

Denver Broncos safety T.J. Ward eager to bring his hits to prime time

By Troy E. Renck

The Denver Post

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When the NFL announced its 2014 schedule last week, T.J. Ward realized he wasn't in Cleveland anymore.

"I haven't played too many prime-time games," Ward said Monday, "so I am definitely excited to get on that stage."

It required a fictional movie to make the Browns a story line this spring. Even with Kevin Costner starring as the general manager of the Browns in "Draft Day," the football drama has been a disappointment.

Ward lived the frustration, providing big hits for Cleveland, but left without sniffing a playoff berth. After four years with the Browns, and 18 wins, he joined the Broncos as a free agent, bringing glower and power.

Three weeks ago, Ward boasted that the Broncos could have the NFL's best defense this year. He didn't back down from that claim Monday.

"The players we have here, the mind-set the players have, you bring that together with a whole team philosophy and that's usually how it happens," Ward said, when asked why he was so confident. "You can see glimpses of that during the workout. I am eager to see how it comes together when we are on the field. Talent-wise, it's definitely there."

The Broncos zeroed in on Ward during free agency. He signed a four-year contract worth \$22.5 million, triggering a defensive makeover that included the additions of cornerback Aqib Talib and pass rusher DeMarcus Ware.

"He's going to bring energy and toughness to our secondary," general manager John Elway said of Ward.

Ward, 27, is a human clenched fist. He seeks contact, arriving at the line of scrimmage with violent intentions. YouTube highlights of his tackles are set to Eminem's "Till I Collapse," the bass synchronized at one point as he crunches Darren McFadden, lifting the Oakland Raiders running back off the ground.

"I think it just comes naturally. I have always been this way since I started playing," said Ward, a member of De La Salle's record-breaking California prep program before walking on at Oregon after a knee injury. "It's a mind-set, a mentality, and that's just the way I have to approach it."

It has come with a cost. Ward has been fined by the NFL for helmet-to-helmet and shoulder hits. He adjusted his tackling technique last season and sidelined New England Patriots star Rob Gronkowski with a low tackle that tore the tight end's right anterior cruciate ligament. Ward said adjusting to the ever-changing NFL rules regarding where you can hit an offensive player can leave a pursuing defensive back "caught between a rock and a hard place."

Tempering his aggression is not an option. Ward plays with RPM in the red, providing unusual versatility as one of the NFL's top run-stuff safeties who also is a capable blitzzer and effective in coverage.

He made 74 solo tackles and two interceptions last season. In a league where sticking out an arm can qualify as an attempt at stopping a runner's progress, Ward wraps up with ferocity. He earned his first all-pro honor last season, and Cleveland teammates selected him as the team's Ed Block Courage Award winner after his return from a knee injury.

Ward left his mark in Cleveland in bruises. He would prefer to make his mark in the playoffs in Denver.

"There's definitely a difference. We worked hard in Cleveland, but I think there's just a different kind of mind-set here, a different aura around here," Ward said. "You can already tell by how the team is working and preparing."

Big hitter

The Broncos added toughness to their secondary when they signed safety T.J. Ward. His nickname is "boss," not intern, which should give you an idea of his stature on the field. Broncos reporter Troy E. Renck takes a look:

--More than a dozen teams pursued him as a free agent, including the Jets.

--Earned all-pro honors for first time last season with 74 solo tackles.

--Walked on at Oregon after playing for De La Salle California prep power that never lost a game during his high school career.

Super success for Denver Broncos is tied to improved turnover margin

By Mike Klis

The Denver Post

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If a statistic can explain why the Broncos haven't won the Super Bowl in recent years, it would be turnovers.

Last season, the Seattle Seahawks had a plus-20 turnover margin during the regular season. The Broncos were in the turnover red through most of last year until they had a plus-three in their final two regular-season games, against hapless Houston and Oakland. The turnover margin for the past four Super Bowl winners: Seattle (plus-20), Baltimore (plus-nine), New York Giants (plus-seven). Green Bay (plus-10). That's a four-year Super Bowl total of plus-46.

