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Richard Sherman and the Cornerback Summit

The All-Pro DB, starting fresh with the 49ers after seven stellar seasons in Seattle, summoned the best at his position to study film and share trade secrets. Plus, unexpected fan reaction to a week of really bad NFL news, a shot at a preseason power ranking and more with training camps on the horizon

ROBERT KLEMKO • JUL 16, 2018

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Try to put yourself in Ahkello Witherspoon's shoes. You're 23, a third-round pick out of Colorado in 2017, and you had no idea what to expect in the NFL. Most guys say they knew back in college they'd make it in the league, but you're honest, and you'll admit you had no idea until you stepped onto the field in August 2017 and saw your first action as a 49er. Yet you thrived on a losing football team, earning the starting gig in late October. The team traded for a quarterback who led you to five straight wins to finish the season. A few months later they signed a three-time All-Pro cornerback to play opposite you. It's all happening now, and there's more.



The All-Pro has been watching you—on film, in OTAs—and he’s convinced you’re *next*. In a year, he says, the football world will know your name. He invites you to a gathering that’s the first of its kind. On a sun-soaked practice field at Stanford University in late June, you meet Aqib Talib, Darius Slay, Xavier Rhodes and the guy who invited you, Richard Sherman. Between them they have 12 Pro Bowl nods, six first-team All-Pro selections, two Super Bowl rings and something like \$155 million in career earnings before taxes.

You work out with them, running cone drills to fine-tune your footwork, and then you watch film of each of your targets and explain to the room what you were thinking on each play. Talib, Slay, Rhodes and Sherman do the same, and you start to think maybe you deserve to be in this room with these giants of the position.

“I was watching these guys on TV in college, on *Monday Night Football*, in the playoffs, and to be around them is just a blessing. It’s surreal,” Witherspoon says. “I think this is the group I belong in, and turning on the tape confirms that.”

This self-styled cornerback academy was an attempt to take a page from Larry Fitzgerald, the Cardinals receiver who for years has hosted offseason workouts with dozens of receivers across the league. About 10 of the top cornerbacks in the NFL were invited to the first get-together at Stanford, with several citing scheduling conflicts and pledging to make the trip next year.

In this cornerback-centric episode of *The MMQB*, we talk to three CBs who changed teams in 2018—former Seahawk and current 49er Richard Sherman, former Bronco and current Ram Aqib Talib,

and former Patriot and current Titan Malcolm Butler—to get their take on the change in scenery and break down their prospects in new defenses, or rather, old defenses with new faces. Plus I'll give you my top 16 teams for 2018, and get into an interesting reaction to some bad news out of the NFL last week.

But first the CB summit, and the most important thing on the docket that weekend: For 90 minutes, the five corners broke down their own film and explained the methods that make them exceptional. Slay went into detail on how he interprets different 3x1 formations. Rhodes broke down when and how to be aggressive in man coverage. Talib explained how he disguises coverages and “sits on routes,” leading to 10 interceptions returned for touchdowns in his career, putting him at fourth all-time behind Rod Woodson (12), Darren Sharper (11) and Charles Woodson (11). “Talib is great at taking the call coach gives you and using it to effect on the field,” Slay says. “He has a lot of pick-sixes because he sits on a lot of routes and jumps them. He's great at route recognition and understanding how to use the call against them.”

They were all there to pick Sherman's brain on fade routes; the former Seahawks cornerback (that feels weird to say, doesn't it?) is renowned in the NFL defensive back community for being the best in the business at not only defending fade passes, but also intercepting them. He estimates two-thirds of his 32 career interceptions have come on this single route.

“It was great to hear Sherm talk about what he be thinking on those plays,” Talib says. “Running to that certain angle, and he showed two or three examples of it. That was something I felt I could really work on. He puts a lot of emphasis on it, and it turns into big plays.”

