

Selections of history say Broncos can go from 5-11 to the Super Bowl

By Mike Klis

9 News

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Selective history says the Denver Broncos can do it.

They can go from 5-11 in 2017 to playing in the Super Bowl to cap 2018. They can do it with a second-year head coach. Been done before. They can do it with a journeyman, free-agent quarterback in his first year with the team. It's happened before.

They can do it with their top two receivers older than 30. Yep, it's happened. They can do it with a third-round rookie running back. Look at two playoff teams from last year.

They can do it with a 29-year-old, future Hall of Famer pass rushing from one side, and another dynamic rookie pass rusher coming from the other. If so, it would be an NFL repeat, repeated.

Such scenarios haven't happened often since the NFL went to a 16-game schedule in 1978. But if the Broncos turn it around -- flip it with their draft, at certain positions and with their team -- it would not be an unprecedented feat.

Here's how a select view of history lends hope for the 2018 Broncos.

*Three teams since 1978 have played in the Super Bowl a year after going 5-11 or worse. The Patriots went from 5-11 in 2000 to winning the Super Bowl in 2001. The 1998 St. Louis Rams went 4-12 only to win the Super Bowl in 1999. And the Cincinnati Bengals bounced back from 4-11 in 1987 to almost knocking off Joe Montana's San Francisco 49ers in the Super Bowl to cap 1988.

*In 2003, the Carolina Panthers signed unrestricted free agent Jake Delhomme, who had been cut twice and spent his career as a backup quarterback. He then led Carolina to the Super Bowl in his first year there and threw for 323 yards and 3 touchdowns in XXXVIII to nearly beat New England.

Maybe, Case Keenum can become the next Jake Delhomme. Keenum has been cut three times and was mostly a backup before breaking out last year in Minnesota. He then signed with the Broncos as an unrestricted free agent.

*Bradley Chubb, the Broncos' first-round pick, would do well to match the rookie season of Jevon Kearse in 1999. Kearse, Tennessee's No. 16 overall selection and nicknamed "The Freak," had 14.5 sacks to win the NFL's Defensive Rookie of the Year and key the Titans' surprising run to the Super Bowl, where they were 1-yard short of sending the Rams and XXXIV into overtime.

Von Miller, the other Broncos' star pass rusher, would do well at 29 years old to have the kind of season Hall of Famer Michael Strahan had at 29. Strahan's New York Giants reached the Super Bowl in the 2000 season before falling to Ray Lewis' Baltimore Ravens.

*Broncos receivers Emmanuel Sanders and Demaryius Thomas are young up-and-comers compared to the 2002 Oakland Raiders' pass-catching duo of Jerry Rice and Tim Brown.

Rice finished with 92 catches and 1,211 receiving yards in the season he turned 40. Brown, who played at 36, had 81 catches for 930 yards. A combined 173 catches and 2,141 yards to help Rich Gannon – who has been mentioned when people talk favorably of Keenum – carry the Raiders to the Super Bowl.

Granted, Rice and Brown are Hall of Famers. But Sanders, 31, and Thomas, 30, are still young. They have time. As recently as the 2016 season, Thomas and Sanders combined for a Rice and Brown-like 169 catches and 2,115 yards.

*Bill Belichick went 5-11 in his first year with the Patriots in 2000. Vance Joseph went 5-11 in his first year with the Broncos in 2017.

I'm not saying Joseph is the next Belichick. What I am saying is I bet New England fans didn't think they had a very good head coach entering the 2001 season.

*New Orleans' running back Alvin Kamara, the NFL's Offensive Rookie of the Year last season, was drafted in the third round. Kansas City running back Kareem Hunt, the NFL's rushing leader last season, was drafted in the third round.

The Broncos' top rookie running back this year, Royce Freeman, was drafted in the third round.

There. Take a slice of history here, and another piece of history there, and the Broncos can play in the Super Bowl this season. And they wouldn't even need a once-in-a-lifetime turnaround to pull it off.

Global Down Syndrome Foundation's 'Dare to Cheer' Camp boosts kids' confidence

By Caitlin Hendee

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A six-day summer camp at Valor Christian High School aims to give kids with Down syndrome a confidence boost through cheerleading and football.

Kids ages 7 and up who participate in the Global Down Syndrome Foundation's Denver Broncos Cheerleaders' Dare to Cheer Camp practice dance moves, do team-building activities and drills and learn cheerleading routines throughout the week.

The camp runs concurrently with the organization's Dare to Play Football Camp with Ed McCaffrey, where kids are paired with Valor Christian High School football players for one-on-one attention and coaching.

This year's camp runs Monday, June 18 through Saturday, June 23.

Global Down Syndrome Foundation is a public nonprofit "to significantly improving the lives of people with Down syndrome through research, medical care, education and advocacy," according to its website.

The week culminates in a scrimmage on Saturday, which is joined by Broncos players and cheerleaders, Miles the mascot and skydivers.

Sahriyah Stewart, an 11-year-old girl and 6th grader at Grant Beacon Middle School, said she loves the camp because she can make friends there.

"We...do these health and wellness camps, and making friends...is a big deal -- doing the drills and actually playing in a real game with a huge audience is a big deal, so we're very excited," added Michelle Sie Whitten, president & CEO of the Global Down Syndrome Foundation.

Stewart said she is a great cheerleader "because I'm a great dancer."

Whitten said people can get involved by attending the scrimmage Saturday, June 23 at Valor Christian High School and by volunteering for other events.

More than 300 kids have participated in the camp since its summer 2010 inception.

Five biggest questions facing NFL teams at minicamps

By Dan Graziano

ESPN

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The NFL offseason comes to a crescendo this week with 28 -- count 'em, twenty-eight -- of the league's 32 teams holding mandatory minicamps. (The other four had them last week.)

Over the coming days, coaches will be able to watch and evaluate the players on their rosters in concert and competition with one another for the final time until the late-July/early-August days of training camp.

After Thursday, the NFL goes dark for about a month and a half. So if you're into things like first-team rep tracking and live Twitter updates of 11-on-11 drills, this is the week for you. Watch it. Embrace it. Commit it to memory because it's going to have to last you for a while.

Here are the five biggest questions facing NFL teams as we roll into mandatory minicamp week:

Who's (not) showing up?

