

Broncos' Demaryius Thomas: Finishes year with 949 yards

By STAFF

CBS Sports

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Thomas snagged 83 of 141 passes for 949 yards and five touchdowns during the 2017 season. He fumbled once.

Thomas' yardage total was the first time he failed to crack 1,000 yards since 2011. Thomas still finished 11th in the league in catches and 20th in yards, but neither total screams "elite" receiver nor warrant the \$14 million average salary Thomas is hauling in. Fair or not, there is going to be some debate concerning whether Thomas is on the decline and whether Denver should move on. True, he doesn't seem to be the dynamic catch-and-run target he was playing with Peyton Manning, but how much can Denver expect when it has trotted out an aged Manning, Brock Osweiler, Trevor Siemian, and Paxton Lynch for the past three years? Denver will almost certainly have a new face under center in 2018. Even a slight improvement should bring Thomas back up to speed, that is, of course, assuming that he survives this offseason's almost-certain shakeup.

Broncos bring back Demaryius Thomas by exercising \$4 million contract option

By Nicki Jhabvala
The Denver Post
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Demaryius Thomas isn't going anywhere.

As general manager John Elway said they would, the Broncos have exercised the \$4 million option on Thomas' contract to trigger the final two years on his deal, according to an NFL source.

The eight-year veteran signed a five-year, \$70 million contract in 2015 and is due a total payout of \$22.5 million in salary over the next two years. In 2018, Thomas has an \$8.5 million base salary and carries the team's second-largest cap charge at about \$12.03 million.

The money is significant, but so is his play.

Since 2012, Thomas has been the Broncos' leading receiver despite multiple quarterback and coaching changes. And he's a key piece of the Broncos' offense moving forward with quarterback Case Keenum.

Though there was speculation early in the offseason that the Broncos might consider cutting ties with either Thomas or receiver Emmanuel Sanders to clear cap room, Elway quickly put an end to such talk.

"The plan is to have them back," he said definitively at the NFL combine.

Besides, behind the Broncos' top two pass-catchers is an inconsistent and revolving door of receivers with many questions heading into 2018.

Bennie Fowler was not tendered and will be an unrestricted free agent Wednesday. Cody Latimer, a former second-round pick, will join him on the open market. Carlos Henderson, a third-round selection last year, spent his entire rookie season on injured reserve. And fellow rookie Isaiah McKenzie was benched multiple times because of fumbles. Jordan Taylor, an undrafted receiver out of Rice, proved to be among the most consistent contributors in spite of multiple personnel changes.

Over the years, Thomas has taken considerable heat for his drops and perceived "non-elite" play by critics. But as the most-tenured Bronco on the roster, he's been a consistent target, all while playing with six different starting quarterbacks and for five head coaches and four different offensive coordinators (two stints with Mike McCoy).

Thomas has also played through myriad injuries to start the last 106 consecutive game (playoffs included), the most of any receiver in the league.

"I don't compare myself to guys who had the same quarterback their entire career," Thomas told The Denver Post in an extensive interview last year. "Nothing against that — they're blessed with that. But I don't compare my numbers. This is what I compare: If I go out that week and I play good for my squad, then that's all that really matters. If I play bad, then I feel bad about myself and I have to do it better."

Thomas is one of only four NFL players to post five consecutive seasons (2012-16) with at least 90 catches and 1,000 receiving yards, and although he fell seven catches and 51 yards shy of making it six seasons last year, he continued to scale the Broncos' record books. He moved into third place in career receptions (629), and second in both receiving yards (8,653) and receiving touchdowns (57). He already sits at No. 1 in Broncos history with 35 career 100-yard receiving games and is the fastest Broncos player to log 600 catches (112 games).

Since he and Sanders joined forces in 2014, the Broncos have boasted a receiving duo that has topped 100 yards each in seven games (league most) and 1,000 yards each in three seasons.

The list of accolades and records will only continue to grow longer. While the Broncos have already begun to make significant changes to their offense for 2018, their top receiver isn't one.

Thomas isn't going anywhere.

Dez release reinforces Demaryius was better choice

By Mike Klis

9 News

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Demaryius got 'em.

Demaryius got Dez.

