

Focus up front: Vance Joseph breaks down the state of the Broncos' offensive line

By Andrew Mason
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While not a finished process, the building of the Broncos' offensive line is at a more advanced state than it was at this time last year.

While there will be competition, Head Coach Vance Joseph said that if OTAs started today, he would expect to see Garrett Bolles at left tackle, Ron Leary at left guard, Matt Paradis at center, Connor McGovern at right guard and Jared Veldheer at right tackle, with competitive situations for McGovern with Max Garcia and Veldheer with Menelik Watson.

"At the end of the day, there's going to be competition everywhere," Joseph said.

This personnel grouping and alignment would return Leary to left guard, the position he played in Dallas before signing with the Broncos as a free agent last year.

"Obviously, Leary was a left guard in Dallas when we signed him, and I'm a firm believer [that] when you sign free agents to do a certain skill set for you, you don't want to change those guys," Joseph said. "So I think our football team will be better with Leary playing left guard."

Leary moved to right guard last year when Garcia shifted back to left guard, the spot at which he was most comfortable. This year, Garcia could see time at both guard spots.

"I know Max. Max wants to play. McGovern wants to play. And Leary will play," Joseph said. "So I think it's going to be competition, and iron sharpens iron, and that's what you want."

McGovern impressed Joseph in his late-season run at right guard in place of the injured Leary. The 2016 fifth-round pick started the final five games of the 2017 season at right guard, and he also earned distinction by filling in for Paradis at center throughout the offseason and training camp.

"I thought McGovern played well the last month of the season, so he would have a chance to be our right guard," Joseph said.

Backups like Billy Turner, who re-signed last week, and J.J. Dielman, whom the Broncos plucked off Cincinnati's practice squad late last year, will also be in the mix. Dielman, in particular, was a player the Broncos "coveted" in last year's draft, Joseph said.

Dielman was one of four Utah offensive linemen drafted last year, along with Bolles, guard Isaac Asiata (Miami, Round 5) and tackle Sam Tevi (Los Angeles Chargers, Round 6).

"That was the best college line [in 2016]," Joseph said. "But [Dielman] was a great leader in college. You ask all of those kids, 'Who would you take with you from your college O-line?' and it was always J.J. Dielman. And he was the [second-]lowest drafted guy. But from a leadership standpoint, he was the guy,

and that's important when you're a center. He also played guard, and he was a tackle at sophomore in college, so I'm looking forward to getting him on the field, because he was a guy that we really, really liked."

Joseph also believes that Dielman's presence can help Bolles.

"Him and Bolles are really tight," Joseph said. "That's always a good thing, to have one of your buddies there who can push you behind the scenes to be a better player, so we're excited about him. He's played center, he's played guard, he's played some right tackle. So we're excited to see what he can bring."

Maximizing Bolles' potential is one of the top priorities after a rookie season that saw him start all 16 games as he was thrown into the fire.

"I would say this about Garrett: First of all, physically, he has to get bigger and stronger. That's his first issue. His second issue is technique," Joseph said.

"But as a rookie, to survive 16 weeks at left tackle, that's going to pay dividends for him. So I'm excited to watch him come back and get better and better," Joseph said. "But he is a talent that just needs time to grow into the position, but he is going to be a very, very good player for us in the future."

Joseph believes the altered responsibilities of the offensive-line coaches will help Bolles grow. With the coaching responsibilities divided by position. Chris Strausser will handle offensive tackles, while Sean Kugler coaches the guards and centers.

Joseph said he got the idea for shifting the duties up front from his work on defense, particularly his background as a secondary coach.

"Defensive backs usually have two coaches now, because there's so much information, and there's really two different skill sets between safeties and cornerbacks," Bolles said. "So why not have two offensive-line coaches? Because the center and guard, it's different skill sets than the tackles.

"Obviously we have a No. 1 pick in Bolles, and tackle is so important to you playing great offense, so we wanted to give those guys their own coach."

And if the offense is to find its footing after a frustrating season, improvement from Bolles and the entire line is a necessity.

