

# Broncos still see potential in tight end Julius Thomas

By Jeff Legwold  
The Denver Post  
March 26, 2013

Today's question about the Broncos comes from Scott Sargent. To submit a question for consideration, send an e-mail to The Denver Post's Jeff Legwold.

**Q:** Can you please provide an update on Julius Thomas? Two years ago he was the talk of training camp, and it appeared that he would be a red-zone matchup nightmare for the opposing defenses. I know he has had some injuries, mainly his ankle. But my question to you is have the Broncos given up on Thomas? Or, are they still optimistic that Thomas may be able to contribute?

**A:** Scott, of the Broncos players who have not had a significant amount of playing time over the last two seasons, Thomas easily draws the most interest among folks kind enough to send along the questions each day.

And it may be just that untapped potential Thomas showed in his first training camp — in the weeks following the 2011 draft. In John Elway's first two years as the team's executive vice president of football operations, the team added two tight ends, either in free agency or the draft.

In 2011, the Broncos selected both Thomas and Virgil Green in the draft — Thomas in the fourth round, Green in the seventh.

Thomas was considered a project who had shown enormous athletic potential after a four-year basketball career at Portland State. He played just one season of college football, but consistently showed scouts the kind of athleticism and hands they want at the position.

The Broncos were just one of many teams who had that high a grade on Thomas before the '11 draft. And his rookie season was lost because of an ankle injury, an injury he then had repaired following his rookie season, in early April.

Also, last March the Broncos signed Jacob Tamme and Joel Dreessen in free agency, each to three-year deals, each with a \$2.5 million signing bonus (Tamme's deal was for \$9 million overall and Dreessen's for \$8.5 million).

And the pair's playing time was in line with that financial commitment last season.

Dreessen led the way at the position with 853 snaps on offense in the regular season. And his playing time picked up steam as the year wore on, having played at least 59 snaps in each of the last five regular-season games to go with 70 in the playoff loss to the Ravens.

Tamme played 528 snaps for the year, but had 29, 11, 27 and 34 in the last four games of the regular season to go with 20 snaps against the Ravens. So, the Broncos clearly like Dreessen's receiver-blocker combination more as they leaned toward a more three-wide receiver look — with Eric Decker, Demaryius Thomas and Brandon Stokley down the stretch.

And with Wes Welker's addition, those totals aren't going down.

When Tamme played, he was in the slot plenty. And Green, who the Broncos like on run downs in the two-tight end look, finished the year with 176 snaps.

But it is in that receiver-blocker mode where Thomas can still carve out some playing time, and the Broncos have plenty of expectations for him to do that. Coach John Fox made it a point to say that publicly last week at the league meetings.

Asked a question about some of the Broncos' younger players the team wants to have bigger roles, Fox said:

"Like Julius Thomas ... but he got hurt, missed time and then everybody moves ahead. Towards the end, even though he's having great practices and you like him, as a coach it's hard to get him a uniform on game day. There's a guy that virtually I don't think anybody knows about, but he's a young guy that's going to be a good player."

And it wasn't just lip service. The Broncos still think Thomas can have some kind of role in their offense, and he is in a group of players they want to see take the next step.

After coming back from ankle surgery, he played just two snaps on offense all season — one against Atlanta, one against Oakland to go with 14 snaps on special teams — when Green was serving a four-game suspension.

There is an element of bad timing to his career so far with the lockout having wiped out what would have been his first offseason program in '11, having injured his ankle on his first NFL reception and then losing his second offseason program because he didn't have surgery until last April.

So, essentially he is a guy who played just one year of college football who has yet to go through his team's full offseason program. This year's offseason work is huge

for Thomas. The Broncos' decision-makers still think he can find a way on to the field.

# Broncos enter final stretch of pro-day circuit

By Jeff Legwold  
The Denver Post  
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In a sprint down the March stretch, it is the last full week of pro days across the football nation. The Broncos will have plenty of folks at need positions to take a look at in the coming days.

Texas and Notre Dame are the high-profile stops for teams on Tuesday. It's a down year overall, at least in NFL circles, for the Longhorns, but defensive end Alex Okafor will get plenty of attention.

And certainly the headliner, at least if Twitter is the measuring stick, at Notre Dame will be linebacker Manti Te'o, who will try to improve on a balky 4.81 clocking in the 40-yard dash at the scouting combine.

