O’Halloran: Double the coaching is fine for Broncos linebackers
By Ryan O’Halloran
Denver Post
May 27, 2019

Coach Vic Fangio will call the defense and is also involved in teaching up the linebackers.

Vic Fangio’s first NFL stop was 33 years ago as the New Orleans Saints’ linebackers coach.

Even as he advanced to become a defensive coordinator, Fangio imparted expertise on his team’s linebackers. He is doing the same with the Broncos.

That means inside linebacker Josey Jewell, for example, has his position coach (Reggie Herring) and his head coach in his ear.

“It’s awesome,” Jewell said. “It’s two linebackers coaches so when we screw up out there or do something good, (Fangio is) going to let you know and you’re getting double the coaching. Every time something happens, even if you played it so-so, he’ll tell you and so will Coach Herring.”

As the Broncos have installed their new defense, Jewell said Fangio has showed video clips of San Francisco and Chicago — his last two coordinator stops — as a visual example of what he’s trying to teach.

“We’ve seen some,” Jewell said. “We saw some of the 49ers film from a while ago and this past year with Chicago; it really relates his defense and his playbook for us.”

Draft Weekend worked out for Jewell because the Broncos passed on Michigan linebacker Devin Bush to trade down 10 spots and take tight end Noah Fant. And the first two weeks of organized team activities should be encouraging for him because the Broncos could be using more nickel (two linebackers) than last year (dime — one linebacker).

“I love this playbook,” Jewell said. “It’s a little bit like Iowa — stuff that I was familiar with.”

Around the Broncos
Harris situation. One school of thought circulating is that the Broncos should keep cornerback Chris Harris because he is bound to net the team a 2021 compensatory draft pick (maybe as high as a third-rounder).

Slow your roll, folks.

1. What if Fangio plans to use Harris in a different role than usual? That could impact his playing time, production and future contract value.

2. Because this is pro football and it’s a violent sport, what if Harris is nicked up and doesn’t play to the level of the previous years? Again, his next contract will be affected.
3. And, here’s the big one: To get a compensatory pick, the Broncos not only would need Harris to sign a huge deal elsewhere, but would need to stand relatively pat in free agency. Don’t ever think that will happen.

If the Broncos’ season doesn’t go well and general manager John Elway is committed to not re-signing him, Harris could be a valuable in-season trade chip — a very good player on an expiring contract.

Bowlen display. The Pro Football Hall of Fame announced last week that 20 artifacts belonging to Broncos owner Pat Bowlen have been donated to the Hall ahead of his induction this summer. Among the items are his Super Bowl XXXII commemorative jacket from the Broncos’ win over Green Bay in January 1998, game balls presented to Bowlen after the Broncos’ three Super Bowl wins and his bronzed running shoes and photos from his participation in the Ironman Triathlon. Many of Bowlen’s artifacts will be showcased in the Class of 2019 Locker Exhibit that is scheduled to open later this summer.

Around the NFL

10,000-day drought. Nice work by the Detroit Free Press calculating that Thursday was the 10,000-day anniversary of the Lions’ last playoff win (Jan. 5, 1992 over Dallas). The Lions have lost their last nine postseason games. Only Cincinnati (Jan. 6, 1991) has a longer skid. The Bengals have lost their last seven playoff games.
An apartment full of Broncos rookies helped Troy Fumagalli in tough times. Now he gets a second chance to prove he belongs as an NFL tight end.

By Kyle Fredrickson
Denver Post
May 27, 2019

Former Wisconsin star has totaled fewer than 20 NFL practices entering Year 2.

Check that. A lot of teammates.

Want proof of the bond shared between Denver’s 2018 rookie class? Many lived in the same apartment complex last season, such as wide receiver DaeSean Hamilton, who saw Fumagalli about every day through the course of rigorous injury rehabilitation and said he “wasn’t really complaining” — even if Fumagalli had legitimate gripes.

The Broncos drafted Fumagalli in the fifth round from Wisconsin in 2018 shortly after he had surgery to repair a sports hernia injury. He was sidelined from rookie minicamp and OTAs. Fumagalli finally got on the field in training camp, but lasted just a week before reaggravating his injury. Soon after he was put on injured reserve and his rookie season was over before it truly began.

“There are days where you’re hurt that things go up and down,” Fumagalli said. “You don’t know what’s going to happen.”

He didn’t need to look far for support. Just knock on the front door of a fellow Broncos rookie down the hall.

“We’re all going through the same thing living alone and playing in the NFL for the first time,” Fumagalli said. “It was nice to be able to lean on each other and enjoy each other’s company.”

But enough with the sappy teammate talk. The NFL is a results-oriented business, and through a full year with the Broncos, Fumagalli has not made an on-field impact. The clock is ticking, especially with Denver trading back to select Iowa tight end Noah Fant with the 20th pick in April’s draft. The depth chart is undecided entering the final week of OTAs at Dove Valley. Fumagalli has run with the first-team offense in two-tight end sets, rotating with Jeff Heuerman, Jake Butt and Fant; similarly with the wide receivers group.

But he knows he needs to start showing something. He used the past year to become a film junkie and learn how pro players think and react in addition to relentless physical rehabilitation under strength coach Loren Landow. It’s been more than 16 months since he last played in a game and Fumagalli said he’s participated in “probably less than 20” full Broncos practices.

Fumagalli’s football future in Denver, beyond his development in the team’s new offense, hinges on his ability to stay healthy. The former second-team All-American didn’t endure any serious injuries prior to
his sports hernia, said Fumagalli’s college position coach Mickey Turner, but Fumagalli’s risk for continued groin issues is real.

Christos Photopoulos is a Los Angeles Rams team physician and orthopedic surgeon who specializes in sports medicine at the Cedars-Sinai Kerlan-Jobe Institute in Los Angeles. Photopoulos encounters sports hernia injuries at his practice on a weekly basis and stressed there is no singular diagnosis or estimated recovery period. The affected area can include soft muscle tissue, ligaments, and bones with some injuries needing only weeks of physical rehabilitation and extended months for others. Soft tissue muscles, such as the groin, are at a heightened risk for re-injury.

Fumagalli’s 2018 training camp setback suggests a more severe case. However, Photopoulos said recent medical research indicates a 95 percent full-recovery rate from sports hernia injury surgeries overall. It’s the required sprinting, cutting and leaping with Fumagalli’s job description that make him vulnerable to more injuries.

“Probably the most important thing is just being very vigilant and very conscious of the symptoms that might be presenting,” Photopoulos said. “If you have a low-level pain that could indicate possibly the very earliest chance of a recurrence, you want to bring that to the attention of the medical staff for your team. Unfortunately, if you let it get too severe and sit on the pain and don’t tell anybody about it, then it often becomes a more difficult entity to treat.”

Early returns from OTAs are positive for Fumagalli. At 6-foot-5, 247 pounds, he was a dynamic force at Wisconsin with 1,627 yards receiving and seven touchdowns. Can he start making his mark in Denver?

“I knew Fum coming from the Big Ten. I obviously knew he was a baller. He couldn’t wait to get back out here and get his opportunity again,” said Hamilton, who played at Penn State. “We always saw him working in the weight room and the training room. Now that he’s finally back healthy, he’s showing great glimpses.”

Fumagalli scoffs at the notion he’s still a rookie in experience and it’s reflected in the mindset he developed through Landow’s program. Fumagalli credits the support of fellow rookies in those deep couch-side chats for lifting him from moments of doubt. Erasing the memory of his sports hernia took longer than he’d hoped. Consider it all forgotten in OTAs.

“I treat it as if I played the full year,” Fumagalli said. “Come in and don’t be a rookie. Be way ahead of the ball.”
Sides appear to have moved closer to an agreement that would bring the star cornerback back with the team.

Broncos’ general manager John Elway continued to talk with agent Frederick Lyles Jr. over the Memorial Day holiday weekend about a 2019 contract adjustment for Harris.

The two sides have been moving closer to an agreement, sources tell 9News. But as every negotiator would tell you: A deal is never done until its done.

The cornerback Harris was scheduled to make $8.9 million this year in salary and bonuses in what was supposed to be the final year of his current contract.

The Broncos are offering Harris a pay raise. Although such contract adjustments without an extension are rare, if not unprecedented, it’s clear Elway doesn’t want to leave anything to chance as the Broncos attempt to rebound from back-to-back losing seasons.

There is cautious optimism Harris and the team will reach agreement by the time the Broncos hold their final segment of OTAs (Organized Team Activities) Wednesday, Thursday and Friday. The Broncos’ offseason program continues the following week with a three-day mandatory minicamp June 4-6.

Then the team breaks for five weeks before recovering in mid-July for training camp.

Harris is a four-time Pro Bowler who is the last remaining player from the No Fly Zone secondary he dubbed during the Broncos’ Super Bowl 50 season of 2015. The other four defensive backs from that team -- Aqib Talib (trade to Rams), Darian Stewart (release), Bradley Roby (contract not renewed, signed as free agent with Texans) and T.J. Ward (released) -- are either on other teams or are not currently in the league.

Harris, though, has yet to practice within the revised 3-4 defensive system new Broncos head coach Vic Fangio and coordinator Ed Donatell have been installing. Harris has been a no-show to protest his contract since the Broncos’ offseason program began eight weeks ago on April 2.
Predicting the story of the season for all 32 NFL teams

By NFL Nation
ESPN.com
May 27, 2019

After an offseason of trades, free-agent signings and draft picks, each team has plenty of storylines. But let's face it: There are stories, and then there are stories.

We're addressing the latter, as we've enlisted our NFL Nation writers to pick out the top story for each team in 2019. Can the Cleveland Browns' "dream team" reverse a history full of nightmares? Can the quarterbacks from the Class of 2004 adjust to their late-career realities? There are only 101 days until the start of the season, so dive in and familiarize yourself with what's going on throughout the league.

AFC EAST

Buffalo Bills

Can quarterback Josh Allen take the next step in his development?

Last season as a rookie, Allen showed flashes of becoming the long-term answer the franchise has been waiting for since Jim Kelly retired after the 1996 season. Though Allen's talent is evident, he'll need to improve his accuracy, consistency and help bring the best out of a supporting cast that lacks star power. -- Mike Rodak

Miami Dolphins

Is Josh Rosen the long-term answer at QB?

The Dolphins are searching for the franchise quarterback to lead their rebuild after seven seasons of mediocrity under Ryan Tannehill. They weren't in love with the options in the draft, but Dolphins general manager Chris Grier pulled off a great deal getting Rosen at a discount value. The 2019 season will be like a tryout for Rosen, who will have to beat out Ryan Fitzpatrick and convince the Dolphins that they don't need to pick a QB in next year's draft. Miami has spent the past 20 years looking for the next Dan Marino, and Rosen is as talented as any option they've brought in to fill that role. -- Cameron Wolfe

New England Patriots

Can the Patriots become the first team to repeat as Super Bowl champions since they pulled the trick in 2004?

Tom Brady turns 42 in August, Bill Belichick shows no signs of slowing down at 67, and the Patriots are still viewed as a perennial contender. But there's no Gronk, significant turnover on the coaching staff, and history isn't on the team's side, as it's proved to be especially difficult to win back-to-back titles. That mix adds a layer of intrigue as the Brady-Belichick pairing enters its 20th season together. -- Mike Reiss

New York Jets
Can coach Adam Gase overcome his rocky start?

