

Broncos new chaplain offers both spiritual, financial help

By Arnie Stapleton
Associated Press
December 25, 2015

When Gary Kubiak was hired to coach the Denver Broncos, he wanted a full-time chaplain.

Kubiak went looking for someone players could really relate to, someone who had played the game and "had some stories to tell."

That led him to Luther Elliss, once the highest-paid defensive tackle in the NFL before losing it all and going bankrupt, then rebuilding his life and answering his second calling as a minister.

Elliss, who played nine seasons in Detroit and one in Denver after a standout career at the University of Utah, serves as both a cautionary tale and a sounding board at 13655 Broncos Parkway, where he delivers practical financial advice and spiritual guidance.

Elliss shepherds players on their faith journey and also warns them not to follow his path to financial ruin.

"He's been to the mountaintop and he's been humbled," linebacker Brandon Marshall said. "It's really nice to have a guy like that. I went to him when I had questions. He's very knowledgeable, he's wise, he's like a gentle giant."

Cornerback Chris Harris Jr., said Elliss brings "cred" into the job because he played the game: "When you have a guy who's done it, it makes it easier to approach him."

Elliss, who has a family of 14, seven adopted, speaks from experience and the heart when he tells his tale of recovery from being broke and broken five years ago.

He didn't blow his \$12 million in earnings as a pro football player on the high life of drugs and drink; he just made bad business decisions.

Elliss, who also serves as a transition coach for the NFL and speaks at the league's rookie symposiums, brings firsthand knowledge into the job of convincing players they'll one day lose their Midas touch.

"Everything they touch turns to gold. And usually they're pretty creative, hard workers, so they've been able to overcome things, any obstacle that comes to mind," Elliss said. "And even for myself, we had guys come over and talk to us about finances and gave us the statistics, it was like over 60 percent of the guys end up broke, divorced, homeless, without a job after you leave the game within three years. And I'm like, 'No, that's not me.'"

Elliss calls it the Superman Syndrome, which serves athletes well, but not in life away from the game.

"I thought I could transition into business and do the exact same thing that I was doing on the football field. What I didn't realize is business is a different animal," Elliss said.

He lost his businesses, a call center and a manufacturing company for the auto industry, even though he had promised not to go over budget and to listen to his accountants and attorneys.

"It ultimately came down to my decision and my decision was I'm unstoppable, we can make this work," Elliss said. "And ... it was just good money chasing bad money and before you knew it we were in trouble and you're trading second mortgages and doing just all sorts of silly things that you really shouldn't have been doing.

"But being that I'm not used to losing, I figured, hey, I just needed a little bit more, a little bit more time," said Ellis, who still rues hurting employees and business partners. "I just hope people understand I never meant to do anyone harm. But it was my own foolishness and pride that took me off the cliff."

Elliss relied on family, friends and his faith to help him rebuild his life. His wife's family sold them a home at a good price and former teammates pitched in to help the Ellisses.

"You think of people that normally go through bankruptcy and everything else, rags to riches or riches to rags, you see that story so often end in divorce, separation and all those types of things," Elliss said. "But it was because my wife and I have such a strong faith. That's what carried us through and it allowed us to move on.

"I think I'm an entrepreneur at heart. I love business. But I still didn't know where to go, how to get it going, doing certain things well. But going through that struggle and that downfall allowed me to start figuring out what I wanted to do.

"And I love the word, I love sharing the gospel and doing those things, and we helped start a church in Salt Lake City," Elliss said. "And being a part of that was reaffirming and helped me to understand that this is a part of my DNA, it's always going to be me. So when Coach Kubiak gave me this opportunity, it was like OK. We knew it was the right thing to do."

He left his life in Utah, where he was helping at his alma mater's football program. He brought two of his kids with him to Denver while his wife stayed back with eight of their children until they could sell their home. Their oldest son, Kaden, plays football at Idaho, and their eldest daughter, Olivia, plays basketball at Central Wyoming College.

"I've always had a heart for ministry," Elliss said. "And I just thought if I could go back to the NFL, I would want to go back to minister, to love on these guys, and I can also share my experience and help them shape their future."

