

Justin Simmons has long set standard for CB Isaac Yiadom

By Aric DiLalla
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During Isaac Yiadom's career at Boston College, Broncos safety Justin Simmons was held up as the standard for the rest of the group.

Among the Eagles' defensive backs, Simmons served as the example for what each player in the B.C. locker room could achieve.

And after years of striving to be like the third-year NFL player, Yiadom now finds himself in a familiar situation: in the same locker room as his collegiate role model.

"In our [Boston College] locker room, Justin is really highly praised and honored," Yiadom said during his introductory press conference with the Broncos. "We hear about it all the time if we do something bad at practice because Justin set such a high standard that we have to hold up. We always say that Justin set the bar up here for us, and after that it was John Johnson with the Rams now, and it's me, [former Boston College DB] Kamrin [Moore] and Gabe (former Boston College DB Gabriel McClary) right now and so on."

Even after Simmons left for the NFL in 2016, he remained in touch with Yiadom and the rest of his former teammates. He remains in a group chat with the defensive backs, and he's served as someone who Yiadom can go to about both faith and football.

As Yiadom looks to transition to the NFL, that relationship should pay dividends.

In the immediate moments after Yiadom was selected with the 99th-overall pick in the draft, Simmons made sure the young player felt welcomed to his new team.

"He was hyped," Yiadom said. "He texted me and he gave a couple of the other guys like Chris [Harris Jr.] and Von [Miller] my number. They texted me too to welcome me to the family. Justin put out a post and stuff like that. Yeah, he was happy and I was excited, too. Everyone was happy that we both are going to get together, and they know that it's going to be something special."

Once Yiadom arrives in Denver and gets on the field, Simmons' advice will likely be even more valuable.

"I think it's going to help me a lot," Yiadom said. "Justin is like my big brother. When I first went to college, he's the one that hosted me on my official visit and here, I know if I have any questions I can ask the coaches or Justin. He'll help me on and off the field. I know he's got high expectations for me, so I could never let myself go underneath the bar because I know he's looking at me and everybody else."

Simmons, who was also selected in the third round, has raised those expectations during his first two seasons. He has recorded four interceptions and a touchdown during that time, and he earned the starting job ahead of his second year.

He'll aim to help Yiadom accomplish the same.

The B.C. standard may have been met, but the Broncos' is even higher.

Mason's Mailbag: Don't forget about Justin Simmons

By Andrew Mason
DenverBroncos.com
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Should Su'a Cravens start over Justin Simmons so Simmons can back up and learn from Cravens on covering running backs and tight ends?

-- Taylor Rhodes

Simmons has more experience than Cravens and offers more speed and range than most starting safeties in the NFL. If anything, this is an opportunity for Cravens, with 11 games and three starts on his resume, to learn from Simmons, who has played in 26 games with 16 career starts.

As safety Darian Stewart said March 9, Simmons could be set to soar.

"I think he's going to be a Pro Bowler, man," Stewart said. "He has all the natural attributes to do that, man, and he's a smart football player. He's going into Year 3, he has me next to him helping him grow, he has great players around him, and the only way you can get there is having other players around you doing their job."

Hey Andrew, I love that the Broncos honored both Peyton Manning and Frank Tripucka with the retired No. 18 banner. But, I think it would look much better if it were, say, a "hologram" banner that showed Peyton's name from one angle, and Frank's from another, like the old trading cards. Thoughts?

-- Alan Benedict

I favor simplicity. Furthermore, I always thought the trading-card holograms looked murky and dull. I'll take the banner as is.

Much attention has gone to the QBs projected to go in the top of this year's draft, which the Broncos are reported to have met with including, Josh Allen and Sam Darnold. Have the Broncos been scouting lesser-known quarterbacks such as Texas Tech's Nic Shimonek who might also be viable options to develop behind Case Keenum?

-- Michael Sutherland

I'm sure they have scouted Shimonek and plenty of other quarterbacks, as well. Several hundred players are scouted and evaluated in each draft class, even at positions where there may not be an obvious need. It's that sort of work that allowed the Broncos to find undrafted contributors such as Chris Harris Jr. and C.J. Anderson, among others.

Why not get Kayvon Webster and Eric Decker signed before the draft so they can pick best available instead of reaching? Seems like it would be a no-brainer to bring back some valuable former players who would be awesome to have back! How much do you think they'll cost us? Is cap space a concerning factor? Thoughts?

-- Chris Frost

In regards to cap space, the Broncos went into Friday with \$10,694,385, according to the daily report posted by the NFL Players Association. A significant portion of that will be allocated to their draft picks, although with the offseason accounting that counts only the top 51 selections, there should be a bit of buffer.

