

Broncos can once again be successful if they focus on four key areas

By Ryan O'Halloran
The Denver Post
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Stressing the details.

Discussing that topic is an NFL offseason program tradition as much as identifying which undrafted free agent can make the team and declaring which player "looks great."

And Broncos camp during organized team activities, which wrap up Friday, has been no exception.

Players say the figurative temperature has been ratcheted up at Dove Valley.

"I like the vibe; it's a sense of urgency," defensive end Shelby Harris said last week. "Everyone has something to prove. I love the atmosphere. I love the competitiveness."

Great teams become great and stay great because they maintain their hold on the details.

Bad teams have a chance to improve quickly because they re-focus on the details.

The Broncos fall in the second category, coming off a 5-11 season. Combine the new voices on the coaching staff, a head coach (Vance Joseph) maybe finding his way and players who want to erase 2017, and there is a different standard.

"The intensity is (higher) compared to last year," free safety Justin Simmons said. "You can feel it — the attention to detail, the awareness, the grit, the need, the want-to-be-better-than-last-year."

So what are the details?

They can be little things that make a huge difference. They can be large things that make a big difference. They're things such as penalties and turnover ratio, opening drives and sacks allowed. Last year, the Broncos lacked success in those areas.

Penalties. The Broncos were called for 113 enforced penalties, 10th-most in the NFL. They actually improved in this category (119 enforced penalties in 2016), but this remains a team that must tighten up this area to compete.

Turnover ratio. The Broncos' minus-17 differential was second-worst in the league, ahead of only winless Cleveland (minus-28) and one of only five teams that was minus-10 or worse. Included were 22 interceptions by myriad Broncos quarterbacks, a total they hope will be lowered by veteran Case Keenum.

Opening drives. Most teams script their opening series, making mistakes inexcusable. The Broncos scored only 16 first-drive points last year, tied for fifth-fewest. The bottom 11 teams in first-drive points did not make the playoffs.

Sacks allowed. The Broncos allowed 52 sacks, third-most in the league behind Houston (54) and Indianapolis (56), and most by the club since 1994 (55). Sacks happen when the run game is broken and communication breaks down in obvious passing situations.

A true barometer on how well the Broncos do the little and big things can't be measured during the non-padded OTA sessions. But some clues are gleaned.

During Monday's OTA, for example, there were no procedure (false start or off-sides) penalties during 11-on-11, although the passing-game execution was sloppy. During pass protection, the offensive line can work on its communication against stunts and blitzes.

"We've all been doing a lot of things on the side before practice (like) working on technical things," left guard Max Garcia said. "We critique ourselves when we watch film, we critique each other when we're out there watching each other. Everything matters."

Garcia and left tackle Garrett Bolles have credited right tackle Jared Veldheer, who is out with a foot injury, for becoming a vocal leader.

"That's something you need, the older guys really investing in the younger guys and making sure everybody is paying attention to the details," Garcia said. "The more and more everybody is focused and locked in, the better we'll be."

Defensive end Zach Kerr has noticed the difference in how Joseph patrols the practice field.

"Obviously, when you lose double-digit games as we did last year, you have to come in and kind of change something up," Kerr said. "You can't do the same things — that's insanity. (Joseph) is definitely on us a lot more now and has definitely ramped it up a bit."

Broncos linebacker Shane Ray to undergo fourth left wrist surgery

By Ryan O'Halloran

The Denver Post

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Broncos linebacker Shane Ray's push for a new contract in Denver or elsewhere is officially off to a bad start.

A team source confirmed Wednesday that Ray will need left wrist surgery, his fourth in less than a year, that will keep him out "a couple of months."

At the very least, Ray is expected to miss the start of training camp.

The source said Ray will undergo "a clean-up procedure related to the initial surgery. Better news than we expected."

Ray participated in the first six Broncos organized team activities but was held out on Monday and had a brace on his wrist. On Tuesday via Instagram, Ray said he "didn't re-injure anything," and there was a "complication from the initial surgery that needs correcting." That correcting will include surgery.

Ray was originally injured early in last year's training camp, which kept him out of the regular season's first half. He returned to play eight games, recording one sack.

Last month, the Broncos declined to pick up Ray's 2019 contract option, meaning he is scheduled to become a free agent next March.

Ray's injury likely means fifth overall pick Bradley Chubb will enter training camp as the starting strong-side linebacker.

Broncos have plenty of options for open right guard position. The challenge is picking the right player.

By Ryan O'Halloran

The Denver Post

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The Broncos know Garrett Bolles, Ron Leary (if healthy), Matt Paradis and Jared Veldheer (if healthy) will start at left tackle, left guard, center and right tackle, respectively, against Seattle in September's season opener.

Unknown is the right guard spot.

During Monday's organized team activity, Menelik Watson and Connor McGovern rotated with the first-team offense. And Max Garcia — the left guard starter in 2016-17 — could make it a three-player race in training camp.

Leary (knee soreness) and Veldheer (recovering from last December's broken foot) haven't participated in OTAs. Because of Leary's injury, the Broncos have equal parts been unable to see him at left guard and start their right guard competition.

The Broncos waited until the sixth round to draft guard Sam Jones, a signal they feel their right guard solution was already on the roster.

Garcia, 26, has 37 starts at left guard in his three-year career. McGovern, 25, started the final five games at right guard last year. And Watson, 27, has 24 career starts but none at guard.

Based on their NFL interior line experience, it could be Garcia or McGovern against the Seahawks.

Garcia has the most pro guard experience but has worked at left guard during OTAs because of Leary's injury, although he said he took snaps at right guard during Tuesday's practice.

"I've just been focusing on myself and focusing on my craft and just getting better," Garcia said.

McGovern, a left tackle at Missouri in 2015, replaced an injured Leary (back) last year.

"It's huge," McGovern said of the opportunity. "It's nice to have the opportunity to actually have a chance to start."

Continuity at guard isn't a requirement for making the playoffs, but it doesn't hurt the cause.

Last year, the Broncos went 5-11 and started one left guard (Garcia) and two right guards (Leary and McGovern). But among the 12 playoff teams in 2017:

Five teams started one left guard: New England, Buffalo and Carolina. Pittsburgh and the Los Angeles Rams started the same left guard for the first 15 games before sitting them out of a meaningless finale. Philadelphia and Minnesota started three apiece.

Six teams started one right guard: New England, Pittsburgh, Tennessee, Philadelphia, the Rams and Atlanta.

Kansas City used four players.

The road to stabilization starts in training camp.

If players stay healthy, juggling does not need to happen and educated decisions — not forced ones — can be made after the third preseason game.

The Broncos' right guard spot opened this offseason when it was floated that Leary would move back to the left guard post he previously held with the Cowboys. And that decision to move Leary over left Garcia without a spot.

"It's part of the game," Garcia said. "I felt like I've had to overcome some type of adversity every season I've played football since high school. I can control only my attitude and focus on my details."

One detail above all is a part of Garcia's focus this offseason.

"Definitely pass protection," he said. "I felt like I got out of position a lot of times and didn't have my eyes in the right place. I've really been working on that and it's showed the last few weeks practicing out there."

Garcia just wants a chance and a fair one, and that means getting practice snaps to make the left-to-right transition.

"I don't think it's essential for me to be there on Day 1 but I definitely want my fair chance to be a starter," he said. "I feel I deserve at least a chance and if they don't like what they see at the end of preseason, I'll let destiny ride its course."

McGovern, a fifth-round pick in 2016, did not play as a rookie and spent last offseason and most of training camp as the starting center while Paradis recovered from two hip surgeries. McGovern became a backup player until Leary was shut down in December. He played 418 snaps and was called for three penalties.

"That experience helps with everything — just overall football knowledge and technique," McGovern said. "It really was valuable how much those last five games meant."

A wild card would be Watson, but tackle-to-guard transitions aren't totally uncommon. Just last year, left tackle Luke Joeckel, a former second overall draft pick, left Jacksonville and signed with Seattle to play guard.

Broncos OTA notes: No more leaping, body bump celebrations for Justin Simmons

By Mike Klis

9 News

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Justin Simmons was having his breakout season.

He had more than outplayed locker room favorite T.J. Ward, the safety Simmons replaced in the Broncos' starting lineup.

