

Following “rocky moments” in 2017, Broncos left tackle Garrett Bolles focused on big improvement

By Ryan O’Halloran
The Denver Post
June 10, 2018

Broncos offensive coordinator Bill Musgrave could have gone several directions when asked about left tackle Garrett Bolles.

He could have pointed out Bolles’ durability as a rookie (16-game starter), his progress this offseason (added weight and strength) or his potential (anticipated Year 1 to Year 2 growth).

Musgrave chose another route.

The real route.

“We want Garrett to clean up his level of play,” Musgrave said.

And ...

“(He) had a number of penalties last year that we can get corrected.” And ...

“We’re looking forward to him ... just being better for us overall.”

If Musgrave isn’t an everybody-should-get-a-trophy guy at the interview podium, he definitely isn’t one behind the scenes.

Most players appreciate the bluntness. Point out their flaws and then help them get better. That has been the Broncos’ approach with Bolles.

And Bolles wants it that way. He embraces the critiques. He loves the grind.

“I made mistakes (last year) and I’m ready to fix those mistakes,” Bolles said. “I’m ready to show people why the Denver Broncos drafted me.”

The Broncos drafted Bolles 20th overall in 2017, the first offensive tackle selected, ahead of Ryan Ramczyk (No. 32 to New Orleans) and Cam Robinson (No. 34 to Jacksonville).

Bolles’ play was a mixed bag reflective of offensive turmoil – two coordinators, three quarterbacks and his professional inexperience. On top of it all, he only had 13 games of major college experience.

The good: Bolles’ 1,106 snaps were second among all NFL offensive tackles, behind New England’s Nate Solder (1,114), who’s now with the Giants. And he wasn’t called for an accepted holding penalty in the Broncos’ first five games.

The not good enough? Bolles was called for seven enforced holding penalties, tied for the league lead with Cleveland's Shon Coleman, and his 12 overall penalties were third-most among offensive linemen behind Seattle's Germain Ifedi (16) and Chicago's Charles Leno (13). And Bolles' 8 1/2 sacks allowed were third-most in the NFL behind Cleveland's Spencer Drango (9 1/2) and Arizona's Alex Boone (nine).

Part of being a rookie is merely surviving and then getting a full offseason of training and evaluation instead of preparing for the scouting combine and traveling from city to city for pre-draft meetings. What Bolles and the Broncos saw from his 2017 tape set the table for his 2018 plan.

"Just being consistent and continuing to work on my footwork and fundamentals to make sure I'm in the best position for fall camp and game time," Bolles said of his goal during organized team activities, which wrapped up Thursday and leads into this week's mandatory mini-camp (Tuesday-Thursday).

Bolles' offseason work started in the weight room. Listed at 300 pounds, Bolles estimated he was at 290-295 last December. Compare that to Ramczyk (listed at 314) and Robinson (320).

"I just had to gain a bit more weight so I can anchor when I get those bull rushes," Bolles said. "I'll probably stay around 300-305 — that's sort of my range. I feel more comfortable there."

Before each organized team activity, Bolles and the other linemen work on their pass-rush sets — footwork and hand action. When the pads come on in training camp, they want to have their technique down so it can quickly mesh with the physical aspect.

"He's definitely getting better," left guard Max Garcia said. "His sets look good and he's using his hands better than he was last year."

Said Bolles: "Ninety-five percent of the game is technique. The other five percent is just being gifted."

Reviewing the tape of Bolles' holding penalties, a common theme developed. He was not overwhelmed athletically — a rusher did not burst around the corner untouched or run over him with straight-ahead power. The trouble was technical.

At the Chargers in Week 7, defensive end Melvin Ingram won the edge and drew a penalty when Bolles didn't bend enough to contain him. Later in the game, defensive tackle Tenny Palepoi rushed toward Bolles, who was late to kick-step outside to get in front of defensive end Joey Bosa.

In Week 13 at Miami, defensive end Andre Branch juiced inside before darting outside, catching Bolles slightly out of position and getting into his pads. And in Week 15 at Indianapolis, Jabaal Sheard used the same move as Branch to gain an advantage.

Bolles was called for two holding penalties on run plays when he initially contained his opponent but held on too long when C.J. Anderson bounced outside.

All of lessons have been applied to Bolles' work this offseason.

After a rookie year of "rocky moments," Bolles feels "calmer and collected," going into Year 2. Improve and the Broncos have their blind-side pass protector and physical run-game presence locked down for

the future, a player who plays like his status as a first-round pick. Stay the same, and left tackle will develop into a question mark under consideration for re-drafting.

“Guys get drafted every year and there is always that guy who comes in and wants to take your spot,” Bolles said. “You have to be prepared. The guys that play eight, 10 years are the guys who are consistent. You have to be ready for everything that comes your way.”

Shane Ray's game plan should be to not rush back to Broncos

By Ryan O'Halloran
The Denver Post
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Broncos linebacker Shane Ray's game plan should be simple when he begins recovering from a fourth left wrist surgery in less than a year.

Take as much time as necessary to get healthy, even if it means he's not ready for the Sept. 9 opener against Seattle.

Period.

Ray is without a contract for 2019 after the Broncos declined to pick up his fifth-year option. He shouldn't rush back from the latest hurdle. If he does and re-injures the wrist, he may be unable to pass a physical next March, diminishing his open market value.

