“He was going to rise.” Juwann Winfree's personal evolution leads to Broncos opportunity.

By Kyle Fredrickson
Denver Post
June 17, 2019

Former CU wide receiver took long road to become Denver sixth-round NFL draft pick.

Think Juwann Winfree can fly on the football field?

You should have seen him on a skateboard.

Picture this: A middle school adrenaline junkie rolling down blacktop near the Hudson River in eastern New Jersey. Find a trick, practice like crazy and land it. He’d glide through the air on six-, seven- and eight-stair drops. Fearless.

“It was a hobby that I grew to really love,” Winfree said. “I can still kick-flip.”

These days, Winfree walks through the Broncos’ training facility with a similar skate swagger. He still craves the thrill but finds it elsewhere. The rookie receiver, a sixth-round pick out of CU, evades defensive backs with kick-flip footwork and sails through the sky to grab deep passes from quarterback Joe Flacco. The rush of a lifetime.

Winfree has always sought speed, and sometimes, to a fault. It nearly derailed this dream.

“The way this whole process happened to me was so crazy,” Winfree said. “God was truly on my side.”

Winfree dropped skateboarding in seventh grade after a football coach’s ultimatum but rediscovered adrenaline in all the wrong places. He chose Maryland among 26 Division-I scholarship offers out of Dwight Morrow High School, and about 16 months after signing day, the program suspended Winfree indefinitely as a result of failed drug tests and check fraud.

“I was just rushing life,” Winfree. “I wanted the flashy things and thought I could always get away with stuff.”

Winfree scrambled for a football solution. He emailed D-I coaches constantly in the summer of 2015, maybe 20 per day, only to find their interest evaporated with his reputation. Winfree’s last opportunity to gain it back arrived in an unlikely place where life moves just a bit slower: Coffeyville, Kansas.

The rural community of fewer than 10,000 sits a mile north of the Oklahoma border where cattle and windmills dot an otherwise flat horizon. Blazing summers and frozen winters. No nightlife. But food options irked Winfree the most with KFC and McDonalds considered prime dining. And Winfree didn’t get to town until the day before football training camp started at Coffeyville Community College.

“It wasn’t pretty,” Winfree said, “and made you real humble.”

His saving grace? A checklist from Winfree's Maryland mentor, now Jacksonville Jaguars' wide receivers coach Keenan McCardell, who provided a custom-fit workout plan that included in all-capital letters: 200 CATCHES PER DAY. Coffeyville offered zero distractions.

"That's when it hit me," Winfree said. "I'm going to have to decide what kind of life I wanted and what path I want to take. From there on I made up my mind that I'm going to be the hardest worker on my team."

The grind took place with few eyes watching from small stadiums across the Kansas Jayhawk Community College Conference. Winfree starred with four 100-yard games, seven touchdowns and a 15.2-yard catch average. A grainy handheld highlight tape posted to his Hudl recruiting account showcased the technical route skills of a slot man in the 6-foot-3 frame of an outside wide receiver.

CU assistant coach Darrin Chiaverini watched along and didn't need convincing. The Buffs sought a junior college wide receiver for their 2016 class and Winfree "was the one that I wanted," Chiaverini said. A year-long recruitment proved fruitful and the mentality Winfree established in Coffeyville traveled to Boulder.

Then an unfortunate and reoccurring theme manifested just two weeks into CU practice: Injuries.

Winfree tore an ACL in camp and sat out his first season. He rebounded as a junior with 21 catches for 325 yards and two touchdowns over 12 games — and earned team-captain status to begin last season. But a hamstring pull and high-ankle sprain his senior year resulted in four missed games. Winfree capped his CU career with 49 receptions for 649 yards and four scores. You can't fault Winfree for enduring injury adversity. Yet he still ties it all back to once living too fast.

"It was just a different point in my life where I didn't realize how much recovery meant and how much eating goes into the output of how you play and how your body lasts," Winfree said. "It was definitely a lot of built-up stress on my knee and stress on my body from not taking care of it the right way. And I built up years of not eating the correct things."

Winfree stacked years of proper training and nutrition at CU, and following an offseason procedure to reduce ankle inflammation, he returned to rare 100-percent health this year. Perfect timing to impress scouts at the NFLPA Collegiate Bowl and the Broncos' local pro day. Former teammates such as 49ers cornerback Ahkello Witherspoon were hardly surprised when Denver traded up to draft Winfree.

"He wasn't going to be defined by his situation," Witherspoon said. "He was going to rise. His work ethic and the countless times I've seen him in the indoor facility working, it's not a coincidence that he's finding success. … He's not really flashy and he's not looking for accolades. He's just about his grind and I think you can see that in his personality."

Those same terms would not have described Winfree during his early football days at Maryland or while pushing his skateboard down the boardwalk. Change is good. Winfree will enter Broncos training camp next month with an opportunity to carve out a role within a talented wide receiver corps.

"When I finally got here (to the NFL), it felt surreal," Winfree said. "It really came true, all I was ever working for, it finally hit me — and it continues to drive me. I see that I'm making plays, but I'm still not where I want to be. I want to help my team win.
The skateboarder at heart has more to accomplish.

Bowlen's close relationship with Shanahan pivotal to Broncos' success

By Mike Klis
KUSA
June 17, 2019

Even after the firing, Shanahan and the Broncos owner remained close friends.

From notable to common, Pat Bowlen impacted the lives of many.

Perhaps no relationship meant more to the success of the Denver Broncos, though, than the one between Bowlen and Mike Shanahan.

They became close soon after both joined the Broncos weeks apart in 1984 -- Shanahan as head coach Dan Reeves' new receivers coach and Bowlen as the franchise's new owner.

"I talked to him almost every day,'' Shanahan said in a sit-down interview with 9NEWS on Friday afternoon from the resplendent foyer of his luxurious home. "Throughout my whole career as an assistant coach and as a head coach, Pat would come in and we'd sit down and talk. We had that type of relationship, which was fun.

"Pat wasn't a guy who tried to interfere. He just wanted to make sure he was on top of everything that was going on. We talked about the players, how they practiced. What you saw about their potential. I don't care if it was the quarterback position, or running back position, defensive line, he was inquisitive on, 'Hey, tell me what you think.'

"Draft choices, free agents -- 'Did we waste our money here?' Or if you did make a mistake – 'Hey Pat, we made a mistake on this free agent. It's not the character we wanted. We might have to make a change.' Or a draft choice.

"But as long as you were real with Pat, or honest with Pat, you had no problem at all because he just wanted to be informed. That's why he was such a great owner.''

Bowlen, who had been suffering from Alzheimer's since the end of the 2013 season, died Thursday night at his Denver home with his family at his side.

"I had talked to somebody the day before and he said Pat was not in very good condition,'' Shanahan said. "Woke up the next morning and found out he had passed away. I just started thinking about the great times and what he's meant to this organization and this town. And what a special man he was.''

Bowlen's pursuit of Shanahan as head coach

Bowlen had a unique owner-quarterback relationship with John Elway, yes. But it wasn't until Bowlen finally got his close friend to run the Broncos' football team that Denver didn't just reach the NFL summit, but got over the top.

Shanahan made Bowlen work for it. When Bowlen fired Reeves after the Broncos finished 8-8 in 1992, he wanted Shanahan to become his next head coach.

But Shanahan had just spent the previous year working as offensive coordinator with Steve Young, Jerry Rice, Ricky Watters and the San Francisco 49ers' machine. The 49ers went 14-2 in 1992 before losing to the Dallas Cowboys in the NFC Championship Game.

The 49ers were a program built by Eddie DeBartolo Jr. and Bill Walsh and were now led by George Seifert. Everything was first class from travel to single-room hotel accommodations for players to top-end meals served daily at the facilities.

"He talked to me and I said 'Pat, I'd love to come back and be your head coach,' " Shanahan said. "But I said 'we (the 49ers) just went 14-2 and if I have a chance to come back to Denver, I want to make sure we do things a little bit differently than we have in the past. There's a few things I would like to do differently.' I wasn't able to get it that year, but I was two years later.''

Shanahan wanted his upgrade request put in writing. Bowlen said he couldn't do that, but he did offer Shanahan an enormous head coaching salary. Not enough.

Shanahan returned to San Francisco for two more years, his term there reaching its apex with a then-league record 505 points and a Super Bowl blowout of San Diego to cap the 1994 season. Bowlen, meanwhile, hired his backup choice, Wade Phillips, to replace Reeves as head coach. The Broncos went 9-7 and 7-9 in Phillips' two seasons – nowhere near good enough for Bowlen.

Following the 49ers' Super Bowl win, Bowlen went back to Shanahan, wearing a disguise to meet him at the team's hotel.

"When I talked to him again after the 49ers (1994-season) Super Bowl, Pat said, 'We're going to make sure you get all that and more.'

"It made me feel pretty good, and I knew we had a chance to be successful. I had just been to three Super Bowls from the AFC Championship Game (with the Broncos in the 1980s) where we kind of got embarrassed. So if you are going to come back, you want to make sure you have at least a chance to win it all. Luckily, Pat gave us everything we needed when I came back.''

It took Shanahan one year to rebuild the Broncos into the best team in the NFL. Although they were stunned in the 1996 playoffs by Jacksonville, the Broncos won back-to-back Super Bowl titles in 1997-98.

Bowlen's legacy was secure, and the Broncos became the NFL's crown jewel franchise. During that time and for years afterward, the Bowlen-Shanahan bond continued to strengthen.

"We got to be best of friends,'' Shanahan said. "We're talking, we did everything together. Dinners, vacations, golf. I considered him one of my best friends. We did everything together.''

After the 1998 season, the Broncos suffered the dual blows of Elway's retirement and running back Terrell Davis' devastating knee injury. Not even the Mastermind, as Shanahan was dubbed during the team's Super Bowl run, could overcome the losses of two superstars.

Shanahan got close in 2005. With a balanced offense led by quarterback Jake Plummer and a hyper-blitzing defense protected by sublime cornerback Champ Bailey, the Broncos beat New England in a home playoff game to earn home-field advantage in the following week's AFC Championship Game. But a young Pittsburgh quarterback named Ben Roethlisberger kept converting third-and-longs and the Steelers whipped the favored Broncos.

When the Broncos followed with a three-year run of mediocrity of 9-7, 7-9 and 8-8, Bowlen fired his good friend to end Shanahan's 14-year run as Broncos' head coach.

"Even at that time, we were very close,'' Shanahan said. "Very close. I know the situation better than anybody, so I know exactly what did happen, so I always considered Pat one of my best friends even when I got fired there. You understand the profession, and at the same time, I felt close enough to Pat that I knew what direction he was going and why he did it.''

Elway nearly brings back Shanahan
For a fleeting moment, there was the thought of bringing Shanahan back to lead the Broncos' coaching staff.

Bowlen, in one of his final decisions as owner, had hired Elway in 2011 to run the Broncos' football department. Elway, the general manager, had strongly considered replacing his head coach Vance Joseph with Shanahan after the Broncos went 5-11 in 2017.

It didn't happen and Shanahan said that while he still follows the NFL closely – in particular his head coaching son Kyle's team in San Francisco and the Broncos – he has put aside his desire to coach again.

"I'm retired from the game,'' he said. "Yeah, I had a chance to talk with John. We had a great conversation. I don't want to go into detail. But that's something where we always had a special relationship.

"He did call me, and we did talk. That's one of those things you think about. We had a great conversation at the time. It didn't work out. Probably in the best interest of everybody concerned, but with John Elway, you're going to win games.''

