

Broncos have NFL's least experienced set of running backs

By Mike Klis

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It's not enough to say the Broncos have a young backfield.

More precisely, they have the least-experienced collection of running backs in the NFL. And it's not close.

Three of the Broncos' six running backs are rookies -- Royce Freeman, David Williams and Phillip Lindsay. Of the other three, tailback Devontae Booker and fullback Andy Janovich each have two seasons of NFL experience and De'Angelo Henderson has one.

Compare that to the LeSean McCoy-Chris Ivory Buffalo Bills, who have 38 combined seasons from their running back room. Or the New England Patriots and New Orleans Saints, who each have 29 combined running back seasons.

"It is weird that the oldest guy in the room is a year three guy," Henderson said of Booker. "I think he's well prepared for the role he's going to have this year. I think I'm well prepared, and I'm getting more prepared for the role I'm going to have."

The Broncos' five combined seasons of NFL experience is the least in the league. A look at the five teams with the least combined NFL seasons among running backs and fullbacks (with combined career carries in parenthesis), and then the five teams with most combined running back seasons:

Teams Seasons (carries)

1. Broncos 5 (270)

2. Ravens 7 (630)

3. Chargers ... 7 (777)

4. Falcons 8 (1,113)

5. Titans 9 (619)

28. Raiders 24 (3,786)

29. Chiefs 27 (1,243)

30. Patriots 29 (1,499)

30. Saints 29 (1,587)

32. Bills 38 (3,401)

The Broncos' running back room also has the least amount of playing time. The six-man running back group has a combined 270 career carries – 253 by Booker, 10 by Janovich and 7 by Henderson. The Seattle Seahawks have one less career carry, but their 269 attempts come from five backs and their running back room has a combined 12 years of NFL experience.

“We all understand we're pretty young,” said Royce Freeman, a third-round draft pick who has a chance to start as a rookie. “But I think that gives us a chance to grow and see the growth throughout camp, into the preseason.”

Team with the five-least amount of career carries from their running back room (with combined career seasons in parenthesis) and teams with five most carries among backs:

Teams Carries (seasons)

1. Seahawks 269 (12)
2. Broncos 270 (5)
3. Packers 356 (12)
4. Cardinals 485 (11)
5. 49ers 601 (17)

28. Steelers 2,022 (19)
29. Lions 2,144 (21)
30. Dolphins ... 3,400 (19)
31. Bills 3,401 (38)
32. Raiders 3,786 (24)

Jenkins, Long lead Players Coalition group pushing bail reform

By Tim McManus

ESPN

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Just hours after Malcolm Jenkins held up signs to gathered media in the Philadelphia Eagles locker room Wednesday, he addressed a group of about 100 public defenders at a reception.

He explained how the police shootings of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile motivated him into action. How Anquan Boldin's cousin also was killed by a police officer after his car broke down on the side of the road, leading to Boldin's involvement and the eventual forming of the Players Coalition, which convinced the league to contribute \$89 million over seven years to projects dealing with criminal justice reform, law enforcement/community relations and education.

Jenkins spoke of how members of that coalition recently helped push through a piece of legislation in Boston that raised the age children are allowed to be sent to juvenile institutions from 7 to 12, and about the championing of the Clean Slate Act -- a bill aimed at reducing the recidivism rate in Pennsylvania -- which has effectively passed through the House and Senate.

"There's all of these ways that we've found to help," Jenkins said. "If there's one thing that we know how to do as athletes, it's draw a lot of attention to whatever it is we're doing. So we're just here to really encourage you guys.

"We know that your job is not easy and you're right on the front lines of this. So when you're getting tired, you're overworked, you're running out of resources, time, please lean on your community ... lean on organizations like us to really help you push that to the next level because you have people who are advocating for you, who are behind you. Thank you, guys, for having us."

A public defender called out from the back of the room: "Thank you for kneeling."

Jenkins never has knelt in protest, but instead raised a fist during the playing of the anthem for parts of two seasons. But in this room, it was the progress that had been done, not the form of demonstration, that mattered.

Jenkins, defensive end Chris Long and safety Rodney McLeod were meeting with chief public defenders from across the country for a discussion about bail reform -- a major point of focus for the Players Coalition for 2018. Gathered together around a horseshoe table, the group brainstormed for close to two hours to identify potential solutions to the core issues and cultivate an action plan that would best utilize the players' growing influence in the court of public opinion.

In order to have the proper messaging, they had to first get properly educated.

"This might be a dumb question," Long said, "so prepare yourself."

Transparency, the group of about 25 defenders concluded, is key in keeping the power brokers honest and protecting the vulnerable, so Long was curious about the capacity of courtrooms and how easy it is for the public to have access to bail hearings to help keep things on the up-and-up.

“I’m not the person to ask because our system currently is really messed up,” one defender responded. “Our bail hearings happen via video conference in a trailer while our current jail is being reconstructed. It is, for a lack of a better professional term, a s--- show right now.”

“You’re speaking my language,” Long responded, drawing laughs.

The latest actions of the Players Coalition unfolded in the shadows of a national controversy surrounding the Eagles and the White House. The Eagles were scheduled to visit Washington, D.C., on Tuesday to celebrate their Super Bowl championship, but President Donald Trump, who has been at odds with the NFL over player demonstrations during the national anthem, canceled the event after the team told the White House that just a small player contingent would be in attendance. Instead, Trump had a celebration of the American flag and emphasized the importance of proudly standing “for our glorious nation under God” before the playing of “God Bless America.”

About 75 media members descended on the Eagles’ practice facility Wednesday. Most set up shop at the locker stall of Jenkins, who chose not to use his voice at all in this moment, instead holding up signs that pointed to the work that players have been doing in the community and stats related to social-justice issues.

As it so happened, one of the events dedicated to those efforts was scheduled for that night.

“This is just an interesting coincidence, and it is an irony, because so many people that see players drawing attention to causes say, ‘Well, what are they doing?’ And the evidence is a Google search away,” Long said. “But the reality is I don’t think good news and productive stuff sells. We just have to get past this thing in our country where only the bad news and only controversy sells. This is good stuff. This is common-sense stuff. And it should be reported on that players are doing substantive things in their community and have been for a while.”

