diligently training for the duty, which does demonstrate a passion for the job. If she took over at age 28 or 30 or 32, Brittany would almost certainly make rookie mistakes. And some Broncomaniacs would complain. So if you're asking me, it's not a question of her passion so much as the stomach for the inevitable criticism of leading the most publicly scrutinized private biz in Colorado.

I've seen quite a few rumors about the Nuggets trading the 14th pick to get out from under Kenneth Faried's contract. Hopefully that allows them to re-sign Will Barton if he chooses to stay. In any case, it's a sad causality of the Mason Plumlee and Paul Millsap contracts.

Kizla: The Nuggets overvalued Kenneth Faried at every turn, for far too long. That's not a criticism of the Manimal, it's a statement of the dangers of being more impressed with your own player than every other team in the league. So Faried was set up to be a sad casualty more by management's over-estimation of his ability more so than whatever mistakes were made (and I think they were made) when signing Mason

Plumlee and Paul Millsap for way over market value. Is this a pattern of the Nuggets overspending on talent? You might be on to something there, my friend. If the Nuggets were more frugal, however, many would gripe about a rich owner being cheap. Damned if you do, damned if you don't (And, now that I think about it, maybe that gets to the issue of Brittany Bowlen having the stomach for criticism mentioned earlier in this chat.)

Being from St. Pete I am use to small market baseball teams, but the Rockies don't seem to have the ability to trade for and develop pitchers, a la the Rays, can they build a club without that piece?

Kizla: The care, feeding and nurturing of young pitchers at 5,280 feet above sea level does make it difficult. Hey, it's harder to grow roses in Denver than in Portland. Every locale has its quirks. While I'm never slow to criticize the Rockies (much to some fans' chagrin), I would say their recent efforts with Kyle Freeland, German Marquez and Jon Gray (despite his recent and troubling woes) deserves applause. Because, you're correct, developing pitchers at altitude is no easy task.

Per your Broncos ownership reply, agree 100% on stable ownership. And where Sean McVay had a great first year as a 31-year-old coach, he has yet to face criticism the first time. And it compounds for the owner. Tough job coming up. If a Bowlen daughter gets it, who would she lean on as right hand man/woman? Can't be Pat. Is Elway close to them at all?

Kizla: Fair point on Sean McVay. He started like gangbusters as coach of the LA Rams. Let's see how he reacts if Rams stumble early in 2018, with all the heightened expectation they are now a legit Super Bowl contender. Good point on next owner of Broncos. Whether it's Brittany, Beth or any of the Bowlen children, for that matter, the new owner would be wise to have a mentor in the front office. Might be a reason to name Brittany sooner rather than later, so John Elway is around to take the heat, give her a thumbs up with a portion of the fan base that might be skeptical about her ability and set a competitive tone at Dove Valley. Of course, if Elway keeps having trouble in the NFL draft ... Different topic for a different day.

Did the Broncos make enough of an upgrade to the O-line to make Case Keenum competitive? Off the Denver topic a little, but do you have a take on the Bucs first-round draft pick? Veal, didn't fill a huge need, and most of the mocks had a Safety or Nelson going to the Bucs.

Kizla: Is Case Keenum a legit starter? Not yet proven, in my mind. Of course, I've never owned a pair of orange-tinted glasses that are standard issue with some media outlets that cover the team. And were O-line upgrades sufficient? Fair question. We. Shall. See. Know this: I agree with Von Miller. Everybody looks like a Super Bowl champ during OTAs.

Broncos OTA report: Shane Ray, Von Miller among group of players not practicing

By Ryan O'Halloran
The Denver Post
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The Broncos started their third and final week of organized team activity (OTA) workouts today. This is the seventh of 10 workouts and the last one that will be open to the media.

A recap:

Ray does not work. If his left wrist had not undergone surgery three times over the past 10 months, Broncos linebacker Shane Ray's absence from Monday's organized team activity would be a semi-footnote.

But because of that injury, which limited Ray to eight games last year, his role as an instructor and not a participant is something to monitor over the final two weeks of the offseason program.

Coach Vance Joseph said Ray has a "sore wrist," and added the wrist was "irritated."

Ray watched the OTA with a brace on his left wrist.

"Just being smart with Shane," Joseph said. "We're taking it slow." Joseph added that he wasn't sure if Ray would practice Tuesday.

Ray was added to the injury report, but healthy absences were linebacker Von Miller and receivers Demaryius Thomas and Emmanuel Sanders. Joseph said Thomas and Sanders both had a "personal matter."

"Not a big deal," Joseph said. "Those guys have been here all year. Not here (Monday). It's not mandatory. We can't take roll (call). I'm not concerned about it. We're good. We coached the guys who were here (Monday)."

Benefitting from the injury/personal absences were rookie linebackers Bradley Chubb and Jeff Holland and rookie receivers Courtland Sutton and DaeSean Hamilton.

"To get those (first-team) reps with (quarterback) Case (Keenum), it's really important because you never know what can happen in a game and practice," Sutton said.

Hamilton was able to work against starting cornerbacks Chris Harris and Bradley Roby.

"Those guys were giving me fits, but I embrace the competition and they're going to make me better," Hamilton said.

Said Joseph: "(Sutton and Hamilton) were pushed up to the first team and we didn't miss a beat."

Uniform choices. The Broncos announced Monday they have requested to wear their orange “color rush” uniform for their Week 12 home game against Pittsburgh. They previously wore the uniform on the road (at San Diego in 2016 and at Indianapolis last year) when it was reserved for Thursday night games only.

A new league rule allows teams to wear their “color rush” uniforms during any game of their choosing.

The Broncos will wear their blue jerseys (with either white or blue pants) for home games against Kansas City in Week 4 and Cleveland in Week 15.

Sloppy practice. The Broncos didn’t look sharp during Monday’s workout.

There were overthrows by the quarterbacks. There were drops by the receivers. Even the defense didn’t capitalize on a few takeaway chances.

Dropped passes were by Hamilton and Carlos Henderson.

Cornerback Chris Harris intercepted Keenum when he undercut an out-route. Linebacker Keishawn Bierria dropped an interception of Chad Kelly. Tight end Jake Butt fumbled out of bounds after a catch. Safety Jamal Carter made an end zone interception of Keenum off a deflection.

One of the only offensive highlights was a high-pointed catch by receiver John Diarse on a 20-yard Hail Mary pass by Keenum.

Challenging Roby. Last week, when Roby was sick and missed the fourth OTA, Tramaine Brock filled in and had an interception. Joseph praised Brock after OTA No. 7.

“Brock’s played really well for us,” Joseph said. “He’s battling Roby right now to be the second corner. Whoever doesn’t win it will obviously be the third.”

Brock, 29, was signed in March. He spent seven years with San Francisco (80 games/40 starts/11 interceptions) and last year with Minnesota (11 games/no starts/no interceptions).

“I’m getting (the system) down pat so it’s good,” Brock said last week. “Just different terminology that I have to get used to and how the coaches want me to play certain techniques.”

Stevens sees time. For the first time during the three OTAs open to the media, rookie quarterback Nick Stevens saw reps in 11-on-11 work.

Stevens’ old coaches from the Colorado State staff, including coach Mike Bobo, attended the practice.

