The 99 NFL players, coaches and themes that will define 2018

It has been a wild offseason, even by NFL standards. Most recently, team owners drew the ire of many players by approving a complicated policy that ultimately requires those on the field to stand for the national anthem. But as our gaze turns from the offseason, here are the 99 players and storylines that figure to shape the 2018 season.



Veteran stars returning from injury

- [ ] 1. Aaron Rodgers, QB, Packers: The Packers are an annual Super Bowl contender with Rodgers and often inept without him. They averaged 27.4 points per game as he led them to a 4-1 start last season, then 17.3 in a 3-7 stretch after he broke his collarbone.

- [ ] 2. J.J. Watt, DL, Texans: Any projection of Watt's full return from a tibial plateau fracture must be tempered by the fact that a serious back injury cost him 13 games in 2016. He has played only eight games since January 2016. But the Texans are optimistic they'll finally have two of the NFL's best pass-rushers (Watt and Jadeveon Clowney) on the field at the same time.

- [ ] 3. Andrew Luck, QB, Colts: Reports that Luck has not yet resumed a full throwing regimen, more than a year after surgery on his right shoulder, have been worrisome. But the Colts are a playoff contender if he can return at 100 percent, as they still hope, in time for the regular season.

- [ ] 4. Marshal Yanda, G, Ravens: One of the NFL's best guards is still recovering from a fractured leg but is expected to open the regular season. The Ravens struggled to replace him last season, losing five of their next eight games after his injury and watching their points average drop by six per game.

- [ ] 5. Julian Edelman, WR, Patriots: Edelman's return will no doubt be of comfort to Tom Brady, who completed 356 passes to him from 2013 to 2016 -- fifth most in the league during that time. But the Patriots always find ways to move past injuries. They scored an NFL-high 28.6 points per game after Edelman tore his ACL in the preseason last year.

- [ ] 6. Eric Berry, S, Chiefs: It can be difficult to draw a straight line between safety play and team success, but Berry's presence has always seemed important. The Chiefs have made the playoffs in four of his five full seasons, and last season's wild-card flameout came after he tore his Achilles tendon. His leadership will be especially important as they transition to Patrick Mahomes at quarterback.

7. Richard Sherman, CB, 49ers: It's fair to wonder if Sherman, 30, will have lost a step once he returns from a torn Achilles tendon. But his presence will bring an important attitude to the 49ers' young defense, and he'll be highly motivated to lift them above and beyond his former team (and division rival) in Seattle. -- Kevin Seifert

Rising stars returning from injury

9. Deshaun Watson, QB, Texans: It's impossible to overstate the difference in the Texans' offense after Watson tore his ACL last season. The Texans averaged 33.7 points in his six starts, winning three of them. In their other 10 games, they averaged 13 points and went 1-9.

10. David Johnson, RB, Cardinals: One of the NFL's most versatile running backs is 100 percent after fracturing his wrist in Week 1 of 2017. At a time when pass-catching from backs has never been more valuable, it should be remembered Johnson had 80 receptions in 2016. He'll be central to the offense as it manages the eventual transition to rookie quarterback Josh Rosen.

11. Dalvin Cook, RB, Vikings: Cook will return the level of explosiveness he provided to the Vikings' backfield last season before tearing his ACL in Week 4. He averaged 4.8 yards per carry, nearly a full yard more than the combined average of his replacements. -- Kevin Seifert

Free-agent acquisitions who will make big impacts

12. Kirk Cousins, QB, Vikings: Cousins has a high bar to eclipse. Predecessor Case Keenum ranked No. 2 last season in Total QBR (69.7) and took the Vikings to the NFC Championship Game. But Cousins' accuracy and strength in the pocket make them a top-end Super Bowl contender.

13. Jimmy Graham, TE, Packers: At 31, his best days might be behind him. But Graham remains a uniquely talented receiver, especially in the red zone, and has landed with a quarterback who wants to make use of good tight ends. When paired with Jermichael Finley (2009-13) and Jared Cook (2016), Rodgers averaged more than five targets to them per game.

14. Tyrann Mathieu, S, Texans: Injuries contributed to some down years in Arizona, but Mathieu is still only 26 and should benefit from the change of scenery. The Texans' plan to anchor him at safety should maximize his playmaking instincts, and he'll get the benefit of playing behind a pair of elite pass-rushers.

