

# Broncos rookie tailback Devontae Booker embracing the pressure of his golden opportunity

By Cameron Wolfe

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Devontae Booker briefly lowered his eyes, shook his head and rubbed his left knee while showing a slight smirk. He can smile recalling the pain because it's all behind him now.

When the rookie running back first heard about fellow backfield mate C.J. Anderson's torn meniscus, it felt all too familiar. Nearly a year ago, while playing for Utah, Booker suffered a torn lateral meniscus and bone bruise in his left knee. The former required two surgeries and put his football career in peril. He attacked rehabilitation deep into this past summer.

"It was rough. Honestly, it was a long, tough process. It was a major injury," said Booker, before shifting his thoughts to Anderson's situation. "If it's the same thing as what I had, then man, it's going to be a journey."

Anderson's knee injury, suffered Monday night during the Broncos' victory over Houston, gives Booker an enormous opportunity as the team's top tailback, starting with Sunday's home game against San Diego. How the 5-foot-11, 219-pound Booker responds could go a long way toward determining whether the Broncos can repeat as Super Bowl champions.

Booker hasn't shied away from the responsibility, or the pressure. In fact, he's encouraged it. His confidence has been apparent since he arrived as a fourth-round draft pick last spring, eager to take somebody's job, not carry pads at the rookie premiere in May.

Now, it's all about production.

Broncos running backs coach Eric Stutesville quickly classified Booker as special and a player he wanted when he watched his Utah tape leading up to the draft. Booker's natural hands, vision and aggressive running style stood out even more once he hit the Broncos' practice field.

"I always thought there was an upside to him. But there's a point where he's got to catch the potential with production. And he's done that," Stutesville said. "He's worked at this. He's in the playbook. He learned it, protections, all those things. He's closed the gap from where we think he could be to where he is, and now we have to take that next step."

"I can handle it all"

The timeline for Booker's impending leap is now fast tracked, with Anderson out for at least eight weeks and possibly for the entire season.

It will largely be up to Booker whether the Broncos can feature him like they did Anderson.

"I can handle it all," said Booker, who has 51 carries for 244 yards and a 4.8 yards-per-carry average this season. "Whatever they throw at me, I can handle it."

Booker was a workhorse at Utah, but he won't be expected to play the whole game for the Broncos. Backup running back Kapri Bibbs is expected to spell him.

Carries and catches are only a portion of a running back's responsibility. One of Anderson's greatest strengths is his knowledge of head coach Gary Kubiak's offense and his ability to recognize blitz packages. Stuedsville stressed that all of his backs have to be complete backs, which means being able to block. He is comfortable and confident in all his backs to do so.

"Book is definitely ready to play and I'm ready to play. I don't think there is going to be any drop-off," said Bibbs, who has four carries for 21 yards. "We're going to handle our business."

Kubiak added: "This is where you find out a lot about the depth of your team and guys stepping up. That is what this league is about. (Injuries are) going to happen, it's just how you respond."

Bibbs, a former Colorado State star, is in his third season with the Broncos but his first on the active roster. He now gets his big chance.

"This can make a difference in my whole life. Opportunities like this have shaped so many players in the league," Bibbs said. "Arian Foster, practice squad guy. Bennie Fowler, Chris Harris, it all took them an opportunity. C.J. is a perfect example of that too. Now he's a household name. That's what I'm trying to do for myself."

Bibbs knows the Broncos could bring in another tailback to help Booker carry the load. He looks at Sunday's game as a way to halt those plans and "give them what they've been looking for the past three years."

"That's a hard role — to sit in the wings and somebody's telling you to stay ready when you know the chances of you playing are slim, but now something happens and you assume a larger responsibility," Stuedsville said. "And you can't get ready now to do that. It doesn't work that way."

Broncos running back Juwan Thompson was called up from the practice squad Saturday to provide more depth. He and fullback Andy Janovich are also available to receive touches out of the backfield.

