Broncos, Empower Retirement agree to deal for stadium naming rights

By Joe Rubino
September 5, 2019

Empower Field at Mile High is new name under terms of deal that runs through 2039

Coloradans who have never heard of Empower Retirement may soon be hearing that name a lot. The company has purchased the naming rights for the Denver Broncos stadium, the team confirmed on Twitter Wednesday.

Empower Field at Mile High will be the new moniker of the stadium where Denver's pro football team plays its home games. The stadium has gone without a corporate naming sponsor since Sports Authority went bankrupt in 2016. Last year, the Metropolitan Football Stadium District approved renaming it Broncos Stadium at Mile High temporarily.

Empower is the second-largest retirement plan provider in the country, with 9.2 million plan participants and $638 billion in assets under its control. Based in Greenwood Village, the company has 2,700 local employees and has been a Broncos team partner since 2015, according to the franchise.

By Wednesday afternoon, the company's website had already been updated with an "Empower Field" logo.

"This announcement represents both a remarkable accomplishment and a tremendous opportunity for Empower that will fundamentally change the way our brand is recognized across the country," an internal Empower email stated on Wednesday.

The news comes days before the team kicks off its 2019 season against the Oakland Raiders.

AFC Preview: Patriots still have Tom Brady, but conference could go through Chiefs or Chargers

By Ryan O'Halloran
Denver Post
September 5, 2019

The AFC's waiting game for Patriots quarterback Tom Brady to finally retire marches on.

Don't hold your collective breath, Broncos Country. The 42-year-old with 517 career touchdown passes hasn't shown much decline with age. The Patriots have won three of the last five Super Bowls and there is no reason to expect they won't be in the conversation again this season.

While New England is banking on experience, a slew of AFC hopefuls are relying on youth to try and dethrone the defending champions.

Chiefs quarterback Patrick Mahomes, 23, no longer requires an NFL introduction. The reigning MVP's playing style is the closest thing we've seen to Brett Favre with twice the athleticism in a more passing-oriented league. But changes on defense will ultimately decide Kansas City's fate under new coordinator Steve Spagnuolo.

Kansas City was one stop away from taking down the Patriots in the AFC championship game a season ago but couldn't get it done.

The Jets were an NFL laughingstock with three consecutive losing seasons, yet optimism is borne from 22-year-old quarterback Sam Darnold's development paired with fresh-legged running back Le'Veon Bell. Texans quarterback DeShaun Watson, 23, led Houston to 11 wins last season and has arguably the NFL's best wide receiver at his disposal in DeAndre Hopkins. In Buffalo, hopes for a consistent winner rest on the big right arm of 23-year-old quarterback Josh Allen of Wyoming fame.

The sudden and surprising decision by Colts quarterback Andrew Luck to retire in his prime sent shockwaves through the NFL. Indianapolis had built a strong supporting cast around their four-time Pro Bowler and outside expectations for Super Bowl contention were rising. Coach Frank Reich now turns to Jacoby Brissett, a 2016 third-round pick, to quarterback the Colts with tepid expectations over the team's new ceiling.

And don't forget the other aging star AFC quarterback with Brady-esque statistics — without all the rings. Chargers gunslinger Philip Rivers, 37, posted his sixth consecutive 4,000-yard passing season last year with 32 touchdowns as Los Angeles fell one game short of the conference championship game.

What does it all mean for the Broncos?

First-year coach Vic Fangio faces an uphill climb in resurrecting Denver back to conference relevancy, especially in a division with two legitimate Super Bowl contenders in the Chiefs and Chargers. Denver, much like New England, will ride the strengths of an older quarterback with a Super Bowl victory to his name. But one championship for Joe Flacco in Baltimore doesn't inspire quite the same confidence of Brady's six Lombardi Trophies.

AFC EAST

The rest of the division continues to make moves anticipating the day New England quarterback Tom Brady retires. Now 42 years old, Brady had 29 touchdowns and 11 interceptions last year on his way to a sixth Super Bowl title. The Jets and Buffalo feel they have their quarterbacks of the present/future in Sam Darnold and Josh Allen, respectively. New Miami coach Brian Flores, a former Patriots assistant, is undertaking a massive rebuild.

PLAYERS TO WATCH

Tom Brady, QB, Patriots: Currently fourth all-time in regular-season passing yards (70,514), he will move past Brett Favre (71,838) and Peyton Manning (71,940) this year and will chase New Orleans' Drew Brees (74,437). An all-time great, Brady will have to succeed without retired tight end Rob Gronkowski.

Le'Veon Bell, RB, Jets: The combination of being a running back and sitting out last year produced a predictably tepid free-agent market for Bell, who signed with the Jets. A two-time All Pro, Bell is a fantastic player who can run (NFL-high 321 carries in 2017) and catch (160 receptions his last two seasons).

Xavien Howard, CB, Miami: Howard became the NFL's highest-paid cornerback in May with his five-year, $77 million contract extension. Last year's interception leader (seven), the Dolphins opted to splurge on one of their drafted-and-developed players.

PREDICTED ORDER OF FINISH

1. Patriots

Reaching the Super Bowl for a fourth consecutive season is a within-reach goal for the Patriots despite losses on the roster and coaching staff. Reinforcements to be counted on early include draft picks N'Keal Harry (receiver), Damien Harris (running back), Chase Winovich (defensive end) and Joejuan Williams (cornerback).

2. Jets

Jets general manager Mike Maccagnan drafted quarterback Sam Darnold last year, engineered the coaching search that resulted in hiring Adam Gase (the former Broncos offensive coordinator who was previously Miami's coach), signed running back Le'Veon Bell and linebacker C.J. Mosley and drafted nose tackle Quinnen Williams … and then Maccagnan was fired. Same ol' Jets? We'll see.

3. Bills

A surprise wild card team in 2017, the Bills took an expected step back last year because they had millions in dead salary cap money and committed themselves to rookie quarterback Josh Allen. Added this offseason were center Mitch Morse, running backs Frank Gore and T.J. Yeldon and receivers Cole Beasley, John Brown and Andre Roberts. Good enough to pass the Patriots? No. Good enough to challenge for the playoffs? No.

4. Dolphins

The NFL's streak of a team not playing the Super Bowl in its stadium will continue. Miami may not be favored to win a game until Nov. 17 (Week 11) vs. Buffalo and its training camp included firing offensive line coach Pat Flaherty before a preseason game was even played.

AFC NORTH

The times have changed in this division. Baltimore begins the season with a new starting quarterback (Lamar Jackson replaces Joe Flacco) for the first time since 2008. Cincinnati has a new coach (Zac Taylor replaces Marvin Lewis) for the first time since 2003. And there are expectations in Cleveland for the first time since, well, the early 1990s. This could be the league's most wide-open division because every team has flaws.

PLAYERS TO WATCH

Odell Beckham, Jr., WR, Browns: Stunningly acquired by the Browns (and given away by the New York Giants), Beckham will team with receiver Jarvis Landry to be quarterback Baker Mayfield's main targets. Beckham had 91, 96 and 101 catches in his first three years, but 25 and 77 the last two seasons while he battled injuries.

Devin Bush, LB, Steelers: The Broncos opted to trade down from No. 10 with Pittsburgh instead of taking Bush. The early- and long-term edge could go to the Steelers, who will count on Bush to anchor their 3-4 front. Bush was a one-man wrecking crew (10 tackles) in the preseason opener against Tampa Bay.

Lamar Jackson, QB, Ravens: Jackson went 6-2 (regular season/playoffs) as the starter last year, allowing Baltimore to flip veteran Joe Flacco to the Broncos. New offensive coordinator Greg Roman coached Colin Kaepernick in San Francisco and is expected to incorporate many of the same concepts in the offense.

PREDICTED ORDER OF FINISH

1. Steelers

Some team has to win the division so we go with the club that has the surest quarterback. Ben Roethlisberger doesn't have tailback Le'Veon Bell (Jets) or receiver Antonio Brown (Raiders). No matter, he will continue to lean on tailback James Conner and receiver JuJu Smith-Schuster. Rookie linebacker Devin Bush will be terrific. A key is improving their 31st-ranked running game so Roethlisberger doesn't have to throw a league-high 675 times again.

2. Browns

We're buying Browns Stock … for 2020. It is worth remembering they were a combined 1-31 in 2016-17. These floor-to-ceiling rebuilds take time. Multiple draft classes. Multiple free agent/trade seasons. Multiple wins to foster belief. No doubt, Cleveland will challenge for a wild-card berth, but its offensive line could be leaky and the secondary will need cornerbacks Denzel Ward to stay healthy and Greedy Williams to be good right away.

3. Ravens

This looks to be a reset year for Baltimore, which moved on from quarterback Joe Flacco, edge rusher Terrell Suggs and linebacker C.J. Mosley. The new offensive scheme will tailor to Lamar Jackson's strengths of throwing on the move. The defense, which led the NFL in fewest yards and points allowed last year, added safety Earl Thomas. Losing Mosley's presence at linebacker will ultimately push the Ravens from first to third in the division.

4. Bengals

The Broncos were among the teams that interviewed Zac Taylor, hoping to glean insight into how Sean McVay ran the Rams. Cincinnati hired Taylor to help utilize quarterback Andy Dalton and receiver A.J. Green.

AFC SOUTH

For all the usual chatter about this division chasing its collective tail, consider that all four teams have reached the playoffs once in the last two years — Jacksonville/Tennessee in 2017 and Houston/Indianapolis in 2018 — and all but the Texans won at least one playoff game. Despite not winning the division a year ago, the Colts had momentum until quarterback Andrew Luck's stunning retirement on Aug. 25.

PLAYERS TO WATCH

Marcus Mariota, QB, Titans: This is Mariota's last chance in Nashville to prove he merits a long-term contract. He is under .500 as a starter (27-28) and has never played all 16 games. He is on his third offensive coordinator in as many years (Arthur Smith). Maybe Smith will be the one to elevate Mariota's game.

Jalen Ramsey, CB, Jaguars: Any conversation of the league's top cornerbacks should include Ramsey and maybe at the top of the list. He has nine interceptions in three years and can lock down top receivers. There is always drama surrounding Ramsey (nearly all of it self-inflicted) but it doesn't impact his play.

Justin Houston, OLB, Colts: Indianapolis was quiet in free agency except for adding Houston, who had 78 1/ 2 sacks for Kansas City in eight years. Houston hasn't reached double-digit sacks since 2014 (league-high 22), but if he can match last year's total of nine, the Colts should win the division.

PREDICTED ORDER OF FINISH

1. Colts

Nine wins in its final 10 games propelled Indianapolis into the playoffs. The expected year-after buzz evaporated when quarterback Andrew Luck retired, but new starter Jacoby Brissett knows coach Frank Reich's offense, has playing experience and the Colts will rally around him. Aside from signing pass rusher Justin Houston, general manager Chris Ballard opted to bank his salary-cap space ($45.5 million as of mid-August). The core of Brissett, left guard Quenton Nelson, receiver T.Y. Hilton, linebacker Darius Leonard and safety Malik Hooker will be enough.

2. Texans

Continued offensive line issues and the preseason injury to running back Lamar Miller (knee) and a brutal opening-month schedule (at New Orleans, vs. Jacksonville, at the Chargers, and vs. Carolina) will wreck Houston's season. It is crucial coach Bill O'Brien limits the punishment on quarterback Deshaun Watson (62 sacks and 133 additional hits). The Texans continue to squander J.J. Watt's prime and the start of Watson's best years.

3. Jaguars

A season of Super Bowl aspirations in 2018 dissolved into a 5-11 fiasco. The Jaguars signed quarterback Nick Foles and hired offensive coordinator John DeFilippo to improve the 31st-ranked scoring offense. Problem is, they are stuck with overrated players at center (Brandon Linder) and left guard (Andrew

Norwell). The Jaguars' defense will keep them in division contention, led by Denver native Calais Campbell up front and pass rushers Yannick Ngakoue and Josh Allen and cornerback Jalen Ramsey.

4.Titans

Tennessee was active in free agency, signing receiver Adam Humphries, outside linebacker Cameron Wake and left guard Rodger Saffold. The Titans' chances, though, ride on their ability to be balanced (48.5 percent rush plays in 2018) with running back Derrick Henry opening up play-action passes to tight ends Delanie Walker and Jonnu Smith. On defense, tackle Jurrell Casey is an elite player but needs help from the defensive ends.

AFC WEST

There is a reason why the Oakland Raiders and the Broncos have the two toughest schedules in the league based on 2018 records — they have to play Kansas City and the Chargers twice each. The division and maybe the conference will go through the AFC West champion. The Chiefs came up one win short of the Super Bowl and overhauled their defense. The Chargers reached the divisional round and embraced continuity.

PLAYERS TO WATCH

Antonio Brown, WR, Raiders: Before he had even appeared in a preseason game, Brown had turned into a migraine for coach Jon Gruden, missing time with frostbitten feet and complaining about not being able to wear his old helmet. If healthy and happy, there are few better (six consecutive 100 catch seasons).

Tyrann Mathieu, S, Chiefs: Following his exit from Arizona, Mathieu bet on himself and signed a one-year deal with Houston. Eighty-nine tackles later, it paid off when he joined the Chiefs via a three-year, $42-million contract.

Philip Rivers, QB, Chargers: This should be the 37-year-old Rivers' best chance at the Super Bowl since 2006, when the Bolts went 14-2. Rivers has great chemistry with play-caller Ken Whisenhunt and weapons in receiver Keenan Allen, tight end Hunter Henry and running back Melvin Gordon, a training camp holdout.

PREDICTED ORDER OF FINISH

1. Chargers

If the Chargers were able to hold serve last year at home, they could have had home-field advantage. And they might this year. A balanced team (sixth in scoring at 26.9 points per game and eighth in fewest points allowed at 20.6), the Chargers return all of their key players and added linebacker Thomas Davis (free agency) and rotational defensive tackle Jerry Tillery (first round). Terrific safety Derwin James (foot) is out indefinitely, which is a critical loss, but we still like the Bolts.

2. Chiefs

Give Kansas City credit: It knew its defense was terrible so they went about fixing it, hiring coordinator Steve Spagnuolo, who has a 4-3 front, pass-rusher Frank Clark, safety Tyrann Mathieu, cornerback Bashaud Breeland and defensive end Alex Okafor. But it feels like a lot of mismatched parts so Spagnuolo will have his hands full. Offensively, quarterback Patrick Mahomes is the reigning NFL MVP and will continue to do Patrick Mahomes-type things.

3. Broncos

It is entirely possible the Broncos will have better coaching, offensive line play, quarterbacking and pass defending … and still finish third. That's how good Kansas City and the Chargers will be.

4. Raiders

A near-universal pick to finish last in the division, Oakland won't be boring. The Raiders added receiver Antonio Brown, guard Richie Incognito, right tackle Trent Brown, linebackers Vontez Burfict and Brandon Marshall and three first-round picks — defensive end Clelin Ferrell, running back Josh Jacobs and safety Johnathan Abram. The schedule, though, is a bear.

Joe Flacco on his Broncos' regular-season debut: "It's about time"

By Ryan O'Halloran
Denver Post
September 5, 2019

Quarterback Joe Flacco was speaking for his entire locker room, all of his coaches and likely every Broncos fan Wednesday afternoon before practice.

"It's about time," he said of Monday's season opener at Oakland. "It's nice to get back into a normal week and start game planning and (doing) stuff that really matters. It's always a lot more fun."

A positive for the Broncos for those who believe in such statistics: Flacco in season openers is usually a lot of fun.

Flacco was 8-3 in Week 1 for the Baltimore Ravens, throwing 16 touchdowns and seven interceptions. Two of those losses were on the road to the Broncos.

During his limited action this preseason, Flacco showed a command of the offense, awareness of the pass rush and arm strength — so basically everything he wanted to show.

Flacco appeared in two games, completing 10 of 15 passes for 78 yards.

"I've had my head down just trying to come to a new team and be one of the guys also be a leader and play my best," he said when asked about the road to Week 1 that started with his trade from Baltimore in mid-March. "I haven't really thought about or reflected about the process. The goal is that 17 weeks from now, we're still preparing for games. Whenever that ends, then maybe I can reflect, but not right now."

Flacco quickly won over the locker room with the combination of his resume (Super Bowl champion), skills (still at a starter level) and approach (even-keel).

"Flacco's a baller," receiver Emmanuel Sanders said. "Probably one of my favorite quarterbacks of all time, him and Peyton (Manning). They're close. I'm looking forward to going on Sundays and competing with him because I know what type of guy he is."

Said coach Vic Fangio: "Joe's got his own personality. He's quietly confident and quietly works hard. He's not an up-and-down guy emotionally. I think that's a strength of his."

On an offense with rookies at left guard (Dalton Risner) and tight end (Noah Fant) and second-year players at running back (Phillip Lindsay/Royce Freeman) and receiver (Courtland Sutton/DaeSean Hamilton), is that a good thing?