Until now, all 2018 NFL offseason activity for these 28 teams has been voluntary. But this week is mandatory, and players who skip these workouts could face fines of up to \$84,435. For some players, that money pales in comparison to the contract extensions they're expecting, which means they might be willing to swallow it to avoid the risk of injuring themselves and missing out on the big, guaranteed paydays waiting for them in the coming weeks or months.

We will watch to see whether Rams defensive tackle Aaron Donald, Raiders pass-rusher Khalil Mack, Giants wide receiver Odell Beckham Jr., Cowboys guard Zack Martin, Cardinals running back David Johnson and others in the final years of their rookie contracts show up without new deals. Steelers running back Le'Veon Bell, a franchise player who hasn't signed his franchise tender and thus technically isn't on the Steelers' roster, can (and likely will) skip this week's camp without penalty. But the others on that list are worth watching because they're in sensitive situations. If you're Beckham, for example, and you're currently scheduled to earn \$8.5 million this year on your fifth-year rookie contract option, do you show up and risk an injury that could jeopardize the \$35 million or so in guaranteed money that comes with a top WR contract these days?

Another name worth watching here is that of Seattle safety Earl Thomas. He isn't on a rookie deal, and he's scheduled to earn a tidy \$8.5 million this year. But he has only one year left on his deal, and this offseason has seen many of his high-profile, championship teammates depart Seattle via trade or release. Thomas announced Sunday that he won't show up for this week's camp or any other Seahawks offseason activity until his contract is addressed. As long as Thomas remains unsigned beyond this season, he'll be a name atop all the trade-candidate lists.

How healthy is your quarterback?

The list of high-profile quarterbacks working their way back from injury this offseason includes Indianapolis' Andrew Luck, Philadelphia's Carson Wentz, Houston's Deshaun Watson, Arizona's Sam Bradford, Miami's Ryan Tannehill and Green Bay's Aaron Rodgers. Rodgers and Tannehill have been healthy for a while and fully participating in offseason work to this point. But questions surround the others.

Luck still hasn't thrown a football since his brief return to practice in October. He has been out since the 2016 season trying to recover from shoulder surgery, and while there's nothing but optimism on Luck emanating from the Colts' building, the same was true this time last year. If he starts engaging this week in football activity we haven't seen from him in the past year and a half, it'll be easier to join the Colts in their outward optimism.

Wentz and Watson, both recovering from torn ACLs, have been able to work a fair bit during recent practices. Watson, whose injury happened a month before Wentz's and was less extensive, is expected to be able to do some drills this week and be ready for the start of training camp. Wentz has been participating in 7-on-7 drills already, and the Eagles are hopeful that they can have him back in time for Week 1. But with Super Bowl MVP Nick Foles still there as an obviously capable backup, there's no reason for the Eagles to take any risks by rushing Wentz back. Expect them to continue to bring him along slowly.

As for Bradford? Signs are good, but the Cardinals are deliberately limiting his offseason activity due to his extensive injury history. But it's worth wondering whether Bradford will want to start taking on more first-team reps in an effort to show he's healthy enough to hold off first-round pick Josh Rosen for the starting job. Bradford's contract makes him the clear favorite, but his health history potentially leaves the door open for the rookie.

What about these rookies, anyway?

Rosen is one of five first-round quarterbacks from this year's draft, and the other four will draw just as much attention this week as we track where they stand.

In Cleveland, No. 1 overall pick Baker Mayfield is behind Tyrod Taylor, and the team plans to keep him there once the season starts. This week likely is about Mayfield's continued progress in the things that are new to him in his transition from college to the pros: taking snaps from under center, operating out of a huddle, etc.

The Jets are bringing along No. 3 overall pick Sam Darnold in a similar way, behind both Josh McCown and Teddy Bridgewater. McCown is a known quantity, and Bridgewater has looked good in his continued effort to recover from his devastating 2016 knee injury. But the fans are going to want to know about Darnold, who has to be the future, and whether he has a shot to start right away.

Buffalo is working Josh Allen as a backup while letting AJ McCarron and Nathan Peterman split first-team reps. The relative lack of starting experience with those two should provide Allen an opportunity to win the job if he develops quickly, but he was seen before the draft as a prospect who needed time before starting in the NFL.

They should be especially busy in Baltimore, where they just lost two OTA practices due to a violation of offseason workout rules. Joe Flacco is still the starter, but many eyes will be on No. 32 overall pick Lamar Jackson. Can he develop quickly enough to be the No. 2 quarterback this season? Do the Ravens have plans to use him and his unique skills in creative ways while he develops? The practice plan for Jackson could offer some clues as to the timetable they have for him.

How quickly are they picking up the new stuff?

Coaching staff changes across the league mean new principles and new schemes that will take time to learn. Watch, for example, the Giants, with which head coach Pat Shurmur is installing a new offense and defensive coordinator James Bettcher is revamping the defense. Does one of those groups look worse than the other in team drills because the concepts on its side of the ball are more complex?

How does Cam Newton look under the guidance of new offensive coordinator Norv Turner in Carolina? What changes should we expect on the Steelers' offense with Todd Haley gone? How different will the Packers' defense look with Mike Pettine as coordinator? Can new Titans offensive coordinator Matt LaFleur have the same success with Marcus Mariota that he and Sean McVay had with Jared Goff last year in L.A.?

Minicamp offers a glimpse at some of these new coaches and new concepts and how players are reacting to them.

Who enters the summer on the roster bubble?

As always, there are veterans with recognizable names who are fighting for their jobs -- either because their teams drafted players who play their positions, because their salaries are too high or because they can't get/stay healthy. Players such as Jets cornerback Buster Skrine, Seattle newcomer Brandon Marshall, New England's Jeremy Hill, even former first-round picks Breshad Perriman in Baltimore, Corey Coleman in Cleveland and Ereck Flowers of the Giants could find themselves in roster peril come late August. They might want to get a jump on things with strong performances this week.

New details emerge in Beth Bowlen's past employment with the Denver Broncos

By Nicki Jhabvala

The Athletic

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The 347-word statement came down like a hammer only hours after Beth Bowlen announced her desire to be appointed controlling owner of the Denver Broncos.

The three trustees of The Patrick D. Bowlen Trust — Broncos president/CEO Joe Ellis, team counsel Rich Slivka and Denver attorney Mary Kelly — responded with a full-page retort stating the team's longtime owner made it clear his children would not be entitled to a job with the organization, but rather have to earn a position of leadership.