"I got mad faith in my boys man, big time," Anderson said about Booker and Bibbs in his absence. "Plus they got one of the best running backs coaches in E, they will be ready."

### Readjusting the path

Sunday will mark the first time Booker has made a start since he suffered a knee injury in a double-overtime loss to the Arizona Wildcats last Nov. 14. He has stopped worrying about the injury, but the memories are still fresh.

During rookie minicamp in May, the Broncos were going through walkthrough drills but many undrafted players trying to make a good impression were running full speed.

“I was kind of timid on making certain cuts and giving it everything,” Booker said. “But I pushed myself to run full speed and make cuts; I could just feel my knee hurting.”

Booker had two surgeries — one to repair a supposedly “minor” torn meniscus and another 20-percent trim of his meniscus a couple of months later after he felt pain when he started to walk again. And yet six months after the initial injury, he was still feeling pain when he tried to run and cut.

Then the Broncos and Booker took a different approach. They convinced the rookie to come in at 5:30 a.m. before any other players arrived and get a rehab session before practice. And they had him stay after practice for another rehab session.

Booker obliged, and he saw huge progress soon after. The Broncos allowed him to participate in most drills during organized team activities in June rather than waiting until training camp in late July.

“What you saw from that time is how important this is to him and how good this guy wants to be,” Stuedesville said.

Broncos running back Juwan Thompson was called up from the practice squad Saturday to provide more depth. He and fullback Andy Janovich are also available to receive touches out of the backfield.

Now, Booker’s role grows even larger. Booker believes he is ready for the workload. Stuedesville believes he is ready too. But neither knows for sure until Booker does it on the field.

#### The Book on Booker

— Booker grew up in Del Paso Heights, one of the most crime-ridden and poverty-stricken neighborhoods in North Sacramento, and attended Grant Union High School. He is the youngest of three brothers, each six years apart.

— He ran for 2,773 yards and 21 touchdowns on a 5.0 yards per carry average in his two seasons at the University of Utah. He also had 80 catches for 622 yards and two touchdowns. Utah was his second college stop after spending two years at American River junior college in Sacramento.

— A knee injury, his age (24) and questions about his ability to learn an offense quickly all contributed to his drop to a late fourth round selection.

— Booker has a quiet, unassuming personality, but several of his teammates said he’s opened up a lot since they first met him this summer.

# Book it, the Broncos need rookie running back to power offense

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN.com

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They were all there for the Denver Broncos decision-makers to look at, stacks of names, placed in order after months of work.

And 135 players had been taken this past April when the Broncos were on the clock in the fourth round of the NFL draft, and John Elway and crew looked at the names that were left and were "surprised, really surprised," is how Elway put it.

Devontae Booker's name was still there, still tucked among the available players. And at pick No. 136, just after the Dallas Cowboys has selected a quarterback named Dak Prescott, the Broncos quickly made Booker the pick.

"We just felt like he had what we were looking for in our offense," Elway said in recent weeks. "We thought to find him there was just surprising for a guy we thought could play on every down."

Well, with C.J. Anderson's knee injury, Booker has gone from a running back the Broncos simply wanted to get more involved in the offense to The Guy in the backfield. Booker will now have the chance to show why the Broncos were so happy to select him.

He will have a chance to show off his penchant for finishing runs with a filling-rattling thump and his hands in the passing game. And the Broncos need him to be up to the challenge.

Asked this week if he's ready for all of that, Booker said: "Absolutely."

"Right now, my coach (running backs coach Eric Studesville) has talked about it pretty much every day in our meeting room about opportunity and being ready for it," Booker said. "He coaches us to be ready for every opportunity and during film study he makes sure we are ready for each and every situation that we may get on the field."

Anderson's injury comes at a time when the Broncos believed they had finally gotten their running game in order, and as they find themselves in a tight division race. The AFC West is the only division in the league with two teams with at least five wins -- the Broncos and the Oakland Raiders. It is also among three divisions with three teams with at least four wins.