Shanahan will attend Bowlen's private funeral June 24 in Denver, and he and his wife Peggy are planning a vacation in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, where Elway and his wife Paige will also be vacationing. There are golf plans together. Bowlen's circle of life continues.

And then Shanahan, Elway and the spirit of Bowlen will meet again during the induction ceremony for the Broncos owner on Aug. 3 in Canton, Ohio.

"For sure, yeah,'' Shanahan said when asked whether he would attend. "No. 1, he was the person that hired me to be the head football coach. … I think me, John and Pat were probably as close as an owner, head coach and quarterback as you could possibly get. All those days are not the highest highs, a lot of times it's the lowest lows. And when you go through those times with people, and you understand how they act and you're impressed with how they handle themselves in the tough times, when you do experience those good times you feel pretty good that they finally get their due.''

Pat Bowlen's unprecedented circumstance could lead to HOF Gold Jacket/ring clarification

By Mike Klis
KUSA
June 17, 2019

The Broncos owner is the first Hall of Famer who passed away between election and enshrinement.

The Pro Football Hall of Fame is reviewing its Gold Jacket and ring policy given Pat Bowlen's unprecedent circumstance.

According to Hall of Fame spokesman Pete Fierle, Bowlen is the first Hall of Famer to die between his election and induction.

That Bowlen was alive when he was elected as a contributor by a Hall of Fame voting committee on February 2 is potentially significant because HOF policy states only living inductees are to receive the Gold Jacket and Hall of Fame ring.

The policy drew considerable controversy following the inductions of the late Junior Seau in 2015 and Kenny Stabler and Dick Stanfel in 2016. Those three players, though, were elected posthumously and their family members did not receive a Gold Jacket or ring.

Bowlen could wind up becoming either an exception, amendment or simply a clarification to the rule. Not only was he alive when elected, the Hall of Fame had made arrangements with Bowlen's family to have a photo of the Broncos' owner taken with a Gold Jacket and ring, according to a family member.

As Bowlen died a mere seven weeks prior to the Gold Jacket ceremony on August 2 in Canton, Ohio, his Gold Jacket and ring may have already been in production.

What is certain is Bowlen's children will receive their father's bronze bust during his formal Hall of Fame induction on August 3 in Canton. 9News reached out to Fierle for confirmation that Bowlen would also receive his Gold Jacket and ring.

Fierle's first response was to respectfully share that the Hall of Fame "was focused on remembering Pat Bowlen and supporting his family with our thoughts and prayers during this difficult time. We'll address policy later.''

He added a more comprehensive explanation Sunday: "This is the first time that a Hall of Famer has passed away between election and enshrinement. The policy for posthumous enshrinees is being reviewed to clarify the intent and purpose of decisions made in the past.

"I reiterate my initial comment that out of respect for Mr. Bowlen, we will address policy later.

"Again, we are focused on Pat Bowlen's upcoming memorial. We are also preparing to celebrate his life at the Enshrinement Week … that not only includes Pat's enshrinement but the Broncos' first game since his passing.''

Fierle acknowledged the HOF had been working with the family in an attempt to take a photo of Bowlen with a Gold Jacket and Hall of Fame ring as Bowlen would not have been able to attend his induction ceremony. Fierle added he wasn't sure whether the photo had taken place.

Bowlen died Thursday night at home following a lengthy battle with Alzheimer's. Hall of Fame weekend in Canton, Ohio will begin Thursday, August 1 with the Broncos playing in the Hall of Fame preseason game against the Atlanta Falcons. The Gold Jacket ceremony is the next night with the formal enshrinement on Saturday, August 2.

The Hall of Fame has explained its policy of not providing the Gold Jacket and ring to posthumous inductees because the institution doesn’t want family members fighting over, or selling, the prized artifacts.

And while the Bowlen family has had its share of drama in recent times, his children couldn’t have appeared more together when they were in Atlanta celebrating their father's Hall of Fame election in February and again last week when the family was at Pat Bowlen's bedside as he passed away. The family announced Bowlen's death in a touching, unified statement issued by the team.

Broncos need to heed the words of the late Pat Bowlen

By Jeff Legwold
ESPN
June 17, 2019

After Pat Bowlen's battle against Alzheimer's disease ended Thursday night, the outpouring of grief and remembrance across social media made it clear the fondness many people felt for the former Denver Broncos owner.

Former players have taken to Twitter to praise him and flowers have been placed at his statue outside the Broncos' stadium. The praise and memories have come from a spectrum of admirers, yet they all shared what Bowlen and the football team he owned and operated for more than 30 years meant to them. The ups, the downs and all of the in-between.

Moments such as the The Drive, "This one's for John," and "This one's for Pat." Friendships that spanned decades and chance encounters when Bowlen simply offered a glimpse of his humanity.

Those moments, like each and every game week it seems, are part of the tapestry of an entire region, part of life, passed on from one generation to the next like a family heirloom. And now those who operate the team Bowlen lived to run are definitively faced with Bowlen's mission on what has recently been a rocky road.

It's the same mission Bowlen gave them when he stepped away from the day-to-day operations in 2014: Run the team, every day in every way, as he believed it should be run, as he would have. Be "No. 1 at everything."

The words have been repeated in the years since Bowlen vacated his second-floor office at the Broncos' Dove Valley complex. Most prominently, John Elway has said them; team president and chief executive officer Joe Ellis, a longtime Bowlen confidante, has said them.

Family members have said them, former players have said them, and during the past three seasons -- all playoff misses -- those who passionately fill the seats week to week have wished them as well.

That the Broncos would operate each and every day, each and every season, like Bowlen would have.

Easy to say, because Bowlen's mission was always clear, but sticking to it is clearly going to be a challenge. It's going to be a challenge given that family members are currently battling in court to decide who controls the team, and those within the corporate flow chart, with the closest and tightest lineage to Bowlen -- people such as Elway, Ellis, trainer Steve Antonopulos and chief counsel Rich Slivka -- are far closer to the end of their runs than the beginnings.

The team's stadium doesn't have a name or the revenue that comes with one, revenue that team officials have repeatedly said they'll need to maintain the place in the long term. The Broncos have missed the playoffs in three consecutive seasons, and they just did something they never did when Bowlen was at his desk: back-to-back seasons of at least 10 losses.

Yes, times change, sometimes a lot, and Bowlen's $71 million investment over three decades ago has turned into a $2.6 billion operation -- yeah, that's with a "B." And, frankly, that kind of money talks almost incomprehensibly loudly and is an enormous lure for those who want to control it on all fronts.

Many have stakes in the game and will pay plenty of high-powered legal teams along the way to sort things out in front of judges, all while trying to convey to the team's most loyal of followers, perhaps even to the NFL's decision-makers, that everything is going to be OK.

But since Peyton Manning retired and took his intense, franchise-challenging, keep-pushing-for-more demeanor with him following Denver's victory in Super Bowl 50, the Broncos have not always appeared to be nearly as sturdy, as on point, as Bowlen always intended them to be.

It doesn't mean people haven't worked exceedingly hard or tried to stay true to the mission. But it's complicated now, very complicated.

The mission is still simple, and the Lombardi trophies in the lobby show it works. If all involved can step back from the disputes, the money, the desire to be at the head of the table, and just remember what Bowlen really wanted, they could repeat history.

Which would benefit everyone involved.

2019 Fantasy Football Team Previews: Broncos trusting in their system

By Ben Gretch
CBS Sports
June 17, 2019

Key additions and departures, numbers to know, and which players to target in Fantasy Football from the 2019 Denver Broncos.

Demaryius Thomas is gone and Emmanuel Sanders is recovering from a torn Achilles, leaving new quarterbacks Joe Flacco and Drew Lock with a less settled pass-catching corps than Denver passers have thrown to in recent years. Courtland Sutton figures to be the early-season No. 1 while tight end Noah Fant should have plenty of opportunity to have an impactful rookie season. The backfield is in better shape for the team if not Fantasy owners, as the workload split between second-year guys Philip Lindsay and Royce Freeman is anything but clear.

More than anything, I think his skill-set marries very, very well with the type of offense we run. He's tough. He stands in the pocket and he can make all the throws. Those are the things that of course you want in your quarterback, and so [I'm] looking forward to building on that and working with him.

Rich Scangarello, on Joe Flacco

2018 Review
Record: 6 - 10 (22nd in NFL)
PPG: 20.6 (24)
YPG: 350.1 (19)
Pass YPG: 230.9 (19)
Rush YPG: 119.2 (12)
PAPG: 36.8 (8)
RAPG: 24.6 (21)

2018 Fantasy finishes

QB: Case Keenum* - QB20
RB: Phillip Lindsay - RB13; Royce Freeman - RB47; Devontae Booker - RB57
WR: Emmanuel Sanders - WR23; Demaryius Thomas* - WR37**; Courtland Sutton - WR50
TE: Jeff Heuerman - TE31; Matt LaCosse* - TE38
*No longer with team
**Played seven games with HOU

Number to know: 23

Of the 84 targets Courtland Sutton saw in his rookie season, 23 were deemed uncatchable by Sports Info Solutions. New quarterback Joe Flacco helped John Brown be a big storyline in the early part of 2018 with the Ravens, and Sutton's 14.0 average depth of target (aDOT) last year suggests he's the guy who will play a similar role for the Broncos in 2019.

2019 Offseason
Head Coach: Vic Fangio (1st year - previously Defensive Coordinator, CHI)
Offensive Coordinator: Rich Scangarello (1st year - previously QB Coach, SF)

Draft Picks

1. (20) Noah Fant, TE
2. (41) Dalton Risner, T
2. (42) Drew Lock, QB
3. (71) Dre'mont Jones, DT
5. (156) Justin Hollins, LB
6. (187) Juwann Winfree, WR

Additions

QB Joe Flacco, OL Ju'Wuan James, LB Dekoda Watson, DB Kareem Jackson, DB Bryce Callahan

Key Departures

QB Case Keenum, WR Jordan Taylor, TE Matt LaCosse, OL Matt Paradis, OL Billy Turner, OL Max Garcia, OL Jared Veldheer, LB Shaquil Barrett, LB Shane Ray, LB Brandon Marshall, DB Bradley Roby, DB Tramaine Brock, DB Jamar Taylor

Rankings and Projections

Joe Flacco	QB30	QB28	QB32
Philip Lindsay	RB24	RB17	RB17
Royce Freeman	RB43	RB54	RB48
Courtland Sutton	WR45	WR44	WR51
DaeSean Hamilton	WR43	WR49	N/A
Emmanuel Sanders	N/A	WR51	WR50
Noah Fant	TE16	TE10	TE20
Brandon McManus	K23	K19	K21
Broncos DST	DST11	DST9	DST9

Heath Cummings' projected offensive stats

QB	Joe Flacco	3,400 YD, 18 TD, 12 INT
RB	Phillip Lindsay	216 ATT, 1,059 YD, 9 TD; 45 TAR, 32 REC, 217 YD, 1 TD

RB Royce Freeman 184 ATT, 736 YD, 6 TD

WR Courtland Sutton 100 TAR, 50 REC, 790 YD, 5 TD

WR DaeSean Hamilton 100 TAR, 67 REC, 603 YD, 4 TD

WR Emmanuel Sanders 105 TAR, 63 REC, 725 YD, 4 TD

TE Noah Fant 70 TAR, 49 REC, 539 YD, 4 TD

Biggest Question

Besides Phillip Lindsay, is there anyone else worth drafting here?