Cam, AB and Opponents Who Team Up for Summer Workouts

During their two on-field sessions, each Pro Bowler introduced a drill that they felt was important. Sherman explained his six-inch first step and how he avoids wasting steps in the beginning of a route. Slay taught a backpedal drill for defending double moves. During breaks they discussed what makes the great receivers in the NFL great; how Antonio Brown will tug on a jersey discreetly and how he “late-hands” everything, as in not stretch out his hands to catch a ball until the very last possible moment, so as not to provide an opportunity for a DB to slap his hands away. As Witherspoon listened, they talked about the postseason and how the game gets even faster. “It really does become a game of inches when you get to the playoffs,” Sherman said. “You have to experience it to really get it.”

The goal for next offseason is to get more of the best cornerbacks in the NFL in Palo Alto, enduring \$500-a-night hotel rooms to share their knowledge with the group. “It was dope, just picking each other's brains and finding out what these guys are thinking,” Talib says. “We wanted to have more people come out, but it was our first time. We're gonna get the kinks out and run it back.” Sherman is convinced that when they do run it back, Witherspoon will no longer seem like an interloper to anyone paying attention.

“I invited him because I thought he could hold his own,” Sherman says of Witherspoon. “I think from being around him, working with him, working out with him, watching him in OTAs and minicamp, I knew he could keep up with the workflow. I knew he would look the part. I knew, drill-wise, he wouldn’t be overwhelmed. His footwork is beautiful and technical. I knew that in terms of demeanor and just being able to just walk around and not be star-struck by these guys, he’d be fine. I think he belongs with those guys, and people will figure that out in a few months.”

The two-day experience energized Witherspoon and left him with some lofty goals for the 2018 season, set to begin for the 49ers when they report to training camp on July 25. “I expect for us to be the best defense in the league,” Witherspoon said. “I like to think we’ll be able to play 9-on-9, with myself and Sherman out there taking out two receivers. It’s a matter of coming together, playing fast and making those plays when they come.”

As it happens, two of the attendees of the cornerback academy, Sherman and Talib, find themselves on new teams in 2018. Throw in Malcolm Butler and you have three veterans older than 28, each of them in the upper echelon of one of the most important positions on the field in the modern NFL, coming to teams we can expect to be in the postseason in 2018. Sherman joins Witherspoon in San Francisco on a three-year deal worth up to \$39 million; the Broncos traded Talib to the L.A. Rams for a fifth-round pick; and Butler signed with the Titans for five years and \$61 million, with \$30 million guaranteed.

In interviews with The MMQB, each shared his thoughts on the teams and people left behind, and his optimism for the future.

Beginning with Butler, it’s easy to see why he chose the Titans from a schematic standpoint. Forty-two-year-old first-year coach Mike Vrabel played linebacker for eight seasons in New England with Bill Belichick and in his first season in Tennessee will employ a 3-4 defense that will use many of the same concepts Belichick has mastered. It’s harder to understand why Butler chose to continue on the Belichick coaching tree after how bitterly things ended in New England, with the fifth-year corner benched in a Super Bowl loss to the Eagles for reasons that have yet to be fully explained. (Butler, [in an interview with SI TV](#), discussed his emotions during the game but didn’t go into detail on the reasons he didn’t play.)

Malcolm Butler: Patriots Were 'Short About One or Two Plays' From Winning Super Bowl LII

Still, Butler has nothing but kind words for Belichick and his style, which he sees echoed in Vrabel. Much of Belichick’s outsized influence in New England stems from his egalitarian treatment of star players, which is to say, he treats them like scrubs. (The MMQB’s Jenny Vrentas wrote a [highly recommended breakdown of this dynamic](#).)

“It’s the Patriots system, one of the greatest systems in the NFL,” Butler says of the Titans. “You can tell Mike played for Belichick because you can see some of the similarities. They’re about winning

the way New England is about winning.

