

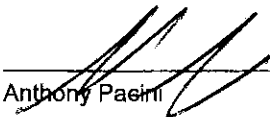
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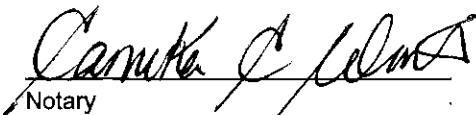
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D-backs top USFL players to watch

Steve Gardner and Jim Reineking

USA TODAY

When the revived USFL begins its 10-week regular season this weekend, NFL and college football fans will see some familiar names dotting the rosters of the eight teams.

The league kicks off on Saturday when the Birmingham Stallions host the New Jersey Generals in a game broadcast on both NBC and Fox.

A pair of defensive standouts could be among the headliners for Birmingham.

Stallions linebacker Scooby Wright was the Pac-12 defensive player of the year and a unanimous All-American as a sophomore at Arizona in 2014. That year he also won the Bronko Nagurski Award, Chuck Bednarik Award and Vince Lom-



Wright

XFL with the DC Defenders.

The Stallions defense will also feature **cornerback Brian Allen**, who appeared in three games last season for the Cleveland Browns.

On offense, **former Denver Broncos first-round pick Paxton Lynch** is part of the Michigan Panthers' dynamic quarterback duo. He'll compete for the starting job with **Shea Patterson**, the No. 1 overall pick in the recent USFL draft, who played at Ole Miss and Michigan.

Elsewhere, **quarterback Jordan Ta'amu** of the Tampa Bay Bandits has bounced around the NFL and last played for the St. Louis BattleHawks of the XFL.

The Houston Gamblers have **Clayton Thorson** as their quarterback. The former Northwestern star was a fifth-round pick by the Philadelphia Eagles in 2019.

Former Richmond quarterback **Kyle Lauletta** is expected to start the opener under center for the Pittsburgh Maulers. He was a fourth-round pick in 2018 by the New York Giants and appeared in two games for them that season.

The Tampa Bay Bandits have trio of interesting wide receivers. **Eli Rogers** played four seasons with the Pittsburgh Steelers, including three under offensive coordinator Todd Haley, who is now the Bandits' head coach.

Rashard Davis was a wideout on the Eagles practice squad when they won Super Bowl 52. **John Franklin III** was a star on Netflix's "Last Chance U."

Also, the New Orleans Breakers have **wideout Taywan Taylor** on their roster. Taylor was a third-round pick by the Tennessee Titans in 2017 after a decorated career at Western Kentucky.

Defensively, the Philadelphia Stars will feature **linebacker Gabriel Sewell**, the older brother of Detroit Lions 2021 first-round pick Penei Sewell.

Cornerback Channing Stribling will also be part of the defensive unit in Philly. Stribling may be the USFL's most-traveled player, having seen action on several practice squads in the NFL, with the Memphis Express of AAF, the Hamilton Tiger-Cats of the CFL and the Seattle Dragons of the XFL.

Logano embracing Next Gen challenge

Kelly Crandall

RACER magazine | USA TODAY Network

No matter the venue, there has been a theme following NASCAR Cup Series drivers this season when facing questions about the Next Gen race car.

A new car has been a big learning curve. There have been challenges in learning its nuances and how it changes the feel of each racetrack. It is one of the biggest stories each weekend.

Joey Logano expects that to continue into the foreseeable future.

"I think if you have the right mentality, you never stop learning," Logano said. "You should be trying to find ways to evolve and become better no matter what. I will say probably the low-hanging fruit (around the car) eventually goes away. Right now, there are big areas to get better. And eventually, it's going to be grasping for these little tiny pieces here, little something here, and it's going to be harder to find. It's not going to mean as much when you find it."

"But that's when you get into the stacking pennies type of stuff. Little stuff. Until then, right now, we're taking big stuff as we grow quickly."

As the saying goes, patience is a virtue. Especially when it comes to a new car; just because the season is well underway doesn't mean the learning and tweaking are over.

"And I said this before the season even started, as fans and competitors, we have to be a little bit patient," Logano said. "Because there's going to be some areas of this car that are just spectacular. There are going to be areas where it's just better. We saw some of the races, particularly on the mile-and-a-halfs, it's better than what we had last year. For sure. No doubt."

"But we also have to be patient and understand that where some areas are going to be great and much better, some areas are possibly going to be worse. And we need to, all of us, including the fans, work to make this thing better. Not just keep pointing out where every weakness is. We also need to focus on some of the good things."

There have been seven different win-

NASCAR Cup Series

Food City Dirt Race

TV: 7 p.m. EDT Sunday, Fox

Track: Bristol (Tenn.) Motor Speedway; 250 laps, 125.5 miles.

Fast fact: Chase Elliott leads Ryan Blaney by three points in the standings. Two-time 2022 race winner Byron is 12 back. Neither of the top two have won this season.