It's been Demaryius and Dez, Dez and Demaryius since the 2010 NFL Draft.

They were selected two picks apart in the first round. They both took the No. 88. They were both established five seasons into their career as two of the best receivers in the league. At that point, Demaryius and Dez both received five-year, \$70 million contract extensions.

But finally, Demaryius got separation on Dez.

John Elway has decided to bring Demaryius Thomas back for a ninth season while Cowboys owner Jerry Jones released Dez Bryant on Friday.

It can be unequivocally stated Josh McDaniels, Brian Xanders and the Broncos made the correct choice when they picked Demaryius instead of Dez. The numbers say so.

Player	Pick ...	Rec	YD ...	TD ...	SB
Demaryius Thomas	22	629	8,653	57	2
Dez Bryant	24	531	7,459	73	0

In Thomas' first Super Bowl appearance following the 2013 season, his Broncos got destroyed by Seattle, but he set a Super Bowl-record with 13 catches. In his second Super Bowl appearances, Thomas had just one catch but he came away with a ring.

Advantage, Demaryius from goal line to goal line.

He also has 98 catches and 1,194 yards more than Dez.

Yes, Bryant, who at 6-foot-5 is 2 inches taller than Thomas, was a post-up, high-point, touchdown-catching machine, especially in the three-year period from 2012-14, when he scored 41 times.

And there's no question Bryant received gobs more publicity than the reserved Thomas.

But Bryant's career has pretty much overlapped with two quality quarterbacks in Tony Romo and Dak Prescott. Thomas had a terrific four-year run with Peyton Manning but that period was sandwiched by Tim Tebow and Kyle Orton on one side and Trevor Siemian, Brock Osweiler and Paxton Lynch on the other.

Brandon Marshall was a big reason why the Broncos took Thomas, and not Bryant, with the No. 22 selection in the first round of the 2010 draft.

“Didn’t expect to go there at all,” Thomas said in an interview for the book, *The 50 Greatest Players in Denver Broncos History*. “Everything was all Dez.”

But McDaniels clashed with Marshall, the Broncos’ 100-catch receiver, the previous year, and he wanted the coachable Thomas instead of Bryant, who was considered the better receiver but a huge character concern. Bryant went No. 24 to the Dallas Cowboys, and indeed, he often clashed with his coaches and teammates early in his career.

Thomas had a foot injury entering the draft and didn’t have much of a rookie season. He started to break out with Tebow – who was the No. 25 overall pick, one after Bryant, in the 2010 draft -- midway through his second season of 2011.

From there, Thomas and Bryant were in the conversation for NFL’s top receiver for a few years although both had their production slip in the past three years.

But while Bryant’s three-year decline was precipitous following his own foot injury – an average of 50 catches for 678 yards and 6 touchdowns – Thomas’ has still been efficient with an average of 93 catches, 1,112 yards and 5 touchdowns.

Thomas has five Pro Bowl selections to three for Bryant.

Ultimately, the two were separated when Elway exercised Thomas’ \$4 million option bonus in March – effectively assuring he will also receive an \$8.5 million salary in his ninth season in Denver – and the Cowboys decided to let go of Bryant.

Given the Cowboys waited a month after the start of free agency to release their star receiver, Bryant supporters might say the only difference between Demaryius and Dez is Elway did right by Thomas and Bryant was wronged by Jones.

But the numbers other than 88 say the Broncos did right by taking Demaryius instead of Dez.

DeMarcus Walker has faced a challenging rookie season. But the Broncos' second-round pick believes he can close it strong.

By Nick Kosmider
Denver Post
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DeMarcus Walker walked out of Miami's Hard Rock Stadium less than one year earlier in a triumphant mood.

The Broncos rookie finished a decorated career at Florida State by helping the Seminoles beat Michigan 33-32 in the Orange Bowl on Dec. 30, 2016. Walker had a sack, his 16th of the season, a fitting final audition for the NFL draft.

Walker returned to that stadium Sunday in a far different space. His sterling career as a pass rusher for the Seminoles led the Broncos to draft him in the second round, with the 51st overall pick. But little has gone right in a rookie season during which he was shifted from defensive end to outside linebacker, became a weekly inactive upon the return of Shane Ray and recently moved back to defensive end because of injuries along the line.