Beth Bowlen, the trustees said, "is not capable or qualified at this time" after spending more than three years with the Broncos as their director of special projects and after receiving her law degree from the University of Denver's Sturm College of Law.

"We have communicated our decision to Beth and her lawyers on multiple occasions," the trustees wrote. "She is also fully informed as to why her employment with the team ended in 2015."

In the near two weeks since Beth Bowlen's announcement, the situation has spiraled into a verbal spat that has indirectly included those who have not even spoken on the matter (Bowlen's five children with wife Annabel, and Annabel herself), and has raised further questions about the future of the franchise and the true qualifications to become the team's controlling owner.

The statement also put Beth Bowlen's employment with the team — specifically why it ended and what she was told — in the spotlight.

"The facts will speak for themselves," Bowlen, 47, told The Athletic on Saturday evening at an Alzheimer's Association event held inside the Broncos' fieldhouse.

Beth Bowlen — who worked in marketing and founded the event planning company, Social Butterfly, LLC, in Hawaii before returning to Denver — was hired by the Broncos in 2012 as director of special projects. The position was listed as part of the community development department overseen by Cindy Kellogg, then the team's vice president of community and development. But it's unclear who Bowlen's direct supervisor was during her tenure.

Among the projects Bowlen was involved in was the conception and development of the Ring of Fame Plaza outside the Broncos' stadium in Denver, and various community outreach initiatives with organizations including Alzheimer's Association and Rocky Mountain Children's Health Foundation.

But her time with the Broncos ended abruptly in April 2015.

According to documents obtained by The Athletic, the trustees told Bowlen that her position with the team had been eliminated.

Multiple sources close to Bowlen, who wish to remain anonymous because of the sensitivity of the matter, claim she was let go 24 hours after informing the trustees she was in law school in an effort to meet the criteria to be considered for controlling owner. (The trustees issued a lengthy memo with both objective and subjective criteria to Pat Bowlen's seven children and wife, Annabel, in February 2015. Among the items were a requirement for an advanced business-related degree, such as an MBA or law degree, and at least five years of senior management experience with the team, league or Stadium Management Company.) Those sources also said that Beth Bowlen was given no indication of poor performance or issues with her work prior to her job being eliminated.

About a year before her departure from the team, Bowlen provided her annual self-evaluation and underwent an employee review in which she was to said to have expressed a desire for more communication within the organization.

In June 2015, about two months after Bowlen was told her position was cut, the trustees wrote to her to provide clarification on a number of issues, including the end of her employment.

The trustees reminded they had met with Beth Bowlen and other members of the family in July 2014 to go over Pat Bowlen's plan for the future. (July 2014 was when the family announced publicly that Pat had resigned as controlling owner.) The trustees also reminded of the criteria that was sent to the Bowlen family and emphasized that it should not be perceived as a checklist; if met, it would not necessarily result in controlling ownership for a child.

Ellis, Slivka and Kelly also mentioned Beth Bowlen's hope to obtain an internship within the football operations department and stated they would not create another new position for her. Her job as director of special projects, they wrote, was being eliminated and there was no longer a role for her in the organization.

The Athletic reached out to Kellogg, Broncos executive vice president of human resources Nancy Svoboda, chief commercial officer Mac Freeman and senior manager of community development Liz Mannis — all of whom were said to have some interaction or work in conjunction with Beth Bowlen during her employment with the team. All declined to comment.

"I'm not going to make any disparaging comments about anyone," Bowlen said Saturday. "That is not my style. I am a very capable and qualified woman and that can be very threatening to some men. Fortunately my father was not one of those men, which is why he always encouraged me to pursue a presence at his organization."

Brittany Bowlen, Pat's 28-year-old daughter with Annabel, has also been discussed as a candidate for controlling owner. She served as a business analyst for the Broncos for about a year and recently completed her MBA from Duke. Brittany Bowlen is expected to begin a full-time job with McKinsey & Company global consulting firm, and is believed to be interested in, one day, being appointed controlling owner of the Broncos.

Asked on Saturday if she has had further communication with the trustees since her announcement in May, Beth Bowlen said she has not talked to them. She offered no comment when asked if she had to spoken to anyone on Annabel's side of the family or with the NFL.

The next step for Beth Bowlen remains unclear. But over the past two weeks, as she has made her wishes known, the ownership of the team has not changed. The trustees have full discretion to select the next controlling owner or even to sell the team, though they remain adamant that is not in the plans. Ellis, as Controlling Owner Delegee, has the power to make the day-to-day decisions for the team and to represent the team at league meetings, just as Pat Bowlen would.

Any change in that dynamic would require involvement from the league, which voted in 2015 to allow trust ownerships of teams. The NFL has historically avoided stepping into family ownership disputes, and commissioner Roger Goodell has praised the leadership and work of the Broncos' trustees.

"The Broncos are in compliance and they're actually being very well-run," Goodell said at a 2017 town hall held at the Broncos' facility. "Our membership is very happy with that and it's consistent with the way Pat wanted it done. Pat outlined that exactly the way it's operating."

On the Denver Broncos, Isaiah McKenzie and second chances

By Paul Klee
Colorado Springs Gazette
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Maybe I'm getting soft. Maybe that's it.

Either way, this is a tough one. Not in the way that somebody lost a loved one or encountered another life-or-death scenario. This is about football, so it's all relative to actually important things.

It's a tough one in the way that we're all still human, and we fail. We fail terribly. One of Isaiah McKenzie's failures just so happened to splat down in front of 76,820 at Mile High, a few hundred more than its listed capacity, and another 530,000 folks in the Denver TV market. That was against the Patriots in Week 10, and he fumbled five other times during his rookie year. McKenzie would be front and center on the poster of a lost Broncos season.

"That's not the first punt McKenzie has muffed this year," Patriots coach Bill Belichick allowed afterward.

Think about that. His nightmare recurred so often, opposing coaches began counting on the fact McKenzie wore butterfingers, so they made a point to punt to him. The gameplan was to give the Broncos the ball.

Eight months later and McKenzie's still beating himself up about it.

"I caught it inside the 10 and I was like, 'Why did I do that?' And against the Patriots I should have fair caught that one."