The Broncos finally broke out on Monday night with 190 yards rushing -- after four consecutive games when the team didn't finish with 90 yards on the ground -- in the win over the Houston Texans. Anderson finished with 107 yards and a touchdown while Booker had 83 yards rushing and a touchdown.

Now, Sunday's game against the San Diego Chargers will be the first look at Booker in the leading role as the Broncos try to decide what his workload can, and should, be. He topped 1,200 yards in both of his

seasons at Utah and likely wouldn't have been available so late in the draft had he not injured a knee in the 10th game of his senior season.

"It's kind of up to 'Book,' how much can he handle and what kind of load he can handle," said Broncos coach Gary Kubiak. "I think that he's been growing and played really well the other night."

Booker has also bounced back from an inauspicious start to his pro career when he fumbled on his first regular-season carry in the season opener against the Carolina Panthers. As a result he got just three carries in that game, but has steadily worked his way toward more playing time.

"I just go out there and continue to play ball," Booker said. "I was definitely getting into a rhythm with the more and more carries that I got. With the more and more snaps that I got, I started getting my rhythm and being more comfortable."

The Broncos ran the ball a season-high 35 times in the win over the Texans and it was the third time they had topped 30 carries in a game this season -- wins over the Indianapolis Colts and the Tampa Bay Buccaneers were the others. And Monday's game resembled what Kubiak has strived for in the offense.

Or as Kubiak put it: "We also went out there and got [35] shots at it, too. We hadn't been doing that. That's how you get better at something. Hopefully we're in those types of games where we could stay committed to the run and what we like to get going."

It all puts Booker at the front of the line now, as part of a young and restless backfield with a first-year starter at quarterback in Trevor Siemian to go rookie with fullback Andy Janovich.

"C.J. has helped out a lot, not only C.J., but all the running backs that were in the room," Booker said. "I thank them for helping me because they wanted to see me out there and play right away. I'm just going to continue to study my butt off and then they can be helpful as well."

"I think his first carry he fumbled and I was kind of bummed for him because you don't know what that does to somebody's confidence," Siemian said. "He's been coming along the whole way. We knew that he had some juice all the way back to camp so he's got some juice and it's exciting to see him grow and get more comfortable out there."

# Devontae Booker continues to impress Broncos teammates, staff

By Aric DiLalla  
DenverBroncos.com  
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The pass was well overthrown.

The throw had more power than necessary for a simple dump-off pass, and the Broncos defense looked like it had racked up another stop during Monday's training camp practice.

That's when the rookie running back planted his foot in the grass and exploded upward to the football. Devontae Booker – all 5 feet, 11 inches and 220 pounds of him – flung his hands above his head and the ball stuck. What should've been a pedestrian incompleteness became an instantaneous example of why the Broncos drafted the Utah product in the fourth round of the 2016 NFL Draft.

"He's impressive," Head Coach Gary Kubiak said. "Today, he was really doing some great stuff. He's right there. We know how he's pushing our veteran players. The thing that's been impressive with Booker is how well he's done mentally, football wise. He's keeping up on third down. We have a really good player there, so we'll see how far he can come. We'll play him a lot in the preseason. It'll be up to him. We'll see."

The injury that kept him out of most of OTAs -- a torn meniscus in his left knee – seems like a distant memory. Booker was listed alongside Ronnie Hillman as the second-string running back when the Broncos released their first depth chart of the season on Monday.

Since his return to the field, Booker has impressed a slew of teammates that includes fellow running backs and the three players vying for the starting quarterback job.

"He's pretty shifty eyed," quarterback Mark Sanchez said. "He picks up protection pretty quickly. He's very quiet. He'll crack a smile every once in a while, but you kind of have to push it out of him. He's a little different than [RB] C.J. [Anderson] and [RB] Ronnie [Hillman], but everyone's different." Booker may not make a ton of noise inside the locker room, but his teammates have noticed him plenty on the field. Similar to many other players competing for roles, he has gotten reps with all three lineups on the depth chart. No matter the lineup, though, he's showed flashes that range from his reception on Monday to bursts of speed when he turns the corner.

