

# Andy Janovich is the “Hammerhead,” Gary Kubiak’s new, not-so-secret Broncos weapon

By Nick Groke  
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Nicknames are for veterans. Broncos safety T.J. Ward, for example, can call himself “Boss” because he earned it over six seasons. Rookies, though, do not get nicknames. They get numbers. At best they hear “Hey, rook.”

Rookie fullback Andy Janovich is a rarity. One week into his first NFL training camp, he already has a nickname. He is “Hammerhead.”

“There are plays when I knock the crap out of a linebacker or something and everybody seems excited,” Janovich said at Broncos headquarters. “But that’s just the role of the fullback. I feel like they’re liking what I’m doing.”

The glory days of the smashmouth fullback in the NFL are distant. The Broncos drafted 10 fullbacks from 1960-67. But they drafted only three since 1968. They grabbed Janovich in the sixth round in April, the highest-picked fullback in the draft.

As coach Gary Kubiak rebuilds the Broncos’ offense this season in his image, he started with a fullback. Last season, with Peyton Manning playing out his final games in a one-back, shotgun or pistol formation, the Broncos had no need for a fullback. It just didn’t fit. This season is different.

“I know how I’d like to use them,” Kubiak said. “When you’re operating with a fullback offensively, there are certain things you get defensively. When you’re a one-back team with three or four (receivers) wide, you get a variety of things and teams can settle down a bit.”

In his 22 seasons as a head coach or offensive coordinator, Kubiak has unsettled the NFL order by being a bit of a throwback. When Kubiak coached the Houston Texans in 2012, fullback James Casey played 53.6 percent of their offensive snaps, ranking second in the NFL among fullbacks. When Kubiak was the offensive coordinator of the Baltimore Ravens in 2014, fullback Kyle Juszczyk played 42.2 percent of their snaps, ranking third in the NFL.

And when Kubiak came to Denver, general manager John Elway saw the change coming, promising to bring back the fullback.

“To be really effective in the running game, you have to run the fullback,” Elway said last year. “We will have people in the fullback position.”

Elway wasn’t lying. It just took an extra year to implement. The players who logged any time at fullback last season weren’t even fullbacks: halfback Juwan Thompson and tight end Virgil Green.

That led the Broncos to Janovich, a 6-foot-2, 238-pound bruiser from Nebraska who became the first fullback drafted by Denver since Arkansas' Peyton Hillis was a seventh-round pick in 2008. Janovich loves the position. He feels like a fullback in his core. And he makes a defense feel it too.

"Downhill hitting. I love one-on-one blocks with linebackers," said Janovich, who joined the Cornhuskers as a walk-on. "They're the biggest, toughest guys out there. I get a headache now and then, but that's just what the position is."

The Broncos ranked only 17th in the 32-team NFL in yards rushing last season, but they were 17th in rushing attempts too. Manning did not fit with an under-center, hand-off style. That will change this season, no matter who is playing quarterback. Denver is a running team now. And a running team needs a lead blocker.

"We ask our fullback to do a lot of things," Kubiak said. "We knew what Andy was when we drafted him."

In the far corner of a practice field at Dove Valley this week, Janovich plowed into a blocking sled with the verve of a big-horned ram. As a sophomore at Gretna (Neb.) High School, Janovich was beaten out for the starting running back job. His coach made him a fullback, and he has loved playing that position ever since. The fullback is first through the line.

"It's different than a pulling guard. A fullback is looking to kill you," said Janovich, 23. "I'm having a blast. I love this. I'm just trying to work my butt off every day."

# Andy Janovich aiming to revive the fullback position

By Caroline Deisley  
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Sixth-round draft pick Andy Janovich is ready to become the fullback the Broncos need. A fullback can be described as a silent workhorse — rarely acknowledged, but crucial in creating separation for skill players. Playing there requires a certain physicality and warrior-like mentality because of the sacrificial nature of the position.

The Broncos' offense figures to incorporate a fullback plenty in the 2016 season and beyond. It's a staple of Head Coach Gary Kubiak's offensive mindset, and Denver added a potential key to that end in the 2016 NFL Draft in sixth-round pick Andy Janovich.