NASCAR Camping World Truck Series

Pinty's Truck Race on Dirt

TV: 8 p.m. EDT Saturday, FS1

Track: Bristol Motor Speedway; 150 laps, 75 miles

Fast fact: Ben Rhodes leads the standings by four points over Chandler Smith.

— The Associated Press

ners in eight races from five organizations. Parity during races is also noticeable, not just in who is running well or leading laps, but in the finishing results. Last weekend at Martinsville, seven different teams were represented in the top 10 finishers.

Although Logano is not one of those seven winners, he is a fan of the car. The industry has seen a little bit of everything since the start of the season, which seems to be pointed at both the different styles of tracks visited and what Next Gen brings to the equation.

"I think the racing is better than what it's been over the last couple of years, in my opinion," said Logano. "I think cars have been able to move around the racetrack more. Things have been pretty good, all things considered, with the racing on the racetrack."

"There are a lot of teams making mistakes on pit road and drivers making mistakes in learning the car and understanding what they can and can't do and just crashing them. It's pretty good, I'd say, right now."

Most decorated US Olympic track star Felix sets retirement plans

Jim Reineking

USA TODAY

Allyson Felix, the most decorated woman in Olympic track and field history and the American record-holder for most Olympic track medals, has announced 2022 will be her final season of competition.

In an Instagram post Wednesday, the 36-year-old wrote, "I have given everything I have to running and for the first time I'm not sure if I have anything left to give. I want to say goodbye and thank you to the sport and people who have helped shape me the only way I know how — with one last run."

"This season isn't about the time on the clock, it's simply about joy. If you see me on the track this year I hope to share a moment, a memory and my appreciation with you," Felix continued.

"This season I'm running for women. I'm running for a better future for my daughter. I'm running for you," Felix wrote. "More to come on that, so stay tuned, but I'll be sharing a series of announcements that I'm hoping will make the world better for women."

At the 2020 Summer Olympics, Felix was among six mothers on the U.S. track and field team. In November 2018, she had to have an emergency C-section while giving birth to her daughter, Camryn.

Felix has used her platform to advocate for pregnancy and maternity rights in sports. A little more than two years after the life-threatening procedure for both mother and child, Felix was motivated by her young daughter to qualify for her fifth Olympics.

In 2021, Felix competed in her fifth Olympic Games. Her 11 medals won are more than any other female track and field athlete and more than any American has won in the sport.

Felix earned bronze in the 400-meter dash and gold in the 4x400-meter relay at the Tokyo Games to surpass Carl Lewis' American record of 10 Olympic medals.

The 4x400-meter relay was Felix's



Allyson Felix celebrates after Team USA won the 4x400-meter women's relay at the Tokyo Summer Olympic Games. JAMES LANG/USA TODAY SPORTS

final Olympic event. A star-studded foursome of Sydney McLaughlin, Daliyah Muhammad, Athina Mu and Felix cruised to victory with the fifth-fastest time in the history of the event.

"I think this is a really special team, because we're not 400-meter runners," Felix said after that gold medal performance. "I don't consider myself a 400-meter specialist. We all do different things. And it was really cool to come together, to get to close out the Olympic Games — and, for me, my Olympic career — in this way."

The U.S. women have won gold in the 4x400 relay in seven consecutive Summer Games, and Felix has been a part of four of those Olympic victories.

A Los Angeles native, Felix graduated high school in 2003 and attended Southern Cal but gave up her college eligibility to run professionally.

At the age of 18, Felix won her first Olympic medal, taking silver in the 200 meters at the 2004 Summer Olympics in Athens.

Contributing: Nancy Armour, Emily Adams

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Watson's hotel conduct under scrutiny

QB liked to go to upscale Houston hotel when he wanted to get massages

Brent Schrotenboer
USA TODAY

NFL quarterback Deshaun Watson liked to go somewhere special when he wanted to relax as a player for the Houston Texans.

It's called The Houstonian, an upscale hotel and club that once served as the residence of former President George H.W. Bush. According to court records, Watson had an account there, liked to get massages there in his room and had his marketing manager arrange those rooms in advance.

It's also where at least two women say he exposed himself to them and touched them with his genitals during massage sessions in 2020.

Now it's part of the fight for pretrial evidence after 22 women sued him last year and accused him of sexual misconduct during massage sessions, including the two at The Houstonian, according to court documents filed recently in Houston.

"He takes women in some of these cases to The Houstonian, which (offers luxury massage services to customers), but he's bringing in women who aren't even licensed in massage?" the attorney for the women, Tony Buzbee, said to USA TODAY Sports earlier this month.

Watson's activity there has been subject to increased scrutiny in recent weeks as the pretrial discovery process has intensified. In one case, two weeks after meeting a woman on Instagram, he flew her in from Atlanta to give him a massage in his suite at The Houstonian, where she said he exposed himself and caused his genitals to touch her inappropriately on Aug. 28, 2020, according to her lawsuit against him.