When I fail my front lawn turns brown and the neighbors judge me. Or the trout escapes the end of my line and I judge me. It's significantly less visible, nothing a Google search (Do I need fertilizer?) or deep breath can't fix. When the 22-year-old NFL rookie Isaiah McKenzie failed, he began to question everything he's known since he first picked up a football at 6 years old. He went to a sad place that you or I wouldn't wish on anybody, unless they play for the Raiders. OK, and maybe even then.

"I would say it came to a point where I was doubting myself. Where's this punt going? How will I catch it? Things like that," McKenzie said.

It was a heartfelt, sincere admission last week and makes you wonder what Vance Joseph and the Broncos were thinking when they kept putting a broken rookie on punt return duty. But that's a column for another day.

And that's not what got me rooting for McKenzie when the Broncos open mini-camp on Tuesday. This was. I asked Isaiah who in his life he had leaned on for support during his forgettable rookie season.

"No one, actually," he said.

Like, no one no one?

“I just had to take it in myself. Me being in the NFL, it’s just me.”

Is McKenzie a good guy? A bad guy? No clue. I know the Broncos return man, as a rookie, didn’t assert himself as a professional. I know Aqib Talib gave him the what-have-you when McKenzie was late for a meeting. I also know he’s 5-foot-8, 164 pounds, and it’s a sports miracle to play in the NFL at 5-foot-8, 164 pounds. Really doubt he’s that tall, anyway.

Point is, I know McKenzie about as well as you know McKenzie, a fifth-round pick in 2017. We’ve talked a few times, most extensively when McKenzie told me he’s on par with Kansas City’s Tyreek Hill as the fastest return man in the NFL. Yes, that one caught me by surprise as well.

“It’s the second quarter of the season now. The first quarter was all right,” McKenzie said in Week 5. “But these next four games — the second quarter — I’m taking it by storm.”

Like life itself, the NFL takes hubris personally. Flashing airs usually doesn’t end well, which is probably why you hear calculated veterans like Drew Brees, Tom Brady and Von Miller (especially Von Miller) heap praise on players that quite clearly aren’t operating on their same level.

It’s an alibi if you lose, among other things.

“It was pretty tough. But that comes back to me. I’ve got to do my job,” McKenzie told me last week. “I know inside my head nobody is going to do this job for me. If I can’t do it myself, somebody else is going to do it. It became a confidence thing. I just got to get over it.”

Unfortunately, the McKenzie mess carries a hint of Rahim Moore and the Mile High Mistake. There are certain things you don’t come back from, and you know what Moore’s doing these days? Not playing in the NFL. Isaiah McKenzie knows he has his work cut out just to make the team and isn’t looking for your sympathy, not that Broncos Country would have any. I’m not, either, because let’s be real: dude is 23 years old and made over \$700,000 to fail at the one job to which he was assigned.

But I can’t get past this: “No one, really.”

I tried to think of something worse than feeling alone, and the only thing I could come up with was feeling alone in front of 76,820 people. That’s what got me. That was Isaiah McKenzie. And that’s tough.

Sacco Sez: Ed McCaffrey on College Football Hall of Fame ballot

By Jim Saccomano
DenverBroncos.com
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When hard work is not only a cornerstone of one's career path but is passed along to their children as an absolute must, it is funny how "lucky" guys get.

This past week was another banner one for Ed McCaffrey and his family, who have largely followed the adage of making their own luck.

Not only did Ed and Lisa proudly watch their youngest son, Luke, announce that he intends to attend and play football at the University of Nebraska, but a major national honor came Ed's way as well.

Luke is going into his senior year at Valor Christian High School, where Ed will be in his first season as the head coach, but Luke becomes the fourth McCaffrey brother to have a college football career before him.

The others are Max (Duke), Christian (Stanford) and Dylan (Michigan).

Like his brothers, Luke has been highly touted as a college prospect; he is a quarterback, like Dylan. It has become common for top players to select their college before playing the senior year of high school, eliminating a lot of the recruiting pressures, and young McCaffrey becomes a top big-name quarterback for new Nebraska coach Scott Frost.

Meanwhile, all those genes must come from somewhere!

Ed McCaffrey, who was a standout wide receiver for the Denver Broncos on our back-to-back Super Bowl championship teams in the '90s and who did the color commentary on our game broadcasts for many years at KOA, this week saw his name on the College Football Hall of Fame ballot for the first time.

McCaffrey heads up a stellar list of Broncos and Colorado connections on the 2019 ballot.

Of course, selection to the College Football Hall of Fame is for one's accomplishments at the college level, and Ed had plenty of them as well as those he amassed as a professional.

McCaffrey was a star wide receiver at Stanford, where he was a first team All American as a senior.

He was a two-time team most valuable player for the Cardinal and led the team in receptions for three of his four years at the offensive powerhouse West Coast school, and Ed remains in the Stanford top 10 in both career receptions (146) and yardage (2,333).

Six other players with Bronco or University of Colorado connections are on the College Football Hall of Fame 2019 ballot.

Alphabetically, they are as follows.

Terrell Buckley played for the Broncos in 2000, but he was also a 1991 All-American at Florida State, where he also won the Jim Thorpe Award while leading the nation in interceptions (12) and return yardage (501).

Phil Olsen played for Denver as a center in 1975-76, and he was a first team All-American at Utah State in 1969.

Jake Plummer played quarterback for the Broncos from 2003-06 after a stellar college career at Arizona State. Plummer was a 1996 All-American and the Pac-10 Player of the Year in leading the Sun Devils to an undefeated season and the Rose Bowl. He had more than 2,000 yards passing for three straight years at Arizona State.

Simeon Rice, a Bronco in 2007, was a two-time All-American at the University of Illinois.

Rashaan Salaam was one of the most legendary players ever at the University of Colorado, where he won the Heisman Trophy in 1994.

And Al Wilson had a notable career as a multiple Pro Bowler for the Broncos from 1999-2006, and as a college star at Tennessee, Wilson led the Volunteers to the BCS national championship in 1998. Wilson also led Tennessee to three SEC crowns.

Great players all, but usually the fan focus is on those names they know most recently, and that made the 2019 College Football Hall of Fame ballot the capper to a McCaffrey kind of week for the Broncos and our legions of fans.

Good luck to young Luke McCaffrey in his future career, and as a voting member of the National Football Foundation I think I have pretty well-tipped hand as to the players who will head my voting ballot for the 2019 Hall of Fame.