“One thing I saw early: Mike will put you on blast. He don’t care who’s around. He’s going to say what’s right. He might be a bit looser than Bill Belichick, but they’re both great guys. A man caught a ball on me—honestly I don’t know his name yet—but Mike let me hear about it. ‘Don’t get stuck on top of the routes like that! Make a play!’ Nobody cares where you come from or what you make. Everyone’s equal. And you can tell from the head coach all the way down to the interns, everybody wants to win.”

If the Titans are going to repeat last season’s playoff berth, they’ll be doing so with a defense that shares a lot of the basics with New England and little else. The Texans with Vrabel as defensive coordinator played a healthy split of man and zone coverage, ranking 15th in the league in use of the former, according to data provided to The MMQB by [Sports Info Solutions](#). The Patriots, on the other hand, ran the third-highest rate of man last season and 30th-highest rate of zone with Butler on the roster. A transition to a more zone-heavy approach could end up being bad news for Butler, who performed better in man (57.1% completion percentage) than zone (73.3%).

For Many NFL Players, Summer Doesn't Bring Much of a Break

In fact, Butler’s strongest moments in 2017 came when he was tasked with shadowing the other team’s fastest receiver. When Butler was asked to follow DeSean Jackson, Robby Anderson, Emmanuel Sanders, Amari Cooper and Deonte Thompson (twice), quarterbacks completed only 48.8% of passes against him, despite the average depth of target against Butler jumping 2.6 yards from his average non-shadow assignment. “There’s something about being mano a mano,” Butler says, “You can’t say, this is all I’m going to be doing all game, because if they come out in no-huddle you may end up with a different assignment, but it really allows you to zero in and focus on that one job.”

In joining the Titans, Butler is essentially doing the opposite of what his former teammate Stephon Gilmore did in 2017, leaving the zone-heavy Bills for the man-heavy Patriots. It wasn’t a problem for Gilmore, who was consistent if not spectacular. Butler doesn’t sound particularly fazed. “I really can’t tell the difference yet,” he says. “No matter what it is, you’re gonna have to tackle somebody, cover somebody, defend somebody.”

In Los Angeles, Talib joins a team with big expectations for Year 2 under Sean McVay, who is 20 days older than his new All-Pro cornerback. The Rams can boast perhaps [the biggest defensive talent haul of the offseason](#), having traded second- and fourth-round picks to Kansas City for cornerback Marcus Peters and a sixth-round pick. Talib and Peters join a defense that Talib is intimately familiar with; Rams DC Wade Phillips was Talib’s coordinator in Denver in 2015 (when the Broncos won the Super Bowl) and ’16. Phillips left for the same role in L.A. when Vance Joseph was hired as head coach. Under Phillips’s successor in Denver in 2017, Joe Woods, Talib says the Broncos ran the same scheme in its beta version.

“It was the same defense but we called less stuff,” Talib says. “Wade really had it wide open, and it wasn’t as open in 2017. It was like the beginning stages of Wade. It was new to this coach, so things were less disguised with fewer calls. If 40 calls were available to us in a game in 2016, we had half of that last season.”

Aqib Talib and Marcus Peters: How a Pair of Risk-Taking Corners Could Give the Rams the Edge

That wasn’t the only difference. While the Broncos finished third in yards allowed in 2017, they lost a certain bite in the passing game with Phillips’s departure. Joe Woods’s defenses were soft underneath, with opposing offenses’ average depth of target dropping from 11.92 yards in 2016 to 8.31 a season later, and completion percentage rising from 42.6% to 50%, per SIS. Opposing quarterbacks had a 48.12 passer rating in 2016, and an 88.54 rating a year later. One major personnel difference: The Broncos jettisoned hard-hitting safety T.J. Ward after the 2016 season, a move that was unpopular among several defensive players, including Talib.

For both Peters and Talib, joining the Rams will likely mean less man coverage; the Chiefs and Broncos last year were in man 62.6% and 57.2% of the time, respectively, while Phillips’s Rams were in man just over 50% of the time, per SIS. “It’s not too much different,” Talib says. “Wade’s going to run his defense. He may switch things up depending on his personnel, but he’s been the same on defense everywhere he’s been.