Footnotes. Holland hobbled off the field after getting tangled up with an offensive lineman, but was able to finish the practice. ... Offensive tackle Billy Turner and tight end Austin Traylor did side-field work during practice.

Isaiah McKenzie aims to re-claim Denver Broncos punt return spot after “unacceptable” 2017

By Ryan O’Halloran
The Denver Post
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During his tumultuous rookie season trying to catch and return punts for the Broncos, Isaiah McKenzie had to have a, “I just did what?” moment, right?

“Plenty of times,” McKenzie said.

And that sums up McKenzie’s 2017 when he performed well enough to win the job a full month before the season started, only to struggle mightily. Plenty of times, he fumbled. Plenty of times, he showed poor decision making. And plenty of times, he was confused about his decision.

A fair catch at Miami in December was the first one that McKenzie cited after Monday’s seventh organized team activity workout.

“Caught it inside the 10 and thought, ‘Why did I do that?’” he said.

He caught the punt at his 5-yard line. Three plays later, Miami scored a safety and rolled to a 35-9 win. It was McKenzie’s final game as a punt returner.

The Broncos could have given up on McKenzie as a punt returner and cited only his statistics as the justification.

Per Stats, Inc., McKenzie’s 32 offensive touches were tied for 314th in the NFL last year, but he was tied for 20th (and tied for second among non-quarterbacks) with six fumbles (lost two). His 18.8 fumble percentage was first among all players with at least 12 touches.

“I’ve said it plenty of times: Unacceptable,” he said.

On draft weekend, McKenzie had to accept the Broncos’ decision to select Courtland Sutton and DaeSean Hamilton, pushing him down the depth chart.

“I was like, ‘We got two of the best receivers in the draft,’” McKenzie said. “And then I said, ‘This is about competition every day.’”

McKenzie is getting another shot to compete. During Monday’s OTA, he worked at slot receiver and caught punts alongside Hamilton, Phillip Lindsay and Brendan Langley. McKenzie and Hamilton were 5-for-5 in catching punts, Langley was 4-of-5 and Lindsay 4-of-4.

“We’ve got four, and obviously Jordan Taylor when he’s back from his (hip) injury will be catching punts, also,” coach Vance Joseph said. “It’s an open competition and the more the merrier.”

McKenzie is in a tough spot — he wants to wipe last year from his memory, but must remember it so he doesn't repeat it.

If that sounds complicated, so is returning punts. Let it hit the turf, call a fair catch or try to return it? Turn up the middle of the field or head for the sideline? McKenzie had returns of 29, 31, 31 and 44 yards last year, but those were overshadowed by the blunders.

"I even look at them now," he said of his mistakes, "I say, 'OK, I could have done this better, I could have done that better, I could have made a way better decision.' I look at it, learn from it and leave it behind me."

McKenzie admits his confidence was shaken last year following a career at Georgia that included five punts returned for touchdowns. He has spent the offseason rebuilding it. He believes he can be an effective punt returner. He believes he can help the offense as a slot receiver.

"It's a fresh start," McKenzie said. "I feel like I came in this year with a good mindset. I feel more comfortable with the plays on offense and I'm catching the ball well on punt returns. I just want to keep it rolling."

Broncos OTA notes: Von, Demaryius, Emmanuel absent; Shane Ray's wrist ailing again

By Mike Klis

9 News

June 5, 2018

Von Miller already has a nice contract, thank you very much.

So that wasn't why the pass-rushing outside linebacker missed the Broncos' organized team activity practice Monday morning.

"It was nothing," Miller said by phone Monday afternoon. "I'll be out there tomorrow."

Miller will be the NFL's highest-paid defensive player for a third consecutive season – unless the Los Angeles Rams' Aaron Donald can parlay his second consecutive offseason holdout into a contract worth more than Miller's \$19.083 million a year average deal.

Besides Miller, the Broncos were also missing star receivers Demaryius Thomas and Emmanuel Sanders from the OTA session Monday.

"It's not mandatory so no big deal," said Broncos head coach Vance Joseph, who later added: "I think D.T. had a personal matter and Emmanuel had a personal matter. It's their time. We can't take roll. They've been here all year. We're good. We coached the guys that were here today."

Ray wrist injury worrisome

This can't be good. Shane Ray walked off the practice field Monday after doing nothing more than observe the Broncos' workout while wearing a protective splint around his left wrist.

It's the same wrist that required multiple surgeries last season and limited Ray to eight games and one sack. A first-round draft pick in 2015, Ray had 8.0 sacks as a part-time starter in 2016.

"They're just evaluating it," Ray said with a look of disappointment as he walked into the locker room.

"We're taking it slow, just being smart with guys," Joseph said. "It's the spring. Our real goal is to get him healthy for training camp, but right now we're being smart with Shane, and he's not by himself."

Other players held out of practice Monday because of physical ailments were the usual group of Clinton McDonald, Jared Veldheer, Ron Leary, Jordan Taylor and Troy Fumagalli, plus Billy Turner, Austin Traylor, J.J. Dielman (sick) and De'Angelo Henderson.

Henderson was taking a day to rest his body as the car accident from a couple weeks ago left him with a strained oblique. The running back should be back practicing Tuesday.

OTA Observations

*Even without his top two receivers, Case Keenum had another good day as the No. 1 quarterback. No. 3 quarterback Chad Kelly also had his moments. No. 2 quarterback Paxton Lynch, though, did not have his best practice.

*Rookie receivers Courtland Sutton and DaeSean Hamilton replaced Thomas and Sanders with the No. 1 offense.

Joseph was pleased with how the rookie receivers performed in the passing game Monday.

“They looked fine,” he said. “We didn’t miss a beat. That’s what you want from your backup players. Someone’s not here today and they step in and play and we don’t miss a beat. I was very impressed with those three guys including Isaiah McKenzie, who played slot today.”

McKenzie struggled last season as a rookie punt returner, but he never ducked responsibility.

“Last year was a roller coaster,” he said. “It was very unacceptable by me. But this year I came back with a clear mindset. I know how to do my job. I know how to catch the ball. I know I can run the ball. I just have to make great decisions.”

*With Henderson out, rookie Royce Freeman continued to push Devontae Booker for the starting running back position.

Broncos' Color Rush uniforms coming home vs. Steelers

By Mike Klis

9 News

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Buckle up the chin strap, Big Ben.

Here comes the Color Rush.

The NFL for the first time is not reserving their teams' Color Rush uniforms for Thursday night games.

Instead, the Broncos can wear their all-orange uniforms one time, at any time.

Per a team source, the Broncos have selected their Week 12 game November 25 against the Pittsburgh Steelers and quarterback Ben Roethlisberger for their Color Rush garb at certain-to-be-at-least-temporarily-renamed-Sports Authority Field at Mile High.

The Broncos wore their Color Rush uniforms for one game each of the past two years, both on the road. This will be the first time the garish-orange ensemble will be on display before the home fans. The Color Rush? Orange jersey, orange pants, orange socks, AND ... old-school, blue helmets.

One other league-wide uniform tweak this season: Teams can wear their alternative uniforms for two home games instead of one.

The Broncos will wear their alternative navy jerseys with either blue or white pants against the Kansas City Chiefs in a week 4, Monday night home game on October 1 and against the Cleveland Browns for a week 15, December 15 home game.