Very few things in sport bring communities together like football, and these names once again remind Broncos fans that the present is supported by the past to create even more future memories.

Brendan Langley showing growth

By Andrew Mason
DenverBroncos.com
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How is Brendan Langley looking in OTAs?

-- Daniel King

So far, so good. He has looked solid in OTAs, showing his athleticism. Most importantly, he appears to have learned what it takes off the field to stick and find success, according to safety Will Parks.

"You can tell that he had a great offseason. I was with him out in Dallas with Chris Harris [Jr.] and [Bradley] Roby -- we're actually going to be out there again this summer [before training camp] -- but you can tell that Brendan Langley got tremendously focused," Parks said. "He got in his playbook more this offseason, and it's showing out here on the field."

What justified the Broncos getting the first pick out of the 5-11 teams in the first round? I know that there is snake-style in later rounds (among teams with the same record) but why were we so privileged to land Bradley Chubb?

-- Donovan Morgan

Strength of schedule. The Broncos' opponents last year had the lowest combined winning percentage of any slate of foes for the 5-11 teams. Thus, the Broncos picked first among that group.

The final piece of the puzzle to Denver picking fifth was the Bucs' Week 17 upset of New Orleans, which dropped the Bucs to 5-11 and pushed the Broncos into the top 5 picks. That game also made it possible for the Broncos to coach in the Senior Bowl, as the Bucs would have likely received the call if they had finished 4-12.

What do you think of Matt LaCosse making it as tight end this year with the Broncos?

-- Mike

With Jake Butt and Troy Fumagalli aboard and developing, Austin Traylor building off of a solid second half of the 2017 campaign and Jeff Heuerman creating good timing with Case Keenum -- as he explained after last Tuesday's OTA -- LaCosse will need to deliver some outstanding work in training camp to crack the 53-man roster. The Broncos' tight-end group is relatively unproven, but the youth in the room has upside. LaCosse will simply have to show that his potential is better than that of the others in the group.

Why don't the Denver Broncos sign a young proven veteran like Johnathan Hankins?

-- Bhuvan Yerramsetty

Because defensive line isn't a big need right now, given the Broncos' strength up front against the run last year and the return of the players involved in that effort -- Derek Wolfe, Domata Peko Sr., Shelby Harris, Adam Gotsis and Zach Kerr in particular.

Hankins' strength is as a run defender, which would make him a two-down player in the Broncos' defense. With the players on hand -- including Bradley Chubb, who can rotate into a hand-in-the-dirt defensive end in addition to his work at inside linebacker -- there would probably not be many snaps left for Hankins, and certainly not a total worthy of the type of contract he could have been expected to command, perhaps \$8 million for one season. Furthermore, with the Broncos expected to use sub packages for a majority of their downs, Hankins' opportunities would be limited, especially with the players on hand.

For Pete Carroll's Seahawks, It's Time to Compete Again

By Albert Breer
Pro Football Talk
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Every April, Pete Carroll has his Seahawks go through an exercise. In the team meeting room, each player gets up from the seats they were in the year before and finds a new spot around different people.

The idea, quirky as it might be, is to send the message to everyone that when a new NFL season begins, a new identity, new roles and new relationships have to be forged, because the team itself is brand new. You've heard it before—what happened last season doesn't matter, past accomplishments don't count—and this is Carroll's way of physically demonstrating it for his players.

The Seahawks went through with it again a couple months ago, but the reminder wasn't really necessary this time around. Richard Sherman is a 49er. Michael Bennett is an Eagle. Cliff Avril is mulling retirement. Kam Chancellor is awaiting scans on his neck to see if he'll be able to play. Earl Thomas has stayed away, and plans to keep staying away until he gets a new deal. And those five weren't just a significant part of the team's title core—they were also all under contract for 2018 just a few months ago, as five of Seattle's 10 highest-paid players.

"I'm not saying I'm not more challenged this year than some other years," Carroll said from his office the other day. "But I always feel like, 'Man, this is my whole deal, to try to figure out how to recapture that.'"

Here's the curveball: The roster turnover, the departure of all those core players, has actually made it easier for Carroll. Crazy? Not really. As he sees it, this offseason has been and will continue to be a chance, at age 66, to sell the bedrock of his program—competition—all over again. It got a little hard, as the above core came to prominence, to keep selling the idea that every spot was up for grabs. It's not so difficult to sell anymore.

"It's pretty plain to see, that when guys have established themselves for four or five or six years at a spot, and they've been really effective at what they do, it's hard to convince the next guy that he's going to take their spot," Carroll said. "That's for sure. So when opportunities are more open, it does create, in the truest sense, the best connection to what the philosophy and the approach is all about.

"And it feels like four or five years ago. It feels fresh and wide open, it's more of an open competition for some of the spots. And that's a really good thing for us, because it does feed into the whole approach."

It's a big week across the NFL—28 of the league's 32 teams are in minicamps. The other four are wrapping up their offseason programs with one last set of OTAs. And by the time we get to next weekend, the NFL will be on its summer break. Therefore, there's a lot packed into this week's MMQB. We're going to check in on the Browns, and how Hue Jackson has put last year in the rear-view. We'll weigh in on the blow up between the Eagles and the White House. We'll bounce around the league with nuggets on guys who have emerged this spring. And we're going to share details on a visit Kobe Bryant took to Foxboro in May.

The Kobe visit was an interesting one, because of Bryant's experience as an athlete who played 20 professional seasons. The Patriots have a guy like that—Tom Brady is approaching his 19th year, and he's done it a different way in 2018, staying away from all voluntary phases of New England's offseason

program. He was back last week at the team's mandatory minicamp, as you might have heard. And when he and I spoke afterward, the question that was lingering was what he took from spending the last seven weeks away. The answer was tremendously... normal.

"Just enjoying my time with my family, bringing my kids to school, supporting my family the best I can," Brady told me. "They've been supporting me. It goes both ways. I wish I could be in five different places at one time, but that's not life. I've enjoyed it. I'm never going to look back and regret spending time with my wife and my kids, and being a part of their life."

And when I asked if this represented an unplugging of sorts, which I'd heard he wanted, he quickly combatted the idea, because it is not as if he disengaged altogether, nor did it look that way on Tuesday, Wednesday or Thursday.

"I mean, I'm trying to get to ready to play, doing whatever I can do to get ready to play," he continued. "I love this team, I love this organization, and I try to be a good example."