"Joe Flacco's track record suggests a decent lean on rookie Noah Fant (about 20% of Flacco's completions annually go to tight ends) and second-year receiver Courtland Sutton (Flacco has an eye for the longer throws). They're worth low-expectation picks after 100th overall, but the Broncos figure to be conservative, hurting the upside of all parties involved." - Dave Richard

One sleeper, one breakout, and one bust

Sleeper: Noah Fant

Of all relevant Fantasy positions, tight end is the one where players have the hardest time contributing as rookies. But when they do, it's typically guys with early draft pedigrees and physical traits like Fant's. With 4.5 speed at 6 feet 4 inches, 249 pounds, Fant is a matchup problem for defenses. He's too quick for most linebackers, too big for most defensive backs, a reality that helped him to 18 touchdowns along with over 1,000 receiving yards in his final two collegiate seasons. It may take a little time, but in an offense devoid of clear passing-game options while Emmanuel Sanders rehabs from his late-season Achilles tear, Fant should get plenty of chances throughout the season.

Breakout: Courtland Sutton

Sutton was frequently used as a downfield threat in his rookie season, posting an aDOT of 14. That can mean a boom-or-bust statistical profile, and he just didn't seem to be on the same page with Case Keenum, as more than a quarter of his 84 targets were deemed uncatchable by Sports Info Solutions. In fact, one of Sutton's two touchdowns of more than 20 yards came from fellow wide receiver Emmanuel Sanders. Still, Sutton managed a strong 8.4 yards per target as a rookie, and the 704 yards he posted suggests the potential for a 1,000-yard season if he can bring in more balls than the 50% catch rate he posted in year one. He has a strong pedigree behind him as a productive collegiate player, and a quarterback change may be all he needs to ascend in his second season.

Bust: Phillip Lindsay

Lindsay was electric as a rookie, coming in as a sub-200 pound UDFA and completely stealing the show from third-round pick Royce Freeman. He'll be hard-pressed to repeat. A new coaching staff means the potential for a redefinition of roles, and the 45 pounds Freeman has on Lindsay suggests the goal line work might go to Freeman. Four of Lindsay's 10 touchdowns in 2018 came from 25 yards or further, a difficult

feat to replicate. And Devontae Booker is still on the roster after leading the backfield in targets and receptions last year. Lindsay is also recovering from offseason wrist surgery, though he's expected to be fine for camp. Lindsay's 2018 was thrilling, but everything from the size of his role to the efficiency numbers he put up will be difficult to match in year two. Tread carefully.

The Jets Got Their Man. What Now for GM Joe Douglas and Gang Green?

By Albert Breer
MMQB
June 17, 2019

Douglas on why he took the job, why he has confidence in Adam Gase, and what's next for the Jets after a wild month. Plus, Pat Bowlen's legacy, the first-ever Black Quarterback Club Summit featuring Deshaun Watson, Kyle Rudolph on his new contract, more details in the Texans-Patriots GM battle over Nick Caserio, a breakout player in Green Bay, the Ravens' new speed, and one more reason everyone loves Sean McVay.

Back when he was The Turk for the 2001 Ravens on Hard Knocks, or rolling the dice in letting his Baltimore contract run out to pursue career advancement, or breaking through with a VP job in Philly, this would probably have qualified as the last place Joe Douglas would expect to reach the top rung of the NFL's scouting ladder.

But there he was two Fridays ago, when it all came together.

"This is crazy," Douglas said from his new office on Thursday. "I was in my house. But because there was so much commotion going on with the kids—there were kids everywhere—I was walking around back and forth upstairs and I was on and off the phone. And I went to my room and there's a desk in our bedroom and I was sitting at the desk, and then the kids would run in and I'd walk out.

"So finally I barricaded myself in my youngest daughter's room. I had to have my phone calls, and get some peace and quiet, so I shut the door. And I'm sitting on my daughter's bed in a room with pink walls."

And that's where he processed everything: the initial rumors of interest from the Jets in April, all the tumult that organization had gone through since, his interview five days earlier, and the negotiations over the 48 hours or so prior that promised to set his family up financially for decades to come. The decision coming would be life-changing for his family. For Douglas it was 19 years in the making. All of it, right there in a place that wasn't exactly stirring thoughts of third-and-2.

"Making the decision to be a New York Jet," Douglas said. "I hung up the phone and looked around. I was like, 'Wow, I never thought it'd go down like that.' It was pretty funny."

The decision wasn't easy. Douglas knows the vast majority of personnel men only get one shot at being a GM, and the Eagles' success and stability gave him flexibility to be patient. He's also aware that the job in front of him has its challenges—he's the fourth guy to serve in the position for the franchise this decade, and there are reasons for that. But he's at peace now. Douglas is the Jets' new GM. It's full steam ahead.

The NFL's summer vacation starts now, but this is a 52-week-a-year column, and so we've got plenty coming to you in this mid-June MMQB:

• Kyle Rudolph on the most unsettling few months of his NFL career.

• A look at this weekend's black quarterback summit, from the man who organized it.

• An appreciation for late Broncos owner Pat Bowlen.

• More on the Patriots-Texans dustup.

And we've got a bunch to get to in wrapping manadatory minicamps. But we're starting with the team that probably had an eventful six weeks during what's normally the NFL's quiet time.

Here's the other thing Douglas did 10 days ago while he was sitting there in his daughter's bedroom: He canceled his vacation.

Normally, coaches and scouts go to their lake houses or beachfront properties in the middle of June to shut it down for a month or so. Douglas had plans, as he always does.

Now? He went to North Carolina for his mom's 80th birthday this weekend—the one thing he didn't take off the calendar. He checked back into the hotel where he's spent the past week, he'll be back in the office Monday, and he'll be there right on through the return of all the football people in mid-July.

"This is a lot different than most of my summers," he said. "I'd tell you in the past, I'd usually be getting ready to head to Outer Banks or maybe Ocean City, Md. for a couple of days with the family and kids. That's not happening."

There's a lot to catch up on. Ahead of his interview two weeks ago, Douglas watched tape of four games of the Jets defense and six of the Jets offense from last year, so he could speak with some depth at his meeting with acting owner Christopher Johnson.

Since then, he's learned more. He's gotten to know Johnson and an organization that looked, at least to us on the outside, like a five-alarm fire in mid-May. He's gotten through most of the team's 2019 tape. He's acquainted himself around the building. And he's gained some perspective. Over about an hour on Thursday, Douglas and I covered that perspective, top to bottom. What can we distill for you from the conversation?

Leaving Philly wasn't easy. And it wasn't just because there were some pratfalls waiting for him 90 minutes north in Jersey. It was also because of where the Eagles are, which both promised to insulate his place as a hot young executive and provide chances to compete for championships.

"I really feel like that franchise, that football team, they're firing on all cylinders," Douglas said. "It's as deep of a team as I've ever seen there. And that's including the '17 team. There's a lot of good going on. And so that made it a really tough decision."

The next question, obviously: Why did he leave? That relates back to the Saturday night dinner and Sunday interview he had with Johnson.

"Even just within five minutes, your first instinct is like, 'Christopher Johnson is a really good man,'" Douglas said. "He's extremely genuine. He's extremely sincere. He's a direct communicator. He believes in a lot of the same things I believe in when it comes to the successful teams—people, chemistry, teamwork, selflessness. The more I talked with him, the more I knew."

Of course, Christopher Johnson will eventually hand the reins back to his older brother Woody, whenever Woody returns from his appointment as U.S. Ambassador to the UK. That could happen as soon as next year, and it was a concern of most of the candidates who considered the job. It sounds like Douglas at least got it addressed. Asked if he was concerned about it, Douglas said, “No. Without going into the details, I feel good about the situation, and I feel great about Christopher.”

He doesn’t see this as a teardown. Douglas was part of one with the Bears in 2015. “[GM] Ryan [Pace] has done an amazing job in Chicago,” Douglas says. And Douglas was also part of a job that required more fine-tuning than fumigation, alongside Howie Roseman in Philly three years ago. It’s clear how he sees this one, in relative terms.

“It was not a teardown there, and I don't think it's a teardown here,” Douglas said. “And frankly, those two are much better situations than when me and Adam [Gase] walked into in Chicago in ’15.”

There are some pretty valuable lessons he’s taking from the infancy of Roseman’s reemergence atop the Philly football operation, and that’s how important it is to bring the building back together after a tumultuous couple years. Within a couple months, the Eagles extended veterans Zach Ertz, Lane Johnson, Vinny Curry and Malcolm Jenkins. And that summer, they got star DT Fletcher Cox done too.

“[Roseman] knew the building was fractured,” Douglas said. “He knew that the players needed a safe harbor. And he wanted to send a message to the homegrown players that if you do right, you're going to be cared for—we're not going to throw the baby out with the bathwater. And I think that went a long way.”

When I asked Douglas if he felt like he had to bring the building back together like Roseman did in Philly, he answered that he didn’t want to judge those that came before him. But, very clearly, and regardless of what happened before, he knows the building needs to be together.

“With all the highs and the lows and the adversity you face, it's just important to have strong relationships and try to cultivate strong relationships around the building, not just on the personnel side or the coaching side but really around the building,” Douglas said. “We're all in this together. We're all pulling in the same direction and everyone wants to feel part of it. So I think that's important, to have a building unified.”

He has watched a lot of Darnold. We mentioned that Douglas watched six games of the Jets on offense and four on defense before his interview. The reason for the disparity is he wanted to have a feel for the quarterback. So he looked at two early-season games of Darnold’s, then the Jets’ final four games, the four that came after the now-22-year-old returned from a foot injury.

“Sam did a really nice job coming back from injury,” Douglas said. “Just seeing him seeing him, he's not a guy that hung onto the ball for very long. He's able to go through his progressions quickly, I like his feet in the pocket, I like his pocket awareness, he's got a nice quick release, ball spins out of his hands, he throws an accurate ball, he can escape. … So he’s an interesting guy. I mean, he’s a good player.”

While he was digging through Darnold, Douglas saw what he believes is a better-than-advertised group of skill players. Robby Anderson, in particular, impressed Douglas, especially when the new GM popped in the Denver tape from October. “He's a tough weapon for defenses to match up with, he can get behind you and he can challenge the defense vertically. That was a very pleasant surprise.”

Douglas added the tape also confirmed the things he, and the Eagles, liked about tight end Chris Herndon before the 2018 draft. And, having been in the AFC North and NFC East, he has plenty of background competing against new additions Jamison Crowder (“really savvy, quick, really good route-runner”) and Le’Veon Bell (“probably one of the best running backs in football”).

The defense is strong up the gut. This one is obvious, based on investment. The Jets will line up two top-5 picks on the inside of their defensive line, two big-ticket free-agent signings as off-ball linebackers, and two top-40 picks at safety. They should be good through the middle of the defense. And they are, as Douglas sees it.

“You talk about baseball teams, you want to build from the inside out, I think this defense is strong, strong up the middle,” he said.

Douglas hit all the obvious ones. He just said, “golly,” when Leonard Williams’s name came up, mentioned that Avery Williamson was on Philly’s radar as a 2018 free agent, called Jamal Adams “as fierce a competitor as you'll find in this league”, and noted how he was in Baltimore when C.J. Mosley was drafted in 2014. But beyond just that, he added, “I was pleasantly surprised with their interior depth.” He knew ex-Steeler NT Steve McLendon from his Raven days, and liked DT Nathan Shepherd coming out in 2018. Both those guys showed up in his evaluation of what will be behind Leonard Williams and third overall pick Quinnen Williams. Again, Douglas doesn’t feel like he’s starting from scratch.