The Broncos' standard uniform is an orange jersey with white pants at home and white jersey with white pants on the road.

Q&A: Broncos WR Isaiah McKenzie opens up about his rough first season, hopes for Year 2

By Nicki Jhabvala

The Athletic

June 5, 2018

When No. 16 came available, second-year receiver Isaiah McKenzie turned in the number that Shannon Sharpe made famous in Denver and opted for new start. A more familiar one.

McKenzie wore 16 in college at Georgia and, well, 84 didn't bring him much luck. Maybe his old number will.

Maybe his offseason of work will, too.

McKenzie's rookie season left a few marks he still bares but hopes to soon erase. Drafted in the fifth round of the 2017 draft in large part because of his speed and shiftiness, McKenzie brought hope that the Broncos would have their answer to Kansas City's Tyreek Hill. Former special teams coordinator Brock Olivo saw firsthand the explosiveness of Hill in Kansas City and believed McKenzie had a chance to flash similar productivity on special teams.

But year one in the pros for McKenzie turned into a nightmare, with six total fumbles (two lost), two separate benchings for "unacceptable" play, and even a scuffle in practice that left him in tears in the locker room.

The cap on the year was a play near the end of the first half in Washington, where the Broncos faced third-and-10 at the Redskins' 31-yard line with 16 seconds remaining. It was Week 16 and by then the Broncos' season was all but lost. McKenzie's instruction was to catch the pass from Brock Osweiler and run out of bounds to stop the clock. Instead he cut inside to try to pick up more yards.

The clock ran out, the Broncos lost their shot at a field goal and Washington's 10-3 lead ballooned to 27-11 by the final whistle.

"His issue is not catching the football," coach Vance Joseph said of McKenzie at the league's annual meetings in March. "It's not. It's decision-making. He has to make better decisions. ... Every return he wanted to make a touchdown. You can't do it. Teams started playing him differently. We saw I think maybe two or three left-footed kickers that gave him problems. We have to get him back to making good decisions."

When the offseason began, McKenzie headed to his hometown of Miami to regroup mentally and physically. He returned to the Broncos' offseason workouts this year a little bigger and with a renewed vigor that he'll need to secure a roster spot; through the draft and with signings immediately after, the Broncos added two receivers and four potential candidates to the list of punt returners.

After practice Tuesday, McKenzie opened up to The Athletic about the trials of last season and his regimen in recent months.

What did you do this offseason?

From Jan. 12 to May 10 I was working out each and every day trying to gain weight, trying to get better at my craft as a receiver and a punt returner. Just worked out every day to improve the mental part of the game — get more sleep, eat better, be calm.

Where did you train?

Miami, at my old high school, American Heritage. My trainer's name is Mike Smith, with D2D Performance.

How much weight did you put on this offseason?

I put on like eight pounds. The reason I did that is to be able to take more hits. I didn't think I'd be as fast with the weight on, but I got more muscle and I got faster. It's very hard (to keep the weight on), especially during the season and camp. At least before camp, I want to be like 182, 183 because I know once camps starts I'll be like 178, 175 around there.

How was last year for you?

Like I said before: Unacceptable. It was a roller coaster. I don't want that to happen again, so I'm going to come out here each and every day and get better.

Did you lose confidence at any point last season?

I wouldn't say I lost confidence. I just felt like — it was just hard. It was just hard for me. I know I can do my job. I know I can catch punts. I just made bad decisions and was just not thinking things through. That got me where I was last year and I won't let it happen again.

The transition from college to the pros generally, was it what you expected?

I would say it was moderate. I expected the players to be bigger, to be faster, to be smarter. And that's what I got. In college you got younger guys here and there, you got older guys, some were more mature. But during the game, it was kind of easy because the older I got the younger the players were coming in. So it was different. But here, everybody is on point.

Any veterans take you under their wing last season?

All the veterans — Von (Miller), DT (Demaryius Thomas), Emmanuel Sanders — they look out for us where they can and they try to teach us the best way they can. I listen to them and try to perfect my craft on what they say.

What do you think of new special teams coordinator Tom McMahon?

Oh he's great. He's amazing. He talks to me every day. He tells me to catch punts like a man. He screams it at me. I like it though.

Shane Ray sidelined in Broncos' OTAs with wrist issue

By Troy Renck

KMGH

June 5, 2018

Outside linebacker Shane Ray cuts an imposing figure. He regained 30 pounds, leaving him fit and built to rebound. Yet the strength comes with a caveat. He cannot produce a breakthrough season without a strong left wrist. So it created pause and concern Monday as Ray watched Monday's OTA practice with a protective brace on his wrist.

Ray tore ligaments in the wrist during training camp, undermining his season, and leading, in part, to the Broncos electing not to pick up his fifth-year option. It's June, but Ray's absence remains noteworthy, and an issue until he returns to the field.

Is his wrist OK?

"I am not sure," Ray told Denver7.

Typically in these cases, a medical exam follows, leaving uncertainty until the results are known.

Coach Vance Joseph explained that the Broncos will take a cautious approach with Ray. He is viewed as a critical component to producing waves of pass rushers. And given what happened last year -- an argument can be made that Ray should have missed the season with the injury given the lost strength because he could not lift -- a conservative plan is wise.

"Shane's got a little wrist going on right now, so we're not sure. We're taking it slow, just being smart with guys. It's the spring. Our real goal is to get him healthy for training camp, but right now we're being smart with Shane," Joseph said.

The Broncos boast depth at the position with Von Miller, Shaquil Barrett, and first-round pick Bradley Chubb. Ray's health issues, projected salary and the arrival of Chubb led to Denver declining to exercise his fifth-year option for the 2019 season. However, Ray, if his wrist cooperates, is projected to help this year. He said he understood the Broncos decision on his option, recognizing the "NFL is a business."

While Ray's absence is worrisome, the calendar works in his favor. Training camp does not start until the last week of July. But the last thing Ray wants at this point is another speed bump in his recovery after last year's lost season.

Footnote

Monday featured the same group recovering from or easing back from injury and not practicing. Defensive tackle Clinton McDonald (shoulder), tight end Troy Fumagalli (hernia), right tackle Jared Veldheer (foot) and guard Ron Leary (knee). For now, Leary does not have surgery scheduled on his knee, electing to rest to ease the inflammation.

Broncos LB Shane Ray out of optional workout with sore wrist

By Pat Graham
Associated Press
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The Denver Broncos held linebacker Shane Ray out of workouts Monday due to a sore wrist.

Ray broke his left wrist in July and underwent three surgeries that caused him to miss the opening six games in 2017. He had one sack over the next eight contests before going back on injured reserve.

Denver coach Vance Joseph said Ray's wrist was irritated and the team is "taking it slow. Just being smart with guys. It's the spring."

Absent from the optional workouts were players such as pass rusher Von Miller, along with receivers Demaryius Thomas and Emmanuel Sanders. Joseph wasn't concerned with their absence, saying, "they've been here all year. We're good. We coached the guys who were here today."

Peyton Manning, Riddell team up to provide equipment grants

By Arnie Stapleton

Associated Press

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Peyton Manning is again lending his support to football helmet manufacturer Riddell as it provides equipment grants across the country to teams as part of the company's Smarter Football initiative.

