

Surprising performances along the defensive line provided silver lining for Broncos in 2017

By Nick Kosmider
The Denver Post
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Nearly every member of the Broncos' defensive line entered the 2017 season with something to prove.

Domata Peko, at 32 years old, came to Denver to prove he had more in the tank. Adam Gotsis wanted to prove a rocky rookie season wasn't an indicator of what he could bring to the table as a former second-round pick. Shelby Harris just wanted to prove he deserved a shot from somebody. And, as a whole, the Broncos wanted to prove their failures against the run in 2016 were an aberration.

The motivations weren't hard to find, and they helped Denver's defensive line form a tight bond while becoming arguably the team's best overall unit in 2017 — a silver lining in a forgettable 5-11 season.

"Everyone is over here grinding," Harris said after the defensive line led the way in a shutout of the Jets on Dec. 10. "We play for each other. You can see it in our emotions on the field. We love the game. We love playing. I am just happy to be a part of this. It might not be the best season in our eyes, but I love the guys I am playing with. This is a blessing just being here with them."

The Broncos finished fifth in the NFL against the run, surrendering just 89.4 yards per game. It was a major leap from a 2016 performance that was 28th against the run at 130.3 yards per game. During the team's 3-1 start this season, the Broncos held opponents to an average of just 50.8 yards per game, constructing a wall against a gauntlet of talented running backs like Melvin Gordon, Ezekiel Elliott, LeSean McCoy and Marshawn Lynch.

That's not to say the defensive line was immune to setbacks, most notably when the Broncos surrendered 197 rushing yards in a loss to the Eagles. Injuries to veterans Derek Wolfe and Billy Winn and free-agent acquisition Zach Kerr at times tested the team's depth. Wolfe's injured neck especially hampered the line's pass-rushing ability. Wolfe played in 11 games but was limited in several of those, and he finished the season with just two sacks. In fact, no member of the defensive line had more than five sacks.

Still, there were several players who made big impressions and provided hope that they can be a key pieces to the puzzle as the Broncos aim to return to playoff form for the first time since their Super Bowl-winning season in 2015. That started with Peko, whose 325-pound presence as the anchor of the line was an obvious boon to the team's rush defense. His ability to hold ground even while absorbing two blocks helped the Broncos swarm to the football and earned him recognition as a Pro Bowl alternate.

There was some doubt as to whether Peko, who signed a two-year, \$7.5 million deal with the Broncos last spring, would perform at a high level after struggling in the last of his 11 years in Cincinnati. The jovial nose tackle erased it quickly.

“I had to come in here and prove myself again; show these guys, new locker room and new staff, that I can still play,” Peko said. “I had to show them that I wasn’t over the hill. I really thank God for that; for keeping me strong this season and being able to go out there and prove myself.”

Gotsis, too, silenced some doubt after struggling as a rookie. The 2016 second-round pick out of Georgia Tech played in all 16 games, starting 13, and finished with 41 tackles and four passes defended.

But perhaps the biggest revelation on the defensive line was Harris, who signed a future/reserve contract with the team one year ago. The seventh-round pick of the Raiders in 2014 had failed to find any traction in the NFL this season, and he never made it onto a roster in 2016. But he finished with five sacks this season, second on the team behind Von Miller (10).

For all the growth along the defensive line, there is still plenty to address at the position in the offseason. Harris is a restricted free agent. Wolfe’s neck injuries raise doubt about whether he can return to his dominating 2015 form. DeMarcus Walker, the 2017 second-round draft pick, showed some promise late in the season after switching back to the defensive line from outside linebacker. Will he stay there in 2018 and grow into a contributor?

It’s no secret the Broncos struggled to get to the passer this season. They could use more pressure from the defensive line, an addition that could be addressed in the draft. But the Broncos know they have a good foundation and that’s more than they could have been assured of before the start of 2017.

Seven NFL Players to Compete in 'Most Valuable Performer' Talent Show

By Scooby Axson

MMQB

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Seven NFL players will compete in a talent show to see who will be crowned the MVP: Most Valuable Performer.

The one-hour interactive talent show is set to be hosted by actor/rapper LL Cool J, and will be broadcast on CBS next Thursday, starting at 8:00 p.m. ET/PT.

The show is aimed to find the NFL player who has the most off-the-field talent. A panel of celebrity judges will evaluate each player's performance during the live telecast.