There was good reason for Douglas to call off his annual away time over the next few weeks, and it’s not just professional. The Jets’ North Jersey home is, as Douglas puts it, “right at the point of uncomfortable” in distance from his home in South Jersey, about 90 minutes away (without traffic). So he and his wife have been huddling on moving a little ways up the I-95 corridor this summer.

“I never wanted to be a sleep-in-the-office guy, not when I have little kids,” Douglas says. “This game keeps you way enough.”

And it will in the interim, too, with Douglas planning to be in the office daily right until the start of camp. He had his first personnel meeting with the coaches on Wednesday. Now, with most of the football staff off, he’s going to try to use the next few weeks to forge relationships with those on the business side.

That will happen when Douglas takes breaks from his study, which has moved to practice tape from the spring (both OTAs and minicamp) “I've watched tape from last year, but I haven't watched this team all together.” There are obvious holes on the roster, to be sure, in the areas Douglas didn’t mention above (corner, edge rusher, offensive line). He’ll get to work on solutions for those.

He’ll also be communicating with Gase, whose work, along with John Fox and Vic Fangio, with that barren Chicago roster in ’15 certainly left an impression on Douglas, enough that the new head coach’s presence became a draw. “I know what kind of coach he is,” he said. "I know that I can make it work with Adam.”

Eventually, he’ll get to take a breath and let it all sink in. That hasn’t happened quite yet, and maybe it won’t for a while. But he knows, and knew back when he was staring at those pink walls, what he signed up for. And considering where the Jets have been the last few months, there’s a lot of work to do.

PAT BOWLEN'S LEGACY AND THE BRONCOS' FUTURE

The story is from the John Fox era, with the Broncos coming off a good year but maybe not a great one. Owner Pat Bowlen gathered his senior football staff for a dinner just after it ended. There, he called for a toast.

Here's to a Super Bowl next year! Or else!

It wasn't meant in a mean-spirited way, and wasn't taken that way by John Elway, Fox, or any others in attendance. Rather, it was just who Bowlen was as a boss. He cared about his people, but he never relented from demanding the very best of them. He delivered it in a sort of kidding-but-not-kidding tone, one that got the message across without ruining the spirit of the evening. And it wasn't long before the Broncos were champions again.

Bowlen passed away on Thursday, at the age of 75. He owned the Broncos for 35 years, running them for the first 30 before Alzheimer's left him unable to lead the day-to-day business of the football team. His legacy can, in a bunch of ways, be encapsulated in the above anecdote. And it's a legacy with a long list of accomplishments. Among them:

• Seven trips to the Super Bowl under four different coaches, and three world titles in 35 seasons. Denver is also tied with the Patriots and Steelers for the fewest losing seasons (seven) over that time.

• Former NBC exec Dick Ebersol called Bowlen the "father of Sunday Night Football", using his key role in NFL broadcasting to help move the league's showcase primetime event from Monday Night in 2006. Bowlen was also a leader, along with Jerry Jones, in getting FOX (then known as little more than the home of The Simpsons) involved in the NFL in the early '90s.

• As native of Wisconsin and adopted Canadian, Bowlen became deeply entrenched in the Denver community, which in turn identified with its local NFL team. He was the only owner among the 123 major North American sports teams to fund his own branch of the Boys and Girls Club, paying operating costs that are now over a quarter-million dollars annually.

• He was a pretty good athlete in his own right, having played for the Oklahoma freshman football team in college, then Canadian Junior Football's Edmonton Huskies, before getting into triathlons. In 1984, he finished in the top 200 in the Ironman in Hawaii, among close to 1,500 participants.

You'll hear more about him in the coming months, of course, with his induction into the Pro Football Hall of Fame slated for August. And that's deserved, of course—he took a franchise that had been nondescript before his arrival and turned it into one of the NFL's brand names, while more recently helping to bridge the old and new schools in ownership circles.

As for what comes next, nothing will change in the immediate future. Bowlen laid out a plan before he got sick, naming team president Joe Ellis as "controlling owner delegee" while the possibility of one of the Bowlen kids taking over is fleshed out. If one of the kids proves worthy, it will be Ellis, team general counsel Rich Slivka and attorney Mary Kelly making the decision, as trustees, to hand over control.

The most likely to get it (by a comfortable margin) is 29-year-old Brittany Bowlen, a Notre Dame graduate and Duke MBA. She's taken part in a rotational program at the league office, and worked for the Broncos on the business side during the championship 2015 season. She's currently working at the consulting firm

McKinsey and Co., with plans to take a business-side executive role with the Broncos early on in the 2019 season.

But for the time being, the team will operate as it has for the last five years, with Ellis acting as owner. But Brittany Bowlen's focus on and drive towards filling her father's shoes, eventually, has at least created the perception that this is more "when" than "if". And whenever it does happen, she'll have some big shoes to fill.

THE BLACK QUARTERBACK CLUB SUMMIT

Quincy Avery, as a personal quarterbacks coach, is as self-made as they come—he started as a volunteer at UCLA. He's deeply invested in every kid he's taken under his wing. It's his livelihood, and his influence has grown to the point where NFL quarterbacks like Deshaun Watson, Dwayne Haskins and Josh Dobbs have entrusted their mechanics to him. Over the weekend, he took that influence to a different level.

Avery staged the first Black Quarterback Club summit in Atlanta, bringing NFL and college players to Atlanta to work with a group of 72 high school quarterbacks. They did two days of on-field work, but maybe most impactful was the symposium held on Friday night, which brought to light the reasons why Avery decided to put the event together in the first place.

Really, this was an outgrowth of an incident from last September. The Texans' clock management was an issue at the end of a loss to Tennessee, and an East Texas school superintendent responded by posting this to Facebook: "That may have been the most inept quarterback decision I've seen in the NFL. When you need precision decision making you can't count on a black quarterback."

"No one knows how to respond to something like that," Avery said Sunday night. "But on a smaller scale, that kind of thing is happening day-in and day-out. … I've been working with so many guys, in college, the NFL, these things they're struggling with, the issues they have, from being one of the only black guys in the room because there are so few black quarterbacks, coordinators and quarterbacks coaches.

"It's a unique situation to them at the quarterback position. They don't always have someone to go to, to provide them with the advice on how to handle situations like that. So I thought we should get the NFL guys, and get Warren [Moon] together to share their perspective."

Avery says the response he got from those he reached out to was immediate; they wanted to jump on board and help. Some, like Cam Newton and Jameis Winston, had scheduling conflicts but showed support. Others did make it. Watson, Dobbs and EJ Manuel were there, as were Moon and college quarterbacks Jalen Hurts (Oklahoma) and D'Eriq King (Houston).

The hope is that the event will grow over the next few years, and Avery's plan is to try and use it to address a number of issues that he thinks still hold people back. One is with the pipeline of backup quarterbacks—while eight of the league's 32 starters are black, just 14 of the 88 backups currently on 90-man rosters are. Another is the relative dearth of black quarterbacks coaches and OCs. Both issues, he knows, are complex and will take time to solve.

"It starts at the high school level," Avery said. "I think we have a long way to go before we see everyone as just a quarterback, so we have to keep putting people in leadership positions—head coaches, offensive coordinators, quarterbacks coaches. … I think we can do a better job of advocating for these guys, to get them in that room from the time they're quality control coaches."

Avery got to see Watson address the situation with the superintendent head on, and Watson addressed it in front of the campers on Friday. “He knew he could’ve gone back after him, but he talked about being the example, it was important for him to be the bigger person.” Watson then had an in-depth talk with Hurts on what he’ll be facing in a year’s time, when his college eligibility is up.

Avery knows, too, that there may be questions about exclusivity of the event. He says he wants to create a safe space for younger kids, where they can speak freely and not feel like they are being judged. He had coaches of all races doing the on-field work, but insulated the symposium portion of the event. And he hopes the guys found value in it.

“I just hope they take the conversations on all the things they’re going through, and help out the next guy,” Avery said. “I want them to say, ‘Come out with me, let me help you out,’ and do it not only on the field, but also off the field. The older guys should be mentors for the younger guys, and that’ll trickle down to the high school level. The quarterback’s the most important guy.”

KYLE RUDOLPH TALKS NEW DEAL

Vikings TE Kyle Rudolph knows what everyone was thinking, that eventually he’d be Foxboro-bound. His contract, as it stood, was easy to walk away from. Minnesota had cap issues. Rudolph played for ex-PatriotS OC Charlie Weis at Notre Dame. And New England had a new, Gronkowski-sized hole at his position. He gets it.

“I don't know how real those trade possibilities were,” Rudolph said the other night when I asked about it. “But, like you said, I played for Charlie. So for me, I've kind of followed that organization from afar since 2008 when I got my first Notre Dame playbook and we watched cut-ups from the Patriots offense that we were running. I have a huge amount of respect and appreciation for what they've done over the last two decades. But I don't know that there was ever any real opportunity there.

“Obviously the speculation is going to be there because of their situation at my position and then our team's cash/cap situation and my salary. So there was kind of just a natural, like, ‘Hey, Kyle’s familiar with the offense, he played for a coach that was a coordinator there.’”

Maybe it would have been fun to see it, but we now know it will stay a hypothetical. That’s because last week, Rudolph signed a four-year, $36 million deal, which helps the Vikings cap-wise (they had about $610,000 in space before this) and opens the real possibility the 29-year-old will be able to retire having played for only one franchise.

It’s the result that Rudolph wanted all along. And with it done, I spoke to Rudolph about what the last few months have been like…

MMQB: Did you let your mind wander to the idea of playing elsewhere?

Kyle Rudolph: “I think, for the first time in my career, there really wasn't certainty in an offseason. Every year to this point, I knew what was going to happen, where I was going to be. Obviously, everyone knew our cash situation, our cap situation. So there were times that they couldn't figure something out, where I thought, ‘Obviously, I'm the easy guy to move.’ Now, the more I got familiar with our situation and talking to [GM] Rick [Spielman] and to the Vikings, they made it very clear early on that that wasn't something that they wanted to do. So I talked about it a few times through the process. That it made it easier on me to—it's cliche to say, but—just focus on football.”

MMQB: I’d assume your kids are too young for this to have affected them…

KR: “Yeah the kids have no idea. I think the person it was hardest on was my wife. She has our kids enrolled in school in the fall here. I think in our industry, change is always hardest on the spouses, because I'd go to work every day, I'd be in the facility, I'd be busy, I'd be making new friends as teammates and [my wife would be] kind of thrown into a completely different city not knowing anyone, not being in an environment where they’re meeting new people. So the possibility of change, I think it was definitely hardest on my wife.”

MMQB: Was the disappointing 2018 season a motivator to want to stay?
KR: “I think that’s kind of motivated [all the] guys, I know I speak for myself, but also throughout the entire locker room. It's been interesting here in the last five years. It's like we have a down year, then we win the division, make the playoffs, then we have a down year, then we win the division, make the NFC championship game, then we have a down year. So how do we bounce back? How do we handle not meeting expectations? I think that's motivating guys to work harder this offseason and get back to how close we were in 2017.”