"He competes hard," Sanchez said. "He wants the ball and he wants to nail the protection. He doesn't just want to be in the right position; he wants to flatten that linebacker. He wants to be in the right spot, in the flat route and catch that ball and go. He doesn't just want to catch the ball and fall down. He's trying to make that big play all the time. He's doing great. He's everything you could ask for in rookie." With only one day of practice remaining before the Broncos head to Chicago, Booker will finally get the chance to play against another team for the first time since he left Utah's game against Arizona in November, 2015.

And that's when Booker's full skill set should be revealed — Those hands. Those cuts. That speed.

# Devontae Booker's battles with adversity paved his unusual path to the Broncos

By Cameron Wolfe

Denver Post

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Devontae Booker sat right outside of the hospital room door with his legs shaking, hands sweaty and heart pounding. He was overwhelmed with an anticipation that was far greater than he experiences when going head-to-head with a 250-pound linebacker on fourth-and-goal.

Inside the room, Booker's first-born son, Daeshon, was making his grand entrance to the world. On first sight, it was like he saw a clone. He couldn't speak. His heart sunk, his eyes softened and he experienced a feeling he never felt before.

"Ever since he was born, he just changed my whole life," Booker said of his now 3-year-old. "All my priorities changed. It wasn't about me anymore. It was about him."

At the time, Booker was in a period of transition. Academics held him back from making a leap to the University of Utah in 2013 after two years of going to college in Sacramento, Calif., at American River College. He didn't play that year. He still had NFL dreams, but realities of his older age and classroom struggles allowed doubt to creep in.

When Daeshon arrived, all of that dissipated. Dreams became plans. With Booker possessing a talented skill set and a rejuvenated mind, the buzz of potential around Broncos camp has many believing the 24-year-old running back, picked late in the fourth round in April, will be the steal of the draft.

The typically quiet, unassuming Booker breaks out of his shell immediately when speaking about family – the most important core value to him. It's one of the few times you see him crack a smile.

On the field, it's all business. He sticks to himself and speaks only when he's spoken to. He wins teammates and coaches over with his work ethic.

And maybe most important for fellow running back C.J. Anderson, he manned his rookie responsibility of carrying the veterans' pads off the field at the end of practice without much of a fuss.

## The 13th grade

One of the most startling facts in the Broncos running back room is that fifth-year pro Ronnie Hillman and Booker are the same age. Teammates have joked about it with them all camp.

Age is rarely on a running back's side, but Booker's winding journey to the Broncos might benefit him more than being a couple of years younger.

Booker grew up in Del Paso Heights, one of the most crime-ridden and poverty-stricken neighborhoods in North Sacramento, and attended Grant Union High. He was the youngest of three brothers, each six years apart, living with his parents.

“We were pretty much a low-class family. We lived in a low-class neighborhood,” Booker said. “There was a lot of killing, gang violence. Sports kept me out of that stuff.”

When time came to choose a college, he couldn’t qualify academically after committing to Washington State and Fresno State. He couldn’t play Division I football. He considered giving it all up and finding a job, but his family talked him out of it. He had to go to junior college.

“It felt like I was going to be in the 13th grade,” Booker said.

“He was a little frustrated and it was a little bit of a culture shock. He came in a little bit with the ‘I’m the big man on campus attitude,’” American River coach Jon Osterhout said. “But once he got in here and realized we were all about football, it really allowed him to flourish and get that second chance to succeed.”

Osterhout went out-of-the-way to return the favor, calling coaches around the country after Booker’s time at American River to sell them on an older back with academic struggles. Osterhout told them about Booker’s talent as an every down back who reminds him of Dolphins running back Arian Foster.

Utah and coach Kyle Whittingham bit and found a Heisman candidate in the process.