But if Ray is effective during his 2018 sample size — be it 12, 10 or eight games — and finishes healthy, there will be a team out there that compensates him.

But will his wrist allow that to happen? Can Ray be a part of a potentially dynamic pass-rushing rotation?

A team source termed Ray's latest surgery as a "clean up" procedure. What does that mean? We asked an expert.

"We all tend to use 'clean up' when you're not changing some major component and we are either taking a screw out, taking some scar tissue out or something like that," said David Hay, orthopedic hand/wrist surgeon at Cedars-Sinai's Kerlan-Jobe Institute in Los Angeles.

"Certainly, taking a pin or a screw out, the recovery for that could be 2-4 weeks. If something more significant is done, it can be longer and they have to wait some amount of time for healing and then can start rehabbing the healed part."

Hay said Ray's multiple surgeries don't make him more susceptible to re-injuring it in the future.

"But it does make it more likely he will have stiffness and mild, chronic pain," Hay said. "The hope, I'm guessing, is they're trying to get the pain to a one out of 10 and they can tape it and deal with it without thinking as opposed to having it always on his mind during the game."

Foremost on Ray's mind when he does return will be his future, and don't blame him for that. He isn't injury-prone — he played 14 games as a rookie and all 16 games in 2016.

He is merely dealing with a series of unfortunate events that cost him eight games last year and potentially part of this year. To be operated on in early June is better than late July, so taking it slow could benefit all parties.

OTA leftovers

Davis' approach. Entering his third year as a starting inside linebacker, Todd Davis still benefits from the organized team activity season.

"I use it as a way to re-learn the defense," he said. "I feel like it's always great to start from the beginning and when the rookies are taking notes, I'm taking notes, too, because there's nothing like re-learning the material and growing your knowledge of the defense."

Advice for undrafted rookies. In 2014, Davis wasn't drafted and signed with New Orleans, where he toggled between the practice squad and active roster until the Broncos claimed him in November. His advice for this year's group? "I would say bring it every day," he said.

"My goal — and this sounds kind of crazy — it was to pass out every day. To run so fast, to work so hard, to leave it all on the field because you're not promised the next day. If you make it through a day and make an impression on somebody, hopefully you can earn another day tomorrow."

Different feeling. Safety Justin Simmons on this year's off-season program compared to 2017: "This OTA practice (season) has already been better than last year's OTAs and mini-camp and training camp — all those practices combined. Guys are competing and getting after it."

Butt impressing. One young player we are intrigued to see in pads is tight end Jake Butt. In the three open practices, he has consistently gotten open. "It's our responsibility as tight ends and slot (receivers) to win one-on-one match-ups on the inside," he said. "We've got to make plays when our number is called to take a little bit of pressure off those guys (Demaryius Thomas and Emmanuel Sanders) on the outside."

Around the league

More T.O. Drama. Good to see receiver Terrell Owens is handling himself with class ... or not. Owens announced he will not attend this summer's Pro Football Hall of Fame enshrinement ceremonies in Canton, Ohio.

Owens was sore after waiting several years to be voted in and said he will announce "where and when I will celebrate my induction."

Will the Hall even acknowledge Owens during its ceremony? Which team will agree to honor him with an on-field ring presentation? On second thought, we don't care.

Dez keeps waiting. Receiver Brandon Marshall, 34, re-surfaced by signing with Seattle last week. The Seahawks will be Marshall's sixth team.

Dez Bryant, 29, keeps waiting. Bryant has failed to reach 1,000 yards in three straight years (after three seasons of at least 1,200 yards) and teams raced to say they weren't interested after Dallas cut him. Bryant's best move may be to wait until training camp and a team is struck by injuries or ineffectiveness.

Jim Bob's job. Detroit offensive coordinator Jim Bob Cooter, retained by new coach Matt Patricia, could be on the head coaching radar if he can improve the Lions' last-place running game. Detroit signed LeGarrette Blount and drafted Kerryon Johnson.

"It's really flawed on my part if we stay stagnant," said Cooter, who was on the Broncos' staff in 2013. "We got to adjust to the players, we got to adjust to different things going on in the league." A key will be more attempts — the Lions' 22.7 rushes per game were ahead of only Miami (22.5).

Raiders overhaul. Old/new coach Jon Gruden hired defensive coordinator Paul Guenther away from Cincinnati and then brought in 10 veterans via free agency. The Broncos will have one game of tape to study before the teams play in Week 2.

"Defense is not for nice guys," Guenther said, per The Athletic.

"We're going to play physical, with press coverage on the outside, be strong against the run and not back down from anybody. I want to get back to those old Raiders defenses." Among Oakland's issues last year was stopping the pass (26th in yards allowed per game), interceptions (league-low five

Denver Broncos will ride the shotgun, 'Pegasus' offense, under Bill Musgrave

By Woody Paige
Colorado Springs Gazette
June 10, 2018

Bill Musgrave has revived, revised and revitalized the Broncos' offense for this season.

The Broncos will be riding the shotgun.

While players and the media at Dove Valley have been hyping the offensive coordinator's "simplified playbook and terminology," everybody has, in newspaper parlance, buried the lede.