There were some jarring revelations in the session. A study found that 62 percent of the prison population in Philadelphia is made up of people in on cash bail, or as part of pre-trial detention. Those who can’t afford bail sit in jail for the lifespan of the case, which can be about six to eight months at the cost of \$120 a day to taxpayers, all before it’s determined whether they’re innocent or guilty.

The New Orleans rep evoked an image from the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina of evacuated inmates from Orleans Parish Prison, in orange jumpsuits, sitting on the overpass “for hours and days” in part because of the sheer number of people that needed to be rescued. There were more than 7,000 in the local jail at that time in large part because of the cash bail system and the lack of resources in the public defender sector. Improvements in those areas have helped lower the current number of prisoners to around 1,200.

In Washington, D.C., they eliminated cash bail and established a pre-trial services industry that protects presumption of innocence rights, with positive results. It is considered a model for other states.

In a similar effort, Jets CEO Christopher Johnson, along with current Jets Josh McCown and Kelvin Beachum and ex-Jet Demario Davis, sent a letter to New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo and top lawmakers recently calling for them to pass comprehensive bail reform, per ESPN's Rich Cimini.

"Watch a bail hearing and you will see immediately the ills of that process and how it does not match up with the ideals of this country and the presumption of innocence," Long said, "and the fact that we are jailing so many innocent people and it is taking such a toll on not just those people and their families but our country and bogging down our system. And not only that, but it's just wrong, and the assignment of bail is arbitrary. People would be blown away. But we have to connect people to that process. We are influencers who have that ability, and coming away from today, we feel like we're more empowered."

Bradford-Grey pointed out that public defenders have been fighting this fight for decades, but because of the awareness athletes are bringing to the cause, "people are starting to care, they're starting to learn more, they're starting to get involved. For that, we forever thank them."

What is the value of a ‘bona fide leader?’ The Broncos will tell you.

By Nicki Jhabvala
The Athletic
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Talk originally centered around Houston. That’s where Case Keenum has a home base. It’s where Emmanuel Sanders is from. That’s where so many players go to train in the offseason.

So it just made sense.

But as the Broncos’ receivers, tight ends and their new starting quarterback mull options for their informal passing camp, Sanders is hoping the desert becomes their temporary home for a few days.

“Demaryius (Thomas) has some trainers out there. He has a field,” Sanders explained. “You can get an Airbnb or something like that. Just go out there for like two or three days and throw the football around and hang out and gain team chemistry.”

Outside of Colorado, discussion of offseason throwing sessions matters less, if it all. But since 2012, when Peyton Manning took over and organized camps at Duke University with brother Eli and their receivers from the Broncos and Giants, the practice away from practice has been significant.

Manning, known for his maniacal and detailed regimen, brought his teammates to Durham, N.C., with him for sessions with David Cutcliffe, a college coach to Peyton and Eli who helped the former during his recovery from neck surgery in 2011. Their workouts have been documented by “60 Minutes Sports” and was even featured by NFL Films, complete with the brotherly ribbing during film sessions and moments of Wes Welker appearing completely lost in Manning’s world.

Those moments, in part, laid a foundation for each season in Denver as Manning built a rapport and chemistry with his teammates, old and new. Those moments were also a reflection of an offense with a clear leader.

The past two seasons, the Broncos have not had an offseason camp with their starting quarterback and receivers, primarily because their starter wasn’t known before August. But the signing of Case Keenum has changed the dynamic in Dove Valley.

Though the offseason is still young, Broncos players from all sides have already claimed Keenum’s arrival has created a renewed urgency and energy level.

“The first thing is that 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. We’re still working to get that connection going.”

From the other side of the field, defensive end Shelby Harris noticed something similar.

“You have a bona fide leader,” he said. “You have one guy that you can look toward, like, ‘This is our guy for the season.’ Don’t get me wrong, I thought Trevor (Siemian) was a great quarterback. I thought he did great things last year. And I think Paxton (Lynch) is a good quarterback. But when you have a QB battle, it’s like, ‘Who takes the reins? Who’s the one who steps up and is the leader?’ But this year with Case, you have a leader. You have a guy you can go to, a guy that has won games in the league. You saw what he did with the Vikings last year. So, it’s a great relief for our team to be able to have that guy for this year and hopefully for years to come.”

The day Keenum was formally introduced inside the Broncos’ Fieldhouse in mid-March, he told a crowd of reporters, as well as his coach and general manager, that he was “excited to earn the right to be a leader.”

He reiterated his commitment at the start of OTAs, adding it was a daily mind-set.”

“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. He looked good. He’s starting to look a little comfortable. On top of that and how I feel about our defense, I’m just excited for the season. I can’t wait until it gets here.”

Veteran cornerback Chris Harris, who has seen five starting quarterbacks come and go during his eight years in Denver, noticed early Keenum’s control of the huddle from the start of OTAs.

“I remember today ... the offense was kind of jogging but he was like, ‘Huddle up!’ ” Harris said. “He takes command out there. He gets them right and let’s them know, ‘I’ve got the play here.’ He’s a leader out there on the field so far.”

Sanders added that the work with Keenum continues long after practice ends.

Most days, Keenum asks Sanders and Thomas to watch film in a back room at Broncos headquarters to pick their brains, to ensure he sees what they see, and vice versa.

“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.”

After signing Keenum to a two-year deal in march, Broncos coach Vance Joseph and general manager John Elway were adamant that Keenum would be The Guy in 2018. He was the starter, and paid as such, and their belief in him was solidified during the draft, when the Broncos opted to not select another quarterback among a deep class of candidates.

But they also said they haven’t given up on Paxton Lynch, a former first-round pick they had hoped would blossom into their starter. Lynch is now vying for the backup job with Chad Kelly, but for the first time in his pro career, Lynch has an experienced and starting veteran as an example.

As Keenum strengthens his connection with his fellow starters, the Broncos see a benefit from his presence beyond 2018.

“Case has played a lot of football,” Joseph said. “Case has also had spots in his career where it was tough, so that’s a good example for Paxton to be around and see, that if you just keep grinding and keep playing, and keep surviving and playing, that you have a chance one day to have your own huddle. I think it’s a great, great example for Paxton Lynch as a young quarterback.”