15. Jerick McKinnon, RB, 49ers: It's fair to argue that the 49ers overpaid relative to the market. McKinnon will earn the second-highest cash total ($12 million) among all running backs in 2018. But there is no question how productive he could be, especially as a receiver, in coach Kyle Shanahan's offense.

16. Nate Solder, LT, Giants: No one would suggest Solder is among the best left tackles. But simply adding an above-average player at that position can make a huge difference. Look at what Andrew Whitworth did for the Rams last season. Solder will allow Eli Manning to drop back with confidence and will limit how often Pat Shurmur needs to provide backside help. -- Kevin Seifert

17. Jimmy Garoppolo, 49ers: He has still not lost an NFL game as a starting quarterback. If that continues, all other storylines will pale in comparison. But assuming it doesn't, the ups and downs of Garoppolo's development will be worth watching. What he did as a midseason trade acquisition who didn't have time to learn the offense is incredible and has led to sky-high optimism in the Bay Area.

18. Marcus Mariota, Titans: His performance in Tennessee's playoff upset in Kansas City helped redeem a regression year in which Mariota threw 13 touchdown passes to 15 interceptions, but Mariota faces big expectations in his fourth NFL season. The Titans hope new offensive coordinator Matt LaFleur, who had success last season with Jared Goff in L.A., will be a boost to Mariota's development.

19. Jameis Winston, Buccaneers: It was a disappointing season all around in Tampa Bay. Winston tried to play through injuries and ended up missing three games. But the way he played when he returned from injury -- 317 yards per game, 9

touchdowns and 5 interceptions in five December games -- offered hope that this could be the big breakout year the Buccaneers were hoping 2017 would be.

- [ ] 20. Dak Prescott, Cowboys: It's only Dak's third season, but it's a big one. Because he wasn't a first-round pick, the Cowboys don't hold a fifth-year option on him. So 2019 is the final year of his rookie contract, and next offseason is the one in which they'll be thinking about an extension. They're trying to tailor the offense around him, but the biggest thing could be a full 16 games with Ezekiel Elliott.

- [ ] 21. Mitchell Trubisky, Bears: Chicago asked very little of Trubisky when it gave him the starting QB job midway through last season. With Matt Nagy installing a new offense, Trubisky will be asked to make more throws, take more risks and shoulder more responsibility. There are likely to be growing pains, but by season's end, we should have a much better sense of his future NFL prospects. -- Dan Graziano

Players who could break out

- [ ] 22. Josh Doctson, WR, Washington: As any good fantasy football player knows, third-year receivers are very often strong breakout candidates. Docston's rookie year was basically lost to injury, but he showed flashes in 2017 and the coaching staff believes he can be a big-time target for Alex Smith, especially in the red zone.

- [ ] 23. Takkarist McKinley, DE, Falcons: Atlanta's 2017 first-round pick had six sacks as a rookie, and four came in his final seven games. That strong finish should lead to increased opportunity in Year 2. It's possible he could emerge as the team's best pass-rusher -- even ahead of 2016 NFL sacks leader Vic Beasley.

- [ ] 24. Myles Jack, LB, Jaguars: He has played in the middle and on the strong side in his first two seasons and shown an ability to handle both roles. Whether the Jaguars continue to shuffle him around depending on personnel groupings or make him the full-time middle linebacker, expect this to be the year Jack shows everyone why the Jags got a second-round steal in 2016.

- [ ] 25. Trey Burton, TE, Bears: Chicago didn't give him $18 million guaranteed to come in and play the same bit role he had in Philadelphia. Expect Burton to be a big part of Nagy's revamped passing attack. Scouts have long believed Burton has the ability to handle a larger role. We're about to find out if they're right.