Despite the 40 time, Te'o is still considered one of the better inside linebackers on the board, but teams trying to make the call on him would like to see a little more athleticism in this workout.

But a player of real interest in South Bend for teams around the league in search of a running back with a quality size-speed combination — like, say, the Broncos — is Cierre Wood.

Wood came into the draft as a junior, but at 5-foot-11, 213 pounds he ran a 4.56 at the combine to go with a 37 ½-inch vertical leap. Wood shows quality quickness and moves well laterally when he needs to.

And he averaged 5.1, 5.1 and 6.5 yards per carry in his career with the Irish, but had two seasons — 2010 and 2012 — with fewer than 120 carries in a rotational system.

He had a 1,102-yard season in '11 for his best output with the Irish. He does run small at times, without the power his size would indicate, but there is plenty of athleticism to work with there.

Wood was suspended for two games to open last season and it followed a preseason when the Irish coaches had repeatedly said publicly there were "paperwork" issues involved. But teams have asked Wood about it when they've had the chance.

Wednesday is a prime-time day as well with LSU, South Carolina and USC among the schools set to go.

In general the USC workout will get plenty of eyeballs since it's scheduled to feature quarterback Matt Barkley's first public throwing session for scouts since he injured his shoulder this past season.

For the Broncos, however, LSU has its usual allotment of NFL hopefuls and some are at positions of interest for the local franchise. Spencer Ware is a 228-pound running back who entered the draft as a junior after, like many LSU backs in recent years, he largely spent his career in a crowded depth chart at the position.

Ware had just 45 carries as a backup to Stevan Ridley in 2010 and had just 71 carries this past season. Yet Ware is an intriguing prospect because he blocks well in pass protection and breaks tackles as a runner, both in traffic and the open field.

He also has the distinction of having produced touchdowns rushing, receiving and passing in his career. He was suspended for a game in '11 in the wake of what scouts say was a failed drug test, so he has been scrutinized heavily there by teams.

In addition to the top-shelf pass rushers at LSU in Sam Montgomery and Barkevious Mingo, Kevin Minter is an inside linebacker worth a long look as is cornerback Tharold Simon. Simon, a junior, is one of the bigger cornerbacks on the board at 6-2, 192 pounds.

LSU tackle Chris Faulk, a 6-5, 323-pound junior could help himself with a good day as well.

Connecticut has two cornerbacks worth long looks as well who are scheduled to work on Wednesday. Blidi Wreh-Wilson (6-0 3/4, 195) and Dwayne Gratz (5-11 1/8, 201) are both quality prospects from a 5-7 Huskies team this past season.

Wreh-Wilson, with 32 1/2-inch arms, has just the kind of reach Broncos coach John Fox consistently says an NFL defensive back needs. However, Wreh-Wilson did run in the 4.5s at the combine, so scouts would like to see a little more there.

Gratz ran 4.45 at the combine and started 41 games for the Huskies.

And Thursday, a player the Broncos have no shot to draft — BYU defensive end Ezekiel Ansah — is scheduled to do at least position drills at the Cougars' pro day. In short, Ansah is one of the most amazing prospects on the board and should only continue his march up the first round with whatever he chooses to do in Provo.

# Rules book is where the NFL continues to wrestle with safety

By Jeff Legwold  
The Denver Post  
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PHOENIX — It might be the biggest collision the NFL has to offer these days.

The history of a game built on power, big hits and violence has crashed head-on into concerns about the future of the NFL, with hundreds of former players having sued the league regarding injuries they suffered.

"A lot of fans still want those pretty aggressive hits, so it's a fine line between player safety and keeping football kind of the way it used to be," said Broncos coach John Fox. "(But) we're changing, and I agree with the direction we're going. ... You want young people playing football. What we're doing is not just affecting the top of the world, it's affecting youth, the college game. It's making it safer for the future of the game."

With concerns about legal liability, a decline in youth football participation and a public questioning of the game by President Barack Obama during Super Bowl week, safety has become the mantra at NFL headquarters.

At the league meetings last week, several player-safety proposals recommended by the league's competition committee were approved. They included what became a hot-button issue, a rule that will penalize — with the potential for fines and suspensions — any player who uses the crown of his helmet to initiate contact on another player outside the tackle box (the area around the line of scrimmage).