Tim Tebow not happy about 'Tebowing' being brought into national anthem protests debate

By Josh Peter

USA Today

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Tim Tebow said he has never knelt during the national anthem and he's disappointed that his so-called "Tebowing" has been misrepresented.

"I think that's sometimes one of the things that's a little bit sad is sometimes people will just try to create something that had zero truth," Tebow said Friday before the New York Mets' Double-A affiliate, the Binghamton Rumble Ponies, were set to play the Trenton Thunder. "I never did anything during a national anthem but stand and support my country. And then stories can get written and they can get put out of proportion so that you believe one thing when you're asking me a question that was nothing that was part of the truth."

Tebow, in his second season playing minor league baseball for the Mets, said it was important to go back to the facts about why he knelt.

"A lot of people even think it was a touchdown celebration," he said. "I never did it to celebrate a touchdown. I did it from my sophomore year in high school all the way through the NFL, that before and after games I would get on a knee to thank my Lord and savior, Jesus Christ, and also put things into perspective. ...

"It was never something I did to take away from somebody else. It was just something I did with a personal relationship with my God. So I think that's just sometimes disappointing when things get taken away from the truth and then it's just created into whatever somebody wants it to be."

Tebow also shared his opinion about NFL players who have protested during the national anthem.

"I think when people believe in something and they stand for that, I don't knock them for that," he said. "Even if I agree with some or disagree with some, I appreciate it when people have convictions and they stand for that."

"I think it's important how we do that as well. So I think there's a lot of players that I'm friends with that have been on both sides and I understand it and I think what's more important is to know their heart and where they're coming from and where the conviction stands in their heart and what they really want to share."

President Trump: I'll consider pardon recommendations from NFL players

By Charles Robinson

Yahoo! Sports

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After nearly two years of openly berating NFL players who declined to stand for the national anthem on gameday, President Donald Trump said Friday he is now willing to consider pardon recommendations from athletes protesting for justice reform.

His statement comes one day after a Yahoo Sports report that lawyers for Colin Kaepernick are expected to seek deposition subpoenas for Trump and other administration officials in the quarterback's collusion case against the NFL. The goal of those subpoenas, sources told Yahoo Sports, will likely be obtaining testimony that would flesh out political pressure on the league regarding Kaepernick and players who declined to stand during the national anthem.

"We have a great country. You should stand for our national anthem," Trump told reporters Friday. "You shouldn't go in a locker room when our national anthem is played. I am going to ask all of those people to recommend to me – because that's what they're protesting – people that they think were unfairly treated by the justice system. And I understand that. And I'm going to ask them to recommend to me people that were unfairly treated. Friends of theirs or people that they know about, and I'm going to take a look at those applications. And if I find and my committee finds that they're unfairly treated, then we will pardon them or at least let them out."

After consistently framing players who failed to stand for the national anthem as an assault on patriotism or the military, Trump's statement Friday appeared to publicly acknowledge for the first time that protests were aimed at inequalities in the justice system. While the political motivations of the statement can be openly debated, the public nature of Trump's comment – and the stated willingness to consider pardon recommendations from protesting athletes – represents a fairly dramatic contrast to previous rhetoric. Notably, it comes after Trump repeatedly suggested that protesting players should be fired or find another country.

Whether his latest statement generates dialogue between Trump or NFL players remains to be seen. But it's unlikely at this stage to alter the pursuit of subpoenas by Kaepernick's legal team, according to sources who spoke with Yahoo Sports on Friday.

Predicting Every NFL Team's 2018 Season Record

By Jonathan Jones

MMQB

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With about three months until the official start of the NFL season, everyone—from players and coaches to the fans—is feeling good about their teams. Each team got a crop of great young players in the draft. The aging vets are about to come out of the offseason slumber in the “best shape” of their lives. The new coordinators promise their units will be fast, smart and physical. Get excited.

Except... next season's playoffs will probably look a lot like last season's. For the second consecutive year I've predicted the winners of each of the 256 regular-season contests, and I've come out with a very similar group of top teams compared those playing in January last season. A year after just four teams made consecutive appearances in the playoffs (tying a league low since playoff expansion following the 1990 season), I believe we're looking at an all-time league-high nine teams returning to the postseason this year.

It's difficult to look at the NFC last year and view any of those playoff teams as flukes or one-offs. In fact, you could argue that each of those team's rosters today are better than they were in the postseason. The same could be said more or less about the AFC—with the exception of Buffalo—going into this season.

First thing's first: The NFC is the dominant conference. Not only does it have several contenders to the Eagles' throne (the Saints, Vikings, Rams and Packers with a healthy Aaron Rodgers), but it also has a solid second tier of teams that would likely make the playoffs in the AFC. That's why, in these predictions, you'll see more NFC teams with records closer to .500 than in the AFC, and the two NFC wild-card teams boast 12–4 records. Meanwhile, it's tough not to go ahead and pencil in a Steelers-Patriots AFC title game.

This is always a difficult projection because, as I alluded to, everyone feels great about his or her team right now. So I'll be the bad guy. (And tweet your love and hate for me to @jjones9.)

NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS: 13–3*

The Patriots have had at least 13 wins in four of the past nine seasons, so there is no reason to believe they won't win the AFC East for the 10th straight year. You also can't feel great about the rest of the division this year for reasons I'll detail below. There was plenty of attrition in Foxborough—Malcolm Butler, Danny Amendola, Brandin Cooks, Nate Solder, Cam Fleming, Dion Lewis and Matt Patricia—but New England still has Tom Brady, Rob Gronkowski, Bill Belichick and Josh McDaniels. That'll be plenty to keep the defending AFC champs in the championship chase, even if the Patriot Way seems to be crumbling a bit.

Pivotal game: Week 15 at Pittsburgh

The Pats have won the past five matchups against the Steelers dating back to 2013, including last season's controversial finish with the non-touchdown from Jesse James. The outcome of this game could very well determine where the AFC title game is played in January 2019, and that's why it's of greater importance than the Week 9 Sunday night showdown against the Packers.