MMQB: Did you learn anything about the business side of the game in this?
KR: “I feel like I’m a player who kind of has a good feel and understanding for the business side of our sport. The biggest thing that I can take from the last few months, I could put my trust in people that I felt like had my best interests in mind. And that's not always the case with guys in our league. And every player, every individual is different, and every organization. But for me I truly trusted [agent Brian Murphy] and Athletes First, and I truly trusted Rick, Rob [Brzezinski, EVP of football operations] and the Vikings organization. They told me that it was important for me to stay here and we told them that it was important to us to stay here. And at that point, I could leave it at that. I could focus on football. I could worry about offseason workouts, OTAs, being at minicamp today, and I think the biggest thing is, a lot of time in our business, in the sport of football, the business side sucks. And you know a lot of people are hury by the business side. And I think for me personally I feel extremely blessed and fortunate.”

MMQB: So you get the deal done, any call or text you get stand out?
KR: “I think it was just overall the outpouring of support both via text message and phone call from friends and family, and also from social media and Vikings fans, how many people are truly happy that we are sticking around. Also being able to go on the radio first thing this morning with Coach Weis. He was the first person that I talked to this morning after I signed. He's a guy that's played a huge part in my career and helped get me to this point in my career. So to be able to go on his show [Tuesday] morning on Sirius Radio, it was cool. And that was something that I'm glad I was able to do.”

TEN TAKEAWAYS
1. The Patriots/Texans showdown-that-never-was over Nick Caserio was interesting, and the fallout may not be finished. I’m told that the clause Caserio had in his contract that Texans owner Cal McNair referenced was one that prevented him from interviewing for jobs with other teams, and that term was secured as part of Caserio getting a raise somewhere along the line. What’s really interesting is that the Patriots have offered the same terms to others on the scouting side in the past to try to keep their staff in place. On one hand, it’s smart business to try to use leverage in a negotiation to establish continuity in a traditionally unstable industry. On the other, I can’t imagine it goes over great with someone like Caserio, who’s near the end of his deal and could view the Texans GM job as a unique opportunity for all the reasons we laid out last Monday. So why were the Patriots so hard-charging on this one? I don’t think there are issues between the Kraft and McNair families. I do, however, think there’s a little something there between the Patriots and new Houston EVP Jack Easterby, who left in the aftermath of Robert Kraft

being charged in Florida and let it be known that was one reason why. And the resulting fallout to come? It will be interesting to see what Caserio does when his contract is up. And what the Texans do next.

2. While we're there, my money right now would be on Houston moving into 2019 with Bill O'Brien leading the football operation, and director of player personnel Matt Bazirgan and director of college scouting James Liipfert heading up the personnel side and reporting to O'Brien. It may not be how the Texans drew it up, but this GM search was clearly a coordinated run at Caserio—the team interviewed ex-Browns GM Ray Farmer and ex-Lions GM/current Niners exec Martin Mayhew last weekend, then halted the process while it awaited permission on the top target. The Texans have to know it will be tough to find the right guy externally at this point in the calendar, especially considering perception of how the organization has handled it. It might make the most sense to go forward with the status quo, let Caserio's contract expire, then try and hire him. Or call the Patriots back and offer a draft pick (I don't think that's happening, but it might be worth a shot if you're McNair).

3. One more on the Texans: The team is vehemently denying the discrimination charges of ex-security coordinator Jeff Pope. Sources say Pope was fired for falsifying payroll documents, seeking overtime pay for hours he didn't work. And those inside the organization have defended ex-GM Brian Gaine on this one, saying he doesn't deserve this on his way out the door.

4. Impressive work by Howie Roseman to hold the Eagles' scouting staff together in the wake of Joe Douglas's departure, and good on him for promoting guys who were being pursued for promotions elsewhere. Sources say the Jets put in requests to interview both director of player personnel Andy Weidl and director of college scouting Ian Cunningham. The Eagles blocked both from interviewing, then promoted the two—Weidl to VP of player personnel, and Cunningham to assistant director of player personnel. Both guys are very highly regarded and could be GMs within a few years, so Roseman giving them each a bump in title is significant. Also significant is Roseman himself regaining the GM title that he held from 2010-14. In all, nine scouts/cap guys were promoted by the Eagles last week.

5. I thought of this when I was sorting through all the different moves this week: Good on Sean McVay for letting so many of his guys go, when he could've blocked them for doing so, over the last two years. He let offensive coordinator Matt LaFleur go to Tennessee so he could call plays last year, even though it wasn't an on-paper promotion, and LaFleur wound up getting the Packers job 12 months later. Simultaneously, he let quarterbacks coach Greg Olson go to Oakland as Jon Gruden's OC, knowing Olson's family was in the Bay Area. That opened the door for Zac Taylor to take a more prominent role and, ultimately, to leave and become head coach in Cincinnati (McVay, of course, couldn't have stopped that one if he wanted to). Over and over again, the Rams coach has operated with the best interests of the people around him in mind, which is part of what makes him great. And any conversation you have with him on one of his guys will start with, "I'd hate to lose him, but …" To be clear, I don't have a huge problem with people being held to their contracts. But how McVay has run things in L.A. makes it pretty easy to see why people would want to work there.

6. Remember I said this (and if I'm wrong, I'm wrong): Packers CB Jaire Alexander has a good shot at being All-Pro, and maybe first-team All-Pro, in his second NFL season. He's had a sparkling spring and has a coach, in coordinator Mike Pettine, who has a long history of making his corners (Darrelle Revis in New York, Stephon Gilmore in Buffalo, Joe Haden in Cleveland) shine. The cool part for Green Bay is, as GM Brian Gutekunst's first draft pick, Alexander arrived after the team traded down and back up in the first round 2018, and picked up an extra 1 this year as a result. The Packers wound up using that pick, 30th overall, as part of a package to go up and take safety Darnell Savage with the 21st pick in April.

7. The Ravens lost a lot on defense, and it won't be easy to replace C.J. Mosley, Eric Weddle and Terrell Suggs. That said, one thing that was obvious throughout the offseason program was that, what Baltimore lost in experience they've picked up in speed, part of a concerted effort over the last two years to get faster on that side of the ball. Older additions Earl Thomas and Pernell McPhee look like they've got plenty left in the tank. Linebacker Peanut Onwuasor has gotten more vocal in the absence of Mosley. And Timmy Williams and Willie Henry look ready to take a step forward up front. Add that to a strong, deep group of corners and, while they might not be what they were last year, there's optimism that the dropoff will be manageable.

8. Niners WR Marquise Goodwin's continued interest in making it to the 2020 Olympics in Tokyo (he won the U.S. Olympic Trials in the long jump in 2012 and competed in the London Games) has overshadowed a really strong spring he had to kick off his third year playing for Kyle Shanahan. He's playing with confidence and, at 28, could be ready to take another step forward in his seventh NFL season. And he's not the only one: Tevin Coleman has taken advantage of his opportunities on that side of the ball too, with other guys coming back from injuries, and looks like he's grown up since Shanahan had him in Atlanta three years ago. Jimmy Garoppolo, returning from his ACL tear, could have a group around him that's quite a bit better than the one he carried through the end of the 2017 season.

9. The Saints were without first-, third- and fourth-round picks (thanks to trades for Marcus Davenport, Teddy Bridgewater and Eli Apple) going into this year's draft, which, of course, heightens the importance of the selections they did have. And their undrafted free agent class. Along those lines, I'd keep an eye on linebacker Kaden Ellis (seventh round) and edge rusher Carl Granderson (UDFA). Both have quickly made an impression on their coaches, and both will have a shot at winning roles when the pads go on in the summer.

10. Really interesting analysis from Ben Goessling of the Minneapolis Star-Tribune here, detailing how the Vikings have $211.638 million in cap charges lined up for 2020 season. If you follow the money for your NFL answers—and it's always smart to do it that way—this signifies Minnesota being as all-in for 2019 as any other team. And it also makes you wonder, with Kyle Rudolph taken care of, what the Vikings might say if a corner-hungry team made a phone call on someone like Xavier Rhodes.

... OF THE WEEK
QUOTE

"I think we are going to play the very best player, and I know we are dancing around the words there. Right now, Eli [Manning] is getting ready to have a great year and Daniel [Jones] is getting ready to play. You see what happens with it. We feel good about where Eli is. He is our starting quarterback and we have a young player that we think is going to be an outstanding player, getting himself ready to play.''

Giants coach Pat Shurmur to the New York media on Tuesday. Pressed on his words, Shurmur steadfastly refused to shut down the idea that there will be a quarterback competition in camp come August. So what to make of this? That Jones has done enough to fight for playing time, and that's it for now. But acting as if Jones couldn't win the job is to ignore all kinds of history on first-round quarterbacks who were supposed to be redshirted, only to be in the lineup in Week 1. If Jones is clearly the better player, the locker room will know it. And Shurmur will have to make the tough call to put a franchise icon on the bench. That's how the NFL works. We'll know more when we see, in six weeks or so, how the first-team reps are split up.

“He knows the system better than we do. He can get us into any play at any time and then he has the ultimate weapon in the exit button.”

Cardinals WR Larry Fitzgerald on rookie QB Kyler Murray. Murray, of course, ran a cousin of Kliff Kingsbury’s system playing for Lincoln Riley at Oklahoma, which only should make him more of a safe bet to start Week 1 against the Lions.

SIX FROM THE SIDELINES

1. I love Kawhi Leonard’s game and take back anything negative I may have said about him the last few years. There isn’t much he doesn’t do a very, very high level.

2. Maybe the Anthony Davis trade shouldn’t bother me. But I just hate seeing a franchise that’s been a certifiable dumpster fire for the last half-decade being rewarded with the best player of this generation last summer, and the best big man in the NBA this summer, because the sun shines more in their backyard than in anyone else’s.

3. Great job with the magazine story on Davis’s agent, Rich Paul, by our own S.L. Price. Craziest thing to me, from a journalism perspective: that Paul said all those newsmaking things to Price in March, and they held for over two months. It’s also a good example, for any young reporter, of the importance of news in absolutely everything we do. A story like that is on steroids, from a exposure standpoint, when it generates the kind of news that Price’s did.

4. It kind of sucks that a team like the Pelicans can’t have both Davis and Zion Williamson. But with all those assets, they’re about as interesting a team as there is in the NBA for the next five years, especially considering that such a unique player is coming with the first pick.

5. Jordan Binnington is a good example of why the NHL playoffs are one of the best postseasons in sports. Going into Blues/Bruins, a ton of people who know way more hockey than I do said the biggest advantage either team had was Boston’s edge in goal. That played out to some degree in the series, with Binnington getting dragged in Games 3 and 6. But what Binnington somehow summoned in Game 7 was as incredible as it was out of nowhere, as good a clutch performance as you’ll see in sports. And the kind of story that isn’t that unusual in the Stanley Cup playoffs.

6. Congrats to Gary Woodland. And I think that’s really about all I have to say about the U.S. Open.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

I’ve got two more MMQBs to go before I disappear to Nantucket for a couple weeks, and since we’re into my second year with the column I’d love your feedback on what you like—in this column, the MAQB column that we launched in the fall and have rode through the offseason, my Thursday GamePlan column, or anything else on the site. You can get us on any of that at talkback@themmqb.com.

And even through the dead period to come, we’ll have you covered. In the couple weeks I’m gone, there will be Monday morning columns, and we’ve got a few more themed weeks on tap—we’re rolling back Draft Week again in early July after a pretty good run with it last summer. Hope everyone had a great Father’s Day, and we’ll see you guys in a few hours, with the MAQB coming.

Pat Bowlen's passing may force HOF to change its ring/jacket policy

By Mike Florio
Pro Football Talk
June 17, 2019

The Pro Football Hall of Fame's clumsy policy regarding the posthumous presentation of gold rings and jackets is about to get even clumsier.