The finalists are Brandon Williams, Justin Tucker and Alex Collins of the Baltimore Ravens, Carolina Panthers running back Jonathan Stewart, Cody and Jacob Hollister of the New England Patriots, who will compete together, and Cleveland Browns guard Kevin Zeitler.

The contest began Dec. 1 with the first videos of 32 participating NFL players available online at Sports Illustrated's website and allowed for fans to watch and vote for their favorite performer.

Williams and Tucker are scheduled to sing. Cody Hollister will also perform with his brother on the guitar. Collins will do Irish dancing, and Zeitler will be performing tricks with a dog.

During the Jan. 25 broadcast, viewers can place their vote on the final three on CBS.com.

Domata Peko (Denver Broncos) and Robert Nkemdiche (Arizona Cardinals) are the alternates should any of the finalists be unable to compete.

Former Cincinnati Bengal Domata Peko still smiling with Denver Broncos

By Jim Owczarski
Cincinnati Enquirer
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Joe Woods smiled and instinctively glanced over at the sun-splashed players parking lot behind the sprawling UCHealth Training Center in suburban Denver, the weekday home of the Broncos.

“He’s got the convertible, like a ’64 Continental, hair’s flying everywhere,” Woods said. “I mean, this dude just enjoys life. He enjoys football. It’s really been infectious for our whole defensive team.”

Ah, yes. The 1964 Lincoln Continental. A staple in Cincinnati has become a favorite already in and around Denver.

“That’s old school,” Domata Peko, Sr. said, laughing. “It’s always sunny here, so I can drive it more.”

Derek Wolfe admits he’s less inclined to smile – but the on- and off-field personality of his new teammate kitty-corner from his locker is, indeed, infectious.

“He’s all about having fun doing what you do and loving your life while you do it. I’m usually like a pissed-off type of guy, so having him there, it’s nice to have a change of speeds, you know what I mean?” said the 27-year-old University of Cincinnati alumnus - with a very straight face.

“It keeps my – especially when you’re losing like this, it’s making it more tolerable to come to work.”

Peko, Sr. of course, is always smiling. That wasn’t going to change. Not in Denver. Not in Los Angeles. Not in Carolina. Not anywhere he might have landed.

“He’s a great guy, well-spoken and loves everybody, you know?” said his cousin and Broncos practice squad member, Kyle Peko. “Anywhere he’ll be home.”

Peko, Sr. smiles. Of course, he does.

But about the one change that’s clear in his new home.

The new generational suffix atop his customary No. 94 was a nod to his cousin, who already had the family name stitched on Broncos blue, and to his son, Domata, Jr.

But it was also for something else.

“Coming to a new place, I wanted to start fresh,” Peko, Sr. said.

He admits there was some sadness and uncertainty he and his wife Anna had to face with the move, from leaving the only professional home they ever knew to having to take their children out of schools

and away from friends. But Peko, Sr. said the Broncos welcomed him warmly, and the community and fan base have come to embrace him like he had been a longtime Bronco.

“He’s a great role model, a great father, a great husband, a great person to look up to, man,” Wolfe said.

Now eight months into a new home and 10 days away from his 33rd birthday, the defensive tackle is feeling every bit the fresh start and the fresh, albeit thin, air.

He’s lost eight percent of his body fat from 2016. He isn’t being asked by Woods or defensive line coach Bill Kollar to take up blocks, instead to run downfield and shoot gaps in the Broncos’ 3-4 base defense.

“It’s been good, man, loving the city, having a good time here. Man, I feel like, s--- man, go five more,” he said about extending his career, laughing hard. “I’m just kidding. I don’t know. We’ll see.”

So, yes, Peko, Sr. is helping provide a true anchor at the nose tackle position in the Broncos’ fifth-ranked run defense, but he’s already made 16 solo tackles – just one fewer than he recorded in 2015 and 2016. He had his first sack since 2015 and he’s playing more snaps than any defensive lineman other than Wolfe.

“I’ve just been feeling really good. The different scheme is helping me out,” Peko, Sr. said, squinting from the sun. “Before in the 4-3, I was playing a different technique where I was reading more. This defense, we attack more, so I’m able to just go.

“That has been good, but I just feel like I’m in my prime, man. I feel like I’m doing good. I don’t know. I feel good here.”

He’s also being counted on for leadership. The Broncos have lost five straight games, the last two with 92 points being put on the board by Philadelphia and New England. There is uncertainty at quarterback and injuries that have slowed down key players.