NEW YORK JETS: 6–10

The Jets and the other teams filling out the AFC East have the unenviable task of facing the AFC South and NFC North this season. Because of that, it's tough to find many wins on the schedule for the final three teams in this division. Look, Sam Darnold is the future of the Jets, and they should still be cutting backflips that they got him at No. 3 without having to give up a future first-rounder. Locking in cornerback Trumaine Johnson for his prime years will also help a passing defense that took a tremendous dip in 2017. The Jets probably won a few more games than they should have last season, so six wins and second place in the division will be something to build on for Todd Bowles into 2019.

Pivotal game: Week 5 vs. Denver

This contest follows games against Detroit, Miami, Cleveland and Jacksonville. It's conceivable the Jets are 2-2 after the first quarter of the season, and a win against the Broncos and their rather intimidating pass defense could go a long way toward giving New York confidence about the rest of the season, even with a daunting schedule.

MIAMI DOLPHINS: 3–13

Quarterback Ryan Tannehill has missed the past 20 games for the Dolphins, and if he misses another, either Brock Osweiler or David Fales will start in his place. That's the main reason for giving Miami its worst record since 2007. Tannehill has said he'll wear a brace on the knee that he injured twice before having surgery that kept him out of the 2017 season, and this team is too dependent on his health for my liking. While the Dolphins added some nice pieces in guard Josh Sitton, receiver Danny Amendola and rookie safety Minkah Fitzpatrick, losing Jarvis Landry, Ndamukong Suh and Mike Pouncey outweighs those positives.

Pivotal game: Week 12 at Indianapolis

The Dolphins have one of the latest byes available, in Week 11. So here's where they can fight to save their season and finish with some respect, or limp to the finish for a second straight year. Miami's post-bye response will tell us what we need to know about this group.

BUFFALO BILLS: 2–14

The 2017 Bills team depended on LeSean McCoy racking up yards, low-risk quarterback play and an opportunistic defense. It's tough to see two of those three happening in 2018. Buffalo's receiving group shouldn't be feared, so that means defenses will keep focusing on the run. The Bills lost Eric Wood to retirement, Richie Incognito to... something and traded away Cordy Glenn, so good luck running the ball. A stacked box means the quarterback will look to take chances down the field, and that's a problem with first-rounder Josh Allen. He was the least-accurate and most turnover-prone top quarterback in the draft. It all spells a big step back for the surprise playoff team from 2017.

Pivotal game: Week 6 at Houston

Here's where the Bills can prove all of that wrong. Houston's stacked front seven should be able to stuff the run and force Allen to throw. Meanwhile, the defense will face Deshaun Watson, who, while one of the most dynamic young players in the game, has a penchant for turning the ball over himself, and Tre'Davious White, Jordan Poyer and Micah Hyde could pick up where they left off last season.

PITTSBURGH STEELERS: 11–5*

As long as the Steelers have the Killer B's they're going to win this division. Antonio Brown is a top-two (or the top?) receiver in the league, Le'Veon Bell is the best running back in the NFL, and Ben Roethlisberger is the second-best quarterback in the conference. Randy Fichter replaces Todd Haley as offensive coordinator, but the changes you'll see should only be minor. The Steelers did well to pick up linebacker Jon Bostic in free agency and nab safety Terrell Edmunds in the draft. Who knows what will happen with Bell in Pittsburgh long-term, but as long as he's on the field in 2018 for this squad they remain atop the division.

Pivotal game: Week 11 at Jacksonville

The Steelers got thoroughly out-everything'd by the Jags in their two meetings last season. Jacksonville forced seven turnovers, while the Steelers could create just one. The 45–42 final score from their playoff contest is not indicative of how totally in control the Jags were for more than three-and-a-half quarters of the game. Now Pittsburgh has to go on Jacksonville's turf in hopes of not making it three straight embarrassments.

BALTIMORE RAVENS: 6–10

After going to the playoffs in six of John Harbaugh's first seven years, the Ravens have missed out the past three seasons, and any questions regarding Joe Flacco and "elite" have thus been answered. Don't be confused by last year's 9-7 record, where the Ravens were in the playoff hunt in Week 17. Baltimore went 0-5 against would-be playoff teams and 9-2 against all others. Flacco's yards-per-attempt slipped to a career-low 5.7 last season, when his best receiving option was 31-year-old Mike Wallace. The Ravens bolstered that group with John Brown, Michael Crabtree and Willie Snead, but this year isn't about Flacco finding his magic again. It's about when Lamar Jackson will be ready to take over.

Pivotal game: Week 6 at Tennessee

Four of Baltimore's first six games are on the road, and the Titans contest is the final of three straight away for the Ravens. This provides a good test for Baltimore's revamped receiving group against a Titans secondary led by former Patriot Malcolm Butler and 2017 All-Pro Kevin Byard. The match is also important to Baltimore because it faces New Orleans, Carolina and Pittsburgh in consecutive weeks afterward.

CINCINNATI BENGALS: 6–10

This designation is more about feel than what I see on paper. Yet again, the Bengals have a solid roster with very few holes (they'll need to figure out Vontaze Burfict's spot for the first four games). You have to like their running game, pass catchers and, if rookie center Billy Price is healthy as expected, their offensive line, too. But the Bengals have undersold with solid offenses the past two seasons, finishing in the bottom-third of the league in points in 2016 and '17. Using the same logic as with the Ravens, the Bengals went 1-5 against playoff teams last season but a paltry 6-4 against the others. It's fair to wonder if the Bengals, helmed by Marvin Lewis and Andy Dalton, have reached their peak without winning a playoff game together.

Pivotal game: Week 6 vs. Pittsburgh

Dalton and Lewis together are 3-12 versus the Steelers (including the playoffs) and have just one win at home against the division rival. The Bengals need to wrest the AFC North from Pittsburgh like they did in

2013 and '15, and the first step to that would be getting the home win. If not, this could be another forgettable season for a well-put-together team.