- [ ] 26. Corey Davis, WR, Titans: All three of the top receivers drafted in 2017 (Davis, the Bengals' John Ross and the Chargers' Mike Williams) struggled with injury issues as rookies, and all should be in good positions to bounce back. But Davis has a clear opportunity to be the Titans' No. 1 wide receiver, and the change in offensive coordinator to LaFleur should help the entire passing game. -- Dan Graziano

Rookies with the most fantasy potential

- [ ] 27. Saquon Barkley, RB, Giants: He's the easy choice for the top spot here. The Giants didn't use the No. 2 pick on a running back so he could sit and learn from Jonathan Stewart. Barkley should be a huge part of the offense as the bell-cow runner and, if he shows he can handle his blitz-pickup responsibilities, he should help in the passing game as well. He's a strong second-round fantasy pick who could sneak into the first in some drafts.

- [ ] 28. Rashaad Penny, RB, Seahawks: Seattle surprised a lot of people by drafting Penny in the first round, but the Seahawks identified him as a back who could step right into the kind of system they run on offense. Opportunity is everything in fantasy, and a team whose quarterback led it in rushing last season is looking for someone to grab the reins in the running game.

- [ ] 29. Royce Freeman, RB, Broncos: Denver is another team looking for consistent answers in the running game. And if you don't think a third-round pick can step right in and be a rookie fantasy stud, then you have quickly forgotten the 2017 performances of Kareem Hunt and Alvin Kamara.

- [ ] 30. Ronald Jones II, RB, Buccaneers: Sensing a theme here? Tampa Bay was 27th in the league in rushing last season -- one spot behind the Giants and four behind the Seahawks. Jones might not project as an every-down back right away, and it's

on the coaching staff to find the right spots to deploy him, but he has explosive, big-play ability.

- [ ] 31. Anthony Miller, WR, Bears: Well, it couldn't be all RBs, right? This year's rookie WR class doesn't seem to have a lot of instant-impact stars, but there'll be opportunity (there's that word again) in Chicago, where Miller steps in as one of the more polished rookie receivers. Don't be surprised if he gets a high volume of targets right away, even if Allen Robinson is the nominal No. 1. -- Dan Graziano

Quarterbacks on the hot seat

- [ ] 32. Tyrod Taylor, Browns: No. 1 overall choice Baker Mayfield will not sit forever.
- [ ] 33. Josh McCown, Jets: The Jets drafted Sam Darnold third overall. McCown has never started 16 games in a season.
- [ ] 34. AJ McCarron, Bills: Wait, is McCarron even the starter? The depth chart says he is, but with No. 7 overall pick Josh Allen behind him, the seat is already warm.
- [ ] 35. Sam Bradford, Cardinals: Josh Rosen's arrival puts Bradford on notice.
- [ ] 36. Joe Flacco, Ravens: The Ravens' decision to draft Lamar Jackson at the end of Round 1 suggests they see the huge gap between Flacco's compensation ($22.1 million a year) and his performance (25th in Total QBR over the past three seasons).
- [ ] 37. Eli Manning, Giants: The Giants have gone out of their way to support Manning even though he belongs in Flacco's company with a $21 million APY and No. 24 QBR ranking over the past three seasons. That support is surely conditional on Manning performing better this season.
- [ ] 38. Andy Dalton, Bengals: Dalton has no more guaranteed money in his deal beyond 2018, which means Cincinnati could easily bail from its 2019-20 commitment. That doesn't necessarily make the seat beneath Dalton scorching, but it's a little warm, at least.
- [ ] 39. Ryan Tannehill, Dolphins: Tannehill has not played in a game since Dec. 11, 2016. He needs to stay on the field and perform decently for Miami to stay the course beyond this season. -- Mike Sando

Backup quarterbacks who could make a difference

- [ ] 40. Nick Foles, Eagles: I know. Duh, right? How long did it take you to come up with that one? Dude just won Super Bowl MVP. Obviously he can make a difference, and with Wentz working his way back from December knee surgery, the odds appear strong that Foles will have to open the season as the starter and play a few games.
- [ ] 41. Brian Hoyer, Patriots: Hey, he's getting more May and June first-team reps than Patriots backup QBs usually get, right? As long as Tom Brady stays away, Hoyer gets the work he needs to get in order to be ready in case the soon-to-be 41-year-old Brady goes down at some point during the season.
- [ ] 42. Lamar Jackson, Ravens: Not because I see him as a threat to usurp Flacco's starting role this season, but because Baltimore could look for creative ways to use his unique speed and skills during his rookie season. And no, I'm not suggesting he move to receiver, just that his athleticism could lend itself to a trick play here or there that could help make a difference.
- [ ] 43. Jacoby Brissett, Colts: Here we go again with Andrew Luck and the offseason of non-update shoulder updates. Brissett showed himself capable of starting games in the NFL and could have to do so again if Luck isn't ready to start the season or has a setback at some point.
- [ ] 44. Chad Henne, Chiefs: They're excited about Patrick Mahomes in Kansas City, and they should be. He's nothing if not exciting. But he's also 22 years old and has one NFL game under his belt. There's a nonzero chance he ends up not being ready, and if that's the case, Henne is the veteran backup who could help win a game or two. -- Dan Graziano