In come the Bengals, a game Peko, Sr. has had circled since the schedule was released. It means something to him, for sure. And his former teammates know it.

“I think he’ll be all gassed up,” Bengals guard Clint Boling said with a smile. “He’s obviously a super nice guy. When he played, he played with some passion. I think it’s just going to be one of those things to be fun to go against him in a game in a full-speed setting like that for the first time.

“He’s played for a long time, done a good job. It’ll be a challenge. Should be fun, a fun matchup.”

The Bengals and Broncos find themselves in similar situations, with disappointing 3-6 records but feeling like a win Sunday gets them back into the AFC playoff picture. On some level, it has to be just another game. But at least this time, the first time, it’ll mean a little more.

“I want to go out there and make some plays and have fun out there and do my job,” Peko said, shearing the tightly wound tape around his wrists. “Now they’ll be on the other sideline, not on my sideline now. But it’ll be fun, man. I’ll be excited to see all the dudes and make plays for the Broncos, man, and do my job.”

Domata Peko is the roll-up-your-sleeves defender Broncos needed

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN

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There probably isn't room under the radar for Denver Broncos nose tackle Domata Peko, but the 325-(or so)-pounder was an acquisition made this offseason to relatively limited fanfare.

But if things go as Peko and the Broncos would like, this picture of durability, stability, consistency and production will be a big reason why Denver's defense plays a lot more like 2015 than it did in 2016. Not that everybody will notice, because as former Broncos nose tackle Rubin Carter has said, "Nobody in their right mind would say they want to grow up to be a nose tackle."

The Broncos defense was at its disruptive best at times in 2016 as it finished No. 1 in the league in pass defense for the second consecutive season. The Broncos were third in sacks, fourth in scoring defense and fourth in total defense.

However, they were 28th in run defense, and down the stretch, when the Broncos needed at least one more victory to get into the playoff field, they couldn't stop offenses from pounding away at them. And they couldn't keep those offenses in the down-and-distance situations where they could turn their pass-rushers loose, as they had in '15, when they led the league in every significant statistical category on the way to a Super Bowl win.

Von Miller was held without a sack in the final four games, and the Broncos went into the offseason looking to bulk up, hence Peko's job description.

"His job is to take up two gaps," Broncos coach Vance Joseph said.

"Everybody has something dirty about their job, and for the D-line, they have to take on those double-teams and keep the linebackers clean," Broncos defensive coordinator Joe Woods said of Peko and his linemates. "He's been doing it for a long time and doing it well."

Indeed, Peko is about to begin his 12th NFL season. The fact he has been around that long at one of the most physically grueling spots on the field -- the epicenter of collisions on every play -- and played every game in 10 of those previous 11 seasons is a whole lot of good fortune mixed with preparation and desire.

"That's crazy, man," Broncos cornerback Chris Harris Jr. said. "I'm in my sixth year and he's in there with all that traffic going into his 12th year. But he's just the kind of guy we need in there."

"I'm blessed to play 12 years," Peko said. "I say God has been keeping me strong and healthy. So a big shoutout to him, the man upstairs. I just keep my routine going. I hit the hot tubs and the cold tubs every day to keep my body right."

The math is simple, really: The more blockers Peko and the team's defensive ends can occupy, the fewer get to the Broncos linebackers. Then Miller, Todd Davis and Brandon Marshall have a far cleaner path to the ball carrier, and punts follow.

Too often last season, the Broncos front was pushed off the ball and the linebackers were wrestling with guards and centers who had moved a defensive lineman out of the way to get to the second level.

"Just being behind him, you can see the difference," Marshall said. "It's going to be a lot harder to do what teams did to us last year."

"He's just a beast," Miller said. "He rushes the passer and he's solid in the run, and that's something we were missing the last year, maybe even two years. To have him there, have him shore up the defensive line, is great."

But Peko isn't just a snap-to-whistle addition, he's a presence. In practices, you can often see the 32-year-old helping one of the team's younger linemen in the art of winning the battles in the tight quarters around the line of scrimmage. Peko also doesn't ever really seem rattled by the heat, the length of practice or the fact that whenever the ball is snapped, he's often got two 300-pound offensive linemen trying to move him.

"People ask me sometimes how to keep at it; I say you don't get out of shape," Peko said. "Always stay at your best."