The shotgun formation - as directed by Peyton Manning before Gary Kubiak, then Vance Joseph emphasized the quarterback-under-center system - has returned to where it belongs and will be predominant in the Musgrave-Case Keenum offense.

What went around has come back around.

Credit and cheers to the old Grand Junction Tigers quarterback. Musgrave will get the Broncos out of that stick-in-the-mud scheme that ranked the team 27th in points and 17th in yards in the awful throes, and throws, of a 5-11 season.

On a concrete walkway outside the Broncos headquarters, in a one-to-one conversation, Musgrave and I discussed his prep football career, when he received the highest honor in Colorado (Gold Helmet Award), and the reasonable prices of housing in The Springs.

I asked the money question: "Are you putting Case under center or in the shotgun?"

His response: "I don't want Case to turn his back on the defense."

Bingo!

"Given his size (6-foot-2, perhaps in high-tops) and intelligence, and what we're doing different on offense, I want his eyes downfield instead of having him take a 7-yard drop.

Musgrave's statements definitely were indicative that the Broncos will be in the shotgun.

"We can run successfully out of the offense," said Musgrave while doing a demonstration. When both Kubiak and Joseph proclaimed, as they took over the coach's job, that the Broncos would be run-centric, the offense didn't flourish. The NFL is a pass-happy league.

And Musgrave has proven - first with the Falcons, and young Matt Ryan, as assistant head coach and, years later, as the offensive coordinator with young Derek Carr - his pass first, and on first, second and third downs, offensive structure is quality-controlled.

The 2010 Falcons finished 13-3, and the 2016 Raiders, sixth in scoring and seventh in offensive yardage, won 12 of 15 games before Carr suffered a broken leg.

Both Ryan and Carr worked out of the shotgun a vast majority of their plays.

As did Keenum with the Vikings.

The new offense also already is benefiting Paxton Lynch, who was a full-time shotgun quarterback in college, but seemed like a lost soul in the under-center offense.

In 22 years of NFL coaching, Musgrave has tutored 24 quarterbacks, including Michael Vick, Nick Foles and Donovan McNabb.

His principal influences as a player and an assistant were the Bill Walsh West Coast offense in San Francisco and Denver (with Mike Shanahan and Gary Kubiak in both locations) and eventually, the Chip Kelly spread formation in Philadelphia.

Musgrave's offensive schemes, fashioned to fit a quarterback rather than force a QB into a specific system, and his abridged terminology (one word on myriad plays, particularly during the hurry-up two-minute offense) derived from his tenures in Atlanta and Philadelphia.

His is an innovative offensive mind. Musgrave will vary his schemes with four- and even five-wide receiver sets - spreading the field as Kelly did with the Eagles - or an elephant backfield or three tight ends.

Musgrave, after all, was a quarterback for the Oregon Ducks and set passing records broken by Marcus Mariota.

He is inclined to sporadic end-around runs and the receiver bubble screen that was very productive with Manning-to-Demaryius Thomas before disappearing.

Musgrave is partial to play-action pass out of the shotgun. In 2016 Carr equally threw 1-10 yards, 11-20 and 21-30 (exactly 150 times each). Carr flung 30-yard-plus passes on 110 plays.

Jack Del Rio foolishly didn't renew Musgrave's contract, and the Raiders' offense declined badly last season. Del Rio was fired.

Mike McCoy, whose playbook was as lengthy and complicated as a Leo Tolstoy novel, was dismissed on Thanksgiving amid the Broncos' eight-game losing streak.

Musgrave was given the "interim" title. A Broncos executive said there was no way Bill could do a makeover in the final five games.

All changed after he got the official title. He met with the overhauled offensive staff and revealed his fresh philosophy. When asked in Oakland by writer Vic Tafur what name he had given the proficient offense, Musgrave said: "No name. Hopefully, just a 'score points' offense."

The Broncos' offense could become "Pegasus" under Musgrave and with Keenum in the, viola, shotgun.

Why a former weakness is now Su'a Cravens' biggest strength

By Jason Reid

BSN Denver

June 10, 2018

Last season, Su'a Cravens never saw the field.

This year, he's the piece that's going to allow Joe Woods, his new defensive coordinator, to transform the Denver Broncos' defense.

"I think bringing in Su'a just gives us another level of our defense that we can totally explore into," fellow safety Justin Simmons said during the team's third week of OTAs. "Su'a has been awesome."

"He's also another smart safety, too," Simmons added. He's already picking up the defense, knows it well and is making his checks. Su'a already seems like he's been a day-one guy. Like he's been here since all last year. So, I'm really excited to have him, and like I said, another part of the defense that just makes us that much better."

Last year, amidst an incredibly disappointing and forgettable year, Denver's defense actually performed incredibly well — ranking in the top five in total yards allowed, rushing yards allowed and passing yards allowed.

Yet after finishing with the eighth-worst scoring defense, allowing 23.9 points per game, and more importantly a 5-11 record, John Elway put a plan in place this offseason to make the defense better.

That plan included Bradley Chubb, the fifth-overall pick in the draft, and another player they had a first-round grade on two years ago.

"Coming in here, they obviously had a plan for me. When I got here they told me that they wanted me when I was coming out of the draft," Cravens told BSN Denver on Thursday. "They run a lot of defenses that utilize a lot of things I can do, and whatever they need me to do, I'm happy to do it."