Simmons displayed sideline-to-sideline range when asked to play the role of free safety. He had surprising pop as a tackler that belied his long, slender frame (6-2, 202) when he moved into the box as a strong safety.

But then Broncos linebacker Brandon Marshall forced a strip sack of Jets' quarterback Josh McCown early in Game 13. Broncos' defensive end Adam Gotsis recovered the fumble and Simmons celebrated with a leaping body bump of Marshall.

Simmons' foot came down awkwardly on Marshall, twisting his ankle. His breakout season was finished with three games to go as the Broncos made the cautionary move of placing Simmons on season-ending injured reserve.

An adjustment has been made.

"No celebrating, period," Simmons said with a smile at his post-OTA press conference Wednesday. "That's definitely taken out of the playbook."

Simmons said in ordinary circumstances, the ankle sprain would have forced him to miss the next game four days later at Indianapolis last season, but not the final two against Washington and Kansas City.

"I think the most frustrating part was that I could've played," he said.

"But due to the circumstances of the season not going the way we wanted it to and just letting other guys get in there and see what we had as far as backups and other guys getting some playing time for the future -- that's what it came down to."

Ray will have surgery

A second medical opinion confirmed the first: Broncos' outside linebacker Shane Ray needs surgery on the same left wrist that caused him so many problems last year. Ray missed half the games and was not himself in the other half.

He is again expected to miss the start of this season, although there is hope he will return sooner than he did last season.

The problem with wrist injuries is it's almost impossible to keep the upper body strong. Upper body strength is a must for edge rushers if they are to beat those 300-pound offensive tackles.

While this is another tough break for Ray, the Broncos are better protected against his absence this year. This year his replacement will be rookie Bradley Chubb, the Broncos' No. 5 overall draft pick.

Sanders, new coach Azzanni butt heads for greater good

By Mike Klis

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Many people in Broncoland were surprised when the Broncos fired Tyke Tolbert and Eric Studesville the day after the 2017 season ended.

They were both really good Bronco assistant coaches, and for a long time.

But sometimes when a coach is around a group of players for a while, the players can subconsciously get a little comfortable. It's the same with a boss in the workplace. It's why students get different teachers or professors every year, if not every class.

In the case of Demaryius Thomas and Emmanuel Sanders, the feeling by Broncos general manager John Elway and head coach Vance Joseph was a new voice of authority could help reinvigorate the receivers.

In came Zach Azzanni, a receivers coach who has spent most of his time in the college ranks.

"Oh yeah, we butted heads at the beginning," Sanders said Wednesday while speaking only for himself. "Obviously, the new coach coming in and he has his ways, and I have my ways of doing it, how it took me to go the two Super Bowls and two Pro Bowls.

"We butt heads, but at the end of the day we have a common goal and we want to win. We've been working it out and I've been listening to him, he's been listening to me.

Just a guess, but Elway and Joseph probably aren't disappointed there was some initial friction between Azzanni and his veteran receivers.

"It's starting to pay off because-- he always tells me 'You can get better, you know that, right?'" Sanders said. "And I'm like 'OK, OK.' And I'm listening."

A change in quarterbacks to Case Keenum will probably do more to help Thomas and Sanders to become 1,000-yard receivers again. But new ideas, new methods and a new coaching personality might help, too.

Neither Studesville or Tolbert were unemployed for long. Studesville is now the running backs coach for Adam Gase in Miami; Tolbert is tasked with trying to eventually get through to disgruntled star Odell Beckham Jr. with the New York Giants.

They've been good coaches before and just because the Broncos wanted to make a change doesn't mean they're not good coaches now.

But the Broncos are happy with Azzanni and new running backs coach Curtis Modkins.

When a team is coming off a 5-11 season, change is expected.

Source: Fourth surgery on wrist might delay start of Shane Ray's season

By STAFF

ESPN

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Denver Broncos linebacker Shane Ray will undergo a cleanup procedure on his surgically repaired left wrist, a source told ESPN's Adam Scheffer.

The surgery is expected to sideline Ray for at least three months and could jeopardize the start of his season, the source said.

The procedure will be the fourth surgery Ray has had on the wrist, which he initially injured in training camp last season.

Ray has sat out the past two days of OTAs with soreness in the wrist.

The 25-year-old had sought a second opinion on the need for surgery, and he has decided to go with the procedure, according to the source. The NFL Network earlier reported that Ray was going to have the surgery.

Last year's injury-marred season held Ray to just one sack in eight games due to his wrist woes.

"Obviously, anybody who's watched me in my first two years knows what I'm capable of, and last year I wasn't the same me due to injury," Ray said earlier this offseason. "For people holding that against me, it is what it is. I don't care. I'm just going to go out here and do what I can for my team."

The Broncos did not pick up their fifth-year option on Ray last month, making the Missouri product a free agent at the end of this season.

"It's business. Unfortunately, my injury happened," Ray said earlier this offseason. "Do you invest \$9 million in the guy who had three wrist surgeries the year prior? Maybe not. I can't blame [president of football operations and general manager] John [Elway] for that, and I can't focus on that. That's not something I'm going to allow to mess up my focus or my commitment to the team."

"I'm going to play as hard as I can and do what I was brought here to do."

Complicating matters for Ray's future in Denver is that the Broncos used the No. 5 overall pick in this year's NFL draft on linebacker Bradley Chubb out of NC State.

Another setback for Broncos OLB Shane Ray: wrist surgery No. 4

By Nicki Jhabvala

The Athletic

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Broncos outside linebacker Shane Ray will undergo a fourth procedure on his left wrist and is expected to miss the remainder of the offseason and possibly the start of the regular season, according to an NFL source.

Ray initially suffered the injury at the start of training camp last season. His wrist got caught on a block during a run play and, two days later, he was in surgery to repair torn ligaments and separated bones. Over the course of last season, Ray underwent three procedures to insert pins and later have them removed.

The fourth procedure, however, is not because of re-injury but rather complications from the initial surgery. A team source characterized it as a “clean up” and “better news than expected.”

Ray sat out the team’s OTA practices this week because of soreness in the wrist, and coach Vance Joseph said the move was out of precaution. The team’s primary goal was to have him healthy for training camp.

Ray sought a second doctors’ opinion to determine his course of treatment and took to Instagram on Tuesday to clarify his condition.

“No I didn’t re-injure anything,” he wrote. “There was a complication from the initial surgery that needs correcting. We will evaluate my options going forward and I’m sure it will work out fine.”

The surgery is the latest setback in an almost year-long ordeal for Ray. He essentially lost his third NFL season as his weight plummeted to as low as 223 pounds because of his inability to lift upper body weights. He was placed on recallable injured reserve to start the season and returned for Week 8, but he was severely limited by his low weight and the bulky cast covering his wrist.

In eight games (seven starts) last season, Ray totaled 16 tackles and one sack. He was placed on season-ending injured reserve for the final two games.

“Anytime you go under the knife three times and are still trying to play football, as physical as the sport is, it was tough,” Ray said told The Athletic in April. “Not being able to be the player that I knew I could be, not being able to be the player my teammates knew I could be, the player they saw during camp — that’s always tough. You have all the outside people saying, ‘Are you injury prone?’ and are you this and are you that, so you have to deal with those things and just chalk it up.”

Before this year’s draft, Ray had high expectations for his return. He regained the 20-plus pounds he lost last season and said he felt the best he has in his career. He also anticipated the Broncos picking up his \$9.32 million, fifth-year contract option for 2019.

But the team ultimately declined after drafting Bradley Chubb at No. 5 overall, leaving Ray's future with the team beyond this season in doubt. It's quite possible Chubb will become an immediate starter (if he wasn't already) with Ray likely missing the start of the regular season.

The Broncos traded up to draft Ray at No. 23 in 2015 and groomed him to be the successor to DeMarcus Ware. After earning a Super Bowl ring as a rookie, Ray had a breakout season in 2016, starting eight games as Ware nursed multiple injuries. Ray's eight sacks and 21 quarterback hits that year both ranked second on the team behind Von Miller.

But now it's reasonable to wonder if Ray's fourth NFL season might be his last in Denver. Any hope for a contract extension with the Broncos is likely dependent on a season too good to pass up. But with his offseason shot and maybe the start of his regular season too, the goal now is simply to get healthy and back on the field.