"It's a big addition for us," Woods said. "He's a veteran player and he's played for a long time. He not only brings leadership to us on the football field but in the classroom as well. He's very, very smart, and guys look up to him. He's done a great job so far."

Domata Peko bringing big frame — and hair — to heart of Broncos reconstructed defensive line

By Nick Kosmider
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Everything about Domata Peko is big.

The new 325-pound nose tackle for the Broncos has been hard to miss at training camp. If you can't spot the hair that juts out of the bottom of his helmet and flows downward until it covers up the No. 94 on the back of his jersey, the giant ear-to-ear grin that seems permanently attached to his face gives him away.

If none of that works, you can identify him by the giant circular hole cut into the T-shirt underneath his shoulder pads, exposing the midsection meant for moving massive men.

"I'm just trying to breathe, get some ventilation going for the big guys," Peko said of his on-field fashion choice.

The Broncos in March signed Peko, who spent the first 11 seasons of his career in Cincinnati, to a two-year, \$7.5 million contract, an investment in the kind of size they needed to add up front after finishing 28th in the NFL against the run last season.

For Peko, the move was a chance to start fresh.

"It's exciting to come in and be a part of this great group of guys who have been competing for years," Peko said. "The back end is always on point. We've got some monsters up front. The linebackers are flying downhill. It's been amazing."

Peko's primary job at the center of the Broncos' 3-4 defense is to gobble up space and occupy blockers, leaving them more vulnerable to Denver's army of pass rushers. It's a role, Broncos coach Vance Joseph said, to which the durable Peko has been well-suited.

"He's what you want in a nose guard," Joseph said. "He's a big man who can hold a point. He's got some quickness to rush the passer on pass downs, but his job is to take up two gaps and he can do that."

The Broncos won't put on their full pads until Sunday morning, but Peko's presence along the defensive front already has been felt.

"When they brought him in, I was happy because I know that he's a great guy, a great player and a great leader," offensive guard Ron Leary said. "We've had some great battles and they're only going to get better, but it's going to help both of us — the O-line and the D-line — get better and get ready for Sundays."

The Broncos also added Zach Kerr, a 334-pound former Colts defensive end, during free agency as part of general manager John Elway's plan to increase the size and toughness on both lines. Kerr figures to provide depth behind Derek Wolfe, Jared Crick and Adam Gotsis.

DeMarcus Walker, the 280-pound second-round pick in April's draft out of Florida State, also is expected to make an immediate impact at defensive end. That's more than 900 pounds of new bodies on the defensive line who are eager to provide more nastiness than the unit possessed last season.

"It's only day three of camp so we've got a long way to go and we've got to keep pushing each other," Peko said. "It's an exciting time to be a Bronco."

Domata Peko has an extremely simple job description with the Denver Broncos

By Zac Stevens
BSN Denver
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Last season, for the first time since 2010, the Broncos missed the playoffs. While there was plenty of blame to go around on all three units, Denver's defense, yes the defense, had a gaping hole that hindered their ability to reach the postseason—stopping the run.

In the offseason, John Elway addressed that hole in a large way, literally. On a single day in free agency, March 11, the Broncos added a combined 659 pounds on the defensive line with the signings of Domata Peko and Zach Kerr. Now, with over half of the offseason workout program under his belt with the new team, Peko already knows exactly what his role will be on the defense.

"I'm coming in here trying to be a run stopper like I've been doing, and do that to the best of my ability," he said. "Their run-average [last season] was way too high for being a great defense."

Led by the best pass defense in the league, Denver's defense finished tops in many statistical categories last season, however, stopping the run was close to the bottom. The Broncos defense gave up the fifth-most rushing yards per game (130.3), the 14th-worst yards per carry (4.3) and the 14th-most rushing touchdowns.

Fortunately, Peko's 11 years with the Cincinnati Bengals have all been focused around eating up offensive lineman to stuff the run.

"Being in the AFC North, it's a really tough run-type of division," he said. "Being a nose guard for over a decade, that's what I do. I like to clog up the middle of the field. I like to fill in those run lanes that were kind of lacking last year."

Last season, while the run defense wasn't the fault of one player, the man in the middle of the defensive line was Sylvester Williams. Williams, who signed with the Tennessee Titans this offseason, was never a true nose tackle meant to take on multiple blockers in an effort to stop the run. However, that's what Peko's been doing his entire career and what he'll continue to do in Denver.

