Moments before he took the stage Tuesday, Steven Johnson got a text from his mom: Her lights had gone out. The Denver Broncos linebacker would need to send her money for bills.

Although Johnson landed his dream job, his life isn't perfect.

"I've always had faith and wanted to do the right thing, but sometimes it's like there's this cloud around me," he said, while speaking at Vista Grande Baptist Church on Stetson Hills Boulevard. Johnson didn't mind opening up about his daily worries - from expecting his first child to missing tackles or not starting a game.

That's the draw of Praise with the Pros, a three-day, annual event hosted by churches around the Springs. It's held in conjunction with a football camp for kids ages 7 to 14.

Along with Johnson, several NFL players shared their stories of faith to a crowd littered with jersey-clad kids and parents.

Johnson began by talking about his quiet and shy younger self.

"I saw the cool guys who played all the sports and had all the girls, and that wasn't me," he said.

When fans see Johnson on TV or on the football field, here's what they don't know: He wasn't the fastest on his high school team. Other kids picked on him. None of the top college coaches recruited him. He tore the anterior cruciate ligament in his left knee right after graduation.

"I was so worried all the time," he said. "I didn't know if I would ever play football again."

From the stadium steps, fans also don't realize how Johnson jumped over those hurdles - with faith.

"God has my back, always. I look at where I am now and I don't know why I worry so much," he said. "I come from a family that is semi-broken. I've spent plenty of nights crying, not knowing what to do, trying to put everything on my shoulders, but God is right there, always."

One of Johnson's lowest moments? After a sub-par game against the Cincinnati Bengals last season, he broke down in tears on the plane ride back to Denver.

"I was praying, 'God, what is going on?' "

Still, he's the only player from his high school team who made it to the NFL. His dream is still alive. "My faith has brought me to where I am today; everything for me has been about my faith."
Stephanie Johnson is used to cheering her husband on, but she enjoys it when fans get a glimpse of the "normal Steven."

"Being in this atmosphere, you got to stay grounded, too," Stephanie said. "You see his stats or how much money he's making and you don't know the other side of his story."

Seattle Seahawks defensive end Greg Scruggs also shared his tumultuous path to football's biggest stage. He has been a part of Praise with the Pros for the past three years.

"It's an event in which we can share the side of our lives a lot of people don't get to see, for political correctness, for censorship reasons, whatever it may be," Scruggs said. Growing up, Scruggs lost his father and lived in and out of a boy's home.

But going to church always gave him hope.

"Football is the smallest thing I hope the kids get out of my story," Scruggs said. "I hope they learn to give respect and they are loved and they can go places if they work hard."

Scruggs and Johnson are using their platform to give back.

"A lot of athletes do the wrong thing, they go out and spend money and kids need more from us," Johnson said.

Their stories can change the typical pro-athlete narrative, Praise with the Pros co-founder Richard Griffith said. "Thousands worship them in the stadium, but not everyone knows who they worship," said Griffith, who played for the Jacksonville Jaguars and is now a pastor at Woodmen Valley Chapel.

After 10 years, the camp continues to grow and reach kids in the Springs, he said.

"Having faith doesn't mean everything is going to work out great," Griffith said. "Everything isn't going to be rosy, but it gives us something bigger in our world to believe in."
Colorado Springs' Pro Football Camp uses NFL headliners, Broncos to spread its message

By Brent Briggeman
CO Springs Gazette
July 15, 2015

The name Steven Johnson is painfully common.

More than 150 people of that name live in the Colorado Springs area. More than 3,000 are found in Colorado.

But add, "of the Denver Broncos," behind that name, and suddenly you have someone with an uncommon ability to reach a larger audience and spread a message, and that's something linebacker Steven Johnson takes very seriously.

Johnson is among nearly a dozen current and former NFL players in Colorado Springs helping with the Pro Football Camp at Vista Ridge High School. This is one of four camps Johnson works each year, including one of his own in his native Philadelphia.

"That's why I come here," Johnson said, noting the wide eyes he sees when his name is announced as a Broncos player in an area where the team enjoys unmatched popularity. "It reminds me of why I play the game of football."

The campers certainly responded to Johnson at this annual camp that aims at "teaching character qualities that relate to football and everyday life." In addition to on-field drills, the event also offers nightly Praise with the Pros at area churches.

"It is really cool. I don't play linebacker, but it was really cool to meet him," said Dylan Mildbrandt, 14, who will be freshman at Vista Ridge. "I like the Broncos and I watch him a lot."

Added Mildbrandt's classmate Jordan Calib, "He's a really good player. He's actually my role model. He's very inspiring."

Camp representatives said 200 preregistered and there were multiple walk-ups to the first of three days on the Wolves' field.

In addition to Johnson, who made 32 tackles for Denver last year, some of the counselors included Vikings receiver Charles Johnson, who caught 31 passes last year, Panthers backup center Brian Folkerts and a pair of local receivers in Paul Browning and Dominic Rufran who are looking to break into the NFL this year after attending minicamps. Browning attended CSU-Pueblo, helping it to a Division II national title. Rufran, a Palmer grad, starred at Wyoming.

"It's the giving back. When you're little you always need some good influence," said Browning, a Widefield product. "I think we want to continue to stress that good influence on these young kids, whether it's being a better football player or more importantly being a better person. To have them all
out here, staying active and learning some techniques and new ideas from our players and we get a chance to give back, especially in our own community in Colorado Springs, it's a wonderful thing."

The camp counselors stuck around after Tuesday's morning session, running sprints and putting in a workout. Many of them also climbed Pikes Peak over the weekend and plan to hike the Manitou Incline on Wednesday. They are vacationing, but also keeping sharp as the season beckons.

"Because it's right before camp, it allows my mind to actually be in football but not really be in football," Johnson said.