Gase wasn't a popular hire among fans and was later portrayed as the bad guy in a power struggle that resulted in GM Mike Maccagnan's ouster. He also might have to repair his relationship with running back Le'Veon Bell, whom Gase reportedly didn't want to sign. His challenge: Fix the dysfunction, turn Sam Darnold into an elite QB and make the Jets a contender. So much for a honeymoon. -- Rich Cimini

AFC NORTH

Baltimore Ravens

The development of Lamar Jackson

He led the Ravens to a 6-1 record and their first AFC North title in six years, but Jackson needs to make strides in his second season -- especially as a passer -- for Baltimore to return to the postseason. The Ravens have done a lot of work this offseason to help Jackson, giving him a new offensive coordinator (Greg Roman), drafting two wide receivers in the first three rounds (Marquise Brown and Miles Boykin) and signing a proven runner and leader (Mark Ingram II). How much Jackson progresses is the key to the Ravens' season. -- Jamison Hensley

Cincinnati Bengals

Did the Bengals make the right choice in hiring Zac Taylor?

A lot has been made about Taylor's age (35) and relative lack of experience after he was hired away from the Rams (he was the quarterbacks coach in L.A.). It's clear Taylor has a vision in mind, which included the controversial hire of offensive line coach Jim Turner, who was involved in the Dolphins' bullying scandal. But it remains to be seen if that vision will lead to success. The Bengals have a new head coach for the first time since Marvin Lewis was hired in 2003, so this certainly will be a year of scrutiny. -- Katherine Terrell

Cleveland Browns

Can the new Dream Team exorcise its playoff demon?

The Browns' offseason acquisitions are reminiscent of those made by the 2011 Eagles, and the buzz is palpable inside the team facility. The Browns haven't experienced a playoff game since 2002 and believe it's time. Linebacker and tight end might be the only perceived weaknesses on the roster -- on paper. The pieces have to jell, and Baker Mayfield and Odell Beckham Jr. have yet to connect on a practice pass. It's on Mayfield to make sure the team responds to adversity if it hits early in the season. -- Jeremy Fowler

Pittsburgh Steelers

Can Big Ben produce big things for the Steelers as the last Killer B?

The franchise is all-in on Ben Roethlisberger to lead it to one more Super Bowl, and he must do so without 3,500 combined yards of yearly production from Le'Veon Bell and Antonio Brown. Roethlisberger is doing his part, calling his leadership in 2019 a "refocus" effort to better understand his players on and off the
field. The Steelers will need one of his best years, but not just statistically -- he'll be charged with getting the offense in the right place and maximizing the run game with pre-snap decision-making. -- Jeremy Fowler

AFC SOUTH

Houston Texans

Can Deshaun Watson take the next step to being an elite quarterback?

On paper, the Texans should have one of the best offenses in the NFL, led by Watson, All-Pro receiver DeAndre Hopkins and receiver Will Fuller. But while the offense has shown promise and glimpses of how good it can be in Watson's first two seasons, the Texans could be one of the best in the AFC if he becomes more consistent. -- Sarah Barshop

Indianapolis Colts

Can the Colts become a top-five rushing team?

That's coach Frank Reich's goal. Huh? With Andrew Luck as their starting quarterback? It's actually possible when you consider that the Colts return all five starters from one of the league's best offensive lines, the passing game will force defenses to be honest and there are a number of running backs who present different challenges for the defense. The Rams (third in rushing in 2018), Patriots (fifth) and Saints (sixth) all have very talented passing quarterbacks, so the Colts could achieve that type of success this season. -- Mike Wells

Jacksonville Jaguars

The signing of QB Nick Foles to fix an anemic offense

The Jaguars have one of the NFL's top defenses, but that wasn't enough to overcome the offense's terrible play last season. The defense had no margin for error, and giving up more than 10 points meant the team had little chance of winning. The Jaguars believe that adding Foles changes that. His consistency and accuracy -- the two major issues with former starter Blake Bortles -- means the offense should be able to produce points again, especially if it can run the ball the way it did in 2017. -- Mike DiRocco

Tennessee Titans

Can Marcus Mariota establish himself as the cornerstone of the Titans' offense?

Mariota is surrounded by perhaps the best supporting cast he's had. The Titans bolstered the offensive line, added playmaking wide receivers, and tight end Delanie Walker is returning from injury. If Mariota doesn't prove he can stay healthy and be productive, the Titans might find themselves moving on to a different option under center. -- Turron Davenport

AFC WEST

Denver Broncos
Can the Broncos’ offense be the best it’s been since Peyton Manning retired?

This question breaks off into some smaller ones. Does quarterback Joe Flacco have plenty left in the tank? Can they protect him? Can they fit the plan to the personnel? Rich Scangarello is the third offensive coordinator in the past three seasons and will try to find a rhythm that's been mostly absent since Manning was the QB. Since winning Super Bowl 50, Denver has had a mishmash of inconsistent line play, hesitant quarterbacks and conservative philosophy. That has to change, or it'll miss the playoffs for a fourth straight season. -- Jeff Legwold

Kansas City Chiefs

Can the defense carry its fair share of the load?

The Chiefs overhauled their defense by changing the coaching staff, installing a 4-3 base system and acquiring as many as seven new starters, including safety Tyrann Mathieu and defensive end Frank Clark. Will this be enough to get the Chiefs to their first Super Bowl in 50 years? -- Adam Teicher

Los Angeles Chargers

Can the Philip Rivers-led Chargers reach the Super Bowl?

The Bolts finished 12-4 last season and fell two games short of the big game. After adding defensive tackle Jerry Tillery and safety Nasir Adderley through the draft and linebacker Thomas Davis in free agency, the Chargers believe this year’s team has the pieces to compete for a Super Bowl crown. The most durable quarterback in the league, Rivers has yet to reach the Super Bowl and still seeks that signature moment to cement his status as a future Hall of Famer. -- Eric D. Williams

Oakland Raiders

How will Antonio Brown vibe with Derek Carr?

Sure, the final season (we think) in Oakland is an overarching theme, as is Carr’s perceived vulnerable status as franchise QB, with many analysts thinking the Raiders were ready to move on this offseason. But the polarizing Brown, and how he connects with Carr, will be the main on-field issue. Nothing but positive reviews have surfaced thus far, and the two famously hit it off at the Pro Bowl a few years back. But what happens if the Raiders get off to a slow start and Brown is not getting targeted as often as he’d like? From Oakland’s perspective, it’s better to wonder how lethal they'll be if everybody's happy. Stay tuned. -- Paul Gutierrez

NFC EAST

Dallas Cowboys

Can the Cowboys take the next step?

Only the Lions and Redskins have a longer NFC Championship Game drought than Dallas, which hasn't been since its Super Bowl-winning season of 1995. The Cowboys believe their roster is the deepest it has been in a decade. They rebounded from a 3-5 start to make the playoffs last season and carry that
confidence with them. History suggests things will be different this season, though. The Cowboys haven't made the postseason in back-to-back years since 2006-07, and there hasn't been a repeat NFC East champ since the 2003-04 Eagles. If the Cowboys don't progress, then coach Jason Garrett, who is in his contract year, likely will have to find another job in 2020. -- Todd Archer

At what point will Daniel Jones, left, take the reins from Eli Manning? Adam Hunger/AP

New York Giants

When will we see Daniel Jones?

The Giants invested their future in the quarterback from Duke. The Eli Manning era is about to end. It's inevitable at this point. But when? Midseason? Late in the year? Maybe next offseason or beyond? And, perhaps most important, will Jones be any good? -- Jordan Raanan

Philadelphia Eagles

Can Carson Wentz stay healthy?

The Eagles let Nick Foles walk this offseason and are committed to Wentz for the long term. He has ditched his knee brace and looks as healthy as we've seen him since 2017. If he can shake the injury bug and return to MVP-caliber form, Philly has a real chance of being the best team in the NFL. -- Tim McManus

Washington Redskins

Can Jay Gruden save his job while starting a rookie quarterback?

The Redskins drafted quarterback Dwayne Haskins at No. 15 overall, and it's just a matter of when he starts, not if. Of course, if Case Keenum starts strong and the Redskins are winning, they won't need Haskins, but it's hard to imagine him not playing. The pre-draft view was that Haskins had terrific upside but would require patience. So the question becomes: Will owner Dan Snyder have patience with a coach trying to develop a rookie quarterback? Washington has missed three straight postseasons, and doing so again would be bad for Jay Gruden's job security. It would be interesting to see what happens if Haskins develops but the Redskins miss the playoffs. -- John Keim

NFC NORTH

Chicago Bears

Is Mitchell Trubisky a franchise quarterback?

The Bears appear loaded for a repeat run in the NFC North, but questions persist about Trubisky. The 24-year-old quarterback had a good season in 2018 (95.4 passer rating) but needs to take another step for Chicago to move from playoff qualifier to Super Bowl contender. The Bears assembled a formidable cast of characters around Trubisky, who enters Year 2 in head coach Matt Nagy's innovative offensive scheme. -- Jeff Dickerson

Detroit Lions
Will the Lions buy in to Matt Patricia?

That was a major question last season, and for Detroit to have success, Patricia will need the players to believe in his approach, which is a marked change from the past. Almost every move they made this offseason, from free agents signed to players drafted, was done with building the team in his and Bob Quinn's image. Many of those players understand what Patricia is trying to do because of their history in New England. Whether it works likely will define if the 2019 season will lead the Lions in a positive direction -- or doom Patricia to the fate that has done in previous Lions coaches. -- Michael Rothstein

Green Bay Packers

Will Aaron Rodgers and Matt LaFleur clash or thrive?

It wasn't hard to see that something was off with Rodgers last season -- and it wasn't just his banged-up left knee/leg from the season opener. Rodgers no longer seemed to believe in what the Packers were doing, and it cost Mike McCarthy his job after 12-plus seasons as head coach. Enter LaFleur, a 39-year-old first-time head coach with his own ideas about how to run an NFL offense. As Packers president Mark Murphy told ESPN early in the offseason, Rodgers "has to embrace it." How that works out will determine what kind of season the Packers have in 2019. -- Rob Demovsky

Minnesota Vikings

Can Kirk Cousins take himself and the team to new heights in Year 2?

The Vikings have done everything imaginable to support their quarterback this offseason, putting together a staff to create a scheme best suited to his strengths, placing an emphasis on fixing the O-line and finding new weapons in the draft. Now it's Cousins' responsibility to improve in areas where he struggled in 2018 and lead this team back to the playoffs. What we'll learn in Cousins' second year in Minnesota is if he can push his ceiling higher. How this season goes will help determine how much longer he'll be the quarterback of the Vikings given that his deal goes through 2020. -- Courtney Cronin

NFC SOUTH

Atlanta Falcons

Can the Falcons remain healthy and become contenders again?

Linebacker De'Vondre Campbell tweeted, "I guess people seem to have forgotten how good we are when we're healthy lol. I can't wait till the season starts." The injury bug hit the Falcons hard last season, with Devonta Freeman, Keanu Neal, Ricardo Allen, Andy Levitre and Brandon Fusco lost to season-ending injuries and star middle linebacker Deion Jones missing significant time. Freeman's return should positively impact an already-potent offense now coordinated by Dirk Koetter, while coach Dan Quinn will be thankful to have Neal and Allen back as he takes over the defensive playcalling. -- Vaughn McClure

Carolina Panthers

Is Cam Newton ready to go?
Will he be ready, as he's indicated he will be, for the start of the season after a second shoulder surgery in three offseasons? Can he return to the form he was at a year go in leading a 6-2 start and continue to evolve as an efficient quarterback? Or will the 2015 MVP have another setback and force the Panthers to turn to third-round draft pick Will Grier or one of their other young quarterbacks? The future of coach Ron Rivera and general manager Marty Hurney could depend on this answer after two losing seasons in the past three years. -- David Newton

New Orleans Saints

Can the Saints finally avoid a miracle?