"It could be," Fangio said. "It's all what your flavor of ice cream is. Do you like to see a guy out there that's yelling, screaming and has snot coming out of their nose? Or do you like to see a calm guy that you might want to see more?"

Flacco has proven to the latter during Broncos practices and preseason games. His calmness never wavers. That is especially important on the road in general and an environment like Oakland in particular.

The Broncos have won their last seven season openers, but all have been at home. To run the streak to eight?

“You keep it simple and you play football,” Flacco said. “You allow everyone to play fast and that allows them to play physical and do the things that you really need to do to play football.”

The Broncos’ offensive starters played very little as a unit in the preseason. That will change against the Raiders.

“I’m looking forward to just going out and trying to showcase our talents together,” Sanders said. “Hopefully we can be one of those duos that put up a lot of points and win a lot of games.”

Broncos Mailbag: Is general manager John Elway done wheeling and dealing?

By Ryan O'Halloran
Denver Post
September 5, 2019

Do you see John Elway eyeing anyone else in a trade this year?

— JD, La Porte, Texas

Rule nothing out in terms of the Broncos' player acquisition plan this year. Adding six players to the roster over the weekend shows Elway, coach Vic Fangio and the personnel staffs will be constantly churning the back of the roster via the waiver wire. That said, working the wires will be more likely than trading for players unless it's a player-for-player deal. The Broncos have five picks in the first four rounds of the 2020 draft and the aim should be to keep those in the cupboard.

Hey Ryan, why did the Broncos cut quarterback Kevin Hogan and pick up Brandon Allen? Is the new guy a significant upgrade over Hogan? I mean, Kyle Sloter and Brock Osweiler were still out there.

— Tyson Reynolds, Aurora

And don't forget – Paxton Lynch was also out there. We kid, of course. The Broncos long ago moved on from Lynch … and Sloter … and Osweiler. Why didn't Hogan make the team? He wasn't good enough, period. Elway and Fangio pointed out during Saturday's press briefing that if upgrades are available, they would be unafraid to shake up the roster. Allen hasn't played in a regular-season game, but they saw something on tape in terms of how he fit into Rich Scangarello's offense that made them feel comfortable switching backup quarterbacks a week before the opener.

What's the biggest surprise for you from the Broncos cuts? I'm a little sad they cut the local kid Sam Jones.

— Mike, Denver

Jones wasn't a surprise — he hung onto his roster spot throughout last year, but the Broncos liked Austin Schlottmann more as their backup guard/center. Jones signed with Arizona's practice squad. Once the roster was announced, there were no earth-shattering surprises.

What do you know about Diontae Spencer? Can he cure the Broncos' problems in the return game? River Cracraft was trash.

— Austin, Golden

Spencer was acquired via waivers from Pittsburgh on Sunday and is expected to be the punt returner Monday night in Oakland. Spencer is 27 years old and is listed at 5-foot-9 and 161 pounds. He has no NFL regular-season experience, but he averaged 11.3 yards on 191 punt returns in the Canadian Football League and 14.7 yards in the preseason for the Steelers. I predict he will improve the Broncos' punt return

game, partly because there is nowhere to go but up (they were last in the league in 2018) and partly because he has a track record of producing — albeit in a different league.

How much will Malik Reed and Josh Watson play this year? Both dudes were balling all preseason.

— Keith, Fort Collins

Reed should be active for Week 1 and Watson is on the practice squad after he was waived on Sunday. I would find a way to get Reed on the field as a situational pass rusher, but not at the expense of taking snaps away from Von Miller (of course) and Bradley Chubb (of course). Moving Chubb inside (still in a stand-up alignment) and having Miller/Reed coming off the edges would be a good look.

Ryan, I feel confident in our team's defense — I mean, it's one of the league's best — but there's plenty of concern about the offense, especially after watching them in the preseason. Do you think we'll have enough firepower to propel ourselves into the playoffs? We can't win if we can't get in the end zone.

— Bryan F., Parker

The problem for the Broncos' offense in the preseason: they didn't score touchdowns when they got into the red zone. But you're right, as it's currently constructed, this needs to be a team that finds a way to get a lead and then leans on their defense to carry them home. If the defense stays healthy, they do have a chance to be elite. And let's hold off a final judgment on the offense until we've seen the starters play for a bit and with a full game plan.

Broncos briefs: Despite long camp, starters enter opener with energy

By Ryan O'Halloran
Denver Post
September 5, 2019

The Broncos had the longest training camp in the NFL, but the team's starters said coach Vic Fangio was on point about managing their work.

"I think he did a good job these last two weeks," defensive end Derek Wolfe said before practice Wednesday. "It was the longest and hardest camp I've had since I've been in the league. I feel good and fresh and ready to go now — I didn't feel that way a couple weeks ago Now I feel great."

Fangio saw enough of his starters in the Seattle and San Francisco games to shut them down for the final two exhibition contests.

Still engaged. Broncos running back Theo Riddick is on injured reserve because of a left shoulder injury sustained Aug. 8 at Seattle. He is out at least the first eight weeks.

Riddick wouldn't elaborate on what kind of injury he sustained, but he wore a bulky contraption in the locker room earlier this week.

"So unfortunate; I was super (ticked off), but I have to stay positive," he said.

When he signed a one-year contract after the first preseason game, Riddick was expected to be the Broncos' new third-down back. His injury allowed Devontae Booker to keep that role.

Riddick has spent the last month attending position meetings to learn the playbook.

"I get to home in and teach myself the playbook," he said. "The mental reps are 24/7, which is helping me tremendously because I envision myself doing everything at a fast pace."

Ready to debut. Broncos tight end Troy Fumagalli is expected to make his regular-season debut Monday after missing all of his rookie season with sports hernia surgery.

"You get that excitement building up (with) putting in the game plan," he said. "It's been a long time so I'm looking forward to it."

Fumagalli played significant snaps in the preseason, which he saw as a benefit.

"I had to catch (up); I was a year late and just getting out there and getting acclimated to the speed and the type of athletes (playing), being out there helped me a ton," he said.

Fumagalli said his two older brothers will travel from Chicago to Oakland for the game.

"Hard Knocks" experience. The final episode of the Raiders' "Hard Knocks" series on HBO aired Tuesday.

“I enjoyed meeting those guys from ‘Hard Knocks,’” Raiders coach Jon Gruden said in a conference call with the Denver media. “I got to know them quite well. … We let a few guys go and it was like a terrible ending to the series. We did keep 12 rookies. Unfortunately, that wasn’t the subject of the show.”

Etc. Only one roster move last weekend upset Broncos fans on Twitter: The release of running back Khalfani Muhammad, who cleared waivers and joined the practice squad. “I wouldn’t say (waiting for word) was tough because I prepared myself for the worst,” he said. “I was really pleased (with my preseason). I thought I put out some good film and showcased what I can do. I just wished for a better outcome. But you have to move forward from here.” … Fangio on why he opted for game-to-game instead of season captains: “I think leadership is something somebody takes, it’s not granted to them, whether it’s by a coaching staff or a vote. You take it, you don’t get proclaimed it.”

Vic Fangio's "Death by Inches" more than a catchphrase for Broncos

By Kyle Fredrickson
Denver Post
September 5, 2019

It occurred on the 14th day of practice, lasted at most 30 seconds and was mostly forgotten through the completion of Broncos training camp. Yet one unsuspecting moment provided a perfect snapshot of the mantra for first-year coach Vic Fangio's mission in Denver: There will be no "Death by Inches."

The temperature at UCHealth Training Center crept into the 90s on Aug. 6 when an 11-on-11 scrimmage period got heated. Defensive lineman DeShawn Williams and offensive lineman Don Barclay began a pushing match with both reserve players eventually throwing blows. But the skirmish didn't last long.

Williams, a stout 6-foot-1 and 292 pounds, suddenly felt his momentum moving backward.

"I looked down and I was like, 'Oh, I can't put hands on Coach Fangio,'" Williams said.

That's no typo. The 60-year-old Fangio charged into the full-pads scuffle, took both hands to Williams' chest plate and drove him backward almost 10 yards before letting go. Williams, several days after the skirmish, smiled and told The Denver Post: "(Fangio) was low, had leverage, hands inside, nice and tight with feet driving. It was like he was an offensive lineman out there."

Coach appreciated the humor as well — "It must have been a favorable angle or I wouldn't have done it," Fangio quipped — but his intent was no laughing matter. Fangio strictly prohibited fighting through training camp and he was the first to shut it down when things got hot.

Translation: Don't just talk about it. Be about it.

"Those inches add up, and when those inches add up, you're in a losing program," Broncos' general manager John Elway said. "(Fangio) says, 'I promise you, we will not kill ourselves by inches.' And I thought that was the best thing that he said in the (job) interview."

But the catchphrase "Death by Inches" has not been thrown around much at news conferences since Fangio was introduced as the head coach when he offered his philosophy. He's now more concerned about the implementation of his methods. Study Fangio's coaching habits and it's clear that the message has sparked initial flames of a Broncos' culture change.

SONG AND DANCE

Fangio made two small changes at training camp practice this summer: no blaring music and game jerseys instead of practice jerseys.

A typical Vance Joseph-led Broncos practice featured sideline loudspeakers pumping out player-approved music playlists. The players likely appreciated the energy and tempo as many Broncos would dance along in drill lines. The loud volume is also a decent substitute for crowd noise.

Fangio disagrees. He cut music entirely from training camp practices with the exception of a few songs during stretch lines and a NASCAR race sound during scrimmage periods that more accurately mimics an NFL game environment.

“Anybody who’s been a position coach or an assistant coach, they don’t like the music because it makes it hard to talk to your guys, so I don’t see the benefit of having music,” Fangio said. “I was an assistant coach and I don’t want to have to drum out the noise to talk to my players. There’s no music in games. … Noise by definition sounds annoying. Music sounds nice so if we have to deal with noise let’s deal with noise.”

Defensive end Derek Wolfe dismissed the notion that players are unable to focus with music blaring at practice but appreciated the clarity that silence provides. He said: “You can come to the sideline and you can talk to guys because without the music guys are locked in on what’s happening on the field. … You can get the advice that you need.”

The decision to ditch traditional practice jerseys, typically more loose-fitting than game uniforms, made too much sense to reject.

“The whole reason we do that is to cut down on the grabbing,” Fangio said. “When you wear the loose shirts, it’s very easy, almost unavoidable, for the players to grab each other when they’re going against each other. … It’s not easy to grab in the game because they’re tight. So we want to make it game-like as much as we can. That’s why we practice with them.”

ON-TIME IS LATE

Among the many reasons for of back-to-back losing seasons inside Broncos headquarters, if you ask some players, was a lack of punctuality for team meetings.

“Last year we had guys coming in two seconds before and they’re not even seated by the time of the meeting,” fullback Andy Janovich said. “But they’re there now. … We start five minutes early.”

Fangio leads a meeting every day in which he speaks to the entire group. While his message varies, the intent is consistent, with aggressive attention a key component.

Outside linebacker Bradley Chubb: “Every team meeting in the afternoon, we start off with situational; whether it be our offense, defense, four-minute, two-minute, end of half and stuff like that.”

Wide receiver Courtland Sutton: “We have times in practice where it’ll be something where coach (Fangio) will just throw 10 seconds on the clock and be like, ‘Hey, 10 seconds at the end of the half, what’s the situation?’ So that we can all know so that whenever we get in the game, it’s not like big-eyed and everybody’s like, ‘What are we supposed to do?’”

Fangio also uses meeting time to hold players accountable for their mistakes. Undrafted rookie or accomplished veteran, it doesn’t matter, as Fangio aims to make corrections in plain sight.

Wide receiver Juwann Winfree: “In the meetings, he points (mistakes) out: ‘This is your fault.’ ”

Defensive tackle Shelby Harris: “Last year, I felt like accountability was a word that was thrown out a lot and a lot of people felt like a lot of people weren’t being held accountable. This year, there is none of that.”

One facet of “Death by Inches” is capitalizing on the Broncos’ greatest strengths.

Case in point: Cornerback Chris Harris.

The four-time Pro Bowler enters his ninth NFL season accustomed to change. Harris has played for four head coaches (John Fox, Gary Kubiak, Vance Joseph and Fangio) and five defensive coordinators (Dennis Allen, Jack Del Rio, Wade Phillips, Joe Woods and Ed Donatell). Harris missed the initial portion of the offseason training program while restructuring the final year of his contract, but he jumped in open-minded to whatever role Fangio envisioned.

Nowadays Harris can’t stop smiling when asked to describe his relationship with Fangio.

“He’s telling me different routes I can steal once it comes game time and how he wants me to play this and different coverages,” Harris said. “He’s different than all my coaches I’ve ever had. I haven’t had a coach tell me, ‘When you see this, you’re going to be able to pick this,’ and (Fangio) told me that on like 10 plays. I’ve never had that.”

BAND OF BROTHERS

An often overlooked aspect of the player-coach relationship: A simple acceptance and understanding of personal differences and similarities which make NFL locker rooms a cultural melting pot.

That’s why Fangio recently played clips in a team meeting from the NFL Network documentary series “A Football Life” from a 2012 episode on the Fearsome Foursome; a nickname given to the Los Angeles Rams’ defensive line of the 1960s and 70s. Beyond their distinction as the “most dominant line in football history” by Pro Football Hall of Famer Dick Butkus, the unit featured white and black players during a racially charged era of American history. The documentary examines their legacy and enduring friendship long after their football careers ended.

Safety Will Parks called Fangio’s decision to share the film with Broncos players “one of the greatest things you can do as a coach.”

“Coach Vic put that tape on to create a brotherhood among each other,” Parks said. “We could be The Fearsome 53-men, you know? … I told all my teammates, I said, ‘Coach, what he did right there, that little thing right there, y’all don’t even know big that’s going to be for us down the road.’

“When we’re in a playoff game and when we win that game … I’m gonna look back and say, ‘Hey, man, remember when we watched that movie?’ We’re together now. We’ve got to be together through all this. And football, it teaches you so much. That’s one of the biggest little things that Coach Vic did so far.”

How Vic Fangio's "Death by Inches" mantra with Broncos was born in Philly

By Sean Keeler
Denver Post
September 5, 2019

It was born in a USFL special teams meeting room in Philadelphia, or thereabouts, in 1984. Ish.

Even for Joe Marciano, the man credited with introducing Vic Fangio's signature phrase, his mantra — "Death by Inches" — with the Denver Broncos, the specifics get a little, well, hazy.

"Yeah, I can't believe I heard it from anybody else," the 65-year-old Marciano laughs. "I might've read it somewhere. I read a lot of coaching books and motivational books."

The short version? The birth of the Death came at the end of one of Marciano's special teams meetings with the old Philadephia Stars, because a few players in particular had cheesed Marciano the heck off.

Fangio, who was working with Marciano on the Stars staff, happened to be in the room at the time, taking careful mental notes.

At the end of the meeting, Marciano would say, "Ready," and the players would respond by shouting, in unison, "Break!"

"And I said, 'Let's have everybody do it and see how it sounds,'" recalls Marciano, a special teams coordinator for five NFL teams from 1986-2018, and one of the Broncos coach's oldest pals.

"So everybody would in unison would clap their hands. And then I said, 'OK, let's do it again and remember what it sounds like.'

"And I said, 'OK, just the offensive guys do it.'

"And then I said, 'Just the defensive guys,' and then, 'Just the defensive backs.'

"And the decibels were a lot lower. And when I said, 'ready, break,' the whole team sounds like half of the group's not doing it. (I said), 'If it's not important for you guys to say "break…"

"And that's when we said, 'death by inches' — if it's not important for you guys to say 'break' and clap your hands, it's not important for you to use the right technique or be in the right stance. It's not going to win us a ballgame, but it's going to tell me where our focus is. It was high school-ish, but I told a (player) once, 'You let the decibels go down, we have an issue.'"

The message? The devil's in the details.

Every detail, no matter how trivial. Add up enough paper cuts — being late for meetings, letting little things slip — and a flesh wound starts to form.

“It was a thing about discipline, you know what I mean?” chuckles Marciano, who grew up near Fangio in Dunmore, Pa., and was four-and-a-half years his senior. “Yeah, it’s contagious. I’ve said it. Other coaches have said it.”

Most notably, Tony Dungy — who had Marciano on his staff in Tampa Bay from 1996-2001 — has dropped “death by inches” in a public setting, as has University of Arizona men’s basketball coach Sean Miller.

“And other players have said it,” Marciano says. “Tony Dungy has said it’s true, it’s so true, how it works.”

Broncos stadium now named Empower Field at Mile High

By Marshall Zalinger and Mike Klis
KUSA
September 5, 2019

For the next 21 years, the Denver Broncos will be playing at the newly named stadium of "Empower Field at Mile High."

The Broncos and Greenwood Village-based Empower Retirement formalized an agreement late Tuesday night that will place the name of the nation's second-largest retirement plan provider on the face of the team's stadium through the 2039 season.