CLEVELAND BROWNS: 4–12

In the last three seasons the Browns have been the worst, second-worst and third-worst scoring offense in the NFL, and the team has tallied four total wins. Enter Baker Mayfield. Forget whatever Hue Jackson said in May about Tyrod Taylor being the guy. I can't see a situation in which Mayfield isn't the starter by October—if not Week 1—as the No. 1 pick. The offensive line has been in place, the receiving group is now ready with Jarvis Landry and Josh Gordon, and the young defense that last year surprised by being 14th in yards (but 31st in points allowed) added Denzel Ward and Damarious Randall.

Pivotal game: Week 7 at Tampa Bay

This season is going to be all about small victories for the Browns. Cleveland hasn't won a road game since Oct. 11, 2015. The Browns' first two road games are in New Orleans and Oakland, so their best, first chance to win on the road will come in Tampa on Oct. 20, more than three years after they upset the Ravens in overtime. And hopefully for the Browns, that one road win will turn into two, and two will turn into...

KANSAS CITY CHIEFS: 11–5*

The Chiefs have made it to the playoffs the past three years playing in what has been, over that span, the most competitive division in football. The steadiness of Alex Smith, the coaching of Andy Reid and a stout defense have been the reason. Now Smith has gone to Washington, and it's The Pat Mahomes Show. The sample size from last season is too small to extrapolate from, but clearly Reid—who has had just one losing season since 2006 and eight top-10 scoring offenses in that time—knows what he's doing. The defense will hardly be recognizable from last year. The Chiefs shipped out Marcus Peters and lost Terrance Mitchell, Phillip Gaines and Kenneth Acker. Now Kansas City has Kendall Fuller, David Amerson and Robert Golden, and will get Eric Berry back after an Achilles injury.

Pivotal game: Week 15 vs. Chargers

The outcome of this game could decide the AFC West. It'll be interesting to see if Mahomes has hit a wall at this point and how he performs against a hungry veteran like Philip Rivers in December. Considering how weak the AFC is, 10 wins should get you into the playoffs, and a victory here will help the Chiefs secure at least one game at Arrowhead.

LOS ANGELES CHARGERS: 11–5*

Clearly the Chargers had a quiet offseason, because they feel good about what they've built. After two down years, this team crawled out of the AFC West cellar to finish second last year with little contribution from their 2017 rookies. Now Mike Williams and Forrest Lamp enter Year 2 with rookie safety Derwin James—possibly the best value pick of the first round—bolstering a defensive backfield that already has Casey Hayward and Jason Verrett. Losing tight end Hunter Henry to an ACL tear hurts, but the Chargers have three months to figure out a position that was a given for so long thanks to Antonio Gates.

Pivotal game: Week 4 vs. San Francisco

The Chargers played a lot of home games last year that felt like road games in the 30,000-seat StubHub Center. This will be the second home game of 2018 for Los Angeles, and it comes against the resurgent

Bay Area club with the popular young quarterback. Getting the home win against one of everyone's preseason darlings will help establish the Chargers as a contender early.

OAKLAND RAIDERS: 6–10

Everyone is talking about the Raiders this offseason because of Jon Gruden, but that's the reason I don't feel great about this team in 2018. I think it's foolish to think Gruden can just hop back on the coaching bike after a 10-year break. Fans should still be reeling from his combine comments, where he said he's "not gonna rely on GPS's and all the modern technology" when asked about analytics. On top of that, the Raiders basically got a new secondary, new No. 2 receiver and new specialists. I'm willing to hedge my bets on the 2018 Raiders and wait for '19.

Pivotal game: Week 8 vs. Indianapolis

Oakland has a rather manageable early schedule, and a Week 7 bye breaks up this season's slate nicely. The Raiders return to action against the Colts, and here's where Gruden's coaching will come in to play. How will Oakland and its coaching staff respond after a week off following what I suspect to be early-season success based largely on the schedule?

DENVER BRONCOS: 4–12

The Broncos never figured out their quarterback situation last year, and even the third-ranked scoring defense couldn't help them muster more than five wins and a dead-last finish in the AFC West. What was telling in Vance Joseph's first season was the eight-game losing streak in the middle of the season after starting 3-1. (Also telling was Denver getting just one road win, against the hapless Colts in Week 15.) Case Keenum is coming off a season no one saw coming, and I'm not sure I anticipate it happening again for the 30-year-old quarterback.

Pivotal game: Week 6 vs. Los Angeles Rams

The Broncos certainly have the defense to stop Sean McVay's offense, but can they score enough points against Wade Phillips's defense? The former Broncos defensive coordinator returns to Denver, where he helped craft the Super Bowl-winning defense three seasons ago. This game will be the best test for both sides of the ball in Denver.

JACKSONVILLE JAGUARS: 11–5*

The Jaguars defense is not to be trifled with. Jacksonville's back seven might be my favorite in the NFL, with Telvin Smith holding down the linebackers group and Jalen Ramsey playing his way into being the top cornerback in the league. On offense, Jacksonville signed guard Andrew Norwell at the start of free agency to bolster an already strong line. It's an old-school football philosophy for Tom Coughlin, who understands that Blake Bortles doesn't have to win the game as long as he doesn't lose the game.

Pivotal game: Week 2 vs. New England

Jacksonville was up two possessions in the fourth quarter on the Pats in Foxborough before Tom Brady did Tom Brady things in the AFC title game. The rematch, slated for the second week of the season, will be a tone-setter for the Jags. A home win against New England won't be revenge—it won't win them the AFC title from last year—but it will show that 2017 wasn't a fluke and everyone was right to believe in these Jaguars.

HOUSTON TEXANS: 10–6*

The Texans have won nine games in three of Bill O’Brien’s four seasons as coach with Ryan Fitzpatrick, Brock Osweiler and Brian Hoyer as the leading passers in those respective seasons. Deshaun Watson is better than those three combined. DeAndre Hopkins has come into his own after another stellar season got him the deserved recognition of the All-Pro team. And the worst scoring defense in the NFL gets the best pass rusher in the game back while also adding Tyrann Mathieu, on a one-year bet-on-himself deal, to the secondary

Pivotal game: Week 12 vs. Tennessee

These teams split the series last year, but the one game in which Watson played really tells the story. The Texans won 57-14 and Watson led the franchise to its highest scoring output ever. The way I see it (below), the Titans will very much be in the hunt in Week 12, so this division contest is a crucial one for Houston.