We know the Saints are talented enough to reach a Super Bowl with the ageless Drew Brees and a deep cast of young stars around him. But they're going to have to show a ton of resilience to climb all the way back up that mountain after getting knocked out of the playoffs by the "No-call" and the "Minneapolis Miracle" the past two years. They bounced back in impressive fashion last season by earning the NFC's No. 1 seed, but they also were fortunate with injuries. Doing that again won't be easy. -- Mike Triplett

The Bucs hope that Bruce Arians is the man to break them out of a decade-long funk. Cliff Welch/Icon Sportswire

Tampa Bay Buccaneers

Can 'Quarterback Whisperer' Bruce Arians work his magic with quarterback Jameis Winston?

Can he turn around a franchise that has the second-longest playoff drought in the league (11 seasons) while galvanizing a fan base that has seen the Bucs compile the NFL's third-worst record and seven double-digit loss seasons the past decade? "That 'it' factor that you really can't explain ... anybody that's around Bruce knows that Bruce has 'it,'" general manager Jason Licht said the day Arians' hiring became official. "I've never been around a guy that has such magnetism about him that players and coaches just instantly want to follow him when he comes." -- Jenna Laine

NFC WEST

Arizona Cardinals

All things Kyler Murray

The focus of every offensive play of every Cardinals game will be on Murray, the first overall pick out of Oklahoma. How he's throwing? Is he running? Did he get hit? There'll be a trillion questions about his progress, development, accuracy, health -- everything. There might not be a a brighter spotlight and a more intense magnifying glass on a player this season than Murray's. He's a football enigma. A subplot will be how Kliff Kingsbury's offense will adapt to the NFL, but, again, that'll come back to Murray. Everything about the Cardinals this season will be Murray, Murray, Murray. -- Josh Weinfuss

Los Angeles Rams
Can the Rams return to the Super Bowl?

The Rams must regroup as they go into the 2019 season and put their disappointing 13-3 Super Bowl loss to the Patriots behind them. Their roster had some turnover at key positions, including two spots on the offensive line, but quarterback Jared Goff is more comfortable going into Year 3 of coach Sean McVay’s scheme. They also return two-time Defensive Player of the Year Aaron Donald and star running back Todd Gurley -- though the extent of Gurley’s knee issues remains unknown. -- Lindsey Thiry

San Francisco 49ers

Is Jimmy Garoppolo the franchise quarterback the Niners believe he is?

Coming off a torn ACL that limited him to three games in 2018, Garoppolo is still something of an unknown commodity with just 10 NFL starts. The 49ers are paying Garoppolo like the franchise centerpiece but still don't know if he's the guy who can elevate the team back to playoff contention -- and now he's bouncing back from a serious knee injury. The Niners have plenty of question marks on the roster, but how Garoppolo fares in his first full season as a starter is of paramount importance -- now and for the future.
-- Nick Wagoner

Seattle Seahawks

The Seahawks must be better than the sum of their parts again

It's hard to make a credible argument that they're better on paper this offseason after losing Earl Thomas, Frank Clark and Doug Baldwin. Then again, the same thing seemed true last year, when they parted ways with a handful of the best players in franchise history but improved from 9-7 to 10-6 and a wild-card berth. A big reason for that was quarterback Russell Wilson turning in the most efficient -- and perhaps the best -- season of his career. With a defense that has lost serious firepower, the Seahawks might need to put more on Wilson in 2019 to stay in games. -- Brady Henderson
Mason's Mailbag: Gary Zimmerman a true Broncos Hall of Famer

By Andrew Mason
DenverBroncos.com
May 27, 2019

Send a question for the next mailbag!

Do you consider Gary Zimmerman to be a Broncos Hall of Famer? Nobody really includes him in the conversation, so if he isn’t, who is the first Broncos O-lineman that makes the HoF?

-- Chris (@badstonevader via Twitter)

Who is this "nobody" to whom you refer? I’ve never heard of Zimmerman not being considered a Bronco in the Hall of Fame. While he had more seasons in Minnesota (seven) than Denver (five), he was a part of a Super Bowl winner with the Broncos, and the discrepancy between his two NFL stints isn’t great enough to cause the scales to be tipped in one direction or the other. Thus, he is a Hall of Famer as both a Bronco and a Viking. Furthermore, the fact that he chose Owner Pat Bowlen to introduce him at the 2008 Hall of Fame ceremony cements the esteem in which Zimmerman held the Broncos and their presence in his career.

Champ Bailey is probably the best cornerback I have ever seen. His 2006 season is insane and arguably, deserving of the Defensive Player of the Year. That being said, Randy Gradishar or Steve Atwater should have been the first Broncos defender to enter the HoF. Can fans do anything to help them?

-- Jose Borrero

Short of unearthing more data regarding either Gradishar or Atwater, there isn't much that can be done. That said, Atwater made the cut from 15 finalists to 10 last February, and seems to have momentum in his corner. I don't think it's a matter of "if," but "when."

There are 43 players eligible for Pro Football Hall of Fame induction who played at least nine seasons and were selected to the Pro Bowl or AFL All-Star Game in at least 70 percent of their seasons. Atwater is the only one of the 43 who is not in the Hall of Fame. (Three were added in the 2019 class: Champ Bailey, Tony Gonzalez and Ed Reed.) Atwater is also one of just two players from the All-1990s team on offense or defense who is not yet in the Hall. (The other is LeRoy Butler, another safety who deserves enshrinement.)

As for Gradishar, Hall of Fame President David Baker has noted the potential for an additional group of senior Hall of Fame inductees in 2020, the 100th anniversary of the NFL's first season. Gradishar would seem to be a slam-dunk choice, especially given that Hall of Famers Harry Carson (New York Giants) and Robert Brazile (Houston Oilers) played in the same era and have similar resumes.

If the escrow requirement were to be removed for guaranteed money, how much would that help in restructuring contracts to free up cap space and re-sign players? Would we start to see more contracts like other sports, especially with the contact soon to be renegotiated?
-- Stephen Phelps

Not necessarily. If NFL contracts resembled those of other sports -- in which the money is entirely guaranteed (with team, player or mutual options at some point later in the deal), that would likely be an alteration that resulted from a new collective bargaining agreement.

The escrow requirement has value, in that it keeps owners (or ownership groups) from being in too far over their heads. It is a fail-safe that prevents the potential issue of not being able to meet payroll and other financial obligations. This was an issue for some teams through history, although at the highest level of pro sports today, it is generally less of a threat, thanks to the comprehensive vetting of potential owners and abundant revenue streams.

Why haven’t we given a look at Brody Oliver out of Colorado School of Mines? He’s got great size, excellent speed and he pulls down every contested ball. He’s a battler. He is just what Joe Flacco needs as a downfield big body. To top it off he comes cheap. Small school shouldn’t deter looking at real talent. I really like what I see in this guy and I’m not alone.

-- Orion Rogers

The Broncos did take a look at Oliver. He took part in the local Pro Day the team held at the Pat Bowlen Fieldhouse on April 10. They didn’t sign him, but they did sign other small-school players from FCS and Division II, such as wide receivers Kelvin McKnight (Samford, FCS) and Trinity Benson (East Central, D-II).

Don’t forget that they already have two big-bodied young receivers returning to the roster in Courtland Sutton and Tim Patrick. That's not a skill set and body type they lack at this time.
The interesting reason why DaeSean Hamilton feels Denver’s new offense suits him

By Ryan Koenigsberg
BSN Denver
May 27, 2019

Daesean Hamilton will be the first one to tell you he wasn’t in love with how things went for him during his rookie season.

30 catches for 243 yards and two touchdowns in 14 games just wasn’t up to snuff for the Penn State product.

“The standards and expectations that I set for myself last year,” he said, “I didn’t meet them.”

Now with a year under his belt and a veteran receiver in Demaryius Thomas out the door, Hamilton, a fourth-round pick in 2018, is expected to be a big part of the Broncos offense under new offensive coordinator Rich Scangarello.

But it’s not just the experience he now has to his name, the Scangarello scheme he says can be a “well-oiled machine,” or the Super-Bowl winning quarterback that has Hamilton feeling like he can meet his bar this year.

“Compared to last year what my role was to now, I’m running a lot more routes,” he said when asked what’s different for him this year. “I’m getting to use a lot of things I can do in route running within this offense and putting me in positions where I have to beat the guy over me and find open spaces, stuff that.”

When Hamilton was selected two rounds after fellow wide receiver Courtland Sutton, the narratives surrounding the two were on opposite sides of the spectrum. Sutton, at 6-foot-4, 216-pounds, was the raw receiver with the high ceiling. Hamilton, at 6-foot-1, 200-pounds, was considered to be a polished route-runner who could become Denver’s starting slot receiver from the get-go.

But Hamilton, in the midst of fighting for playing time on a weekly basis, never felt he was able to showcase what he could do in that regard. Now, he feels his role in the new offense is set up to showcase his biggest strengths.

“I can use my football IQ, [which] I had already had,” he added. “It’s just a different scheme, a different structure of things.”

And that IQ is only getting higher.

“I think just the difference from this year from last year is just the confidence. Last year, I was thankful to be out there on the field. Now I’m more so worried about what I am doing and making sure I’m doing the right thing at all times. Now it’s just not really worrying about if you’re doing the wrong things it’s about making the play over the guy that lined up over you and being able to play a lot faster in that regard. Last year worked for me, at least from a rookie standpoint, but now I just try to make gains, and I grow.”
Early in OTAs, it has been clear that Hamilton has a knack for getting open in the middle of the field, already having developed a nice connection with Joe Flacco on third downs for that reason.

As it stands, with Emmanuel Sanders still sidelined due to an Achilles injury, Hamilton is running as the team’s No. 2 receiver, but even if/when Sanders comes back, that step forward from both Hamilton and Sutton will be integral to Denver’s success this year.
2019 NFL season: One key homegrown player for each AFC team
By Gregg Rosenthal
NFL.com
May 27, 2019

Offseason stories are inevitably dominated by what's new: coaching changes, player acquisitions and draft picks. But the biggest area for potential growth on each roster comes from within. This week, I've taken a look at one homegrown talent from each team who could provide a huge boost by taking the next step in his development, beginning with AFC clubs. Who will follow in the footsteps of the breakout players from last year's list, like Dee Ford, Joe Mixon and Marlon Humphrey?

For the purposes of this exercise, I'll only look at players who are still on their rookie contracts and whose growth would be welcomed by their organizations. All stats are according to Pro Football Focus.

Baltimore Ravens: Lamar Jackson, quarterback. Of all the players on this list, Jackson is the most significant to his team's success. As a 21-year-old rookie quarterback last season, Jackson lined up for 568 snaps and only threw 170 passes (29.9%) -- that's a percentage that looks out of the 1930s. All of those Ravens zone runs were an effective midseason change of pace for a stagnant offense, but there's little reason to believe their 2019 attack will look the same.

The Ravens promoted Greg Roman to offensive coordinator with the idea of rebuilding their offensive playbook from scratch around Jackson's skills. While Roman will take advantage of spread concepts and Jackson's running ability, the Louisville product has more accuracy, touch and ability to throw deep than he was asked to show as a rookie. Don't forget that Jackson's first start last season came in Week 11. A full offseason as the starter with a largely new group of weapons around him (like first-round pick Marquise Brown) offers Jackson the tools to take a big second-year leap as a passer.

Buffalo Bills: Tremaine Edmunds, linebacker. As a 20-year-old rookie defensive signal caller at a new position (middle linebacker), Edmunds understandably struggled early last season. By December, the first-round pick was the Defensive Rookie of the Month. Buffalo treasure Kyle Williams, who retired this offseason, tapped Edmunds to run the players' weekly Thursday film session. As the game slowed down for Edmunds, his instincts, film study and pass coverage ability took over. If he builds on that progress to become the AFC's answer to Carolina's Luke Kuechly -- with Matt Milano alongside as his version of what Thomas Davis was to Kuechly -- the Bills' defense will be tough to beat to the outside.