"I'm playing nose guard. It's the same thing I've been playing in Cincinnati. I'm playing nose guard right now and that's what I've been doing for years and that's what I play," he said. "It's a little bit different now. It's a 3-4 compared to a 4-3, but it's all to say that I'm lined up right over the center and that's what I've been doing. That's where I make my money. Right there in the middle of the field."

The biggest concern with the big man is his "older" age. Peko will turn 33 in November and already has 11 seasons of physical NFL caliber football under his belt. But in the two short months he's been with the Broncos, he's taken full advantage of their staff to get him in peak condition.

"I'm in year 12 but I feel good. My body is feeling great," Peko said as he stood in a sopping wet sweatshirt coming off a workout. "I feel like I'm in the best shape that I've ever been in. I'm getting

stronger than I've ever been. The weight room staff over here is no joke. They're doing a great job with me—[Strength and Conditioning] Coach Luke [Richesson] and also with [Defensive Line] Coach Bill [Kollar], he's a heck of a coach...I really love it here."

With his body bigger and better than ever, his mentality toward the game every second he's awake hasn't faded, either.

"I still love waking up in the morning and coming out here to hit o-linemen and hitting running backs," he said grinning ear to ear. "That's fun to me. I love that stuff."

Denver courted Peko for his ability to stuff the run. Peko ultimately chose Denver for their ability to lead him to the promise land.

"In Cincy, we're always talking about, 'Oh, I want to win a playoff game. I want to win a playoff game.' But over here, we're talking about winning championships. That's what brought me here, I want to win a championship."

Peko's ability to stop the run in Denver could ultimately be the deciding factor to whether he earns the Super Bowl ring he's chasing in the Mile High City.

Domata Peko knows expectations are higher in Denver

By Aric DiLalla

DenverBroncos.com

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Domata Peko hasn't played a game yet for the Broncos, but he's well aware of the standard in Denver.

It's no secret the Broncos have more Super Bowl appearances (7) than losing seasons (5) under Owner Pat Bowlen's direction. And that resume creates expectations that Peko knows are higher than in most other NFL cities.

That's even true in Cincinnati, where Peko played his first 11 seasons and helped the Bengals make six playoff appearances in an eight-season stretch. But the Bengals could never find that elusive playoff win.

"In Cincy, we were kind of always talking about, 'Oh, I want to win a playoff game. I want to win a playoff game,'" Peko said. "But over here, we're talking about winning championships. That's what brought me here. I want to win a championship."

The 32-year-old nose guard chose Denver in part because of his desire to win a title and in part because his cousin, defensive lineman Kyle Peko, is on the roster. Kyle's presence gave Domata stability even in light of a move away from a city where he had played his whole career.

But Peko has also found familiarity on the football field. Though he's transitioned from a 4-3 defense to a 3-4, he's still in a spot where he's very comfortable: right over the center. And that's where, as he said Tuesday afternoon, he makes his money.

"Being in the AFC North, it's a really tough run type of [division]," Peko said. "And being a nose guard [for] over a decade, that's what I do. I like to clog up the middle of the field. I like to fill up those run lanes that were kind of lacking last year."

Peko's teammates along the line are tough, just as they were in Cincinnati, but he senses a different kind of intensity in Denver. And they're expecting improvement.

The Broncos are months away from seeing the results, but even in walkthroughs, Peko said he has sensed the chemistry between Derek Wolfe, Jared Crick, Adam Gotsis and a number of other players in Defensive Line Coach Bill Kollar's room.

"Coach Bill, he's a heck of a coach," Peko said. "He really gets after you, and what I love about Coach Bill is that he has no favorites. If you're a young guy, if you're an old guy, he's going to tell you how it is. So I really love it here."

Peko may be closer to "old guy" on the scale, but Strength and Conditioning Coach Luke Richesson has him in "the best shape I've ever been in."

If that's the case, then Peko should be poised for success in the Broncos' plans to become more physical against the run.

Because if there's one thing Peko enjoys, it's hitting people.

"I still have that hunger that I want to get a ring," Peko said. "I want to win a championship, and that's what keeps me going. Also my family, playing for my children, my wife – those are motivations. I think that's what's keeping me young, keeping me live.

"You see guys, when they get a little older, they start losing their love for the game but for me, I still love waking up in the morning, coming out here, hitting O-linemen and hitting running backs. That's fun to me. I love this stuff."