"Everybody thought I had a simple wrist injury. Well, you don't have three surgeries in the season for a simple wrist injury," he said. "I dislocated my entire wrist. I had to get it screwed back together and repair a main tendon in my wrist. I still made the decision to come out and play, and I only had one hand. That's the heart in me. A lot of people say, 'Don't play, take injury reserve.' Maybe I could've done that, but I'm a fighter. It just didn't feel right for me. Even if I had a little bit in me to sit on the bench. That's the kind of guy I am, I am going to keep fighting. That's all I know how to do."

After a “gut-check” rookie season, Broncos DE DeMarcus Walker believes he’s back where he belongs

By Nicki Jhabvala

The Athletic

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Shane Ray said it felt like a sprain. He didn’t realize he tore ligaments, separated bones and would be on an operating table within 24 hours getting screws and pins inserted in his left wrist.

It was the first week of the the Broncos’ 2017 training camp and Ray, a former first-round pick coming off a breakout season, was entering his prime as a full-time starter.

So he thought.

So the Broncos hoped.

But Ray’s third NFL season was a wash as he spent the first half on injured reserve and latter half playing outside linebacker nearly 20 pounds underweight. (Ray is seeking a second opinion to determine if he needs a fourth surgery on his wrist.)

The unspoken truth about that injury, however, is it didn’t just destroy one season. It killed two. With Ray out of the mix, the Broncos moved second-round rookie DeMarcus Walker away from his natural position of defensive end to outside linebacker.

Not only was Walker new to the league, to the game, to the Broncos’ locker room and their playbook, but he was also tasked with adapting to two positions at the highest level.

In mere weeks he shed more than 40 pounds (food-poisoning during the season added to the weight loss), and he was forced to relearn things he hadn’t done since his early days at Florida State.

“I hadn’t dropped (in coverage) since my sophomore year of college,” he said. “Learning just to read techniques, when you drop in the zone, learning to read the quarterback’s eyes and all that stuff. I had to refresh my brain and my body. I wasn’t the best at it, but I can do it.”

Welcome to the NFL, kid.

Underweight and uncomfortable, Walker’s rookie season took a detour few expected. When injuries ravaged the Broncos’ line late in the season, Walker was moved back to defensive end for a final gasp of normalcy as the team crawled to a 5-11 finish.

But his bounce-back is underway, he says, thanks in large part to his mother’s fried chicken.

Walker has spent the majority of this offseason regaining the weight he lost, eating four or five meals per day to get back to his usual playing weight of 280 pounds.

Though the offseason is early and the Broncos have yet to put on pads, players have noticed a change in Walker.

“DeMarcus, I’ve definitely seen a lot of improvement,” defensive end Zach Kerr said. “He’s put some weight on. He’s definitely rushing the passer. That’s what he can do. That’s what we all know that he can do. I’m impressed with that.”

Added veteran Derek Wolfe: “His effort level is way above where he was. Bill (Kollar) is pushing him and trying to make him better. He’s trying to compete with everybody. He’s not complacent. He’s just trying to get better every day, and I’m proud of him.”

Turning a 3-4 defensive end into an outside linebacker is nothing new nor rare. The Broncos in subpackages the majority of the time, allowing them to rearrange their ends and linebackers, and the typical positional lines get blurred. Many of their defenders are hybrids, with Von Miller and cornerback Chris Harris among the elite of elite.

With his physique, quickness and natural ability to bend under tackles, Miller is on a level no other can top at outside linebacker. Harris, with his ability to play inside or out, even safety, puts him in a league of his own.

Bradley Chubb, the Broncos’ No. 5 overall pick this year, will be a hybrid too, but with his size — 6-foot-4 and nearly 270 pounds — and natural ability (the handwork, the burst), the transition is expected to be fairly seamless. Plus, Chubb will remain an outside linebacker and maintain his weight. The plan is to move him to the line in certain subpackages.

“It really depends on the guy’s ability. If you have enough quickness it doesn’t end up mattering,” said Kollar, the Broncos’ defensive line coach. “What happens is if you’re playing 3-4, just like DeMarcus Ware — he was a 4-3 end then we went to 3-4 — is it really depends on your skill. If you have the quickness and all that stuff to be able to do it, then it isn’t that much of a problem. If you’re lacking in something, then it’s a lot tougher.”

Walker’s transition was different.

Walker’s transition was a complete switch.

“It was really a gut check. But I just maintained,” Walker said. “I’ve been through worse things in my life. Like I just told them earlier, I had to finish out strong. That was my biggest key.”

Now back on the line where he’s comfortable, and back at a weight he’s used to, Walker’s motive is simple: Keep the added pounds, and the quickness.

So far, he’s on track.

“He’s back to where he was before and then just keep working on conditioning and his quickness,” Kollar said. “He’s really worked hard this offseason to get to where he is, so now he’s just gotta keep rolling. When the pads come on it’s different than what it has been in OTAs, but so far he’s done a pretty good job.”

Broncos' Ray will undergo another wrist surgery

By Pat Graham
Associated Press
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Shane Ray's ailing left wrist needs another surgery. This one could sideline the pass rusher for several months.

The Denver Broncos outside linebacker is expected to undergo a fourth operation on the wrist, a person with knowledge of the situation told The Associated Press on Wednesday. The person spoke to the AP on the condition of anonymity because the team hasn't announced the news.

Ray suffered the injury during training camp last July, which 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.

This week, he sat out several days of voluntary workouts with what coach Vance Joseph described as a wrist that was sore. This after Ray spent the offseason bulking up from 219 pounds to around 247 to be a pass-rushing force alongside Von Miller and rookie Bradley Chubb, who was taken with the No. 5 pick.

"Everybody thought I had a simple wrist injury," Ray recently said. "Well, you don't have three surgeries in a season for a simple wrist injury. I dislocated my entire wrist. I had to get it screwed back together and repair the main tendon in my wrist."

The Broncos didn't pick up the fifth-year option on Ray, who was a first-round selection in 2015. His option — \$9.23 million — would have been worth more than the four-year, \$9,118,894 rookie contract he signed after the Broncos selected him.

Ray said he understood the business decision by the Broncos. But it adds fuel. So does the team selecting Chubb.

"I always have motivation," said the 25-year-old Ray, who's started just 15 games in three NFL seasons, with 13 sacks and two fumble recoveries. "The option? That's motivation. Chubb coming in? For him to come in and challenge me, I look at that as a motivation. I look forward to all these things coming into this season.

"I'm going to play as hard as I can and do what I was brought here to do."

Broncos returner hopes for another chance after 6 fumbles

By Pat Graham
Associated Press
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Isaiah McKenzie knows he let a big opportunity slip right through his fingers last season.

Six muffed punts .

The Denver Broncos returner knows he can't hide from that glaring figure. All he can do is learn, which is why McKenzie went back and watched every mistake again and again. He's hoping to win back trust and receive another chance after fumbling it away.

"Unacceptable," the 5-foot-8, 173-pound McKenzie said of his rookie season as two of his muffs led to turnovers and another to a safety. "I say that because I know the things I can do. I can catch the ball. I can make plays. I made bad decisions. I understand that and I'm building off that. I've come back this year with a better mindset."

Over the offseason, he focused on little things: Getting more sleep. Eating better. Lifting more in the weight room.

"It was about getting my mind right, my body right," McKenzie said.

He also scrutinized those muffed punts and the decisions that led to them.

"It's like, 'Why did I do that? I shouldn't have done that,'" said McKenzie, whose long return last season was 44 yards at Philadelphia. "The first four games, I was catching everything and making big plays. I kind of got greedy."

He's got even more competition this time around. There's receiver Jordan Taylor and rookie wideout DaeSean Hamilton, along with rookie running backs David Williams, Phillip Lindsay and Royce Freeman. The team also has a new special teams coordinator in Tom McMahon, who doesn't have any sort of hierarchy in place yet.

Or preconceived notions.

"I want them to earn it," McMahon said. "Naturally, Isaiah and Jordan, in my opinion, they're doing a great job right now. ... We're going to have a great returner, whoever it is."

McKenzie just hopes he can win back the confidence in him — from head coach Vance Joseph, who kept running him out there. From his teammates. From the fans.