Cincinnati Bengals: Carl Lawson, defensive end. Add up Lawson's stats through two seasons, and there's a clear picture of a potential star: 9.5 sacks, 18 QB hits and 55 hurries on only 702 snaps. He had such a low snap count partly because the Bengals don't trust him on running downs and partly because of a torn ACL suffered last October. The Bengals lacked edge-rushing juice a year ago, ranking 28th in the NFL in sacks, and didn't do much to address the position in the draft or free agency. Their best hope of finding a difference maker opposite Carlos Dunlap is for Lawson to develop into a terror in his third season.

Cleveland Browns: Genard Avery, defensive end/linebacker. Avery was the hidden gem of a preposterously good Browns draft class, which was headlined by Baker Mayfield, Denzel Ward and Nick Chubb. Avery's 42 pressures and sure tackling were both outrageous for a fifth-round pick in a part-time
role. Now he's expected to replace Jamie Collins, released in March, as the team's strong-side linebacker on early downs while also getting work as a defensive end. His versatility is exactly what creative coordinators should be looking for. Though he was once viewed as a 'tweener, the profile of this 250-pound outside 'backer with the ability to play on the line or off the ball may soon look more like the prototype.

Denver Broncos: Courtland Sutton, wide receiver. Sutton was the subject of an unfair amount of offseason hype last season -- and still, he mostly delivered. For a second-round pick to accumulate 704 receiving yards as a rookie is impressive, no matter how he got there. Now an unfair amount of expectations will be placed on him again. With Emmanuel Sanders coming off a torn Achilles tendon and Demaryius Thomas having been traded away last season, Sutton is the closest thing to a No. 1 receiver the Broncos have. He struggled with drops and getting open in that role late in the season after Thomas was shipped out and Sanders was injured, with fellow first-year receivers DaeSean Hamilton and Tim Patrick outgaining Sutton in the season's final quarter.

That sluggish finish was a typical part of Sutton's learning curve and his jump-ball ability should be a perfect match for new quarterback Joe Flacco's strengths. (Not that Broncos fans need to be told about Flacco's ability to throw a jump ball.)

Houston Texans: Keke Coutee and Jordan Thomas, wide receiver and tight end. I'm grouping both of these young Texans players together because there are so many similarities. Both outproduced their Day 3 draft slots as rookies, and both will be asked to do much more in their second season. Coutee battled injuries as the team's best slot receiver, yet showed his potential with 11 catches for 110 yards in the Texans' forgettable playoff loss. Thomas is a sixth-round pick with outrageous size (6-foot-5, 277 pounds) and rare athleticism. He enters 2019 as the heavy favorite to start at tight end. If the Texans offense is going to become less dependent on DeAndre Hopkins, it will need these 2018 pleasant surprises to kick it up another notch.

Indianapolis Colts: Kemoko Turay, defensive end. As great as general manager Chris Ballard's 2018 draft class looks now, it could look even better after the 2019 season. Turay was off to a fast start as a rookie second-round pick before an injury slowed his progress and apparently impacted his practice effort. Still, he put up 38 pressures on only 383 total defensive snaps and may have the most pure edge-rushing talent of anyone on the entire team, outside of free agent pickup Justin Houston. Yet another 2018 Colts second-rounder (Tyquan Lewis) will also vie for snaps at end and inside, but Turay has the biggest upside to help the Colts at a position where they could use more playmaking.

Jacksonville Jaguars: Leonard Fournette, running back. It says a lot about the 2019 Jaguars that so many offensive players were prime candidates for this list. While left tackle Cam Robinson or wideout Dede Westbrook would have also made sense, no other player should set the tone for the Jags like Fournette. Tom Coughlin built this roster up front to run the ball. Fournette doesn't need to suddenly play like the No. 4 overall pick he was in 2017; he just needs to stay healthy, stay in shape and run hard. The big plays should follow like they did in his rookie season, and his underrated pass-catching skills should make the offense more versatile. If the Fournette of 2018 (3.3 yards per carry and 624 yards from scrimmage in eight games) shows up again, though, this offense has no chance.

Kansas City Chiefs: Demarcus Robinson, wide receiver. If Tyreek Hill doesn't play for the Chiefs this season (a child-abuse investigation involving Hill was reopened by a prosecutor in April), the natural inclination is to expect veteran Sammy Watkins and rookie Mecole Hardman to soak up Hill's targets. But don't look
past Robinson. The 2016 fourth-round pick could never pass Chris Conley on the depth chart, but he's flashed playmaking ability when given the chance. With Conley (who signed in Jacksonville) and now possibly Hill gone, Robinson could easily top his career production (500 yards) this season.

Los Angeles Chargers: Dan Feeney, guard. Feeney is the only AFC player to land on this list two years in a row, in large part because most every other key homegrown Chargers player has already exceeded reasonable expectations. Feeney, on the other hand, ranked No. 80 out of 81 PFF qualifiers at guard last season, and he was dead last in pass protection. The 2017 third-rounder stands on this list to represent the entire Chargers offensive line, which quietly imploded down the stretch, torpedoing their title chances. With the same group back once again, the Chargers will need improvement to come from within.

Miami Dolphins: Charles Harris, defensive end. Since the rules of this exercise -- only rookie contracts -- prevents me from going with receiver DeVante Parker again, let's take a gander at another recent first-round pick. Harris, taken No. 22 in 2017, was once seen as a test of the popular "great film vs. combine metrics" debate when he came out. So far, the folks who prioritized his disappointing athletic testing over the scouts who loved his spin move look correct.

His career has gotten off to a slow start -- 3 sacks and 12 QB hits in 843 snaps over two seasons. But Harris will be given a second chance under new coach Brian Flores, because the Dolphins' edge-rushing options are perhaps the least proven in football. The Dolphins will need some pleasant surprises in the front seven to step up, with Harris squarely in the spotlight.

New England Patriots: Sony Michel, running back. Michel was good as a rookie. Can he be great? Playing behind one of the best Patriots offensive lines of all time, Michel consistently ran hard in the regular season, if not always to daylight. But the 2018 first-round pick put it all together in a playoff run that included 336 rushing yards and six touchdowns over 71 carries. Those are the kind of numbers associated with a dominant workhorse back. While Michel won't have to keep up that pace in an absolutely loaded Patriots backfield, his ceiling has been strangely underrated. He could become a true game-changer for Tom Brady with improved elusiveness and pass-catching ability.

New York Jets: Robby Anderson, wide receiver. Despite multiple arrests early in his career, Anderson has already proven to be an incredible success story for an undrafted player who wasn't even invited to the combine. He's already one of the game's best deep threats, with the second highest rate of catches over 20 yards for receivers with at least 200 targets over the last two seasons. Yet, he still has a lot to prove.

Anderson admitted to struggling with inconsistency and injuries early last year before closing strong with 23 catches for 336 yards and three scores in the final four games, when the light turned on for rookie quarterback Sam Darnold. Now playing under a coach who plans to use him in more ways, Anderson has a golden opportunity to make life-changing money if he puts together a big contract year. If he can produce like a true No. 1 receiver, the rest of the Jets' weapons (Quincy Enunwa, Jamison Crowder and Chris Herndon) should fall right into place behind him.

Pittsburgh Steelers: Sean Davis, safety. No one has played more snaps for the Steelers' defense over the last three seasons than Davis, yet the team still doesn't seem entirely sure what it has in the 2016 second-round pick. After settling into his role as a free safety -- his third position -- Davis was less streaky overall in 2018. GM Kevin Colbert has poured resources into the team's secondary, and it looks better on paper than it has in years. They'd look even better if Davis made enough big plays to inspire Colbert to sign him to an extension.
Oakland Raiders: Kolton Miller, left tackle. Bringing in veteran receivers Antonio Brown and Tyrell Williams and rookie running back Josh Jacobs was nice. None of it will matter if Derek Carr isn't protected better. Miller was the Jon Gruden regime's first ever draft pick last season at No. 15 overall. After one season of desultory play, the pick looks like a reach. It's not a problem that the Raiders are leaving Miller on the left side while putting high-priced free agent Trent Brown on the right side. All tackles matter. It's a problem if Miller doesn't improve quickly after a season in which he was one of the league's worst starters at slowing down opposing pass rushers, even before he started battling injuries.

Tennessee Titans: Harold Landry, outside linebacker. The Titans finished No. 28 in team pass rushing last season according to PFF, and this was clearly the biggest weakness on an otherwise solid defense. If Landry steps up in his second season, he and veteran signee Cameron Wake could form a formidable edge duo. The second-round pick was a draftnik favorite, and his quick first step is obvious on tape. But Landry struggled to hold up stopping the run, and he was enveloped too often by bigger left tackles. The Titans' young linebackers (Jayon Brown, 2018 first-rounder Rashaan Evans and Landry) could give this defense a much-needed identity, with Landry the key to fixing the pass rush.
After trading for Joe Flacco and drafting Drew Lock in the second round, it’s no surprise that quarterback has been the focal point of offseason discussion about the Broncos offense.

It’s not the only place where they’ll need to improve in order to be a better unit, though. The team also needs better offensive line play and they hope they landed the right man to build the group by hiring Pro Football Hall of Famer Mike Munchak away from the Steelers.

Munchak will be working with all of the linemen, but left tackle Garett Bolles figures to be a particular concern. The 2017 first-round pick needs to cut down on penalties — he was flagged 27 times, including 19 holding calls, in his first two seasons — but Munchak believes Bolles has the right tools that need consistent development after working with two other offensive line coaches in his first two seasons.

“People don’t realize how hard that is on the development of a player,” Munchak said, via Mike Klis of KUSA. “So hopefully I can stay with him for a while and we can develop something. But he has obviously great skills. He’s a great athlete, can do a lot of things for ya. He’ll fit really well in this offense. So I’m enjoying our relationship. Getting to know each other. Getting to know what he does well, how I can help him going forward. Because there’s really nothing he can’t do.”

Any quarterback is going to have a better chance to succeed if they can stay upright and ahead of the chains. A leap from Bolles this season would help on both fronts.
In his last interview—and that is a stretch, really, because the “interview” was 23 courageous and arduous words long, and it lasted well over an hour—Bart Starr tried to accomplish his goal just as hard as he tried to burrow in for the biggest touchdown in the history of the Green Bay Packers in the Ice Bowl. Two strokes, a heart attack and a brain-scrambling disease called aphasia can make uttering 23 words like climbing Kilimanjaro. I know. I witnessed it, late last August in Starr’s office south of Birmingham, Ala.

The effort that day said so much about Starr the man. I had come to Birmingham to convey the level of the relationship between Rodgers, 34, and Starr, 84. Though they were a half-century apart in age, they had a bond. When Rodgers took over the Packer QB job in 2008, Starr wrote Rodgers a letter, and Starr kept writing him. Encouraging things. “It meant so much, coming from a man who had been in my shoes with this team,” Rodgers told me a few days later. “I was a big football fan, and big Packer fan. Here was Bart Starr, writing to me. It always meant a lot to me, because I knew I had the support of one of the greatest players of all time.”

Bart Starr died Sunday morning at 85. He was a great player, a Hall of Fame player, quarterbacking the Packers to the NFL championship in 1961, 1962 and 1965, and the larger Super Bowl championship in the 1966 and 1967 seasons. Pretty good for the 200th pick in the NFL draft in 1956, exactly 44 years before Tom Brady was the 199th pick in the draft.

The Lead: Bart Starr

You know what I really wanted to ask Starr that afternoon in Birmingham? You completed 14 of 24 throws in minus-46 wind chill in the Ice Bowl, against that great Dallas defense, with two touchdowns and no interceptions, and a rating over 110. How? How’d you do it? But it wasn’t the place or the time; the memory bank just wasn’t there. But I did want him to know how good he was if no one reminded him about it much anymore—his 104.8 career rating in NFL playoff games has never been surpassed in the last half century by the greatest of the quarterback greats. But he didn’t care.