"It helps me get my mind right."
Steven Johnson proving his worth at linebacker for Broncos
By Nicki Jhabvala
DenverPost.com
May 29, 2015
On a cold spring evening in early May, Steven Johnson was surrounded by friends, family and some of his Broncos teammates in a dimly lit private room at The Crimson Room on Denver’s Larimer Square. They gathered to celebrate the launch of his Faith Motivated Foundation, whose mission is to help kids and adults set and achieve goals and use their faith "to get them through their darkest times."
About a week after raising a glass to toast his foundation, Johnson got word that his close friend, Adrian Robinson, committed suicide in Philadelphia. Robinson, a former Broncos linebacker, was only 25, and had a baby girl.
Johnson was one of the first to respond on social media, as the news hit him hard.
"I know everybody has tough times," he said. "But if you continue to set goals and go after them, you can achieve them. I'm a living witness to that. I was teased when I was little. I was just a fat kid. But now when I go out, no one wants to mess with me."
Johnson, a fourth-year linebacker with the Broncos, knows what it feels like to believe all is lost. He knows what it feels like to be overlooked. He knows what it feels like to be unwanted. He's been there. Multiple times. And he's bounced back. Multiple times.
Now he's hoping to prove himself once again.
Last season, when Danny Trevathan went down with three separate injuries and played only three games, Johnson stepped in, starting seven games and recording a career high 32 tackles (21 solo).
"I was waiting for my coaches to put me in the fire," he said. "To tell you the truth, going against Cincinnati last year on Monday night, I learned a lot. I got beat one-on-one. I missed a couple tackles against some good tight ends, like Jermaine Gresham. I was just like, 'You know this is a time when certain people can hold their head and really go into the gutter, or they can bounce back and become better individuals.' I believe I've done that."
This season, with Trevathan still recovering from his injuries and leading tackler Brandon Marshall rehabilitating from foot surgery in March, Johnson knows the onus is on him to prove his value. He doesn't want to be just another talented player.
And he's been in this position before.
Johnson came out of high school with only one year of starting experience on varsity. No colleges wanted him. So he went to Wyoming Seminary, a small preparatory school in Pennsylvania, for year. Just as he was starting to show what he could do, he tore two ligaments in his knee.
"People told me my dream was over. It wasn’t going to happen," he said. "So I got depressed. Didn’t know what to do with my life, was away from my family. Was just lost."

Johnson ended up walking on at Kansas. Division II schools such as West Chester University in Pennsylvania didn’t want him. But the Jayhawks gave him a shot.

He finished his four years at Kansas with 225 tackles, three sacks, two forced fumbles and an interception. But it wasn’t enough to win over an NFL team, and he went undrafted in 2012.

Four years later, he’s proven he can play in the NFL but he’s hoping for more — because he knows it could all be gone at any point.

"I’m trying to make that leap and become a (full-time) starter and a true leader on this team," he said. "And I think I’m making strides toward doing that."
Steven Johnson a "Mike" fit in Broncos' 3-4 defense
By Mike Klis
9 News Sports
May 30, 2015

Steven Johnson wasn't necessarily raised to be a Denver Bronco, even if he is pleased life worked out that way.

Johnson's roots as an inside linebacker were with the 3-4 defensive alignment. There is the "Mike" linebacker in the 4-3 and "Mike" linebacker in the 3-4.

There's enough difference for Johnson to prefer one over the other. Now that the Broncos are switching to the 3-4 for the first time in Johnson's four-year term with the team, he believes his fit has cinched.

"I played 3-4 in college, 3-4 in high school and now, playing it in the league, I'm like 'Oh, shoot, I feel like I'm in high school again,'" Johnson said Friday following the Broncos' third organized team activity (OTA) practice session. "It's cool. I haven't played it in a while but I think just me realizing that I'm better in a 3-4; when I go out there I'm just able to make plays and understand what my coaches are telling me to do and doing it to the best of my ability."

Johnson is playing in the NFL – making it to the all-important second contract – despite ability that has always been questioned. He didn't play much football until his senior year in high school in Wallingford, Pennsylvania.

When no college scholarships were offered, he spent a year at a Pennsylvania prep school, where he was playing well until he tore up two knee ligaments.

The best offer he could get then was an invitation to walk on at Kansas. He eventually became a starter for two awful Turner Gill-coached teams that went 3-9 and 2-10 in Johnson's junior and senior seasons.

Playing inside linebacker on last-place Big 12 teams will keep you busy -- Johnson led the Jayhawks each season in tackles – 215 combined.

A tad undersized as NFL middle linebackers go at 6-1, 237 pounds, and not the fleetest afoot, Johnson went undrafted in 2012, signing with the Broncos as a college free agent.

Overachievers like Johnson, though, are why football invented special teams. After 2 ½ seasons as one of the Broncos' top three special teams players, Johnson got his first chance to start at middle linebacker halfway through last season, when Nate Irving went down with a season-ending knee injury.

Johnson did OK, starting eight games including the Broncos' playoff loss to Indianapolis. But by his own admission, he needs to play better if he wants to seriously challenge Brandon Marshall for the inside "Mike" linebacker position in 2015. (Marshall is currently healing from right foot surgery but is expected to return by training camp).

"To tell you the truth, going against Cincinnati last year on Monday night, I learned a lot," Johnson said. "I got beat one-on-one. I missed a couple tackles versus some really good tight ends like Jermaine
Gresham and stuff like that. And I was just like, 'You know, this is a time where certain people can hold their head and really go into the gutter or they can bounce back and become better individuals.' And for me, I believe I've done that. I was battling through a high ankle sprain and I finished off the season strong even though we lost. I wish we could have had that game back but when we played the Colts I really tried to put it out there for my teammates and try to get us to the Super Bowl. But this year, we focus on getting better each and every day and I think this coaching staff has done a great job of pushing us on the practice field because it's certainly different from what it used to be.
Community Conversation: Steven Johnson

DenverBroncos.com
December 26, 2014

Why is it so important for you as an NFL player to give back to the community?

“I know where I came from and when I was a little kid how I looked up to NFL athletes. And when I went to certain football camps—I went to the [former NFL running back] Duce Staley football camp—I met all the players that were there and they would give back with their knowledge of the game. I just wanted to keep that trend going, especially to people who are less fortunate and don’t have certain things in their lives. It’s easy for us to be able to give back. This is a platform that God gave me and it’s what I’m supposed to do—I’m supposed to help others.”

