

The Broncos have a problem, and they couldn't be happier about it

By Nicki Jhabvala

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The Broncos have a problem that started with the NFL draft in April and was complicated by a pair of phone calls in the ensuing months, first to Kansas City and then to Natchez, Miss.

It's a welcome problem — one that teams strive to have and one the Broncos are cherishing for the remaining days of training camp and the preseason. But it's one they soon will have to solve.

With the selection of sixth-round draft pick De'Angelo Henderson, the signings of veterans Jamaal Charles and Stevan Ridley and the returns of C.J. Anderson, Devontae Booker (when healthy) and Juwan Thompson, the Broncos' once-dormant running game has seemingly been revived with a unique blend of talent.

The preseason opener at Chicago on Thursday was a test of patience as the Broncos continue to work through the kinks of a new scheme and search for the starter at multiple positions, none more significant than quarterback. But among the more promising aspects was their ground game, which gained 106 yards (4.1 per-carry average) against the Bears and included the winning 41-yard touchdown run by Henderson late in the fourth quarter.

"What we saw tonight is what he's been since we drafted the guy in the spring," first-year Broncos head coach Vance Joseph said of Henderson after the 24-17 victory over the Bears. "So I'm not surprised to see that tonight."

For the past two years, the Denver running game has failed to launch in the way general manager John Elway envisioned. But this season — thanks in large part to a remade offensive line whose pride is tied to run blocking — sure has the potential to be the charm and the key to supporting Denver's quarterbacks and still-developing offense.

"From what I watched on film to what I see now, it's a different attitude," Joseph said. "In my opinion, it's the offensive line that has made the most improvement. Now, running back-wise, adding Jamaal Charles and adding a guy like Ridley, that obviously makes you better. It makes the competition tough in that room."

Subway and second chances

Training camp opened with a setback. Booker, Denver's No. 2 running back who had been pushing to be No. 1, suffered a fractured wrist. A pair of screws would fix him, but the Broncos couldn't fill his void on the field for the remainder of camp and the preseason.

Enter Ridley, a free agent who spent four years with the New England Patriots and topped 1,200 yards rushing in 2012 but started only six games over the last three years because of injuries. His shot at a career revival was offered July 27.

"I told my mom about it at Subway," he said with a laugh. "A small country town in Natchez, Miss., there's not too many options. You've got Wendy's, McDonald's and pretty much Burger King, so Subway takes it."

Then he drove three hours to New Orleans, boarded a plane to Denver and worked out for Joseph, offensive coordinator Mike McCoy and running backs coach Eric Stutesville inside the Broncos' field house. Then he signed on a dotted line, suited up in a No. 47 practice jersey and took the field for his first walkthrough.

All in a day's work.

The next morning, Ridley announced his arrival after throwing on shells and a helmet. He "flashed" — a term Denver coaches have used often to describe their rushers — showing his ability to find his holes at the line and power through them.

Ridley said he wanted to provide "stability" to the running backs room, but he has been a welcome disruption — and a contender for a coveted roster spot.

"He's a pro," Stutesville said. "He approaches this the professional way. And he knows the great opportunity that's sitting here. We're very excited about him."

The Broncos also are excited about Charles, once an AFC West nemesis as a Kansas City Chiefs star who signed a one-year contract in May to fit with Joseph's theme of infusing the offense with speed. Charles didn't play Thursday against the Bears, but he is expected to take the field at some point in preseason as he eases his way back from knee surgeries that hindered his last two years in the league.

He says his troublesome knees no longer are a concern. The Broncos hope he's right.

"I don't feel rusty. I feel good," Charles said after two days of camp. "I told the guys in the locker room, when I see one of you kids beat me, it's time for me to give it up."

So far, that kid testing Charles is Henderson, a 5-foot-7 speedster from Coastal Carolina who has given the Broncos a weapon on the ground and in the passing game.

"Speed kills. That ain't my game," Anderson said. "So, No. 28 (Charles) or No. 33 (Henderson) can go out there and they're fast. If it's time to bulk some muscle and hit somebody in the mouth, call No. 22."

No longer a one-guy position

If Joseph had his way, the depth chart that was announced last week wouldn't exist. With multiple position battles underway and many lines blurred because of scheme, the depth chart is misleading and temporary.

It could change — as quickly as the Broncos' running backs room changed.

But for now, Anderson is No. 1. For now, Booker — despite his wrist injury — is No. 2. For now, Charles, Ridley, Henderson, Thompson and Bernard Pierce are lumped together in the No. 3 slot.

