

From Madden to Broncos, Adam Gotsis' NFL journey still a work in progress

By Jeff Legwold

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If Adam Gotsis scrolls through the calendar pages he's already flipped in his life and digs deep, he can point to the exact moment he discovered football.

American football, that is, and it had to be discovered, mined from the sports landscape, because Gotsis is Australian and, well, American football is not.

"It was Madden '07, the video game, the one with Shaun Alexander on the cover," Gotsis said. "I think my mom or my brother got it somewhere. We just played a bit of that. We didn't really understand it much, we didn't know what we were doing, we just threw the deep ball every time. That was the first insight to football that I had."

That's a long way from where Gotsis was when he described that first memory, which was in a hallway inside the Broncos' suburban Denver facility, surrounded by team photos roughly 8,762 miles from Abbotsford, Australia, as the 747 flies. Gotsis was the Broncos' second-round pick in this year's draft, the coveted defensive line prospect with the physical attributes to succeed.

Gotsis was so enticing he had Broncos defensive line coach Bill Kollar asking coach Gary Kubiak every day before the draft if the team was going to select him, what with the benefit of rare upside for a player still learning the game. Gotsis first played American football, he said, "when I just turned 14, so I think I signed up when I was 13 and played just after I turned 14." It was a club team in what he said was an eight-team league in the Melbourne area.

The oddity, besides mismatched equipment and cobbled-together playbooks, was there were only two age divisions -- one for 14- to 18-year-olds, the other for those 19 and older.

So, as a 14-year-old, Gotsis often found himself surrounded by 18-year-olds, and as a 17-year-old, when he moved up to the upper-age division because of his size and strength, he found an entirely different challenge waiting for him.

"I didn't play much at first because everybody was 18 and shaving and I was 14," Gotsis said. "Then when I was 17, I moved up and there were 35-year-olds out there and I was 17. After the first bit, it kind of gave me confidence because these guys were men -- 25, 27, 30, 35 years old -- and I was 17 and doing all right. But these dudes were bigger than me, stronger than me and I was still doing pretty well, I thought I might have a shot at this."

It took a year after he graduated from high school, a year when Gotsis said he worked at a "leisure center" as a lifeguard, a trainer or whatever else needed to be done, before he was recommended to the coaches at Georgia Tech, who offered him a scholarship. Gotsis proved to be a bit of a football prodigy in a massive frame. He caught the eye of the Broncos and others around the league, but he didn't close out his senior year at Tech because he tore an ACL in the ninth game of the season.

It was an injury Gotsis was recovering from even when the Broncos selected him this past April. Kubiak has joked Kollar "would ask me if we were going to pick Gotsis every day before he even said hello."

Gotsis still is learning, with plenty more time on the learning curve to come. At times in training camp, he said, he still felt like he was recovering from his surgery -- he said Tuesday, however, he feels "full go, finally" -- and he's been an important part of the Broncos' rotation in the defensive line this preseason.

Defensive coordinator Wade Phillips has said, "I see a big guy who can move like a smaller guy."

And linebacker Von Miller said after seeing Gotsis work in one recent practice that "Gotsis is looking incredible out there."

His parents, older brother, older sister and two younger sisters will have to be somewhat creative to see him play this season given the 2:25 p.m. Denver time kickoff would be "about 9 in the morning, Monday morning at home," Gotsis said, "so they might have to get a bit of the Game Pass happening on their phones."

Gotsis had to wrestle a bit to get the paperwork done for his work visa -- it's good for five years -- and had to fly back to visit the U.S. consulate in Australia to complete the process. He figures he'll make at least one trip per year back to Australia and that his family can visit "in shifts, maybe a couple at a time to spread it out."

"But I think right now, after everything to get to this point, right now it's about football," Gotsis said. "It's about me learning, getting better, getting smarter, but it's just about football and I like that."

From Australia to Denver, no one took a path to the Broncos quite like Adam Gotsis

By Andrew Mason
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They call our code of football "gridiron" in Australia.