How did you start getting involved in community work?

“I started getting really involved when I went to [the University of] Kansas with certain little things. I can’t necessarily remember everything, but I specifically remember a little kid named Connor, I can’t remember what specific disease he had but he came out to our practice and we just hung out with him after for a while. Soon after that he passed away and I think ever since then I’ve always wanted to be able to help out and give back in any way that I could.”

You’ve been to nearly every community event this season. What do you like about participating in the team events?

“They’re all just different. I like how the kids look up to you and look at you like you’re superhuman or something like that—I know the feeling of looking at an athlete like they’re superhuman. It’s just fun to be able to hang out with kids and get your mind off of football, just to be able to go out in the real world and see what’s going on and how you can influence somebody and help make somebody’s day a better day.”

You always support your teammates at their individual foundation events. Why is it important for you to support their work?

“A lot of them are like myself with giving back, and at a same time with my foundation coming up I’ll want them to come to my events. It’s just supporting them and what they do and how they want to give back. We all have different ways that we give back, but they’re all beneficial to the community.”
Who was an NFL player who you looked up to for his community work and leadership?

“When I got to the NFL, people who always stood out to me were [former Broncos/current Tennessee Titans LB] Wesley Woodyard and [G] Ben Garland. Those guys are always at every event, always doing things for kids and things like that. I think that’s how we all should model ourselves to be in the community. Those guys did a great job doing that. Ben being a Walter Payton Man of the Year, he did a great job this year doing that and he does that every year. That’s just the person he is.”

You were named a Denver Broncos Community Champion award winner for your contributions to the club’s community platform. What did that mean to you?

“It means a lot. This was the second year in a row now and I’ve got those plaques hanging up in my house. It means a lot and next year you hope you’re the Walter Payton Man of the Year—that’s not what I’m looking for, but it’s a cool accomplishment. You’re giving up a lot of your time and there are plenty of times where you’re tired but there is some kid out there that’s going through something and I could talk to them, so it’s important.”

You and your wife, Stephanie, have worked with the Dream Foundation to bring a family out to a Broncos game. How did you get involved with that?

“My mother-in-law works with the Dream Foundation back in Kansas City. They were trying to get a family out here to meet some of the players and stuff like that. That will be a good deal for them to be able to come out here and be able to experience something like that. Whether it’s through my foundation or somebody else’s foundation or through a friend, just to be able to help a little kid or anybody do something like that—it can be a lifelong memory.”
Steven Johnson won't knock his opportunity with Broncos

By Irv Moss
The Denver Post
November 7, 2014

It might seem that Broncos linebacker Steven Johnson is having a hard time breaking into the starting lineup.

He's in his third year after signing as an undrafted rookie out of Kansas in 2012, but so far his most noteworthy work has been on special teams. Last season, for example, he blocked a punt against the Philadelphia Eagles and returned it for a touchdown.

Though Broncos coach John Fox isn't confirming anything about his starting lineup, Johnson's résumé is likely going to change come Sunday at Oakland. The 6-foot-1, 237-pound Johnson is the next man up after injuries to Danny Trevathan and Nate Irving.

"If I get the opportunity this weekend, I'm already really excited," Johnson said. "I've made some plays in the past on special teams, but to be able to go out there and play some defense will be special for me."

It's not that Fox is avoiding a decision on naming a replacement for Irving as much as not tipping his hand in advance for the Raiders' coaches.

"We've got a variety of guys, Steven Johnson being one of them," Fox said, when asked who would start. "We're not going to get into who is starting due to the competitive nature of this game, but we feel good about our players. We were heavy in that area (linebackers), and we've got some young guys that we've leaned on really over the last month."

Cornerback Aqib Talib said he believes the defense can more than make up for the loss of two linebackers over the past month.

"We have capable players. That's why they were kept on the roster," Talib said. "Steven Johnson definitely is a capable player. He's a smart player, and he makes calls in the meeting room. We have confidence in each other."

Defensive coordinator Jack Del Rio said Johnson knows the defense well.

"He's been in the system for three years," Del Rio said. "He has an understanding of what we do and how we do it. He's an experienced guy, and he's one of the
special-teams leaders in terms of being productive. You do what you can. Plug players in where you can. Make sure you're doing things they can do well."

Johnson has patiently waited for his chance.

What does he expect from the Raiders?

"They have a good offensive line, and they're very good at running the ball," he said. "Our coaches will have a good scheme, and we'll get it right."

And he won't be looking over his shoulder at his teammates.

"We've been together for a while," Johnson said. "I think they have confidence in me."
Ware, teammates give back

By Lauren Giudice
DenverBroncos.com
October 27, 2014

DENVER- On Monday afternoon at the Boys and Girls Club of Metro Denver, kids were amazed by the size of Marvin Austin’s biceps and compared their short statures to Kenny Anunike’s 6-foot-4 frame.

Austin and Anunike, along with DeMarcus Ware, Ben Garland, Juwan Thompson and Steven Johnson, took a break from preparing for Sunday’s game to give back to the community by spending time at the Boys and Girls Club. The Broncos played games, showed their basketball skills and took pictures with the kids.

While the kids had a great time meeting their favorite Broncos, the players also enjoyed their afternoons.

“It’s a blessing, it brings a smile to our faces, a lot of us have younger siblings that look up to us and I mean we’re not always around them, so being able to come out to the community and be around younger children, it’s like being around those siblings that you’re not around all the time,” Thompson, who has two younger siblings, said.

Ware invited his teammates to join him at the Boys and Girls Club and, after their afternoon with the players, Ware provided tickets for the kids for an advanced screening of the movie “Annie.”

Johnson, who Thompson said was the Broncos’ best performer on the basketball court, played basketball until high school. While he hadn’t played in a while, he acknowledged that he still has “a few skills.” Johnson showed those skills off as he and the Broncos played against the kids on the court.

Johnson said he grew up less fortunate so he relates to the people at the Boys and Girls Club. He had an important message for them.