After Washington selected him with the 53rd overall pick in 2016, Denver's plan had to be put on hold for two years. But after Elway traded the equivalent of a fourth-round draft pick to acquire the talented safety back in March, that plan is back on track.

"They obviously want me out there when it comes to teams going wide, teams creating mismatches with their big tight ends or athletic tight ends," Cravens said, giving an idea of his role in the defense. "They think that I can fit the role of being able to cover and being able to play the run at the same time."

The best word to describe Cravens' game is simple: Versatile — a characteristic Denver's entire defensive backfield now possess thanks to the addition of the third-year safety.

"I mean, he gives us so much more versatility and mobility, both at safety and if we put him at like our dime and nickel packages," Simmons stated.

Now, paired with Simmons, Darian Stewart, Will Parks and Jamal Carter, No. 21's presence gives the Broncos "rare" depth in the defensive backfield, according to Woods.

"In the safety position, we can play strong, free and dime. It gives us the versatility based on matchups to move guys around," Denver's defensive coordinator explained with excitement in his voice.

"It could be — let's just say it's a team and they're running the ball more. We can put Su'a down there. If it's a team and maybe they're passing more, maybe we can put Justin down there. But we can have more on the field and say, 'Hey on this call, you guys play these positions.' It makes it easy for me."

But this elite versatility hasn't always been labeled as an advantage for the young safety.

"My whole life I've heard being a tweener is bad, but I guess nowadays in the NFL you need guys that are not 190 pounds and fast, you need guys that are around 215-220 area that can not only cover, but run and play the run," Cravens said, explaining how a former weakness now plays into his favor greatly.

With a wide smile that never left his face for the entirety of the interview, he added, "I guess I provide that."

To put this in perspective, Cravens 6-foot-1, 224-pound body is 10 pounds heavier than fellow-safety Stewart, 22 pounds heavier than fellow-safety Simmons and falls three pounds short of the desired playing weight of linebacker Brandon Marshall.

"He's a unique player. You can see his natural instincts when he's in the box. When he's in the box, he fits the run like a linebacker. Right now, you can see that. You can see it's easy for him," Woods said, giving positive initial feedback on his new versatile weapon. "I think he's going to really help us in terms of what we're able to do with our sub-packages. I think there are a few things actually we can do that we couldn't do last year."

One of the things the great Broncos defense couldn't do last year — not from a scheme standpoint but from an execution standpoint — was cover tight ends and running backs out of the backfield. This year, Woods said he will plan on using a combination of safeties and linebackers in order to do that difficult task.

Woods then admitted Cravens will play "a big part" in covering tight ends and running backs. However, the man described by many as a hybrid linebacker-safety could very well end up being Woods' one-stop shop in the defenses greatest area of weakness.

Another perceived "weakness" — or at least significant concern — of Cravens was his love and commitment to the game. Now, after having football yanked away from him for an entire season, no one can question the 22-year-old's passion for the game.

"It's great to be out here. It's great to be out here," Cravens emphasized as his smile nearly leaped off his face.

“Nine months ago, I was in a place where I don’t ever want to be. I couldn’t play football—not by choice—and the fact that the Broncos gave me another opportunity at playing football is just a dream come true. I’ll never take it for granted.”

Simply asked if he was happier with the Broncos, his facial expression answered the question before his words.

“Oh yeah.”

Excitement for Broncos tight end Jake Butt continues to rise heading into minicamp

By Ian St. Clair
Mile High Report
June 10, 2018

Good morning, Broncos Country!

The MHR Radio Podcast is now on iTunes, Google Play, Stitcher and TuneIn. Please subscribe to the one that fits your fancy, and also rate and review what you hear.

As the Denver Broncos head to minicamp, two factors stand out in the final week of organized team activities.

No, it has nothing to do with the quarterbacks.

The first was Garrett Bolles telling the media he's added more muscle to fight bull rushes. The Broncos left tackle wants his weight to be between 300-305, but no more than 308. The other aspect that should help Bolles in his second season is playing next to Ronald Leary, as long he can get and stay on the field.

The other is tight end Jake Butt. As Adam Malnati and I said on the latest MHR Radio Podcast, Butt adds another element to Denver's offense and gives quarterback Case Keenum another weapon to attack defenses. When you look at the success Keenum had with the Minnesota Vikings last season, Kyle Rudolph was a huge part of that.

If the Broncos can get anything close to that with Butt this season, it makes the offense that much tougher to stop, and increases the odds of success.

"You're out here playing football, but your main goal right now is to work your craft," Butt told the media earlier this week. "Work the little details of the game. Work your feet in the run game. Feed the top of the routes, pass game. It's just the little details that you're trying to work on. You're not trying to go full speed out here. You want to make sure no one gets hurt, but you're trying to get better, you're trying to maximize your time that you do get on the field."

While it's exciting to think about what Butt can do now that he's healthy, and he said he's 100 percent, it's crucial to temper expectations. For all intents and purposes, this is rookie year and he still has a lot to learn. As is the case with every rookie, what's pivotal is how Butt responds to the inevitable hiccups he encounters.

"He's working hard and he wants to be a great player," Broncos coach Vance Joseph said. "We haven't played a game yet, so I don't know what Jake is going to be, but he's very engaged, he's worked hard and he's here every day. That's all I can tell you about that."