What he cared about that day was doing something nice for his friend. These 23 words were his Bob Lilly, his big foe.

I, and an NBC crew, had come to Birmingham, and would proceed to Green Bay a few days later to speak to Rodgers, for an NBC story on the warm relationship between the great Green Bay quarterback of the sixties and the great Green Bay quarterback of modern day. Starr and his personal assistant, Leigh Ann Nelson, had written a short note for this story. Starr would tell of his relationship with Rodgers. Nelson knew the message had to be short, because Starr simply didn’t have the ability to say much, at any volume, because of the strokes.

When Starr walked in, steadied by Nelson, he sat down on a couch and I told him how much I appreciated him making this effort.

He stared at me, opened his mouth. “Glad,” he said, and then it took a few seconds, “for Aaron.”
This was for Aaron. Anything for Aaron. Bart and Cherry Starr, his wife of 64 years, loved Aaron Rodgers.

Then Nelson and Starr began to practice the lines he would say. This is what she and he agreed that he would try to say:

You are a strong leader
Cherry and I are admiring you
Because you are one of the finest men we have ever met.

Say that right now. How long does it take? I just said it. It took eight seconds.

Starr, after 15 or so tries, just couldn’t do it.

At the 45-minute mark of our session with Starr and Nelson, she said: “Let’s take a break.” The room got silent. Five, 10 minutes. No one said a word. Starr looked at Nelson. She rubbed his wrists. Then we took a walk around the office. She was so kind. He just wanted to get this right, and he didn’t know how. As Nelson took one hand and I took the other and we walked, I said to him (I still don’t know why; I guess just to be nice), “You know what I always admired about you? Your autograph. Your autograph was perfect. Today you can’t read anyone’s autograph. Why’d you always do your autograph so perfect?”

For the first time on this day, his eyes bore a hole through mine.

“Why … would you want to do it … any other way? … That’s … the only way I know.”

We want back to his desk. He sat down. An hour now. We wanted 23 words, and maybe it was just too cruel, just too much to ask.

I felt like aphasia was the enemy, and Bart Starr would not let it win.

“You are a strong leader,” Starr said into the camera. And a few minutes later:

“Cherry and I are admiring you …”

The patient Nelson practiced, and practiced more. I swear I was thinking: What was harder to conquer—the Dallas defense in 1967, or these 23 words?

“One more line, Bart,” Leigh Ann Nelson said. “You can do this. I know you can do this.”

“Because you are one of the finest men we have ever … MET.”

He did it. He won.

The TV equipment got broken down, and there was 30 minutes of busy-ness in the room, and I had to tell Bart Starr what a great thing I thought he’d just done. It was awesome. I put my hand on his shoulder, at his desk, and said thanks.

“Good,” he whispered with a huge smile, “… for Aaron. Good for Aaron.”
Today, we appreciate and remember one of the great quarterbacks of a bygone era, a five-time world champion, a man who must not be forgotten when the roll is called for the all-time great quarterbacks, a man who executed what the great and dictatorial Lombardi needed to have executed for most of a decade. I say we should remember just as well the grace and determination and humanity of Bart Starr.

On this Memorial Day, best wishes and hearty thanks to those who have served and sacrificed. And thanks to a member of the Idaho Army National Guard, recently deployed to Afghanistan as a Blackhawk helicopter crew chief, ferrying the wounded out of harm’s way. Remember Daryn Colledge, the nine-year NFL guard? Started for the Packers at left guard in their Super Bowl 45 win over Pittsburgh? Colledge, an Alaskan who played college football at Boise State, told the U.S. Army’s website he enlisted “to help and support the city and state that supported me through my days in college ... I would have not been able to pay for college on my own and the chance to give back and serve that same community means the world to me.”

We salute you, Army Spc. Colledge.

Gruden, Unplugged

In Oakland on draft weekend, I conversed with Jon Gruden about his players, his team, his job, his passion, and this meandering Oakland Raiders season, which includes (reportedly) a preseason game in Manitoba, a regular-season game in Europe, and 48 straight days without a game in Oakland.

There was a lot to talk about.

We started with his new favorite running back, Alabama rookie Josh Jacobs, and veered into Antonio Brown territory, and went into how-much-did-he-really-love Kyler Murray territory. It was a rollicking 33 minutes. The highlights:

**King:** Amazing how little Josh Jacobs was used at Alabama. He ran it 20 times or more just once in his college career.

**Gruden:** I know! It’s incredible. He really got discovered late in the season when he got a chance to play. The way he played without the ball against Clemson is what really caught our eye. He can return kicks. We really wanted him. He’s exactly what I have been looking for. He’s got the ability to catch it. He can run it inside, outside. He’s not afraid to pick up the blitz. He loves to. There’s a lot of untapped football in there that no one’s seen yet. We felt he was one of the top players in the draft, honestly.

**King:** Ever get serious at all about moving up to get Kyler Murray at number one, or moving up to get anyone?

**Gruden:** We all loved Murray. That doesn’t mean we were gonna take him. How do you not love his performance, his playing style, what he accomplished? I had a blast with him [when the Raiders worked him out pre-draft in Dallas]. We didn’t think about going up to number one. We did look at [Nick] Bosa, [Quinnen] Williams, but not going to one. We did our homework on the quarterbacks. You gotta know who’s coming into the league at that position. There was a lot of speculation that we were gonna take a quarterback. I kept watching a guy on NFL Network saying we’re going up to get Murray. Then he says we’re going up to get Haskins. Then he says we’re going up to get Lock. We’re trading Carr. I don’t understand it.
Jon Gruden and Antonio Brown.

King: How’s it been to be around Antonio Brown?

Gruden: I just love guys like that. He’s like ... he just wants it. Reminds me of, you throw a dog the ball, he just goes and gets it. He keeps going, and going, and going, and going. He just won’t stop. Antonio’s energy is contagious. Getting him here was interesting. I remember my wife and I in a car in Las Vegas, early March. Mark Davis had me and Mike [Mayock] go there for a fund-raising event. Mike’s wife Mandy came and my wife Cindy came. And we’re driving around, and I get a call from [Pittsburgh VP and cap guy] Omar Khan. He’s like, ‘Hey what about a second-round pick for Antonio Brown?’ Free-agency’s about to start and I’m thinking, ‘Man, all these slot receivers are going for $10 million. Some of these players are going for $15 million. Why don’t we just give him the second? Get Antonio Brown!’ I call Mike and I said, ‘Why don’t we just give the Steelers the second and get this guy?’ Mike says, ‘That’s a little rich still. Let me talk to [Steelers GM] Kevin Colbert.’ Now he talks to Kevin Colbert and he says, ‘I think we can get him for a three and a five.’ I said, ‘Get the hell outta here!’

King: Amazing. That happened fast.

Gruden: Mike goes, ‘Now you gotta call Antonio Brown and see if he’ll play for us.’ So my wife and I were up in the Red Rock Mountains, just outside of Vegas. Just looking around, waiting for the event to start that night. There’s bad cell phone service. I’m like, ‘I can’t even get ahold of this guy!’ So we’re driving down to some sports bar parking lot, I’m calling Antonio Brown, and he says he’d love to play for us. Now Mike has to get on the phone with Colbert to work out the contract. We’re at this nice event, I got my wife ... They got beautiful makeup on, beautiful dresses on. But me and Mike are over there at the event, working on a trade for Antonio Brown. ‘What’s the deal, man? We getting him?’ It was great though.

King: Pretty huge facelift for this team this offseason.

Gruden: Last year was tough. It was gut-wrenching honestly. It was a necessary year. People have their opinions but we added some draft picks. We feel like we added some free agents and got two more first-round picks next year. Hopefully we have a competitive, fun training camp and get a lot better before the season. Because we got a tough schedule, man. We got a hell of a schedule.

King: What’d you say when you saw the schedule that had you not playing in Oakland for 48 days?

Gruden: I don’t think I’ve ever seen that. One of the games is in London, and we fly from, wherever, after a game to get there.

King: Indy.

Gruden: Right. Indy. I just hope we don’t get messed up missing our families. And we still gotta decide where we’re playing one of our home preseason games. We’re only allowed to have one home preseason game. Might go to Canada for a preseason game.

The Raiders reportedly will play the Packers in Winnipeg in week three of the preseason.
King: You guys are like mongrels, just looking for a home.

Gruden: We are. Like an old-fashioned rock ‘n’ roll band. We don’t play anywhere!

King: Barnstormers.

Gruden: We just gotta put on some good shows. We gotta play well no matter where we play, no matter how many weeks we’re on the road. Doesn’t matter. Guys just have to be ready to go, anywhere.

King: Parcells always used to say, “I want guys who don’t care if the game’s in the Paramus Mall parking lot.”

Gruden: Exactly. I remember I was here the first time, I swore we had about 25 guys that if I called them up and told them, we’d play out there in that parking lot for nothing. I bet I could call Steve Wisniewski and Rich Gannon and they’d do it. I think this Clelin Ferrell would too. He’d play for nothing. I really think this [safety Johnathan] Abram guy, he’d play out there on the asphalt. Want to play a doubleheader? He’d play it. You gotta have guys that love football instead of loving some of the things that come with it now. Forty-eight days in a row on the road, I can hear the bitching. We’re the sports bitchers now. We don’t have a cafeteria here so the food gets brought in. You hear some guys, they first get here, ‘Are we ever gonna get new food? Are we gonna get a new weight room? Are we gonna get more supplements?’ You know? Doesn’t matter. It’s a great place, man. Great opportunity. Gets tiring though.

King: Still glad you came?

Gruden: Yeah. I am glad. I love it, man. I do. I really do. I have no regrets doing it. It’s a lot of work. I knew it was gonna be a lot of work coming in here. But starting to see progress. Starting to feel momentum. I can... I sit at a quarterback meeting with [Derek] Carr and [Mike] Glennon, and we had Landry Jones and Nate Peterman. You just feel a different vibe. Antonio Brown sticks his head in there and then Vontaze Burfict talking trash at us down the hall. Here comes Lamarcus Joyner walking up the hall and you see your second-year tackle, Kolton Miller. He’s 20 pounds heavier. And you look, is that Brandon Parker, our rookie right tackle? God, he looks better. Maurice Hurst looks like he’s growing up a little bit. You start to feel like there’s some roots that are starting to grow here. We’ve had so much turnover here. So many different coaches. So many different coordinators. So many different players. You just hope we can get some roots and start growing up a little bit.

King: Burfict and Antonio had quite a history. Burfict knocked Brown cold in a playoff game. They hated each other. How about now?

Gruden: They’re good. We played Family Feud one day in our team meeting. We had three guys on one team, three guys on the other. Our version of Family Feud. Silver team and a Black team. The Silver team was Antonio Brown, Vontaze Burfict and I think we had Isaiah Crowell on the team. [2018 teams: Brown, Pittsburgh ... Burfict, Cincinnati ... Crowell, New York Jets.] You gotta try to get these guys to know each other. This is the only time that you can really do that. April, May, June. It’s almost like church. Everybody stand up. Shake a hand, introduce yourself to your teammates. Otherwise, Peter never gets to know Jon and Jon never meets Joe ...

King: What happened in Family Feud? How was it?
Gruden: It was a helluva game. One of the questions was, ‘Who were the 1,100-yard rushers in the NFL last year?’ They nailed that pretty good, but they had a hard time with [Chris] Carson of Seattle. Another question: ‘Who do the Raiders play on the other side of the Mississippi?’ Last one was top designer brands clothing or jewelry. These guys were guessing Nike, Wrangler. They don’t know s— about fashion. But they did great. Got some laughs. These days, you gotta think outside the box.