The poster plays for the rule used in the presentation to team owners were Browns running back Trent Richardson driving the top of his helmet into Eagles safety Kurt Coleman (a hit that launched Coleman's helmet into the air) and Chargers linebacker Donald Butler leaving his feet to drive the top of his helmet into Chiefs running back Jamaal Charles.

Hall of Fame running back Jim Brown said the rule will work. "I used my shoulder," he said. Hall of Fame running backs Emmitt Smith and Eric Dickerson questioned the rule and whether it can be enforced.

"Basically, the best way to phrase this is, we're bringing the shoulder back in the game," said Rams coach Jeff Fisher, a longtime member of the competition

committee. "We all know the helmet is a protective device. It's not designed to be used like it's being used as of late and we want to protect our players."

Fox said players need to imagine playing without wearing a helmet. "Realize that it's not a weapon, it's just for protection, not make it the lead part of the uniform,"he said.

Concerns about the rule being officiated at game speed were shoved aside by members of the competition committee as well as the league's officiating department. The proposal then passed with a 31-1 vote by team owners.

The league also passed a rule to limit how field-goal and extra-point attempts can be rushed because of the injury concern with players lined up with their legs often crossing over the legs of players next to them. It also eliminated low blocks in "peel-back" situations behind the play when a player approaches an opponent from behind or from the side.

Texans linebacker Brian Cushing suffered a season-ending injury in 2012 on a peel-back block when an opposing lineman hit him low.

While there's plenty of sound and fury that follow rule changes, the players always adjust — as they did a year ago, when kickoffs were moved up to the 35-yard line from the 30 to try to reduce injuries on those plays.

Critics said it would all but remove kickoff returns from the game, but the Broncos' Trindon Holliday returned a kickoff for a touchdown in a playoff game against the Ravens and the Ravens' Jacoby Jones returned a kickoff for a touchdown in the Super Bowl.

"There was a lot of concern that it would hurt the quality of the game, might affect field position and a major concern that it would affect scoring," said Falcons president Rich McKay, a member of the competition committee. "The nice thing is that in 2012, one of the most memorable plays of the year was Jacoby Jones' 108-yard kickoff return for a touchdown in the Super Bowl."

There will be grumbling when the new rules are enforced in the 2013 season, especially if a big play is wiped out. And there will continue to be the specter of lawsuits and growing concerns over the long-term effects of concussions.

"I have been on the committee a long time. My first year on the committee was 1994," Mc-Kay said. "I have always thought that player safety has been at the forefront of our discussion for a long time. The game has gotten safer. Where we have really focused is on the big hits, the open field hits and hits where players truly can't defend themselves.

"I do believe the game, from a safety standpoint, is in a good place. It doesn't mean we can't do more and doesn't mean we shouldn't do more in the future. But right now, we feel pretty comfortable where the game is."

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## **Rules are rules**

In the past two years the NFL has passed several rules changes to promote player safety:

### **Changes in 2012**

Kickoffs moved from the 30-yard line to the 35. Competition committee chairman Rich McKay said concussions were down 40 percent on kickoffs when compared with 2010.

Rule requires players to wear thigh and knee pads, to be enforced during the 2013 season.

### **Changes for 2013**

Penalties, fines and suspensions for players who "forcibly strike" opposing players with the crown of their helmets outside the tackle box.

"Peel-back" blocks below the waist are illegal.

Defenses no longer can line up with more than six players on either side of the center on field-goal and extra-point attempts and defenders no longer can shove other defenders into the linemen to create rush lanes.



# Elvis Dumervil and the Wink factor

By Mike Klis  
The Denver Post  
March 25, 2013

Caught Elvis Dumervil this morning just before he boarded a flight from Miami to Baltimore. We didn't have much time but he did acknowledge that Baltimore inside linebackers coach Don "Wink" Martindale is a big reason why the former Broncos pass rushing defensive end is now a Ravens' pass rushing outside linebacker.

Martindale was the Broncos linebackers coach in 2009, when Dumervil posted a career-best 17 sacks in his only season as a linebacker.

"He definitely was a big reason (why I'm with the Ravens)," Dumervil said. "I loved it when he was in Denver. He's a great guy on and off the field. You want to go somewhere where you know somebody. That's why relationships are always good. That's why I value the relationships I have. He's been there for me with some of the things I've been through. And now I'm going to play for him."