What adds to the excitement is the attitude and work ethic that Butt possesses. It's no guarantee to success, but it's a great harbinger. As the Broncos head into minicamp, his continued development remains intriguing.

“It’s football ... but you’re a professional now,” he said. “You look around the locker room, and we have a lot of guys who are pros. A lot of great examples that I can learn off of, feed off of and carry that into this offseason.”

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Broncos Tracks

NFL's best defenses: Who got better, worse, and who's next up - NFL Nation- ESPN

The NFL's reigning No. 1 defense in Minnesota is even more formidable, the Eagles have questions and the Rams appear poised to make a big leap.

9news.com | Broncos have NFL's least experienced set of running backs

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.

9news.com | As OTAs end and minicamp begins, biggest difference in Broncos: Case Keenum

The Broncos wound up 5-11 last year, in part because they never did decide on their quarterback. How they'll finish this year is subject to conjecture, but not at quarterback.

Woody Paige: Another lost season for Broncos' Shane Ray? | Colorado Springs Gazette, News

The last month has been dreadful for the fourth-year first-round draft choice, who turned 25 on May 18. On May 4 the Broncos declined to pick up Ray's fifth-season 2019 option, which would have guaranteed him \$9.232 million. John Elway was leery of Ray's injury and underachieving history, and the Broncos fortuitously had drafted heralded edge rusher Bradley Chubb fifth overall.

NFL Tracks

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From 'pro-style' to productive: How Saints find NFL-ready OL talent like Ryan Ramczyk | Saints | theadvocate.com

Finding a plug-and-play offensive lineman in the NFL draft is harder than it's ever been before, for one simple reason.

How the NFL drug testing and appeals process works

The league and the NFLPA jointly announced “a wide-ranging series of improvements” in 2014.

Drug charges against free agent T.J. Ward dropped - NFL.com

T.J. Ward's name has been cleared. The free-agent safety saw his pair of drug charges, which included a third-degree felony, dropped on Thursday, according to Hillsborough County (Fla.) Court records.

The NFL and ALS: Before Dwight Clark, three 49ers were victims

The baffling anomaly of three players from the same team contracting ALS received national attention in the late 1980s as 49ers officials searched for clues. Theories ranged from the fertilizer on the team's practice field in Redwood City to the use of drugs. They investigated anabolic steroids, painkillers and dimethyl sulfoxide, or DMSO, a controversial substance athletes and trainers at the time used to help heal sprained ankles, tendonitis and muscle strains.

10 players who've stood out during Denver's voluntary OTAs

By Chad Jensen
247 Sports
June 10, 2018

The Denver Broncos just wrapped up three weeks of Organized Team Activities. Peppered throughout were 10 voluntary practices, as mandated by the NFL.

Compared to training camp, OTAs might not be as immediately affecting, but they are a piece to the greater puzzle the Broncos are putting together in 2018. With a Draft class of 10 players, plus a crop of undrafted rookies, the Broncos are rolling into this summer with a wealth of youth on the roster.

Combined with the Draft classes of 2016 and 2017, the Broncos are no longer one of the oldest teams in the league, as they were when the likes of Peyton Manning and DeMarcus Ware were around. This is a young Broncos squad, replete with unknown quantities.

But that's a good thing. And it could be the impetus of a monumental turnaround.

Coming off a 5-11 season, the Broncos are sandwiched between a World Championship and a new era. But in order for Denver to emerge from this awkward period, realize its goals, and make some new entries in the franchise annals, the youth of the roster has to carry its weight.

With that in mind, which players stood out over the last three weeks of voluntary OTAs? While it isn't easy to distinguish oneself without pads and without contact, several players found a way to do so.

PHILLIP LINDSAY, RB

The Broncos have Phillip Lindsay listed at 5-foot-8 and 190 pounds, but that must be soaking wet, as he played out his collegiate career closer to 170. Despite coming off back-to-back seasons of 1,000 yards rushing and double-digit touchdowns at Colorado, Lindsay wasn't invited to the Combine.

It was due to his diminutive size. Between getting snubbed for the Combine and going undrafted, Lindsay — as you can imagine — has developed a world-sized chip on his shoulder.

Thus far he's been able to parlay it into some momentum at OTAs. Lindsay has earned some praise from Head Coach Vance Joseph, and is officially in the mix for the punt returner duties, even as a UDFA.

"I think it went pretty well," Lindsay said last Thursday. "I've got a lot of things to brush up on, but I was pleased with what I had done so far. I just have to go back to work now, clean up the little things, get back into the playbook and do things right. You can't ever have a lot of miscues. You've got to go in there and be perfect. So, that's I want to try to do."

JAKE BUTT, TE

As a first-year player, Jake Butt was allowed to participate in Denver's rookie mini-camp last month where he made it known that he's in the best shape of his playing career. Coming off a torn ACL and a rookie season lost, it's encouraging news.

As OTAs plowed ahead, it's clear that Butt is back to feeling like himself because he's making plays left and right.

"He looks healthy, finally," Vance Joseph said last week. "We brought him back last year hoping he was going to be healthy and he wasn't ready to play, so we put him back on the shelf. Right now, he's totally healthy.... He's working hard and he wants to be a great player. We haven't played a game yet, so I don't know what Jake is going to be, but he's very engaged, he's worked hard and he's here every day."