They addressed the No. 3 cornerback position by signing Tramaine Brock, and they expect second-year cornerbacks such as Marcus Rios and Brendan Langley to develop. At wide receiver, second-year player Carlos Henderson and exclusive-rights free agent Jordan Taylor are expected to step forward and be part of the solution. The Broncos can supplement both areas the draft, but as of now, they feel they have players who a) have contributed as rotational contributors and b) have upside.

With what they have on the roster, the Broncos already feel like they have a squad that allows them to pick the best available player.

Case Keenum, in my opinion, will never get Denver to a Super Bowl unless we have a top-5 offensive line. Why is Elway not going all out on offensive linemen?

-- Rick Schermerhorn

Their top free-agent signee last year, Ron Leary, was an offensive lineman. So was their first-round pick. Then the Broncos traded for a proven veteran who can hold down right tackle in Jared Veldheer. Matt Paradis, a restricted free agent who is one of the game's best young centers, is expected back and will get a significant raise from his one-year tender.

It seems to me like they've actually put "all-out" resources into improving the offensive line in the last 13 months, especially considering that you can't put every dollar there, with sizable veteran contracts spread around the roster at other positions such as wide receiver, quarterback, defensive line, linebacker, cornerback, etc.

Justin Simmons eyes lofty turnover totals as he enters Year 3

By Aric DiLalla
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After transitioning to a starting spot in 2017, safety Justin Simmons has taken aim at bigger goals for his third season in the NFL. But in addition to the lofty standards he's set for himself on the field, he'll also gain a big responsibility off the field. We caught up with Justin about impending fatherhood, how he's spending the time leading up to his daughter's birth and how he plans to rack up an insane number of turnovers in 2018.

Aric DiLalla: Can you explain what "Fortnite" is?

Justin Simmons: Since I'm an avid offseason gamer?

AD: Yes, that's why.

JS: You actually have no idea?

AD: Not really.

JS: Have you ever seen "Hunger Games"? That's what it is. You have 100 people and you can do squads, you can do duos or you can do solo. And you try to be the last one alive. Do you remember in "Hunger Games" how if they wanted you to fight someone, they would close in the mist or the storm? That's what they do in "Fortnite." There's like 25 places to land on this map, and you land with just a pick axe. And then you loot as much as you can, and the storm starts coming in. It gets smaller and smaller, and it forces you to fight. By the end of the game, as the circle gets smaller, it's just the last one standing.

AD: Didn't Drake play a few days ago?

JS: There's a very popular streamer out right now called "Ninja." His name's Tyler Blevins. People love him because he's legit, like, crazy. He says some bizarre stuff. But he's one of the best at the game, if not the best. And then Drake was like, I want to play with him. Everyone loves Drake. So everyone watched his stream. JuJu [Smith-Schuster] from the Steelers was also in it.

AD: How can Broncos fans play the game with you?

JS: I'm on Xbox. JSimms1119. You can add me, and then we join a party and start playing. But I've only got a limited amount of time. When May gets here, my kid is due and I'm done. I'm retiring the game for at least a year or two.

AD: How are you feeling about that?

JS: Ah, man. It's the first one. It's a girl, so I'm in big trouble. I'm feeling nervous, excited.

AD: Harder than football? Scarier than coming in as a rookie?

JS: Oh, 100 percent. Because, I mean, I love the game of football, and I'm obviously here putting in the work. I put in so much effort and time into the game, but at the end of the game, it is just a game. When it's all said and done, I want my career to be up there. My standards are to try to get up there with guys like Steve Atwater and Brian Dawkins. Those are the type of names that I aspire to have my name associated with. But then when I think about my kid, it's way beyond that. I'm talking about building their character, responsibilities in life and how they deal with disappointment and losses compared to wins and achievements.

AD: What's been your strategy to get ready?

JS: I've been reading up, but there's no instruction manual that comes for your kids. They're all different. But I've just been reading stuff, like some parenting advice — like you're their parent, you're not actually their friend. That can be a bit of a complex ideal for young parents, because you're so young and you have a child. ... Obviously, a lot of the books that you're reading, as much as it's about the child, it's just as much about you and your spouse and things you agree and disagree on and how you should hash that out beforehand. Those are the types of things that we're working through and [my wife, Taryn] has me going to baby classes with her. That's a day in my life: wake up, work out, rest of the day baby classes, and then if I have time at night, hop on Fortnite with Ninja and Drake and them.

AD: How's the naming process going?