As explained by Mike Klis of 9News.com, the recent passing of 2019 enshrinee Pat Bowlen will force the Hall of Fame either to apply its policy as written, or to create an exception.

Pro Football Hall of Fame spokesman Pete Fierle acknowledged that the museum faces an unprecedented dilemma.

"This is the first time that a Hall of Famer has passed away between election and enshrinement," Fierle told Klis. "The policy for posthumous enshrinees is being reviewed to clarify the intent and purpose of decisions made in the past."

The Hall of Fame has gotten it very wrong in the past, stubbornly refusing to give rings and jackets to the families of Hall of Famers like Junior Seau and Ken Stabler. And the reason given for denying the ring and jacket to Seau, Stabler, and other posthumously enshrined Hall of Famers applies equally to Bowlen, since he passed before he was given the ring and the jacket.

"While the iconic bronzed busts are created to memorialize every member of the Hall of Fame, the Hall of Fame Ring and Gold Jacket are items presented to living Hall of Fame members to be worn exclusively by them as evidence and pride of their having been elected to sport's most elite fraternity," the Hall of Fame said in a 2016 statement, when the issue of deceased Hall of Famers being denied a ring and a jacket first arose. "At no time in its 53-year history has the Hall of Fame presented either of these personal adornments posthumously or retroactively to a family member of a deceased Hall of Famer."

To the extent that the Hall of Fame is considering making an exception for Bowlen because he passed between his election and induction, that exception would in the face of the reasoning articulated in 2016. So here's the best solution: Give the ring and the jacket to the family of Pat Bowlen. And to the family of Junior Seau. And to the family of Ken Stabler. And to the family of every other Hall of Famer who dies before election or induction.

The Hall of Fame badly blew it in 2016. Pat Bowlen's passing gives the Hall of Fame an opportunity to get it right. Here's hoping that the Hall of Fame, under the guidance of the NFL, will do the right thing, as to Bowlen, Seau, Stabler, and all others who secure the game's highest honor without witnessing it.

FMIA Guest: PFF On How Data Is Changing NFL's Present And Future

By Pro Football Focus
Pro Football Talk
June 17, 2019

As they famously said on the old Monty Python show, "And now for something completely different."

Seven different voices representing PFF will handle the writing duties in various sections, including the site's founder Neil Hornsby, who will provide a history lesson of football analytics in recent years and detail the changing attitudes towards them among NFL teams. As PFF's majority owner for the past five years, ex-NFL star receiver and NBC Sunday Night Football analyst Cris Collinsworth will weigh in on how such analytical data is changing the game, from its impact on personnel and play-calling within the league to the fans who can't seem to get enough data in their quest to succeed in either fantasy football and/or the newly legalized sports gambling scene.

Analyzing and putting football under the microscope is the task PFF tackles every week, and this week's column offers it a new platform to share a few insights.

Changing the Game

How data is impacting the landscape of football

By Cris Collinsworth, PFF Majority Owner

When I broadcast my first NFL game during the 1989 season, I had absolutely no idea what to study or how to study. NBC provided me with a handful of newspaper articles, we watched some film at the team facility on Friday before the game, and we interviewed some players and coaches. I took notes, but I didn't even have a board with the players' names and numbers on it.

I was thrown into the deep end of the pool. This was going to be the shortest broadcasting career ever. Luckily, I had David Michaels as my producer (yes, Al Michaels' brother). David had worked for years with Terry Bradshaw, and Terry had created these boards for calling games. The positions were aligned on this board where they would line up on the field. Offense facing defense, back-ups behind starters. All I had to do was fill in the blanks. Once again, my friend Terry was ahead of his time, and David showed me how to use it.

When I think back to those days, it's pretty comical. Today, I could never read, watch or study all the data that I have available to me. In 2014, I bought controlling interest in Pro Football Focus. At the time we had 60 employees evaluating every player on every play of the NFL season. Now we have nearly 500 employees, providing data to 90 NFL and NCAA teams, multiple television networks and individuals who use it for private purposes. I won't get into all the details, but if you are a data scientist, mathematician or IT specialist, and you love football, we are hiring.

PFF has already changed the way I think about building a team and play-calling. I can remember a time when everybody thought Andy Reid was crazy for passing 60% of the time. He doesn't look so crazy now.

I remember when running backs were thought to be the most valuable position; now they are considered the easiest to replace based on our WAR (wins above replacement) metric. I think it is fair to say that now very few NFL contracts are negotiated without PFF data being at the heart of the debate. The agent pitches all the positive data about the player, and the team is loaded with all the not so positive data. Some of those negotiating stories are pretty entertaining.

But as much as the data has changed broadcasting, it has changed the game of football even more. “Gut instincts” are no longer good enough. Decisions must be made based on the data. Every year at the NFL Scouting Combine in Indianapolis, PFF meets with nearly every team. I always laugh when somebody starts telling me about “old school” coaches in the league. I won’t mention names, but some of the “old school” coaches have recently blown me away with their knowledge of the data.

I sat in on a meeting with a team that had seven data scientists, mathematicians and IT specialists from Harvard, Stanford and M.I.T. all in the room, and they were loaded with questions that would make your head spin. Luckily, I had the people in the room with the answers. Of course, there are teams that are not quite that sophisticated, and it is getting more and more difficult for them to compete. The data arms race is very real, and it is widening the gap between those who engage, and those who don’t.

The fans are now engaged in the data arms race, as well. Fantasy football had always created a market for data, but since May 2018, when the Supreme Court ruled 6-3 against the Professional and Amateur Sports Protection Act that effectively barred state-authorized sports gambling, a new aspect in the arms race has opened to fans. Whether anyone likes it or not, there is no stopping state-sponsored gambling on football and other sports. We have seen a real spike in our consumer sales of our Edge and Elite products. Some fans just want to know more about their team, others want to be the smartest person at the water cooler, some want to dominate their fantasy league, and others still are writing their own gambling algorithms. Regardless, there is no going back now. Data has changed the game.

5 Rising NFL Players

Five players who could end up in the PFF 50 next year

By Sam Monson, Senior Analyst

One of my favorite aspects of PFF data and grading is how it can spot the obvious coming when it’s still some ways off on the horizon—getting ahead of the curve and identifying talent before it becomes self-evident. Every year there are players who excel in limited snaps before ultimately being handed a larger role and workload for their teams. When they continue dominating, we wonder how they were ever seen as anything other than superstars.

Case in point: When Joey Porter was a star and the sack leader for the Miami Dolphins back in 2009, coming off a 17.5-sack season, we at PFF were clamoring for his backup –- a former undrafted pass-rusher who had not long before been playing in Canada -– to get more snaps because he was generating pressure at a far greater rate than Porter. Cameron Wake ultimately went on to be one of the best pass rushers of the past decade and looked it from Day 1 if you were seeing beyond the box score numbers.

Such examples are everywhere, and each year it’s always an interesting exercise to take a look through the PFF grading and predict the players that could take that next step if they get the right opportunity.

This past week we unveiled our PFF 50—a list of the best 50 players in football entering the season—but in this case let's look a year from now and predict some players who could make that list in 2020.
Levi Wallace, CB, Buffalo Bills: If there's a player with the backstory to rival Wake's, it's Wallace. With precisely zero scholarship offers coming out of high school, Wallace walked on at Alabama, and eventually earned a starting job. Then he had to do it all over again when he went undrafted before signing as a collegiate free agent with Buffalo. As a rookie in 2018, he earned the highest PFF grade of any first-year cornerback, along with the highest coverage grade, and wasn't beaten for a catch longer than 29 yards all season. Though he played far fewer snaps than first-round selection Denzel Ward of Cleveland, Wallace looks like a potential star in the making if he's given greater opportunity in year two.

Vita Vea, DL, Tampa Bay Buccaneers: At the other end of the scale, you've got Vea, a player who went in the first round in 2018 but fell off the radar a little because he began the season injured, then took a little while to get going and ultimately didn't produce the box score production people want to see. Vea ended up with only three sacks, but had 23 additional pressures as a pass-rusher, 17 of which came in the final six weeks of the season. Over that stretch of play, his overall PFF grade was 86.4, and he had a top-20 grade at his position, hinting at what's to come.

Mackensie Alexander, CB, Minnesota Vikings: Changing positions in the NFL can be a significant adjustment, and sometimes it takes time. The Vikings drafted Alexander in 2016's second round and moved him inside to the slot after he principally played outside at Clemson. His transition wasn't smooth, but he has now seen his overall PFF grade improve each year of his NFL career: from 47.5 as a rookie, to 54.1 in 2017, climbing to 78.1 last year. Over the final half of the season, he was the highest-graded cornerback in the league at 88.2, surrendering just 80 receiving yards in a seven-game span. Alexander could emerge as a force with the right opportunity in 2019.

O.J. Howard, TE, Tampa Bay Buccaneers: Another former first-round pick, Howard has yet to top 600 receiving yards or 35 receptions in a season, even while tight ends are breaking receiving records across the NFL. Dive deeper into the numbers, however, and Howard looks primed for a huge season with an uptick in opportunity. His overall PFF grade last season was 89.4, higher than any other tight end outside of San Francisco standout George Kittle. And on a yards per route basis, he was third behind only Kittle and Kansas City star Travis Kelce. His average depth of target was 11.3 yards downfield, a top-five mark in the league, and now the vertical threat he brings is being linked up with new Bucs coach Bruce Arians and an offense that lives down the field.

Jon Halapio, C, New York Giants: The Giants are revamping their offensive line in a major way, but one of the unsung components of the rebuild is at center, where Halapio could emerge as a foundation piece to the new-look front. He began last year as New York's starter before going down with an injury after just 116 snaps of action. But in those snaps, he didn't allow a single pressure, despite almost 50 pass-blocking snaps against the Jaguars and their array of pass-rushing weapons. With vastly improved players beside him, Halapio could prove to be a significant upgrade as a player who isn't being talked about much heading into 2019.

Collegians to Watch
What the data says about the 2020 draft

By Mike Renner, Lead Draft Analyst

When it comes to draft evaluations, prospects such as Quinnen Williams are an anomaly. For the most part, the sure-fire top-10 talents in any draft class have been dominating college football for multiple seasons before they declare for the draft. The 2020 class already has a handful of players doing just that. With elite PFF grades and exceptional athleticism, here are the names you can pencil into your top 10 for next April in Las Vegas:

Tua Tagovailoa, QB, Alabama: NFL offensive coordinators have been willing to build around mobile quarterbacks more and more in recent years, as they've realized how much pressure such passers can put on opposing defenses. Tagovailoa pairs exceptional athleticism and pocket presence with one of the most accurate arms in the country. He had the highest percentage of passes charted with perfect ball placement of any Power 5 quarterback last season and had the seventh-lowest percentage of passes deemed uncatchable. He also added four touchdowns with his legs on designed runs. That combination is going to give NFL defensive coordinators headaches.

Jerry Jeudy, WR, Alabama: The Alabama offense is utterly stacked once again with Jeudy being the next big thing in the lineage of 'Bama wide receivers, and he has a good chance to go higher than either Julio Jones (No. 6 overall in 2011) or Amari Cooper (No. 4 in 2015). That's because there isn't much the Biletnikoff award winner can't do. Last season, he broke 17 tackles on only 68 catches, dropped a mere four passes, converted 7-of-11 contested opportunities and scored 14 times. Those are video game-like numbers as a true sophomore.