The "18 in 18" program which launches Tuesday nearly doubles the 10 grants that Riddell awarded last year with Manning's input.

"It also happens to be my favorite number," said Manning, who wore No. 18 during his playing career with the Indianapolis Colts and Denver Broncos.

"Not only does it mean delivering more equipment grants to deserving teams, but it also means that we can shine a light on more programs that are playing the game the right way," said Manning, who will help review the applications. "Our goal is to inspire the football community to continue to take steps forward in better protecting today's players."

The Smarter Football initiative rewards teams across the country for implementing smarter, safer tactics and techniques on and off the field. More than 2,400 football programs have applied for equipment grants since its inception.

"Today's players and coaches know that safety starts with the right equipment," Manning said. "Working with Riddell has really opened my eyes to the level of detail and design that goes into making the best gear available. It's an honor to be part of the Smarter Football program and provide state-of-the-art equipment to teams that need it."

The deadline for entries is July 9.

Broncos 'didn't miss a beat' with Sutton, Hamilton running with first-team offense

By Aric DiLalla
DenverBroncos.com
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With Demaryius Thomas and Emmanuel Sanders absent from Monday's OTA practice, Thunder and Lightning Lite got their chance to take a leading role.

Wide receivers Courtland Sutton and DaeSean Hamilton practiced with the first-team offense, and the rookies' performances impressed their head coach.

"Yeah, so far, so good with those two guys," Vance Joseph said. "[No.] 14 and [No.] 17 are very mature football players. And obviously, [since Thomas and Sanders] missed [practice], they're pushed up to the first team, and we didn't miss a beat. That's what you want.

"You want guys in each room who can play as a starter. So I was very pleased with those two guys today."

Offensive Coordinator Bill Musgrave hinted Thursday that Sutton and Hamilton — drafted in the second round and fourth round, respectively — could make early impacts on offense.

Monday's practice only seemed to reinforce that notion, and both players were eager not to waste the chance in front of them.

"I appreciated the opportunity [and] tried to make the most of it," Hamilton said. "I really just tried to do the best that I possibly could and tried to make sure there was no drop off with those guys not being here. And [I am] just taking on the responsibility of being ahead of the installs and making sure I know everything so I'm able to go out there and play fast."

Sutton, who said he's focusing on being "the best version" of himself rather than look at the big picture, relished the opportunity to face off against Chris Harris Jr., Bradley Roby and the rest of Denver's secondary.

"I love going against them," Sutton said. "Iron sharpens iron, and everybody knows that. To be able to go against them as a rookie ... that's awesome. It's only going to make me better whenever I get to get those reps.

Those are obviously two guys that are at the top of their game at their position, so to be able to go against them every day in practice, that's something that I look forward to."

On several of those days, both Sutton and Hamilton have made highlight-reel catches. And Sutton's, more often than not, have been of the one-handed variety.

"That's his specialty," Hamilton said. "He's obviously one of those guys that has a crazy catch radius. I'm trying to match that as much as I possibly can, but he's been out here, he's been making plays.

“That just goes along with us being able to come out here and play a lot faster and be confident and really just be comfortable with what we’re doing and then letting our natural, God-given ability take over.”

That process has just begun, but that talent is already shining through.

Shane Ray misses practice with 'sore' left wrist

By Aric DiLalla

DenverBroncos.com

June 5, 2018

Outside linebacker Shane Ray could miss the remainder of OTAs with a "sore" left wrist, Head Coach Vance Joseph said Monday.

"[It's] irritated," Joseph said. "So we're not sure [when he'll return]. We're taking it slow, just being smart with guys. It's the spring. So our goal is to get him healthy for training camp. Right now, we're being smart with Shane."

Joseph confirmed the irritation is related to Ray's 2017 injury that caused him to miss the majority of last season.

Ray initially injured his wrist in the early days of training camp last July, and he underwent surgery to repair a damaged ligament.

The former first-round pick returned in Week 7 wearing a protective club on his left hand, but he totaled just one sack in the eight games in which he saw playing time.

Denver then placed Ray on injured reserve ahead of Week 15.

Ray has recorded 13 career sacks in his three seasons in the NFL.

Broncos to wear Color Rush jerseys in Week 12 home game vs. Pittsburgh Steelers

By Aric DiLalla

DenverBroncos.com

June 5, 2018

The Broncos on Monday submitted to the league the dates on which they will wear their Color Rush and alternate uniforms.

After two years of wearing their Color Rush uniforms on the road — in San Diego in 2016 and in Indianapolis in 2017 — the Broncos will don the emphatically orange uniform in front of their home crowd during a Week 12 game against the Pittsburgh Steelers.

The team made it a point to give their fans the opportunity to see the Color Rush uniforms at home in 2018.

For the first time, teams are able to wear their Color Rush uniforms during any game of their choosing. Previously, the uniforms were reserved for “Thursday Night Football” matchups.

The Broncos last wore the uniforms — which include orange shoes, orange socks, orange pants, orange jerseys and blue helmets featuring Denver’s old logo — in a Week 15 game in Indianapolis in 2017. Denver came away with a 25-13 win in that contest.

Denver will also wear its alternate uniforms on two occasions in 2018.

The team will wear its blue jerseys — with either white or blue pants — in Week 4 against the Kansas City Chiefs and in Week 15 against the Cleveland Browns.

Both games will be played at home.

Broncos OTA observations: Operating in pressure situations

By Andrew Mason
DenverBroncos.com
June 5, 2018

The most fascinating part of Monday's OTA session came when the Broncos worked in a series of fourth-down situations, with one repetition for each of the first, second and third units from the 24-yard line, 20-yard line, 12-yard line and 6-yard line.

"I really liked that -- last plays of the game, fourth down," tight end Jeff Heurman said. "It's good work. It's good stuff to do during the spring."

... In the battle of No. 1 units, the defense got the better of matters, stopping the first-team offense on each of the four plays. The high points for the defense came from plays snapped at the 12- and 6-yard lines, as Case Keenum looked for Hamilton and Heurman, respectively, but were felled in part by string coverage from Justin Simmons and Shaquil Barrett on DaeSean Hamilton and Will Parks on Heurman.

Parks' coverage set up a situation where Keenum had a tiny window near the left sideline in the end zone. Keenum succeeded at squeezing the ball in there, giving Heurman a chance, but he couldn't quite reach the football.

Safety Jamal Carter's interception was the highlight of the second-teamers' duel. With the offense at the 24-yard line, Lynch looked down the middle for Kenny Bell, who caught a handful of passes from the third-year quarterback throughout Monday's practice. But safety Dymonte Thomas arrived to deflect the football at the goal line, allowing Carter to pounce and fall to the ground for the touchback.

After an incompleteness on an end-zone attempt to tight end Matt LaCosse from the 20-yard line, Lynch hit running back Dave Williams in the left flat on his play from the 12-yard line. At full speed and with full contact, Williams might have been able to bull his way to the goal line; in an OTA without pads, the play was dead before he reached the end zone. On the last repetition for the No. 2 offense, the pass rush collapsed the pocket, preventing Lynch from getting off a throw before the whistle blew.

... The Chad Kelly-led offense scored twice in its four plays against the No. 3 defense, thanks in part to some outstanding work from the wide receivers. On the play from the 24-yard line, Kelly lobbed a pass to the back of the end zone that rookie John Diarse caught behind the defense. He made the leaping grab and got both feet in-bounds for the score.