Send those game programs to re-write. The Broncos will be officially playing at Empower Field at Mile High for their home opener September 15 against the Chicago Bears.

"Great company, local company with about 3,000 employees,'' Joe Ellis, the Broncos' chief executive officer and president, said in a joint 9NEWS interview along with Empower CEO Ed Murphy III. "Very forward thinking, very innovative. Wanting to be, as Pat Bowlen once said, the best at everything. Took a while, obviously, to get to this point but we found the right partner and I'm really excited to have Empower Retirement come forward and we're looking forward to having the name Empower Field at Mile High in lights on September 15 when we open up against the Bears.''

Let's start with that name. As football stadiums go, "Empower Field" is as strong as it gets.

"It got our attention, there's no question about that,'' Ellis said. "There were a lot of people involved and the first thing everybody said, 'Wow, that's a great name.' And it is. It exemplifies something that is emblematic of pro football, so we're very fortunate.''

The Broncos had been looking for a stadium name sponsor since Sports Authority filed bankruptcy in 2016. The temporary name of Broncos Stadium at Mile High was used last season and during the recently completed preseason. Temporary signs of "Empower Field at Mile Stadium" will go up immediately.

The Metropolitan Football Stadium District owns the stadium and must sign off on the deal between the Broncos and Empower, but that will be a formality. A board of directors manages the stadium on behalf of taxpayers in Adams, Arapahoe, Boulder, Broomfield, Denver, Douglas and Jefferson counties. The Broncos lease the stadium from taxpayers.

The City of Denver must approve the permanent Empower signage.

While the Broncos held discussions with several companies about becoming a stadium naming sponsor the collapse of Sports Authority, it helped that the Broncos already had existing relationship with Empower, which had been a team sponsor since 2015.

"No question about it,'' Murphy said. "We started off in 2015 and obviously it was great year, a terrific time to become engaged with the Broncos. We've had a loyal following for some time. We're 6,000 employees across the country with the headquarters here in Greenwood Village and nearly 3,000 associates. So we wanted to get involved.

“And quite honestly, it’s done wonders for our brand. We’re a young brand. We’re a company that basically came together five years ago for all intents and purposes. We’re No. 2 in the market today and growing at a good clip which is important. We’re excited about this partnership.’’

The stadium in which the Broncos have played since 2001 was initially named Invesco Field at Mile High.

Sports Authority became the stadium’s name from 2011 until it folded in 2016. The retailer paid roughly $6 million a year on average – the stadium district getting roughly $3 million a year and the Broncos getting slightly less.

The team picked up the payments starting in 2016, yet decided to extend the “Sports Authority” moniker through the 2017 season before temporarily renaming it Broncos Stadium at Mile High last year.

“That’s the whole thing: We found the right partner,’’ Ellis said. “We found a great partner. They’ve always been a great partner since 2015 and for them to step up this way – it’s not a relief. It’s just exciting and it’s something the fans deserve. They deserve to have the right name on this building and now they’ve got it.’’

Financial terms were not available although one source told 9NEWS it was close to the deal the district and team had with Sports Authority.

Since the advent of stadium naming rights sponsors some 25 years ago, results have been mixed. The sponsored names have not always been durable as the Broncos’ venue is near the norm with Empower becoming its third naming sponsor in 19 years.

Murphy was well-aware of the history, yet committed to a deal so far in the future, Broncos’ quarterback Joe Flacco will be eligible for the 55-and-over senior discount at Denny’s before it expires.

“You don’t enter into a long-term agreement without confidence in your long-term commitment,’’ Murphy said. “ We’ve built a very good business, a sustainable business. And we’re continuing to grow. We continue to hire more and more employees in Denver and around the country.

“And so building a brand takes time. We’re a young brand and we know it will take years to build a brand that is truly viable across the country.

“Frankly, we could have made a lot of different decisions in terms of what is the best way to deploy that capital. And we felt the best way to deploy it was is in the community that we call home and to make a commitment to this community and this organization. I have complete confidence that Empower is going to be around for a long time with the Broncos and the Denver community.’’

According to its website, Empower administers $638 billion in investments for 9.2 million participants for 38,000 organizations. Only Fidelity has bigger numbers. In Colorado, Empower serving 212,000 residents within nearly 5,000 plans.

Empower has 2,700 employees in its Greenwood Village headquarters and 6,200 employees across 40 offices in the United States and India. A subsidiary of Great-West Lifeco Inc., Empower has volunteered more 20,000 hours in community service for nearly 1,000 non-profit organizations, including nearly 500 in Colorado.

Although naming rights represents a small piece of the Broncos' overall revenue, nearly all of it is allocated towards stadium maintenance. Since the stadium opened in 2001, the Broncos and Stadium District have spent nearly $100 million in upgrades, according to the team.

The second most significant aspect of a stadium naming rights deal is its far-reaching visibility. Besides hosting at least one game before a nationally televised audience each year, the stadium holds nearly 275 non-Broncos events each year from Garth Brooks and Rolling Stones concerts to soccer games and monster truck rallies to weddings, luncheons and private parties.

Securing the naming-rights deal finishes off a big week for Ellis. The Bill Bowlen lawsuit against Ellis and two other trustees of the Pat Bowlen Trust was dismissed "in its entirety" by an Arapahoe County District Judge. And now "Empower" headlines the team's stadium name.

"No, a sense of excitement,'' Ellis said. "I'm thrilled to be able to go into the season with the commitment Ed has made with Empower Field at Mile High and optimistic about what the future holds for the team.

"Coach Vic has done a good job coming in and being very steady for this team. I know our fans are excited to see how we do on the field. Ed talked about the long-term commitment – his commitment allows us to have a long-term commitment to this building.

"That was a big part of our discussion. From Ed's standpoint he asked a lot of really good questions: 'How long is this building going to be here? Are you guys really going to stay in this stadium for the long term?'

"And I don't see any reason why we shouldn't at all. It's a great venue. It's a real part of our cultural fabric here. And now we have the right partner with the right name. So we're going to be here a long, long time.''

What is Empower, the company behind Mile High's new name?

By Marshall Zalinger
KUSA
September 5, 2019

The Denver Broncos have sold the naming rights to the stadium, and no, it still won't officially be called Mile High Stadium.

Empower Retirement, based in Greenwood Village, Colo., has inked a deal to put its company's name on the stadium.

The name will be Empower Field at Mile High.

According to its website, Empower Retirement, is the second-largest retirement services provider in the United States, with more than nine million participants.

In 2015, Empower signed sponsorships deals with the Broncos and, brace yourself, the Kansas City Chiefs and New England Patriots.

The stadium has gone through three other names and two corporate sponsors.

When it replaced Mile High Stadium in 2001, the stadium was called Invesco Field at Mile High.

In 2011, Invesco sold the naming rights to Englewood-based Sports Authority, which changed the name to Sports Authority Field at Mile High.

In 2016, Sports Authority filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy.

The name of the now-defunct sporting goods store stayed on the stadium for almost two years, until the Broncos bought the naming rights and changed the signs to say Broncos Stadium at Mile High.

The Metropolitan Football Stadium District owns the stadium and must sign off on the deal between the Broncos and Empower. A board of directors manages the stadium on behalf of taxpayers in Adams, Arapahoe, Boulder, Broomfield, Denver, Douglas and Jefferson counties. The Broncos lease the stadium from taxpayers.

What happens to the three Broncos logos on the north, east and west sides of the stadium that replaced the Sports Authority signs? Good question. We'll ask the Broncos and get an answer.

When Invesco entered into a naming rights agreement with the district prior to the stadium's opening in 2001, Invesco agreed to pay $60 million through 2021. The company also paid the Broncos $60 million for advertising in the stadium.

The naming rights agreement was backloaded, starting at $2 million in the first year and gradually increasing to $4.6 million in 2020. When Sports Authority took over in 2011, there was still more than $32 million remaining to be paid in the original deal with Invesco.

The Broncos bought the naming rights in 2018, with more than $12 million remaining. The district board has allowed the team to pay in quarterly installments, instead of annually in August.

The money from naming rights gets spent on upgrades at the stadium.

In 2018, the Broncos estimated that it would need $500 million over the next 30 years to keep the stadium updated.

Last month, the city approved a master plan for a stadium district that would allow the development of the concrete parking lots south of the stadium. A tax generated from the development would also contribute to the upkeep of Mile High Sta…er, Empower Field at Mile High.

POLITICIANS REACT TO EMPOWER NAMING RIGHTS DEAL

Gov. Jared Polis (D) posted on Facebook, "It’s good to see that the Denver Broncos reached an agreement with a local company for stadium naming rights. The stadium will now be called Empower Field at Mile High."

Former Denver Mayor Wellington Webb, who wanted to preserve the name "Mile High Stadium" told Next in a text message:

"Today, the Denver Broncos had a missed opportunity to name the stadium Pat Bowlen Field at Mile High Stadium after the patriarch of their team. As for the new name change, I know myself, as well as thousands of Bronco fans will always call the stadium 'Mile High Stadium.'"

Current Denver Mayor Michael Hancock sided with Polis:

"I'm excited the Broncos we're able to secure a new naming rights partner for Mile High! This is a local partner fans know well and respect."

Broncos hope newly acquired CFL import can solve return woes

By Jeff Legwold
ESPN
September 5, 2019

The Denver Broncos could open the regular season with a 27-year-old rookie who stands all of 5-foot-8-inches tall -- maybe -- catching punts. Maybe kickoffs, too. A guy who has spent the past four years in the Canadian Football League and the summer with the Pittsburgh Steelers.

But if Diontae Spencer can unpack, learn fast and show enough in a week's worth of practices, he could be the Broncos' return man come Monday Night Football at the Oakland Raiders in Week 1.

Or as Broncos coach Vic Fangio said earlier this week after seeing Spencer in all of one workout: "I think we're planning on it."

"It's a big opportunity, I'm just blessed to be here," Spencer said. "This is my first time in Denver. I'm just ready to get here, work, get to know everybody, my teammates, coaches and just play football."

The Steelers waived Spencer on Saturday when rosters leaguewide went to 53 players, and he arrived in Denver Sunday night. By Monday afternoon he was already catching most of the punts and Fangio was already acting like he had his fingers that crossed Spencer could be a solution. When asked early in camp about the team's punt returner, Fangio had said "We don't have one right now.''

The Broncos haven't returned a punt for a touchdown since Omar Bolden ran one back 83 yards against the Indianapolis Colts in November 2015. The team hasn't returned a kickoff for a score since 2013. Last season the Broncos' top two punt returners -- River Cracraft and Adam Jones -- averaged 3.3 and 2.5 yards, respectively per return.

Enter Spencer, who certainly fits the profile of a fall-through-the-cracks player. He's undersized and played at a non-Power 5 school (McNeese State). He was not selected in the 2014 draft despite a game during his senior year against Stephen F. Austin when he returned two kickoffs and a punt for touchdowns. He wasn't signed as an undrafted rookie, either, in the days following that draft. Instead, his first attempt at an NFL rookie year in '14 consisted of a week's worth of practices with the Chicago Bears and a stint with the Rams when he was added in May and then cut in July.

So, Spencer went to Canada, land of three-down football on a 110-yard field with 20-yard end zones, as one season turned to two, two to three and finally four.

"I never thought it would take four years, but each year I always thought I had the opportunity and that window was always opened for me so it's just -- I feel like right now it's just the perfect time," Spencer said.

Spencer played 57 games over the past four years in the CFL, including three years with at least 71 receptions. He set several team and league records along the way -- he spent two years in Toronto and

two years in Ottawa -- including a single-game mark of 496 all-purpose yards against Hamilton in 2017 (133 yards receiving, 165 yards on kickoff returns and 169 yards on punt returns).

With the Steelers in the preseason, Spencer had the team's longest run from scrimmage, longest punt return and longest kickoff return. And if Spencer could somehow contribute in some way on offense or return kickoffs for the Broncos, it would be a tidy little bonus.

What the Broncos really want, however, is for Spencer to be their punt returner, to be more than the well-he-caught-it guy.

"He's got a lot of experience doing it," Fangio said. "He's quick, fast and he's a seasoned returner."

Spencer returned a whopping 191 punts in his four CFL seasons, including 82 in 2018. To put that into perspective, Cracraft led the Broncos with 12 punt returns last season and the Broncos had 30 as a team.

Tarik Cohen was the only player in the NFL to have more than 23 punt returns last season, finishing with 33 for the Bears.

"[I want] to put the offense in great field position and if I can score, it'll happen," Spencer said. "For me it's all about going out there, letting the game come to me and just playing fast. It's going to be a lot of emotions, but that's a part of being a pro. I'm just excited to get out there ... it's been a long time coming."

Biggest Week 1 injury questions for all 32 NFL teams: Latest on OBJ, Thomas and more

By Staff
ESPN
September 5, 2019

AFC EAST

Buffalo Bills

Will offensive tackle Ty Nsekhe (knee) and guard Quinton Spain (ankle) hold up against an aggressive Jets defense? Both projected starters are practicing in full after missing time at the end of the preseason, but their healed injuries will be put to the test against what should be an attacking defensive front seven. They both should play Sunday; how often they'll need to rotate out of the game is the question. -- Marcel Louis-Jacques

Miami Dolphins

Running back Kenyan Drake missed two weeks of practice with a right foot injury that had him in a walking boot, but coach Brian Flores said Drake is physically and mentally ready for Week 1. Drake participated in practice Wednesday and looked good in cutting drills. He was listed as the starting running back in the Dolphins' Week 1 depth chart, and Flores said he is "looking forward to getting him a lot of touches this week." -- Cameron Wolfe

New England Patriots

Wide receiver Demaryius Thomas has been limited in practice with a hamstring injury, and top tight end Matt LaCosse (ankle) also isn't practicing in full. With receiver Josh Gordon still working himself into top playing condition, Thomas projects to assume some of the receiver load, if healthy. Julian Edelman and Gordon are the top receivers, with Phillip Dorsett also likely to play a notable role. Then it is Thomas and undrafted free agents Jakobi Meyers and Gunner Olszewski. -- Mike Reiss

New York Jets
The Jets will never be healthier than they are right now. Starting cornerback Trumaine Johnson, who missed most of the preseason with a hamstring injury, is practicing and expected to play. His overall conditioning is in question because he missed four weeks; that bears watching. Wide receiver Robby Anderson, who tweaked a calf muscle last week, should be ready to go. -- Rich Cimini

AFC NORTH

Baltimore Ravens
There's one choice here: cornerback Brandon Carr. He is the only player listed on the Ravens' injury report. All 53 players participated in Wednesday's practice. Carr, who has a hip injury, was limited. But there isn't much concern about Carr, the iron man of NFL defenders. He has started every game in his 11-year career. His streak of 176 starts currently ranks behind only that of Philip Rivers (208) league-wide. -- Jamison Hensley

Cincinnati Bengals

Bengals starting left tackle Cordy Glenn still is dealing with concussion-like symptoms, which doesn't bode well for the opener at Seattle. If Glenn is out, his backup, Andre Smith, will have to contend with a revamped Seahawks defensive line that just added Jadeveon Clowney. Clowney and fellow defensive end Ezekiel Ansah could give Cincy's tackles a ton of problems. -- Ben Baby

Cleveland Browns

Wide receiver Odell Beckham Jr. didn't play in the preseason while battling a nagging hip injury. But last week, he returned to full practice activities, and Browns coach Freddie Kitchens said Wednesday that OBJ "will be ready to go" Sunday against Tennessee. -- Jake Trotter

Pittsburgh Steelers
Safety Sean Davis (ankle), the lone player on the Steelers' injury report Wednesday, eyes a Week 1 return but must show significant progress during Thursday and Friday practices to have a chance. Davis plays a key role as a free safety in base defense and a linebacker in certain sub packages, so getting him back will help keep safety mates Terrell Edmunds and Kameron Kelly fresh. -- Jeremy Fowler

AFC SOUTH

Houston Texans

Bill O'Brien said he isn't hopeful that wide receiver Keke Coutee will play Monday against the Saints. Coutee injured his ankle in the preseason opener and missed most of training camp, but he is "trending in the right direction," according to O'Brien. If Coutee doesn't play, DeAndre Carter or Kenny Stills could see more time in the slot. -- Sarah Barshop

Indianapolis Colts

The Colts are the healthiest they've been at any point, going back to the start of training camp. Starting defensive end Jabaal Sheard (knee) is the only significant player on the team's injury report. He has been out since early in training camp. He won't play against the Chargers, and general manager Chris Ballard recently said Sheard isn't a candidate to go on injured reserve. Al-Quadin Muhammad has been working with the starting unit in Sheard's absence. -- Mike Wells