“Having Aaron Donald is pretty similar to having Von Miller, where you have a guy that’s a real disruption up front, and he forces quarterbacks to make quick decisions and they start making mistakes.

“The thing that excites me about this team is the confidence and the work ethic that’s in that building. It starts with McVay. You can tell the work he puts in because he knows everything. He knows the whole defense and the whole offense. I think that confidence breeds success. All the successful teams I’ve been on have had great, hard-working offseasons and a super confident bunch of guys.”

As for Denver, the veteran of four NFL teams has one parting recommendation to management: “Maybe they should stop firing all the dogs,” Talib says. “That team was full of dogs, and now they’re all gone. So, stop firing all the dogs.”

Sherman, entering his eighth NFL season, joins a defense that ranked 24th in yards allowed but yielded 100 yards rushing just once in its final six games. **San Francisco defensive coordinator Robert Saleh** is from the Pete Carroll coaching tree, having been a defensive quality control coach for the Seahawks from 2011 to 2013 (Sherman’s first three seasons with the club) and linebackers coach under Gus Bradley, Carroll’s former defensive coordinator, in Jacksonville from 2014-16. Witherspoon, for one, is a big fan. “He holds the room to a very high standard and treats you like a grown man,” Witherspoon says of Saleh. “He’s not going to baby you, and he loves the game. I can’t

“speak highly enough of him.”

Sherman says he chose the 49ers after being released by the Seahawks on March 9 for a wealth of reasons, including his familiarity with Saleh, the money offered, his respect for head coach Kyle Shanahan's offensive scheme, and the quarterback. In fact, there were just two QBs Sherman says he was interested in sharing a sideline with in 2018: Kirk Cousins, who jumped from Washington to Minnesota in free agency, and Jimmy Garoppolo.

The NFL in California in 2018: The Best Year Ever?

“I watched his tape, and it was him doing his best impression of Tom [Brady],” Sherman says. “It was quick releases, quick reads, trying to eliminate the pass rush through speed of execution more than your line being great.”

Sherman bristled at Jacksonville cornerback Jalen Ramsey's late-June dismissal of Garoppolo, who passed for 240 yards, two touchdowns and an interception in a 44-33 win over the playoff-bound Jaguars last December. Said Ramsey: “It was a lot of scheme stuff. It wasn't like he was just dicing us up.”

Sherman's response: “It kind of sounds like you're making excuses, but you're making poor excuses. You got beat. You got beat last year. That doesn't matter. What are you going to do this year? You all didn't win the Super Bowl. We're talking about a regular-season game. Move on.”

Moving on, back to the defense: With Saleh running a unit with a very similar coverage distribution to the one Sherman is leaving behind, the largest difference will be the change in personnel. The big question is obvious to anyone who has watched the Seahawks for the last seven seasons: Who is Richard Sherman without Earl Thomas? Playing cornerback is different when you have the benefit of a six-time Pro Bowl safety having your back, and Sherman has shown us why over and over again.

When the Seahawks are in coverages where the middle of the field is closed—that is, when a safety is responsible for deep balls down the middle of the field (Cover 3 or Cover 1 most commonly)—Sherman is consistently great regardless of Thomas's presence, with a 59% success rate over the past two seasons, per SIS. But Thomas's effect is evident in touchdowns and interceptions. Sherman's INT rate drops from 5.8% to 2.7% when someone other than Thomas is responsible for the middle of the field, and his rate of touchdowns allowed jumps from 2.9% to 5.4% in such situations. In layman's terms, the presence of an elite safety allowed Sherman to take more risks, knowing he had backup in the event he was beaten over the top.

