



BIG DECISIONS FOR BRONCOS PENDING?



January 17, 2011: The Broncos will make their first Super Bowl appearance since the 2005 season, and have one of the youngest squads in the ISFL this year. And the staff believes they have only scratched the surface of their players' potential. Some long-time veteran players, however, may not be back next year.

Rex Grossman hasn't done much in his time in Denver, but the Broncos say they believe in Rex as a good stop-gap in case of an injury to Josh Freeman. If the Broncos can improve that spot via draft or trade, however, Grossman could be gone. But bear in mind that the Broncos only carried two quarterbacks last year, whereas they typically prefer to carry three, including one developmental player. So they could draft a quarterback in 2012 and Rex could still be the back-up, depending on how game-ready the newcomer is perceived to be.

Two more players on offense haven't done much and should be released in the near future. Sam Hurd is a 25-year-old journeyman wide receiver who was signed to provide depth and veteran experience. With the development of fourth round pick Golden Tate from the 2011 rookie class, Hurd could be ushered out the door. Taylor Price, an eighth rounder wide receiver selection in 2011, hasn't shown much as a rookie, and he could likewise be cut. The Broncos retained seven wide receivers in 2011, and that is probably at least two too many, as they don't play a lot of four- and five-wide-receiver sets. Look for the Broncos to thin the herd a bit here, probably by at least two players.

At running back, the Broncos kept five players (six if you count FB/H-back Delanie Walker), and all showed well in their opportunities, but five running backs is again a bit above what the Broncos would like to carry at this position, so one or two may be cut. If Ricky Williams retires, as the current talk about town suggests, then the other running backs may be safe. If not, probably Demitri Nance or Anthony Dixon may be jettisoned. Williams himself is probably safe for another year, based on what he's done this season.

The Broncos only carried seven offensive linemen, so all those players are probably safe, although Nick Cole's weight issue continues to linger (he played at 360 or thereabouts this season, and the Broncos want him in the 320 - 330 range). If he reports overweight to camp next season, he could be gone.

On the defensive side of the ball, linebacker Ernie Sims was a cypher most of the year, but probably saved his job for 2012 with a good post-season performance, including a key fumble recovery against the Titans in the Wild Card game. A case could be made that without Sims play in that game, the Broncos are one and done in the playoffs this year. As a former first-round pick, the Broncos will no doubt try to milk Sims ability to the max for another few years.

Veteran defensive tackle Ed Johnson, however, has been outplayed by his competition, and has been on a downward slope since his rookie year. Johnson is a player in imminent danger of being released. The current Bronco staff doesn't have a lot invested in Johnson, as he was a selection from the prior regime, but Johnson hasn't appeared to grasp that fact.

Philip Merling was acquired from the Rams last year as part of a multi-player deal (along with Brandon Pettigrew and Louis Murphy), but although he started in 2010, he has been in Hank Sienzant's doghouse for much of 2011. He certainly hasn't shown the same kind of burst off the edge or hustle he showed last season, nor has he risen to the occasion as Pettigrew and Murphy have. Granted, he hasn't had much opportunity to shine, but by the same token, in his limited appearances this year he has appeared half a step slower, and a bit lacking in the hustle department. Sienzant's staff simply won't abide a lack of hustle, and they may decide that Merling simply isn't worth keeping around.

Another defender within range of the cut-knife in the off-season is Will Herring. Herring was acquired as a veteran presence as the Broncos felt their young linebackers like Robert Ayers, Kaluka Maiava, Connor Barwin and Jonathan Goff needed a guiding hand, but with a year of experience added to the youngsters' resumes, they may deem Herring expendable moving forward. He plays hard, and is a good locker room influence, but there are limitations to his skill set that no amount of hustle can overcome.

Maiava will probably be on the bubble as well. He was cut prior to the start of the season, but re-signed just before the first game when Dane Fletcher was traded to the Giants, opening a spot for Maiava. He hasn't done much this year, and is undersized for the MLB position in any case. He is a good special teamer, however, and if moved to his more natural position of outside linebacker his 6-0, 229-pound frame suggests, he might have a better chance to stick around.