How he fits: OT Jared Veldheer

By Andrew Mason
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The press conference to introduce quarterback Case Keenum had barely ended March 16 when Head Coach Vance Joseph was already answering questions about other items on the Broncos' offseason to-do list -- starting with fortifying the right tackle position.

Last year, four different players started at that spot: Menelik Watson, Allan Barbre, Donald Stephenson and Cyrus Kouandjio. A slim free-agent crop of right tackles offered few potential solutions, but Joseph made it clear that the Broncos needed to bolster the spot.

"We're still searching free agency for help at tackle," Joseph said. "Again, we've got 10 draft picks. It's March 16, guys. We've got a long time to go.

"But I've said this 10 times to you guys: It wasn't just the quarterback. We have to protect the guy -- whoever's playing quarterback for us -- and run the football better, and continue to play better defense. It wasn't just the quarterback."

Fixing the offense wasn't just about finding a new quarterback, and the free-agent frenzy isn't just about players with expiring contracts. This year, more than in previous years, it is about a robust trade market, one that has seen the Broncos finalize three deals since the start of the new league year -- including Friday's trade with the Cardinals for Jared Veldheer.

Although Veldheer has spent most of his career at left tackle, he is expected to step into the mix at right tackle. With Stephenson off to Cleveland in free agency and Barbre on the open market, he joins Watson and Kouandjio as veterans who will be in the mix for playing time.

The 2017 season was a frustrating one for Veldheer, who was placed on injured reserve after 13 games because of a fractured ankle. The injury was his second consecutive season-ending issue; he missed the final eight games of the 2016 season because of a torn right triceps muscle.

Those injuries -- and the fact that he has one year left on his contract -- are why he was available for a sixth-round pick. But his experience and leadership will immediately make the Broncos' line better. Not only can Veldheer contribute on the field, but his past experience at left tackle could be valuable if he is called on to help second-year left tackle Garrett Bolles mature and live up to his first-round status.

Denver needed help up front. Veldheer provides it.

Broncos acquire tackle Jared Veldheer from Arizona in exchange for 6th-round pick

By Nicki Jhabvala
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The Broncos believe they've finally found the help they've sorely needed on the offensive line.

The team on Friday acquired veteran tackle Jared Veldheer from Arizona in exchange for a 2018 sixth-round pick (No. 182). Although Veldheer's natural position is at left tackle, the plan is to have him start at right tackle, leave Garrett Bolles on the left side, and shift Ron Leary to left guard, where he is most comfortable.

A shuffle on the line was considered at the start of the offseason, as the Broncos sought ways to improve not only the protection of their quarterback, but to also aid the run game. Doing so became especially vital when the team signed quarterback Case Keenum to a hefty \$36 million deal.

With Menelik Watson returning (his \$5.5 million salary was fully guaranteed last Sunday) and Billy Turner re-signed to a one-year contract, the team is confident it not only has the right pieces now, but also the depth at tackle.

What's more: The trade for Veldheer gives the Broncos' options after 2018; Veldheer, 30, has one year remaining on his contract, with a base salary of \$6.5 million.

An eight-year veteran, Veldheer was drafted by the Raiders in the third round of the 2010 draft and spent his first four years in Oakland before signing with the Cardinals as a free agent in 2014. Last season, Veldheer started the first nine games at right tackle, then switched to the left side for four games before suffering an ankle fracture. He was placed on injured reserve after the team's win against Tennessee in Week 14.

On the year, Veldheer allowed five sacks and was flagged for four total penalties (three false starts and one holding), per STATS, LLC.

Though the Broncos are hopeful the changes eliminate many of the 52 sacks on their quarterbacks last year (tied with Arizona for the third-most in the NFL), they leave the right guard spot in question. Max Garcia, who has one year left on his deal, manned the left guard position last year, but could face competition from Connor McGovern and maybe a newcomer. The Broncos now have nine selections in the upcoming draft, including the No. 5 overall pick. It's possible they spend an early-round selection on a guard to fill the hole.