For his part, Sherman isn't putting too much thought into the transition from Thomas to 2017 seventh-round pick Adrian Colbert playing safety behind him. Sherman has been busy rehabbing the torn Achilles tendon that sidelined him in early November and required surgery. He's running

at full speed, but walking with a slight limp after a full day's workout at Stanford. It would be hard to think of a better landing place than San Francisco for the player who spent his college years in Palo Alto and is as admired in the Bay Area as any Raider or 49er. (After one workout of the corners, a Stanford student passerby shouted to Sherman one of his own quotes from a few years back: "When you try me with a sorry receiver like Crabtree, that's the result you gonna get!")

Kam Chancellor's Retirement Marks the End of Two Eras

Yet Sherman can't help but wonder what might have been in Seattle. The Seahawks won a single Super Bowl, after the 2013 season, and spent the next four years falling short in the playoffs against teams that couldn't claim Seattle's wealth of defensive talent. Now the band is broken up, with Michael Bennett, Kam Chancellor and Sherman out of the fold, and Earl Thomas in a contract dispute that could lead to a trade out of Seattle.

"It's just unfortunate. It's really unfortunate," Sherman says. "I think it'll all come out when they do the 30 for 30. Mistakes and poor judgment on things ruined what could have been a really special deal. You don't have much left right now. And to say you're not going to pay Earl Thomas is just ... There's no decline in play there. He's played the game the right way. Who do you have to pay? You have the two best linebackers in the game. You have the quarterback. You have a great wide receiver in Doug [Baldwin]. And you're paying Duane Brown.

"They've lost their way. It's as simple as that. They've just lost their way. When you make too many mistakes over a long period of time, you kind of dig yourself a hole. And then when you backtrack, you gotta make a bunch of rash decisions to try and fill the hole and hope that it holds up.

In San Francisco, the NFL's Next Great Defensive Force Emerges

"When we were rolling it was an environment for pure competitors. When it becomes something else, then it's more difficult to thrive in, and I think that's what was tough on Earl, that's what was tough on a lot of guys. But I think as it kind of progressed, you start seeing the writing on the wall. You're like, 'Not only are they probably moving in a different direction,' but it's like, 'Ah, well, I kind of want to move in a different direction, too.' So it happens like that. All great things must come to an end, I guess.

"I'm not even going to worry about it now. I've got bigger fish to fry."

The Bad, the Good and the Newsy

In non-cornerback news, last week was a stunningly bad one for the NFL. Jaguars defensive tackle **Marcell Dareus is being sued for sexual assault** by two separate women. Bills running back **LeSean**

McCoy is embroiled in a bizarre home invasion incident. Onetime Browns tight end Kellen Winslow Jr. has been charged with multiple sexual assaults. Sherman's former Seahawks teammate Brandon Browner was charged with attempted murder and several other crimes. Former SI.com NFL editor Melissa Jacobs chronicled all the bad news in [one biting tweet](#), and the response was eye-opening. A few years ago, when I started covering the NFL, a post like that would have floated without much pushback from anybody. But Jacobs's mentions blew up with people pointing out the good being done by NFL players.

Among the responses:

"Josh Norman buys gifts for immigrant children [who] were taken away from family"

"Chris Long donates Years salary to charity"

"JJ Watt donates 10k to family of fallen firefighter"

"Leonard Fournette pays off student loan debt for local teen"

"Bradley Roby & friends conducting free summer camp in Atlanta"

"Former HS teammates Titans Logan Ryan & Giants Eli Apple conduct 2nd free football camp for kids in south jersey"

"Steelers Ryan Shazier continues to shine in the community"

Wrote Annie Apple, Eli Apple's mom: "Many more NFL good guys."

Jacobs came back later with a [blog post](#) about all the good being done by NFL players, a kind of mea culpa. Reading her timeline, I wondered what changed over the years. What's inspired football fans to seek out those who relay the bad news and reply with the good? It's obvious, isn't it? This is the Trump effect. In calling protesting NFL players "sons of bitches" last September, the president split the NFL fandom along partisan lines never seen before. People who said they were newly turned off to the pro game because of the player protests against police brutality sent social media missives accusing players of doing nothing for their communities but protesting. Players and their fans countered with facts.