"People don't understand, you're sitting in the stands, but punt return is hard. It's a tough job," receiver Emmanuel Sanders said. "He has to reset. He doesn't have a choice. He has to take a step back and say,

'OK, how can I break down the film and get better?' That's what he's been doing. We're going to see if it paid off when the season comes."

McKenzie also hopes there's room for him as a receiver. The team spent draft picks on Courtland Sutton (second round) and Hamilton (fourth).

"We got two of the best receivers in the draft," said McKenzie, who caught four passes for 29 yards. "It's a job competition every day. That's what I come here to do, compete every day."

A fifth-round pick out of Georgia, McKenzie started out with a 31-yard punt return against the Los Angeles Chargers in the opener.

Soon after, the muffs began to happen. Two against Oakland, which didn't result in turnovers. Another mishandling against the New York Giants — again recovered and no real harm done, except perhaps to the psyche.

McKenzie's bobble cost him at Kansas City, with his turnover leading to a field goal. And another against New England after the defense forced a three-and-out to open the game. Tom Brady converted that into a TD during a 41-16 rout on Nov. 12.

McKenzie was inactive the following week in a season going sideways. At practice on Thanksgiving Day, McKenzie and defensive back Chris Harris Jr. got into a tussle.

The following week, inactive again before he returned Dec. 3 at Miami. He fumbled a punt in the fourth quarter that led to him being tackled in the end zone for a safety. He didn't return a punt over the last four contests.

"Last year was a roller coaster," McKenzie said. "But it's a fresh start. I'm catching the ball well on punts. I'm keeping it rolling."

NOTES: Sanders is hoping to help set up a quarterback/receiver camp this summer. "Go out there for two or three days and throw the football around and hang out and gain team chemistry," Sanders said. ... S Justin Simmons is trying to balance workouts with being a father after the birth of his daughter last month. "No sleep," he said. "But it's good."

Case Keenum showcasing traits needed to win championships

By Aric DiLalla
DenverBroncos.com
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Early in the Broncos' offseason program, quarterback Case Keenum clarified one aspect of his new role as Denver's starter.

While he was appreciative of the opportunity to head into a season as the unquestioned signal caller, he wouldn't declare himself the leader of either the offense or the team.

Instead, Keenum said, he'd aim to work every day to prove himself to his teammates.

The process — at least through the first several weeks of OTAs — seems to be moving at an accelerated pace.

"The guys have already rallied around him," safety Justin Simmons said. "I know he talks about how he wanted to come in and earn that leadership spot. I'm not speaking for him or for anyone on the offensive side, but I feel like he is definitely earning it, if not has earned it. Day by day already, just in OTAs, he's taken full steam of the offense and has really gotten them going."

That seems evident in talking with wide receiver Emmanuel Sanders, who has been one of the main beneficiaries of Keenum's arrival.

The new version offense, Sanders said, gives Keenum and Co. a variety of ways in which they can attack a defense, and they're displaying them in OTAs.

During Wednesday's practice, Sanders saw a number of his teammates make big plays on the offensive side of the ball. After a 2017 season in which the team struggled to create explosive plays, that's a welcome change.

"I tell you what, everybody — like at practice today — everybody was making plays on the offensive side," Sanders said. "A lot of big-time plays. We went off [as] wide receivers, and [had] great balls by the quarterbacks. I'm optimistic; I like what I'm seeing."

Sanders rattled off a series of names — Courtland Sutton, DaeSean Hamilton, Jake Butt, Jeff Heurman — but the most impressive offensive player may be Keenum.

As Thomas said on May 29, one of Keenum's most noticeable attributes is the way in which he leads the team while on the field.

"He takes control of everything," Thomas said. "Not just offense, but the whole group. Offense, defense, special teams and all. He takes control of the huddle. I know that I was in the huddle one day and I said, 'Wait, wait, wait. We're missing ...' and he said, 'I got this.' And I said, 'OK.'"

“So it’s stuff like that. It’s good to have him around.”

That leadership hasn’t stopped off the field. Keenum, Thomas and Sanders are working to finalize a throwing session over the summer break, and Keenum has made the most of every spare second while at the facility.

“Every day — the majority of the days — he’ll come in and ask me and D.T. to go and watch practices,” Sanders said, “and we’ll sit in the back room and watch film and go over what he’s thinking and what we’re thinking.”

Think those extra film sessions are overkill or that they’re just for show?

Sanders made it clear Wednesday just how valuable extra studying in June can be when a team turns the corner from December to January.

“I’ve been a part of two Super Bowl teams, and that’s what it takes,” Sanders said. “That extra work that’s not mandatory, where guys are in there working out or working on their mental game. That right there — when it’s fourth quarter or when it’s fourth-and-5 or third-and-8 — that’s the stuff that gets you over the hill.”

With Keenum on the Broncos’ side, that hill may not seem so daunting.

Broncos IT exec: NFL cyber breach is 'not a matter of if,' but 'when'

By Monica Vendituoli
Denver Business Journal
June 7, 2018

Russ Trainor, Denver Broncos senior vice president of information technology, believes it's inevitable that an NFL team will be the victim of hackers.

"The NFL is a pretty big brand and all of the clubs are pretty big brands and so honestly, candidly, it's not a matter of if, it's only when somebody gets breached," Trainor said.

He spoke about what his team and the NFL as a whole are doing to prepare for and prevent such a breach during the Check Point Experience at The Ritz-Carlton on Wednesday. More than 200 IT professionals attended the event, which is one of many that will be held by the software technologies company throughout the country this year.

Trainor said his job, as well as those of other NFL team IT departments, has grown leaps and bounds in the last 10 years.

In 2008, there were around 350 devices on the Broncos' network. Trainor said there are now 8,000 devices on that same network, which is secured by Check Point Software Technologies.

These devices include everything from the players' iPads to the scoreboard.

Trainor said new protocols have been developed in response to this rapid increase in devices.

For instance, the Broncos players now all have team playbooks on their iPads. Trainor had to create protocols to make sure the playbooks stay only with current Broncos players.

"If that iPad doesn't check in, and say there's some video on there, in a certain amount of days the app won't be deleted, but the video and the playbooks inside there will go away and they can't get it back," Trainor said. "You've got to do that because sometimes the trades happen so quickly."

Similarly, Trainor said his system allows for the direct transfer of Broncos players' medical records to their new teams if they are traded.

Trainor added that the Broncos' IT department is preparing for an increase in wireless users after the team announced in April that it will only accept digital tickets.

In late June or early July, Trainor said the Broncos' IT department will simulate an emergency data breach situation.

"We'll say, 'OK, Ticketmaster was breached; we lost 100 credit cards,'" Trainor said.

Trainor said the NFL's IT departments meet with Ticketmaster yearly and Ticketmaster gives them their "roadmap of the future" of cybersecurity.

Trainor said companies must act fast after a breach happens. He added that there is often a lag time between when a company is breached and when it realizes it has been breached.

"After a breach happens, it's usually three to four to five months until they know someone is in their network," Trainor said.

During the simulation, Trainor said his team will discuss the plan for letting the public know.

"When you get a million credit cards hacked, you have an obligation to let those million people know," Trainor said.

In addition, Trainor will collaborate with the Broncos staff, the NFL and the Department of Homeland Security during the simulation.

Trainor said collaboration is increasing between individual NFL clubs and their IT departments. The Broncos IT department is among seven NFL club IT departments on the NFL Security Committee.

The committee meets to discuss emerging cybersecurity threats and create best practices.

"What can we do to raise up the whole league?" Trainor said is the guiding principal of the committee.

While the NFL now has minimum cybersecurity standards for all of its teams, each team is able to go beyond those requirements.

"I think we're in the top half," Trainor said when asked how the Denver Broncos' cybersecurity efforts compare to the rest of the NFL.

Trainor compared the Broncos IT system to an M&M with a hard shell on the outside, but with softer borders on the inside. He said he hopes to tackle further securing departments such as finance and human resources so even fewer employees can access those records.

"We want to make sure we can be secure as we can be," Trainor said.