“It was well worth the wait,” Whittingham said. “He’s right up there with some of the greatest backs that have come through our program.”

Unfamiliar territory.

The night of November 14 still makes Booker shake his head.

For Utah, it was a double overtime road loss to Arizona that took them out of the college playoff picture. For Booker, it ended in a torn left meniscus and bone bruise that ended his college career and put his NFL future in flux.

“It was a big blow to the team, but he handled it well,” Whittingham said. “He didn’t sulk or say ‘Why me.’”

Internally, Booker was dealing with a lot of mental stress. It was his first injury. It caused him to miss the Senior Bowl and the NFL combine. He was on crutches for a month and a half, and after, he had to learn to walk again. At times, he wanted to quit.

But after two surgeries and months of rehabilitation, Booker is full-go in Broncos training camp, pushing the veterans and making his claim for serious playing time. He’s the co-No.2 running back along with Hillman on the depth chart with a strong possibility to win the No.2 job outright.

“He works hard in the classroom. He’s learned everything. You’re starting to see what he can do,” Broncos running backs coach Eric Studesville said. “He can do a lot of things — run, pass protect, catch out of the backfield — so yeah I’d play him right now.”

The preseason will be the perfect chance for Booker to showcase his vision, one-step cuts and hands.

“Everybody wants to see what I bring to the table,” Booker said. “And we’ll just find out here shortly.”

Tracking Devontae Booker’s journey to Denver with facts and stats

— He ran for 4,734 yards and 81 touchdowns with an average of 10.8 yards per carry in his two high school varsity seasons at Grant High in Sacramento, Calif.

— Booker can throw the ball 70 yards, according to American River junior college football coach Jon Osterhout.

— Booker played every special teams unit at American River, including kick return where he scored two touchdowns

— Utah coach Kyle Whittingham on Booker: “I’ve never seen a running back catch the ball out of the backfield like him.”

— He was the first of three Booker brothers to graduate college (sociology), which is one of the main reasons he stayed at Utah for his senior year.

Booker on graduating college: “All the adversity I been through, getting that degree was the icing on the cake.”

# Devontae Booker might carry pads now, but he still wants to play – soon

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN

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It has been just over two months since Denver Broncos rookie running back Devontae Booker dropped the missive that still brings a slight smile to his face.

In May, at the NFL Players Association Rookie Premiere in Los Angeles, Booker raised a few eyebrows in the rookies-should-be-seen-and-not-heard crowd when he made it clear that he had no intention of being a typical first-year player. He said in an interview, "I'm not there to carry pads. I'm there to take someone's job."

On Tuesday, just before the Broncos rookies' second practice of the week, that snippet of bravado brought a grin to Booker's face.

"I said it at the Rookie Premiere, so a couple minutes later, my phone was blowing up," Booker said Tuesday. "I thought I was going to get a lot of stuff when I came back here from the vets, but they did not at all. They pretty much liked it and were telling me that that is what I have to do when I am a rookie. The [Broncos players] were basically saying, 'What else are you supposed to say?' I'm not going to downplay myself and my ability on the field."

Booker, who was the Broncos' fourth-round pick in this year's draft, figures to push for playing time quickly, given his size (219 pounds), vision as a runner and work as a receiver out of the backfield (he had 80 receptions in two seasons at Utah). He rushed for 1,512 yards for the Utes in 2014 with 43 receptions and had 1,262 yards in 10 games last season before he suffered a torn meniscus in his knee to end his season.

He had surgeries in November and February to repair the knee and did not participate in drills at the NFL's scouting combine. The Broncos held him out of most of their team drills in the offseason program but saw enough for coach Gary Kubiak to declare that Booker would have a role in the offense.

For his part, C.J. Anderson, who has worked as the No. 1 back throughout the offseason program and will open training camp in that role, has said, "What do you expect him to say? I said the same thing. I have confidence in what I can do."