The Broncos' turnover margins the past four seasons: zero, minus-one, minus-12 and minus-nine. That's a four-year nonchampionship total of minus-22.

It's not the statistics, though, so much as the reason behind the stats.

"Sometimes turnovers just happen, but in practice, stripping the ball, tackling, getting pressure to the quarterback, making errant throws, things like that," said new Broncos strong safety T.J. Ward. "But I think getting in that habit of just working the ball in practice, and interceptions— they're going to come with pressure on the quarterback and good coverage, but the other types of turnovers, fumbles and things like that, you've got to work at during practice."

The Broncos improved in forcing turnovers the past two seasons under defensive coordinator Jack Del Rio, coming up with 26 and 24 turnovers — compared with 18 in 2011 and 18 in 2010.

But considering the Seahawks' defense forced 39 turnovers last season, the Broncos still have some work to do.

Backfield in motion. Don't give up on Ronnie Hillman. The Broncos haven't.

Through most of last year's offseason, the team's depth chart at tailback had Hillman slotted No. 1, Montee Ball at No. 2 and Knowshon Moreno hanging around at No. 3. Now, Ball is No. 1, Hillman is No. 2 and Moreno is gone. C.J. Anderson is the team's No. 3 tailback.

The key for Ball and Hillman isn't running the ball, or even pass protection. The key is ball security. Ball lost three fumbles last season. Hillman lost only one fumble, but it came near the goal line late in a loss at Indianapolis. He also fumbled twice in the preseason.

Popularity on display. Eric Decker is a New York Jet now. He left with one final reminder of his popularity with the Broncos.

Decker's No. 87 Broncos jersey had enough sales last year to rank No. 46 in the league, based on NFL jersey sales from March 1 last year through Feb. 28 this year.

The No. 18 jersey of Broncos quarterback Peyton Manning ranked second in sales — impressive, considering his NFL jersey has been selling for going on 17 years while the new No. 1 jersey seller, the No. 3 of Seahawks quarterback Russell Wilson, only recently has been introduced to the national landscape.

Two other Broncos cracked the top 50 in sales: Wes Welker's No. 83 came in 23rd and Von Miller's No. 58 came in 45th.

Broncos QB Peyton Manning No. 2 in NFL jersey sales

By Mike Klis

The Denver Post

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Eric Decker may be a New York Jet but he leaves with one final reminder of his popularity with the Broncos.

Decker's No. 87 Broncos jersey had enough sales last year to rank No. 46 in the league based on NFL player jersey sales from March 1, 2013 through Feb. 28, 2014.

Broncos quarterback Peyton Manning's No. 18 jersey ranked second in sales — impressive considering his NFL jersey has been selling for going on 17 years while the new No. 1 jersey seller, the No. 3 of Seattle Seahawks quarterback Russell Wilson, has only been recently introduced to the national landscape, relatively speaking.

Besides Manning and Decker, two other Broncos cracked the top 50: slot receiver Wes Welker's No. 83 came in at No. 23, and Von Miller's No. 58 came in at No. 45.

The most glaring omission is Demaryius Thomas' No. 88.

A look at a potential returner for Broncos

By Jeff Legwold
ESPN.com
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On the Denver Broncos' pre-draft list of wants and needs, they could still use some help at wide receiver. The help they've already signed this offseason at wide receiver, Emmanuel Sanders, also happens to be the team's top returner.

But the Broncos would like Sanders to surpass his career-best of 67 catches when he gets to work in their offense, so having him also return kickoffs and punts is not ideal. Once in a while, sure, but the Broncos aren't looking to put Sanders on the receiving end of punts and kickoffs unless they have to because they have big plans for him in the offense.

And there are plenty of front-line receivers in this draft with serious return skills -- most notably players such as LSU's Odell Beckham Jr. and Oregon State's Brandin Cooks -- but down the board is an intriguing player worth a long look by the Broncos.