Honoring Ebersol

Kudos are in order for Dick Ebersol, the longtime NBC Sports executive who, along with Denver owner Pat Bowlen, invented the Sunday night football package that now has been the king of prime-time TV for eight years running. (“Sunday Night Football” has been the highest-rated TV show in the country every year since 2011.) It has to be emotional for Ebersol to be getting the Pro Football Hall of Fame’s Pete Rozelle Radio-Television Award—which recognizes exceptional contributions to radio and TV in pro football—in Canton on enshrinement weekend in August. Because he’ll be taking his spot in Canton while Bowlen is inducted to the Hall of Fame for his long and meritorious career as the owner of the Broncos and one of the most influential owners in the league. Ebersol called the honor “especially meaningful to be recognized in the same year that my friend Pat Bowlen earns his rightful place in Canton.”

Ebersol hired me in 2006 for the Football Night in America pregame show, so I’m hardly a dispassionate observer to this, but in my 29 years in the sports media business, I’ve never worked for a person who had his fingerprints all over every aspect of the team he put in place than Ebersol—from the researchers to the stories on the pregame show to the game telecast to lobbying for the best package of games with the league to making everyone (and I mean everyone) feel they’re valued and an important piece of the overall product.

Quick story, leaving out some of the details: The Sunday night football telecasts were the first to be able to be flexed, meaning teams could be moved on and off them depending on the relative attractiveness of the matchups. One year early on, a coach who was scheduled to have a 1 p.m. game on Sunday on the road heard rumors his game would be flexed into the Sunday night game, which meant his team would land back home around 4 a.m. Monday and would impair his team’s future preparation. This coach asked me if I could relay a message to Dick Ebersol. Sure, I said. He didn’t want his team flexed, and if it was, he might do something the network wouldn’t like. I told Ebersol. He chuckled. And he assured me that it didn’t matter what some coach thought, or what threat some coach made. The league had final say on what game would be played on Sunday night; Ebersol could put in his opinion, which he always did, but the league made the final call. And the best matchup would win.

One more note about the harmony of Ebersol and Bowlen going in together: Bowlen wanted NBC to get the package, I’ve always thought, because he knew Ebersol could deliver Al Michaels and John Madden in the booth in 2006, and Bob Costas and Cris Collinsworth in the studio. It took some wrangling on a lot of levels to make that foursome the key to the NBC talent pool, but Ebersol made it happen.

I think moving the best prime-time game of the week from Monday to Sunday probably will be what people remember about Ebersol and the NFL. But I have always thought the most important thing for TV fans was flex scheduling. In 2005, when the negotiations were taking place, the NFL had been plagued by a bevy of late-season Monday night games with at least one team with a poor record. Ebersol was insistent that NBC and the league have the ability to be able to change the game that looked like stinkers to more competitive or more attractive affairs. In fact, if the NFL hadn’t embraced the flex-schedule concept (and why wouldn’t it, because it would certainly mean better average ratings for the prime-time package), I don’t think NBC would have bid aggressively for Sunday nights.
Scores of examples, but I’ll use one from 2018. Niners lost Jimmy Garoppolo to injury in Week 3, sit at 1-4 after five weeks, and in Week 7 were slated to play the Rams on Sunday night. Great-looking prime-time game in April—Shanahan versus McVay, Goff versus Garoppolo. No more. The league flexed out of Rams-Niners (which turned into a 39-10 rout) and into Cincinnati-Kansas City; at the time of the flex, the Bengals were 4-1 and Chiefs 5-0. But this was more of a Patrick Mahomes flex, and Mahomes did not disappoint. Coming off a 43-40 loss to the Patriots, Mahomes threw for 358 yards and four touchdowns and torched the Bengals. The game was not competitive. But the league got to put its new megastar in prime time for the third time in four weeks. Though the ratings were meh, they’d have been significantly worse if the league had to use the Niners here. The flex was basically Crap Game Insurance through the guts of the NFL season. The other networks didn’t like it much, because it meant they could lose a great game to NBC on Sunday night. But it was Crap Game Insurance, and it has served the league well since 2006.

Graduation Speeches

Some football people, some not. The graduation speeches, and snippets from them, that caught my eyes and ears this month:

J.J. Watt
Houston defensive end
University of Wisconsin
Madison, Wis.
May 11, 2019

“I once had a teacher who told me my dream of one day playing in the NFL was unrealistic. Well, hello. The path to your dreams often never goes the way you imagine it will. When I dreamed about coming to Wisconsin I dreamed about getting a scholarship coming out of high school. I dreamed about starting early on in my career and going and winning Rose Bowls. And that’s my message to you. Even at this point in your life, you may not have imagined how your college career would go. But here you are, accomplishing one of your dreams. It will be difficult, it will not look the way you want it to look, but in the end, if you stay focused, if you stay true, if you have the passion for your dream, you will get there.”

Viola Davis
Actor
Barnard College
New York, N.Y.
May 20, 2019

“Own all your memories and experiences, even if they were traumatic. The world is broken because we’re broken. There are too many of us who want to forget … I can remember what it’s like being a child who was hungry. I can remember what it means to be in trauma. I can remember poverty. I can remember what it means to be a child who dreams and sees no physical manifestation of it. I can remember it because I lived it. I was there. That has been my biggest gift. You can only understand people if you feel them in yourself …

“You can either leave something for people, or you can leave something in people.”

Jeffrey Lurie
Eagles owner
Clark University
May 19, 2019

“You want a lesson in impressive workplace leadership? When our great backup quarterback, Nick Foles, went into the huddle with two minutes left in the game to start a drive that we needed to win the Super Bowl, you know what he said? Not, ‘Let’s go do this.’ But simply, ‘I love you guys.’ I love you. Maybe it sounds hokey, but what could be more freeing of the best you have inside you than knowing you’re loved regardless of what happens?

“… In the big data, A.I. world you’re graduating into I can’t emphasize enough how the qualities that make us uniquely human are more essential than ever. That means emotional intelligence, empathy and appreciation for the people not only in your own family, but those you choose to be with in every facet of your life and work.

“We use data analytics as much as any professional sports team—and I’d be the first to tell you that crunching the numbers can tell us a lot about performance. But in the end, you have to make a judgment about human character that no algorithm can really capture. When we decided to hire Doug Pedersen as our new coach, we got plenty of criticism for what seemed like a completely unconventional choice based on his career experience at that point. But what I saw in Doug was someone not just with expertise about football strategy and tactics, but a unique level of empathy for players as individuals, and real insight about how people work together as a team. That kind of leadership and the success it generates isn’t about sports. It’s about trust. When it comes to solving problems, study after study shows that the most effective organizations aren’t built on individual genius, but on diverse groups who trust and respect one another … So what’s it take to be one of those trusting problem-solvers who can truly hear one another? I’ve found that to embrace what makes us fully alive to ourselves and those around us calls on you to keep the child in you as you grow, with an enduring sense of wonder and curiosity. Buddhism calls it ‘beginner’s mind.’ There’s nothing childish about keeping that child-like perspective regardless of how old you are.”

Jeff Daniels
Actor
Kean University
Newark, N.J.
May 23, 2019

“Our country is not in a good place. We are divided. We’re angry. You can help change that. You can make a difference by bringing back civility, decency, compassion, empathy, class, honesty, respect for others and truth. You have to want it. If I could give you one piece of advice that has served me well, it is to find out what it is that you want to do and spend the rest of your life getting better at it. Take pride in what you do. Become the person you dream of being, the one who, with a little luck, can make a difference in the world.”

Scott Pioli
Former executive with New England, Kansas City and Atlanta
Central Connecticut State University
Hartford, Conn.
May 18, 2019
“When I was 7 years old, my third-grade teacher, Elisa Cooper, was the first black school teacher in our district in Washingtonville, N.Y. People were rough on her—people were mean-spirited and they were racist, mostly the adults. However, Miss Cooper’s grace in the face of overt racism and racism behind her back was extraordinary. At 7, I watched a woman treat me and my classmates with nothing but love and grace. Not all the adults were racist and hateful, but as Martin Luther King said: ‘The ultimate tragedy is not the oppression and cruelty by the bad people but the silence over that by the good people.’ I saw Miss Cooper—who is now Mrs. Jackson—last fall for lunch one afternoon in Washington. She still owns a standard of love and grace that I strive for.

“Another side piece of advice: Stay in touch with or seek out those educators who loved you and taught you. They deserve to know that they made a difference. She taught me something about grace and forgiveness when I didn’t even know what the words meant. She modeled it daily to the children she taught. Bryan Stephenson spoke these words in his book ‘Just Mercy’ in 2014: “I’ve come to understand and to believe that each of us is more than the worst thing we’ve ever done. I think if somebody tells a lie, they’re not just a liar. I think if somebody takes something that doesn’t belong to them, they’re not just a thief.” Elisa Cooper knew that in 1973 and she taught it to a young boy that has tried to see the world like her. She understood that good people could do bad things and mean things. She knew that people were broken …

“Be a servant. Be resilient. Be loving and graceful.”

Sonia Sotomayor
Supreme Court Justice
Manhattan College
New York, N.Y.
May 17, 2019

“Education has a more important value than money. It is deeply important to our growth as people and as a community. I am often asked if I ever imagined as a child being on the Supreme Court, the highest court in the United States. ‘No,’ I say, ‘When I was a child, my family was poor. No lawyer or judges lived in my neighborhood. I knew nothing about the Supreme Court.’ You cannot dream of becoming something you do not know about. You have to learn to dream big. Education exposes you to what the world has to offer, to the possibilities open to you.”

John Krasinski
Actor
Brown University
Providence, R.I.
May 25, 2019

Krasinski told of taking a chance and auditioning for a Providence sketch comedy troupe, Out of Bounds, after graduating from Brown in 2001.

“When I graduated, I was terrified because all these people came up to me and said, ‘The future belongs to you.’ Whoa! What? I am currently searching for an apartment and trying to keep the number of roommates in the single digits. Literally nothing belongs to me. I went in for the audition, and my entire life changed. Nope, not because I got in, not because I started acting. It was through that group that I found my way into this community. It was through that group that I met my people. And all of a sudden,
I was surrounded by the most inspiring peers. I mean, every single one of them seemed way smarter than me, way cooler than me, way more interesting.

“Find more of your people. Lean all the way in. Take chances. Fail big and take chances again. Listen to music. Remember to believe in something. Fall in love as many times as it takes. And remember, before you do something special, just do something.”

Bill Nye
The Science Guy
Goucher College
Towson, Md.
May 24, 2019

“When it comes to changing the world, don’t be scared. Don’t freak out. When you have to perform doing anything, you might be nervous. That fear can stop you cold. Don’t let it. As we say in the theater and on television, ‘Take that fear and turn it into excitement.’ You’re Goucher graduates, for crying out loud! You can do it. Take a chance! It’s what everyone here wants you to do. In every challenge you face, turn your fear into excitement and change the world.

“Everyone you will ever meet knows something that you don’t. Everyone! Farmers know things about plants that most of us, even botanists, never will. Bricklayers have an intimate knowledge of what it takes to lay bricks. Respect that knowledge and learn from others. It will bring out the best in them and it will bring out the best in you.

“Just get started. Just get started.”

“And vote. You have to vote. Voting is how we influence policy makers. It’s how we make big changes. It’s how we get things done. If you don’t want to vote, would you please just shut up ... so the rest of us can get on with changing things for the better.”

Quotes of the Week

I

“This whole 100 years of pro football thing got me to thinking. There is nobody more knowledgeable about the 100 years of pro football than Joe Horrigan. It is not even close. I don’t know how you replace that brain. You can’t replace that brain. I don’t know what we’ll do without Joe Horrigan. You have young people, smart people, people who know how to look things up on computers, but there’s a difference between reading about something and knowing the people and knowing the eras. Joe is the one who knows football, and the people, more than anyone we have today. I just hope we can find a way to pass that on.”