Most exciting offenses to watch

- [ ] 45. Young Patrick Mahomes takes over the high-octane Chiefs: We haven't seen Mahomes in any extended meaningful action in Kansas City, but we're about to. And with guys like Tyreek Hill, Travis Kelce, Sammy Watkins and Kareem Hunt around him, the razzle-dazzle the Chiefs showed last season on offense shouldn't skip a beat as long as the young QB can handle it all.

- [ ] 46. Drew Brees is dangerous when he has a running game: The running backs were the stars last season, but a passing game led by Brees and emerging star receiver Michael Thomas still has plenty of ability to entertain us. Expect more fun from second-year running back Alvin Kamara and a return to more Brees-like numbers in the passing game.

- [ ] 47. Gronk and the GOAT keep things rolling in New England: Julian Edelman's return from injury will help the offense look more the way the Patriots want it to look. So long as Rob Gronkowski and Tom Brady are on the field, the Pats retain the ability to score from just about anywhere. Sony Michel adds a fun element to the running game.

- [ ] 48. What can Sean McVay do for an encore? The Rams led the NFL in scoring in 2017, and the only major change was replacing Sammy Watkins with Brandin Cooks. With Coach of the Year Sean McVay leading the offense and running back Todd Gurley taking handoffs from Jared Goff, the Rams should continue to be fun for a while.

- [ ] 49. One last ride for Pittsburgh's Killer B's? Couldn't make this list without the team that has the game's best wide receiver (Antonio Brown) and best running back (Le'Veon Bell). Add in exciting youngster JuJu Smith-Schuster and Ben Roethlisberger's bunch is even more fun to watch. -- Dan Graziano

Most dominant defenses

- [ ] 50. Jalen and the Jags try to muscle their way past the Pats: The Jaguars have depth and stars at every level, with Jalen Ramsey emerging on the back end as one of the best young corners and a monster defensive line harassing QBs up front. The Jags made it to the AFC Championship Game last season on the back of that defense, and there's little reason to think they can't continue to dominate on that side of the ball.

- [ ] 51. Is the Vikings' D good enough to keep them kings in the North? Another defense with impact guys at all three levels, the Vikings added defensive tackle Sheldon Richardson to the mix and should be even better. No team allowed fewer yards or points last season. Aaron Rodgers' return from injury in Green Bay should test that defense, and division rivals Chicago and Detroit look to be better on offense, but the Vikings should still rank as one of the league's better defenses.

- [ ] 52. Ingram and Bosa terrorizing QBs in L.A.: Even before safety Derwin James dropped into their laps at 17th overall in April's draft, the Chargers boasted a deep secondary with the likes of Jason Verrett and Jahleel Addae. And no team comes at you with a more fearsome edge-rusher tandem than Melvin Ingram and Joey Bosa.

- [ ] 53. The champs are still as deep up front as anyone: The Super Bowl wasn't the greatest showcase of how good last season's Eagles were on defense, but with second-year pass-rusher Derek Barnett set for an expanded role and Michael Bennett joining an already-stacked defensive line, the depth in the front seven should help them be one of the league's best defenses for the second year in a row.