North Texas wide receiver Brelan Chancellor wasn't invited to the scouting combine, but he deserved to be. He had 1,964 all-purpose yards this past season, a total that included a 99-yard kickoff return for a touchdown against then-No. 9 Georgia that showed patience and the speed to close the deal against a SEC heavyweight.

Also, only two college players in the nation had three punt returns for at least 50 yards last season and Chancellor was one of them.

And with former University of Texas quarterback Garrett Gilbert throwing the ball, Chancellor showed some versatility as a receiver. Chancellor could line up outside or in the slot to add some depth on a roster.

He had a 53-catch season in '13 with an average of 14.9 yards per catch. At 5-foot-8 1/2 and 188 pounds, Chancellor is undersized. But like a similarly sized wide receiver on this draft board in Wyoming's Robert Herron (5-foot-9, 193), Chancellor is a former running back who has been durable and decisive with the ball in his hands.

Chancellor ran a 4.51 40-yard dash at the school's pro day earlier this month, a workout the Broncos attended. His 41-inch vertical jump and broad jump of 10 feet, 1 inch would have been among the best at the combine.

Chancellor's Indy snub was one of those annual misses made by the committee of personnel executives who make the selections, but he can't invite everybody who's worthy. Often the desire to put a player who has been injured through the extensive medical exam will tip the scales in some of the selections.

Last year, 29 players who were not invited to the combine were selected in the seven-round draft -- or 11.4 percent of selections -- so a guy who was a conference special teams player of the year isn't exactly a sleeper to the guys who evaluate for a living.

As a result Chancellor is not an under-the-radar player for special-teams units with a need -- he's squarely on it.

Denver Broncos using '35' as offseason motivation

By Kevin Patra

NFL.com

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Peyton Manning admitted two weeks ago that the blowout loss in Super Bowl XLVIII would "fuel" the Denver Broncos in 2014.

In Denver this offseason, the fuel grade of choice is 35 octane.

When one player gets fatigued or lapses during a training session a teammate will yell "35!"

That number, of course, signifies the point margin in their 43-8 embarrassment in the Super Bowl.

"Whenever someone gets tired, you just say '35,' and they just start picking it up again," defensive end Malik Jackson said, per the team's official website. "We know we have to come back strong this year. We had a disappointing loss. But that's last season. We're ready to move on."

Being shamed in front of the world can be a motivating factor -- especially during the doldrums of April and May -- to ensure it doesn't happen again. Being reminded of that humiliation day after day can be infuriating.

Just two weeks in to the voluntary offseason conditioning, Broncos players have 131 more days to remember "35."

The Value of ESPN Surpasses \$50 Billion

By Kurt Badenhausen
Forbes Magazine
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The National Football League announced last week that ESPN would host the first playoff game in its 35-year history in January 2015. The Wild Card playoff game is a carrot for the \$15.2 billion ESPN committed over eight years in its latest NFL TV rights deal, which kicks off next season. ESPN's commitment to the NFL is worth almost twice as much annually as the pacts signed by NBC, Fox and CBS. An NFL playoff game marks the latest milestone for the network and further strengthens the stranglehold it has on sports programming.

The NFL is the engine that makes ESPN go with year-round programming dedicated to America's favorite sport, but the self-proclaimed Worldwide Leader in Sports has built an empire on the back of valuable programming across all sports that dwarfs any other network. The result is a company worth \$50.8 billion, according to Wunderlich Securities research analyst Matthew Harrigan, who did a valuation analysis last month of ESPN's parent Walt Disney based on discounted cash flows (the Mouse House bought ESPN as part of its purchase of Capital Cities/ABC in 1996; Disney's current market value is \$137 billion). The Disney-owned ABC Network is a footnote compared to ESPN at a valuation of \$3.2 billion, according to Wunderlich.