Jacksonville Jaguars

Quarterback Nick Foles is dealing with soreness in his oblique, but the team expects him to play on Sunday. Foles did not get injured in his only preseason action; the soreness is related to the amount of throwing he has done in camp. Coach Doug Marrone has had the starters take extra reps in practice to make up for their playing less than a half in the preseason. Expect the Jaguars to be careful with Foles so the injury doesn't become a chronic problem. -- Mike DiRocco

Tennessee Titans
Right tackle Jack Conklin was listed on the injury report after not practicing Wednesday. He is recovering from a knee injury that landed him on injured reserve last season and required a medical procedure during the offseason. -- Turron Davenport

AFC WEST

Denver Broncos

Linebacker Todd Davis has not practiced since the first week of training camp, when he suffered a calf injury. While Davis was on the practice field Wednesday, he participated in only some brief stretching and did not take part in any individual or team drills. Broncos coach Vic Fangio said after practice that Davis was "still questionable.'' Davis had been the team's three-down linebacker in offseason workouts -- the guy who went from the base defense and stayed in the lineup when they went to the nickel or dime look -- but in his absence, rookie Justin Hollins, Alexander Johnson and Josey Jewell have all been used inside in practices. The Broncos figure to be in the nickel the majority of the time on Monday if the Raiders give Denver a heavy dose of three-receiver sets. For the nickel LB to be Davis, he will have to improve significantly before the week is out. Once he is on the field, he has some ground to make up since he hasn't practiced with the defense since July. -- Jeff Legwold

Kansas City Chiefs

The Chiefs should have all 53 players available to them on Sunday, but one injury to watch is that of safety Tyrann Mathieu. He hurt his shoulder in an early preseason game and played only a handful of snaps in the exhibition season. Mathieu will start Sunday, but it will be intriguing to see how he holds up. -- Adam Teicher

Los Angeles Chargers

The Chargers placed All-Pro safety Derwin James on the injured reserve list this week after he recently had surgery to repair a stress fracture in his right foot. James is expected to be out until at least November. Adrian Phillips will start at strong safety with James out, bringing a solid, veteran presence to the starting lineup. However, the Chargers will miss the playmaking ability of James. "No one is flinching," Chargers head coach Anthony Lynn said. "We're going to miss him. I can tell you that. We're going to miss him, but we're ready to play without him." -- Eric D. Williams

Oakland Raiders

Offensive lineman Denzelle Good was expected to miss the first two months of the season after undergoing offseason back surgery. Instead, he is in line to start at right guard for the injured Gabe Jackson in Monday night's season opener -- so long as his back cooperates. "He's doing great," Raiders coach Jon Gruden said this week of Good, who did not play a snap in the preseason. "It'll be a fun game. When you watch Denver play in the preseason, you don't see some of their players very much. When they watch our preseason tape, they probably aren't going to see some of the guys that are going to play against them very much. It'll be a real fun, interesting Monday night game." -- Paul Gutierrez

NFC EAST

Dallas Cowboys

Running back Ezekiel Elliott was not on the injury report after his first practice with the Cowboys following a summer holdout, but he said he felt good after the workout and could handle whatever workload the Cowboys give him. A benefit to Elliott would be a healthy Amari Cooper, who went through a full practice for the first time since injuring his heel in the first week of August and expects to be full-go Sunday against

the Giants. Guard Zack Martin was limited for most of his time in training camp because of a back injury, but the expectation is that he will play against the Giants. -- Todd Archer

New York Giants

The Giants are relatively healthy, with right tackle Mike Remmers (illness/back) the only starter in jeopardy for Sunday versus the Cowboys. Pat Shurmur didn't mention Remmers during his Wednesday news conference before practice, but the coach did say this: "If there's a big injury or something, we'll talk about it. But if there's a guy that's going to end up being out there on Sunday, I won't mess with it too much." Remmers likely falls into the latter category, which is vital considering that he will be matched against Dallas' Pro Bowl end, DeMarcus Lawrence. -- Jordan Raanan

Philadelphia Eagles

Wide receiver DeSean Jackson has been wearing extra protection around his broken left ring finger during practice this week, but he is on target to play against Washington. That the injury is on his non-dominant hand should help make catching the football a bit easier than if it were on the right hand. Defensive tackle Fletcher Cox (foot) and right guard Brandon Brooks, who is just eight months removed from an Achilles tendon rupture, also intend to play. Brooks' backup, Halapoulivaati Vaitai, is waiting in the wings in the event that the team changes course or Brooks needs a breather. -- Tim McManus

Washington Redskins

Tight end Jordan Reed remains in the concussion protocol, but he was able to participate in meetings as well as individual work. That marked the first time Reed has done so since he suffered the concussion in the third preseason game. The Redskins have been optimistic that Reed will play versus Philadelphia on Sunday, but until he is cleared, their fingers will be crossed. Winning on the road will be tough without Reed. "He's an elite player," Redskins coach Jay Gruden said. "He changes the game considerably for us." -- John Keim

NFC NORTH

Chicago Bears

The Bears list tight end Trey Burton (groin strain) as a game-time decision after he practiced all week on a limited basis. Chicago claims that Burton's latest groin injury is unrelated to the sports hernia surgery he underwent in the offseason, but the setback is troubling nonetheless. "I feel like it is getting slightly better, but we'll make that decision as we go," Bears coach Matt Nagy said. "But it'll end up being pretty much a game-time decision, and that's all we can really do. We're prepared both ways." Look for tight ends Adam Shaheen and Ben Braunecker to play larger roles in the event that Burton is inactive versus Green Bay. -- Jeff Dickerson

Detroit Lions

The Lions didn't have anyone completely sit out of Wednesday's practice, but considering linebacker Jarrad Davis (ankle), defensive end Da'Shawn Hand (elbow) and cornerback Rashaan Melvin (knee) all did very little in individual drills during practice Tuesday and Wednesday, the status of those three key defensive players is going to be a major question. Detroit will rely more on Mike Daniels and Romeo

Okwara if Hand can't play, and it will likely look to Jalen Reeves-Maybin and perhaps Jahlani Tavai if Davis can't go. The Lions have a lot of untested options if Melvin can't play, so his potential absence would be the biggest concern. -- Michael Rothstein

Green Bay Packers

The Packers would love to have their preferred cornerback duo of Jaire Alexander and Kevin King for every snap, but King missed more than a month of training camp and all four preseason games because of a hamstring injury, so they're going to have to see how much he can handle. "We're optimistic that we'll be able to handle some of the workload, but I doubt it would be -- for any player that's had that period of inactivity -- I doubt it will be a full game," defensive coordinator Mike Pettine said. The other question is tight end Jimmy Graham, who sustained a finger injury late in training camp and has been practicing with two fingers on his right hand taped together. "He told me, 'What finger? It's game week,'" Packers coach Matt LaFleur said of Graham. -- Rob Demovsky

Minnesota Vikings

Stefon Diggs missed Wednesday's practice with a hamstring injury after making it through six weeks of the preseason without missing a beat. It could be that the Vikings want to exercise precaution with Diggs by holding him out, but the amount of work he gets on Thursday and Friday will be important in determining his availability for the Falcons game. Mike Hughes, who was removed from the physically unable to perform list last week, returned to practice in limited capacity for the first time since he tore his ACL in October. Although coach Mike Zimmer said the former first-round cornerback is "getting real close" to playing, the safe bet is to expect that Hughes will be sidelined until at least Week 3 or 4. Right tackle Brian O'Neill (elbow) and Linval Joseph (shoulder) were full participants after missing a majority of the preseason with injuries. Zimmer said he is expecting O'Neill to be able to play on Sunday. -- Courtney Cronin

NFC SOUTH

Atlanta Falcons

The only injury to pop up for the Falcons was that of tackle Matt Gono, who was limited Wednesday with a back injury. That's significant because Gono is supposed to be competing with rookie Kaleb McGary for the starting role, with veteran Ty Sambrailo the other tackle option the Falcons have considered. The Falcons like Gono, but putting him out there with a bad back for his first NFL start probably wouldn't be wise against Danielle Hunter and the Vikings' strong pass rush. McGary still has to get his conditioning after missing several weeks following a heart procedure. -- Vaughn McClure

Carolina Panthers

Outside linebacker Bruce Irvin, signed as a free agent to help the Panthers transition to a 3-4 front, has missed the last week of practice with a hamstring injury. If he is unable to go, first-round pick Brian Burns would be elevated to a starter. Irvin declined to talk about his injury, but he didn't appear too concerned. Burns said he is ready for whatever role he has to play this week. -- David Newton
New Orleans Saints

The Saints don't have to issue their first practice report until Thursday, given that they play Monday night. But coach Sean Payton said he expects linebacker Alex Anzalone to play. It seems likely that tight end Jared Cook will too, since the Saints kept only two tight ends on the 53-man roster. The only player that we know for sure is out is defensive tackle Sheldon Rankins. That will be a problem area since his top backup, David Onyemata, is serving a one-game suspension. -- Mike Triplett

Tampa Bay Buccaneers

Bucs defensive tackle Vita Vea returned to practice this week for the first time in a month after suffering a sprained lateral collateral ligament in his left knee. Vea plays a big role in Todd Bowles' defense as a space-eater, rushing the passer and freeing up linebackers to attack. His presence also makes it difficult to double-team Ndamukong Suh. But how much can Vea realistically play after missing so much time, assuming he does play? "The training room, they've been running me to the ground," Vea said. "I feel good. I feel like I haven't missed a step conditioning-wise. Everything's just mental right now to get back into it." -- Jenna Laine

NFC WEST

Arizona Cardinals

Cardinals linebacker Haason Reddick has been slowly returning over the past week from the arthroscopic knee surgery he had in July. Coach Kliff Kingsbury said Reddick will "be out there" on Sunday against the Lions, but his snap count and role remain unknown. -- Josh Weinfuss

Los Angeles Rams

In an effort to go into Week 1 of the season fresh and healthy, Rams coach Sean McVay did not play starters or key reserves throughout the preseason. The Rams will feature a healthy roster in its entirety against the Panthers. "Everyone's good to go," McVay said. -- Lindsey Thiry

San Francisco 49ers

Rookie defensive end Nick Bosa returned to practice Monday for the first time since he suffered an ankle sprain on Aug. 6. Afterward, Bosa sounded like a man determined to play on Sunday in Tampa: "I don't think I've ever been as motivated in my life to get back," Bosa said. "I've had my sights set on playing my first NFL season, and every waking hour was spent getting my ankle right." Barring a setback, it looks like those efforts will pay off and the Niners will have the No. 2 overall pick for the opener. -- Nick Wagoner

Seattle Seahawks

Rookie receiver DK Metcalf practiced Monday and Wednesday, but there's no definitive word on whether he'll play Sunday. The Seahawks' opener against Cincinnati will be only 19 days from when he had what coach Pete Carroll described as "minimal" surgery on his knee, so Metcalf's availability for that contest has been in question all along. Metcalf was running last week, but he will have had only one week of practice by Sunday, which is one fewer than the Seahawks prefer with players coming off injury absences. With David Moore still out, Metcalf's absence would mean a bump up the depth chart for John Ursua and/or Gary Jennings. The two rookie receivers haven't looked as NFL-ready as Metcalf, who was running with the starters before his surgery. -- Brady Henderson

How the Broncos' three-year search for a naming rights partner finally ended

By Nicki Jhabvala and Daniel Kaplan
The Athletic
September 5, 2019

The Broncos may not know their future owner, but they now have clarity with one major unsettled piece of business. The team on Wednesday announced a 21-year agreement with Denver-based Empower Retirement as naming rights partner for their stadium, now called Empower Field at Mile High.

The deal will run through 2039 and is pending the approval of the Metropolitan Football Stadium District, but the final OK is considered a formality. Once signed, the contract will end the Broncos' laborious and costly search for a naming rights partner that spanned more than three years and included discussions with multiple companies.

"It came together fairly quickly," Broncos president/CEO Joe Ellis told The Athletic. "I would say in the last 2-3 months. Empower has been a partner of ours since 2015, our Super Bowl season. Empower Retirement also manages our retirement accounts here at the Broncos, so we have a great relationship with them.

"It moved very quickly because we both had the objective of getting this together, if we could do a deal, prior to the start of this season. And we were able to succeed in that endeavor and now we're off and running with Empower Field at Mile High."

Empower Retirement, the nation's second-largest retirement plan provider, is based in Greenwood Village, Colo., some five miles from the Broncos' Englewood training facility, and administers $638 billion in assets for 9.2 million retirement plan participants.

Temporary signage with Empower's logo is scheduled to arise immediately around the stadium in time for the Broncos' home opener against the Chicago Bears on Sept. 15. Plans for the permanent signage have not yet been fully approved, but there will be a mix of digital and fixed signage.

"We're going to be doing some interesting things with the lighting and movement of the signage, so I think you see a very different look and feel, relative to what we've had in the past there," said Ed Murphy, Empower Retirement's president and CEO. "Our presence in the stadium and outside the stadium far exceeds what existed previously."

Ellis and Murphy declined to provide the terms of the agreement, but The Associated Press reported that the deal is similar to the team's previous naming rights contract with Sports Authority, which was worth $6 million a year. That is far less than naming rights deals in major markets that are double to triple that amount. The two also resisted providing many details of the expected changes at the stadium, beyond greater visibility for Empower's name inside and outside the stadium.

"There's signage in both end zones, there's signage on the 50-yard-line on both sides, there are aerial signs on all four corners of the stadium, there's significant statement signs in the south end zone, and there's lots of other areas within the stadium where we'll continue to have high exposure," Murphy said.

That the companies agreed in mere months provides a strange finish to the team's lengthy search. Throughout the process, Ellis indicated discussions with other companies appeared close to an agreement, but that the team moved on at its discretion.

"There were a lot of people that we engaged with that we just couldn't get across the finish line, and those were generally our decisions because they weren't the right partner," Ellis said. "Here today, it became clear early in the discussions we started a couple months ago that this was going to be the right partner, so let's put our heads together and do a deal. And we were able to do that.

"A lot of these deals are done with home-town companies, and Empower's track record here … it speaks for itself and that was very, very appealing to us. And then the fact that they were willing to enter into a long-term agreement, that also was appealing."

As recently as March, at the NFL's owners meetings in Arizona, Ellis said the team was "narrowing down on some details with a company" and that he was "really hopeful we can bring a deal to closure."

That company was not Empower Retirement.

Ellis also indicated that the next stadium naming rights partner could have ties to the development plans around the stadium, which is slated to include retail, housing and restaurants south of the stadium. Neither he nor Murphy provided specifics on how Empower's deal may be intertwined with the development project.

Since the stadium opened in 2001 it has featured three different names. Invesco originally signed a 20-year, $120 million naming rights contract, but that deal ended in 2011 when Sports Authority took over and extended it to 25 years for $150 million.

When Sports Authority went bankrupt in 2016, the Broncos assumed the remainder of the company's contract, worth close to $20 million over five years. The team had been paying the stadium district $3.6 million annually. Since 2018, the temporary name of Broncos Stadium at Mile High had been plastered around the stadium.

Acquiring the naming rights allowed the team to maintain control over the next partner as they sought a long-term deal with a local company that was financially sound enough to fulfill its contract, unlike its last partner. Although fans called for the stadium to remain simply "Mile High Stadium," Ellis insisted a partner was necessary to help fund stadium maintenance and improvement projects that have projected to cost hundreds of millions over dollars in the coming decades. When the search started, projections were around $300 million over 30 years. That later ballooned to an estimated $650 million over 20 years.

"It's going to be north of $500 million over the next 30 years," Ellis said. "We've invested $100 million in the last 18 years into the building alone with Ray Baker and the Stadium District, who have been partners with us in this. We feel the building is in great shape, but it's always going to need to be improved, it's going to need to be modernized, it's always going to need certain things done to it to make the game-day experience the best it can possibly be."

Endeavor advised the Broncos, and Catalyst Marketing Group advised Empower.

NFL Week 1 Power Rankings: AFC South is wide open after Andrew Luck's sudden retirement

By Lindsay Jones
The Athletic
September 5, 2019

Oh thank God, the NFL regular season is here. And with it, our first regular-season power rankings!

What has happened since the last time we were here? Only one of the most stunning retirements in history, a 2018 division champion trading away one first-round pick while trading for another after the end of the preseason and an exhibition season in which four starting quarterbacks (Aaron Rodgers, Philip Rivers, Carson Wentz and Jared Goff) didn't play a single snap.

What does all this mean for the rankings? Before we dive in, a note about our methodology. This year, The Athletic's national staff, a mix of reporters, columnists and editors, will be voting on the power rankings. If you want more, make sure you listen to our companion podcast, available twice a week on iTunes and The Athletic app.

Now, on to the rankings:

32. Miami Dolphins (Preseason rank: 32)
A lot of mixed messaging is going on with the Dolphins right now. Are they in full-on tank mode? That's what the Laremy Tunsil/Kenny Stills trade to Houston would indicate. Or are they trying to win just enough games to be competitive early in the season, which would take them out of contention for the No. 1 pick in 2020? That's what the decision to name Ryan Fitzpatrick the starting quarterback over Josh Rosen seems to mean. The only thing our panel isn't confused about? The Dolphins deserve the bottom spot in the poll.