DeMarcus Ware: I would have wanted to visit White House this year

By Lindsay Jones

USA Today

June 7, 2018

Two years ago, DeMarcus Ware was part of a large contingent of Denver Broncos who traveled to Washington D.C. to meet President Obama as part of the team's celebration for winning Super Bowl 50. Ware, who told USA TODAY Sports in 2016 that he is a Democrat, said he would have gone to the White House this year, had he been a part of the Philadelphia Eagles, regardless of the new administration.

The White House and President Trump canceled the Eagles' celebration scheduled for Tuesday, saying the decision was made after the team planned to have a small group of representatives on hand for the ceremony.

"I want to go," Ware said Wednesday after helping coach Dallas Cowboys pass rushers. "Presidents, they change, but the White House doesn't change, and I want to see it. I want to see it."

Ware, who played for the Cowboys from 2005-13 before joining the Denver Broncos for three seasons, called it a "privilege" to meet the president and see the history of the White House building itself. During the Broncos' trip, the nine-time Pro Bowl selection and his teammates tossed a football on a lawn and posed for pictures with portraits of former presidents before joining Obama in the Rose Garden.

"A lot of people don't get to go to the White House, and to meet the president. It is a big privilege because he is that person that represents us. So I want go to the White House and see all the history that is, and I want to see where I'm paying all my money to, to Uncle Sam," Ware said. "But then, to be there with your team and you're having a good time. They didn't get to do that this year, and that's hard. I guess the tradition is broken."

Nearly all of the Broncos made the trip (defensive end Derek Wolfe was a notable exception), and Ware understood why multiple Eagles players said they would not want to attend.

"As a team, you have to stick together," Ware said. "I would say, tell you what, let's make it to the Super Bowl again and then see if we get invited back next year."

Broncos' Shane Ray reportedly expected to miss start of season due to wrist surgery

By Sean Wagner-McGough

CBS Sports

June 7, 2018

It's not even summer yet and Broncos outside linebacker Shane Ray has already seen his season get sidetracked by an injury. It turns out, the sore wrist that forced Ray to sit out Monday's practice will reportedly impact his availability for the start of the 2018 regular season.

On Wednesday night, NFL Network's Ian Rapoport reported that Ray will undergo surgery on his wrist and is expected to miss three months, which means he's expected to miss the beginning of the season. The Broncos will open up the season with games against the Seahawks, Raiders, and Ravens before an Oct. 1 date with the Chiefs.

According to NFL Network's James Palmer, the upcoming operation will be Ray's fourth surgery on his wrist in the past year. The Athletic's Nicki Jhabvala characterized the surgery as a clean-up procedure.

The development is a brutal break for a player entering a pivotal season. Ray, drafted with the 23rd pick in 2015, is entering the final year of his rookie deal after the Broncos declined to pick up his fifth-year option in May. Ray notched four sacks during his 14-game rookie season and proceeded to double his sack total in 2016, but his sack total dropped to one in an eight-game, injury-shortened 2017 season. Suddenly, with the addition of Bradley Chubb and the emergence of Shaquil Barrett (to go along with Derek Wolfe and Von Miller, of course), Ray has become expendable in Denver. Over the past three seasons, Barrett has collected 11 sacks. Ray has 13 in that span.

The good news for Ray is that he'll still have a chance to prove his worth if he's able to return sometime in September or October. The bad news is that his competition within the team will get a chance to cement their roles on the defensive front with Ray sidelined.

For the Broncos, their depth on the defensive front means they're equipped to handle Ray's absence. Last year, they finished as the 10th-best defense by DVOA even though they were missing Ray for half the season. Ray will certainly help when he returns, but the Broncos can probably survive without him. Adding Chubb helps too, of course.

When the Broncos drafted Chubb, Ray seemed to find extra motivation as he prepared for the 2018 season.

Unfortunately for him, the injury woes that plagued him a year ago continue into this offseason.

Broncos' Shane Ray to undergo another wrist surgery

By Chris Wesseling

NFL.com

June 7, 2018

While No. 5 overall pick Nick Chubb is already opening eyes in Denver, the team's 2015 first-round choice has fallen on hard times.

A wrist injury that sidelined Broncos pass rusher Shane Ray earlier in the week will require surgery, NFL Network Insider Ian Rapoport reported, via a source informed of the situation. The recovery is expected to last at least three months, per Rapoport, putting Ray's status in doubt for the season opener.

Ray developed discomfort in the same left wrist that has necessitated several procedures going back to last summer. The Broncos declined last month to exercise the fifth-year option on his rookie contract, clouding the former Mizzou star's future beyond 2018.

After generating just 13 sacks in 38 games over three NFL seasons, Ray was expected to battle Chubb and Shaquil Barrett for snaps opposite All-Pro Von Miller. Now that it's a two-man race, the hotshot rookie has a prime opportunity to earn the starting job with a strong showing in training camp.

Five reasons why the Broncos will make the 2018 NFL playoffs

By Adam Rank

NFL.com

June 7, 2018

The Broncos finished 5-11 last season, "earning" a top-five pick in the 2018 NFL Draft. And yet, their Super Bowl window is wide open. Which is kind of cool. Especially since we are sitting here as witness to the Golden State Warriors and Cleveland Cavaliers going at it again in the NBA Finals. A matchup as fresh as a WWE PPV with Brock Lesnar and Roman Reigns.

Look, I'm not totally shading the NBA, because I enjoy it very much. But just a handful of cities have a legitimate chance at the Finals. Not so here in the NFL. The Broncos are definitely in the mix. But if they are going to take advantage of that window, they need to make the playoffs. Here are five reasons why they will do so.

1) The Broncos still have Von Miller, right?

I just wanted to make this clear. Because I hear a lot of people (haters, really) saying that the Broncos' defense isn't what it used to be. And they are sort of right, because there are new players. But Denver's defense is still pretty good -- and No. 58 is still an elite game wrecker. It's crazy to think people have become so desensitized to Miller's greatness that they look at his 10 sacks last year and offer a collective yawn. Like they have awesome-defensive-player fatigue. The same way a lot of those haters on Twitter just watched "Solo: A Star Wars Story" and somehow walked away unimpressed. Are you kidding me? That movie had a lot of heart. And it was an enjoyable film. Likewise, Miller is still playing the best football of his life, and you need to recognize.

2) And they stole Bradley Chubb

Yes, it takes more than one player to make a defense great. The Broncos won Super Bowl 50 with a collaborative effort on defense. I get that. But this team still has a great all-around unit. One that only got better with the fifth overall pick in April's draft ...

Defensive coordinator Joe Wood said he nearly passed out when Bradley Chubb was gifted to Denver in Round 1. The Broncos ended up with the player some considered the top prospect in the draft. This is like when the Spurs landed Tim Duncan in the draft after ... Ah, shoot -- guess I already used that analogy in the Giants piece. Fine. This is like when the geniuses at Taco Bell were like, Tacos are good. But what if we made this taco shell out of Doritos?? It's like that. (And does everybody realize the Browns are basically that dude in your fantasy draft who inexplicably passes on a stud right before your pick? I just did a mock where I got Todd Gurley at No. 4 and had the same feeling Denver must have had.)

Chubb gives the Broncos the kind of dynamic presence opposite Miller that they've missed since DeMarcus Ware joined NFL Network. They also have Shane Ray, Shaq Barrett and Derek Wolfe on that front. And they nabbed Su'a Cravens, who appears to be recommitted to football. Aqib Talib is gone, but his protege, Bradley Roby, is going to surprise a lot of folks. I know a lot of people believe the Broncos' defense from a few years ago is not walking back through that door. But this reboot looks pretty great.

(UPDATE: NFL Network Insider Ian Rapoport reported Wednesday that Shane Ray will require wrist surgery and is expected to miss three months.)

3) Denver did a nice job with the other draft picks, too

I really like this infusion of youth in the Mile High City. Chubb was an absolute lock once he fell to them. But second-round selection Courtland Sutton is a nice player who produced at SMU despite meh quarterback play for much of his college career. I mean, shoot: He would have felt right at home with Brock Osweiler. Sutton could end up pushing Emmanuel Sanders into the slot (which is actually a more natural fit for the veteran). Another enticing slot option: fourth-rounder DaeSean Hamilton. I'm also quite bullish on third-round pick Royce Freeman, who will end up being the workhorse back, and fourth-rounder Josey Jewell, who's a tackling machine at linebacker.