[Everything We Know About the Allegations Against LeSean McCoy](#)

I asked Jacobs for her thoughts on this, and her answer affirmed my suspicion.

"I agree that a lot of it comes from frustration with Trump and how he has treated players as second-class citizens, publicly calling them sons of bitches and ripping their action, while [NFL Commissioner Roger] Goodell says nothing to defend players and promote them as great citizens [as opposed to Adam Silver]," Jacobs wrote. "Also the weakness of the union to give so much power to Goodell and the owners who have shown little interest in spotlighting players as individuals.

"Yes, there's the Walter Payton Man of the Year award, but how much promotion of their causes and philanthropy do we see the NFL promote through their well-trafficked channels? A lot of

players have called out the muzzling, and I think fans feel it now. Plus the reality is there are a lot of bad eggs we all do cover—and we know more with social media, access to records, etc. The more we report on those guys, the more calling for the flip side, especially in this current climate. I believe this feeds in to the overall attack on football, which is felt in more areas than we think. Fans feel compelled to defend the players, and that's a great thing.”

I couldn't agree more. And that's not to say the bad news isn't worth reporting. Teams and leagues need to know they'll be held accountable when players break the law. But care should be taken to remind readers and fans that misbehaving players are the exception, not the rule, and highlighting the good NFL players do goes a long way toward that goal.

Preseason Power Rankings

A way-too-early look at what I think will be the top half of the NFL in 2018. When we put our NFL preview package together, my picks to reach the playoffs will be from this group of teams.

16. **Seattle Seahawks** 2017 record: 9-7

Seattle's offensive line troubles will continue, but Russell Wilson will keep this team relevant in the post-Boom era.

15. **Dallas Cowboys** 2017 record: 9-7

I like the Allen Hurns signing. I like the idea of 16 games of Ezekiel Elliott. They still have a top-five offensive line. Is it enough to beat Philadelphia in the NFC East? Probably not.

14. **Tennessee Titans** 2017 record: 9-7

Adding former Patriots Dion Lewis and Malcolm Butler will bring the sort of culture tweak Mike Vrabel is undoubtedly aiming for. Mariota looks ready to turn the corner.

13. **Carolina Panthers** 2017 record: 11-5

D.J. Moore and Torrey Smith *might might might* just be the answer for a team that has fallen down at receiver of late. Even if the Panthers are just average, Christian McCaffrey is the tide that lifts all boats.

12. **Minnesota Vikings** 2017 record: 13-3

I'm not convinced Kirk Cousins is a such a big upgrade over Case Keenum, but he's got one of the NFL's best defenses at his back and a pair of stud receivers, something he never sniffed in Washington. Oh, and healthy Dalvin Cook too.

11. Kansas City Chiefs *2017 record: 10-6*

In a wide-open division, the Chiefs and new quarterback Patrick Mahomes are the biggest question mark. Travis Kelce will play a bigger role in this offense than any other tight end with any other NFL team.

10. Green Bay Packers *2017 record: 7-9*

The Packers are a top-10 NFL team as long as Aaron Rodgers is healthy and a bottom-10 team when he's not. Only he and Tom Brady are worth that many wins.

9. San Francisco 49ers *2017 record: 6-10*

In a small sample size, Jimmy Garoppolo looked fantastic. There are some brilliant defensive minds in the NFC West, but Kyle Shanahan may just be smarter.

8. Los Angeles Chargers *2017 record: 9-7*

My pick to win the AFC West before Hunter Henry tore his ACL; now I'm not so sure. We'll be calling Joey Bosa football's best edge rusher after Year 2.

7. Atlanta Falcons *2017 record: 10-6*

I really hope these Falcons don't squander the brilliance of Julio Jones. The pieces are in place—now the play-calling has to catch up.