The only U.S. media companies trading at higher values than ESPN on Wall Street are Time Warner and Twenty-First Century Fox, and they are both conglomerates with a broad array of brands and assets (Comcast also fits the bill, but it is largely a cable distributor). The reality is there are not a lot of publicly traded companies worth more than ESPN's \$51 billion valuation (80 U.S. companies as of last week across all sectors led by Exxon Mobil at \$432 billion). ESPN is more valuable than Hewlett-Packard, Lowe's, Sprint and Twitter based on Wunderlich's estimate and the most valuable media brand in the world.

ESPN's value is derived from the massive cash flow the company generates, which is expected to reach \$4.5 billion this year, up 39% from five years ago. For comparisons sake, CBS Corp., the highest rated broadcast network, had operating income of \$1.6 billion last year.

ESPN's advantage over its network and cable brethren lies in the affiliate fee and ad revenue model that generates huge sums of cash. ESPN's average monthly affiliate fee was \$5.54 in 2013, according to SNL Kagan. The next highest national cable channel was TNT at \$1.33, followed by Disney Channel at \$1.15 and \$1.13 for the NFL Network. ESPN2 is not far behind at \$0.70 with ESPNNews, ESPN Classic, ESPNU and ESPN Deportes each around \$0.20 a month says SNL Kagan.

While battles over affiliate fees for regional sports networks rage in Houston and Los Angeles, ESPN quietly bumps its fees 5% or more year after year with must-see programming that cable distributors can't possibly live without. ESPN has splashed billions on sports leagues and college conferences to get its hooks in the NFL, NBA, MLB, championship golf/tennis, college football/basketball and dozens of additional offerings. The result is an expected \$6.3 billion from domestic affiliate fees this year that acts as a consistent, guaranteed revenue stream for Disney.

The story is even better on the advertising side. The U.S. economy has been sluggish the past five years as it recovers from the Great Recession, but ESPN ad revenues are up 63% to a projected \$3.9 billion this year, according to Wunderlich. Total ESPN revenue, including ads, affiliate fees as well as ESPN.com, ESPN The Magazine and the international business, is expected to hit \$11.2 billion this year.

It has been expensive for ESPN to corner the market on sports programming, particularly with new entrants like Fox Sports 1 and the rebranded NBC Sports Network looking to make a splash on the national stage. ESPN's sports rights costs jumped from \$2.8 billion in 2009 to \$4.1 billion last year. But ESPN has locked up many of its deals through 2020, and the only major sports TV packages coming up for bid are Big Ten football and the NBA, which ESPN is expected to back up the bricks truck to secure. Despite the jump in programming costs, ESPN's profit margins stayed high by keeping the lid on production and other costs. Operating margins hovered around 40% in recent years and Wunderlich expects them to stay there for the next five years at least.

Sports programming remains one of the best bets on TV for advertisers because it is viewed live and commercials are not skipped with the push of a button. A study on time-shifted viewing habits by Discovery Communications found that 94% of programming on sports channels is consumed live (it is even higher for live sporting events) compared to 70% on network television.

One of the biggest winners from ESPN's remarkable rise is publishing giant Hearst, which owns 20% of the company (Disney owns the remaining 80%). Hearst's traditional newspaper and magazine businesses have been hammered in recent years by stiff economic headwinds and the shift to digital formats, but the company reported record revenue and profits in 2013 on the back of ESPN's success. One estimate had ESPN responsible for half of Hearst's profits last year. For ESPN's corporate owners, the network is the gift that keeps on giving.

'35' Serving as Rallying Cry

Stuart Zaas
DenverBroncos.com
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ENGLEWOOD, Colo. – It will be a long time before the disappointment around the way the 2013 season ended subsides for Broncos players and fans.

But this offseason, the players are using that defeat as a motivator for their offseason workouts.

When someone starts to fatigue, a teammate will yell out '35!'

The Broncos lost to the Seahawks 43-8, a 35-point margin, in Super Bowl XLVIII.