Overall, this was a fine haul for John Elway.

4) John Elway didn't draft a quarterback

I know that sounds a little weird, but stick with me here ...

We can debate whether Case Keenum's 2017 campaign was an aberration or not. But what can't be debated is that the Broncos did the best thing for him when they didn't draft a quarterback. This signals to Keenum -- and the team -- that he's the starting quarterback, for better or worse.

Could you imagine the pressure on Keenum if the Broncos had selected Josh Rosen? Half of the fans would've demanded Rosen start the season at quarterback. And the first errant Keenum pass would swing the other half. Well, not the entire other half. I figure, like, 19 percent of Broncos fans would have backed the starter no matter what.

The point is, Keenum doesn't have to look over his shoulder every time something goes wrong. He's The Dude, and that goes a long way for everybody involved.

5) This is a legit win-now group

If you're a reporter covering the team's offseason workouts, it's nearly a requirement to seek out the player who is willing to throw out the most early-season tropes. You know the ones: Culture changes. Best shape of their life. We're built to win right now. Shelby Harris got us at a recent OTA.

"I like the vibe. It's a sense of urgency," Harris told reporters. "Everyone has something to prove."

So, glad we got that covered.

Honestly, though, this sentiment does fit these Broncos. They have enough veteran mettle -- with Miller, Keenum and Demaryius Thomas, among others -- to not only compete for the AFC West, but make a deep run in the playoffs. I feel like a lot of folks are foolishly dismissing this team because Denver lost a few pieces. But these Broncos look pretty darn stout to me.

2018 NFL season: Predicting every AFC team's MVP

By Dan Hanzus

NFL.com

June 7, 2018

The beginning of the 2018 NFL season is less than 100 days away. If you're like me, you've been studying your favorite team, diagnosing the roster's strengths and weaknesses as you make an internal case for a playoff run. Some of us might have to squint harder than others, of course, but there's always that path to success -- a best-case scenario for a fine autumn of football enjoyment.

I'm not breaking news when I say your team will probably need strong performances from its best players to find success. After all, if the big dogs don't lead the way, the journey is almost certainly doomed. (I'd love to draw a particularly famous Iditarod example here, but I just don't have the institutional knowledge to extend this labored analogy any further.)

Back to your stars. Need 'em. They gotta deliver. With that in mind, we went through the league to spotlight the 32 players who are set up to be their team's most valuable player in 2018. To be clear, this is not an exercise in predicting who'll win the league's Most Valuable Player award, though I feel reasonably confident that individual will be included in my lists. God, I hope so. Can't blow this one.

Anyway, let's get to it. Today we'll roll out the AFC, followed by the NFC on Thursday.

Baltimore Ravens: Justin Tucker, K

Ideally, my list doesn't start with a freaking place-kicker, but sometimes alphabetical order trolls you like that. That said, I'll pound the table for Tucker's greatness anywhere on this list. This is a guy coming off two of the greatest seasons a kicker's ever had. Shame it's been wasted on a pair of middling Ravens teams, but we can see the brilliance tucked amidst mediocrity. Some Tucker facts: He's missed just four field-goal tries in the last two seasons. He went 10-for-10 from beyond 50 yards in 2016, a season in which his only miss came on a block. He's never missed an extra-point try in 205 attempts. He's a game-changing talent at the game's most underappreciated position. Justin Tucker will win multiple games for the Ravens in 2018.

Buffalo Bills: LeSean McCoy, RB

McCoy is the choice here, because if LeSean McCoy has a LeSean McCoy season behind that offensive line, the man's Canton credentials will receive a major boost. Shady was quietly as good as ever last season: His 1,586 yards from scrimmage represented a third of the Bills' total offense during their run to the playoffs. They might ask even more of the soon-to-be 30-year-old as Buffalo attempts to get its quarterback position in order for 2018 and beyond. The man can't tip, but he can absolutely carry an offense.

Cincinnati Bengals: A.J. Green, WR

Green is an excellent bounce-back candidate coming off a disappointing-by-his-standards 75/1,078/8 line in 2017. The Bengals could have done more to add another weapon or two around their All-Pro wideout (the decision to let both Marvin Jones and Mohamed Sanu depart after 2015 remains puzzling, in retrospect), but the upside is, Green will continue to be Andy Dalton's best friend. Two outside factors that could help Green get back to All-Pro status: 1) Tight end Tyler Eifert returns after another season lost

to injury. Then there's wide receiver John Ross, last year's first-round pick, who will try to wipe away all traces of a nightmarish rookie season. No matter what happens, Green will continue to be the centerpiece.

Cleveland Browns: Myles Garrett, DE

Garrett showed plenty of flashes in his debut season, registering seven sacks in just 11 games. It makes you wonder what the former No. 1 overall pick can do with a full season of health and the comfort that comes with escaping your rookie year. Browns head coach Hue Jackson has publicly stated the need for Garrett to blossom into an elite performer, something that typically hasn't happened for Cleveland first-round picks in the past 20 years. Still, Garrett projects as the most talented member of a potentially strong -- like, for real! -- Cleveland Browns defense.

Denver Broncos: Von Miller, OLB

Broncos defensive coordinator Joe Woods said he "nearly passed out" when the Browns passed on edge rusher Bradley Chubb in April's draft, a decision that allowed Denver to grab the N.C. State dynamo with the fifth pick. Von Miller called Chubb "Khalil Mack and Von Miller put together", which is about as high as praise can get. But the rookie won't be our MVP pick in Denver. It's Miller, who stands to benefit greatly from the sudden presence of another game-changing menace near the line of scrimmage. If Chubb lives up to the hype, it could free up Miller to go gonzo in 2018.

Houston Texans: J.J. Watt, DE

When's the last time we saw Peak J.J. Watt? You have to go all the way back to the 2015 season, when Houston's hometown hero was putting the final touches on a four-year run of dominance that rivals that of any defensive player in NFL history. At 29, there's still reason to believe he can be that player again after back and leg injuries wiped out most of his last two seasons. For what it's worth, Bill O'Brien expects the MVP-level stud to be back in full force. "I would never bet against J.J. Watt," the Texans coach told NFL Network's Good Morning Football last month. "He's going to be back, he's going to be at full strength, and he's going to help us win a lot of games." Good enough for us!

Indianapolis Colts: Andrew Luck, QB

Put it this way: If Andrew Luck is not the Colts' most valuable player this season, that means something has (once again) gone very wrong in Indianapolis. We choose to buy into all the optimism coming out of Colts Land and expect Luck to make a successful return from major shoulder surgery. The big question: Will Luck still have the old zip on the ball? If he doesn't, he might have to change the way he approaches the game -- a transition that could take time. Hopefully, we get the mad bomber version. That guy's fun!

Jacksonville Jaguars: Leonard Fournette, RB

Fournette's rookie season was a hit-and-miss affair. At times, he looked like the young star the Jags thought they were getting when they drafted him fourth overall. But he also looked slow and hobbled for long stretches, averaging less than 4 yards per carry during the regular season and playoffs. New season, new expectations for Fournette, who must blossom into a dependable stud if Jacksonville is going to take the next step. The addition of mauling guard Andrew Norwell in free agency could be just what Fournette needs. Ground and pound, baby.

Kansas City Chiefs: Patrick Mahomes, QB

There's a lot of pressure on Mahomes, the 10th overall pick in 2017, but you get the feeling Andy Reid knows a star at quarterback when he sees it. Mahomes replaces Alex Smith in Kansas City and immediately changes the dynamic of the Chiefs' offense with his electric dual-threat capabilities. Mahomes, Tyreek

Hill, Travis Kelce and Kareem Hunt is as enviable a Big 4 as there is in the league right now. The obligatory "growing pains" are possible, but it's also possible the former Texas Tech star takes the league by storm this fall.

Los Angeles Chargers: Joey Bosa, DE

Bosa has been a star since the day he stepped foot on an NFL field, so expectations will be immense as he enters his third season. We're squarely in "prime" territory now, and Bosa comes off a season in which he piled up 70 total tackles, 11 tackles for loss, four forced fumbles, 21 QB hits and 12.5 sacks. That's tremendous production, but you get the feeling he could be just scratching the surface. Having Melvin Ingram cause chaos on the other side is an embarrassment of riches in a league where elite pass rushers are in short supply. Bosa might be the best of the bunch.