- [ ] 54. Kuechly and the Carolina cats: Some questions, sure. But even with some age on the line and linebacker Thomas Davis set to miss the first four games on a drug suspension, the Panthers remain one of the more difficult defenses to play against. Only the Eagles and Vikings gave up fewer rushing yards in 2017, and only the Steelers and Jaguars recorded more sacks. You'd like to see the Panthers up their interception total from last year's measly 10, but they're still able to limit yardage and scoring as well as just about anyone. -- Dan Graziano

Most notable potential 2019 free agents

- [ ] 55. Aaron Donald, DT, Rams: Last season's Defensive Player of the Year has been seeking a new contract for more than a year. His price has only gone up in the interim. The Rams seem committed to getting him signed, and could use the

franchise tag next spring if they do not, but until then, Donald is officially at the top of the list of pending free agents.

- [ ] 56. Khalil Mack, LB, Raiders: A two-time All-Pro, Mack was the 2016 Defensive Player of the Year and has 36.5 sacks over the past three seasons. Other than QBs, there is no more highly valued group of players in free agency than edge pass-rushers. As with Donald, it's difficult to imagine the Raiders letting Mack go. But as of now, he is unsigned beyond 2018.

- [ ] 57. Odell Beckham Jr., WR, Giants: A viral social media video this spring reignited public debate about whether the Giants should or would commit long term to their star receiver. They were reported to be open to trade offers, but the furor has since died down and Beckham has been participating in spring practices. Notably, however, there have been no substantive negotiations. The Giants are not in a rush as the expiration of Beckham's contract approaches.

- [ ] 58. Taylor Lewan, LT, Titans: Lewan is a two-time Pro Bowl player and would be difficult to replace. On the other hand, the money available to above-average left tackles on the open market the past two years has been bonkers. If Nate Solder got $35 million in guarantees from the Giants, what kind of money should Lewan -- who is four years younger and a much better player -- seek from the Titans?

- [ ] 59. Zack Martin, G, Cowboys: The best guard in the NFL is on an expiring contract, one year after the Jaguars gave free agent Andrew Norwell $30 million guaranteed. The Cowboys don't want to let Martin go, but they also have to budget for future negotiations, with Dak Prescott and running back Ezekiel Elliott both eligible for extensions after 2018. -- Kevin Seifert

Players set to cash in if they have a big year

- [ ] 60. Le'Veon Bell, RB, Steelers: This assumes (as it does for anyone else on this list) that Bell doesn't sign a long-term extension before the July 15 deadline for franchise players to do so. I don't expect that he will, which means he plays 2018 on the $14.544 million franchise tag and hits the market as a big-money free agent next year at age 27. It would cost the Steelers $20.9 million to franchise him again, which would make him the 2019 running back version of Kirk Cousins.

- [ ] 61. DeMarcus Lawrence, DE, Cowboys: If Lawrence plays out the year on his $17.143 million franchise tag, he would cost the Cowboys $20.6 million to franchise again in 2019. He'll be 26 when the market opens next spring, and anything close to a repeat of his 14.5-sack 2017 season would encourage the Cowboys to do what they can to keep him off of it. Detroit's Ezekiel Ansah, Cincinnati's Carlos Dunlap and Minnesota's Danielle Hunter and Sheldon Richardson could join Lawrence in a strong free-agent DL class.

- [ ] 62. Brandin Cooks, WR, Rams: Assuming Odell Beckham Jr. gets his new deal this offseason, Cooks and Kelvin Benjamin (and maybe Martavis Bryant) would headline next year's free-agent wide receiver class. It remains to be seen whether Cooks (who doesn't even turn 25 until September!) can produce better numbers in the "Sammy Watkins role" in the L.A. offense, but obviously the lackluster stats didn't keep Watkins from cashing in.

- [ ] 63. Tyler Eifert, TE, Bengals: With Eifert, it's as much about having a healthy year as it is a big one. He has missed 40 games due to injury the past four years and is coming off of back surgery. If he gets through all 16 this year somehow, he hits the market as a 28-year-old tight end with a history of performing when healthy.

- [ ] 64. Ronald Darby, CB, Eagles: He had a strong 2015 rookie season in Buffalo, and in his third year he helped the Eagles win a Super Bowl. Darby will be 25 when free agency opens in 2019, and with a strong 2018 he could be in position to cash in big. -- Dan Graziano

Veteran non-QBs who need to prove it

- [ ] 65. Josh Gordon, WR, Browns: Gordon is playing on a one-year deal for the NFL's minimum salary, with a chance to earn much more if he avoids trouble.