“For guys like us we didn’t have everything growing up,” Johnson said. “We just want to be able to relay things like that to these kids, saying hey you can do anything you want in life if you put your mind to it. Always just showing your face because you never know if these kids have single parent households and stuff like that but we can serve as mentors and ultimately they look up to us because we’re professional athletes, but we’re just normal people and we’re just always trying to give back.”
When Ware was growing up in Alabama, he met Bo Jackson and members of the Auburn football team. Jackson mentored him and Ware took something that Jackson told him to heart.

“He was from Alabama and when he sort of told me it doesn’t really matter what you have, where you come from or what type of facilities you’re at, it’s what you make of it,” Ware said. “You just have to make the best of what you have and that’s what I did. Now I’m playing in the NFL, doing some of the things that he did – being a role model, a professional athlete and returning that favor because I know how much that meant to me.”

While Ware lost at pool and Thompson said he should “stick to football,” he had a great time with his teammates. Ware noted that while spending the afternoon at the Boys and Girls Club is a small act for him and his teammates, he said it’s “really big” for the kids.

Ware knows that first hand after his experience meeting Jackson and he hopes to be a mentor like Jackson was to him.

“You never know how far they [the kids] can go,” Ware said. “They could be the next president, the next doctor that’s fixing one of us, you never know.”
Bronco Steven Johnson, Seahawk Greg Scruggs tease each other at youth football camp

By Kalyn Kahler
Colorado Springs Gazette
July 9, 2014

As Seattle Seahawks defensive end Greg Scruggs spoke to a group of kids at the Pro Football Camp about the importance of perseverance, Denver Broncos linebacker Steven Johnson crept up behind him and jokingly gave the young crowd a big thumbs-down.

"So then I made them bring my Super Bowl ring up front," Scruggs laughed. "Just so I could remind him I got the ultimate thumbs-up."

Scruggs and Johnson have both volunteered as coaches for the past three years at the camp held at UCCS Mountain Lions Stadium and Scruggs said the two Super Bowl XLVIII rivals have been enjoying a little playful trash talk this week.

"When we are on the field we are competitors but when we are off, we are buddies, so it's good to talk about it and joke around," Scruggs said. "They booed me and I told them I was a big fan of the Broncos, because I am."

For Johnson, a regular special teams player, who contributed as a depth player on defense, the Super Bowl loss is a serious motivator as he prepares for his third NFL season.

"We've got that nasty feeling in our mouth," he said. "It is almost worse than the Baltimore loss the year before. We've taken a step farther each year I've been here and this year we are trying to complete that."

Johnson wears No. 53 as a reminder of his difficult path to the NFL, a symbol of his fight to make the 53-man roster. As a high school player, Johnson did not receive a single D-I scholarship offer, walked on to Kansas, and went undrafted in 2012.

Since making the Broncos' final roster in 2012, Johnson has progressed each year. He played 11 games his first season and emerged as a reliable special teams player last season, appearing in all 16 games. Johnson made a name for himself as a playmaker when he blocked a punt against the Eagles in Week 4 and returned it for a touchdown.

"(The number) described my perseverance and my resiliency," Johnson said. "Just to be able to go out there and prove people wrong and not listen to people when they tell you that you can't do something."

Johnson faces a tough battle ahead of him vying for a starting linebacker role when training camp begins. He'll be competing with a strong linebacker corps including Von Miller, Nate Irving and Danny Trevathan. When he got the opportunity last year, Johnson showed his value. Against the Chiefs in Week 11, Johnson subbed in
for the injured Trevathan and forced a field goal when he stopped Chiefs running back Jamaal Charles on third-and-goal at the 1.

"I don't want to be known as a guy who just contributes on special teams, but a guy who contributes a great deal on defense," Johnson said. "I know I can do that, if I was to just get a shot I know I can be one of the best in this whole league."
Broncos' Steven Johnson jumps into spotlight with special-teams play

By Joan Niesen
The Denver Post
October 6, 2013

A week ago, Broncos linebacker Steven Johnson would sit at his locker and joke with teammate Adrian Robinson that not a single media member had a clue who he was. On Wednesday, those same media members swarmed Johnson's locker. Johnson was three days removed from his big special-teams score against the Eagles, when he blocked a punt and returned it for a touchdown, and to magnify the interest, fellow linebacker Danny Trevathan had injured his knee in practice that day, perhaps opening up more playing time on defense for Johnson. Trevathan's MRI eventually came back negative, but he's questionable to play Sunday, which means Johnson might get his chance at some defensive reps. In his first 15 games — 11 in 2012 and four in 2013 — with the Broncos, the linebacker has played primarily on special teams, but now that you know his name, it's time to learn a little bit more about that guy who blocked that punt.

Q: That must have been a big moment for you, to cross into the end zone Sunday. When was the previous time you scored a touchdown?

A: I played running back and receiver in high school, so I was always just running the ball. That was cool, but I can't remember ever blocking a punt or field goal or anything like that, so doing that was pretty awesome. To tell you the truth, it still hasn't hit me that I scored.

Q: You're from Pennsylvania. Did you grow up an Eagles fan?

A: Yep. I was a die-hard Eagles fan. It did (make it more special). I got back in the locker room, and I had about 38 text messages. My Twitter was blowing up. Everybody was like, "Man, I'm so proud of you, but why'd you have to do it against the Eagles?" The Eagles were my favorite team growing up, so I went over to (Michael) Vick after the game and shook his hand. My roommate at the combine was (Eagles linebacker) Mychal Kendricks, so I knew that team pretty well.

Q: So, when you're not scoring special-teams touchdowns, what's your favorite thing to do away from the field?

A: If I'm not playing football, usually during the season I'm just relaxing, playing video games or something like that. I play paintball a lot, and I love fishing. I play basketball. I haven't played in a while, but I do. I pretty much do anything, anything out-doorsy. I've gone snowboarding before, didn't really do too well. I don't know, I just do whatever I feel like in the moment, but paintball, I really like
playing paintball. I get the same rush as I do playing football. I just actually went paintballing with a whole bunch of little kids last Tuesday.

Q: How did that come about?