31. Arizona Cardinals (Preseason rank: 31)
The preseason left us intrigued by Kyler Murray and the Air Raid's return to the NFL, but right now, let's not confuse intrigue with optimism. We're going to need to see Murray's electric skills and Kliff Kingsbury's playcalling translate before the Cardinals climb out of the NFC basement. (And it certainly doesn't help the preseason left us with plenty of concerns about Arizona's defense as well.)

30. Cincinnati Bengals (Preseason rank: 30)
That face you see below? We just checked out the Bengals' offensive line depth chart. It's been a rough summer for Cincinnati, which is preparing to start Andre Smith at left tackle this week against Seattle. (Starting left tackle Cordy Glenn remains in the concussion protocol. Rookie first-rounder Jonah Williams isn't expected to be able to play at all this year because of an offseason shoulder injury.)

29. New York Giants (Preseason rank: 29)
Yes, we saw Daniel Jones' (or "Danny Dimes," as he has now been nicknamed) preseason highlights. No, it didn't sway our panelists into moving the Giants up the rankings. None of our voters had the Giants higher than No. 27, a sign we have much bigger concerns about the Giants' roster and spot in the NFC East hierarchy than just at quarterback.

28. Detroit Lions (Preseason rank: 27)
As much as we got a kick out of Matt Patricia coaching preseason games while perched beside a Gatorade cooler or conducting press conferences while atop an ATV, we think it's a bad sign those things are the most memorable part of the Lions' preseason. It should also be concerning to fans that executives think the Lions' roster lacks "upper-tier playmakers," according to personnel folks interviewed by The Athletic's Mike Sando.

27. Tampa Bay Buccaneers (Preseason rank: 28)
It was an extremely small sample size, just 29 pass attempts, but Jameis Winston didn't throw any interceptions in the preseason, so we'll consider that a positive start to his partnership with head coach Bruce Arians. We're going to need to see Winston continue to make good decisions when the games count before we move the Bucs any higher.

26. Washington Redskins (Preseason rank: 26)
A show of hands for who is excited for the start of the Case Keenum era. Anyone? Bueller?

No?

Wake us up when Trent Williams is back and Dwayne Haskins is under center.

25. Oakland Raiders (Preseason rank: 24)
No one could sum up the Raiders' preseason better than The Athletic's Vic Tafur did when he wrote last month that Antonio Brown is "apparently a lot pickier about what he puts on his head than what he puts on his feet." Yes, the Raiders preseason was defined by Brown's foot-and-helmet related drama, much of it chronicled by HBO's "Hard Knocks." Alas, there would be no "Hard Knocks" bump for the Raiders, as our panelists dropped Oakland one spot after seeing some of the inner workings of the franchise. There will be entertainment, though! Even if it's not the game-quality type.

24. Buffalo Bills (Preseason rank: 25)
There's always one big name to hit the free-agent market on cutdown day, and this year it was LeSean McCoy, released after four years in Buffalo. This means the Bills will go really young (rookie Devin Singletary) and really old (veteran Frank Gore) at running back. For now, we're OK with that, as the Bills actually climbed one spot once their initial 53-man roster was set.

23. New York Jets (Preseason ranking: 22)
Joe Douglas deserves a nap. In the two and a half months since Douglas was named the Jets' general manager, he's been steadily making changes to the roster, including successfully claiming four players off waivers last weekend and cutting third-round pick Jachai Polite, who his predecessor, Mike Maccagnan, drafted a mere four months ago. Yes, it's a sign the Jets are going to be a work in progress, but it's also a sign they'll be active in trying to fix old mistakes to try to more quickly build around Sam Darnold, who had a strong preseason.

22. Denver Broncos (Preseason ranking: 23)
We have two main takeaways from the Broncos preseason: One, Vic Fangio's pass rush and secondary could be very, very good (especially second-year outside linebacker Bradley Chubb), and two, the offense is still a giant question mark. This spot feels just about right for the Broncos, a team whose ceiling might not be super high, but thanks to elite defensive players such as Chubb and Von Miller, the floor might not be too low, either.

21. San Francisco 49ers (Preseason ranking: 19)
The 49ers were our biggest riser in our preseason poll, but our panelists have cooled slightly on San Francisco after some uneven practices and preseason performances from Jimmy Garappolo, as well as notable August injuries (especially to pass rushers Nick Bosa and Dee Ford, neither of whom played in exhibition games).

20. Jacksonville Jaguars (Preseason ranking: 21)
We just looked back through the Jaguars' 53-man roster, and while much of our panel's cautious optimism about the Jaguars comes from the quarterback change, we can't help but worry about the lack of elite skill position players around Nick Foles. And yet, with all the turmoil in the AFC South in the past couple of weeks, we shouldn't rule the Jaguars out, even if they seem to still be in need of a few major pieces.

19. Tennessee Titans (Preseason ranking: 20)
The Titans made a few big free-agent splashes during the spring but have made few waves in the months since, so this spot feels fitting. But they have the potential to be a big riser next week if they can go into Cleveland and win in Week 1.

18. Indianapolis Colts (Preseason ranking: 6)
Hi, Colts fans. Are you OK? You ready to talk about the Andrew Luck thing yet? Luck's surprise retirement late last month sent the Colts plummeting 12 spots in the rankings. Now it's up to Jacoby Brissett to lead a climb back toward the top 10.

17. Carolina Panthers (Preseason ranking: 18)
The good news? We're not talking about Cam Newton's shoulder this week. The bad news? We're still talking about his foot. Fingers crossed this space won't be dedicated to Newton's health for the entire season.

16. Atlanta Falcons (Preseason ranking: 16)
We're not sure what it says about the Falcons that they moved from No. 18 to No. 16 after last season and then stayed put after training camp and the preseason. We think the Falcons are pretty darn average. That's not to say that won't change, but we're waiting for the Falcons' redemption arc to begin before we put them in the top half of the rankings.

15. Green Bay Packers (Preseason ranking: 15)
Another team holding steady, which is to be expected considering how little we've actually seen of the Packers' new offense. Aaron Rodgers took zero snaps this preseason (we can partially thank the subpar field in Winnipeg for that) so we can't wait to finally see the tandem of Rodgers and new head coach Matt LeFleur in action Thursday night against Chicago.

14. Houston Texans (Preseason ranking: 17)
Is Bill O'Brien drunk with personnel power? The head coach is the Texans' de facto general manager and since our panelists last voted, O'Brien has traded defensive end Jadeveon Clowney (to Seattle) and two first-round picks and a second-round pick for left tackle Laremy Tunsil and wide receiver Kenny Stills. Plus, they traded for running back Duke Johnson. Our panel seems to agree the net sum of those moves (and perhaps the absence of Luck in the division) makes the Texans better … even if only slightly.

13. Seattle Seahawks (Preseason ranking: 14)

It is somewhat surprising the Seahawks climbed just one spot after acquiring Clowney. It fills a major void for the Seahawks, and they managed to avoid having to pay market value for an elite defensive lineman this year. Maybe they'll wind up paying Clowney more than $100 million next year, but that's a discussion for the 2020 power rankings.

12. Cleveland Browns (Preseason ranking: 10)
Our panel is tapping the brakes on the Browns' hype wagon. Cleveland dropped out of the top 10 without even playing a game. Was it Baker Mayfield's mustache? Odell Beckham Jr.'s limited practice time? Either way, the Browns now have further to climb.

11. Dallas Cowboys (Preseason ranking: 9)
Opinions from our panelists varied widely on the Cowboys, whose ceiling is substantially different with Ezekiel Elliott than without it. That makes the Cowboys a candidate for rapid upward movement now that Elliott signed his new six-year, $90 million contract with $50 million guaranteed.

10. Los Angeles Chargers (Preseason ranking: 7)
Derwin James' injury was devastating and was the biggest reason our panelists dropped the Chargers several spots. James will be irreplaceable in the L.A. secondary for the first half of the season. Add in that Melvin Gordon is still absent and the offensive line is unsettled, and it's fair to say we've got concerns about the Chargers.

9. Baltimore Ravens (Preseason ranking: 13)
A top-10 ranking to start the season shows our panel is on board with with the revamped Ravens offense. Lamar Jackson showed some flashes of progress in his preseason action and we're very curious what the Ravens' coaching staff will unveil for him Week 1 against the Dolphins.

8. Minnesota Vikings (Preseason ranking: 12)
We guess we're back in on the Vikings? Minnesota made some significant improvements this offseason that appear to be paying off, particularly on the offensive line, and our panel clearly believes even small improvements and more consistency on offense should make the Vikings an NFC contender.

7. Chicago Bears (Preseason ranking: 8)
Good news, Chicago. You've got a kicker. Now let's all hold our breath and hope Eddie Piñeiro doesn't perform poorly on Thursday night. Meanwhile, we'll also be closely watching the post-Fangio defense and furiously taking fantasy notes about the Bears' running back rotation.

6. Pittsburgh Steelers (Preseason ranking: 11)
A big jump for the Steelers over the course of the preseason. A couple likely reasons: One, rookie first-round linebacker Devin Bush looks legit and should be a front-runner for Defensive Player of the Year; two, we grew a little tired of the Browns' AFC North bandwagon; and three, the Brown drama in Oakland made the Steelers look wise for moving on. But with a Week 1 game at New England, the Steelers are a team to watch for next week.

5. Philadelphia Eagles (Preseason ranking: 5)
No Carson Wentz in the preseason meant the Eagles stayed put. We think Philadelphia could make an early statement and give our voters reason to move them further up the top five this week against Washington.

4. Los Angeles Rams (Preseason ranking: 3)
We're not sure if we should thank or blame Sean McVay for starting the trend that is making preseason games even more irrelevant, but everything we learned about the Rams in August came from practices. The ones The Athletic saw looked sharp, and we're going to head into the start of the season expecting Todd Gurley to be at full strength, which is worthy of a top-five spot.

3. New Orleans Saints (Preseason ranking: 4)
Before we see any new evidence of a decline from Drew Brees, we're keeping New Orleans firmly in the NFC contender conversation. We're hoping for the sake of Saints fans that they can make it through their Week 1 "Monday Night Football" game against Houston without an officiating debacle.

2. Kansas City Chiefs (Preseason ranking: 2)
We felt good about the Chiefs when we last voted, and even though they've stayed put at No. 2, we think it's fair to say we might feel even more confident about them now. That confidence comes from the aura coming out of Kansas City, where the Chiefs believe Patrick Mahomes can somehow be even better.

1. New England Patriots (Preseason ranking: 1)
Are the Patriots the best team right now? We think they're better now than they were a month ago thanks to Josh Gordon's reinstatement and none of us are ready to dethrone the champs just yet.

Empower Field at Mile High: Broncos agree to a 21-year naming rights deal with Empower Retirement

By Robert Garrison
KMGH
September 5, 2019

The Denver Broncos have a new name for their home stadium after agreeing to a 21-year deal with Colorado-based retirement planning company Empower Retirement.

Broncos Stadium at Mile High will now be called Empower Field at Mile High, the team announced Wednesday.

Members of the the Metropolitan Football Stadium District are expected to sign off on the agreement later this week. Temporary signage will be in place at the stadium for the Broncos' home opener against the Chicago Bears on September 15.

The contract will run through 2039 and is worth roughly $125-$130 million, according to sources familiar with the deal.

The stadium has been without a title sponsor for since August 2016 after Sports Authority went bankrupt. The Broncos purchased the remainder of that contract, allowing them to gain control of seeking a new corporate partner.

Empower Retirement is headquartered in Greenwood Village and is the second-largest retirement services provider in the United States.

Joe Flacco gives Broncos confidence; playing in Oakland not a fun trip

By Troy Renck
KMGH
September 5, 2019

Joe Flacco is a human metronome. His resting heart rate checks in around 28 beats per minute. Or it should. Nothing bothers Flacco. He sits five days away from his debut as a Bronco, five days away from dealing with the gravitational pull of the Black Hole and five days away from his ears ringing from AC/DC and Metallica, and he remains calmer than an air traffic controller.

There is a been-there-done-that vibe to Flacco's career that inspires confidence for a Broncos team seeking to snap a three-game losing streak in Oakland. Flacco owns an 8-3 record in season openers. The Broncos have won seven straight curtain pulls. They are underdogs, but believe this year's trip to the Bay will be different.

"Listen, it's nice to get back into it for a game that matters. We only get 16 games. It's gotta be the fewest in any professional sports. Everyone matters," Flacco said. "You never know which one is going to matter the most. The key is to keep it simple. That allows to play smart and play fast."

Flacco and Derek Carr compare favorably over the past five years statistically. If Flacco outplays Carr, the Broncos should win. In that regard, optimism sprouts stems of hope on the sidewalk of broken dreams. Flacco is 12-22 on the road since 2014. However, he is 1-1 at Oakland, and has played well, completing 51-of-69 passes for 606 yards, two touchdowns and a pick. Flacco's 74-percent completion percentage dwarfs the Broncos' numbers in their past three seasons in Oakland, when three different quarterbacks completed 56 percent of their passes with six touchdowns and four interceptions.

"Flacco's a baller. He's a baller, probably one of my favorite quarterbacks of all-time. Him and Peyton (Manning), they're close, neck and neck," said Sanders when I asked him what the Broncos should expect from Flacco. "I'm looking forward to going out on Sundays and competing with him week-in-and-week-out because I know what type of guy he is. I know the type of energy he's going to bring and I know he's going to be consistent with his personality because I just know it just hanging out with him. I'm looking forward to just going out and trying to showcase our talents together and hopefully we can be one of those duos and put up a lot of points and win a lot of games."

At this point, it's not even about the points. The Broncos defense seeks a quarterback that can flip the field.

"First of all Joe controls the clock," defensive end Derek Wolfe said. "That's something we lacked last year. Just holding onto the ball helps a lot."

No love for Coliseum

This is Denver's last time in Oakland. Seriously. The Broncos thought they were through with the place last December. The autumn wind might be a Raider, but the field is a potential sewer. It's like AC/DC meets Woodstock. Trust me, it's not a favorite spot among visiting players.

"It's a baseball field," nose guard Shelby Harris said. "I don't get it. How does a pro football team play on a baseball field? I don't understand who thought that was a great idea ever. It blows my mind."

Added defensive end Derek Wolfe, who called this a must-win game, "It's just the Raiders, man. It's just dirty, grimy Raiders. I don't like them. We want to beat them. You want to play well against them. No matter what the record is we always have a good game against each other."

Playing the Raiders will become a favorite stop in 2020. That's when they relocate to just off the strip in Las Vegas.

Footnotes
Coach Vic Fangio said linebacker Todd Davis (calf) remains questionable for Monday. Corey Nelson will be expected to contribute defensively and on special teams. ... The Raiders downplayed the circus surrounding star receiver Antonio Brown, who has been mired in issues from head (helmet) to toes (frost bite) this summer. Wednesday, he revealed his anger about being fined $40,000, posting the letter from the team on social media. "I don't know about the drama, but he is a great player. I consider him one of the best receivers in the world. He be brings us the firepower that we need," coach Jon Gruden said. ... Wolfe admitted the Broncos' defensive potential is limitless under Fangio. "He's a mastermind, the Godfather." .... Cornerback Chris Harris Jr. embraces facing Brown. "It’s a great matchup. It’s one of the best versus the best that’s been doing it for a long time. It’s going to be fun. It’s a rival game. It’s not just us. We’ve been facing [Oakland Raiders WR] Tyrell Williams for a while. It’s been great battles with him too. It’s going to be a great competition.”

Broncos, Empower ink 21-year naming rights deal

By Arnie Stapleton
Associated Press
September 5, 2019

The Denver Broncos have partnered with Empower Retirement on a 21-year deal to name their stadium "Empower Field at Mile High."

The Metropolitan Football Stadium District will meet later this week to sign off on the agreement that runs through 2039 and ends a three-year span without a title sponsor for the stadium that opened in 2001.

"It was worth the wait because we found absolutely the best partner," Broncos president and CEO Joe Ellis told The Associated Press on Wednesday.

Ed Murphy, president and CEO of Colorado-based Empower Retirement, the nation's second-largest retirement plan provider, said temporary signage will be in place at the stadium for the Broncos' home opener against the Chicago Bears in Week 2.

"We're excited, we're pumped up for Sept. 15," Murphy said. "Obviously we're pumped up for the Raider game, too" on Monday night in Oakland. "But once everybody comes home and they see the temporary signage, they'll probably think it's permanent because it's going to be classy."

Murphy, whose company is based in Greenwood Village, a few miles from Broncos headquarters, said the signage would be multicolored featuring an orange mountain backdrop.

A person with knowledge of the deal told the AP it is similar to the team's previous naming rights contract, which averaged $6 million a year. The person spoke on condition of anonymity because financial details weren't revealed by either party.