His playing time has been sparse. He played Sunday for the first time since Oct. 22, finishing with one tackle in three defensive plays in Denver's 35-9 loss to the Dolphins. He has three tackles this season and hasn't played more than 10 snaps in any game. It's a season that has tested Walker more than he imagined.

"I think there are a lot of things that he wasn't expecting coming to the NFL," defensive coordinator Joe Woods said. "Going to Florida State and being a marquee player there, when you come here, you're back to ground zero. That was a little bit of a shock for him along with the speed of the game, the quality of the players that he was going against and things that we were asking him to do."

With four games left as a rookie, Walker is eager to prove he's learned from the struggles he's encountered since seeing Denver snow for the first time in April. With end Derek Wolfe now on injured reserve with a neck injury and the timeline for injured nose tackle Domata Peko's return uncertain, Walker could have a larger role in the final four games.

"I was very happy to be back out there and get the reps I had," Walker, 23, said of playing against the Dolphins. "I just have to keep making plays and get the coaches to trust me."

Broncos coach Vance Joseph left little doubt as to why Walker was sent to the bench when Ray returned from offseason wrist surgery Oct. 30. Fourth on the depth chart at outside linebacker behind Von Miller, Shaquil Barrett and Ray, he had to play special teams. Walker hadn't proved himself up to the task, so the nod went to Kasim Edebali. But even when Edebali was cut by the Broncos last month, a move that seemed to open a door for Walker at outside linebacker, the team instead promoted Deiontrez Mount from the practice squad to play special teams.

“Until he learns how to play (special) teams,” Joseph said of Walker then, “he won’t progress as the fourth guy.”

But before he could continue his fight to become Denver’s fourth outside linebacker, injuries necessitated a move to defensive end. It’s where Walker began the offseason before being shifted to the outside. In a rookie season full of obstacles, Walker said shifting between positions is not one of them.

“To be honest, I’m a defensive lineman, but I can also play outside linebacker,” he said. “I was drafted to do both. I like going back and forth. I tell people that I’m both, an outside linebacker and a defensive lineman, because I can. I’ve been doing that since college and high school, playing inside and out. I’m a versatile player, so I’m used to it.”

But of the challenge of making Walker a true “hybrid-type of player,” as Woods called him Thursday, is identifying the right way to build his body. Walker said weighing 270 to 275 pounds would be the ideal mark to allow him to be a pass rusher who could also hold his own along the defensive front. He weighs about 255, and concedes that maintaining his weight has been a challenge.

“You want to be lighter playing the outside linebacker position because of the things we’re asking you to do from a coverage standpoint,” Woods said. “But inside, you’ve got to be big enough to hold up. He’s more of a situational pass rusher right now, and we’ll have to see how we can play him in terms of playing outside linebacker — or is he just an interior lineman?”

Building blueprints for building his body and identifying his true role for 2018 can wait a few weeks. For now, Walker is determined to end a disappointing season on a triumphant note.

“I want to seize an opportunity,” he said. “I’m not going to go out without a fight.”

Kiszla: Can DeMarcus Walker become more than a one-trick pony for Broncos?

By Mark Kiszla
Denver Post
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There's a hole in the Denver defense. The Broncos are looking at rookie DeMarcus Walker to fill it. Can a down lineman from Florida State drafted in the second round to be a pass-rush specialist now stand up and help solve the team's crisis at outside linebacker?

"Whatever I can do to contribute to this team and win a Super Bowl and whatever a coach asks me to do, I do," Walker said.

So what did Walker do Sunday? He went to school, and showed maybe there's a little Elvis Dumervil in him.

Walker took a crash course in the nuances of playing outside linebacker at the NFL level. Von Miller, the best in the business, gave him private tutorials on the field throughout practice.

"It's a blessing, to be honest with you. He's the best for a reason," Walker said. DeMarcus Ware, still serving as the Yoda of Denver in retirement, also has reached out to Walker via text message.

Ball don't lie. And players recognize talent. If Walker couldn't play, would Miller and Ware be coaching him up? Maybe Walker is more than the situational pass rusher the Broncos drafted him to be.