A: I wanted to go paintballing with some little kids. My publicist, she set it up.

Q: Did you have to hold back on them a little bit?

A: No, not really. To tell you the truth, I got hit in the back pretty good. I've probably still got the welt on my back. I was standing ... probably 3 feet away, and this kid just hit. It technically is against the rules, but he's about 11 or 12, so I just let him go. But it hurt really bad.

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About Johnson

2008-11: Steven Johnson played in college at Kansas, gaining big playing time as a junior and senior. His final season for the Jayhawks, he racked up 120 tackles and forced two fumbles.

2012: As an undrafted rookie, he played in 11 games, amassing 10 special-teams tackles and leading the team in that category.

2013: Johnson has played in all four of the Broncos' games on special teams, and blocked a punt and returned it for a TD against Philadelphia.
**Johnson Eager to Enter Mix at Middle Linebacker**

Linebacker Steven Johnson is eager to make the shift from undrafted free agent to defensive contributor in his second season with the Broncos.

Mike Morris  
DenverBroncos.com  
Jul 1, 2013

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. -- The circumstances have changed and the stakes now ascend into the Colorado sky like a Rocky Mountain fourteener, but there’s nothing new about taking on challenges for Steven Johnson.

When the Broncos’ second-year linebacker steps onto the buzzing practice fields of training camp in several weeks, he will enter the mix in competing for playing time at the middle linebacker position.

It’s a competition Johnson relishes because he believes it will help him grow significantly as a player – and, given Johnson’s history as a former walk-on at the University of Kansas and an undrafted free agent in the NFL, he’s no stranger to meeting challenges on the gridiron with unrelenting enthusiasm and desire.

"Man, (the competition) has to make you better – it’s either going to make you better or you won’t be here," Johnson said during Broncos minicamp in June. "You just want to go out there every day and put your best foot forward and continue to get better each and every day."

"I’m just upping the ante for myself and it’s just being able to make myself more accountable."

After contributing almost exclusively on special teams as a rookie in 2012, increased accountability is critical for Johnson in vying for a significantly increased workload on the Broncos defense this season.

Johnson led the team with 10 special teams tackles in 2012 and forced a fumble against Baltimore during a 34-17 Broncos victory in December.

Transitioning to the next level, however, demands a leap in responsibilities and expectations – something Johnson acknowledges.

"I feel as though, mentally, I’m trying to step into a new role," Johnson said. "So it’s going to be a little bit more difficult, there’s going to be more competition. Last
year, I’m coming in trying to make the team, do the best I can on special teams. Now, I want to have a significant role on defense as well as on special teams.”

Johnson noted that he’s more comfortable with the playbook and the terminology in his second season, but he also credited the competitiveness of his fellow middle linebackers with helping his personal development and with strengthening the position collectively.

“I do appreciate all the linebackers and being able to compete against them every day,” Johnson said. “It’s a privilege and an honor to be able to do that at this level.”

The path for progressing from undrafted free agent to key defensive contributor is well-illuminated on the Broncos defense.

Linebacker Wesley Woodyard, cornerback Chris Harris and cornerback Tony Carter all were undrafted – and all three set strong precedents as playmakers on defense.

Harris – Johnson’s former teammate at Kansas – has been particularly inspirational in setting an example for Johnson to take after.

“(Harris) just goes out there every day and works hard and competes. As a professional athlete, I look up to somebody like that so I follow his footsteps a little bit,” Johnson said. “He paved the way. It’s great to have somebody you know and who’s been there and walked through that.”

Johnson noted that he’s latched onto Harris as a model for improving his coverage abilities.

“I just continue to train with him and work out with him because he sticks the best receivers in the league,” Johnson said. “So if I can get footwork like him, then I can stick a receiver too.”

Johnson is training with Harris during the time off, focusing heavily on footwork – which Johnson identified as the most important aspect of his game that he’s worked towards improving.

“Right now, it’s just efficient movement – being able to get out of my breaks and stuff like that,” Johnson said. “(I’m) continuing to study my playbook and just becoming a smarter and more efficient player.”
If history is any indicator, Johnson will continue working hard to contribute in any way possible for the Broncos.

In high school, Johnson didn’t start until his senior season.

Once he did, he led all of Pennsylvania in tackles.

A severe left knee injury in prep school nearly ended Johnson’s career and squelched almost all recruiting interest.

When Johnson finally unlocked the opportunity to play Division I college football, he had to earn it as a walk-on at Kansas.

Johnson finished his collegiate career by leading the Big 12 in tackles in his final season.

Now, he looks to turn the page to another chapter in his football career in transforming from undrafted free agent to contributor on the Broncos defense.

“I’m just very blessed and fortunate to be able to get some reps out there,” Johnson said.
“I’m going to continue working hard and hopefully it will all work out for me and I’ll be able to get some reps on Sundays when the season comes.”
Irving, Johnson to Compete for Starting Spot

Executive Vice President of Football Operations John Elway said Friday that he expects Nate Irving and Steven Johnson to compete for the team's middle linebacker position.

INDIANAPOLIS -- In 2012, two players in particular always seemed to be around the ball on special teams.

Linebackers Nate Irving and Steven Johnson tied for the team lead with 10 special-teams stops for the year. That knack for tackling the ball-carrier will be even more necessary in 2013, when both players are expected to compete for the team's starting middle linebacker spot.

"We're excited about those two," Executive Vice President of Football Operations John Elway said Friday at the NFL Scouting Combine. "They're both guys very capable of handling that job."

Johnson made the team as an undrafted free agent in 2012 after leading the team with 15 tackles during the preseason. He was the only Broncos player to record double-digit tackles and register a sack during the preseason.

In the regular season, the majority of the rookie's playing time during his 11 regular-season games came on special teams.

The same could be said for Irving, who played in 15-regular season games in his sophomore season. The N.C. State product did, however, notch the first defensive tackles of his career in 2012.

Irving was originally selected in the 2011 NFL Draft to take over at middle linebacker, and Elway said he expects him to embrace that opportunity in his third season.