6. Pittsburgh Steelers *2017 record: 13-3*

Studs at QB, RB and WR. As always, New England is the obstacle.

5. Los Angeles Rams *2017 record: 11-5*

Adding Aqib Talib and Marcus Peters via trades was a major coup. Will they be Rams for life? Probably not. Will they win a lot of football games in L.A.? Yes.

4. **New Orleans Saints** 2017 record: 11-5

With Marshon Lattimore, Alvin Kamara, Mark Ingram, **Michael Thomas**, Cameron Jordan and Sheldon Rankins, this is the most exciting collection of young talent in football. Drew Brees is cool too.

3. **Jacksonville Jaguars** 2017 record: 10-6

The surprise juggernaut of 2017 enters Year 2 with Leonard Fournette and a young defense that believes it can do no wrong. Still giving New England the edge in a matchup with Blake Bortles.

2. **New England Patriots** 2017 record: 13-3

Nate Solder is a Giant. Danny Amendola is a Dolphin. Dion Lewis is a Titan. Still, do you dare bet against Tom Brady and Bill Belichick? Didn't think so.

1. **Philadelphia Eagles** 2017 record: 13-3

There's no reason to dethrone the champs at this time, especially with a better quarterback replacing the one who gave Philly its first Super Bowl victory.

... OF THE WEEK

TWEET

CLIP

Gimme dat brisket!

QUOTE

Former Giants head coach Ben McAdoo on Cardinals rookie quarterback Josh Rosen: "If he stays out on the field he's probably going to be a helluva player and he's probably going to be the most ready to play. I don't worry about the other stuff they say, the leadership stuff, that's all B.S. Aaron Rodgers was not all that. I don't want a nice guy. Between the lines on Sunday, you give me a pr---, I'll take him."

The Rookie QB Roundtable: Baker Mayfield, Sam Darnold, Josh Allen, Josh Rosen and Lamar Jackson

S/O TO...

Michael Bennett, who will be honored for his activism and community outreach at The Inaugural *Athletes for Impact Awards* on Monday night. The awards ceremony in Los Angeles commemorates the 50th Anniversary of the 1968 Olympics held in Mexico, when Tommie Smith and John Carlos raised gloved fists to protest racial inequality in the United States.

Ten Thoughts

1. DeMarco Murray **retires at 30 years old**, having given us the 17th-best rushing performance in a season in NFL history, and the second-best since 2010—his 1,845 yards for the Cowboys in 2014. One thing I remember clearly about that 2014 campaign, in which he never rushed for fewer than 70 yards in a game: **Murray never shied away from contact**. If there was an extra yard to be gained by running through a linebacker at the sideline, he took it. I'd have to imagine it was brutal for opponents, and for Murray, too.
2. **The Patriot Way is already taking hold in Detroit**, where players are appropriately terrified to speak to the media. At Stanford I asked Darius Slay if we could switch gears from discussing the cornerback gathering to talk about the Lions under former Belichick coordinator Matt Patricia. His response, in a perfect southeast Georgia drawl: "Lawd Jesus, not the Lions. I ain't fin to have Patricia calling me. He already done warned us man! They're strict."
3. **I take issue with criticism of Terrell Owens** for not attending his Hall of Fame induction, choosing instead to host fans at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. If you could celebrate this special moment at your alma mater, with as many friends and family in attendance as you'd like, rather than attending a ceremony in Canton with limited accommodation for family and friends and the awkwardness of hobnobbing with the journalists who for some reason are the lone gatekeepers to the Hall of Fame, wouldn't you?
4. **I just don't see the Steelers and Le'Veon Bell reaching an agreement** by 4 p.m. today on par with his desire to make \$17 million annually—that is, unless a long-term deal is incentive heavy and low on guarantees. Bell is a tremendously useful player, but how could you justify anybody on that roster other than Ben Roethlisberger making better money than wide receiver Antonio Brown in a passing league that chews up and spits out running backs?
5. Just in case this flew under your radar in late June: **Congrats are in order for Jocelyn Moore**, the NFL's new executive vice president of communications and public affairs, who will oversee the communications, social responsibility, and government affairs areas, according to the NFL. Moore,

who spent more than a decade as a member of Senator Ron Wyden's leadership team, is the league's first female PR boss and the first African-American to hold the position.