- [ ] 66. Sammy Watkins, WR, Chiefs: Watkins' new deal will pay him $16 million annually despite only one 1,000-yard season to this point in his career. The Chiefs are counting on him.

- [ ] 67. Kevin White, WR, Bears: The seventh player selected in the 2015 draft has appeared in five games through three seasons.
- [ ] 68. Muhammad Wilkerson, DL, Packers: A one-year contract with Green Bay marked a huge fall from his previous deal with the Jets.
- [ ] 69. Dante Fowler, DE, Jaguars: The Jaguars did not pick up Fowler's fifth-year option after getting 12 sacks and one start from him over the past two seasons.
- [ ] 70. Germain Ifedi, OL, Seahawks: Ifedi has a new position coach, new blocking schemes and a chance to reinvent himself. Will he switch to guard?
- [ ] 71. Doug Martin, RB, Raiders: Martin could be getting his last chance at age 29. He has had two 1,400-yard rushing seasons and four with fewer than 500 yards.
- [ ] 72. Shane Ray, OLB, Broncos: A one-sack season in 2017 led Denver to pass on Ray's fifth-year option.
- [ ] 73. Danny Shelton, DT, Patriots: The 2015 first-round pick is in a contract year with New England after the Browns declined to pick up his fifth-year option. -- Mike Sando

Coaches on the hot seat

- [ ] 74. Hue Jackson, Browns: Jackson seemed to defy the odds when new general manager John Dorsey retained him, but with a 1-31 record over two seasons, will he have staying power?
- [ ] 75. Vance Joseph, Broncos: John Elway hasn't been afraid to fire coaches. Joseph survived a 5-11 initial season with Denver. He clearly must do better in 2018.
- [ ] 76. Dirk Koetter, Buccaneers: Ownership tends to keep the seat warm in Tampa Bay even for successful coaches. Koetter is coming off a 5-11 season that dropped his two-year mark to 14-18. Another losing season would probably doom him.
- [ ] 77. Jay Gruden, Redskins: Gruden is the sixth coach hired by owner Daniel Snyder and the first of the six to reach a fifth season. With a 28-35-1 record and no playoff wins, there's some urgency.
- [ ] 78. John Harbaugh, Ravens: Harbaugh has raised the bar in Baltimore by posting a 94-66 regular-season record, plus a 10-5 mark in the postseason. But three consecutive seasons without a playoff berth have put pressure on him in 2018.
- [ ] 79. Marvin Lewis, Bengals: Is there such a thing as a hot seat in Cincy? Lewis has been immovable since 2003 and could be on the hot seat in fans' minds only. -- Mike Sando

Potentially volatile situations

- [ ] 80. Brady-Belichick alliance: It will not last forever. Signs of strain are showing, making the Patriots the most intriguing soap opera in the league.
- [ ] 81. Browns' personality surplus: There are strong, opinionated and outspoken personalities in Cleveland, with general manager John Dorsey, coach Hue Jackson, offensive coordinator Todd Haley and defensive coordinator Gregg Williams in prominent roles.
- [ ] 82. If the stars are dim in Dallas: The Cowboys are expecting big things with Ezekiel Elliott back in the fold, but what happens if they struggle without Jason Witten and Dez Bryant? Jerry Jones reacts.
- [ ] 83. Elway's expectations: General manager John Elway expects results in Denver, or else.
- [ ] 84. Uncertainty in Detroit: Revelations regarding new coach Matt Patricia shocked the organization, making this a situation to monitor if more becomes known.

- [ ] 85. Seattle's tricky situation: The Seahawks haven't had a losing season since 2011. What happens if they endure one in 2018? A roster in transition makes this a potentially volatile situation.

- [ ] 86. Star power in Los Angeles: The Rams played fantasy football by adding Marcus Peters, Aqib Talib, Ndamukong Suh and Brandin Cooks. It will be exciting if things go well -- and potentially volatile if they do not. -- Mike Sando

Potential trade bait

- [ ] 87. Earl Thomas, S, Seahawks: Assuming he's not traded before the season, and that Seattle doesn't extend his contract beyond this year in the meantime, Thomas will be the trade-deadline headliner. Dallas has been interested, as we all know, but fresh needs could open up in new spots between now and the end of October, and if Seattle is struggling, he will remain someon to watch.