Instead of arranging to have this unlicensed therapist come all the way to Houston, there were easier massage options available to him that day, when his team, the Texans, did not practice after holding a scrimmage the day before. The Houstonian offered professional luxury massage spa services at the Solaya Spa & Salon by The Houstonian, just three miles from the hotel. The hotel even provided a free shuttle to get there and back, plus discounts to all guests in 2020 and gifts with treatments to hotel guests, according to the hotel.

In another case, Watson suggested another unlicensed therapist come to his suite at The Houstonian in July 2020, weeks before Texans training camp opened on Aug. 14, 2020. He first contacted this woman on Snapchat and saw the woman for four sessions from July to September 2020, with Watson's behavior getting "progressively worse," including exposing himself, touching her with his genitals and ejaculating in front of her, according to her lawsuit.

Watson, 26, denies any wrongdoing, and two grand juries declined to indict him on criminal charges in 10 cases that were reported to police. But the 22 civil lawsuits march on separately and have proceeded to dig for evidence that still could affect his future even after getting a record contract with the Cleveland Browns worth \$230 million guaranteed over five years. The NFL has said it is monitoring developments and could suspend him for a violation of its per-



New Browns quarterback Deshaun Watson is facing civil lawsuits from 22 women. RON SCHWANE/AP

sonal conduct policy.

"The fact that he went to such lengths to obtain massages tends to bolster the credibility of the plaintiffs," said Kenneth Williams, professor at South Texas College of Law Houston. "The plaintiffs probably want the jury to think that a star NFL quarterback wouldn't have to go to such lengths to obtain a massage unless the massages were a pretext for something else."

His attorney, Rusty Hardin, said Watson took to Instagram and social media to find massages because of his busy schedule and because "spas shut down" during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the case of The Houstonian, the famed spa there called Trellis Spa did shut down for much of that year because of a renovation project starting Feb. 2, 2020 – before the pandemic. But The Houstonian still wanted to make sure its guests and members could access these services. So it opened its sister spa, Solaya, that same month.

That spa and others were ordered closed during a pandemic shutdown ordered by the state governor in March 2020 but reopened in May 2020, after which all but only a few of the alleged incidents took place among the 22 women.

In pretrial testimony, Watson "couldn't say any place was shut down because of COVID," Buzbee previously told USA TODAY Sports. "He didn't reach out to any place that shut down. He didn't even ask."

Another attorney for the plaintiffs, Cornelia Brandfield-Harvey, recently told a judge at a hearing in Houston they were seeking evidence that shows Watson had a pattern and motive when scheduling these massages through social media – that it was to get sex and not just a massage, even if that desire

wasn't mutual. Brandfield-Harvey sought documentation from Watson of where he got massages in 2019 and 2020, how they were paid and any excerpts from his Texans contract in which obtaining massages was discussed.

"The burning question in the jury's mind, I believe, will be why did he not use the facilities that were available" to him instead of looking for massages with people he didn't know on social media, Brandfield-Harvey told the judge.

Despite an objection from one of Watson's attorneys, the judge agreed to compel Watson to provide massage location history and payment information from late March 2019 to late March 2020, as well as the massage information sought from his Texans contract.

Another recent court filing shows the plaintiffs also are seeking other documentation involving The Houstonian and another hotel. They filed a notice in court that shows they are seeking information from the Texans, including records of payments to The Houstonian for Watson, records of rooms at the Houstonian for use by players and any correspondence between the Texans and The Houstonian regarding Watson from 2019 to 2021.

It was not the only place this alleged misconduct occurred, according to the lawsuits. Other locations describe incidents at Watson's house, the house of a woman's mother and other incidents in California, Georgia and Arizona. Most happened in or near Houston from early 2020 to March 2021.

Hardin has said the women are lying, out for money and there were "sometimes consensual encounters."

Citing hotel policy, The Houstonian said it does not provide information on

customers and declined to comment on Watson.

"Watson can argue he simply wanted a private place for a massage (and) did not want to go to a spa," said David Ring, a Los Angeles attorney who has represented sexual assault victims but is not involved in the Watson case. On the other hand, Ring called it "highly suspicious conduct."

"This evidence could be used to show that Watson's plan was to lure a masseuse to the hotel under the guise of a massage, when his real intention was to engage in sexual activities," Ring said.

The hotel also came up several times during a pretrial deposition in February for Watson's marketing manager, Bryan Burney, who testified he sometimes arranged to get hotel rooms for Watson to have massages.

"Where would you get these rooms for him?" Buzbee asked him. "Were they all at The Houstonian or different places?"

"Mostly at The Houstonian," Burney answered.

Buzbee circled back to it. "When Deshaun Watson asks you, 'Hey, man, get me a room at The Houstonian; I want a massage,' how do you bill him for that, or do you?" Buzbee asked.

"I don't bill him because he had an account with The Houstonian, so there was nothing to bill him on," Burney said.

Buzbee then asked if he knew how Watson found the women who provided him with massages on those occasions. Burney said he didn't know.

Watson is required to provide the massage history and location information by about May 6, according to the judge's ruling this month. Meanwhile, the cases might not go to trial until after February 2023 unless they are settled out of court before then.

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