Last week Butt made an eye-popping one-handed catch that earned him some praise around the blogosphere. It shouldn't take him long to establish himself as the No. 1 tight end in training camp, and wrest the job away from the incumbent Jeff Heurman.

JOSEY JEWELL, LB

The Broncos considered themselves fortunate to have Iowa linebacker Josey Jewell fall to them early in the fourth round of the Draft. While Jewell failed to blow scouts away with his athletic testing at the Combine, he's already making it clear in his short time with the Broncos that his playing speed and football instincts more than make up for it.

"I'm starting with Jewell," fellow linebacker Brandon Marshall said. "I like Josey. He's a smart, smart kid. He's intense. He's a hard worker, a blue-collar worker. You see him out there going full-speed all the time. He knows what he's doing already. Obviously he's still young, so he still has some learning to do."

Jewell's serious-minded approach to the game should help him to assimilate the playbook quicker than most rookies, and allow him to do what he does best — fly around the field and make tackles.

PAXTON LYNCH, QB

It's only OTAs, yes, but Paxton Lynch has thus far acquitted himself well. At this stage, he seems to be the more capable QB, compared to Chad Kelly.

But with two full years in the NFL under his belt, that's as it should be for Lynch. We're all still cautious in our expectations of Lynch, but it's nevertheless good to see him doing well at OTAs.

"Paxton's growing every day," Offensive Coordinator Bill Musgrave said. "He's doing a nice job late in the down and being real smart with the football. We have our times out there at practice where the ball doesn't go where it's supposed to. We've got to learn from when we stub our toe. But to Paxton's credit, after six OTAs, he's doing the best of the three in terms of protecting the football and making smart decisions, especially late in the down."

Encouraging, no doubt, but the caveat is that Lynch was earning rave reviews from coaches and teammates alike this time last year. And we saw how that eventually came out in the wash.

For now, I'll maintain a modicum of optimism with regard to Lynch, but he still has a long ways to go in earning the trust and belief of not only the fanbase, but the Broncos as well. When things heat up in training camp, that's where the rubber will meet the road in the Lynch vs. Kelly battle. Can't wait.

BRADLEY CHUBB, OLB

Bradley Chubb arrived in Denver with the high expectations of the No. 5 overall pick but they've been cranked up a notch in the wake of Shane Ray's injury. The good news is that Chubb seems to be equal to the opportunity and is already settling into his role on the Broncos defense.

"Bradley Chubb is a hard worker," left tackle Garrett Bolles said last week. "I'm very grateful he's on our team. He's a great guy to go against. We have Von Miller, which, he's always a leader and a teacher. It's a bummer about Shane Ray, but he still teaches, he still leads on that sideline. But you have Bradley Chubb who brings in a whole different demeanor to the game. And knowing how fast he is and explosive he is, is going to help me and help him in the long run. I'm grateful to have him as a teammate. I sit right next to him in the locker room. So, watching him work in the weight room and doing everything possible, and knowing the pressure that he has—he's done a great job with all of that and I'm just excited to see his future."

As are we all, Garrett. The early returns on Chubb are exactly what you'd hope they'd be.

He's big, powerful and surprisingly 'twitchy' for a 270-pound edge defender. When hard work is combined with rare talent, great things tend to come of it, and no one will benefit more than the Broncos.

SU'A CRAVENS, S

Su'a Cravens was acquired via trade to step in and be the type of safety/linebacker hybrid T.J. Ward was in his prime Denver days. The upside with Cravens is that he might actually have the cover skills to be even better than Ward was against tight ends and running backs out of the backfield.

Thus far, the kid has looked good — good enough to garner some praise from his defensive coordinator.

"He's a unique player," Joe Woods said. "You can see he natural instincts when he's in the box. When he's in the box, he fits the run like a linebacker. Right now, you can see that. You can see it's easy for him. We're just really spending a lot of time teaching him how to play off the ball. Playing the deep safety position. But I think he's going to really help us in terms of what we're able to do with our sub-packages. I think there's a few things actually we can do that we couldn't do last year."

The Broncos like deploying their 'Big Nickel' sub-package, with three safeties on the field. With Justin Simmons and Darian Stewart on the field, having Cravens available to drop down into the box and play some linebacker adds a versatile wrinkle to the type of coverages and blitz packages Woods can dial up.

BRENDAN LANGLEY, CB

Last year, Brendan Langley made Denver's 53-man roster by virtue of his third-round Draft pedigree. But it wasn't enough to keep him on the field.

Langley (6'0, 199) arrived in Denver extremely raw and inexperienced as a cornerback. But the Broncos loved his size and natural ability enough to pull the trigger. He's got to master the playbook and understand his coverage responsibilities, but heading into his second year, the technique Langley's been taught by his pro coaches seems to be paying off on the practice field.

"[Langley's] definitely getting better," Coach Joseph said. "He is such a talent. His problem won't ever be matching up physically. His problem is getting reps enough to know what to do, and to have great technique every play. Physically, he's what you want. He's tall and long with great ball skills."

Langley is being pushed by 2017 UDFA Marcus Rios, but perhaps even more imminently by 2018 third-rounder Isaac Yiadom. It's good to see that the spirit of competition is having a positive effect on Langley's execution.