"Whenever someone gets tired, you just say 35, and they just start picking it up again," defensive end Malik Jackson said. "We know we have to come back strong this year. We had a disappointing loss. But that's last season. We're ready to move on."

The team is entering its second week of phase one of the voluntary offseason conditioning program this week. Weight room workouts are allowed, but the team has yet to go outside for any on-field work. That will come in phase two of the program.

"We use it every day," Jackson said. "These workouts, we come in and we say – we lost by 35, so that's our motivation."

Even players who weren't part of the team during the Super Bowl understand the significance of the number.

"Right now, it is still a hunger," said safety T.J. Ward, who signed as an unrestricted free agent with Denver this offseason. "You can tell it was a bad taste in the team's mouth from last year. Everybody is looking to improve and get better. The goal is to win that Super Bowl, so we're working really hard right now."

Despite having only been a Bronco for a short amount of time, Ward understands the motivation from the difficult loss.

"There's a little added motivation when you're preparing and working," he said. "There are so many leaders on this team. That is what is so great about it. There are not just one, two or three guys. Everybody has their leadership qualities. It comes out when we are working."

Takeaways Focal Point for Defense

Andrew Mason
DenverBroncos.com
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ENGLEWOOD, Colo. --The perfect partner to an offense as prolific as Denver's is a defense that specializes in big plays: sacks and takeaways. These are better indicators of success than total yardage allowed, since the offense usually allows the defense to play from ahead, and yards can come in clumps when the opponent is down two scores and is in comeback, risk-taking mode.

"When you have a team that's scoring like this offense does, it kind of makes the other teams one-dimensional because they have to try to keep up," said safety T. J. Ward. So you know the passes are going to come. They've got to throw the ball downfield just to try to keep up, and that allows us to make more plays on the back end and get more sacks and turnovers."

It's up to the defense to capitalize on this and force these plays. In the past two years, Denver has finished tied for 16th in takeaways forced each year -- 24 in 2012, 26 in 2013. But their rate of interceptions dropped -- from one every 38.2 pass plays in 2012 (13th in the league) to one every 38.5 pass plays (16th), and their sack ratio plunged from one every 11.8 pass plays (second) to one every 16.0 pass plays (17th).

But one common point of frustration has been the inability to recover fumbles. Only six teams pounced on fewer opposing fumbles than Denver did the last two years (17), and the Broncos were one of just four teams to recover less than 10 opponents' fumbles in each of the last two seasons. They ranked 24th in this category in 2012 and tied for 21st last year.

The suspension of Von Miller and proliferation of defensive injuries affected the 2013 pass rush. But the comparable takeaway rates reveal that a remedy might lie as much in practice as personnel upgrades. "Just swarm defense -- one guy getting a hat on the ball and the other guy coming in stripping and getting the ball out," said defensive lineman Malik Jackson.

This has already been a point hammered home by the coaches.

"We have been watching our techniques these last few days as far as what we wanted to do last year good and bad. Takeaways is a big part of that," Jackson said. "Coach Del Rio is really big on those, so we're going to work on that."

But much of the work will not come until organized team activities begin next month. The meetings during this phase of the offseason are about diagnosing the problem; the on-field sessions will revolve around solving it.

"I think you've got to work at turnovers," Ward said. "You know, it comes -- sometimes turnovers just happen, but in practice, stripping the ball, tackling, getting pressure to the quarterback, making errant throws, things like that."

The Broncos hope Ward's arrival helps lead to more takeaways. The aggressive safety has been a part of seven takeaways in the last two seasons: three forced fumbles, three interceptions and a fumble recovery. That doesn't include the plays his presence altered.

The manner in which Ward plays will help. But it's only a starting point.

"I think getting in that habit of just working the ball in practice, and interceptions -- like I said, they (opposing defenses) are going to come with pressure on the quarterback and good coverage," he said. "Fumbles and things like that, you've got to work at during practice."