“The running back position — you need two or three guys that can carry the load,” Joseph said. “It is no longer a one-guy position.”

The competition could prompt the Broncos to take on another tailback and sacrifice depth elsewhere, especially as the backs flaunt a dynamic few other NFL teams can match.

“I also think the way we’re used in the passing game is that other extension of the running game,” Anderson said. “So if we’re not running the ball well, but catching the ball out of the backfield and keeping the defense honest, we’ll still open up some lanes for us to run the ball.”

It’s a Denver problem that could make for tough decisions Sept. 2, when rosters across the league must be pared to the final 53.

“Tough? No,” Stuedesville said with a smile. “Tough is when you don’t have anybody.”

“I’m not small”: Uniquely-sized De’Angelo Henderson making massive impression on Broncos

By Ryan Koenigsberg

BSN Denver

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“I’m not there to carry pads; I’m there to take someone’s job.”

Remember that?

Those were the words of then rookie running back Devontae Booker at the NFL rookie premiere last season.

Interestingly, due to injuries, Booker did end up taking on the starting job and probably took the job of Ronnie Hillman on the way. Now, just a year later, another new guy is out coming for people’s jobs, but he’s not so concerned about that other part.

“Rook, my pads are right there’—that’s all he says,” first-year running back De’Angelo Henderson said with a laugh, speaking of expected starter C.J. Anderson.

Henderson, who doesn’t have to lean far to grab them—standing at just 5-foot-7—takes his rookie medicine, picks the pads up and humbly carries them to the locker room.

“He’s embracing the rookie role,” Anderson said with a laugh.

C.J. certainly doesn’t mind his pad valet, but during practice, he and everyone else on the team are starting to respect the bowling ball that is No. 33.

“Great vision... Wonderful vision,” explained Anderson. “Really good feet. Really, really good feet... Definitely in the play book, asking a lot of great questions... He’s starting to be confident in his game out here, so we’re excited about that.”

“Henderson, the running back, he is looking really good,” Emmanuel Sanders added. “He always seems to find the hole.”

“He’s a quick, explosive, marks out runner,” head coach Vance Joseph chimed in.

The sixth-round pick out of Coastal Carolina is turning heads, but maybe none more than the literal head of Aqib Talib.

On Monday, during one of the first plays of practice, Henderson came off the right edge with a head full of steam, hit the corner, dropped his shoulder and ran directly over No. 21 on defense.

“I didn’t know it was Talib!” He told BSN Denver, almost apologizing to the cornerback legend. “I just saw a white jersey and dropped my shoulder.”

Rumor has it, some of the defenders claim he stepped on Talib's foot, discrediting the rookie's blow.

"I'll have to watch the film," Henderson said with a laugh.

Here's the thing, if a running back—especially one with the build of Henderson—is stepping on your foot before you have them wrapped up, you're in trouble regardless.

Here's the other thing, Henderson vs. Talib? That means the sixth round pick was working with the first team.

Yep, with Devontae Booker on the mend, Jamaal Charles still being eased in and Stevan Ridley still new to the room, it was the rookie sharing reps with C.J. Anderson on Monday.

"I wasn't expecting to be taking first-team reps the second day," he said with a big smile. "But I always have high expectations for myself, and I have high goals. For it to happen so early, I'm thankful for it, but I have to keep pushing because nothing is guaranteed."

"[Eric Studesville], our coach, he did a great job of getting us all prepared and ready to be thrown in, so we won't skip a beat," Henderson added. "I think everybody is ready to be thrown in. It's unfortunate what happened to Book but next man up."

Booker is set to miss at least a couple weeks of the regular season with a fractured wrist, but that also means he counts toward the 53-man roster. Between Anderson, Booker, Henderson, and Jamaal Charles, you are already right at that magic number of four running backs that most teams carry on the roster. Andy Janovich, though, counts toward that number too, and special teams coach Brock Olivo already believes his spot is locked in.

Throw in veterans Stevan Ridley—who has shown flashes during his first few practices—Bernard Pierce and Juwan Thompson, and you've got some serious overcrowding in the running back room.

"Tough decision on the coaches," Anderson said.

Henderson is making his part of that equation seem easy so far. Flashing an ability to fit through tight holes, explode through the hole and burst in the open field with serious speed. Speed he has a whole bunch of confidence in.