While all eyes at training camp were fixed on the competition between Trevor Siemian and Paxton Lynch, so shaky in a padded practice that coach Vance Joseph expressed blunt dissatisfaction with both young quarterbacks, maybe the real news is how the role for Walker keeps expanding. Teams get inventive when looking for ways to get talent on the field.

If Walker is able to earn significant playing time at outside linebacker in addition to being a third-down contributor as a defensive lineman, he could be as essential to Denver's success in 2017 as first-round pick Garrett Bolles, counted on to win the job as the starting left tackle in a rebuilt offensive line.

Miller is the best player in the NFL this side of Tom Brady. But even the Vonster cannot play linebacker on both sides of the line at the same time. So he frequently got in the ear of Walker during practice, offering tricks of the trade at outside linebacker, where Denver has been bit hard by the injury bug.

"Instead of being a freshman who's trying to figure things out, I'm now more like a senior in high school. And I've got to act like it," said Miller, who has embraced his role as a team leader with the same passion he brings to sacking the quarterback or dancing with the stars.

Add the torn wrist ligament of Shane Ray on top of a hip injury expected to keep Shaquil Barrett on the shelf until sometime in September, and outside linebacker has morphed from one of the Broncos' strongest positions to one of those unexpected challenges encountered by every NFL team almost every year.

The Broncos drafted Walker as a 6-foot-4, 280-pound defensive end. His style of play, however, differs significantly from the skill set of Malik Jackson, the down lineman desperately missed by the Broncos after he departed as a free agent to Jacksonville. For Walker to make a major impact in Denver, can he be a Swiss Army knife more like Dumervil or Karl Mecklenburg?

As a pro prospect, Walker was condemned in scouting lingo as a tweener, too small against the run to be an every-down player on the inside and not athletic enough to bring consistent pressure from the edge. He wants to be on the field as more than an interior pass rusher.

Can Walker become more than a one-trick pony for the Broncos? Here's his chance.

For Broncos rookie DeMarcus Walker, taking care of mom was Job One

By Adrian Dater

BSN Denver

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For Denver Broncos rookie DeMarcus Walker, the best moment of his summer, of his life actually, is a quick and easy recollection. It happened a few weeks ago, when he saw the tears of joy on the face of his mother, Cynthia, when presenting her with the keys to a new home.

Taking care of one or both parents is almost as much of a boyhood dream as it is to make the NFL, and the 22-year-old Walker has accomplished both in a surreal year that will never be forgotten.

“It was the best thing that I’ve ever done in my life,” said Walker, of buying a handsome new home in his home state of Florida, along with a new car. “That woman sacrificed so much for me. She took care of me for 22 years; It’s time to take care of her now.”

Walker, the Broncos’ second-round pick (No. 51 overall) from Florida State, signed a \$5.1 million contract with Denver that included a signing bonus of about \$1.8 million. It wasn’t always easy growing up in a tough neighborhood in his native Florida, but mom’s love and dedication saw his son through to a high-school diploma, then a degree from FSU.

“I’ve come from some struggles,” said Walker, a 6-foot-4, 280-pound defensive lineman. “But my mom always did what it took to keep a roof over our head and food on the table for our whole family.”

Walker, prior to coming to Denver, he’d never in his life spent more than a week outside of Florida. While home base will remain the Sunshine State, he said he is ready for what he believes will be a long career in Denver.

“I’m a winner,” Walker said. “I’m just here to win games, that’s all I’m here to do. To win a Super Bowl. But I still have a lot to learn, and a lot to adjust to. I’m just trying to learn, pick up the game and just play football.”

Walker said he has been made to feel welcome by a veteran defensive crew, which doesn’t always easy to a rookie in the NFL. Respect, friendship, camaraderie – it all has to be earned by rookies, but Walker said some of the veterans, particularly star linebacker Von Miller, have been gracious.

“With as much success as Von has had, the guy’s still humble,” Walker said. “Just two days ago, I Face-Timed him, just to joke around with him and I had a little conversation with him. That’s the kind of stuff that I like. People who are used to being around here, surrounding me with positive energy and love, that’s what I like and I really look up to those guys, especially Von.”