So, Janovich, who played at the University of Nebraska, will not only be focused on creating separation for his Broncos teammates on the field but also trying to create separation from his competition off it.

The rookie exuberates a resilient mentality that's been instilled in him since birth. Being the eighth of nine children with five older brothers, the Nebraska native was constantly challenged, forcing him to work harder and fight for recognition.

"Watching all my older brothers in sports, I always wanted to be like them and be the best in the family," said Janovich. "After that, it was pretty much self-taught. I'm used to it now."

This relentless dedication became the defining characteristic of the Janovich's style of play in Lincoln. A former walk-on-turned-scholarship player for the Cornhuskers, Janovich said he understands more than most how to fight for a spot on a roster. This mentality could very well earn the rookie playing time for the reigning Super Bowl champions, which the fullback fully comprehends as he prepares for his first NFL training camp.

"I'm just going to come in and do what I've done my whole life: put my nose to the ground and just work," Janovich said. "It's what's always set me apart from other people. I'm usually never the best athlete at any given time so it's just work ethic and trying to use my technique and be perfect whenever I can be."

And that's exactly the mindset Broncos offensive coordinator Rick Dennison expects from not just Janovich but all the rookies.

"As long as [the new guys] are working hard and trying to get better — that kind of exemplified our team last year; we were grinders," Dennison said. "They may not have been perfect, but they worked hard and tried to make it as good as we could. Persistence was our key."

Janovich will experience the reality of the NFL during his first training camp, when he lines up for the first time in full pads against the league's best defense in 2015.

“That’s a position that, much like the offensive line, it’s tell-tale when you put the pads on,” Dennison said.

Janovich’s situation in Denver could not be more ideal, with the Broncos being a “pro-fullback” team in a league that’s seen the utilization of the position dwindle during the last 20 years.

“Obviously, it gives us more options. There is a whole set of plays that we can run with two backs that we didn’t run very much of last year,” said Dennison on the draft addition of Janovich. “That just opens it up and gives us a little bit more for the defense to have to worry about. One extra blocker in there allows us to block another guy closer to the line of scrimmage.”

Adding to their fullback depth was part of the Broncos’ mission in the 2016 Draft, and Kubiak felt fortunate to land Janovich with the 176th overall pick.

“He did a great job in Nebraska,” Kubiak said after Day 3 of the Draft. “He catches the ball well, he’s very physical, and our special teams got so much better today.”

Janovich seems to epitomize what Kubiak looks for in a fullback, with his strength and blue-collar work ethic.

At the 2016 NFL Combine, Janovich notched 30 bench-press reps, which is just two behind current Miami Dolphin defensive tackle Ndamukong Suh’s 32 reps in 2010. At Nebraska, Janovich received the 2015 Lifter of the Year award and was known among many teammates and coaches as a “weight-room warrior.”

However, “I’ve always been a little undersized,” Janovich said, “so I’ve been able to find leverage, which is a big thing. Just getting under somebody and getting the angle on my approach to get to them.”

This technique, along with his strength and work ethic, make him stand out in the Broncos’ running-backs room, alongside C.J. Anderson, Ronnie Hillman and fullback/running back hybrid Juwan Thompson.

This is the group Janovich is leaning on to learn the ins and outs of the offense, which is similar to the one in which he played in college.

“Andy is so good. I told him on a couple of plays, ‘I didn’t even know you were in there.’ That’s just how smooth and quick he is. I think we see the right things,” said Anderson.

Based on Janovich’s career so far, it’s hard to see a situation where he doesn’t soon find a way onto the field in some capacity — either solely in the backfield, on special teams, or some combination of both.

His mentality has always been to just focus on the game, but now, for the first time in his life, he’ll actually have an opportunity to do just that.

“Being in the NFL, it’s just focused on football. That’s your job now,” Janovich said. “You don’t have to worry about anything else but working out, practicing, watching film ... It’s just all football from here on out.”