We'll get back to Brady and the Kobe connection in a bit. But we're going to start with the Seahawks' reset, and what it means for Carroll's program.

Toward the end of last year, a couple things were happening with the Seahawks. There had been a rash of injuries that put a lot of the foundational pieces of the Carroll Era on the shelf. There was some fatigue on the part of the vets who actually were available to play, to the point where they'd tell younger players, "You should've seen what this place was like in 2012."

Six years ago, the intensity, tension and dog-eat-dog ethos were palpable. And last season, the guys making the decisions heard what the vets were saying—that's evident in the calls they made this offseason. It started with Carroll's staff; he hired new coordinators (Brian Schottenheimer on offense, Ken Norton Jr. on defense) and a new O-line coach (Mike Solari). It continued with the players. And it permeated how they drafted.

In fact, if you look at the Seahawks' rookies, you'll notice they're all hardened by something significant they overcame. Shaquem Griffin is the most obvious example, but not the only one. First-rounder Rashaad Penny had to earn his way onto the field at mid-major San Diego State, behind Donnel Pumphery. Third-round pick Rasheem Green battled injury at USC. Fourth-rounder Will Dissly was a zero-star D-line recruit who grew into a great blocking tight end. Michael Dickson went from Australia to Texas to punt.

"We really hit it across the board," Carroll said. "This year was a really good year for connecting with the right kinds of guys to really compete and add to the mentality. I don't want to say that we tried harder at it. As always, we refocused, and we did better this year collectively hitting it. That's why camp is good, that's why every day these guys are juiced and ready to roll. They just add a nice energy. You can feel it."

Carroll has seen it with veterans too, most notably in how Russell Wilson and Doug Baldwin are working together. It's there with a crew of running backs that Carroll calls "the most competitive group we've had," with Penny fighting Chris Carson, Mike Davis and C.J. Prosise for snaps. And on defense, the addition of ex-Viking Tom Johnson has helped in pushing young D-linemen like Jarran Reed.

"There's just been a lot of highlights, a lot of spots that fire me up," Carroll said. "I'm really looking forward to seeing how we come together when we get to camp."

Of course, there's another side to this, and that's the fact that the previous crew was really, really good. It's fine to be excited now. It's another thing to actually win like those Seahawks did over the last six seasons. (A regular-season record of 65-30-1, five playoff appearances, three division titles, two NFC championships and a Super Bowl win.)

Carroll acknowledges that, of course, but he also doesn't see this as a teardown. That brings us back to the other piece of last year to remember, which is the rash of injuries the Seahawks went through. It pushed onto the field a lot of guys who will be playing bigger roles this year, forcing them to get their feet wet. And what he saw then, and is seeing now, gives him hope that this could be 2012 again.

"It does feel like that," Carroll said. "There was a time when our star players weren't star players yet—they were just coming up, and it was exciting to see that emergence. That's what we're counting on in the next year, seeing these guys start to come to prominence and make a spot for themselves. I'm not even concerned about it. I just want to see what the timeline is. I hope it happens now. I want to see it happen right away."

Last year a lot of people saw the changes looming and thought it was the perfect time for Carroll to walk away—he'll be 67 in September, and after this year he'll have been in Seattle as long as he was at USC. He sees it as a new start.

"I was clearly aware of what other people thought from the outside, because it was stated enough. Really, from my perspective, it turned me the other way," Carroll said. "It made me more jacked up to get back into it, because we were taking all the right steps in the transition we were going to have to face, to make it work out.

"Somebody said, 'You're 65, are you thinking of retiring?' or whatever it was. Who says at 65, you have to retire? What does that mean? It means nothing to me. I'm not old enough to retire. I'm not there at all. I do understand why people thought that. [But] we are not low on juice around here."

HUE JACKSON JUMPED IN A LAKE; NOW IT'S ON TO 2018

A couple weeks back, Browns coach Hue Jackson fulfilled a promise to the fans in Cleveland, jumping in Lake Erie as a form of penance for going 0-16. He called it an "outstanding day for all involved," in part because owner Jimmy Haslam and wife Dee were there, and in larger part because \$30,000 was raised for his foundation.

It's also the last he wants to hear about 2017. When he and I spoke on Thursday night, Jackson told me the players haven't heard much from the coaches about it this spring. And they won't either.

"It's something we already know we were," Jackson said. "We want to turn the page on that as fast as we can. Obviously we can't get the taste out of our mouth until we start playing football games. We all know that and we respect that. But to talk about it, what does that do? It doesn't do anything but bring up bad memories. We've pushed forward from that."

The Browns' minicamp this week will wrap up what's been a much different offseason in Berea. After the Browns took an analytically driven, patient approach to building the roster in 2016 and '17, new GM John Dorsey showed overwhelming urgency to get the team to 2018.

Yes, 0-16 is still there, but because of all of the activity, and because of Dorsey's presence, to the people in Berea it feels like it happened longer than five months ago. That's why I thought to reach out to Jackson this week. Here are a few nuggets from that conversation, straight from Hue to you...

Jackson wants the players to feel the urgency. "That's the way John's approached it. I know it's the way our coaching staff has approached it. We want to get to winning as soon as we can, and the moves signal that. Tyrod Taylor's our starting quarterback, we drafted a rookie quarterback, and I think it's a great situation to be in—we don't have to play a rookie quarterback right away, because we have a proven guy who's played in the league, won games, played in playoff games. That's exciting. I also think it sends a message, creates a narrative that this team is gearing up to win, that everything we're doing is pointing towards winning."

The talent is better... "If you look across the locker room, every position group has been upgraded with more talent. It's everywhere. That in itself, when you look from one guy to the next, they can see it, there's been more talent brought on to this football team. ... I've been in this for a while, so there are things you can tell. I'm not ever going to say our team is not good enough, or we're not this or not that. We'll know when we get to training camp. But I do know there's talent on this football team. And I think that's obvious. If you look around the roster, there's been some players who've been really good players on other teams."

... so is the synergy between scouting and coaching... "When it's like that—and it is now and has been since John has been here with us—we see things the same. So when you're trying to acquire players, there's a reason why we're putting him on our team. There's a reason why we're doing everything that we're trying to do in the offseason to get this team to be the best they can be. It doesn't mean we agree all the time, but we have great discussions and great conversations about why. You gotta win your 'why' on why we're doing this."