Kelly looked for Diarse again from the 20-yard line, but tight coverage from Zaire Anderson ensured the pass fell incomplete. From the 12, Kelly hit Jordan Leslie on a slant route with three defenders in the area for a touchdown. The defense rebounded by forcing a stop from the 6-yard line, as rookie safety Trey Marshall forced LaCosse to run out of real estate in the back of the end zone, leading to a pass that sailed out of play.

Diarse said that Kelly's presence in the huddle has helped when he's guided the offense.

"[He's] somebody I can lean on," Diarse said. "I have questions, and I have somebody I can confide in when a defense doesn't look right. He's doing a great job of leading us in that huddle."

Other practice observations:

Keenum wasted no time adjusting to the collection of young wide receivers he had at his disposal for Monday's OTA.

With Demaryius Thomas and Emmanuel Sanders not taking part in the voluntary session, rookies Courtland Sutton and DaeSean Hamilton moved up to the first-team offense. Isaiah McKenzie worked in the slot.

On the first snap of the initial team period, Keenum found Hamilton. Three plays after that, Keenum turned to his right and hit Sutton.

"We didn't miss a beat," Head Coach Vance Joseph said. "That's what you want from your backup players. Someone's not here today, they step in and play. We don't miss a beat. So I was very impressed with those three guys, including Isaiah McKenzie, who played slot today."

Hamilton was involved throughout practice. The work wasn't perfect; Hamilton dropped a pass at one point. But Keenum kept looking in his direction, and Hamilton recovered from the drop for back-to-back receptions later in practice.

"It helps us see what he's seeing when we go out there and we're really running routes for him, practicing with him and building that chemistry. Case has done a great job, especially today," Hamilton said. "[It was great] taking first team reps and being out there with him, understanding what he likes, understanding where he expects us to be and really just the anticipation of where he's going to place the ball."

... Diarse showed the depth of the rookie receiver class by catching another touchdown pass late in practice, leaping for a grab from Kelly in the back of the end zone during the final team period. However, the undrafted rookie from TCU downplayed his accomplishments.

"That's just doing your job and exceeding expectations," Diarse said. "It's the NFL. Every ball in the air has to be caught. We have to dominate as receivers to take advantage of every opportunity we get, and that was just one that you just don't think about, and you go after [it]."

He left Monday's work wanting more.

"I can do better," said the undrafted rookie from TCU. "I hold myself to a higher standard. Obviously those are good plays to make, but the expectation level is high, so I have to meet those expectations."

Broncos aim to maximize community impact with partnership approach adjustment

By Ben Swanson
DenverBroncos.com
June 5, 2018

As a new season approaches, the football team isn't the only part of the organization that is making changes.

At the franchise's 2018 community partner summit Monday, the community development department announced Monday that it has reshaped its methods when it comes to partnering with community organizations.

"Previously, for about the last decade, we have operated with a flagship partner model," Executive Director of Community Development Allie Pisching said. "We've had anywhere from six to 12 flagship partners that we've worked with. When we did our strategic planning, which we do every offseason, the department and I sat down and we realized that we were working with far more than 10 organizations. So we wanted to really elevate all of our partnerships up to the level where we could do more in an impactful way.

"We have a great pool of assets to use — opportunities with tickets and game-day experiences, player appearances, events, monetary donations, capital improvement projects — and by spreading that across more organizations, we can do so much more in the community, and it really opens up the doors for new organizations for us to learn about and really grow our impact across the city."

Instead of flagship partners, the Broncos now have five community focuses: youth development, quality of life, health and wellness, youth football and civic engagement.

This will allow for more inclusivity in the organization's community outreach in regard to the other charitable nonprofits with which the Broncos will partner and it will allow for greater sharing of resources.

One of the organizations that should receive a boost from this change is Volunteers of America, a nonprofit with the mission of helping the most-vulnerable populations.

"Before we were kind of, we would reach out to them for items donated for auctions and some other stuff, but now it seems like they're more kind of integrated into what our mission is, which is to help the most vulnerable populations," said Bradley Gulley, director of volunteer services for the organization. "So, really looking at some of our youth programs, they're becoming a key partner with them. We do the 'Stuff for Students' campaign, which is partnered with 9News, King Soopers and, now, the Broncos. We're out at training camp, which helps us get our name out there but also collected a ton of money and supplies for kids in need. And then this year, they're also partnering with our 'Camp Postcard' program, which will send inner-city kids up to camp during a week in summer, and it's a partnership with the Denver Police Department."

For the Broncos, it's all about maximizing their impact on the community.

“We have a tremendous responsibility, being a professional sports franchise,” Pisching said. “In our community, those organizations, those fans, those kids are looking up to us to do the right thing. By having a great group of organizations that we’ve vetted, that we’ve worked with — some for more than two decades — we can tie our players into causes that are important to them. We can make sure that players who want to give back have the opportunity to give back, not only with their monetary donations or any financial responsibility, but with their time, just something as simple as going to the children’s hospital once a week or serving lunch at Denver Rescue Mission’s homeless shelter. Those are little things that the players and our staff can do to make Denver a better place.”

Don't Be Fooled: President Trump Is Using NFL as Distraction for Bigger Issues Surrounding White House

By Robert Klemko

MMQB

June 5, 2018

I could write a thousand words about that statement that rocked the NFL on a Monday night in June, and it wouldn't be getting blood out of a stone either. I'd break it down line by line, until all of its falsehoods were laid bare.

If I were writing that column, I'd probably focus on the tremendous deceit of the President's central premise that protesting NFL players dishonor the men and women of the military by protesting during the national anthem. If it were worth going over once more, we could get into the reasons for the protest (racial inequality in the U.S.) and how the original kneeling NFL player —Colin Kaepernick—did so rather than sit on the bench as he had done initially, out of respect, and a firm belief that this country and these ideals we ratified in our founding documents are something worth fighting for.

I could talk about the totalitarian tough guy nature of that line—"They disagree with their president"—an assertion cast as though it were capital sin, rather than what it is: the daily yield of a healthy democracy. I might have written about all that, but that wouldn't be giving the president and his staff enough credit.

Yes, the President knows this sort of thing is red meat for his base. Sticking it to uppity black millionaires has been good for business since the first cretin came up with the lie that the first black president wasn't born in this country, and well before that even. But that's not what Monday's statement was about. This was play-action. This was John Elway faking the handoff to a migraine-addled Terrell Davis in the Super Bowl. This was Dan Marino faking the spike and tossing it into the waiting hands of Mark Ingram Sr.

Monday, if you hadn't heard, was a Bad Day for the President. White House press secretary Sarah Sanders dodged questions about her statement last August that the President "certainly didn't dictate" a misleading statement Donald Trump Jr. released regarding a reported meeting with a Russian lawyer during the campaign, a statement disputed by a letter sent in January by the President's lawyers to the special counsel investigating him. But that was just the appetizer.

Next there came two bombshells, a veritable surf and turf on a fun-filled Monday. There was the late-breaking news that a review of documents seized in an FBI raid of Trump lawyer Michael Cohen's home and office found that just a small fraction of them—less than 200 of nearly 300,000 documents and files—are privileged or partially privileged according to a court-appointed watchdog, contrary to arguments made by lawyers for Trump who are not under federal investigation.