"I've got a great deal of confidence in the fact that he's going to come in, once he's given that responsibility, that he'll step up to it," he said. "I think Nate will step in."

Head Coach John Fox echoed that sentiment on Thursday, when he said whether or not Irving takes over at middle linebacker essentially "depend(s) on Nate."
"He's definitely capable," Fox said. "He'll be given an opportunity. I think we have some young players that need to graduate into more playing time, and I feel confident that he'll do that."

A big part of building a championship-caliber team, Elway said, is helping your players improve each and every year. He believes Irving and Johnson can be part of that process.

"As I've said all along, we don't draft All-Pros -- we've got to make All-Pros," Elway said, noting that the team is looking at its own roster first and foremost to fill spots in the lineup. "That's what we're doing with two young guys that people don't know a lot about. But we have high expectations for them to come in and compete for that job. We'll see them in OTAs and see how they handle it."
Steven Johnson's football career has been one big uphill battle.

Even though he began playing at age 5, Johnson didn't crack the starting lineup at Strath Haven High School in Wallingford, Pa., located outside of Philadelphia, until his senior season. The soft-spoken linebacker made the most of that opportunity, leading the state in tackles and earning all-county honors.

Those feats, however, didn't impress Division I college coaches, who overlooked Johnson. He enrolled at the Wyoming Seminary College Preparatory School in Kingston, Pa., to get more playing experience and national visibility, but that plan was unceremoniously derailed.

In just his fifth game at the prep school, Johnson tore the ACL, LCL and capsule in his left knee, and suffered a bone contusion. He thought his football career was finished.

"People were telling me it was over and I couldn't play anymore," Johnson said. "That's when I got out of shape, and I was depressed. I was away from my family, and my roommate was from Saudi Arabia, and that's when I was losing my mind because I couldn't walk or do anything."

Johnson ballooned to 245 pounds, but he still dreamed of playing football. He went through rehabilitation for the knee injury and then started reaching out to college coaches, begging for a chance to prove himself.

"I sent out a long email, and Kansas was the only school that gave me the opportunity to walk on," Johnson said. "When I got there, I couldn't even walk on and had to sit out a year."

As a walk-on, Johnson bought into the stern coaching staff's exhausting regimen. The fat melted away as he lost 30 pounds before bulking back up to 235 pounds of muscle. His new physique caught the coaches' eyes.

Steven Johnson credits his demanding coaches at Kansas, where he was a walk-on, with making him feel like he could overcome anything.

But there was a problem.

"I was going to have to leave school because we didn't have any money left," Johnson said.
As fate would have it, the Jayhawks offered Johnson a full scholarship right around the time he was preparing to pack his bags and head home. He responded by leading the team in tackles his junior season and was named a team captain his senior year. Johnson led the Big 12 in tackles (124) last year in his final season at Kansas.

His experience at Kansas made a man out of him, both mentally and physically.

"Kansas helped me a lot," said Johnson, who majored in economics. "The coach I had was cutthroat and a real mean guy, and my strength coach was cut-throat and ruthless. That was really the hardest time of my life.

"When I got through that, I felt like I could get through anything. It was like do or die in college, and it was hard and brutal."

His fight was far from over.

Despite leading his conference in tackles, Johnson wasn't on many NFL teams' radars. He realized quickly his ascension to the next level would be yet another uphill battle.

Johnson went undrafted last April but received calls from "12 to 15" NFL teams who expressed at least a measure of interest.

"That day was nerve-racking," Johnson said of draft day. "I had all my family around me, and we had all this food, but I couldn't eat. And it was all my favorite food."

One of his college roommates, cornerback Chris Harris, had gone through the process of being an undrafted free agent in 2011 and made the 53-man roster with the Denver Broncos. Harris, knowing Johnson's character and ability, encouraged him to sign as a free agent with his team.

"I knew they'd give him an opportunity and a chance to play, and it's just a great organization," said Harris, who has seven career starts for the Broncos. "I played with him at Kansas, so I knew he could make plays. I knew that [free agent] situation was going to happen for him, so I just tried to give him advice along the way."

After narrowing his choices to New Orleans, Tennessee and Denver, Johnson signed with the Broncos as a free agent on May 3. That's when the real work began.

Johnson said he practiced like a man possessed. He worked to outhustle teammates, be the first lined up for drills and play the hardest.

"For me, I'm big on [the belief] that, if you practice really hard, that's how you're going to play," said Johnson, who ran a 4.58 40-yard dash at the NFL combine. "I was just trying to fly around like it was college, and I did that to the best of my ability. I continued to get better each and every game."

The 6-foot-1 linebacker led the Broncos in tackles during their four preseason games with 15 and also recorded a sack, all the while giving maximum effort on every play. He was rewarded on the final day of cuts by making the 53-man roster.
Johnson will remember that day forever.

"We had a game in Arizona, and the roster had to be at 53 pretty much by the time we got back," he said. "They brought us all in, and we were lifting [weights], and that's when you started seeing people getting plucked from the team. You didn't really want to look anybody in the eye, your head was down, and you were just hoping that nobody came and tapped you.

"It was nerve-racking, but at the end of the day, I was still here. It was a blessing, and I'm really happy and thankful for it."

Once it sunk in that he'd made the team, Johnson called his parents, and tears were shared.

Since then, he's continued to work to improve and take advantage of every opportunity. Johnson has played in two games on special teams and is cherishing his time with the Broncos.

"I'm taking this year as a learning process," he said. "Of course, I'm anxious, I want to play and I want to feel like I'm part of the team, but it's a learning process for me. I just have to get a lot of mental reps, take it all in and be like a sponge."

Constantly being forced to scratch and claw to make it has been exhausting for Johnson, but he's dealt with the adversity.

"My life has been [going] from the back to the front," Johnson said. "Sometimes it gets difficult, because you're tired of fighting from the back and you say, 'Man, why can't I just be at the front just one time?""

All-Pro linebacker D.J. Williams will return to the Broncos on Nov. 12 after serving a suspension, but the team lost Joe Mays for the season because of a broken leg suffered this past Sunday, so Johnson may be called on for more playing time.