... and so is the makeup of the team. "I really like my football team. I like all the acquisitions we've made to our team. I like the young players we've had, because they've improved, some of them are into Year 3, some are into Year 4. I think it's a great blend of young talent and veteran talent. ... A lot of these guys come from organizations where they won a lot of games, some have been to the playoffs, some didn't do it as well. It's a good blend, a good mix. But I think in the locker room, these guys know what we're trying to do, what we're trying accomplish. We're trying to do something special."

And the big question: Can Baker Mayfield win the starting job this summer? "That's not in my mind. What's in my mind is Tyrod's our starter. We have two very capable players, one in Drew Stanton, who also has a ton of experience, and we have a young, emerging quarterback that's got a lot of work to do, and has to learn a lot. I don't want to put a ceiling on any player, but I already know where our pecking order is. And again, I've said this before, I'm not going to stop him from being the best version of him, I'm not going to stop him from working extremely hard. I just want to do everything I can so when he goes out to play for the Cleveland Browns, whenever that is, he'll know and he'll be ready to play."

KOBE DROPS IN ON THE PATRIOTS

It was a big news week in Foxboro, with Brady and Rob Gronkowski back, and word emerging on the final day of the Patriots' minicamp that Julian Edelman failed a PED test and, pending appeal, will be shelved for the first four games of 2018, delaying his return from ACL surgery.

Perception might not match reality, but it sure feels like the New England dynasty is more vulnerable than it's been at any point this decade. And so Bill Belichick's handling of this offseason has been under the microscope. Along those lines, there was one move he made a few weeks back that was fascinating to me (and maybe only me): The 66-year-old coach brought in Lakers icon Kobe Bryant just after Memorial Day. Among Bryant's talking points was the importance of training, and of studying other players, to his ability to play two decades in the NBA. The Patriots who were listening have another pretty good example of longevity in their own locker room, and they made the connection quickly.

"A hundred percent," said fifth-year safety Duron Harmon. "When he was telling us about his training regimen, how he approached a day, a light bulb went off in my head: That's Tom. You realize it's no coincidence. That's the reason why Kobe Bryant is Kobe Bryant. That's the reason why Tom Brady is Tom Brady. [Brady's] approach to the game, it's totally different than the majority of the NFL, probably 99% of the NFL. And that's why they have the success they have."

New Patriot Jeremy Hill told me that Bryant's study of Allen Iverson stuck out in the speech, because it was a result of Iverson lighting Bryant up early in his career. Bryant also relayed stories of incorporating elements of what Michael Jordan, Larry Bird, Bill Walton, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and Magic Johnson did as players and pros into his own routine.

And there were two keys. One was the aforementioned commitment. "There was no off-day, there was no, 'It's O.K., I'll worry about it tomorrow.' He approached every single day as a life-or-death situation," Harmon said.

And the other was the constant thirst for knowledge. "With Tom and Kobe, you see they have totally different workout regimens, but you see it works perfectly for each one of them in a totally different way," Hill said. "For me, and everyone in the locker room, whatever we can take from that and apply to ourselves to make ourselves better, even if it's just a little better, that stuff is huge."

I don't know exactly why Belichick brought Bryant in, but I sense that the message Kobe delivered absolutely resonated. And given all that's happened in Foxboro over the last six or seven months, and how much of it relates to Brady's own training methods and their influence in the New England program, it's pretty interesting how it lines up with the juicy storylines we've been following since January.

... OF THE WEEK

TWEET

Player Justice

@PlayerJustice1

It's no accident that the NFL announced the banning of kneeling today, effectively muting any pick up of @RealSportsHBO story on the concussion settlement. The NFL are masters at manipulating the press for self serving purposes.

I missed this a couple weeks ago, but it's a pretty interesting point to make, especially in light of where the concussion settlement has gone. The Real Sports piece is well worth your time.

QUOTE

"I'm tired of the narrative being about the anthem, about the White House or whatever. The issues are the issues. And the reason that we're doing any of this is because we have these huge disparities in our criminal justice system; we have this issue of mass incarceration; we have issues of police brutality; our children and access to education and economic advancement is nonexistent in communities of color. And these things are systemic; there are ways that we can change them."

—Eagles S Malcolm Jenkins to ESPN's Tim McManus

I remember a conversation I had with then-Ohio State coach Jim Tressel nine years ago, when Jenkins was entering the draft. Tressel called him one of the two or three best leaders he'd ever coached. All of that has been on display over the last year in how Jenkins has taken a guiding role in the players' ability to get their message out, and use some of the political collateral they've accumulated to make a difference.

TEN TAKEAWAYS

1. If you'd told me on the morning of April 26 that Derrius Guice would wind up being the seventh back taken in this year's draft, I'd have called you crazy—and that would have been even with the knowledge that he was facing off-field questions. But that happened, and now it looks like the Redskins are the beneficiaries of murky rumors emerging on Guice during draft week, which precipitated his fall 27 picks into the second round. Washington coaches love what they've seen from Guice so far. Yes, it's non-contact spring work, but his vision, patience, explosiveness and hands have been apparent. Even better, they see a passion for football in him, which is one thing teams look for in players who've had maturity issues (Guice has) as an indicator that they'll grow past them. Obviously, Guice still has a long way to go, but if he keeps putting it together like he did over the last month, he should be a factor in the fall.

2. Speaking of impressive springs, you can also mark down new Rams receiver Brandin Cooks. You might have seen the video of Sean McVay lusting over Cooks' ability—"How about how fast Cooks looked on that strike? ... You see how fast Cooks is? Oh God!" The truth is, the team had a pretty good idea of what the fifth-year pro would bring to the table. What they've learned for themselves since is of his great attention to detail, practice habits and work ethic. And it ties into what Patriots OC Josh McDaniels told McVay as the trade was going down: Cooks didn't miss a single practice rep last year in New England. A first-round pick was, of course, a hefty price to pay. But early indications suggest L.A. won't regret it.

3. A slow-developing safety market has been a part of the Eric Reid storyline. And we're still where we've been on that. On Thursday, Reid, Kenny Vaccaro and Tre Boston—starting-level players—will hit the three-month mark as free agents. It's crazy, and an indication of a widening gap in how teams value corners and pass rushers vs. players elsewhere on defense. A lot of teams believe, right or wrong, that they can get by with less at safety. That said, it's worth mentioning that the two Super Bowl teams invested pretty heavily in versatile pieces at the position—Malcolm Jenkins in Philly, Devin McCourty in New England.