—John Madden, on the retirement of Pro Football Hall of Fame executive director/archivist/historian Joe Horrigan, who had his retirement dinner Thursday night in Canton. Fittingly, on “Joe Horrigan Day” in the city of Canton.

II

“There would be language that would say that play is just not subject to a challenge.”
—Competition Committee chair Rich McKay, on the league exempting the Hail Mary from pass plays that coaches can challenge to see if interference occurred.

“We really don’t want our games to end on review,” McKay said.

III

“There is an appetite from the coaches, and the membership, as well as the Competition Committee, to explore some form of the proposal [to mandate both teams get at least one overtime possession] for postseason play.”
—NFL executive vice president of football operations Troy Vincent.

That slipped very much under the radar at the NFL’s one-day meeting last week.

IV

“I love it. The training staff, I’m not sure where they got it from, but it’s titanium or something like that. It’s real lightweight. Once I’m out there moving around and stuff, I don’t even feel it. Shoutout to the training staff for that.”
—49ers quarterback Jimmy Garoppolo, on his lightweight knee brace, in his first week back practicing hard on his surgically repaired knee, almost eight months to the day after his Sept. 23, 2018 injury in Kansas City.

V

“That’s ridiculous.”
—Jets coach Adam Gase on the possibility of the Jets trading newly acquired running back Le’Veon Bell in 2019.

VI

“Better to let sleeping jerseys lie.”
—Rochester Democrat and Chronicle columnist Leo Roth, on the Bills giving out jersey number 32 (O.J. Simpson’s old number) for the first time since 1977, when Simpson last played for the team. Running back Sinorise Perry wore number 32 at offseason practice last week.

Interesting. Very interesting.

Numbers Game

Sammy Watkins evidently hears what’s said about him out in the Twittersphere and any other football spheres that talk football. His record after five years in the NFL shows that two teams (Buffalo, in the 2014 draft; Kansas City, in free agency in 2018) have significantly overpaid for him. The Bills traded two first-round picks and a fourth-round pick to take him fourth overall in 2014, and then the Chiefs paid $16 million a year for him in 2018. Once he’s caught more than 60 passes in a season; never has he had 10 or more touchdowns in a season.
Foot issues have plagued the speedy Watkins going back to his second season. He’s never been right for any of the three seasons since.

Sammy Watkins, average production per season in the last three years
Games: 11
Receptions: 35.7
Yards: 514
TD: 4.3
Offensive plays: 538

It was strange to see and hear, in the wake of Tyreek Hill’s questionable status for the 2019 season, that there was very little reliance on Watkins by the Chiefs to fill the void that could be left if Hill misses significant time. So it’s good to see Watkins’ determination to finally fulfill the great expectations that trailed him out of Clemson in 2014 and that he’s never been able to live up to.

II

Yankees this year when Giancarlo Stanton or Aaron Judge, or both, play: 10-10.

Yankees this year when Stanton and Judge are both out: 24-8.

III

Gleyber Torres of the Yankees has 10 home runs against Baltimore this season (by Memorial Day, mind you).

The following players have fewer than 10 home runs this season: Bryce Harper, J.D. Martinez, Manny Machado, Nelson Cruz, Mookie Betts.

Factoidness
I was in the greatest movie in the history of Hollywood, the remake of “The Longest Yard.” I co-starred with Adam Sandler and Chris Rock.

Well, I did say three sentences in the movie.

I am still getting royalty checks for my marquee role. Last week, a Foreign Royalty Statement came in the mail, accompanied by a check for $11.38. It included fees paid me for home viewing, cable transmissions and video rentals of “The Longest Yard” outside of the United States. The following countries have contributed these amounts to the retirement fund of the King family, courtesy of my work alongside Rock and Sandler:

Denmark: 27 cents.
Germany: 23 cents.
Spain: 88 cents, and a second disbursement for 2 cents.
Switzerland: 92 cents.

“No taxes have been withheld from this payment,” the Foreign Royalty Statement said. “Please consult your tax professional with respect to tax consequences.”
How does one pay taxes on a royalty payment of $0.02?

King of the Road

I drove from New York to Canton, Ohio, last week, with a family stop for two days in Pittsburgh. Much of the drive from Chambersburg, Pa., to Canton was on U.S. 30. (Missed the exit for the Pennsylvania Turnpike in Carlisle, and when I discovered where we were, I thought it would be fun to see a part of the region I don’t think I’ve ever seen, the very south of Pennsylvania.) It was so interesting that when I finished the drive to Canton a couple of days later, I went back on U.S. 30 toward Ohio ... and had the surprise of a three-mile trip through the microscopic tip of West Virginia. A few of the things I saw:

• Electronic slot machines at a gas station just west of Chambersburg. I had no idea you could gamble in gas stations in Pennsylvania.

• This sign west of Chambersburg at a business selling home energy systems: “Solar System For Sale.” I wondered which one. Mars, perhaps?

• A road sign near Breezewood, Pa., after driving past a heavy construction zone that apparently included drilling through rock: “LEAVING BORING AREA.” Come on. It’s not that bad.

• A slew of signs for the Flight 93 National Memorial, driving past Shanksville, Pa. I vow to stop there when I’ve got some time—I’ve driven within a few miles a few times. This is the national memorial to United Flight 93 and the heroism of those aboard who, instead of allowing hijackers to divert the plane and fly it into the U.S. Capitol building in Washington, rushed the cockpit and caused the plane to nosedive into rural Shanksville. All 40 passengers and crew died.

• A big Confederate flag on a tall flagpole in West Virginia.

• The hometown of Lou Holtz: East Liverpool, Ohio, just over the Ohio River from West Virginia.

• The little town in Ohio where Larry Csonka has a farm and I believe lives part of the year. Lisbon, Ohio. I just missed one of the highlights of the year in Lisbon: the Dulci-More Festival, featuring the Appalachian dulcimer and other old-time musical instruments.

I’ve often thought how good it is to get off the interstates and see Americana America.

Newman!

Mail call. I’ll be away for a few weeks, and guest columnists will be filling this space until my return on July 15. So I won’t be answering any of your questions till I return. So this week, I’ll give you a few more pieces of correspondence than usual.

But first, I’d like to add two suggestions about how to improve the game. My fault for not including them last week, and my apologies to Daniel Jeremiah and Dan Orlovsky, two smart young football analysts.

Daniel Jeremiah, NFL Network: Modernize scouting
The NFL is the most lucrative sports league in the country, and yet the way scouts measure prospects is right out of the sixties. Scouts still use a $5-dollar tape measure they bought at Walmart for height, hand, wing-span and other measurements of players when they visit campuses. This baffles me. The scouting world should incorporate the technology that currently exists. Every year we see disparity between the measurements at the Senior Bowl and the Scouting Combine. This is easily correctable. We should be using body scans to get precise measurements at those events. Also, most colleges are using GPS devices in shoulder pads to gather incredible amounts of data. If we can agree to share that information it would be transformational in the evaluation process. Instead of “estimating” the play speed of a prospect, we would possess his top-end MPH, acceleration and deceleration numbers.

Dan Orlovsky, ESPN: Overhaul officiating

One recommendation I’d have would be the total washing and rebuilding of the officiating, a top-to-bottom upheaval and reassessment. A few ideas: There would be a mandated retirement age for officials. I would float it somewhere around 55 … The officials would be full-time NFL employees … There would be teams/crews that worked together year round … There would be annual physical tests for ALL, ANNUALLY. And these tests would focus on reactionary healthy/reflex health and cardiovascular health, with an emphasis on vision … There would be year round team building and skill development events for the crews … The expectations would be higher. There would still be mistakes, but the NFL would finally begin to equip what is the third-most impactful entity to the result of a game.

Now for your email:

Hooray, Chris Long. From Mike, of Philadelphia: “Just wanted to say we’re lucky Chris Long the player and Chris Long the person were a part of the Eagles for two years. I loved reading about who he is and who he tried to be on and off the field. The 2017 Eagles will be remembered by everyone around here as a group of guys that formed more than just a football team. Thanks, Chris.”

Excellent point. As Long said last week, the Eagles proved a professional sports team could focus on its business as well as be a bright light in the community.

Football doesn’t need fixing. From commenter 90ragtop, at NBC Sports: “Here’s another idea instead: Let’s stop ‘fixing’ the NFL.”

Got a few of these, but they were wordier than this. Thanks for the economy of syllables.

Keep overtime the way it is. From Betty G.: “The two games cited most often when changing the OT rules are the Patriots-Falcons and Patriots-Chiefs. [The Falcons] blew a 25-point lead in the Super Bowl, while [Kansas City] blew home field and failed to use a timeout or make any adjustments. This would not be an issue if different teams won.”

Respectfully disagree. I believe it’s a matter of fairness. Why is it that 2 percent of the time that the team winning the toss to start overtime chooses to kick off?

Eric Winston’s proposal was good, but Conor has a suggestion. From Conor D.: “I thought Eric’s proposal on seeding playoffs by record was intriguing. In my opinion, I think you’d need to add an extra caveat in there, though. It might seem more technical and less smooth than just seeding by record, but I think you need to have strength of schedule as a consideration if you’re going to seed by record. Now, of course if
someone is 11-5 and a wild-card team, they definitely played at least two tough games against their division winner, but what about the rest of their games? What if the other two teams in their division were 5-11 or worse? What if they played one or two weak divisions for their AFC/NFC full division slates? What if they finished last the season before so they're playing all the last place teams in their conference? Now what if there is a 9-7 division winner that played in a really tough division?”

Hadn’t thought of that, Conor. It’s interesting. I guess I think it would be quite a rarity for a team that finished 12-4 to be worse than an 8-8 or 9-7 team. But it’s possible. And certainly possible that using strength of schedule, a 9-7 team could be statistically better than a 10-6 team.

On Donovan McNabb. From Chazz S.: “Donovan McNabb states he should be in the Hall of Fame. As a member of the selection committee, please make a case for or against his selection. I think he is in the hall of great, but not worthy of the Hall of Fame.”

At first blush, Chazz, I’d agree. One of the problems we have as a Hall of Fame selection committee is comparing players using statistics only. McNabb began his NFL career 10 years after Troy Aikman—who was the flashpoint for McNabb because McNabb said he has better numbers than Aikman—but their careers did intersect for two seasons, 1999 and 2000. I value numbers. But so many good quarterbacks have good numbers, and after a while, you’ve got to figure out what else is important in deciding a player’s Hall of Fame candidacy. McNabb was a decent playoff quarterback (9-7, including 0-1 in the Super Bowl). Aikman was a very good one (11-5, 3-0 in Super Bowls), and he was especially good in Dallas’ Super Bowl years. In the five seasons from 1992 to 1996, Aikman was 11-2 in the playoffs, registering a rating over better than 100 in nine of those 13 games in the postseason. With all of the mega-numbers quarterbacks from the last 20 years coming up for Hall of Fame consideration in the next 10 or so years (Brees, Manning, Manning, Brady, Roethlisberger, Rivers, Ryan, Rodgers), McNabb’s case will have formidable competition.

Taking issue with Chris Nowinski wanting to eliminate tackle football till high school. From Danny: “All well and good. But according to a Children’s Hospital Boston study: ‘Research suggests that female soccer players are second only to male football players in the number of concussions that they develop each year.’ Are we eliminating all girls youth soccer until high school as well?”

Certainly not. But perhaps heading the ball pre-high school, or wearing the type of headgear that some soccer authorities are experimenting with now, could alleviate some of those concussions.