"The district deal will become public and it will reveal what their naming rights agreement calls for in terms of revenues delivered to them. Ours is different. Ours is private," Ellis said. "But, look, it's a significant investment over a 21-year period that's going to significantly help us in maintaining and improving this stadium over the long life of the contract."

The Broncos' stadium was originally called Invesco Field at Mile High. In 2011, Invesco transferred the naming rights to Sports Authority, which signed a 25-year agreement worth $150 million that was supposed to run through 2036. Sports Authority went bankrupt in 2016, however, and the Broncos purchased the remainder of the contract, allowing them to gain control of seeking a new corporate partner.

The Broncos, meanwhile, made all the payments for maintenance and upgrades to the stadium and last year temporarily renamed their home "Broncos Field at Mile High."

Ellis said Empower, which has partnered with the Broncos since 2015 and runs the team's retirement accounts, broached the subject of a stadium naming rights deal a few months ago. "So, we went into the hurry-up offense," Ellis said.

Despite its previous naming rights deals with Invesco and Sports Authority, fans often referred to the Broncos' home simply as Mile High, an homage to the original Mile High Stadium, a baseball-football venue built in 1948.

Sports marketing experts had speculated that the Mile High moniker was an impediment to finding a new naming rights partner, but Murphy said it was actually an enticement for Empower because it's part of the civic fabric in Denver.

"It was never a consideration to remove 'Mile High,'" said Murphy.

Empower was created in 2014 through the merger of three retirement companies and also has sponsorship contracts with the New England Patriots and Kansas City Chiefs in addition to Major League Soccer's New England Revolution.

Ellis called it a big plus to have a national naming rights partner that's also a hometown company.

"I would think in any naming rights deal that should be your No. 1 objective because you're in it together, you're in the same community, you're pulling for each other," Ellis said.

Newest Denver Broncos additions travel winding roads to get here

By Paul Klee
Colorado Springs Gazette
September 5, 2019

One of the newest Broncos had 13 different workouts for NFL teams just last year.
Thirteen!

Thirteen job interviews, 13 chances to crack the code and a roster. And more often (11 times) than not (twice) a team told him he's not what they're looking for, or the fit just isn't right. But best of luck, dude, except if you're playing us.

"There was times when I was going to give up football," new Denver linebacker Corey Nelson tells me in the locker room at UCHealth Training Center. "I don't think anybody knows that."

He also has a Super Bowl ring, the one with 212 diamonds, the one from Super Bowl 50. Stores it in a safe at home, hidden away unless a family member wants to try to it on. It's a good memory, right down to the tackle next to his name in the box score: first quarter, Brandon McManus kickoff, Nelson tackles Panthers return man Joe Webb. Drops him at the 21-yard-line.

"If they give me the opportunity to do (special teams) I'm willing to do that," Nelson says.
Survive the NFL car wash like he did — like a whole bunch of Broncos did — and you'll do anything to make the football dream come true.

This guy is not Von Miller. He's not Joe Flacco, Emmanuel Sanders, Bradley Chubb, any of the big-money household names who will lead the Broncos into Oakland on "Monday Night Football."

This guy's hanging on by the cleats tied to his feet, and there's a herd of those guys on the back end of this Broncos roster — more than we've seen here in John Elway's eight previous seasons as general manager. The Broncos went nuts on the waiver wire and added seven players from other teams, a sure sign Elway and Vic Fangio won't stop there, either.

After wild, winding roads, their next big shot is here.

"The path's been hard, but everyone has a different path," says defensive tackle Mike Purcell, a born-and-raised Coloradan, who's on a 53-man roster after practice-squad stints in San Francisco, Chicago, Kansas City, New England and Carolina. "Some guys are first-round picks. Some guys are undrafted, like me. Now we're all on the same playing field. Now it's all even."
They're short-timers praying and believing they become long-timers. Here are three to root for:

Corey Nelson, linebacker

Full disclosure: Nelson's one of my favorite guys to roll through Dove Valley. Joyful. Faithful. Smile-ful. Five-star husband and dad (to a 3-year-old and 9-month-old, bless it). And last year when he was cut by the Atlanta Falcons — after another injury and 12 days with the team?

“Depression, honestly,” he says. “I was down.”

His response was relentlessness.

“Then I went and had seven more workouts,” he says.

Sure, playing football isn’t roofing. But for most of these dreamers the grind is real and heavy.

“About workout No. 8 I was like, ‘I can’t do this anymore. I’m done.’ It was hard,” he says. “But my wife told me to keep pushing. Her mom told me to keep pushing. They told me to trust in God’s plan. I was big on my faith. I just stayed with God. There was times I’d be mad at him. But I always came back to him. If I don’t go with him, it’s going to be a lose-lose situation. With God, you win.”
It spoke to Nelson’s reputation that his return to the Broncos locker room sounded like Peyton Manning was handing out free Papa John’s. Todd Davis invited him to dinner. Von Miller poked fun at his expense (“Same ol’ Von,” Nelson says). Chris Harris Jr. embraced him in a bear hug.

The Broncos need help at linebacker.

“We’re throwing (Nelson) right in there,” Fangio said.

Fingers crossed this time he sticks around.

Diontae Spencer, punt and kick returner

This guy. What a sports story — heartbreaking, yet somehow brimming with hope.

Beloved father murdered in his own barbershop when Diontae was 20. Undrafted out of off-the-NFL-grid McNeese State. Two months with the Los Angeles Rams, then to the Canadian Football League. Signed by the Steelers — the cradle of wide receivers gifted with turbo jets — and cut last week. Boom, the Broncos called.

“I feel like right now is just the perfect time,” says Spencer, a soft-spoken man.

It’s the perfect team for a return man. Not since Trindon Holliday has Denver fielded a punt returner who made you delay a potty break. Spencer had a 113-yard missed field goal return in the CFL. Stranded on struggle island, the Broncos' special teams simply hope he can catch.

“I never thought it would take four years (to make a 53-man NFL roster),” he says.

His next shot comes on "Monday Night Football."

Mike Purcell, defensive lineman

A native knows how to win over Colorado: “What bigger stage than 'Monday Night Football' playing for your hometown team? And it’s the Raiders. I never liked them growing up. Nobody did,” Purcell tells me Wednesday.

Purcell’s route to this roster weaved through Highlands Ranch High, the University of Wyoming, five NFL practice squads, the defunct Alliance of American Football. That’s right: Purcell’s already played 13 games in 2019 (eight in the AAF, all five in the Broncos’ preseason).

“The AAF helped me get here,” Purcell says.

Now it’s on him — and them. The Broncos’ ruthless, open-minded approach to every spot on the roster, down to the 53rd man, shows they will search high and low for the right guys.

"Reality of this business is, some guys get paid, some guys don't get paid," says veteran Shelby Harris, who was cut six times (four by the Raiders) before buying, not renting, in Colorado.

Reality is, these guys don't have contract years.

They have contract days.

Broncos agree to terms with Empower Retirement on 21-year deal to name stadium 'Empower Field at Mile High'

By Staff
DenverBroncos.com
September 5, 2019

The Denver Broncos have agreed to terms with Empower Retirement on a 21-year deal to name their stadium “Empower Field at Mile High,” it was announced on Wednesday.

The agreement, which runs through the year 2039, is pending approval by the Metropolitan Football Stadium District.

The nation’s second-largest retirement plan provider, Empower Retirement is headquartered in metro Denver and has been a team partner of the Broncos since 2015. Empower Field at Mile High will serve as home of the Broncos and more than 300 other events annually, including major concerts, international sporting matches, festivals and conventions.

“We are proud to reach an agreement on a long-term naming rights deal between the Broncos and Empower Retirement,” Broncos President and CEO Joe Ellis said. “Empower is a thriving — and growing — hometown company that has been a valued team partner since our Super Bowl season in 2015. Most importantly, we’ve enjoyed a genuine working relationship with Empower for a number of years because they are simply great at what they do.

“The Broncos and Empower Retirement share many of the same values, especially a commitment to innovation, a focus on community engagement and a desire to be the very best. It’s exciting to now call Empower Field at Mile High the home of the Denver Broncos—and many other world-class events—well into the future.”

As part of the naming rights agreement with the Broncos, Empower will enjoy significant national brand and media exposure. This includes a comprehensive and integrated mix of visibility on gamedays and throughout the year with signage, media placement (incl. press conference backdrop), promotional opportunities and hospitality benefits.

Empower will also work together with the Broncos on many community and employee engagement opportunities.

“We are thrilled with the opportunity to continue to invest in the community and the future of the Denver Broncos through our expanded partnership with the team,” said Edmund F. Murphy III, President & CEO of Empower Retirement. “Empower was born in Colorado but our associates serve working Americans across the entire nation—many of whom follow the NFL. This agreement gives us the chance to show support for this beloved hometown team and our vibrant local community.”

Administering $638 billion in assets for 9.2 million retirement plan participants and more than 38,000 organizations, Empower Retirement was named among “America’s Best Companies for Customer Service” by Newsweek in 2019. It serves all segments of the employer-sponsored retirement plan market, including corporate 401(k) clients, government plans, non-profits and individual account holders.

Empower serves 212,000 Colorado residents through 4,900 retirement plans. It administers a total of $16.3 billion in assets on behalf of those Coloradoans.

Selected as the "Best Company to Work for in Colorado" by career website Zippia in 2019, Empower Retirement has approximately 2,700 employees at its Greenwood Village, Colo., headquarters. Named a 2018 Top-100 Innovator in Diversity and Inclusion by Mogul, Empower has 6,200 employees overall across 40 regional offices, including in Kansas City, Milwaukee, the Boston area, Somerset, N.J., and Bangalore, India.

Empower Retirement staff members volunteered more than 20,000 hours of community service for nearly 950 non-profit organizations in 2018, including supporting 436 charitable organizations in the state of Colorado.

One of the most successful and popular sports franchises in the world, the Denver Broncos begin their 60th year of professional football in 2019 while celebrating the NFL's 100th season. Only one NFL team has appeared in more Super Bowls than the Broncos, whose eight Super Bowl appearances include three World Championships (1997, 1998, 2015).

The Broncos have averaged more than 10 wins per season over the last 35 years, posting the fourth-best winning percentage (.598) among all 123 major North American professional sports franchises during that time. In addition to their success on the field, the Broncos are one of the most community-minded franchises in sports and this past year volunteered more than 2,300 hours in the community through player/staff involvement.

Since opening in 2001, the Broncos' state-of-the-art stadium has sold out every possible game (153) as part of the team's NFL-record 403-game, 50-year sellout streak that began in 1970. Denver's stadium has hosted an NFL-high 41 prime-time nationally televised games in the regular season along with nine playoff contests since opening in 2001, including three AFC Championship Games (2005, 2013 & 2015 seasons).

The Broncos have enjoyed the league's best homefield advantage over the last four-plus decades, leading the NFL with 253 home wins and a .715 winning percentage at home since 1977. Since their current stadium opened in 2001, the Broncos are one of only seven NFL teams with at least 100 home victories.

World-renowned musical acts such as Garth Brooks, Taylor Swift, The Rolling Stones, Metallica and U2 have played at the Broncos' stadium, which also hosted the 2008 Democratic National Convention. Numerous other high-profile sporting events have taken place at the stadium, including Gold Cup/international soccer, major college football and the CHSAA football championships.

The Broncos' stadium also is home to the three-time Major League Lacrosse champion Denver Outlaws, who have led the MLL in attendance since their inaugural season in 2006.

Featuring first-class amenities to enhance the fan experience, the Broncos' stadium has undergone nearly $100 million worth of upgrades during its 19 years to ensure it remains one of the top facilities in all of sports.

The stadium underwent a $32 million renovation in 2013 that tripled the size of its scoreboard while enhancing all audio/visual elements as well as the concourse areas. In 2017, there was a $6 million Wi-Fi upgrade that made the stadium one of the most well-connected in the country.

Most recently, $8.3 million of budgeted upgrades were approved for the stadium for 2019, including energy-efficient LED lighting for the field/seating areas that meets FIFA World Cup standards.

Kareem Jackson like ‘a kid thinking about Christmas’ as Broncos’ season opener nears

By Staff
DenverBroncos.com
September 5, 2019

Christmas is still a few months away, but for Kareem Jackson, it may as well be Monday.

That’s how he feels as the Broncos’ season opener — and his regular-season debut with his new team — nears and the almost electric kind of anxious energy builds in him with each passing day.

“Almost like … a kid thinking about Christmas,” Jackson said. “You know [it's like] Christmas is this week, but you’ve still got to wait these couple days. For me, it’s just taking these days and making sure I prepare … and everything is where it needs to be so I can go out and perform at a high level … and be accountable to the guys in the locker room.”

That’s the part that makes his expectations for this experience different from any of the previous nine season-opening games in which he’s played. There seems to be a different weight or responsibility with making a debut with a new franchise, he said.

“It’s totally different circumstances for me,” Jackson said. “Obviously being here in Denver, it’s my first year. My first actual game playing with a new group of guys. I’m kind of excited. Obviously I’m always excited for the first game, but I feel like I’m excited to another level for me, because I had to prove myself all over again because everything’s so new. It’s all about going out and proving that I can be accountable and be a piece of the puzzle and help the guys win and help the team win.

“… Every year, year in and year out, you’ve got to go out and you’ve got to prove yourself as a player. You’ve got to prove yourself as a defensive unit, as a team, as an offensive unit — in every phase of the game. I would imagine all the guys in the locker room kind of have that same feeling, because every year is different. You can’t rely on what you did last year.”

Jackson has no doubt about his capability to uphold the expectations and standards he holds for himself personally and in his role in the defense.

“I’m very confident in it, just because I know how I trained this offseason,” Jackson said. “Physically, I’m prepared. Mentally, I’m prepared. So, I’m confident in that because I spared no expense of when it came to my training in the offseason and my preparation in getting ready for OTAs and minicamp and on to training camp … and then also just being here with the guys and the coaches getting us ready for the game. I’m very confident in that.”

Christmas may not be here yet, but you can trust him — he’ll be ready to open presents on Monday.

That’s been his main focus, anyway, since signing with the Broncos. After starting the move to Denver, Jackson has been living largely separated from his family and football has occupied most of his time.

At the moment, it's just him and the newest member of the family, Hendrix. That would be Jackson's three-month-old French bulldog puppy.

"He's been keeping me company in my downtime," Jackson said Wednesday, "and running me around."

Such is life for the Broncos' longest-tenured defensive player who spent the previous nine years in Houston. This kind of transition — picking up his entire life and moving to a new city — hasn't been easy.

"I'm still in the process of getting settled at my place, but obviously for me the football side is the easy part," Jackson said. "I've been doing that since I was a little kid. … I kind of took for granted the moving and getting your place and all that situated. It's pretty overwhelming. [I'm] just taking it a day at a time and hopefully here in a couple weeks, or however long it takes, I'll be settled in my place and then it's only worrying about ball."

Raiders QB Derek Carr: 'Chris Harris is a Hall of Fame cornerback'

By Aric DiLalla
DenverBroncos.com
September 5, 2019

Chris Harris Jr. has picked off Derek Carr just once in eight career meetings between the two AFC West veterans.

But it was a big one.

In 2015, with the Broncos clinging to a 9-7 lead and the Raiders driving in Denver territory in the fourth quarter of a Week 5 game in Oakland, Harris stepped in front of an errant Carr throw.

Harris took off down the left sideline and sprinted the final few yards into the end zone with his arms outstretched. Raiders fans greeted Harris with fingers outstretched as the Broncos improved to 5-0.

The interception and the win proved critical later in the year as the Broncos secured home-field advantage for the playoffs by just a single game.

Carr, who will face Harris for the ninth time when the Broncos meet the Raiders on “Monday Night Football,” has more than a little respect for the player who has often posed a problem for Oakland.

“Oh, goodness. Chris is at the top of the list,” said Carr on Wednesday when asked where Harris ranks among cornerbacks he’s faced. “Chris is unbelievable. He’s definitely top three in my book, and you can argue for all three of the guys that I think are up there, that they could all be No. 1. Chris is someone who has made countless plays against me. The plays that we’ve been able to make on him have been tight, tight window throws. You kind of let them go on him and you pray we complete it and that Chris doesn’t pick it off. He’s that good of a player. Chris knows how much I respect him, how good I think he is.”

And Carr, who has had six passes defensed by Harris over the year, isn’t afraid to make that known.

“I will say this, and I even thought this during the offseason: He does not get the credit he deserves,” Carr said. “In my opinion, Chris Harris is a Hall of Fame cornerback. That guy — the numbers don’t lie. When you throw at him, on the plays he’s been able to make, the guys he’s been able to lock down, for the number of years he’s been able to do it, [it’s impressive]. No one else will give him that kind of credit for whatever reason, but he gets that credit from me. Because I think out of all the guys I’ve been able to play in the league, he’s right up there among the best.”