6. Casey Schwab of the NFLPA **makes a great point** to legislators about **the consequences for players' lives when sports gambling proliferates**. Sadly, that point will probably be ignored. He argues that the vitriol and harassment that players endure with failures on the field will intensify when more fans can bet on games. That's probably true, but drumming up public sympathy for NFL players will always be an uphill battle.

7. **I'm looking forward to giving Cleveland Browns rookie Chad Thomas's mixtape a listen** when it drops Friday. **A preview here**. Thomas, a.k.a. Major Nine, a third-rounder out of Miami, has shown no signs of delaying a promising career in hip-hop.

8. Three personal notes to finish the column: **I spent the early part of this week hiking two sections of the Colorado Trail**, and while I think I have nerve damage in my neck, and my feet feel like flesh sacks of mashed-up bone, I recommend it highly. I went with a close friend of mine here in Denver, Justin Thomas (the high school soccer coach, not the golfer), and his experience was crucial. Over three days and 31 miles of backpacking, he flash-boiled the water and made the meals (dehydrated foods only, for weight purposes), put up the tent and navigated the trail. All I did was put one foot in front of the other and avoid having the wind blow me and my 40-pound pack down a mountainside to my death. I must admit, I tried to quit after the first day of hiking, which was more like climbing, but Thomas, my fearless companion, said he wouldn't be able to respect himself in the morning if we turned back. It's a good thing, because two days later I woke up at 5:30 a.m., stood under a row of pine trees that smelled like fresh tobacco and brown leather, looked beyond a creek surging with ice-cold water melting from the snowy peaks above, and stared at a sky of pure blue flame. My only wish, in that moment, was to have better words to describe it all.

9. A lot has changed at The MMQB. Peter King has left for NBC to do a Monday column there. Gone too is Dom Bonvissuto, our former West Coast editor, who is now handling Peter's column for NBC. A note about the two of them, for posterity, and for the purpose of gaining some sense of closure in my mind: **Peter King gave me my dream job at 26**. He had my back when I made the sorts of mistakes that made some think I might have been too young and inexperienced to have that job. I consider him one of my closest mentors for that, but he's one of my best friends for another reason. In 2013 I told Peter about my grandmother's disdain for the NFL's new bag policy, requiring that fans use clear plastic bags to carry their belongings into games. She's a lifelong Raiders fan, having attended games during the first season in 1960 and at least one game every year they've been in Oakland. Peter invited her to write about the policy for The MMQB. That winter, he invited the entire staff to join him for a holiday party and gave us all plus-ones. I brought my grandma, and when Peter stood up to speak about the contributions of the staff, he spent 10 minutes talking about her, and how important it was for us to break the mold of everyday NFL journalism and host a diversity of opinions. It made her night. It made my year. It is, without a doubt, the fondest memory of my professional life. Thank you, PK.

As for Dom, with whom I worked on numerous stories and was always thrilled to do so, I'll always associate him with the most humbling moment of my career. We were on a lake in western New York with fishing rods in hand. It was The MMQB's yearly summer workshop/retreat, and I was complaining about how long it takes to edit stories, and the little mistakes that slip through the editor's grasp. I was being an asshole. He'd had enough, and his eyes grew serious and he stared me dead in the eye and he told me I was being a brat, and that I had no idea how hard the editors worked. I needed that, and **Dom cared enough about me to give it to me, unfiltered**, on a two-man boat in the middle of lake. Thank you, Dom.

10. We got a cat.

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