On top of that, special counsel prosecutors accused former Trump campaign chairman Paul Manafort of tampering with witnesses in the tax and money laundering case against him. He could face jail time.

The fight with the NFL is fun. It gets the people going. And it concerns NFL owners so much they made a rule against demonstrations during the anthem that's likely done more to divide protesting players and conservative-leaning owners than Trump ever could. Of course, Trump found a way to criticize the NFL

for that measure, tweeting that staying in the locker room during the anthem—an option the league offered to players without punishment—was just as unpatriotic as kneeling.

He's keeping the fight going, because down in Washington, the house of cards is tipping over. Don't look away.

Injuries: Packers WR Davante Adams returns to field

By Marc Sessler

NFL.com

June 5, 2018

The Packers have one their starting wideouts back in the fold.

Davante Adams returned to the field for Monday's organized team activities after missing the past two weeks with a hamstring injury, per ESPN's Rob Demovsky.

Tabbed as one of Green Bay's top receiving targets in a post-Jordy Nelson world, Adams was handed a four-year, \$58 million extension by the Packers in December.

Coming off a campaign that saw him roll for 885 yards and 10 touchdowns off 74 grabs, Adams has a clear path to set career highs in 2018 if quarterback Aaron Rodgers can play from wire to wire.

Other injuries we're tracking on this hushed Monday in June:

1. Chargers receiver Mike Williams also returned to practice Monday after missing time with a tweaked hamstring, per ESPN's Eric Williams.

2. After watching Clay Matthews suffer a broken nose during a charity softball game over the weekend, Packers coach Mike McCarthy says he holds no reservations over his players attending the event again next summer, per Demovsky.

"I think [Matthews] needs to work on his off-hand, mitt side, on the release of the ball," McCarthy joked Monday. "So that's what the tape showed me. It's a charity [game], but most importantly, we don't have any long-term concerns. We're talking about scheduling surgery probably midweek. So, it's unfortunate, but it's for a great cause. I'm just glad he's OK."

3. Giants safety Landon Collins told reporters Monday that his surgically repaired forearm is "very close" to 100 percent, but noted "at the end of the day, we're not taking any risks," per the team's Twitter account. Collins added there's a chance he could be medically cleared before the start of minicamp next week.

4. Broncos linebacker Shane Ray sat out practice Monday due to a sore wrist. Broncos coach Vance Joseph told reporters that the team intends to be smart with Ray and make sure he's ready for training camp. NFL Network Insider Ian Rapoport added that Ray is experiencing swelling and soreness, but should be OK.

The N.F.L. Still Has a Trump Problem

By Ken Belson
New York Times
June 5, 2018

You can't say the N.F.L. wasn't warned to stay away from President Trump – by one of its own owners, no less.

Yet time and again, the N.F.L. has been cowed by a president willing to use his bully pulpit to win political points and exact a measure of revenge on a league that rejected his efforts to buy a team.

The latest admonishment came Monday night when the president disinvited the Super Bowl champion Philadelphia Eagles from visiting the White House. Some players had said they would not attend, unhappy with how the president had criticized them for protesting during the playing of the national anthem.

Trump said that if the entire team was not going to be there, then they need not show up at all.

That's the thanks the N.F.L. got for trying to appease the president.

Last month, the league changed its policy so that players who kneel during the national anthem can now be punished, or their teams could face possible financial penalties. Players will be given the option of staying in the locker room during the pregame ceremony, as if they have to hide in shame.

The owners could have avoided this headache months ago had they listened to one of their own, the owner of the Eagles, who urged them not to get sucked into the president's vortex.

That warning came last October, weeks after the president blasted the owners for not firing protesting players. About three dozen owners, players and league executives met in New York to discuss how to address the crisis, which had divided fans, sponsors and entire teams.

Some owners implored the players to back down, lest the president keep up his attacks on the league. It was bad for business, said Terry Pegula of the Buffalo Bills at the meeting, a recording of which was obtained by The New York Times. Bob McNair, the owner of the Houston Texans, said he supported the players' efforts to address social injustice, but they had to "stop that other business."

Jeffrey Lurie, owner of the Eagles, took a different view. Don't pander to the president, he said, by clamping down on the players. Work with the players and tune out the noise. The president will do what he does regardless.

"We've got to be careful not to be baited by Trump or whomever else," he said at the meeting. "We have to find a way to not be divided and not get baited."

Most of the owners took the bait anyway. Not long after the meeting, everyone from Commissioner Roger Goodell on down said they preferred if the players stood for the anthem. Behind closed doors, they debated how to change the league's policy to force, not suggest, that players stand.

The owners changed that policy in May, infuriating the players, including many who did not protest during the national anthem last season.

Right on cue, the president declared victory. Mr. Trump said he was pleased with the N.F.L.'s new policy, but said he did not think the players should even be staying in the locker room in protest. If a player is not standing for the national anthem, Mr. Trump said, "Maybe you shouldn't be in the country."

If the owners thought the problem would be solved by tweaking their policy, they were wrong. They should have known better, even without Mr. Lurie's warning.

Mr. Trump has been fighting the league since the 1980s when, as the owner of the New Jersey Generals of the short-lived U.S.F.L., he successfully sued the league for violating antitrust laws. The victory was hollow. The upstart league won three dollars in damages and collapsed. Trump has tried to buy N.F.L. teams over the years, but has been spurned, though he does remain friends with several owners, most notably Robert K. Kraft of the New England Patriots. Things changed once he became president. He has attacked the league mercilessly, poking at Mr. Goodell and taking glee in the league's television ratings falling. He even floated the idea of removing some of the league's tax exemptions.

If the other owners had listened to Mr. Lurie, things might have turned out differently. Sure, Mr. Trump would continue to attack the league. But the protests – which only involved a handful of players by the end of last season – might have diminished on their own.

And while some fans might have continued to be upset with the league, the owners would have won points by supporting the players, a significant issue with contentious talks over the collective bargaining agreement looming.

Instead, they have the worst of all worlds – players are angry at the owners, and the president continues to attack the league. Not that they weren't warned.

Bowlen Wallace Hits Back At Notion She Is Not Qualified To Run Broncos

By STAFF

Sports Business Journal

June 5, 2018

Beth Bowlen Wallace said she is "disappointed" and disagrees with the "inaccurate comments" made by the Pat Bowlen Family Trust saying that she is "not capable or qualified at this time" to run the Broncos after informing the trust that she seeks to be appointed controlling owner of the team, according to Ryan O'Halloran of the DENVER POST. Bowlen Wallace in a statement said, "I am disappointed and disagree with the inaccurate comments made by the trustees. While I can certainly respond to each of those statements, I don't believe that will be productive." Broncos Exec VP/Football Operations & GM John Elway "tweeted his support" for Broncos President & CEO Joe Ellis on Friday. Elway wrote, "I want to make one thing clear about (Thursday's news): Joe Ellis is doing an incredible job (and) I have full confidence in him. He's got all of our support. Pat put a lot of good people to follow his plan and that's what they're doing" (DENVER POST, 6/2).