DEMARCUS WALKER, DE

In his second year, DeMarcus Walker is back to his natural playing position on the defensive line. Working under D-Line Coach Bill Kollar could pay dividends for Walker in 2018 and he's already earned some high marks from teammates and coaches.

"He's improving," Joe Woods said. "Last year, he was a versatile player for us. We feel like he could play outside linebacker and a defensive line position. With the injuries we moved him to outside linebacker. Right now, we said 'Hey, you're a defensive lineman' So, he's put the weight on. This morning I got on the scale with him or watched him get on the scale, he was up to 278, and he's really making some tremendous improvements."

Getting back to his natural playing weight will pay dividends for a guy poised to earn his living in the NFL trenches. Walker might not yet have the run-stopping chops to be a starter, but he should be able to make an impact as an interior pass rusher in obvious passing situations.

DAESEAN HAMILTON, WR

DaeSean Hamilton was Denver's second fourth-round pick in the 2018 Draft. He left the college ranks as Penn State's all-time leading receiver, and was coveted by many NFL teams for his route-running skills.

"DaeSean at the Senior Bowl—he's a guy that has veteran presence as a route runner," Vance Joseph said. "He is a sharp route runner. He gets route running. He is definitely ahead of his time."

Being ahead of the typical learning curve portends well for Hamilton's odds of seeing the field as Denver's slot receiver in 2018. He's already earned some first-team reps with Case Keenum when Emmanuel Sanders and Demaryius Thomas skipped an OTA practice.

Hamilton has earned some praise from teammates thus far, but there's another wideout who's really found a way to shine early on.

COURTLAND SUTTON, WR

Courtland Sutton has arguably been the star of OTAs thus far. Yes, it's 'only OTAs', but considering Denver's Draft history with wideouts, it's more than encouraging to see a second-rounder step in and immediately make an impact.

"I feel like you can throw Courtland in right now, throw Hamilton in, throw a couple more guys in right now and make plays for us," Demaryius Thomas said. "Me coming in as a rookie, I was injured a little, it was hard learning the playbook and it was difficult because I had go up against [CB] Champ [Bailey] every day. They have to go up against [CB] Chris [Harris Jr.] and the rest of the guys. From what I have seen so far, they listen and learn what the coaches say—what me and Emmanuel are telling them. And they're picking it up quick. It will only get better and better from there."

Sutton is ridiculously talented. Combine his 6-foot-3, 218-pound frame with his ability to go up and get the ball, and the Broncos might have themselves a potent red zone weapon in 2018. Meanwhile, Sutton's primary focus will be on honing his route tree, as Coach Joseph opined.

"With Courtland, he needs some work with it, but he is so physically gifted that once he gets that part, he's going to be hard to defend," Joseph said.

The good news is that both rookie wideouts are capitalizing on the opportunity the offseason program provides to work on the areas of their game that need polishing. With two Pro Bowlers atop the depth chart, and Sutton and Hamilton behind them, Case Keenum is going to have a smorgasbord of targets in 2018.

NFLPA's Ben Watson says union must 'keep pushing the truth'

By Jason Reid
The Undrafted
June 10, 2018

As President Donald Trump continues to attack NFL players, the league's failure to speak out in support of its workforce is telling.

NFL owners and executives, most likely feeling boxed in because they capitulated to Trump by writing a new national anthem policy and are worried about further inflaming an already volatile situation, declined to counter the president's remarks after he canceled a White House event this week to celebrate the Philadelphia Eagles' Super Bowl championship. But Trump's criticism of the Eagles for what he views as a lack of patriotism, along with criticism of all NFL players who have peacefully protested racial injustice and police brutality by kneeling during the anthem, has prompted pushback from the NFL Players Association.

In an interview with The Undrafted this week, New Orleans Saints tight end Benjamin Watson, a member of the union's executive committee and a former player rep, commented on Trump's ongoing war with the NFL, the bad feelings engendered by the owners' decision to unilaterally implement a new anthem policy and how the events of the past two seasons could affect future collective bargaining discussions. Based on what has occurred recently, Watson said, the NFLPA clearly has reason to be concerned.

"Well, a lot has happened, and I'm not just talking about [Monday] or the day before," he said. "It's imperative that we, the union, are able to weed out all of the back-and-forth, the name-calling and bickering that we see when it comes to the public discourse, and have a strong stance to continue defending our players and supporting our players.

"And we also have to continue to push the narrative, the true narrative, that our players love their country and they love the military. We have to keep pushing the truth. We shouldn't have to say that, but it seems we're backed into a place where we do have to keep saying that. And we will keep saying that."

After word emerged Monday that the Eagles would send an unusually small contingent — two league sources said the team's traveling party would likely include fewer than 10 players, and possibly none who are African-American — to be honored at a scheduled White House event Tuesday, Trump rescinded the invitation without notifying the Eagles and then continued to stoke divisiveness over protests during the anthem. In a statement, Trump wrote that the Eagles disagree "with their President because he insists that they proudly stand for the National Anthem, hand on heart, in honor of the great men and women of our military and the people of our country." For the record, no Eagles players took a knee last season. Regardless, Trump, who for almost nine months has blasted players in speeches and tweetstorms for demonstrating to help others, remained on the offensive as the commissioner's office stayed silent.