Ryan Harris, a Muslim, said he enjoys talking with Elliss about religion.

"When you take two people who have deep religious beliefs, you're going to share the same faith one way or the other," Harris said. "So, I think there's just a high level of respect not only because he played but because also he's inspired by his faith in religion. And he has the respect of all of us. He's a great, positive influence to have in the locker room."

Luther Elliss back on track as Broncos Chaplain

By Aaron Matas

9 News

September 29, 2015

Luther Elliss was a two time Pro-Bowler with the Detroit Lions. He played one season, his last, in Denver before retiring. That's really where his long journey back to football began.

"When you're 24/7 football, everything in your life revolves around football, your vacation time, your family time, football is that pivotal point for you so when you lose that your're trying to fill that void, fill that gap," Elliss said.

He had also lost that NFL paycheck and was determined to make it back in the business world.

"I call it the Superman syndrome. A lot of us have never failed. Anything we touch turns to gold, we have that Midas touch a little," Elliss told 9NEWS.

This new chapter was a new world for Luther and for the first time in his life he failed.

"Trust me there were some bad decisions in there and I'll be honest a little bit of greed," he said.

Elliss was trying to make an honest living, but the millions he earned on the field was gone.

"You still get labeled though," said Elliss. "Bankruptcy is bankruptcy."

Ellis had a family to support, quite a family.

"We have 12 children," he said laughing. Five of his kids are biological and seven are adopted. Elliss also has his religion. and through all the low points, he had that to lean on.

"Not just my belief in the Lord but my wife's also. Because of our faith we stayed together, we have 12 children and we trusted the Lord and he provided for them," Elliss said.

Playing experience, business experience and faith. The Broncos thought Ellis was the perfect person to have around the guys.

"If I could know what I know now, if I could go back a few years and apply that how different things could be," said Elliss. "So if I could take that knowledge and help these younger guys and reach out to them and just be here, be here for them."

For 10 years on the field, Elliss knew exactly what was expected of him. And for 10 years after he was a bit lost. He found his purpose again.

"I'm grateful for the opportunity and I think this position is not only needed here but throughout the league because this life and things that can happen can push you 1 direction or many and you have to stay grounded," Elliss said. "I think someone in my position can help them stay grounded. I really feel like this is the right time and it's what I should be doing. This is my passion."

Return to Detroit emotional for Team Chaplain Luther Elliss

By Ben Swanson
DenverBroncos.com
September 25, 2015

Sunday's game in Detroit offers a bit of a homecoming for former Lion and current Broncos Team Chaplain Luther Elliss. Though he ended his NFL career in Denver, nine of his 10 years were spent in Detroit, and the Motor City will always have a special place in his heart.

"It's something I had already circled and highlighted on my game schedule, but I think as we get closer and actually arrive in Detroit and then actually walk out onto the field, the emotions will really hit me," Elliss said. "Just because when you spend the majority of your career somewhere, so much time and just passion there, to come here from last year and to have my two teams butting heads, it's going to be emotional. It's going to be one of those games where I'm going to have to contain myself and not get too hyped."

A former two-time Pro Bowl defensive lineman, Elliss is unique in his position as the Broncos' chaplain.

"Compared to maybe some other chaplains, I have played this game," Elliss said. "I have been through that. I've been through the highs and lows and those types of things, and being able to relate to the guys, I think, is very key."

But Colorado has also been a place that he has called home. Elliss grew up in Mancos, Colorado, so coming back to the Broncos has been a homecoming in its own right.

"I'm grateful to Gary and John and everybody in the Broncos organization for allowing me to come in, because I think it is a position that's needed throughout the league," Elliss said.

The impact was immediate. A few players met with Elliss as soon as he settled into his office.

"That was very, one, comforting, but, two, also kind of shocking because here I am, first day, and a couple guys are already coming to visit with me," Elliss said.

"We have a great team, great group of character guys and guys that really do care and they are very passionate about this game and passionate about being a Bronco," he added. "And I think that carries over into how we play and the things that we do, and it has to be. To me, this game — you can't play without that emotion, you can't play without that passion."