TENNESSEE TITANS: 7–9

Every year there’s a team you expect will be as good as, if not better than, the previous year but ultimately disappoints. That’s how I feel about the Titans. Derrick Henry has control of the running game. The offensive line is solid. Tennessee had great offseason pickups with Malcolm Butler in free agency and Rashaan Evans in the draft. But I like Jacksonville and Houston more in the division and Marcus Mariota throwing 13 touchdowns to 15 interceptions in his third season is concerning. A slight step back for Tennessee feels like the call here.

Pivotal game: Week 14 vs. Jacksonville

These teams also meet in Week 3, so really you can take your pick. Tennessee impressively topped the Jags twice last season on its way to a 5-1 division record. As noted above, I think the AFC South will come down to the wire, so a win here for the Titans will very likely prove this prediction wrong.

INDIANAPOLIS COLTS: 4–12

This prediction, which mirrors the 2017 results for Indianapolis, is solely rooted in the uncertainty around Andrew Luck. As of this week, Andrew Luck still hasn’t thrown a game-official football since his shoulder surgery. NFL pundits will differ on him because he’s still one of the greatest quarterback prospects in decades, but anyone taking this long to return from injury—and the Colts were right to shut him down in 2017—would concern me. This team isn’t built to compete without Luck, and I’m not willing to say he’s starting 16 games in 2018.

Pivotal game: Week 1 vs. Cincinnati

This should be the first time since Jan. 1, 2017 that Luck has played in a game, so here’s the moment of truth. If Luck is not ready by Week 1 as he should be, further doubt should be cast on this season.

PHILADELPHIA EAGLES: 12–4*

No team—not the Packers or the Patriots or the Saints—has a better quarterback situation than Philadelphia. That’s enough to win the Eagles the division. And thanks to Carson Wentz’s rookie deal, they’re able to spend that money on key veterans during this championship window. That’s enough to win them another Super Bowl. The Eagles don’t have any holes in 2018, and I suspect we’ll see the first NFC East repeat winners since Philadelphia last did it in ’04.

Pivotal game: Week 10 vs. Dallas

These squads have split the season series every year since 2013, and the Cowboys figure to be Philly's toughest division competition this year. The Eagles will be coming off their Week 9 bye, so a strong performance against a rival is needed to kick off the second half of the season.

DALLAS COWBOYS: 9–7

I'd feel much better about the Cowboys if they'd done more at receiver this offseason. Yes, Dak Prescott took a small step back in his sophomore campaign, but he still put together four game-winning drives last season. Ezekiel Elliott should play the whole slate rather than sitting out six games (when the Cowboys went 3-3 without him). And Leighton Vander Esch will fit perfectly with the Cowboys. But Dallas cut ties with Dez Bryant and lost Jason Witten to ESPN, and the plan was to replace them with ... Allen Hurns and Geoff Swaim? Dallas doesn't have the pass-catching group to get them into the NFC postseason.

Pivotal game: Week 11 at Atlanta

Dallas will be coming off that huge Week 10 tilt with the Eagles and heading to Atlanta to face a Falcons team that crushed them by 20 points last year (while Elliott was out). The winner of this head-to-head will greatly improve its odds of getting a wild card.

NEW YORK GIANTS: 7–9

Like the Cowboys, the Giants have one glaring hole. In New York, it's a missing pass rush. Last year the Giants were 31st in passing yards allowed and last in passing touchdowns allowed, thanks in part to a pass rush that had just four players finish the season with multiple sacks. Now with Jason Pierre-Paul in Tampa, Olivier Vernon doesn't have much else to work with. As long as Eli Manning has a healthy Odell Beckham Jr., the offense should take care of itself with a reworked line and top rookie running back.

Pivotal game: Week 4 vs. New Orleans

The only way to beat Drew Brees is to hit him consistently. Obviously that should be a challenge for this Giants defense. This also kicks off a four-game stretch for the Giants against 2017 playoff teams. And finally, we get treated to Beckham vs. Marshon Lattimore.

WASHINGTON 5-10-1

Kirk Cousins pulled off a miracle last year that is rarely discussed. His banged-up offensive line got him sacked 41 times. His best pass-catcher missed most of the season with a hamstring injury. The defense was 27th in scoring was the worst in the league against the run. And somehow Cousins led Washington to a 7-9 record. Washington has its health, added to the defensive line with Da'Ron Payne and picked up a solid long-term quarterback in Alex Smith to replace Cousins. The concern is that Smith's talents could be unlocked only by Andy Reid, and he may slip into the mediocre quarterback of yesteryear. Washington needs more than that.

Pivotal game: Week 5 at New Orleans

This will be Mark Ingram's debut after his four-game suspension. It'll be Washington's first good test against a solid offensive line and great backfield. Also we'll be able to see how the defensive backfield looks with Orlando Scandrick and D.J. Swearingen.

MINNESOTA VIKINGS: 13–3*

The Vikings are about as well-built as any team in the league. Their top-ranked defense from a year ago got even better in the offseason with the addition of Sheldon Richardson and rookie corner Mike Hughes. Following a career year from Case Keenum, the offense got a quarterback in Kirk Cousins who could get them over the hump, and Minnesota returns running back Dalvin Cook from an early-season ACL tear after he dazzled in his debut. The interior of the offensive line may be the only question in Minnesota, which is looking for its third NFC North crown in four years.

Pivotal game: Week 2 at Green Bay

This is the sort of early game that eventually decides a division. Beating a healthy Aaron Rodgers at Lambeau would give Minnesota a leg up in NFC North before we get into October. Rodgers won't be going down easily in this game, though, since it was against the Vikings last year where the Packers' season was lost.

GREEN BAY PACKERS: 12–4*

As long as Aaron Rodgers is healthy, the Packers will reach the playoffs. The eight-year streak was snapped last season when Rodgers' collarbone broke under Anthony Barr. But he's back this year (hopefully) with a new contract and a few new toys on offense. The Packers finally have a legitimate No. 1 tight end in Jimmy Graham and a great blocker at the position in Marcedes Lewis. Adding Mo Wilkerson to the defensive line and strengthening the defensive backfield in the draft gets the Pack back in postseason play.