- [ ] 88. Jay Ajayi, RB, Eagles: You always have to look at Philadelphia when you're projecting potential trades. Let's say Darren Sproles comes back from injury and makes a big contribution while Corey Clement continues to impress. The Eagles could find themselves with a surplus of quality running backs, and Ajayi could be on the move for the second trade deadline in a row. He's scheduled to be an unrestricted free agent at season's end.

- [ ] 89. Tyrod Taylor, QB, Browns: The following two possibilities are not mutually exclusive: (1) Taylor plays well as the starting quarterback for the first two months and (2) the Browns start 2-6 anyway. If that happens, and they decide it's time to give the job to No. 1 overall pick Baker Mayfield, Cleveland could look to move Taylor, whose contract voids at the end of this season, to a contender whose QB got hurt or is underperforming.

- [ ] 90. Jeremy Hill, RB, Patriots: Just kind of a wild guess here, as the Patriots have more running backs than they can use, and it's possible first-rounder Sony Michel carves out a significant role for himself early in the season. Rex Burkhead and James White appear set in their own roles, and if Hill shows he's healthy and performs well, he could bring back something of value midseason.

- [ ] 91. Anthony Barr, LB, Vikings: Again, a lot would have to happen, including some backup linebacker convincing the coaching staff he's ready to take over as a starter. (The Vikings are a go-for-it-this-year team.) But Minnesota can't sign everyone, and with Eric Kendricks already locked up and the likes of Danielle Hunter and Stefon Diggs still looking for new deals, Barr could be the odd man out and could appeal to a contender (Pittsburgh?) looking for help at linebacker. -- Dan Graziano

Rules changes to watch

- [ ] 92. Helmet rule: Players face a 15-yard penalty for lowering their helmets to initiate contact on an opponent. Flagrant instances will be subject to ejection, which are expected to be rare and will be reviewed by replay. Coaches and players are worried about strict enforcement, but officials have been instructed not to throw a flag unless they see obvious infractions.

- [ ] 93. Catch rule: The league will no longer require players to maintain control of the ball throughout the process of the catch. A catch is now defined as control of the ball, established in bounds and a football move such as a third step or a lunge with the ball. Slight movement of the ball while otherwise in control will be disregarded.

- [ ] 94. Kickoff rule: Owners adopted a proposal from special-teams coaches designed to make the kickoff safer. Two-man wedges were eliminated, as were running starts from the coverage team, and the return team must align eight men within 15 yards of the ball. Without a reduction in concussions in 2018, the play faces an uncertain future.

- [ ] 95. Anthem rule: If they are on the field for the national anthem, players must "stand and show respect for the flag and anthem." They also have the option of remaining in the locker room during the performance. Discipline won't affect game results -- the league will fine the team for a violation, and the team has the option of punishing the player -- but this policy will receive heavy public scrutiny. -- Kevin Seifert

Major health and safety issues

- [ ] 96. Concussions: Alarmed by a league-record 291 reported concussions in 2017, owners took relatively dramatic steps this spring. They not only changed rules involving the kickoff and use of the helmet, but they're also targeting training camp scrimmages that produce a disproportionate number of concussions. Concussion tracking will take on a new urgency.

- [ ] 97. Thursday night games: For the first time since the NFL began releasing injury data, games played on Thursday night produced a higher injury rate than those on other days. The games aren't going away -- owners signed a new five-year broadcast deal with Fox Sports valued at an average of $660 million annually -- but there should be new scrutiny in 2018. Players have long complained about the minimal recovery time associated with games on short rest.

- [ ] 98. Concussion settlement: An issue that has largely played out in the background for current NFL players is starting to spill into the mainstream discussion. Payouts have been slower than expected, as have accusations of fraudulent claims, and the ongoing dispute has become another source of concern for active players who don't trust owners.

- [ ] 99. Helmet restrictions: For the first time, the NFL and NFL Players Association have banned certain helmet models because of poor performance in testing or outdated technology. That includes the helmets worn in 2017 by quarterbacks Tom Brady and Drew Brees. They will have until 2019 to find a new model, but some players will have to change immediately based on the model they used. -- Kevin Seifert

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