"I do. I do," he said without a second of hesitation when asked who wins a foot race between the backs. "I'm not sure by how much, but I do."

"I think we all have our own unique skillset," he added. "Me, personally, I think I bring a little bit of everything at a high level. I can catch real well, I can run real well and I can block real well."

Of all the backs, Henderson's skillset may be the most unique. He has the bulk of a bruiser and the speed of a homerun hitter. Of course, he is missing the height of the equation, but his head coach isn't sure if that's a bad thing.

“As a defender, it’s hard to see the guy,” Joseph explained. “He’s behind [T] Menelik Watson, and he makes a cut, that’s a surprise for a linebacker. You watched today. It’s a surprise when he’s in the A, B, and C gap, but you can’t see the little guy. He’s fast through the hole.”

Careful with that word “little.”

“I’m shorter, but I’m not small,” the rookie said. “I can play football with just about anybody... I’ve never really been scared of too much.”

He’s got the talent, he’s got the unique skillset, and he’s most certainly has the confidence. He’s even getting there in arguably the toughest category for young players.

“He’s getting to the point where he understands the playbook,” Anderson explained. “Now it’s about situational football, and he’s getting to that point, too.”

This is where we learn that maybe C.J. is saying a bit more to De’Angelo than, “Rook, my pads are right there.”

“He’s teaching me everything,” Henderson explained. “C.J. is arguably the smartest running back in the NFL. He knows coverages, he knows fronts, he knows where everybody is going to be before the play even happens I’m learning how to take my game to a different level in terms of learning what everybody is doing... It kinda surprised me how smart he is, but I’m picking it up as I go along.”

Picking it up as he goes along, just like those pads.

Don’t be surprised, though, when he goes from carrying those pads to carrying the rock on Sundays in Orange & Blue.

Broncos rookie De'Angelo Henderson overcame odds and has degree to prove it

By Mike Klis

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De'Angelo Henderson came out of college this year as the Joe DiMaggio of running backs.

The small school (NCAA FCS) record for consecutive game touchdowns was 20. The overall NCAA record for touchdowns scored in consecutive games was 27.

Henderson scored touchdowns in each of the final 35 games of his career at Coastal Carolina – every game in his final three seasons.

Did the streak become an all-consuming monster as it went along (as it did for the Yankee Clipper during his 56-game hitting streak in 1941)?

“If anything I hated thinking about it,” Henderson said in a sit-down interview with 9News last week. “The guys on my team, they did a good job of trying to remind me about it. But I definitely didn’t think about it, I just went out there and played football.”

Henderson scored 64 touchdowns in all for the Coastal Carolina Chanticleers, rushed for 4,635 yards, and added another 921 yards receiving on 97 receptions.

None of those numbers are included in his proudest accomplishment to date.

“Graduating from college,” he said.

Coming out of high school in Summerville, South Carolina, Henderson received a blow when confusion over his math entrance test score left him academically ineligible for college ball. He greyshirted in 2011 to get his scores up to par, redshirted in 2012 and then played four years of college.

The slow start academically made his degree in recreation and sports management – which he finished before his senior football season – even sweeter.

“I guess you could say that as well, but I’m the first person in my family to go to college,” Henderson said. “And I’m the first graduate as well. So, setting the bar high and the standards high for our future generations in my family is something I definitely wanted to do. That was definitely one of the biggest things I ever accomplished.”

During his record-setting college career, Henderson wore No. 31. When he became the Broncos’ sixth-round draft pick on April 29, he soon requested the No. 33 to honor two people.

One was for his fraternity friend, Anthony Frye, who was killed in a motorcycle accident minutes after visiting with Henderson. The other was for his former Coastal Carolina coach Maurice Drayton, who is now an assistant special teams coach with the Indianapolis Colts.

“My frat brother, Anthony Frye, died March 2, 2016,” Henderson said. “And when he went to Coastal, he wore No. 33 as well. I wanted to honor him and keep him by my side. My mentor wore No. 33 as well. I found that out later on. It’s cool how two people I really loved and looked up to wore the same number and I just wanted to do the same.”

Frye’s fatal accident hit Henderson hard.

“We were together in a frat meeting and we went out to eat afterwards,” Henderson said. “And he said, ‘Hop’ text me in 20 minutes. He died in 18. He was a block away from his house. He’s got a newborn kid. His girlfriend he was about to get married to soon. It was tough on all of us at Myrtle Beach and it was real rough on my (frat) brothers. Look at it as a learning experience. Don’t question what’s God’s path and whatever you do, love your family, love your friends.”