# AFC West's top 10 free-agent additions

By Bill Williamson

ESPN.com

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Here is a list, in my opinion, of the top 10 free-agent additions in the AFC West this year:

**1. Wes Welker, WR, Denver:** He has led the NFL in receptions the past six years, and he's a perfect fit in Denver.

**2. Sean Smith, CB, Kansas City:** He's young, big and talented. Good get.

**3. Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie, CB, Denver:** Almost as good as Smith. He has big ability.

**4. Derek Cox, CB, San Diego:** Could be a strong impact player. Very good when healthy.

**5. Louis Vasquez, OG, Denver:** Understated guy. A roadgrader.

**6. Terrance Knighton, DT, Denver:** Another big man who will help Denver at a need position.

**7. Donnie Avery, WR, Kansas City:** A field stretcher who will fit Andy Reid's offense.

**8. Pat Sims, DT, Oakland:** Scouts love this guy, but he needs to stay healthy.

**9. Mike DeVito, DT, Kansas City:** An underrated run stuffer. Should be a big help.

**10. Dunta Robinson, CB, Kansas City:** A fine player rounds out this list. A solid addition.

**Honorable mention:** Chad Rinehart, G, San Diego; Nick Roach, LB, Oakland; Vance Walker, DT, Oakland; Danny Woodhead, RB, San Diego.

# John Elway's Vision is Leading the Denver Broncos

Joe Morrone  
Rant Sports  
March 25, 2013

If there is still anyone who believes that **John Elway** is not one of the best executives in the **NFL**, or any sport for that matter, they are not paying attention. That's a bold statement on the day after **Elvis Dumervil** spurned the **Denver Broncos** and left town, but that's a big reason why Elway is one of the best.

He sets a budget for every position and every player, if the player demands more than the Broncos move on to the next player. If the player, Dumervil, in this case, moves on and then the Broncos quickly move on to plan B. The Broncos will not overpay for players and they will not mortgage their future by straying from their budget.

As great as Dumervil was at times for the Broncos, he was making well beyond market value for his skill set. Elway attempted many times to correct that discrepancy while still hanging on to Dumervil, but through a variety of strange events it just wasn't going to happen. The Broncos set their budget, Dumervil moved on and the Elway moved on to the next step in the plan.

Teams, including the Broncos under **Mike Shanahan** and **Josh McDaniels**, get into trouble because they blow out their budgets for players and positions that do not warrant it. Sometimes it's hard to see players like Dumervil go, but Elway has a plan that has one eye on the present and one on the future—it's how winning organizations are built. Despite the loss of Dumervil, the Broncos are turning heads this off-season

Elway and the Broncos have put together an incredible two weeks; they have addressed almost every need, kept their core players and maintained flexibility within the salary cap. Games are not won in March but the foundation for winning games in the fall is set in March, and what a foundation it is.

There was a need for reinforcements on the offensive line, so the Broncos sign **Louis Vasquez**, who is considered to be the second best guard on the market. There was a need for depth at linebacker, so the Broncos sign **Stewart Bradley** who is also great on special teams. There was a need for a starting cornerback opposite of **Champ Bailey**, so the the Broncos sign **Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie**, who some personnel people believe was the best corner on the market.

There was a need for a big defensive tackle, so the Broncos sign **Terrance Knighton** who played his best football under defensive coordinator **Jack Del Rio**.

Then when people started to think the Broncos have had a good couple of days but are probably done, they make one of the biggest splashes of the off-season. Elway goes after and gets the best slot receiver in football, **Wes Welker**, to go along with **Demaryius Thomas** and **Eric Decker**. Very few people saw that one coming and even fewer believed that Elway could pull it off.

In addition to the free agents that have signed, Elway has re-signed two of the Broncos own in **David Bruton** and **Kevin Vickerson**.

The Broncos have done all of this and remain about five or six million dollars under the cap. They are expected to use some of that money to sign former **Indianapolis Colts** defensive end, **Dwight Freeney**, who is not quite the player Dumervil is anymore but he doesn't have to be. He will be asked to play a role that will be perfect for him.

Freeney won't have to play on running downs, and his only job will be to rush the quarterback, meaning he will be fresher as the season goes along. Once again, Elway sees a need, sets the budget and then fills the need.