By using that word, it makes it easier to differentiate the pads-and-helmets iteration from the sleeveless-shirt-and-short-shorts, run-and-punt version of football played on oval fields in Australia.

The sports share a preferred name and rough shape of the ball -- they're both oblate spheroids, although the Australian version is rounder and blunter at the ends. There's a fair amount of hitting in each. There are goal posts.

But beyond that, Australian and American football have little common ground. Except, of course, in the occasional player that makes the leap across the Pacific Ocean and the Equator.

Usually, these players are punters -- Darren Bennett, former Broncos preseason player Mat McBriar, Ben Graham, Sav Rocca, Brad Wing and Jordan Berry. The few offensive players to come from Australia typically played rugby, like former Seahawks defensive tackle Jesse Williams and current 49ers running back/punt returner Jarryd Hayne.

Adam Gotsis is something new, something different. And he has a chance to help redefine the possibilities for the Australians that eschew their local brand of footy in favor of the American game.

The Broncos drafted him just over two months after the Cardinals signed former Australian rules player Joel Wilkinson as a cornerback. But Wilkinson just took up the game after playing in the AFL professionally. Gotsis has been working at the American game for eight years.

Prior to his 15th birthday, Gotsis' understanding of American football came via the EA Madden video-game franchise. Growing up in Abbotsford, Victoria, Australia, Gotsis was all about the Australian game, of which he remains a devoted fan.

"Growing up, that's what I wanted to do. Obviously, that's the big sport," Gotsis said. "I saw myself playing that from such a young age -- and I can still see myself playing that."

But there isn't a market for 298-pounders in the AFL. The bulkiest player on Gotsis' favorite club, the North Melbourne Kangaroos, weighs 227 pounds; the average weight of players on the team's senior squad is 193 pounds.

Gotsis was growing. Australian football probably wasn't an option. Rugby or American football could be. But unlike in the United States, there is no structure for the sport through the educational system; there are independent clubs, including the one for which his mother found a flyer, the Monash Warriors.

"You go down there, you pay \$300," he said. "They give you a pair of pads and some insurance. You practice once a week and you play once a week, and a lot of guys after the game will go get some beers, and that's it. That's kind of the way it is down there.

"It's a roped-off field. There's no stadiums, nothing. Just guys that love the game. They love every aspect of it. It's a culture down there. It's just a recreational-type league."

It's recreational, but organized; the Warriors had two teams, a senior club for players 19 and up and a junior team for those of high-school age, 14 to 19.

"So I went down there as a 15-year-old and I'm sitting in the car waiting, and I see all these guys with beards, 19-year-old guys walking down there, and I'm like, 'Am I in the right place? I'm not going down there. These guys are men,'" he recalled. "My brother was there at the time, he's about three years older than me, and he was like, 'Look, I'll go down there with you.' And the rest is history."

Gotsis was a man among boys, as it turned out. He quickly established himself as the star of the Monash Warriors' junior team before spending one year on the senior squad.

"I just fell in love with the sport straight away," Gotsis said. "I was like, 'I'm a big guy, and I'm important. I'm not just a big guy out there.' It was awesome."

But he wasn't just having fun. He caught the attention of a former Georgia Tech player who passed along Gotsis' name and information to Tech head coach Paul Johnson. Immediately, Johnson took a liking to Gotsis' quick feet; he saw him as a perfect tackle for the triple-option offense the Yellow Jackets run. A scholarship offer followed.

When Gotsis arrived in Atlanta he had two goals: earn his degree and make it to the NFL. One seemed realistic, the other didn't, especially after he arrived and was shifted to the defensive line. Australian football remained in his mind.

"I [thought], 'I'm going to come to college, I'm going to do the college thing, and then try and get to the NFL, and if that doesn't work, probably just lose 80 pounds and try to play Aussie rules football,'" he said. "That was kind of like my mindset. I love the sport back home. But thankfully I chose football, and it worked out for me."

Whether you call him a football player or a gridiron player, Gotsis doesn't care. In time, he hopes you call him an NFL star.