A.J. Epenesa, DE, Iowa: I'll forgive you if you don't recognize Epenesa's name. Heck, he didn't even start for Iowa last season. But if you go back and watch their games closely, you'll see why he made this list. Listed at 6-6, 280 pounds, Epenesa moves like a man four inches shorter and 40 pounds lighter. On only 243 pass-rushing snaps last season, Epenesa recorded 10 sacks, 10 hits, and 26 hurries. That's good enough for a 90.4 pass-rushing grade—the second highest of any returning Power-5 edge player in the nation.

Chase Young, DE, Ohio State: Young is the only guy Epenesa trailed in terms of pass-rushing grades for returning Power-5 edge rushers, and he seamlessly replaced Nick Bosa's production along the Ohio State defensive line after the future second overall pick went down with core injury early in the season. Now it's Young's turn to be a top-5 pick in 2020. The sophomore led the nation with 75 pressures in 2019, and he rarely came off the field, seeing more snaps (783) than Bosa did in any single season of his college career. Listed at 6-5, 265 pounds, Young checks the size, athleticism, and production boxes in a big way.

Bryce Hall, CB, Virginia: It was a major upset when Hall decided he was returning for his senior season in Charlottesville. There's a good chance the 6-1, 200-pound cornerback would have been the first defensive back off the board had he declared, because with Hall's length, athleticism and ball production, he fits the mold of a modern NFL cornerback. Last season he notched an absurd 23 forced incompletions to lead the country. Maybe the biggest reason Hall decided to return though is because he's capable of some jaw-dropping interception totals, underachieving last season in that department. He picked off only two passes in 2018, but led the nation with six dropped interceptions, two more than any other player in the FBS.

The PFF Mantras

PFF findings that are surprising, useful

By Eric Eager, Data Scientist

The opportunity to study football with math is one we try to approach with humility, because many results run contrary to what we've believed for generations and many findings are merely steps toward the truth instead of complete proof. We have a unique data set that includes PFF grading for every player on every play, and our first question, like the first question of most people, was whether the grading was actually useful.

PFF grading is not only far more stable (meaning consistent from season to season or week to week) than traditional metrics like passer rating or yards per carry, but is also more predictive should you care about figuring out who might win before the game is played. While many point to the inherent subjectivity of our grading, it's important to realize not only are all stats subjective in some way, but that subjectivity doesn't matter if they satisfy the two criteria mentioned above.

Here then are some of our findings that are the most surprising and useful to football fans and teams alike:

To predict quarterback play, look at how he performs when he's in a clean pocket, not when he's under pressure

Pressure is indeed important, and it affects every quarterback negatively. However, we find out very little about how good a quarterback is by looking at his pressured drop-backs. Indeed, we found that quarterback play (however you measure it) from a clean, un-pressured pocket tells you the most about quarterback play.

This makes some sense intuitively. Pressure happens in many ways—via the blitz (with compromised coverage), with a four-man rush (with good coverage on the back end) or some combination of the two. Pressure sometimes succeeds (often not the quarterback's fault) and sometimes doesn't. In this situation, you're judging context more than you're judging the quarterback.

It's important to remember that quarterbacks spend about 70 percent of their drop-backs kept clean from pressure, which is why a quarterback like Ben Roethlisberger can be more than viable despite a passer rating under pressure below 70.0 in each of the past four seasons. By comparison, his passer rating in a clean pocket has been above 100.0 in each of those years.

From a clean pocket, we get to see the signal-caller get a fair shake, and we can ask questions like "Is he accurate enough?'' or "Does he make sound decisions?" without muddying the surrounding circumstances. Effective play from clean pockets was a huge reason for PFF standing firmly on the side of Baker Mayfield's potential in 2018 and Kyler Murray's in 2019, because we've gotten to see them succeed in those circumstances at the college level where others have failed.

Coverage is more important than pass rush, all else being equal

Analytics have a way of upsetting your sensibilities and upending some preconceived notions. Growing up, we've been conditioned to believe that pass rush is critical. And for good reason—pressure reduces passer rating substantially (by about 30 points) and nearly halves a team's yards per play average. And we can see from the broadcast angle when pressure affects a quarterback. Because passing is so important, good pass-rushers have been the highest-paid members of most NFL's defenses.

However, we found that not only does pass coverage (as measured by PFF grades) explain team success better than pass-rushing, but predicts it better as well. This helps explain why the winningest team in the league (New England) has used its only two big-name defensive free-agent signings on cornerbacks over the past decade (Stephon Gilmore and Darrelle Revis), and why defensive end Trey Flowers is currently a Detroit Lion. One need only to go back to last year's playoffs to see how the quick passing game of today's NFL mitigates even the strongest pass rush, with the Patriots racking up 78 points en route to the Super Bowl despite facing the vaunted pass rushers on the Chargers and Chiefs.

The caveat to this finding? As a trait, coverage tends to be less stable year to year. The upshot? Invest a lot into coverage, so that some subset of five or six of these players give you an elite group.

If you're going to invest in a pass rusher, prioritize his pressure rate, not his sack rate

Sacks are important and worth about two points for a defense. They usually end drives and often force turnovers. They are the ultimate goal of all pass rushers and rightly the most valuable non-turnover play for a defender.

But if you want to know how good a pass rusher is, and how good he'll likely be the following season, look at his pressure rate. We at PFF define a pressure as a sack, a hit or a hurry on a quarterback, with the best pass rushers able to generate a pressure on 15 to 20 percent of their pass-rush snaps. For a pass rusher with 500 pass rushes during a season, you're talking about 75 or so plays, versus just 10 sacks.

Generally speaking, "finishing" pressure with a sack isn't really a trait a pass rusher possesses per se. If you want to predict a player or team's sack total one year, use his or its pressure rates from the previous season. A 20 percent decline in a player's sack total from 10 to eight, for example, is mostly noise. But a 20 percent dip in a player's pressure rate from 50 to 40 is less so. Process over results.

History of Analytics
How NFL teams have changed their attitudes towards PFF and advanced data
By Neil Hornsby, PFF Founder

FMIA's Peter King told me last week he estimated there were perhaps 400 people currently employed in analytical roles across major league baseball, then asked how many I felt there were in similar roles in the NFL? "Significantly fewer" was my instinctive response. His next question was the obvious "Why?"

I'll tell you the same answer I told him. "It's just been harder."

Football was harder because, until very recently, you simply didn't have a lot of data about the incredibly complex set of interactions that constitute a typical play. Baseball has always had a lot of data about its relatively simple, one-on-one encounters. It's a little like trying to build a restaurant business with the use of only a couple of ingredients.

The lack of data in football was one of the main reasons PFF came into existence. Go back over the previous 10 years and tell me how well the left guard for the Tampa Bay Buccaneers was playing and how it compared to the rest of the league? Good luck.

Back then we were in a time when establishing the best middle linebacker was a matter of counting tackles, and an era in which people were trying to determine the best offensive line based on how many times its quarterback was sacked and how many yards the offense gained. By way of example, the Houston Texans last season gave up a league-worst 62 sacks. Everyone knows that. It's a stat.

What you don't know is players not on the offensive line were responsible for over a third of those sacks (21 were spread across tight ends, running backs, and even Deshaun Watson, who accounted for 14 himself). The Texans offensive line was not good, but Houston had far from the league's worst pass protection (we had them ranked 20th).

Back in 2008, while a lot of people's response to the lack of data was "Well, let's work with what we've got," our idea was slightly more ambitious. It was "Let's try and collect the data we need." In hindsight that plan seems more strategic than it really was. PFF was initially just a hobby based on collecting something that didn't exist. The fact we now have all 32 NFL teams as customers, and by the time the 2019 season begins, over 60 NCAA clients, is still a matter of amazement to me. "How did that happen?" I sometimes catch myself wondering. We just got lucky I guess.

In that time we have certainly played a part in deepening the football data set. Since our inception we have collected over 13 years of NFL data (every game, every player, every play has always been our mantra), as well every NCAA FBS game played since 2014. In addition, a few years ago, the NFL brought in player tracking data (the x,y coordinates of every NFL player at 10th of a second intervals). Now that's beginning to look more like it!

So now we have the data, so just throw a ton of data scientists at it and all the NFL's analytical problems are immediately over, right? Not so fast. There are at least a couple of problems with that thinking.

1.) Any project manager worth their salt will tell you the time, cost, quality triangle they work within isn't in perfect equilibrium. While you can add more resources to any project, you very quickly get into a law of diminishing returns when it comes to the idea that twice as many people means things get done twice as quickly.

Any vaguely competent business isn't going to throw endless resources at a problem for which there isn't even an estimated (never mind defined) rate of return. From what I have observed, most clubs' response to analytics has been sensibly proportional to date and I'm sure they will add to that as the need arises. Sure, there are a few clubs off the pace and it will take a few years (and unfortunately maybe a change of general manager) before they catch up. However, this does at least account for some of the discrepancies between how baseball and football have embraced analytics.

2.) Although this will sound strange, the other major issue is finding someone with both the chops and skill set to introduce and use the data to effect change efficiently. Surely every major software company on the planet has a ton of incredibly smart people that can chew through such a (relatively) small data set in a few weeks? If only. I'm not going to embarrass anyone by naming names, but a few years ago one of the world's foremost technology companies was given our data to work with. The "results," delivered a few weeks later, had them proudly showing us how they had managed to count the total number of third downs in a season for the New York Giants. The graphs looked magnificent, however.

If a team ever wants its analytics department to be part of the crucial workflow within the football calendar (as opposed to a bunch of nerds with spreadsheets intermittently answering the odd tricky

question), it will need at least one top-flight integrator to make it all hang together. In order to grow the department, you need to add meaningful and observable value, and finding a person who can conceive, articulate, plan and deliver this is not an insignificant challenge.

This role is hard to find in any business, but when you throw in the football component (someone with a deep enough understanding of the game that they can have a peer-to-peer conversation with a coach or GM), it becomes very difficult. Those individuals are slowly being identified and installed, but this is not a plug-and-play type of deal. In all probability, the team has compromised on one of those key attributes and may be trying to get perhaps a world-class business analyst up to speed on the "business of football."

It takes time for a new function to gain acceptance in any business, much less one as set in its ways and traditions as football. For starters, just look at the uneasy alliance on some teams between the front office and the coaching staff and you begin to appreciate how hard it would be for a new group to succeed in that power structure. A "flywheel" methodology—the steady building of momentum predicated on multiple iterations of delivery, success and acceptance—is the only real way forward, and as that happens more and more people will be brought on board to build on that.

Football isn't as advanced as baseball in analytics because it's at a different point in its evolution, but it's gaining traction. Let's check back in five years and see where things are. I suspect we'll not see anywhere near the disparity we do now.

Where Data Is Headed

How teams should be using PFF in the future

By Steve Palazzolo, Player Personnel Insights

Every NFL team is different. They are 32 ecosystems with 32 different leadership structures, communication patterns and decision-making styles. All 32 teams use PFF data to varying degrees. Just as there are 32 unique draft boards every April, each team has a completely different way of integrating PFF information into their day-to-day operations, from game planning, to creating a more efficient scouting process, to relying on PFF grades as part of player evaluation.

The player evaluation component has grown dramatically in recent years, as PFF data has developed from descriptive to predictive, and teams are just scratching the surface on how to best leverage the grades in every personnel decision. It took some time for PFF grades to gain traction as true descriptors of what was happening on the field, but many breakthroughs were made during our early years of existence.