The real test of all this off-season work comes in the fall but this much we know, Elway has a plan and he believes in it. Why shouldn't he? The Broncos under his leadership have gone from the depths of 4-12 in 2010 to back-to-back division titles, and are the AFC favorite heading into 2013. It's safe to say that the plan is working.

# 2013 NFL Draft Preview: Cornerbacks

Gray Caldwell

DenverBroncos.com

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**ENGLEWOOD, Colo.** -- In the weeks leading up to the 2013 NFL Draft, DenverBroncos.com is taking a look at the draft prospects position-by-position.

We will devote a week to each group, looking back at some of the Broncos' previous picks at the position and showcasing some of the top prospects through top stories, blogs and Broncos TV videos.

This week: defensive backs, a position we'll divide into cornerbacks and safeties.

Below you will find five of the top prospects at cornerback. For a photo gallery of the position group, [click here](#).

## TOP PROSPECTS AT THE POSITION:

### DAVID AMERSON

- **POSITION:**  
Cornerback
- **COLLEGE:** North Carolina State
- **HEIGHT:** 6'1"
- **WEIGHT:** 205
- **CAREER STATS:**  
169 tackles, 18 interceptions, 13 pass breakups
- **COMBINE:** 4.44 40-yd. dash, 15 bench reps, 35.5 in. vert. jump

**On his height:**  
"It allows me to get my fingers on the ball sometimes when I'm



not supposed to. And as far as getting hands on receivers and making plays that a guy a little bit shorter than me probably couldn't make, it definitely helps me."

## JOHNTHAN BANKS



- **POSITION:**

Cornerback

- **COLLEGE:**

Mississippi State

- **HEIGHT:** 6'2"

- **WEIGHT:** 185

- **CAREER STATS:**

221 tackles, 16 interceptions, 5 forced fumbles

- **COMBINE:** 4.61 40-yd. dash, 10 bench reps, 34.0 in. vert. jump

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**On comparing himself to NFL players:**

"I look at Antonio Cromartie, Richard Sherman. Look at Richard Sherman, a guy drafted in the fifth round and was the best corner to play in the NFL this year. Antonio Cromartie has been consistent, a lock-down corner for

nine, 10 years. I try to base my game off those two guys and try to work off what they do."

## DEE MILLINER

- **POSITION:**

Cornerback

- **COLLEGE:** Alabama

- **HEIGHT:** 6'0"

- **WEIGHT:** 201

- **CAREER STATS:**

133 tackles, 6 interceptions, 34 pass breakups

- **COMBINE:** 4.37 40-  
yd. dash, 36 in. vert.  
jump, 122 in. broad  
jump

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### On why he looks up to Deion Sanders:

"It's Primetime. You've got to love him. All the stuff you see, they do it because of him. He had that mentality, the swagger of a defensive player that a defensive back should have. He went out there, he attacked, he'll tell you what he's going to do and he backed it up 100 percent. People like that."



## XAVIER RHODES



- **POSITION:**

Cornerback

- **COLLEGE:** Florida State

- **HEIGHT:** 6'1"

- **WEIGHT:** 210

- **CAREER STATS:**

140 tackles, 8 interceptions, 2 sacks

- **COMBINE:** 4.43 40-yd. dash, 40.5 in. vert. jump, 132 in. broad jump

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**On how he matches up with other cornerback prospects:**

"Of course I'm going to say I'm the best. If I don't have confidence in myself no one else will. I feel like I'm the best here right now. I meet all the measureables: big, strong, fast, physical. I feel like I'm the best here."

## DESMOND TRUFANT



- **POSITION:**

Cornerback

- **COLLEGE:**

Washington

- **HEIGHT:** 6'0"

- **WEIGHT:** 190

- **CAREER STATS:**

195 tackles, 6 interceptions, 5 fumble recoveries

- **COMBINE:** 4.38 40-yd. dash, 16 bench reps, 37.5 in. vert. jump



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**On having two brothers that took different paths to the NFL:**

"My brother Isaiah, he definitely took the long road. He's a very resilient person. It just shows that you never give up on your dream. People might say that you can't do this or you can't do that, or you're too short or you're not big enough. He just kept working. And I'm taking that to my game. I'm very resilient. And my brother Marcus went through the same process that I'm going through (as a potential first-round pick). And

I've learned a lot from  
him – just be myself  
and do what I'm  
doing.”