Pivotal game: Week 9 vs. New England

It's a measuring-stick game in the middle of the season for the teams led by the top quarterbacks in the NFL today. Brady and Rodgers have met on the field just once before, and a week for the quarterbacks and their head coaches to scheme against one another could be a multipart docuseries on HBO. This could be the best game of the regular season.

DETROIT LIONS: 8–8

A forecasted .500 record in 2018 for the Lions has far less to do with the job I believe Matt Patricia will do as head coach and far more to do with having the Vikings and Packers make up a fourth of their schedule. Matt Stafford has played a high level the past two 9-7 seasons, the receiving group has gotten better and the 27th-ranked defense from a year ago should improve immediately under the former Pats defensive coordinator. But the Lions are clearly the third-best team in this tough division.

Pivotal game: Week 8 vs. Seattle

The term "trap game" is often misused, in my opinion. It should be the game wedged between two big games, and not just the game against a lesser opponent one week before the big game, hence the word "trap." This is a trap game. The schedule makers pitted the Lions against the Vikings in Weeks 7 and 9, so Detroit has to show mental toughness against a Seahawks team that may be down this year. The outcome of this game will show how focused the Lions are.

CHICAGO BEARS: 4–12

The Bears got better at crucial positions they had to get better at this offseason. Chicago brought in Taylor Gabriel, Allen Robinson and Trey Burton to help their second-year quarterback Mitch Trubisky. The

offensive line took a big hit losing guard Josh Sitton and the defense, while improved with Roquan Smith at linebacker, still needs to find a pass rush. It may take one more year for this group to gel.

Pivotal game: Week 8 vs. New York Jets

After a difficult home game against the Pats, the Bears have a soft middle-season schedule during which they host the Jets, travel to Buffalo and host the Lions in consecutive weeks. Trubisky passing to his new targets against the Jets' new secondary will be a good challenge for the sophomore quarterback.

LOS ANGELES RAMS: 12-4*

The rich got richer this offseason, and the Rams look to be completely unfair. Ndamukong Suh is now on a defensive line beside Aaron Donald. Marcus Peters and Aqib Talib are in the same secondary. Brandin Cooks adds speed to the offense. The Rams are building a monster, and their youthful wild-card exit last year will only fuel this 2018 campaign.

Pivotal game: Week 15 vs. Philadelphia

No game on paper is as exciting as this one. It's the site where Carson Wentz tore his knee and Nick Foles was reborn. Both squads have surrounded their third-year quarterbacks with veterans acquired through various trades and deft free-agency moves. The NFC title game could be in Philly or L.A. based on the outcome of this game.

SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS: 10-6

No team that missed the playoffs last year should feel as good about its odds in 2018 as the 49ers. They went 5-0 with Jimmy G, with three wins against playoff-bound teams. They added Richard Sherman, Weston Richburg, Jerrick McKinnon and Mike McGlinchey after losing Carlos Hyde and Aaron Lynch. I'd say the 49ers got better there. A 10-win season would be San Francisco's best since 2013, but I don't see 10 wins (or even 11) getting you a playoff spot in this year's NFC.

Pivotal game: Week 1 at Minnesota

Talk about a statement game to open the season. Garoppolo has five more games of tape on him, and the Vikings' top-ranked defense have all preseason to prepare for the young quarterback and Kyle Shanahan's offense. If the 49ers can strike an early blow to one of the league's favorites, we may wind up seeing more than just 10 victories.

SEATTLE SEAHAWKS: 7-9

The Seahawks as we knew them are no more, and we should all mourn that. As great as Russell Wilson is, there's simply not enough around him, and Seattle is headed to its first losing record with Wilson under center. Once built with smart draft picks, the Seahawks had to go out in free agency this offseason to get parts such as Jaron Brown, Brandon Marshall and Maurice Alexander. The Legion of Boom is gone, taking the identity of this team and its juice with it.

Pivotal game: Week 6 at Oakland

Plenty of storylines in this one. Jon Gruden gets to go against a quarterback he gushed about for years on Monday Night Football. Marshawn Lynch faces his former squad. Hey, did you know Russell Wilson and

Derek Carr are both shorter-than-average NFL quarterbacks? All this and more in a West Coast tilt between teams looking for their footing.

ARIZONA CARDINALS: 4–12

The Cardinals are going to have to find themselves in the desert this year. I believe first-year head coach Steve Wilks will soon have success in Arizona, but not this season. The quarterback situation with veteran Sam Bradford and future-of-the-franchise Josh Rosen will be a difficult one to navigate for the defensive-minded first-time head coach. There was a great deal of roster turnover this offseason for a team looking for a new identity.

Pivotal game: Week 4 vs. Seattle

Only once since 2011 has a team won both of the games in this series. Both teams are in transition, and Arizona striking the early blow at home against their division rivals could change the Cardinals' fortunes—or at least get them out of fourth in the NFC West and up to third.

NEW ORLEANS SAINTS: 12–4*

Give Drew Brees a defense that isn't miserable and the Saints will usually get to the playoffs. At least, that's been the case in the six times New Orleans has gone to the playoffs under Sean Payton. When the Saints have a scoring defense in the top 20, the team will reach the postseason. Cam Jordan gets to rush the passer with rookie Marcus Davenport. New Orleans has depth at linebacker, and the secondary boasts reigning Defensive Rookie of the Year Marshon Lattimore. No one should have any doubts about the offense doing its job.

Pivotal game: Week 8 at Minnesota

Surely Saints safety Marcus Williams is still haunted by the play he didn't make on Stefon Diggs that lifted Minnesota to the NFC title game and killed the Saints' Super Bowl hopes. Here's his chance at revenge. One of the league's best defenses meets one of the best offenses in this rematch in the Twin Cities scheduled for Sunday Night Football.

ATLANTA FALCONS: 12–4*

When the Falcons go into 11 personnel, there may be no more lethal offense in 2018. Former NFL MVP Matt Ryan has running back Devonta Freeman, tight end Austin Hooper and receivers Julio Jones, Mohamed Sanu and Calvin Ridley all at his disposal. Not many teams can match up with that weaponry, and Steve Sarkisian should be coming into his own in Year 2 after an up-and-down first season as offensive coordinator. Atlanta is a believer in championship windows, and the Falcons are in the middle of theirs right now.