When Carr and Harris meet for the final time at Oakland-Alameda County Coliseum on Monday, Carr will see Harris in a new defensive scheme.

Carr said he’d gotten used to seeing the Broncos in a similar scheme over the last few years, so Head Coach Vic Fangio’s system will be an adjustment.

And that will be no easy task, either.

“Hands down, I’ve always thought [he] is one of the best in the whole league,” Carr said of Fangio. “It’s not even close how good he is. He’s an elite defensive mind. He’s special.”

Come Monday night in Oakland, Carr should face quite the test against both Harris and Fangio.

The Broncos finally have a stadium naming rights partner

By Luke Marshall
BSN Denver
September 5, 2019

Say goodbye to Broncos Stadium and hello to Empower Field.

Since January of 2018, Mile High has been in search of a new name. Following previous sponsor Sports Authority's 2016 bankruptcy filing, the Broncos announced their stadium would be titled 'Broncos Stadium at Mile High' while the organization searched for a replacement sponsor.

Well, after a long search, Empower Retirement has entered into a 21-year deal that will maintain the stadium's new name through 2039. Empower employs 2,700 people at its Denver headquarters and is the second-largest retirement services company in the country.

Ever heard that a boat without a name is bad luck? It seems that the same is true for stadiums. While Mile High was without a sponsor, the Broncos recorded a 3-7 home record in combined pre-season and regular season match-ups.

Maybe a new name will right the orange and blue ship.

The Broncos will debut the new sponsor in an afternoon match-up against the Chicago Bears Sunday, September 15 at Empower Field at Mile High.

Chris Harris Jr. reminds the world of his last meeting with Antonio Brown

By Zac Stevens
BSN Denver
September 5, 2019

Chris Harris Jr. and Antonio Brown have simply been the crème de la crème at their respective positions for over the past half decade in the NFL.

Chris Harris Jr. consistently shuts down opposing team's weapons, while Antonio Brown cuts the locks on his opponent's lockdown corners.

Around the league these are simply facts. Look no further than on Wednesday when Joe Flacco deemed Brown "one of the best to ever do it" and Derek Carr called Harris Jr. a Hall of Famer.

"It's a great matchup. It's one of the best versus the best who's been doing it for a long time," Chris said on Wednesday, previewing the Broncos and Raiders opening week matchup on Monday night. "We've been playing at a high level for a while. So it's going to be fun… It's going to be a great competition."

But the two couldn't be more opposite in their public image. AB is known worldwide—for his play, but also in large part for his interesting off-the-field antics. Just take a peek at the past few weeks to see why.

Chris, on the other hand, is widely regarded in football circles as one of the game's best. But his name doesn't expand much further than football circles as he stays under the radar and out of the spotlight with his wife and daughters at home.

Because of that, the four-time Pro Bowler has consistently flown under the radar, while every step Brown takes is closely monitored around the country.

On Wednesday, however, the lockdown cornerback said enough was enough. He wanted his due.

When asked how excited he was to get revenge on AB from their last meeting together, Chris waisted no time responding.

"In 2018, last year?" he questioned, before dropping the mic. "When I had a pick and he had three catches?"

Boom. Exit stage left, Chris.

You see, because Harris Jr. rarely gets beat, let alone for an entire game, and the fact that Brown is the character among a league of unique characters, the most recent matchup between the two superstars is never remembered.

Instead, people are drawn to the second-most recent matchup the two had, which had quite the different storyline.

On the brisk evening of Dec. 20, 2015, with Brock Osweiler at the helm for the Broncos, Brown went absolutely crazy—hauling in a mind-blowing 16 receptions on 18 targets for a mind-blowing 189 yards and two touchdowns. Yes, against Chris Harris Jr. for much of the game.

That's the game many remember—CHJ's worst of his career by a mile.

"Ain't no revenge, that was for years ago. We played since then," Chris said on Wednesday, trying to get the world to remember their most recent matchup.

Fast forward three years and the script couldn't be more different.

On Nov. 25, 2018, the limping Broncos welcomed in the red-hot Steelers riding a six-game win streak. Thanks in large part to Harris Jr. making Brown a non-factor, the Broncos pulled off the major upset.

Chris, and the Broncos, held Antonio in check, only allowing him to compile 7.4 yards per reception on his nine catches. Unlike the previous matchup, Brown never stepped foot in the end zone.

Going up specifically against Harris Jr., Brown only had three catches. One of Brown's 13 targets went straight into Chris' hands as No. 25 read Ben Roethlisberger the entire play, left his assignment and plucked the ball out of the hair for an interception.

Now, fast forward roughly nine months to Monday night, where No. 25 in Orange & Blue and No. 84 in Silver & Black will get to settle the tie they've had over their two last two matchups.

"Oh man, he can just run all the routes," Harris Jr. said, explaining what makes Brown so dominant. "I think with Big Ben, he had such a connection with Big Ben so it's definitely going to be different with Derek Carr, see how they mesh together and how he does with our scheme."

Chris wouldn't go as far as to say Brown's the most difficult receiver in the league to cover, but did throw him in the top 12, adding, "All those guys are tough."

"There's nothing easy about defending him," Vic Fangio said. "He's really quick and he's really fast. He gets to his high speed very fast, quicker than most. He's very elusive. He's a good runner after the catch and he's a very competitive guy."

Really quick, really fast and very competitive are all qualities of Chris Harris Jr., too. And there's one things that's certain: Neither back down from anything, especially facing one of the game's best.

In the nightcap of Monday Night Football, Chris Harris Jr. and Antonio Brown will add another chapter to their career-long book. Until then, Chris won't let you forget how the last chapter ended.

The other reason why Monday's Broncos game is the end of an era

By Andrew Mason
BSN Denver
September 5, 2019

Packers-Bears is the matchup that the NFL chose to open its 100th season Thursday night. The league opted for the historical resonance of two teams whose histories date back to the NFL's founding.

But Broncos-Raiders is the duel that will actually give a look into the NFL's past.

This isn't a story about the Broncos hiring Vic Fangio, a new head coach with an old-school demeanor. Nor is it about the Raiders tying their hopes for as many as 10 years to Jon Gruden, a coach who told a gaggle of media weeks after his January 2018 rehiring that "I'm trying to throw the game back to 1998."

It's all about the dirt.

The infield dirt.

This is likely to be the next-to-last game in NFL history played with a baseball infield devouring a massive chunk of the playing surface, barring an Oakland Athletics trip to the World Series. So when the Raiders face the Kansas City Chiefs on dirt six days after the Broncos visit, an era of NFL history will close.

"That's crazy that it's still happening in 2019, but, yes, we are playing on dirt. Still," Raiders quarterback Derek Carr said. "And we love our dirt, that's for sure."

Good thing he does. Few others do.

Given that this week's game is the final one that the Broncos will play in Oakland, multiple players were asked why it was so hard to play and win there.

"Because it's on a baseball field," answered Shelby Harris.

Harris played preseason games there during his first three seasons when he was trying to find a role with the Raiders. He learned then that "hand in the dirt" for defensive linemen isn't just a metaphor.

"You've just got to really keep your feet under you, because you're sliding a lot," he said. "It's tough. I just remember playing there my rookie year, my first two years there. You have no traction. You're just sliding all over the place. You're trying to take on a double-team, and you're sliding 10 yards back.

"And it's not like you're doing something wrong. That's just what it is."

It's also the way the game always was.

A BLAST FROM THE PAST

“Man, I still don’t get it — and I keep saying this over and over again. How does a pro football team play on a baseball field?” Harris said. “I don’t understand who thought that was a great idea — ever.”

“But it still blows my mind to this day.”

It wasn’t a great idea. It was a necessary one.

Seeing the lines of a football field painted over the infield dirt a throwback to a quainter time, when the money was smaller and a venue exclusive to an NFL team was not financially feasible.

Seventy-five percent of the league’s teams shared a stadium with a Major League Baseball team at one point in their histories. The Broncos are among them; they shared Mile High Stadium with the Colorado Rockies during their first two seasons, 1993 and 1994.

But for the 33 seasons prior to that, they shared the venue with Denver’s minor-league baseball teams, the Bears and the Zephyrs. And Mile High was a baseball stadium first, known as Bears Stadium before the expansions of the 1960s and 1970s turned it into a 76,273-seat colossus.

In 1981, 17 teams shared their stadiums with major- or minor-league baseball teams. Eleven of them had grass fields with full dirt infields. In those days, the clouds of dust you’ll see from midfield Monday in Oakland were a common early-season sight.

By 1991, the number was down to 13. A decade later, that tally was down to the Raiders and Dolphins, as teams like the Chargers and Vikings had watched while their baseball brethren left for gleaming, downtown, faux-retro baseball parks.

Since 2012, the Raiders have stood alone, kicking up the dirt. It hasn’t helped them much; they’re 5-7 in September home games in that span, compared with 19-21 in all other months.

FOR MANY BRONCOS, IT’S THE FIRST TIME ON DIRT

And unlike the tagline for the Durham Bulls in Bull Durham, no one will be calling this “the greatest show on dirt.”

The Broncos haven’t played a game on a field set up for baseball since defeating the Raiders 23-3 in Oakland three weeks into the 2009 season. None of their current players were with the team then.

“No idea,” defensive end Adam Gotsis said when asked how he would deal with it. “I haven’t played on it. That field is pretty chopped up regardless of when you play on it.”

Carr’s advice?

“If this is going out to to the Broncos, make sure you just wear tennis shoes,” Carr joked to Denver-area media. “The dirt is just fine. You won’t slip at all.”

In all seriousness, Carr acknowledged the differences.

“It is an adjustment,” Carr said. “You’ll see guys before the game if they’ve never played on it — especially the rookies and young guys — they all get out there on the dirt, and they’re trying to run and cut on it, trying to know what cleats they want to wear and things like that.”

But after the kickoff, other priorities take center stage. You might slip in the dirt, but the threat of being clobbered by an opponent or being tied up in a scrum drops the concern about the field down the priority list.

“When the game starts, to be completely honest, I don’t think about it,” Carr said. “I don’t think anyone does.”

Added Gotsis: “As they have to play on it, so do we. “You just hope you don’t get caught too much in that area, sliding around on that stuff.”

After Monday night, it will never be an issue for the Broncos again. Six days later, this part of NFL life will die, likely never to be resurrected.

Farewell, NFL games played on baseball fields. You won’t be missed.

The Raiders have a secret weapon ready for Week 1

By Cecil Lammey
104.3 The Fan
September 5, 2019

The Broncos hope things are different under new head coach Vic Fangio. One thing that needs to change is this team's inability to cover tight ends. This has been a problem in Denver for years, as they have not had an answer for opposing tight ends since Danny Trevathan was playing inside linebacker.

The Broncos defense will get an interesting test from a secret weapon the Raiders have on offense, veteran tight end Darren Waller. How can a veteran who has been in the league for a few years be a secret weapon? Well, that's because Waller has spent most of his time in the league either injured or suspended.

Raiders head coach Jon Gruden said earlier this year that Waller was "one of the best kept secrets" in the NFL. In Week 1, we'll see if Oakland unleashes him against Denver.

Will Waller torch the Broncos on Monday night? Let's take a look.

***

Converted Wide Receiver

During his college days at Georgia Tech, Waller played as a wide receiver. In three seasons with the Yellow Jackets, he caught 51 passes for 971 yards and nine touchdowns.

He's got great size, measuring in at 6-feet-6-inches and 240 pounds. Waller's frame and length immediately make him a tough player to match up with. That's why the Ravens chose him in the sixth round of the 2015 NFL Draft.

Waller was never going to be a wide receiver at the pro level, however, mainly because he's not fast enough. But the Ravens felt if they converted him to a tight end, he could be a dangerous weapon.

They were correct in their assessment of Waller playing tight end – at least in theory – because we never got to see what he could be at his full potential due to off-field problems. He caught only 12 passes with two touchdowns during his time in Baltimore before the team lost him to the Raiders.

***

Trouble in Baltimore

We've learned a lot about Waller during "Hard Knocks" this summer on HBO. His career began in Baltimore, but Waller was not himself by his own admission. During an episode of "Hard Knocks" a couple of weeks ago, Waller admitted that he spent his time with the Ravens "getting high literally every day" on pain pills, cocaine, Xanax, and "whatever I could get my hands on."

Waller was first suspended by the NFL in 2016 when he missed four games for violating the league's substance-abuse policy. He was then suspended for a whole year in 2017 for the same reason. Finally,

Waller was reinstated in 2018, but he ended up on the Ravens practice squad. In late November of that year, Waller was picked up by the Raiders and finished the season with six catches for 75 yards.

He played a few games as a backup to Raiders starting tight end Jared Cook. With Cook leaving to the New Orleans Saints in free agency this spring, the starting tight end position was turned over to Waller for the 2019 season. He's been clean for two years and is ready for this large opportunity.

***

Preseason Hype

Waller has been one of the most-hyped players for the Raiders this preseason. It mainly has to do with him being an interesting character in "Hard Knocks," but it also has to do with the fact that he was barely used in the exhibition part of the year.

During the Raiders four preseason games, Waller played in one game – against the Cardinals – and came down with one catch for seven yards. That's it. Waller has been given the "opportunity of a lifetime" according to Gruden, but an injury has kept him from flashing that talent outside of minicamp and OTAs.

Waller has been hyped all spring and summer long, but we have little to go on other than some quotes from Gruden.

"He's not been brought up as a tight end, but he has made a lot of progress," said Gruden. "He's got some big shoes to fill, I know he respects that, but he's versatile, smart, fast. He wants to do good."

It was revealed in early August that Waller was dealing with a shoulder injury, a sprained AC joint, and that's why we haven't seen much of him in the preseason. Waller has talent and is an intriguing prospect because of his wide receiver skill set, but he had better not get the best of what we hope is an improved Broncos defense.

***

Constant Problem

Ever since Trevathan left in free agency, the Broncos have struggled to cover tight end. They've went through a few linebackers looking for a replacement, but the problem of tight end coverage has remained.

Last year in Week 1 against the Seahawks, then rookie tight end Will Dissly had three catches for 105 yards and one touchdown. It's not like Dissly was a premium pick in 2018. He was a fourth-round pick out of Washington and known mostly for his ability as a blocker. Because the Broncos struggle to cover tight ends, Dissly was able to have the best game of his rookie season in his pro debut.

We all remember what happened to the Broncos defense in Week 14 against the 49ers last year. If you need a refresher, just remember the near record-setting performance of George Kittle. The Broncos defense couldn't stop him in the first half, and Kittle finished the game with seven catches for a whopping 210 yards and one touchdown.

The Broncos defense will be missing top inside linebacker Todd Davis in Week 1 against the Raiders. That means they'll be using reserve players or sub-packages in order to slow down the Raiders passing attack over the middle. If they don't find the right solution to cover tight ends, then a secret weapon like Waller may have a breakout game and no longer be a secret for the rest of the league.

Not only is Waller a potential problem, but looking over the rest of the schedule in 2019, the Broncos have to deal with the likes of Jimmy Graham, David Njoku, Hunter Henry and others. Oh yeah, don't forget Travis Kelce twice a year, too.

Waller has been all hype for the Raiders to this point. The Broncos don't want that hype to turn into reality on Monday night.

The Broncos are hoping top-heavy football can win games

By Mike Evans
104.3 The Fan
September 5, 2019

Remember in math when we had to do word problems? Man, I hated them.

I especially hated the ones that went like this: “Two trains leave Denver at the same time. One train is heading East at 75 miles per hour and the other is heading West at 80 miles per hour. At what point will they be 310 miles apart.”

Ugh. Misery.

I harken back to those halcyon days as I reflect on the flurry of moves made by the Broncos on and after cutdown day. A whopping seven players who were not with the team during training camp made it onto the 53-man roster. That is staggering. After months of offseason conditioning, OTAs, mini-camps, training camp and preseason games the Broncos made up 13 percent of their roster with guys who weren’t there for any of it.

For the last three years, I’ve tried to tell anyone who would listen the problem with the Broncos wasn’t coaching; it was a talent drain. Some people got it. Others didn’t because they didn’t want to admit John Elway had fallen into a personnel slump. However, after this, is there any doubt there just isn’t enough homegrown talent to build a complete roster?

I can hear the Elway supporters rallying. “But what about the three Broncos placed on IR? Three of the seven guys brought in will likely go once those guys get healthy.” My answer is, Why couldn’t three players who had been here all along made the roster, only to be cut once guys came off IR? Why did so many outsiders, deemed better than what was here, get brought in?

I do give Elway credit. He owned it. He admitted his guys weren’t good enough and there were better players out there, even if they were other teams’ castoffs. That involves swallowing some pride, placing the ego aside and doing what’s best for the team.

So what does it mean for this year’s Broncos? It means a fascinating year where just like that word problem in math class mentioned above, the Broncos will be traveling down two different tracks at the same time.