4. The Bills are a good example of a team that made it work at safety with less. Last year Buffalo got better ball production out of its starters at the position (10 interceptions) than any other team in football. Those starters, Micah Hyde and Jordan Poyer, are back, and veteran Rafael Bush was added to the group, and I'm told the Bills are ecstatic with their safety situation given how those three worked together in the spring. The cost? Hyde is making \$6.1 million per, Poyer is at \$3.25 million per, and Buffalo pried Bush from the Saints for \$3.5 million over two years. So the Bills are paying a total of \$11.1 million per year for two starters and a top backup at the spot, which is less than the franchise-tagged Lamarcus Joyner will make for the Rams this year, and almost \$2 million shy of Chiefs S Eric Berry's APY.

5. I know what Julian Edelman posted on Instagram in the wake of the suspension news (“I don’t know what happened”) came off as a little weird, but there is an explanation for it. I was told Edelman’s result was triggered by a substance that wasn’t immediately recognizable, and there are scientists analyzing it. And as to the timing, the test did happen during the offseason (a couple months ago), which means it’s not for any kind of stimulant. You might remember the rash of players saying they got popped for Adderall—the rules have changed now so that offseason use of stimulants falls under the substances of abuse policy, rather than the PED policy.

6. I don’t know what’s left to say about what happened with the White House last week, other than that these national anthem decisions are now being made based on business. For Donald Trump, this is about the business of getting re-elected, and having this red-meat issue to engage his base. For the NFL, its (sloppy) effort to find an exit strategy is about the business of its sport, which is best when the league appeals to the largest audience possible. Would the NFL like to see all of this come to an end? Absolutely, which is why the main talking point coming out of Atlanta centered on the owners wanting to put the focus back on football. Unfortunately for those guys, they’ve got a pretty powerful foe who wants to prevent that from happening.

7. If Julio Jones wants an adjustment to his contract, it would be tough to blame him. He’s now making less than Mike Evans, Sammy Watkins, Jarvis Landry and Davante Adams. Jones is three years into the deal he signed in 2015, meaning he’s out of the guaranteed money, with three years left. He has an extensive injury history, and he turns 30 next February. There will come a time, of course, when Jones’s skills will erode, and Atlanta will come looking to give him a financial haircut (like Arizona once did with Larry Fitzgerald) or his walking papers (like Dallas did with Dez Bryant). So he might as well see what he can get before all that happens.

8. Ditto for Earl Thomas. He’s had a litany of injuries, and he turns 30 in less than a year. There will come a time, and soon, when his value starts to nosedive. I’ll never blame a football player in that situation for trying to leverage a team.

9. I have trouble getting worked up over Terrell Owens’ plan to skip the Hall of Fame induction ceremony. I wouldn’t advise a player to do it, but I look at this the same way I look at top prospects deciding whether or not to attend the draft: It’s amazingly difficult to get there, and each guy should have the right to celebrate how he sees fit. And the idea that this act by Owens makes him any less deserving of induction is patently absurd.

10. I thought the surprise in Detroit over new coach Matt Patricia making his players run laps was way overblown. For one, people there I know have said that the guys who worked under Jim Caldwell were a pretty disciplined group to begin with—it was a hallmark of how Caldwell wanted his teams. It’s not like Patricia and his players were starting from zero. In fact, Caldwell would assess fines, rather than penalty laps, and you can guess which method the players wind up preferring. And then there’s where Patricia came from, which makes this predictable. Just this week, in fact, Bill Belichick assessed penalty laps for mental errors on two occasions, in plain sight of the media, and then wrapped the minicamp by making his players run hills. That isn’t treating guys like they’re in high school. That’s conditioning them for an NFL season.

OFF-FIELD ISSUES

1. You can believe that Kevin Durant had every right to make the decision he did two summers ago, while also believing that jumping into a moving Ferrari like he did has given the titles he’s won a totally different

feel than they would've had if he'd won with a team that wasn't already a burgeoning dynasty. It's O.K., I don't think you'll hurt too many people's feelings.

2. And so here we go with the Summer of LeBron III. It would be cool to see him stay in Cleveland. But at this point I think he has to think of going to a place where there are young superstars that he can eventually pass the baton to, once age starts to strike (and who knows when that'll happen?) and he has to reinvent himself as more of a complementary piece.

3. Alexander Ovechkin has a shot to rival the post-Cup summers enjoyed by Patrick Kane and Brad Marchand. And by the time it's over, we're going to wish that Lord Stanley could talk, because he'd have one heck of a story to tell.

4. We just had our anniversary weekend in Nashville, and I had no idea that something called CMA Fest was going to be there while we were. And that whole thing was one incredible bleep-show. I saw ... a lot of hilarious things. And it felt like every bachelorette party on the planet was there the last three days, too.

5. Justify crushed it, no question. But what an impressive comeback bid at the Belmont by Gronkowski's horse ... Gronkowski. Gronk the Horse looked like he didn't belong coming out of the gate, fell way behind, and somehow came as close to beating Justify as anyone at the Belmont, after missing the Derby and the Preakness with an injury. And now Gronk the Horse gets to go live the life his owner would have for him.

FIVE-DAY FORECAST

Aaron Donald isn't expected at Rams minicamp. Khalil Mack's status for Raiders minicamp is up in the air. Le'Veon Bell still hasn't signed his franchise tender, so he won't be at the Steelers' mandatory work. Earl Thomas plans to miss this week. We'll see about Julio Jones. Everyone will be watching Odell Beckham Jr.'s involvement at Giants minicamp closely, too.

And this is what we'll be talking about this week. The maximum fines for missing the three days of minicamp are as follows: \$14,070 for the first day missed, \$28,150 for the second day, and \$42, 215 for the third day, bringing the grand total to \$84,435. (Bell isn't subject to the fines since he's unsigned, but the others are.)

Is skipping worth it? Maybe this is just what I remember of the last few years, but it seems teams aren't often moved much by players missing work in the spring. The summer, of course, is a different story—that can make management squirm a little. We'll all make a big deal—probably too big a deal—of these things this week. If any of these wildcat contract strikes are still going on six weeks from now, well, then that actually would be a big deal.