Now, “Hop” as he was called for the running style he has out of his 5-foot-7, 208-pound frame, needs to figure out how to make a Broncos’ roster that already has Jamaal Charles, C.J. Anderson, Devontae Booker, Juwan Thompson and Bernard Pierce in its running backs meeting room.

To pull it off, Henderson will draw him from his college experience, both on the field and in the classroom.

“Just being on top of my studies,” he said. “Being confident in myself. Believing in everything that coach Mike (McCoy) and coach (Eric) Studesville are going to bring to the table. Learn as much as I can from everybody and be humble.”

Henderson coming up big for Coastal Carolina

By Andre Simone

BSN Denver

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Can't stop, won't stop, that's become the Denver Broncos adage in the 2017 NFL Draft's third day when it comes to adding elusive speedsters on offense. Coastal Carolina running back De'Angelo Henderson is the newest addition to the group and may be the most intriguing of them all. He's truly talented.

Henderson is coming off of three consecutive thousand-yard rushing seasons at Coastal Carolina, having finished his career with 64 total touchdowns in 50 games. At 5-foot-7 and 208 pounds, he's a shorter prospect but has plenty of power to be a running back in the NFL.

Here's what we saw on tape.

Strengths

Short and stocky Henderson is really hard to bring down to the ground as he runs with deceiving power and a low center of gravity.

He's a dynamo in the open field with outstanding quickness and jump-cut ability that he uses to constantly embarrass defenders in space.

His running style is contagious. His combination of power and quickness make him a terror once he has an inch of space.

He rarely goes down on first contact and is almost always able to break the first tackle or wiggle his way out of it to create extra yardage.

Runs low to the ground and seeks out contact. He's hard to locate due to his smaller size but packs a punch.

Henderson's a creative runner in the open field, has lots of moves he uses to leave defenders in the dust.

Has great long speed, can break big runs consistently. Good vision is able to stick his foot and go once he finds an opening.

Pretty good receiver with 97 career receptions. Uses his elusiveness and quickness at the snap to separate at the top of a route and has nice hands.

Weaknesses

Henderson is small something that will limit his ability as a pass blocker in the backfield. As a third down RB, he has everything you need, but he does need to improve in this aspect.

Henderson sometimes dances around too much in the backfield instead of sticking to the play and running through his lane.

He'll have to be more selective in seeking out contact at the next level as sometimes he'll be better off running plays out of bounds. He's at risk of taking a pounding with his running style.

Too often Henderson pushes runs outside. He has the power to run inside more often collegially. Will have to show he can run inside with consistency at the NFL level.

Doesn't have special teams returning experience, likely will have to play in some special teams role as a pro.

Missed three games because of a shoulder injury his final season. This could have led to him dropping in the draft.

How he fits

In a very loaded running back class, Henderson is one of the more intriguing talents in the group. He'll be underrated due to his size, but at 208 pounds he's a load to bring down, especially when he's able to hide behind his line with his short frame.

He's an explosive playmaker who can make big plays when put out in space. He'll also be an intriguing contributor as a receiver.

After having traded away Kapri Bibbs, the Broncos needed a speed back in their backfield, and they got one with Henderson. The depth at the position has also been tested the last few seasons when C.J. Anderson's gone down, and Henderson provides some insurance.

Henderson is fairly complete, making him a ready-made prospect who adds exactly what the Broncos ground game was lacking.

Henderson coming up big for Coastal Carolina

By Andrew Miller

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There were days during those first two years when Coastal Carolina running back De'Angelo Henderson wondered if it was all worth it.

Like when Henderson would run with his teammates in 100-degree temperatures during the summer or drag himself out of bed before dawn to lift weights before class, and then sit on the bench on Saturdays watching his teammates play. Henderson, the former Summerville High School star, is now the top running back in the Big South Conference and will lead the Chanticleers against The Citadel on Saturday in the opening round of the FCS football playoffs. Kickoff is set for 2 p.m. at Brooks Stadium in Conway.

After finishing his high school career in 2010 as the Green Wave's all-time leading rusher with 4,663 yards and 53 touchdowns, Henderson missed the entire 2011 college season when the NCAA Clearinghouse red-flagged his academic transcript, ruling that one of his math classes did not meet core course requirements. Henderson had to leave school and return home to Summerville, ineligible to play football as a freshman.