On one hand, you have the attempt to catch 2015 lightning in a bottle again. You know the formula. A dominating defense supported by just enough offense, superior coaching and a healthy dash of luck can lead to great things.

The Broncos Super Bowl team won 15 games that year – 12 in the regular season and three more in the playoffs. Of those 15 wins, 11 were by seven points or less. Of those 15 wins, the offense scored 24 or less points 10 times. It was an incredible tightrope trick pulled off by those Broncos, but pull it off they did.

I can see them trying to duplicate that this year. If it works, great. But if it doesn't, then look to that other track.

At the same time the Broncos are "in it to win it" this year, they are also rebuilding right before our very eyes. Thirty-three of the Broncos on the team's current roster are 26 years old or younger. This is a franchise ready to switch to a rebuilding project that has already been under construction for two years.

If it doesn't work out this year, if Joe Flacco doesn't have anything left in the tank, if the team wants to move on from Chris Harris Jr. and Emmanuel Sanders, if the team wants to trade Von Miller for a haul, they can do that safe in the knowledge they're in no way starting from scratch. They will have a young QB in Drew Lock to build around, plus building blocks on offense and defense.

So, fret not Broncoland. There is room for optimism when it comes to the franchise. Something good should be happening here in the future.

Just what train will it be?

P.S. the answer to the word problem is two hours… I think

As new season begins, NFL coaches still trying to sort out pass interference rule changes

By Tom Schad
USA Today
September 5, 2019

Twice in Washington's preseason game against the Cincinnati Bengals, Jay Gruden threw a challenge flag on a pass interference call.

Twice, he lost the challenge — and a timeout.

"Still trying to get a feel for it," he deadpanned a few days later.

And he's not the only one.

As the 2019 regular season kicks off Thursday night, there will be a new level of strain and scrutiny on one of the league's most ballyhooed offseason changes — the move to make pass interference calls (and no calls) subject to coaches' challenges and video reviews.

NFL coaches have by and large used the past month as an opportunity to experiment with the new rule, with some coaches — like Gruden — even challenging multiple pass interference calls in the same game.

Altogether, there were 50 challenge flags thrown challenging pass interference in the preseason, with 25 of the league's 32 head coaches utilizing the new opportunity at least once. More than 75% of the challenges involved defensive pass interference. Only five calls were overturned.

"I think it’s just a matter of getting a feel for it and what the replay officials in New York are looking at and looking for," Broncos general manager John Elway told USA TODAY Sports. "The idea is right. We’re just going to have to continue to get better at it. The idea is to get rid of the real bad call, (and) I think in the long run it will help."

The change, of course, came as a direct response to the missed pass interference call in last year's NFC Championship game between the Los Angeles Rams and New Orleans Saints. The goal is to prevent egregious missed calls like that one. But the game-by-game implementation of the change, at least through the preseason, has presented some challenges.

Several coaches said the tricky part isn't so much determining what constitutes pass interference as it is ascertaining what camera angles will reveal to the replay officials who are ruling on the play. In Seattle's preseason game against Minnesota, for example, coach Pete Carroll said he saw a Vikings receiver shove one of his defensive backs, but the push wasn't clear in the camera angles that the officials had to rule on the play. The ruling stood.

"I don’t disagree with the way they called it, based on what they looked at," Carroll told USA TODAY Sports. "It’s clear and obvious, but it doesn’t matter unless they can see it."

In an interview with NBC Sports last week, NFL senior vice president of officiating Al Riveron said the only way to create some uniformity from game to game is to "strictly rely on what our network partners give us for that particular game," eschewing any footage from local feeds or coaches' tape.

"The process itself has worked during preseason," Riveron said on Pro Football Talk Live. "The technology has worked. The communication has worked. So we feel we're in a good place once the season kicks off."

Though only 10% of challenged pass interference plays in the preseason were overturned, there could be fewer instances of replay — and a higher success rate — in the regular season, when the decision to review a call carries more weight. It's unlikely that any team will average one pass interference-related challenge per game — as the Chicago Bears, Detroit Lions and Tampa Bay Buccaneers all did last month.

NFL Network analyst Brian Billick told USA TODAY Sports he is actually far more optimistic about the rule change after seeing it in action. He said officials have thus far quelled his initial concerns that the shift would be a slippery slope, with each review devolving into a "frame-by-frame" analysis of small bumps and grabs.

"(I feared) it was going to mire us down in constantly reevaluating pass interference calls," Billick said. "I was a pessimist before and very critical of it. I've come around to going, 'OK, yeah, I think you're doing this right. I think it's going to work out fine.'"

Nevertheless, there are surely some kinks still yet to be worked out. And the change will certainly inspire outrage at some point this season, as fans, and likely coaches, point to contact shown in slow-motion as evidence that their team was wronged.

"It's not a perfect process. It's something we're all fighting through," Gruden said last month. "If the play's big enough, and we feel like there's a chance for us to throw the flag, we can. ... We just have to be careful about going crazy."

2019 NFL Week 1 picks: Packers upset Bears, Eagles blow out Washington, Broncos edge Raiders

By Cody Benjamin
CBS Sports
September 5, 2019

The 2019 NFL season is finally here, with all 32 teams set to kick off the new year between Thursday and Monday.

We've got rivalries, prime-time classics and playoff previews all across the board. Bears vs. Packers. Patriots vs. Steelers. Panthers vs. Rams. Cowboys vs. Giants. What's not to like?

Predicting these games is part of the fun, but it's also an exercise in projecting the mostly unpredictable. So don't take it personally when we pick against your favorite team, or when your favorite team makes us look bad, or when we're right and somehow put a "curse" on your favorite team. We might cover the NFL, but at some point, we're all just guessing about this wild game anyway.

With that said, let's do some guessing!

As the season progresses, we'll tally my personal record of predictions so that you can decide whether or not my picks are worth reading (let's cross our fingers), but up first, we've got a full slate for Week 1, complete with nine different one-score games that emphasize how unpredictable Week 1 truly is:

BENJAMIN'S RECORD: 0-0

Want a free shot to win $1,000,000 just for picking winners? How about 17 of 'em? Join Parlay Pick'em now to play every week for a million-dollar jackpot and our $10K season prize.

Green Bay Packers at Chicago Bears
Thursday, 8:20 p.m. ET (NBC)
Point spread: Bears -3

You can't get much better than this for opening night. Green Bay has almost become the popular pick here because, well, Aaron Rodgers in prime time, but this should still be close. Think Sept. 9, 2018, when Rodgers' last-minute heroics spoiled an otherwise hot start for Chicago and its vaunted defense.

Prediction: Packers 26, Bears 24

What picks can you make with confidence in Week 1? And which Super Bowl contender goes down hard? Visit SportsLine to see which NFL teams are winning more than 50 percent of simulations, all from the model that is up over $7,000 on its top-rated NFL picks.

Atlanta Falcons at Minnesota Vikings
Sunday, 1 p.m. ET (FOX)
Point spread: Vikings -4

This might be the toughest Week 1 game to pick. Minnesota is really well-rounded, and Kirk Cousins and Co. will have the benefit of opening at home. The Vikings defense is also for real. All that said, Atlanta has the bigger and better weapons on its best day. This one might come back to bite me, but I'm going with a Matt Ryan-led upset to start the Falcons' season.

Prediction: Falcons 26, Vikings 23

Washington Redskins at Philadelphia Eagles
Sunday, 1 p.m. ET (FOX)
Point spread: Eagles -10

You never want to overlook divisional opponents, but this one shouldn't be overthought. Carson Wentz is going to come out firing with the best supporting cast of his career, and Case Keenum is going to be hard-pressed to make much happen with his own offensive weapons teammates. The Philly crowd should be confident and loud all afternoon.

Prediction: Eagles 34, Redskins 10

Buffalo Bills at New York Jets
Sunday, 1 p.m. ET (CBS)
Point spread: Jets - 3

Josh Allen has more talent around him, and the Bills defense is probably a little underrated, but are those things enough to guarantee a road victory to start the season? This is a true tossup. Adam Gase has lots of questions to answer as the Jets' new coach, but at home, with a healthy Sam Darnold and Le'Veon Bell, he should be able to sneak one out. Since I'm predicting a push on the betting line, I'll say my lean is to the Bills with the points since I'm calling for OT.

Prediction: Jets 23, Bills 20 (OT)

Baltimore Ravens at Miami Dolphins
Sunday, 1 p.m. ET (CBS)
Point spread: Ravens -7

On paper, this should be a blowout. Just because it's Week 1, and just because Ryan Fitzpatrick will chuck it plenty of times, Miami might keep it close. But there's still no doubt here: The Ravens are far and away the superior team. Lamar Jackson, Mark Ingram and Baltimore's run-centric offense should put on a clinic in the sun.

Prediction: Ravens 24, Dolphins 14

San Francisco 49ers at Tampa Bay Buccaneers
Sunday, 1 p.m. ET (FOX)
Point spread: Pick 'em

Neither of these teams inspires a ton of confidence entering 2019, especially considering the divisions in which they play. Still, this should be a relatively entertaining matchup. Kyle Shanahan will have a solid

plan for the Niners' opener, but Tampa's weapons are also underrated. If Bruce Arians really does uncork Jameis Winston, the Bucs will "steal" one at home.

Prediction: Buccaneers 27, 49ers 21

Kansas City Chiefs at Jacksonville Jaguars
Sunday, 1 p.m. ET (CBS)
Point spread: Chiefs -3.5

The Jaguars should be better in 2019, and their division is bad enough that they could be back in the playoffs by season's end. But who is Nick Foles throwing to in order to match the powerhouse Andy Reid is trotting onto the field? Patrick Mahomes, Travis Kelce, Tyreek Hill and now LeSean McCoy might be slowed by a hungry Jags defense, but they certainly won't be stopped.

Prediction: Chiefs 30, Jaguars 18

Tennessee Titans at Cleveland Browns
Sunday, 1 p.m. (CBS)
Points spread: Browns -5.5

If someone has even a single reason why we should believe the Titans are going to be good this year, I'm all ears. (Angry tweets incoming in three, two ...) And, look, while we're on the verge of over-hyping the Browns at this point, there's no way Baker Mayfield, Odell Beckham Jr. and Co. shouldn't have themselves a day to start the season.

Prediction: Browns 31, Titans 16

Los Angeles Rams at Carolina Panthers
1 p.m. ET (FOX)
Point spread: Rams -2.5

The Panthers are a popular pick to rebound in 2019, and rightfully so. Cam Newton is rejuvenated, Ron Rivera has to win, etc. On the other side, Sean McVay is a smart guy, but he's also not in charge of blocking for Jared Goff, who is more skittish than some want to admit. Both teams should ultimately be in the playoff picture, but Carolina's got the edge out of the gate.

Prediction: Panthers 27, Rams 24

Detroit Lions at Arizona Cardinals
Sunday, 4:25 p.m. ET (FOX)
Point spread: Lions -2.5

Kyler Murray and Kliff Kingsbury will be fun to watch, and maybe there's something to the idea they'll be dangerous because of their "newness" (a la Chip Kelly's 2013 Eagles), but Matt Patricia has an improved defense, Matthew Stafford will be comfortable in the dome, and the Lions' run game should be able to milk clock against Arizona's stripped-down D.

Prediction: Lions 16, Cardinals 14

Cincinnati Bengals at Seattle Seahawks
Sunday, 4:05 p.m. ET (CBS)
Point spread: Seahawks -9.5

Upsets are inevitable, but this one feels immune. Pete Carroll's squad will have the roaring Seattle crowd behind it, Russell Wilson is still Russell Wilson, and Zac Taylor needs more than Joe Mixon and a motivated (?) Andy Dalton to overcome both a.) rookie head-coaching bumps and b.) the Bengals' general ineptitude.

Prediction: Seahawks 28, Bengals 13

Indianapolis Colts at Los Angeles Chargers
Sunday, 4:05 p.m. (CBS)
Point spread: Chargers -6.5

The Colts are hard to project after Andrew Luck's abrupt departure. They could easily bottom out in the South, or they could win the division. Jacoby Brissett is seasoned enough to put Indy's well-rounded roster in a position to win in Week 1, but the Chargers are talented even without Melvin Gordon and Derwin James. At home, Philip Rivers and their D can take a close one.

Prediction: Chargers 23, Colts 21

New York Giants at Dallas Cowboys
Sunday, 4:25 p.m. (FOX)
Point spread: Cowboys -7

On one hand, this seems like a perfect spot to pick a close game -- the NFC East rivalry, an overlooked Eli Manning and an over-hyped Cowboys team all play into the idea of New York scaring the Dallas crowd. But you know what? No. Besides Saquon Barkley, who is standing out here? Evan Engram? The calls for Daniel Jones might begin by Sunday night.

Prediction: Cowboys 27, Giants 13

Pittsburgh Steelers at New England Patriots
Sunday, 8:20 p.m. ET (NBC)
Point spread: Patriots -5.5

The point spread almost seems crazy here. Ben Roethlisberger, a drama-free offense and a highly underrated defense will take the defending champs down to the wire. But how in the world can you feel good betting against Tom Brady and Bill Belichick in Foxborough? At the very least, this should be one of the games of the week.

Prediction: Patriots 28, Steelers 24

Houston Texans at New Orleans Saints
Monday, 7:10 p.m. ET (ESPN)
Point spread: Saints -7

The Texans might be one of the worst "top" teams to enter 2019. Deshaun Watson will always give them a fighting chance, and Laremy Tunsil is a nice get up front, but are we sure they're even a safe bet to win the South? New Orleans is also bound for regression, but the Saints have far more firepower. Things could easily get out of hand in the dome.

Prediction: Saints 38, Texans 17

Denver Broncos at Oakland Raiders
Monday, 10:20 p.m. ET (ESPN)
Point spread: Pick 'em

People are sleeping on the Broncos, who should be squarely in the playoff picture with Joe Flacco enjoying fresh scenery and their Vic Fangio-led defense keeping games close. Antonio Brown will assuredly steal the Monday night lights at some point, and the Raiders should be better this year, but Denver feels a little more stable entering Week 1.

Prediction: Broncos 21, Raiders 20

Broncos strike deal to name stadium Empower Field at Mile High

By Staff
NFL.com
September 5, 2019

The Denver Broncos announced on Wednesday that they agreed with Empower Retirement on a 21-year deal to name their stadium Empower Field at Mile High.

The agreement with the nation's second-largest retirement plan provider runs through 2039 and is pending approval from the State of Colorado Metropolitan Football Stadium District.

A press conference will be held Thursday morning to introduce the partnership.

"We are proud to reach an agreement on a long-term naming rights deal between the Broncos and Empower Retirement," Broncos oresident and CEO Joe Ellis said in a statement. "Empower is a thriving -- and growing -- hometown company that has been a valued team partner since our Super Bowl season in 2015. Most importantly, we've enjoyed a genuine working relationship with Empower for a number of years because they are simply great at what they do.

"The Broncos and Empower Retirement share many of the same values, especially a commitment to innovation, a focus on community engagement and a desire to be the very best. It's exciting to now call Empower Field at Mile High the home of the Denver Broncos --and many other world-class events -- well into the future."

Opened in 2001, Empower Field at Mile High has held many names (Invesco Field at Mile High, Sports Authority Field at Mile High, Broncos Stadium at Mile High). It replaced Mile High Stadium as home of the Broncos in 2001 and has played host to nine playoff games, including three conference championships. Denver is 2-1 in those AFC title games.

Denver will christen Empower Field at Mile High on Sunday, Sept. 15 when the Broncos host the Chicago Bears.

Broncos Sign Naming-Rights Deal With Empower Retirement

By Staff
Sports Business Journal
September 5, 2019

The Broncos and Denver-based Empower Retirement formalized 21-year deal today that will "place the name of the nation's second-largest retirement plan provider on the face of the team's stadium." The Broncos had been "looking for a stadium name sponsor since Sports Authority filed bankruptcy" in '16. Temporary signs of "Empower Field at Mile Stadium" will "go up immediately." Financial terms were not available, but a source said that it was "close to the deal the district and team had with Sports Authority," which paid roughly $6M a year (9NEWS.com, 9/4).

Endeavor helped negotiate the deal between the Broncos and Empower (THE DAILY).

Broncos' home field gets a new name

By Michael David Smith
Pro Football Talk
September 5, 2019

Just in time for football season, the Broncos' home field has a new name.

Starting with their September 15 home opener, the Broncos will be playing at Empower Field.

The new name is the result of a 21-year deal between the Broncos and Empower Retirement, a Denver-based company that manages retirement plans.

The Broncos played at Mile High Stadium from the franchise founding in 1960 through 2000. That stadium has been torn down, and the Broncos moved into their new stadium, which was known as Invesco Field at Mile High from 2001 to 2011, then renamed Sports Authority Field in 2011. When the sporting goods retailer went out of business, the Broncos went looking for a new sponsor to name their stadium, and now they have it.