Kubiak praised Booker's desire to play, saying, "You want all of [the players] to think that way."

Booker remained at the team's complex in recent weeks to rehab his knee with the team's medical staff. He said he believes he'll be ready to compete quickly and if not when the team's full practices get underway Thursday -- the team's veteran players report Wednesday -- then soon after that.

"It was definitely an investment for me over this whole portion when I got up here," Booker said. "I actually stayed here throughout the summer break when all the guys went home. I was just rehabbing."

Like I said, it was an investment for me to do that so I can get back on the field quicker and go out and compete with the rest of the guys.”

On his potential to play, Booker said, “I’m really confident about it. I’m just here to compete and do what I need to do for the team so I can get out and play a lot this year. I think I’m relied on heavily by some of the coaches to exceed expectations, and I believe that I will do so.”

# With knee on mend, Devontae Booker takes field for Broncos

By Pat Graham  
Associated Press  
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Devontae Booker is just strolling along these days — first across a stage to receive his diploma, and now on a football field at reduced speed with his knee still healing.

Patience, though, isn't exactly a strong suit for the Denver Broncos rookie running back. Not when there's an impression to make and skeptics to prove wrong. He's ready to go, go, go, but with his left knee at "90 percent," his coaches are insisting he take things slow.

"I only know how to practice fast," Booker said Saturday.

Booker missed the first day of rookie minicamp Friday as he received his diploma in sociology from the University of Utah. He was eager to make up for the lost day of work and start demonstrating that passing on him — he tumbled to the fourth round — was a huge mistake for others and a boon for the Broncos. Some scouts had the 5-foot-11, 219-pound tailback going in the second or third round.

"The chip gets even bigger. It's probably the biggest it's ever been now," said Booker, who played at American River College before sitting out the 2013 season to finish academic coursework, then joining the Utes in '14. "Just go out there and prove all the haters and everyone wrong. Just make all the other 31 teams that passed me up pay."

First things first: learning the system. He's already a big fan of the Broncos' one-cut-and-go scheme.

"That's what I like doing anyway," he said. "Get my shoulders downhill and make a move on the defender."

On a dreary Saturday afternoon, Booker had the backfield nearly to himself as he and fullback Andy Janovich, a sixth-round pick out of Nebraska, worked with running backs coach Eric Studesville.

When the veterans return for work, that will all change. Booker will be trying to earn time behind C.J. Anderson, fresh off signing a lucrative deal, and change-of-pace back Ronnie Hillman.

"They're some good running backs," said Booker, who turns 24 on May 27. "I have to work my butt off and compete and gain some trust from coaches, have them give me the rock."

That is, once he's cleared to go full tilt.

He's being eased into things because of a balky left knee that took two surgeries to fix. He had a procedure last November to repair his meniscus — ending his season — and another in February when it wasn't properly progressing.

That may have played a role in him slipping down the draft board. He simply uses it as more fuel.

"I've been overlooked pretty much my whole career playing ball," said Booker, who's from Sacramento, California. "Just for me to fall down or whatever, however the situation was, I'm just blessed to be here and be in this position to go out and contribute."

"I feel like I can do all the cuts and everything. The coaches want to hold me back and be careful with me. I'm just going to play by their rules, I guess."

Booker had quite a career at Utah, rushing for 2,773 yards in two seasons. He was of only two Utah players to turn in back-to-back 1,000-yard rushing seasons.

"He's a good, strong runner and a tough player," offensive coordinator Rick Dennison said. "He's a good football player. We like to add good football players."

NOTES: Rookie QB Paxton Lynch skipped practice Saturday to attend graduation at Memphis. ... Defensive coordinator Wade Phillips has been impressed with defensive lineman Adam Gotsis, a second-round pick out of Georgia Tech who's from Australia. "Sometimes, with foreign players we've seen that they really look great, they can run fast and they're big and strong, but it doesn't carry over to American football," Phillips said. "He's adapted to American football really well."