The NFLPA would have welcomed the backing of owners, or at least a statement correcting Trump's inaccuracies, because "this kind of falls into line with a lot of other things we've seen from [him]. To me, it's dishonorable," Watson said. "Obviously, the person in that office has said some things that have offended a lot of people.

"For someone to invite a group to the White House to honor them for winning in their respective sport or something else heroic, it's upon the invitee to accept or decline. For you to rescind your offer because enough people aren't coming ... to me, that is not presidential. That's below the office of the president."

And Trump appears to have been emboldened by the NFL's new anthem policy.

Last month, owners approved changes that require players to stand if they are on the field during the performance, but it gives them the option to remain in the locker room if they prefer. Clubs will be subject to a fine if a player or any other member of an organization fails to show respect for the anthem. Players will no longer be allowed to sit or kneel, and the league has empowered clubs to discipline players and other employees for violating the policy. Initially, Trump expressed his approval of the portion of the policy about standing on the sidelines. Increasingly, however, he has said that the policy is unacceptable because players should not be permitted to remain in the locker room.

With how Trump has effectively seized upon the issue to gin up excitement in his base, and the owners' ongoing fear about angering a large section of both its fan base and corporate partners, Watson said he could not rule out the possibility of the NFL making additional changes to the policy.

"At this point, I would not be surprised to what length the owners capitulate to the president," he said. "Really, what this [change in policy] about is that the league, because of several attacks and insults on players and on the league by the president of the United States, has responded in this way, which I don't think would have happened if someone else had been president. And I'm not talking about a Democrat or a Republican. I'm just talking about the type of person who did not say these things."

The NFL's handling of the issue has not helped its relationship with the NFLPA, which wanted a seat at the table during the decision-making process. Owners didn't provide one. The question is, are owners even interested in fence-mending?

"Well, moving forward, we want to be partners with the league, especially when it comes to CBA talks (the current deal ends in 2021) as well as things that are going on now," Watson said. "We want to be at the table together. We want to make decisions, especially big decisions, collectively instead of having it be a unilateral approach where the league makes decisions without player input. It's better for everyone if we do it together.

"On the one hand, it is concerning that this hasn't happened here. On the other hand, it doesn't mean it has to continue this way. And the good thing is, the decision that was made in Atlanta ... all the owners weren't totally behind it.

"Yes, players weren't asked our opinion, but there were some owners who really weren't involved in it either. There was a fracturing there that you see with owners. It doesn't have to continue this way. But no matter what happens, we have to continue to protect our players and their rights."

A league spokesman, contacted seeking comment about the NFL's handling of the anthem changes, referenced commissioner Roger Goodell's comments after the policy was approved in Atlanta late last month.

"Anything I have to say to the union, I will say to them directly," Goodell said that day, according to a transcript of his comments. "I do that all the time, but I will do that to them directly.

"There has been incredible engagement with the players on this. We have talked to tens if not hundreds of players on this over the last year or so to get their input and understand their positions. We want to respect their positions."

Again, however, the union had no voice in implementing the policy.

Some NFL observers have criticized the union for the perception that it was slow to act in publicly supporting former San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick, who ignited a civil rights movement in sports by first sitting and then kneeling during the anthem before the 2016 season. The still-unemployed passer has filed a grievance against the league alleging that owners have conspired to ruin his career. Watson said that behind the scenes the NFLPA has been highly supportive of Kaepernick as well as unsigned safety Eric Reid, who was the first player to kneel alongside Kaepernick when they were 49ers teammates and who also has filed a grievance against owners.

"The union is always prepared. The union is always being proactive. And the union is always thinking about scenarios, that even us players have no idea about, that may be coming down the pike," Watson said. "What I've found in my experience with the NFLPA ... is that we talk to a lot of lawyers, all the time, about protecting players' rights. There are a lot of issues we look at and ask, 'Look, is this something the NFL can do?' That won't change."

Madden 19 will steer clear of anthem issues

By Mike Florio
Pro Football Talk
June 10, 2018

For decades, EA has marketed the Madden series by claiming, “If it’s in the game, it’s in the game.”

Here’s one thing from the game that won’t be in the game: The national anthem controversy.

At the EA Play event, which precedes E3 2018, producer Ben Haumiller told GameSpot that the Madden 19 game will not include anything related to the anthem.

“We work very closely with the NFL and the NFLPA,” Haumiller said. “We work very closely about how we want to represent the game, and really make it a celebration of the sport. And maybe a place where you don’t have to . . . you love the game, but you don’t have to worry about everything else that’s going on that might be distractions from [the reason] you’re trying to be here — it’s about the game.”

According to GameSpot, after the anthem issue first arose in 2016, EA said that the announcers would address the issue in the commentary during the game. That never happened.

Two years later, EA is firmly committed to avoiding what Haumiller called a “distraction” from the game.

“We really want to get you to the gameplay,” Haumiller said, and anyone who plays Madden on a regular basis agrees.

The people who play just want to play, and that means minimizing everything else, from the amount of time it takes to load the startup screen to the amount of time that elapses from starting a game to the actual kickoff to the various delays that pop up in connection with penalty calls, the end of quarters, and replay reviews, any moment spent doing anything other than playing the game feels like wasted time.