NOT GOING AS PLANNED: In Colorado Springs, Woody Paige wrote the "contentious franchise-family affair Pat Bowlen never wanted and attempted to prevent has reared its ugly head." Bowlen Wallace's intentions "will have to be carried out in a hostile takeover." The trustees are "grooming" 28-year-old Brittany Bowlen to eventually succeed Pat Bowlen, but that "significant change to the Broncos will not occur for at least five years." The only two "viable candidates were Beth and Brittany, and Brittany had become the Chosen One by the trustees." Ellis and Bowlen Wallace "do not like each other ... at all." Additionally, there is a "true disconnect" between Pat Bowlen's "former family and his second family." The younger Bowlen kids "side with Brittany," while Bowlen Wallace has the "backing of her sibling and Pat's two brothers" (Colorado Springs GAZETTE, 6/3). THE MMQB's Albert Breer writes the recent developments are "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." If there is "one Bowlen child who's shown promise, it's probably" Brittany, who graduated from Notre Dame for undergrad and Duke business school (SI.com, 6/4).

STRONG RESUME? Denver-based KUSA-NBC's Mike Klis reported Bowlen Wallace appears to have "met several components" of the criteria that would qualify her to become controlling owner, but it "could be interpreted she has fallen short in meeting the standards of others." To earn the "right to succeed their father, the child must become qualified according to the criteria written" by Pat Bowlen himself "before he was afflicted with Alzheimer's disease, and carried out by his trustees." There is an "education component, where an advanced degree is encouraged," and the child needs "five years employment with the Broncos or NFL." The trustees also take into consideration "financial and business acumen" and "experience in positions of leadership." Finally, there is an "overarching, subjective component to the criteria that calls for the trustees to make judgments on character, honesty and integrity." How the trustees evaluate Bowlen Wallace in these subjective categories "remains unknown." But it "can be assumed she did not endear herself to the trustees by essentially circumventing the Trust by issuing a press release Thursday to announce her intent to take control of the team" (9NEWS.com, 6/1).

Fanatics generates \$20 million for NFLPA

By Daniel Kaplan

Sports Business Journal

June 5, 2018

The NFL Players Association's high-profile Fanatics deal delivered \$20 million to the union in the most recent reporting year but also served to depress fees from companies like Nike that became sublicensees as part of the new apparel framework. Nike's payment to the union, for example, fell 89 percent to \$1.1 million. Overall the Fanatics contract is a net plus for the union's bottom line.

The NFLPA signed the Fanatics deal in 2016 and last fall renewed with a host of what it is now calling sublicensees like Nike, Outerstuff and Dallas Cowboys Merchandising. The annual report the NFLPA filed with the Department of Labor last week, which covers the 12 months ended Feb. 28, 2018, is the first to reflect a full year under the new apparel arrangement in which Fanatics makes all the products for the sublicensees.

It mirrors deals Fanatics has struck with other unions such as the National Basketball Players Association and leagues like the NFL and the NHL, in which the licensee has taken over most retail categories and manufactures the products.

"It is an opportunity to consolidate under one vendor," said Gene Goldberg, a former NFL licensing executive. "It is going to yield, in theory, an opportunity to generate more revenues."

What it has certainly done for the NFLPA is to shift its reliance on a handful of retail firms to almost entirely Fanatics, a trend that should be even more pronounced moving forward. In the fiscal 2017 year, Nike, Outerstuff and the merchandise arm of the Cowboys delivered \$17 million to the NFLPA. In the most recent filing for the fiscal 2018 year, the figure was \$2.9 million and a good share of that came from marketing payments to players, not royalties. By contrast, of Fanatics' \$20 million, \$18 million is guaranteed royalties.

Entities like Nike and Outerstuff still work with the union on apparel design and other matters, but most of the work, and thus payments, run through Fanatics.

Overall NFLPA commercial revenue rose slightly to \$170 million, from \$167 million, according to a review of the NFLPA's last two annual reports. Both figures set new highs for the NFLPA commercial arm.

An emerging category is production services, a result of the union's ACE Media, launched in 2015. The media outlet creates sports-related lifestyle content. In the most recent fiscal year, Amazon paid the NFLPA \$1 million for production services from ACE. In all, production services and digital media delivered \$2.5 million to the union, compared to just under \$1 million the year before.

The union's assets were \$514.7 million on Feb. 28, according to the latest LM-2, resources the labor group is sure to grow before its current collective-bargaining agreement runs out in three years. When the last CBA expired in 2011, shortly before a lockout, the NFLPA had \$311 million in assets.

'Good Morning Football' builds following, despite early hiccups

By John Ourand
Sports Business Journal
June 5, 2018

"Good Morning Football" is one of the hit shows on NFL Network's schedule, bringing more viewers to a 7 to 10 a.m. time slot that always has been a graveyard for the league-owned channel. But the show's road to success was not always so clear.

In the weeks after it launched in the summer of 2016, Mark Quenzel, NFL Media's senior vice president of production, worried that he had made a mistake in greenlighting the show, which mixes entertainment topics and pop culture with football.

There was a reason for Quenzel to worry. TV ratings in those early months lagged, and the show drew fewer viewers than the show it had replaced, "NFL AM." Plus, the show suffered through embarrassing glitches that looked amateurish. On occasion, one of the show's hosts would call for highlights that never came. Segments would either take too long or be too short.

"There were some real crash-and-burn moments, both on and off the air," Quenzel said. "The first few months into the show were not pretty for anybody and frustrating for everybody."

Luckily for Quenzel, he and the show's producer, Michael Davies, could engineer tweaks in relative obscurity. Unlike ESPN's morning show "Get Up," which has been on-air for only two months, Quenzel had the luxury to preach patience. By comparison, "Get Up" has higher-paid stars and a much bigger budget; any changes will be much more publicly dissected. "Get Up's" ratings have been almost daily fodder for mainstream newspapers and sports media blogs. An anonymous Twitter feed — @DidGetUpGet300K — tracks the show's numbers daily.

In NFL Network's case, producers decided that the best way to move forward was to embrace the cast's free-flowing style. That meant giving more power to the hosts, even though they had much less on-air experience than other show hosts on the network.

That change especially could be seen in the show's production meetings, Quenzel said. A typical NFL Network studio show, like, say, "Total Access," has detailed production meetings that choreograph who will say what and when.

By contrast, "Good Morning Football" production meetings are not scripted at all. Network executives and hosts all point to TNT's free-flowing and popular studio show "Inside the NBA" as the basis for that decision. One of the host's — Kyle Brandt — went so far as to describe "Good Morning Football" as "'Inside the NBA' without the Yo Mama jokes."

"They break every television rule — their segments go too long and their interviews run too long," Quenzel said. "Most shows — like 'SportsCenter' or one of our shows — are producer-driven shows where the producer has the rundown and tells the talent how long they have to speak. In this show, there's very little of that. In this show, we say, here's the subject. Let's go. And it goes wherever it goes."

The host-driven show has led to some awkward moments, Quenzel said. For example, at the end of the May 23 show, which was produced during the NFL owners meeting in Atlanta, the three hosts in studio that day — Kay Adams, Nate Burleson and Brandt — ended the show with a spirited discussion.

The problem was that the network already had moved on to another segment, so the segment did not make the air. The three hosts that day laughed about the snafu afterward.