Pivotal game: Week 15 at Green Bay

The Falcons have figured out Aaron Rodgers lately. Dan Quinn's team has topped the Packers the past three times they've faced them, including in the playoffs two seasons ago. But the Falcons haven't won a game at Lambeau since 2008, and both teams should be in full postseason mode by the time Atlanta makes the trip to Wisconsin in December.

CAROLINA PANTHERS: 11-5

I have no clue how well the Norv Turner-Cam Newton arranged marriage is going to work. But I believe this Panthers team has enough talent at starting positions that it won't be that big a deal, especially after some inconsistent years with Mike Shula as offensive coordinator. Carolina upgraded its receiving group with D.J. Moore and Torrey Smith but never really took care of the guard position vacated by Andrew Norwell. Carolina's defensive line is still one of the league's best even after losing Star Lotulelei to free agency, and the secondary is still the soft spot outside of cornerback James Bradberry.

Pivotal game: Week 15 vs. New Orleans

The NFC South put three teams in the playoffs last year, with the Saints, Panthers and Falcons taking seeds 4-6. Carolina went on the road to New Orleans and lost a tight 31-26 wild-card round game. Would that game have played out differently in Charlotte? This Week 15 Monday Night Football match starts a three-game stretch to end the season for Carolina against the Saints (twice) and Falcons. They would like to have control of the playoff scenarios early.

TAMPA BAY BUCCANEERS: 2-13-1

The Bucs were one of the most disappointing teams last season after a solid offseason and plenty of hype (some of it by yours truly). Dirk Koetter got to keep his job even though his team took a gigantic step back in 2017 on both offense and defense. Tampa Bay desperately needed pass rush help and got it in Vita Vea and Jason Pierre-Paul. But the offense had no reason to struggle like it did in Jameis Winston's third season. Tampa Bay has finished last in the division seven of the past nine seasons, and it looks to happen again in 2018.

Pivotal game: Week 3 vs. Pittsburgh

Last year Tampa Bay entered a Thursday Night match against New England 2-1 with a chance to make a statement. The Bucs lost 19-14 and began their first of two five-game losing streaks. This year the Bucs start the season with the Saints, Eagles and Steelers. Good luck. The best to hope for, realistically, is a 1-2 start, and maybe that win will come against the Steelers.

Broncos Players Help Build New Playground In Under 6 Hours

By Dillon Thomas

CBS Denver

June 9, 2018

In less than six hours, hundreds of volunteers transformed a grassy field into Brighton's newest playground. Thank to KaBoom and the Denver Broncos, the Brighton Boys and Girls Club was given a new playground worth more than \$100,000.

"(Friday was) the build day. This is when all the hands get dirt, and we build it in a day," said Erin Porteous, CEO of the Boys & Girls Clubs of Metro Denver.

Those involved started the playground Friday morning and completed all work by 1:30 p.m. the same day. The new playground has slides, monkey bars, basketball hoops and other items to climb. Though the physical work was done Friday, the project was first thought of in April. Broncos players visited the location and helped design the playground with the kids who would use it.

"(The kids) liked swirly slides, better than straight," said Alli Pisching, Executive Director of Community Development for the Denver Broncos. "Something that twirls was important to them."

The kids were given everything they wanted.

"This is awesome. Kids love new things," said Courtland Sutton, the Broncos second round draft pick. "I've been part of a boys and girls club since I was seven-years-old."

Sutton said the Boys and Girls Club played a big role in his upbringing, which was why he enjoyed volunteering at the build.

"Whatever team I got drafted to, I really wanted to be involved in the community," Sutton said.

Sutton was just one of many players who helped build the playground Friday. Others helped carry mulch to the playground, hang signs, and move equipment.

"It is really important for kids to be active," Sutton said. "I am pretty sure they are going to be excited to see this. And, I am glad to be a part of it."

Papa Johns donated pizza to volunteers, while local firefighters stopped by to help finish construction.

President Trump asks NFL players to recommend people for pardons

By Josh Alper
Pro Football Talk
June 9, 2018

President Trump has railed against NFL players who took a knee during the playing of the national anthem as unpatriotic over the last two years while ignoring the stated reasons for the protests but that changed a bit on Friday.

Those reasons center on inequality in the treatment of minorities by law enforcement in the United States and the President said during a press gathering ahead of his trip to the G-7 meeting that players have “seen a lot of abuse, they’ve seen a lot of unfairness” during their lives. He also invited players to make known people they think have been treated unfairly and promised to look into those cases.

“I’m going to ask all of those people to recommend to me — because that’s what they’re protesting — people that they think were unfairly treated by the justice system. And I understand that. I’m going to ask them to recommend to me people that were unfairly treated and I’m gonna take a look at those applications and if I find and my committee finds that they’ve been unfairly treated than we’ll pardon them. Or at least let them out.”

There’s no way to pardon or let out people who are dead after run-ins with law enforcement, of course. Those deaths and the response to those deaths by law enforcement agencies and the justice system are a major part of what spurred the protests in the first place and were not addressed by the President on Friday.

FOX adds two sideline reporters, Mike Pereira to Thursday Night Football

By Michael David Smith

Pro Football Talk

June 9, 2018

FOX didn't get the commentator it wanted when Peyton Manning turned down the opportunity to call Thursday Night Football games. But the network has now finalized its broadcasting team, and it's a supersized version of what it airs on Sundays.

In addition to the previously announced A-team of Joe Buck and Troy Aikman in the booth, FOX has now announced that two sideline reporters, Erin Andrews and Kristina Pink, will work on Thursday nights. And Mike Pereira, the former NFL head of officiating, will attend each Thursday night game in his role as a rules analyst.

Pink has previously worked some Sunday afternoon games but will now relinquish that role and work only on Thursday nights. Andrews will continue to work as the lone sideline reporter on Sundays with Buck and Aikman.

The question facing FOX is whether five people can work together seamlessly, or whether the crew will have a "too many cooks" feel to it. FOX wants Thursday nights to feel like a big deal, and it remains to be seen whether the broadcast team is too big.