Miami Dolphins: Ryan Tannehill, QB

It's easy to forget now, but Tannehill was finally living up to his promise in 2016, his first season with Dolphins head coach Adam Gase. During an appearance on the Around The NFL Podcast at the owners meetings in March, Gase lamented the fact that he'd only gotten 13 starts from his QB1 in 33 games on the job in Miami. There may be a lot of Tannehill doubters at this stage, but Gase is a believer, and that's all that really matters. Here's an eye-opening Tannehill stat, courtesy of the Sun Sentinel: The Dolphins went 7-1 in Tannehill's last eight games before his knee injury in December 2016, a stretch in which he posted a passer rating of 102.6.

New England Patriots: Tom Brady, QB

I mean, c'mon. What do you want me to say? Rookie running back Sony Michel could have a transformational effect on Josh McDaniels' offense in New England. Please. And that's not taking anything away from Michel, who will probably (definitely) tear it up at Gillette. The truth is that Brady has had a case for MVP in, like, 15 of the past 17 NFL seasons. By that, I mean NFL MVP. True story: I just did a cursory search for Patriots team MVP awards and found nothing. They probably treat team-specific awards the way Belichick treats the AFC Championship trophy. Worthless, pitiable, and small-minded in scale.

New York Jets: Trumaine Johnson, CB

The Jets shelled out massive bucks to land Johnson, who Todd Bowles hopes will be the game-changing presence at CB1 that Darrelle Revis never was in his return engagement at the Meadowlands. It was a no-brainer investment for a Gang Green secondary that suddenly has the look of one of the league's more promising defensive backfields. If Johnson thrives -- something he did regularly during his years with the Rams -- he can be a domino piece that takes New York's defense back into the top 10 for the first time since Bowles' first season as head coach (2015).

Oakland Raiders: Derek Carr, QB

Here's something that didn't get brought up enough in the post-mortem of Oakland's deeply disappointing 2017 campaign: The quarterback broke his back. Like, legitimately. Carr suffered multiple fractures in his back in Week 4, then rushed his return to action after missing only one game. His play suffered as a result, his MVP-level performance in 2016 rendered a distant memory. Enter Jon Gruden and a new era of Raiders football, which still very much includes Carr. I talked about a Carr renaissance on this week's "Around The NFL Podcast" for a reason: Gruden and Carr could be the league's new power couple. Grudrek? Carrden? Do people still do the combined names thing? Let's just move on.

Pittsburgh Steelers: Antonio Brown, WR

We love, as sports fans, to celebrate legends in real time -- it's part of the reason why the LeBron vs. MJ debate has picked up so much steam this spring. That said, I find it strange Antonio Brown doesn't get any "best-ever" love. Because, let's be clear, Brown is an all-time great currently performing -- like James in these NBA Playoffs -- at the very height of his powers. Last year, Brown had a legitimate shot at league MVP honors before a calf injury cut his regular season short: It makes his 2017 stats (101 catches, 1,533 yards, nine touchdowns), accrued in just over 13 games, all the more remarkable. Big Ben and Le'Veon Bell are tremendous talents, but Brown is the deadliest of the Killer Bs.

Tennessee Titans: Marcus Mariota, QB

While we won't call this a make-or-break year for Mariota, you can safely assume the Titans hope this is the year their quarterback develops into the full-blown star they've always expected him to become. Last season, we saw progress with a 9-7 season followed by that upset playoff win over the Chiefs in Arrowhead. Mariota's growth will be tied to new offensive coordinator Matt LaFleur, who, we're told, plans to build an offense that properly suits Mariota's strengths as a player. Um, what took so long, guys?

Taylor Swift show sets Wi-Fi record at Mile High with 8.1 TB used

By Paul Kapustka
Mobile Sports Report
June 7, 2018

From the reviews we've seen lately the Taylor Swift Reputation tour is a great show — and last week in Denver it set a stadium record for Wi-Fi network use, with 8.1 terabytes used, according to the Denver Broncos' IT team.

Formerly known as Sports Authority Field at Mile High, the now-unsponsored stadium that is the home of the NFL's Denver Broncos got a significant upgrade to its Wi-Fi network throughout last season, mainly via new APs installed in under-seat and handrail deployments. Even with the network now fully installed but not yet completely tuned or optimized, the stadium saw approximately 30,000 unique clients connected to Wi-Fi for the Swift show on May 25, out of about 50,000 total attendees. Some of the seats in the stadium were not used due to stage configuration.

Russ Trainor, vice president for IT for the Broncos, said the 8.1 TB mark was the highest yet for Wi-Fi at the stadium, a mark that may be challenged this football season with more fans in the stands and perhaps a playoff season from the Broncos. Anyone else out there with Taylor Swift Wi-Fi numbers to share, let us know. Seattle? Levi's Stadium? C'mon — it's not too soon to share all that. And just FYI — the concert checks in at No. 5 on our unofficial all-time Wi-Fi list! Not bad!

THE LATEST TOP 10 FOR WI-FI

1. Super Bowl 52, U.S. Bank Stadium, Minneapolis, Minn., Feb. 4, 2018: Wi-Fi: 16.31 TB
2. Super Bowl 51, NRG Stadium, Houston, Feb. 5, 2017: Wi-Fi: 11.8 TB
3. Super Bowl 50, Levi's Stadium, Santa Clara, Calif., Feb. 7, 2016: Wi-Fi: 10.1 TB
4. Minnesota Vikings vs. Philadelphia Eagles, NFC Championship Game, Lincoln Financial Field, Philadelphia, Pa., Jan. 21, 2018: Wi-Fi: 8.76 TB
5. Taylor Swift Reputation Tour, Mile High Stadium, Denver, May 25, 2018: Wi-Fi: 8.1 TB
6. Kansas City Chiefs vs. New England Patriots, Gillette Stadium, Foxborough, Mass., Sept. 7, 2017: Wi-Fi: 8.08 TB
7. Green Bay Packers vs. Dallas Cowboys, Divisional Playoffs, AT&T Stadium, Arlington, Texas, Jan. 15, 2017: Wi-Fi: 7.25 TB
8. Southern California vs. Notre Dame, Notre Dame Stadium, South Bend, Ind., Oct. 21, 2017: 7.0 TB
9. WrestleMania 32, AT&T Stadium, Arlington, Texas, April 3, 2016: Wi-Fi: 6.77 TB
10. NCAA Men's Final Four, University of Phoenix Stadium, Glendale, Ariz., April 1, 2017: Wi-Fi: 6.3 TB

After Trump Flare-Up, Eagles Let Football (and Some Signs) Do the Talking

By Marc Tracy
New York Times
June 7, 2018

After spending 24 hours in the center of a culture war, the Philadelphia Eagles shrugged off a white-hot controversy with earnest platitudes and easygoing humor. They spoke of diversity and activism, of team unity and the weather.

And the team's most prominent political figure declined to speak at all, choosing instead to let a series of handwritten poster boards do the talking. It was a stark contrast with his team's and the N.F.L.'s very talkative antagonist, the President of the United States.

This was a little more than one day after a planned White House celebration for the Eagles' Super Bowl victory imploded into canceled plans and recriminations, with the Eagles reportedly planning to send only a few players and the White House press secretary accusing the team of "a political stunt." Now it was time for an off-season practice (an "OTA," or Organized Team Activity, in N.F.L.-speak) and the relief that came with returning to comparatively mundane subjects like blocking, tackling and catching footballs.

"Glad to see so many people for an O.T.A. practice," head coach Doug Pederson joked at a news conference at the Eagles' practice complex near Lincoln Financial Field.

Others were more direct and expansive.

"We've come together as a team, the decisions that were made were made, and at the end of the day, for me it wasn't a decision," said Eagles defensive end Chris Long.

Last season, Long expressed support for teammates who raised their arms during the playing of the national anthem and also donated his million-dollar base salary to educational initiatives. He said that he had not planned to attend the traditional White House celebration for the Super Bowl victor well before it was canceled.

Safety Malcolm Jenkins used the renewed national focus on the Eagles to continue his advocacy. For much of last season, Jenkins raised a fist during the anthem, and he has spent much time researching and lobbying for criminal justice reform.