For instance, we created a proper evaluation process for offensive linemen. We showed there are better ways to evaluate quarterbacks by isolating the timing, ball location and decision-making on every throw. We brought to light that pass rushers should be judged by far more than their sack totals, and we gave proper credit and blame to those run defenders who either blew up the play or got blocked out of it.

While PFF grades started influencing team decision-makers, player contracts, award-voting, fan perception and more, there's still plenty of room to grow within NFL front offices. We've taken our descriptive grades and stats and spun them forward to better project what will happen on the field, or what should happen on the field.

The following questions are only a fraction of what can be answered within the PFF database as we continue to improve our team offerings:

Who are the best fits for each team, both in the draft and free agency?

The PFF grades have always been focused on the evaluation of each player, but now with PFF WAR (wins above replacement), teams have access to a valuation metric for each player. They can gauge how each move will shape their future, not just in an isolated manner, but league wide. One of PFF's biggest advantages has been our ability to evaluate the entire league, not just one team, and that adds proper context for every decision a team will make.

PFF's scheme information adds another important layer of detail in any decision. How well will a cornerback play in a zone-heavy scheme? Is a running back better suited for a gap or zone system? Which routes and route depths will maximize a wide receiver's skill set?

Which parts of PFF's data are most predictive of future performance at each position? What are the strengths and weaknesses for each player? Will they change over time?

Perhaps the most ground-breaking work will be our ability to redefine the "upside" of a player. Instead of just assuming that every player will improve, there is data that supports which parts of a player's skill set will remain consistent over time, while other parts will fluctuate. The wise teams will know which pieces of the PFF data are most crucial when projecting future performance (think of baseball's three true outcomes of home runs, walks, and strikeouts).

Which parts of a college quarterback's performance best translate to pro ball?

With five years of FBS data, we can better project college players to the NFL. Especially at the quarterback position, we've been able to isolate the parts of college performance which best translate to the next level. Teams can use PFF data to project college signal callers like Kyler Murray or Dwayne Haskins based on the various situations they could see in pro ball. How would Murray fare in the same situation as Josh Rosen in Arizona with the same level of pressure and a similar play-calling mix? It's all possible within the database.

How do I attack the opposing quarterback from a game-planning standpoint?

Coaches have been some of the biggest advocates of PFF through the years as our data has made their processes much more efficient, but they're just scratching the surface on how they can further attack their opponents. They will continue to glean actionable insights from the data, more than just first down run/pass tendencies. Which quarterbacks struggle against disguised coverages and what are their tendencies when maneuvering the pocket?

Which coaches make the most optimal game-day decisions? When should I go for it on fourth down given my current roster and quarterback situation?

In-game decision making is another crucial piece of the equation and PFF data is already being used to optimize play-calling and fourth-down decisions. From studying situations ahead of time to evaluating play-calling tendencies in hindsight, this is an area that will continue to grow in the coming years.

Which coach or general manager is best for my team?

We're just starting to properly evaluate coaches and quantify how much they can alter player performance or add value through play-calling. Front-office personnel, perhaps looking to justify a change, have already asked us where their current head coach ranked in these metrics.

Throughout the NFL, many teams have been using PFF to enhance their day-to-day processes while just skimming the surface of answering some of the organization's most important questions using the data. Expect this to continue as we develop PFF IQ, our version of an NFL front-office decision-making tool. PFF IQ will touch every level of the organization as owners, general managers, and coaches will have all of the necessary data at their fingertips to help with every decision and ultimately aid in winning games and championships.

Outsider's Perspective
How a former player sees analytics

By Bruce Gradkowski, former NFL quarterback

As players, we spend each week preparing day in and day out to perform and try to win in the NFL. We condition our minds and bodies for the physical and mental grind of football. In the NFL, every week comes and goes rapidly and is spent preparing for a new defense or installing plays to put new wrinkles in the offense, all to gain the upper hand in six days or less. It's all about maximizing time to get as much information to sink in as fast as possible. And when the week is done, it's time to move on to the next opponent.

One of the things I learned during my time playing is there are so many people inside the organization that help us individually and collectively be successful.

The average career length of an NFL player is three and a half years. I was fortunate to last 11 years in the NFL, but it all has to come to an end at some point. After retirement, players are left trying to figure out what to do with their talents? The drive and determination that helped them make it to the highest level is now put on a bookshelf until they find their next passion. Gone is the focus that competition provides, as well as the familiarity of the locker room, the friendships, the bonds, and the ups and downs. Most importantly, all that preparation and film study? All done! What's next!? And what business could possibly understand and relate to all of this?

So when I first sat and talked with Pro Football Focus, I was a little skeptical. How could people who aren't in the locker room or haven't played the position grade players on every play? What I've learned so far at PFF is there is so much of value to the NFL that comes from people outside of team organizations. The kind of folks who just love the game of football and want to help make it the best it possibly can be. They want to further the understanding of the game across the board and get as much detailed information about it out into the world as they can.

The thirst for knowledge and the desire to be great extends well beyond just coaches and players. PFF is a locker room in itself. It's made up of a bunch of guys who are "gym rats." True locker room guys! The owner is Cris Collinsworth, former star wide receiver. Cris is someone who understands what it's like to be in a locker room. He understands what it's like to watch film and break it down. I was very impressed

with the knowledge throughout the company. Some of the employees might not have played the sport, but they do know it like the back of their hand.

The thing I admire most about PFF is the humbleness of continuing to try and learn and grow as a company day in and day out, just as if you were preparing for your weekly football game. There are coaches and former players in and out of the office on a weekly basis, helping to maximize the grading system, helping to "ultimate" the system all college and NFL teams have access to. (PFF's flagship product for team customers is dubbed PFF Ultimate.)

When Cris Collinsworth asked me to draw some plays and defenses on a whiteboard for him, it made me realize how humble he is as well. For someone with so much stature and notoriety, he is always open to continuing to learn and grow. He is someone who has not only played the game, but has met with coaches and front office executives for years while broadcasting games, but is still humble enough to pick my brain.

For a bunch of guys who love football, working hard every day to give fans and teams what they want and need in the most detailed of ways is remarkable. NFL teams may have only a few assistant coaches breaking down film and coverages, but everybody gets involved at PFF. From Cris on down, it's just a bunch of guys who love football and know how to work hard. I'm happy to say I'm a part of the PFF family now.

Gamblers and Data

How gamblers are using data to gain an edge
By George Chahrouri, Data Scientist

Our primary goal within PFF's Research and Development is to continually get better at answering the question "What wins football games?" There are many aspects within that question, from college to pro player projection, draft-pick valuation and, of course, determining the value of different players, positions and facets. At the game level, the true test is making predictions for the eventual winning margin and hence the term "point spread."

To get there, we start with analyses of different ways to measure overall team strength. Given the uniqueness of PFF grading, we can create metrics that go beyond the traditional use of the final score of a game to determine how well a team played and instead use mathematical techniques to create an "adjusted score," getting rid of some of the flukiness that is rampant within the small sample size that is an NFL game.

Data analysis pioneers such as FiveThirtyEight have employed something called an "ELO rating'' system that adjusts for the strength of opponent, using the final scores of games. We simply take it a step further by using the PFF grading system to give a different interpretation of the disparity between the teams in any given game.

PFF ELO isn't the only metric that goes into our predictions, as there are nuances to each matchup that must be appropriately modeled. But just a few well-calibrated power metrics can explain about 80% of the spread that you see in Vegas or at your online book. Gambling on sports and football specifically tends to carry with it a slimy connotation (some of which is for legitimate reason), and our hope is to be a part of a movement that promotes a purer goal—to understand the study of football more soundly and to celebrate the mathematical techniques that we can all learn from.

With only 16 games per week and 32 teams playing, luck is a very real component of seriously gambling on sports. But having a model that can pick games anywhere near 55 percent correctly is an achievement, and puts an exclamation point on the importance of leveraging sound mathematical practices and pursuing the ultimate goal of truly understanding the game of football more each day.

10 Things I Think I Think

1. We think this is the year people begin, in significant numbers, to differentiate the decision from the result of the play. There is no way Frank Reich should have been criticized last year for deciding to go for it on fourth down in overtime against the Texans. If you want to criticize the sloppy execution go ahead but the decision to go for it was correct. If you have a dice that is weighted to come up as a six 50% of the time and every other number 10% of the time and you bet on something other than six, you are a fool regardless of the result.

2. We think an 18-game schedule with players only allowed to play in 16 of them would be fascinating. It should help with injuries—players won't be playing in more games—and if they have a questionable injury early in the season, a team may be more likely to rest them to use one of the games they can't play. It would also help prevent all-time records from being broken simply by players playing in more games.

3. We think the NFL is a "copycat"league, but the best teams and coaches are the innovators, not the copycats.

4. We think it matters far more how often you do something than if you can do something. In the ego-driven world of football the idea that a coach can turn a talented but poor player into something great is still prevalent. However, how many players in the last five years played poorly at the NCAA level and then turned it around in the NFL? It just rarely happens. Drafting on college production (within certain parameters) is the way forward.

5. We think right tackles are just as valuable as left tackles and should be paid as such.

6. We think Jameis Winston will challenge for the passing yardage title in 2019. Last year he trailed only Josh Allen in average depth of target. These throws put Winston in a position to do great things at times (he was second among quarterbacks in the percentage of throws we grade as "positive"), as well as bad things (he was 21st in limiting negatively-graded throws). New Bucs head coach Bruce Arians has a track record of succeeding with high-variance quarterbacks like Winston. In 2015 Carson Palmer had an MVP-caliber season under Arians, posting roughly the same average depth of target as Winston in 2018 and leading the league in percentage of positively-graded throws. With Mike Evans, Chris Godwin and O.J. Howard a very capable trio of pass catchers, look for Winston to either make good on his 2015 draft position or give the Bucs no other option but to find his replacement the following year.

7. We think David Bakhtiari is the most underrated player in football. Over the past three seasons of PFF pass-blocking grades, Bakhtiari ranks No. 1 among tackles—by a distance! The No. 2 player on that list? Joe Thomas. Bakhtiari is the new gold standard of blindside pass protection, but doesn't have the reputation or recognition yet.

8. We think the NFL now has a plethora of reasonable starting quarterbacks outside of the true superstars and any number of them can create top-10 production in any given year. Mid-tier quarterback production

is more dependent on playmakers and scheme than ever before, so mid-tier quarterbacks need mid-tier contracts.

9. We think this is a big year for Sean McVay's offense and, by extension, the teams that went on a binge of hiring away anybody who had ever been in contact with it to experience the same Midas touch. Late last year teams began to take away what McVay wants to do on offense, forcing the Rams to adjust, and Plan B never really looked like it existed, let alone was as effective. Successful systems have died quickly in the NFL in the past if they haven't evolved, so 2019 is the year McVay needs to show evolution of his scheme.

10. We think we'll miss the AAF terribly. It was high quality football and everyone on the football side responsible for putting a great product on the field deserves credit. With around 50 AAF players currently on NFL rosters there was obviously a real benefit to getting these players more experience.

Beernerdness

One of our IT developers, Alex Padgett, is also a talented home brew guy. He's willing to take some big swings with each new thing—approaching it all as a challenge—and he's churning out some excellent stuff. He'll bring in a growler to share from his most recent batch every so often (a passionfruit / dragonfruit berliner weisse, a NE-style milkshake double IPA, and an imperial milk stout with coffee have been among the latest) and we are yet to taste a miss. No doubt in our mind that he'll have something out for the world to taste at some point, but we are selfishly happy with the current limited access arrangement.