"You really realize that, once you get to this level, you might only get a few chances, so you've got to go out there and put your best foot forward," Johnson said. "I want to go far and want to play in this league for a while. Just making it here was one of my goals, but I have many more goals I'm trying to reach.

"Maybe at the end of my career, I can look back and be like, 'Wow, I was a walk-on and a free agent.' "
Beating the Odds

Stuart Zaas
DenverBroncos.com
September 7, 2012

Linebacker Steven Johnson wasn't offered a college scholarship, but overcame the odds to make the team's opening-day roster as a college free agent.

**ENCEWOOD, Colo.** – As a senior in high school, he led the state with 123 tackles. As a senior in college, he led the Big 12 with 124 stops.

He attended the NFL Scouting Combine and sat in front of the television waiting to see which NFL team he'd suit up for on Sundays.

On the surface, linebacker **Steven Johnson** followed the same path to the NFL as the majority of his counterparts.

A deeper look shows that Johnson’s path, however, was far from typical.

After leading the state of Pennsylvania with 123 tackles in 2005, Johnson received offers to schools that included West Chester University, Millersville, the University of Delaware and Villanova.

Wanting to play at the Division I level, Johnson decided to enroll in prep school at Wyoming Prep Seminary in Wilkes-Barre, Pa., with the hopes of eventually landing a scholarship offer from a Division I program. There, he tore his ACL and MCL just four games into the 2006 season and any chances of a scholarship offer seemed to disappear.

After the injury, coaches told him his chances of playing again were slim and recommended he reset his goals to the Division II or Division I-AA level.

“I had to spend a lot of time rehabbing,” Johnson said. “My trainers initially told me they didn’t know if I could play the game again, but I fought back. My dad went and found the best doctor he could find and I’ve been good ever since.”

Instead of listening to the advice of his former coach and trainers, Johnson pulled out his computer and emailed the recruiting coordinator at Kansas that he'd been in touch with before the injury.

“Kansas was the only school that gave me an opportunity to walk on,” he said. “If it wasn't for them, I don't know where I would be. I’m just grateful that it worked out the way it did.”

With Kansas being the only Division I school to show interest, Johnson enrolled in classes in Lawrence, Kan., and spent the 2007 season rehabbing his knee injury. Cleared to re-join the team on the field in 2008, Johnson appeared in two games for the Jayhawks as a freshman in 2008.

As his knee and confidence grew stronger, so did his impact on the field.

Johnson played 10 games and made nine tackles as a reserve linebacker and special teams contributor as a sophomore. It was during that sophomore season
that Kansas Head Coach Mark Mangino pulled Johnson aside just before the scholarship deadline and told the walk-on that he’d be put on scholarship.

"It was right in the middle of practice, so everybody was clapping with joy and tapping me on the helmet to say congratulations," Johnson told the Big 12 Conference website. "I just wanted to take a second and cry but it was during practice and we were about to start hitting, so I knew I had to snap out of it."

Not having to worry about how he and his family would continue paying for college, Johnson was able to focus on football.

It paid off, as Johnson continued to climb up the depth chart and emerged as a starter when the 2010 season came around. He opened all 12 games for the Jayhawks and led the team with 95 tackles.

The next season, he was elected a team captain and registered double-digit tackles in 8-of-12 games to lead the Big 12 with 124 on the season.

Hoping to continue his career at the next level, Johnson eagerly awaited an invitation to the combine. When it didn’t come, Johnson decided to take matters into his own hands again and contact the combine officials.

“I guess I was originally on the bubble,” he said. “I was calling them just to see if I was going to get invited. They said they’d get back to me and they did – I was one of the guys that had an opportunity to go.”

Despite his success at Kansas, Johnson wasn’t sure when – or if – he’d be drafted. As in the past, he was just hoping that somebody would give him a chance to prove himself.

“I originally thought I was going to get drafted,” Johnson said. “But, the chips fell the way they did and I was undrafted. It was just more of a chip on my shoulder.”

As late rounds of the draft came and went, Johnson remained on his couch, still without a team.

At the end of the draft, Johnson’s phone finally rang. And it kept ringing. Johnson estimated that around 10 different teams called him in the hopes of signing him as a college free agent.

While he was mulling those offers, his phone rang again.

This time it was his former roommate and teammate at Kansas, Broncos cornerback Chris Harris.

“I called him and told him the coaches wanted him and they were interested in him,” Harris said. “I knew they would give him an opportunity to come in and make the team. That’s all you can ask for.”

Harris had been in Johnson’s position a year ago when he joined Denver as a college free agent. Harris not only played his way onto the team’s opening-day roster, but emerged as the club’s nickel back midway through the season.

Harris’ success gave Johnson the confidence that he’d get a fair chance to showcase his abilities in Denver.

“Chris told me, ‘Hey, you need to come here,’ and basically sold the whole Broncos organization – they have great facilities, great people and great coaches,” Johnson said. “He knew that I’d have an opportunity to make it here, so I went with that.”
After signing with Denver, Johnson still faced an uphill battle to make it to Week 1 wearing orange and blue.

Throughout training camp, Johnson turned to Harris for guidance.

“Just come in, do good on special teams and always be a high-effort guy and they should be able to see,” Harris said of his advice to Johnson. “As a veteran guy now that has the experience of being an undrafted guy, I try to stay in all those guys’ ears and give them motivation. You do start to wonder, ‘Am I going to be able to be here,’ with the numbers and stuff. It’s hard sometimes.”

But, given the opportunity, Johnson took full advantage of all his reps in practice and in the team’s preseason games and did what he’s done his entire career – produce.

He led the Broncos with 15 defensive tackles and tied for the team lead with three tackles for a loss and one forced fumble in the preseason. Johnson added one sack and also contributed on special teams, making one tackle in a role that he knew would be vital to his chances of making the roster.

“I felt like I was getting better,” Johnson said of his preseason play. “Going along during the preseason, I felt like each and every game, I was trying to improve on certain things, such as moving quicker on drops and reads and stuff like that. Toward the last game, I felt pretty comfortable out there. I was making some plays. I’m just looking forward to keep getting better.”