When Henderson got his academic house in order and returned to the team in 2012, he found himself listed as No. 8 on the Chanticleers' depth chart at running back. Newly hired head coach Joe Moglia encouraged Henderson to take a redshirt season.

Henderson had played football every fall since the age of six and the idea of missing a second straight season didn't sit well with him, but he realized that sitting out was probably in his best interest.

"Those first two years were rough, I'm not going to lie about it," said Henderson, who in three years has set the Chanticleers' all-time rushing mark with 3,378 yards. "The thing that got me through it was that I had a lot of good people in my corner to help me get through those tough times. I wasn't used to that, just sitting out and not playing. But I never thought about quitting. I definitely got discouraged a couple of times, but my family was behind me the entire time."

Two years away from the game made Henderson eager to prove himself. He can remember that first practice with the Chanticleers.

"We had this linebacker that was bald-headed and had a full beard and looked like he was 30," Henderson said. "I knew I was playing against full-grown men at that point, but once I took a couple of hits I was fine. It's still football. You grow up watching college football and thinking how good the players are at this level, and they are good, but at the end of the day, they're just like you."

During the 2013 preseason, Henderson worked his way up to second on the depth chart behind starter Lorenzo Taliaferro.

"The coaches told me to be patient, that my time would come," Henderson said.

Henderson played in every game in 2013, finishing the season with 589 rushing yards and six touchdowns

“When I got my opportunity I wanted to make the most of it,” Henderson said. “I wanted to show that I could play at this level.”

When Taliaferro graduated after the 2013 season and was drafted by the Baltimore Ravens the following June, the starting job fell to Henderson. It didn’t take long for the Chanticleers coaching staff to realize they had a budding superstar. He finished the 2014 season with 1,553 yards and 20 touchdowns. The 1,553 rushing yards were the second most in a single season in program history.

“We knew that De’Angelo was a talent,” Moglia said. “We saw that during his redshirt year when he was on the scout team. We were pretty deep that season, so we didn’t want him to waste a season sitting on the bench. When De’Angelo got his chance, he made the most of it.”

At 5-8 and 205 pounds, Henderson has always felt like he needed to prove himself on the football field. It’s what drives him to run with the ferocity he does.

“I’ve always played with a chip on my shoulder,” Henderson said. “Hearing what I could and couldn’t do, that just motivates me even more. People are going to say what they’re going to say. I’m just going to go out and play football the way I’m capable of playing it.”

Heading into Saturday’s game with The Citadel, Henderson has already rushed for 1,245 yards and scored 15 touchdowns. He established a FCS record by scoring a touchdown in 25 consecutive games.

Ironically, if not for the help of Maurice Drayton, The Citadel’s defensive coordinator and former Chanticleers assistant coach, Henderson’s college career might have been over before it began.

“Coach Drayton is a phenomenal, phenomenal guy. The stuff he has done for me personally ... words can’t explain how much I love him,” Henderson said. “I’m very thankful and blessed that God put a man like that in my life. I know he’ll have something in his game plan to try and stop me and the offense. They’re a good team, they’ve got a good defense that swarms to the football.”

Coming off a 24-21 loss to Liberty last weekend that cost Coastal a national playoff seed and first-round bye has the Chanticleers more focused on this weekend’s game with the Bulldogs, Henderson said.

“I think we’re more determined and more hungry, especially after the loss last week,” Henderson said. “I think the loss opened up our eyes. We know we’ve got to be more committed and more dedicated to winning.”

After his initial academic issues, Henderson has already earned a degree in recreation and sport management and is scheduled to graduate with a degree in communications next spring. The youngest of three children from a single-parent home, Henderson was the first person in his immediate family to earn a college degree.

“Graduating was a huge deal for me on a personal level,” Henderson said. “I’m the first, so it’s really important to everyone in my family. My little cousins are telling me now that they want to go to college and do great things and that’s who I did it for.”

The Coastal Carolina program has put more than its share of players in the NFL. Besides Taliaferro, former Chanticleer running back Mike Tolbert and cornerback Josh Norman have been mainstays for the Carolina Panthers during the club’s current unbeaten streak.

Henderson is eligible to enter the NFL draft in June, but has no plans to leave Coastal Carolina before his senior season.

“I’m a proud Chanticleer.” Henderson said. “They gave me a chance when no one else would. Playing in the NFL has been a dream since I was 6. When the time comes I’ll focus more on it, but right now I’m just focused on winning a national championship. I’m coming back next year.”