Excellent counterpoint on tackling. From Mark I., of Marysville, Wash.: “There are two opposing views on youth tackle football: yours, that it should be banned; and that of the millions of parents and coaches that encourage and teach kids to play football the right way, while their bodies are less powerful and less likely to cause concussions. To my knowledge (and it’s something I’ve looked into quite a bit) no studies have been done to show which approach is/will be more effective at reducing the potential for CTE and other cognitive issues for former players. Lacking such a study, the anecdotal evidence I’ve seen indicates that kids who start playing tackle in high school are dangerous. My son has played tackle football for 6 years now, and looking forward to joining the varsity team as a sophomore. He has become an effective tackler, and to my knowledge has never caused an injury making a tackle. Full disclosure: My son has had two concussions playing football. One was during a game against a team that was so poorly coached (that old-school style of coaching that encourages kids to purposely hurt their opponents) that our coaches forfeited the game to protect our players. The other concussion? During a flag football game. We all want kids to be safe and healthy. We should be calling for good scientific studies to determine the best way to do these things. You may be right that the best way to protect kids and adults is to ban youth tackle
football, and if so, if that can be supported by more than a feeling, I’ll advocate with you. But for now, my anecdotal evidence tells me that teaching kids to play properly from a young age is the better way to save football.”

What a smart email, Mark. Thanks so much for sending it. You make some good and compelling points. It sounds like your son has been well-coached and well-drilled in the art of form tackling. I do not have sons. I never researched this; I write from a position of what seems to be common sense—if kids are not running around with helmets, they’ll be less inclined to lower their heads and hit another player and expose a developing brain to damage. I have to admit the biggest proponent of this, and the person who swayed me that no tackling till high school is probably best for young children, is Drew Brees. This is what he told me on my podcast in 2016:

“I played flag football in sixth, seventh and eighth grade. I didn’t play tackle football till ninth grade ... I think that the game is so much more fun and you learn so much more about just the fundamentals of throwing, catching, running, concepts and defense through flag football. I think that there aren’t enough coaches to coach proper technique with pads on with kids in elementary school. That’s just the truth and I think kids would have more fun playing flag football. In flag football everybody has a chance to run the ball, catch the ball, throw the ball, and that’s not the case in tackle football. You’re either a lineman or a skill guy. Whereas in flag football it’s a free-for-all. Everybody has that opportunity. I just think it’s a great way to teach the game in a very safe way that certainly parents feel comfortable about, and it still engages the kids and still gets them excited about it to where at some point they transition to pads. I think you will bring a lot more people to the sport by starting them off with flag football to that point – because you get them to fall in love with the sport, and then you gradually evolved to the physical nature of the game.”

But I have to admit, Mark: Your email has really made me think. Thank you.

10 Things I Think I Think
1. I think I hope you take some time later this week to listen to a podcast I’ve been working on for some time. “The Peter King Podcast” that drops Wednesday is about advances made to the football helmet, and how new technology and a new Seattle-based company, Vicis, are giving the NFL the best chance to reduce head trauma of any recent improvements to equipment—and spurring other helmet companies to get better faster. Listen on Cadence 13, or on iTunes. I learned a lot, and I hope you will too.

2. I think Nick Bosa added to the suspicions that he’ll have a hard time staying healthy when he suffered a grade-one hamstring strain in the Niners’ OTA practice last Tuesday. Bosa, the second pick in the draft, had two of his last four football seasons end prematurely with ACL and core-muscle injuries, respectively. Now he may not practice till training camp. Pass-rusher is an explosive-movement position. Not good at all that the hamstring gets hurt right away.

3. I think Tampa Bay “parting ways” with Gerald McCoy now means that, arguably, that three of the best four or five defensive players on the unit from last year (McCoy, Jason Pierre-Paul, Kwon Alexander) are gone—McCoy to a new team, Alexander to the 49ers in free agency, and Pierre-Paul out with a back injury possibly for the season. It just puts more pressure on the offense, and on under-the-microscope quarterback Jameis Winston, to be markedly better under Bruce Arians and Byron Leftwich this fall. And I mean very markedly.

4. I think Ndamukong Suh, at one year and $9.25 million, instead of McCoy at $13 million, says to me McCoy wanted out (which he did; he wants to play for a winner) and the Bucs didn’t fight him because
the team didn’t want to extend a 31-year-old tackle entering his 10th year, at a time when he’s coming off a good but not McCoy-like season.

5. I think I don’t quite get Baker Mayfield continuing his feud with talk-show guru Colin Cowherd. Mayfield said on Instagram the other day he’s selling anti-Cowherd T-shirts for $30. What’s next? Anti-Hue shirts? Cowherd has been critical of Mayfield the person, going too far too often, and it’s rankled Mayfield quite a bit. The problem is, the T-shirt sales make Mayfield seem like he’s got rabbit ears. And that he’s petty. Mayfield’s really good, and he’s got a chance to be the prince of the city in Cleveland. With greatness comes people taking potshots in a 24/7 football world. It makes zero sense to me for Mayfield to be saying, in effect, Colin Cowherd got under my skin. I’ll show him.

6. I think it looks more and more like something that could have been pure gold for the NFL, something that an imaginative and opportunistic league would have jumped on, will be a swinging strike. A missed chance. The Pro Football Hall of Fame was pushing hard for a regular-season game in Canton on Sept. 17, 2020—a Thursday night. The Hall wanted the Bears, one of the two remaining franchises from the 14-team league that was invented in 1920 in Canton, to play on the 100th anniversary day, Sept. 17, of the formation of the league. (The Decatur Staleys, with player-coach George Halas, became the Chicago Bears by 1922.) I’m told it’s not happening. Obviously playing in front of 25,000 in Canton instead of 61,500 at Soldier Field is going to kill the gate for the game, and I’m sure the Bears don’t want to lose a home game and don’t want to get on an airplane to play a “home” game. For a league that likes pomp, a real game in Canton would have been gold. With so many historical angles, that’s a huge chance missed.

7. I think I thought of a few things when I saw the news that Adam “Pacman” Jones retired. One: He had some big picks. He intercepted Ben Roethlisberger three times, Russell Wilson and Eli Manning twice, Tom Brady once. Two: He was the unwitting subject of a hilarious interview in Dallas Cowboys training camp in August 2008 (he was trying to rekindle his wayward career in Dallas; that lasted nine games), between a FOX Sports en Español reporter and wide receiver Terrell Owens. The reporter was interested in knowing if the Cowboys were going to call Jones, in his first camp with the team, by his first name or his nickname. Here is how the interview went:

Fox Sports en Español: “You call Pacman Pacman?”
Owens: “What’s that?”
Fox Sports en Español: “Pacman.”
Owens: “Who?”
Fox Sports en Español: “Adam.”
Owens: “What about it?”
Fox Sports en Español: “I thought he didn’t like to be called Pacman anymore. You said Pacman. Pacman Jones.”
Owens: “What about it?”
Fox Sports en Español: “I thought he didn’t want to be called Pacman anymore.”
Owens: “Did somebody call him Pacman?”
Fox Sports en Español: “You did, man.”
Owens, resignedly: “Dude, I don’t care.”
Fox Sports en Español: “Okay.”

In the history of Misunderstood and Bizarre Interviews, that one would win an Emmy.
8. I think my favorite story of the week comes from KDKA-TV in Pittsburgh. Seems that Antonio Brown left town, and the home he is trying to sell, without making arrangements to have the lawn mowed. Well, in the spring, it rains, and the sun comes out, and the grass grows, and it’s May 27, and if the grass hasn’t been moved, you’ve got a hay field on hour hands. Brown’s former next-door neighbor asked Brown to cut the grass. Brown’s response, also on Twitter, began with this: “Can you be a Good Samaritan and do me a solid cut my grass” Only is America, on Twitter. Still waiting to see if the neighbor did him the solid or Brown did what people with lots of money do in cases like this: hire someone to do it.

9. I think the Patriots had better hope Ben Watson gives them a heck of a lot of production in the final 12 weeks of the season, after the presumptive New England starting tight end revealed Sunday he would be lost for the first four weeks of the season due to a positive PED test.

10. I think these are my other thoughts of the week:

a. Football Story of the Week: Jayson Jenks of The Athletic, on Doug Baldwin the changed man as he reaches the end of his career.

b. Baldwin the consistent overachiever: “When there’s not chaos, I don’t know how to handle that.” So perfect. So Baldwin. When Seattle GM John Schneider made the mega-trade for Percy Harvin a few years ago, it both pissed off Baldwin and supremely motivated him: “I looked at him as an object to conquer.”

c. Jenks got inside the real Baldwin, which is very hard to do. Kudos to him.


e. “The American people have an incredible charitable impulse. But nobody knows exactly what to do when the money comes in.”

f. Sports story of the week: The kid who earned 22 high school letters in four years, by Mike White of the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette.

g. Think of this: Joe Bujdos, in three of his four years at Indiana (Pa.) High School, played cross country and golf in the fall, swimming and indoor track in the winter, and tennis and outdoor track in the spring.

h. Bujdos to White: “You’re only in high school once, so make the most of it.” Brilliant.

i. Real Estate Story of the Week (but strongly recommended if you’re not a property type): How San Francisco broke America’s heart, by Karen Heller of the Washington Post.

j. Really good writing by Heller about what has happened with all the Silicon Valley wealth changing the very fabric of a great city. “In a time of scarce consensus, everyone agrees that something has rotted in San Francisco. Conservatives have long loathed it as the axis of liberal politics and political correctness, but now progressives are carping, too. They mourn it for what has been lost, a city that long welcomed everyone and has been altered by an earthquake of wealth. Real estate is the nation’s costliest. Listings read like typos, a median $1.6 million for a single-family home and $3,700 monthly rent for a one-bedroom apartment. ‘This is unregulated capitalism, unbridled capitalism, capitalism run amok. There are no guardrails,’ says Salesforce founder and chairman Marc Benioff, a fourth-generation San Franciscoan who
in a TV interview branded his city ‘a train wreck.’ You no longer leave your heart in San Francisco. The city breaks it.”

k. Yikes.

l. Thing I did not know about my 29-year-old nephew Luke Ranalli, who had two White Russians at dinner Wednesday: He has seen “The Big Lebowski” 50 times.

m. Congrats to the Raptors. Losing two to start a series, then winning four in a row to end it … quite a feat. I am no hoops guy, but I would love to have Kawhi Leonard signed to my team for a very long team. Leonard will be 28 and Kevin Durant 31 at the start of next season. Is it such a lock that you’d rather face the future with Durant over Leonard?

n. RIP, Gerry Fraley, one of the best baseball writers in America. He covered the Rangers for the Dallas Morning News, but he wrote about all baseball topics and was respected by the hard-core baseball people MLB-wide. Said Joe Maddon: “He always had a well thought-out question. He 24/7’d the game, constantly thinking about different items, whether statistics or matchup or the lineup. He worked from pure intentions .. just a really good reporter, loved baseball & was a good friend.”

o. Crazy stat of the week: With five more strikeouts, Justin Verlander will tie Cy Young on the all-time list.

p. Beernerdness: Had an excellent Belgian Wheat Beer the other day in Pittsburgh—East End Witte from the East End Brewing Company (Pittsburgh). I am a pushover for a light spring beer like the Witte, and this was worth a half-hour of my time: smooth, more of a hint of clove than most Witte or Hefeweizen. Different and nice.

q. I love the birthday tool on Pro Football Reference. Today, two birthdays for former players seem just right. Jackie Slater is 65, and Danny Wuerffel 45. Just what you’d have figured, correct? But on Tuesday, Rex Kern turns 70 and David Shula 60. Whoa! Where’d the time go?

r. Of course, if Jim Thorpe were still alive, he’d turn 132 Tuesday. That seems about right.

s. You’ll like the guest columnists coming in the next few Mondays. Please come back and see interesting people with valuable things to say, starting with Fred Gaudelli on June 3.

t. I always give some Father’s Day book reviews—you know, so you don’t have to buy your dad/uncle/husband a tie. You’ll still get those, but please follow me on Twitter. On Friday, June 5, I’ll drop a thread with a few recommended books.

The Adieu Haiku
40
Hey Joe Horrigan!
Ace football historian.
Irreplaceable.