While he felt good about the way the preseason went, Johnson knew that he still faced long odds to make the 53-man roster.

“When you’re an undrafted free agent, you feel good, but at the same time, it’s like ‘I don’t know,’” he said. “You never know what can happen in this business. I felt like I went out there and put my best foot forward.”

Denver wrapped up its preseason on Thursday, Aug. 30 and had to cut its 75-man roster down to 53 by 5 p.m. MT the next day.

As the hours passed between the final snap of Thursday’s game and the cut deadline, Johnson nervously awaited his fate.

“I was listening to a lot of music, sitting in my room, just staring at the ceiling,” he said. “Friday, when we got here, I was just scared. My heart was beating the whole time. I didn’t want to look anybody in the eye.”

Of the 470 undrafted players that signed with NFL teams immediately following the draft, only 42 made opening-day rosters.

One of those 42 was Johnson, as he helped extend the Broncos’ streak of college free agents making the active roster out of training camp to nine consecutive seasons.

When he found out he’d made the roster, he immediately called his dad, who had sacrificed financially to help Johnson earn his opportunity as a walk-on at Kansas.

“Dad got the first call,” Johnson said. “He was excited at first, and then he started crying. I was like ‘Man, my dad’s crying.’ It was weird. I’ve never seen my dad literally cry, but he was very excited. And I called my mom, and she was very excited, and my whole family found out. They’re just very excited with joy that I made my dream come true.”
Harris learned of the news when he arrived at the facility Friday and saw Johnson’s nameplate still hanging above his locker.

“It’s very hard to make the team as an undrafted player,” Harris said. “So I was very excited for him.”

Each step in his career has been difficult for Johnson. At any point, his career could have come to an end due to a lack of opportunities.

Now that he’s made the initial roster, Johnson knows that nothing is guaranteed.

“I know when I got on scholarship, my roommate said, ‘Oh, you got on scholarship, now you have everything to lose,’” Johnson recalled. "I was like, ‘I felt like I just got so much more to gain, I just want to keep going.’ Now that I’m on the team, I just want to keep going up from here. My goal is to be a Pro Bowl linebacker one day and (Linebackers) Coach (Richard) Smith is a great coach. He’s busting my chops every day trying to get me right.”

Although his path to the NFL was unconventional, Johnson continued to overcome obstacles and earn his roster spot.

“I couldn’t stop smiling,” Johnson said. “I kind of did it again, you know. Being a college free agent is kind of like being a walk-on. I beat those odds twice.”

Throughout his life, he’s taken his chances and run with them. There’s no reason to think that trend won’t continue at his highest level yet.

“I used to think it didn’t get any better than Friday nights,” Johnson said. “Then when I went to college, it was all about Saturday. And now it’s Sunday, so I’m like, ‘Oh, maybe Sunday is better.’ I’m just excited for the opportunity.”
Broncos' Steven Johnson aims to overcome odds, undrafted status

By Jeff Legwold
The Denver Post
June 5, 2012

Today's question about the Broncos comes from Scott Pro in Conifer:

Q: Is there any news about how well linebacker Steven Johnson is doing as an undrafted free agent from the University of Kansas?

A: Scott, every year I try to research and evaluate as many prospects as I can in the months leading up to the NFL draft.

And through the years, I've always had a soft spot for the players who worked through the tough times and made the most of both their opportunities and abilities along the way.

In this draft, Johnson was on that list.

As a football prospect, he's a 6-foot ¼, 239-pound linebacker with plenty of on-field production on his resume. Though he played in one of the worst defenses in the nation, for a team that went 5-19 in his last two years and surrendered 678 yards alone in an October loss to Baylor, Johnson still was noticed by NFL scouts by how he played through those struggles.

He led the Big 12 in tackles with 124 this past season, the first time a Kansas player had led the league in tackles since Roger Robben led the then Big 8 in tackles in 1989.

Johnson's challenge will be to show quality play speed — his 4.71 40-yard dash is not among the top tier at the position — and to add some strength. He had good numbers in his workouts to measure explosiveness — 37-inch vertical jump and 9-10 standing broad jump — as well as a good showing in agility drills at his pro day.

But his strength numbers were below average, so these offseason workouts are important for him. Once training camp opens, he'll have to show he can shed blockers and keep his feet on the way to the ball.

Johnson will also have to show some impact on special teams, the fast track for any player hoping to make it as an undrafted player.

As far as attitude and approach, however, Johnson has consistently shown people what he's about. He tore the anterior cruciate and lateral collateral ligaments in his
knee during a season at prep school, which caused most of the interest college recruiters had shown him during his high school career to evaporate.

Kansas, as Johnson rehabbed his knee, eventually offered a chance to join the team as a walk-on, so Johnson would have to foot the tuition bills as well as his living expenses himself. As a result, his dad — Steven Johnson Sr. — took out a $100,000 loan against the barbershop/salon he operates in eastern Pennsylvania to prepare to pay for as many years of his son's education as possible.

At the start of each semester, Steven Johnson would receive money from his father with the agreement that the money would have to last the entire semester. At one point to save money, he moved in with Kansas teammates Chris Harris and Darrell Stuckey, sleeping on a couch.

Harris made the Broncos roster last year as an undrafted free agent.

Johnson was eventually awarded a scholarship before his third season at the school.

Again, if Johnson had been a tick or two faster on the stopwatch or a few pounds bigger, he certainly would have found himself drafted. At least two teams I spoke to before the draft had a borderline late seventh/priority free agent grade on him.

Johnson had some issues with stingers during his career at Kansas as well as surgery to repair cartilage in his knee, so that was a concern for some in the league.

Still, he's in a good place to have a chance to make it, however, since the Broncos have had at least one undrafted player make the 53-man roster out of the last eight training camps.

Two of the players from those eight years are still on the roster: Harris and linebacker Wesley Woodyard.

Head coach John Fox has always favored smaller, more mobile linebackers through the years as well. So if Johnson can show he has the ability to move through traffic and get to the ball, he'll give himself the best chance.