“Those are the segments that make me crack up the most and where we rely on each other the most,” Brandt said.

From Quenzel’s perspective, those are the types of moments that make viewers find the cast endearing and the show so watchable.

“There are awkward moments and long lapses; ironically, they are the key to the success of the show,” he said. “They succeed because this show is produced differently from any show that I’ve produced here or at ESPN. It’s a different kind of show.”

So far, TV ratings have posted impressive growth, even if the show’s overall numbers still are relatively low — the show rarely gets more than 100,000 viewers outside of the regular season. During the 2017 regular season, “Good Morning Football” averaged 109,344 viewers — a 23 percent jump from NFL Network programming in that slot in 2015, the season before the show launched. During the postseason this year, “Good Morning Football” averaged 88,587 viewers — a 30 percent jump from January 2016, prior to the show’s launch.

“I don’t know if we’re doing flips over the ratings — we’ve still got a long way to go,” one of the show’s hosts, Peter Schrager, said. “But I do know our words matter and we resonate with people I work with on a day-to-day basis.”

Those people — front-office executives and players — make up the kind of audience that causes the hosts to believe that they have hit on a formula that works.

“Our show is successful because the owners love it,” Adams said. “They interact with us in a way that I have never seen them interact with anybody.”

It’s not just the owners, but it’s the rest of the front office, coaches and players who offer daily feedback.

Schrager recalled a 2017 playoff game between the Seahawks and Falcons when he realized that the show was starting to resonate. Schrager was working as a sideline reporter for Fox, and flew down on Thursday after the show to prepare for the game.

On Friday morning, he went to the Seahawks’ hotel for a production meeting with the team’s coaches and some players. In an adjoining room, he saw the team’s defensive leaders — Richard Sherman, Earl Thomas and Cliff Avril — eating breakfast and watching the show.

“They were listening and engaged,” Schrager said. “It’s one thing to see the rerun of our show in an airport. But to see the players before the big game actually watching and nodding their head and arguing? That

was eye-opening. If the players care what we say and the players respect what we say, then we'll never stray from where we want to be."

On May 23, three of the hosts — Adams, Brandt and Burleson — gathered off to the side of their new set looking out over Times Square for an impromptu interview. The set, which is part of NFL Experience in New York City, featured a fully stocked bar. Burleson casually walked behind the bar and jokingly offered to mix drinks for everyone.

The hosts genuinely seemed to enjoy each other's company. They finished each other's sentences, laughed at each other's jokes and regularly tossed compliments to one another.

They all gave the same answer when asked why their show has seen the growth it has in what had previously been such a deadly time slot.

"Chemistry is why we're successful," Adams said. "You could put that desk in the middle of Times Square. You could put it in a stuffy studio — wherever you want — and it's still the four of us."

That chemistry is as much a function of luck as it is of casting. Brandt said he had never met Adams or Burleson and barely knew Schrager before he was cast.

"We all sat down already hired — there was no chemistry test," he said. "That could have been a disaster. We could have all hated each other and had zero chemistry. They took a roll of the dice."

Burleson said the on-air chemistry did not happen immediately, but it developed quickly.

"We'll say something at the same time as if we're like quadruplets," he said. "It's these little things that only people that have been around each other for 10 years do. ... I've worked with a lot of people. I've been on teams where you can play with a guy for four years and you don't even know the name of his daughter because he's shut off or you don't care. But here it's different. We're like family. We're so overly concerned with each other, which you can see."

Schrager mentioned a show last August that Brandt missed because he was guest hosting the 9 a.m. edition of the "Today" show with Al Roker. Schrager said the three hosts would run into the break room during "Good Morning Football" commercial breaks to watch their friend host.

"We encourage each other to be great and try to help each other in every way," Schrager said. "That's not a given always in a competitive work environment."

Shane Ray dealing with more wrist trouble

By Josh Alper
Pro Football Talk
June 5, 2018

Broncos linebacker Shane Ray missed half of last season with a wrist injury and his offseason work is being interrupted by issues with the same wrist.

Ray did not take part in the team's OTA practice on Monday and coach Vance Joseph said, via James Palmer of NFL Media, that the team is going to be smart with Ray during what's left of the offseason program. The Broncos wrap that up with a three-day minicamp next week, so Ray may not work on the field again until the team is at training camp this summer.

It's a less than ideal way to head into a crucial season for the 2015 first-round pick. Ray did not have his contract option for next season exercised by the Broncos, so he's set to be a free agent next offseason and could use a strong season to land a good deal on the open market.

The size of Ray's opportunity even if he's healthy will likely be impacted by the presence of this year's first-round pick as well. If Bradley Chubb makes a quick transition to the professional ranks, Ray could be an afterthought before his contract is out.

NFL's former P.R. exec takes issue with President's cancellation of Eagles trip

By Mike Florio
Pro Football Talk
June 5, 2018

It's unknown what Joe Lockhart would have said about the President's cancellation of the White House visit by the Super Bowl champion Eagles if Lockhart were still the NFL's top in-house P.R. executive. It is known what Lockhart did say in his capacity as a former NFL employee.

"Official statements from the President used to be serious thoughtful expressions of national interest," said Lockhart, who served as the White House press secretary under President Clinton, on Twitter. "Now they are childish rants. The latest — if some of the [Super Bowl] champs don't want to come to the [White House], then none of them are invited. POTUS will play with his toys alone tomorrow."

The President uninvited the Eagles on the eve of the visit, claiming that "[t]hey disagree with their President because he insists that they proudly stand for the National Anthem, hand on heart, in honor of the great men and women of our country."

"It's the people's house," Lockhart added. "All Americans should be welcome. We're not a monarchy where only those who swear loyalty are allowed into the palace. Players wanted to go and are being denied access because some teammates disagree and won't bow, or kneel, before the President."

Regardless of whether that's an accurate description of the reasons for some Eagles to choose not to attend, the move reconfirms that the NFL cannot and will not win when it comes to the anthem issue, no matter how completely and repeatedly the owners try to capitulate to the President's wishes. Anything done by the owners won't be good enough or genuine enough or zealous enough.

Some would say they shouldn't have done anything, accepting the fact that the President and his base will continue to twist the tiger's tail no matter what the tiger does.

President Trump cancels Eagles' visit to White House

By Charean Williams

Pro Football Talk

June 5, 2018

Chris Long and Malcolm Jenkins were among the Eagles players who already said they wouldn't visit the White House. Now, none of the Eagles will.

President Donald Trump issued a statement canceling the trip, citing the national anthem as the reason.

"The Philadelphia Eagles are unable to come to the White House with their full team to be celebrated tomorrow," the statement reads. "They disagree with their President because he insists that they proudly stand for the National Anthem, hand on heart, in honor of the great men and women of our country. The Eagles wanted to send a smaller delegation, but the 1,000 fans planning to attend the event deserve better. These fans are still invited to the White House to be part of a different type of ceremony — one that will honor our great country, pay tribute to the heroes who fight to protect it, and loudly and proudly play the National Anthem. I will be there at 3:00 p.m. with the United States Marine Band and the United States Army Chorus to celebrate America."

The Eagles recently held meetings with their players, according to Mike Garafolo of NFL Media. Owner Jeff Lurie opted to send a smaller contingent to avoid putting his players in a "tough spot."

Now, though, none will go.