During a locker room media availability, he held up a series of handwritten signs. One called for the abolition of cash bail, noting, "Any given night 500,000 people sit in jail. Convicted? No. Too poor? Yes." Another pointed out that Colin Kaepernick, the former San Francisco 49ers quarterback who helped kick off the present controversies when he first sat and then knelt during the anthem in 2016 to protest what he saw as structural racism, had donated \$1 million to charity.

"You aren't listening," read another sign, which Jenkins held up more than once in response to reporters' queries.

It is not clear what transpired in the run-up to Monday evening, when President Trump disinvented the team after fewer than 10 team members planned to attend, according to the White House. Mr. Trump's statement accused the Eagles of disagreeing with his stance that all players should stand for the anthem.

No Eagles players knelt during the anthem last season. Several have since clarified that objections to the visit did not stem from the anthem debate.

Sarah Huckabee Sanders, the White House press secretary, said that last week the Secret Service received several dozen names of prospective attendees for clearance, but then Friday the Eagles told the White House that very few people would be coming.

Team officials have not commented. Jason Kelce, a center, said Wednesday that there had been several team meetings about the trip, and that at one point players had been asked to fill out a form stating whether they wished to attend the ceremony as well as other events in Washington.

"Everybody came at their own decision," Kelce said. "I don't think anyone felt pressured either way."

"It wasn't a boycott by any means," added tight end Zach Ertz on Wednesday.

The N.F.L. has not commented on this week's events. Last month, Commissioner Roger Goodell announced a new policy requiring players on-field before the game to stand for the anthem.

"If he doesn't want to stand up for his players, that's not really my business," Long said of Goodell.

Eagles owner Jeffrey Lurie also has not commented and did not appear Wednesday. Lurie has supported the work of Jenkins and other players.

The New York Times reported in April that in a closed-door meeting last year Lurie referred to Mr. Trump's "disastrous presidency" and warned fellow owners not to be baited into a war of words with the White House. He had planned to attend the event Tuesday. So had Pederson.

"I was looking forward to going down and being recognized as world champions," Pederson said. "It is what it is."

Report: Shane Ray will need three months to rehab after more wrist surgery

By Charean Williams

Pro Football Talk

June 7, 2018

Shane Ray will undergo a fourth surgery on his left wrist, via multiple tweets. The Broncos outside linebacker is expected to miss three months, Ian Rapoport of NFL Media reports.

That puts Ray's availability for the start of the regular season in question.

Ray has had three previous surgeries on the wrist the past year. It began bothering him again late last week but is not a new injury.

A second medical opinion this week determined Ray needs a clean-up procedure related to complications from the initial surgery, Nicki Jhabvala of The Athletic reports. The Broncos, though, were encouraged by the news.

Ray missed eight games last season with the injury and made only 16 tackles and a sack.

The Broncos chose not to pick up the \$9.23 million option on Ray's contract for 2019. He is scheduled to become a free agent in March.

Positive reviews continue for Case Keenum

By Mike Florio
Pro Football Talk
June 7, 2018

At times last year, the Vikings seemed ambivalent about quarterback Case Keenum. The Broncos definitely don't.

After two seasons (arguably three) of subpar quarterback play and quarterback competitions that kept the winner from thriving as much as he could, the Broncos are all in with Keenum. And the players are, too.

"He's a great leader," receiver Emmanuel Sanders told reporters on Wednesday. "Every day — the majority of the days — he'll come in and ask me and [Demaryius Thomas] to go and watch practices and we'll sit in the back room and watch film and go over what he's thinking and what we're thinking. I've been a part of two Super Bowl teams, and that's what it takes. That extra work that's not mandatory, where guys are in there working out or working on their mental game. That right there, when it's fourth quarter or when it's fourth and five or third and eight. That's the stuff that gets you over the hill."

Tackle Garrett Bolles notices the impact of Keenum, too.

"I'm grateful we have Case here," Bolles recently told reporters. "I think he brings a demeanor here. That season he had in Minnesota was not a fluke thing. It was 100 percent who he is. A man that has been benched and moved around multiple times and still fought his way to the top and took his team as far as he did. That's a big picture in my eyes. When we brought him in I had to do my research and understand what kind of man he is. . . . Knowing that everything he does — he's collected, he gets in that huddle, and he demands. But he showed us in the offseason, before we even started OTAs. He's bringing us along, we're doing outings together, hockey games and all those things. He's taking control. . . . We all get together and understand each other. Because that's what a team is, understanding each other. If we understand each other then we get on the field, it's easy."

Maybe the Vikings didn't fully understand what they had with Keenum. Or maybe they thought he could only take a team so far. Regardless, both the Broncos and the Vikings will be paying close attention to what Keenum accomplishes in Denver, and Vikings fans will be comparing what Keenum does in Denver to what Kirk Cousins does in Minnesota.

State constitutions could force the NFL to allow protests in some stadiums

By Mike Florio
Pro Football Talk
June 7, 2018

The U.S. Constitution's right to free speech, as codified in the First Amendment, protects American citizens against governmental limits on expression. It doesn't affect the ability of private entities to control what employees say or do.

But that's not the end of a constitutional analysis that could force the NFL to respect the rights of players to protest during the national anthem, at least in some stadiums.

As recently explained by Nikolas Bowie of Slate.com, some state constitutions apply more broadly, potentially preventing the NFL from prohibiting players from protesting during the anthem.

States like California, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Colorado, Massachusetts, and Washington may have constitutional provisions broad enough to prevent the NFL from restricting anthem protests, which could directly impact home games of the Chargers, Rams, Raiders (for now), 49ers, Giants, Jets, Steelers, Eagles, Broncos, Patriots, and Seahawks.

Of course, any effort to secure the ability to protest most likely would require litigation. As the NFL Players Association decides how to deal with a new anthem policy that was adopted only two weeks ago (it feels like two years), one possible strategy will be to file suit in all states where the constitution may apply not only to public action but also to private action.

NFL taking heat for staying silent on White House controversy

By Mike Florio
Pro Football Talk
June 7, 2018

The NFL has no desire to engage the President on the anthem issue or any other actual, perceived, or potential controversy. And so the NFL has adopted a see-no-evil/hear-no-evil/say-no-words approach in response to the cancellation of the Eagles' visit to the White House, along the various other misrepresentations, embellishments, and/or flat-out lies that have been told about NFL players in the wake of the move.

And the NFL is taking heat for its willingness to take heat from the White House.

SportsBusiness Daily has collected links to various columns calling out the NFL for saying nothing at all in the two days since the latest presidential assault on pro football happened. And it's only going to get worse.

It's only going to get worse because: (1) the President knows it's a winning issue; and (2) the NFL continues to run scared, hopeful that ignoring the President will cause him to eventually go away.

But that response to bullying works only when the only thing the bully gains from bullying is knowledge that the bullying is provoking the desired reaction from the subject of the bullying. In this case, it doesn't matter that the NFL is ignoring the President. What matters is that the President's base isn't ignoring it, and that the media isn't, either.

Through it all, the NFL ends up looking even more impotent and ineffective, which further underscores the chronic failure to fix the anthem problem months before the hiding-in-plain-sight ingredients to a recipe for a major storm of something other than snow came together and splattered all over the league's face.

Let's be as plain and simple about this one as possible. The NFL created the mess in 2009 by deciding to make the players props in an effort to wrap the Shield in the flag. As part of that effort, the NFL wrote an anthem policy that made presence on the sideline mandatory but standing during the anthem optional.

Then, when protests first happened in 2016, the NFL didn't swoop in and fix the problem. Instead, the NFL confirmed that players have the right to protest.

Then, when the President was elected and anthem protests were still happening, the NFL didn't realize that it probably would have been a good idea to remove the issue from the Presidential radar screen before the President realized just how low the fruit was hanging.

Then, when the President first attacked the NFL and its players last September over what was at the time a tiny handful of protesting players, the NFL spent a lot of time talking to players but doing nothing to actually fix the problem.

Then, when the mess had almost completely subsided, the NFL tried to finally fix the problem. And somehow only made it worse.

Now what? Hiding under the bed and waiting for it to go away won't work. So what will?

If only there were someone making more than \$40 million per year to deal quickly, effectively, and proactively with situations like this one.