JS: Terrible. I'm so picky. And I didn't even know I was picky. It's not good. Taryn will bring up a name, and I'll be like, "Ah, I knew a girl in fourth grade with that name." I haven't talked to her since fourth grade, but it's the first person that comes to mind. "Nope, knew her in fourth grade, can't." She could be a great woman. She could be the next winner on "The Voice." But I know her, so I can't. I just can't do it. I just nix a bunch of them. I want a unique name, but I don't want one that's out there. I'm not naming my kid Blue Ivy.

AD: A few football questions for you: What's your perspective on the defensive side of the ball on Case Keenum signing with the team?

JS: I'm excited to have Case for multiple reasons. First, he's a competitor. I watched the playoffs and consistently saw what he was doing with Minnesota. They had a great defense, but more importantly, he was making the right plays, extending drives, taking risky plays and making them. And then obviously that miracle play against New Orleans was just awesome to watch. It wasn't what they wanted when they played Philly, but as we know, Philly was a great team. So I'm excited to have him. I think he's going to be a great leader for us. And not that everyone in here is far removed from that playoff atmosphere, but he was just in it. He was just in the NFC title game. I feel like he's going to be hungry for more and to earn that leadership spot. And on top of that, being a believer, I'm super excited to have a guy at that position that will lead our team the right way. And having him as a believer and stepping into that leadership role is going to be huge for our team. I think it's going to affect us in such a positive way.

AD: You mentioned that a lot of your teammates aren't far removed from the playoffs, but you've never had that experience before. How anxious are you to make that happen?

JS: I think back last year, and it's crazy. You really do take keys and points from every year that you play. Last year, starting 3-1, and after the big win against Dallas I was thinking, "Man, we're on track for a great year this year. We're going to go the playoffs. We're going to make a big run." We were looking so far ahead, and then next thing you know, we lose eight in a row. It just puts it in perspective. This is really a week-by-week, game-by-game, quarter-by-quarter league. You can't take a week off. You can't take your foot off the gas pedal. Especially because we've got that Broncos logo on our helmet, we're going to get teams' best shot[s]. That's just the way we've got to prepare this offseason and really hunker down for a really good 16-, 17-week grind.

AD: If this team gets off to another 2-0, 3-0 start, how do the last two years change how you handle that?

JS: It's really just going to be focus. It's going to start with some of the younger guys. When I look at 2016, toward the end of the season, that's when Will and I played a large number of our snaps. Guys get banged up and the younger guys have to step in and play. Even though this is Year 3 for us, it's our job to get those younger guys ready to get in and play and to contribute on some key snaps. We're going to need every single person in this locker room. This isn't a pride thing about how much I can play and how much I can do for the team. It's about how much we can do as a whole for the team so that we can be the most successful and extend our season to the playoffs.

AD: Year 3 is sometimes the year when guys take a huge jump. For you, what would be an acceptable next step?

JS: When I'm talking about personal standards, for sure a Pro Bowl. I want to be a 16-turnover guy, whether that's eight interceptions, four forced fumbles and four recovered fumbles — whatever it takes for me to get 16 turnovers just on my own. And then at least 10-plus pass breakups. I just need to be more ball productive. I think I've done a decent job my first two years, but not to the standards that I hold for myself. That's really the goal on a personal level. That's the standard I'm setting for myself. Obviously, as a team, I just want to get into the postseason. Because once we get into the postseason, these veterans that have been there know how to handle these games. We'll be good to go.

AD: As a third-year player, how do you see your role in the locker room changing?

JS: I've never been as vocal of a leader as a guy like Aqib [Talib] and some of the other guys that have been captains, but I will say that being one of the older guys that are starting to come up and going into my third year, it requires you to have more of a vocal presence, not only in the locker room but on the field and in the film room. Like I said, you need every single person on the roster — practice squad and up — to buy in week in and week out. That leadership role is definitely going to be what is coming next in my career, not only vocally but on the field and off the field, showing guys how to do it the right way.

The Broncos' youth movement at safety, led by Justin Simmons, could pay dividends after encouraging signs in 2017

By Nick Kosmider
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One of the first texts Justin Simmons received April 29, 2016, moments after he was selected in the third round of the NFL draft by the Broncos, came from veteran safety T.J. Ward.

Ward, whose stellar performance less than three months earlier had helped the Broncos win Super Bowl 50, was reaching out with welcoming arms to the new kid at the position. Right away, Simmons said, Ward took on the role of an “older brother figure” for the rookie. And Simmons was eager to soak up any morsel he could.

“He gave me the ins and outs of the defense by helping me out with my eyes and just discipline at the safety position,” Simmons said. “He showed me what it takes to be a Pro Bowl safety year in and year out like he was.”

So when Ward was released by the Broncos 16 months later — just before the start of Simmons' second season in the NFL — the young player out of Boston College was conflicted. He knew the impact Ward had on the locker room because it was an impact Simmons himself felt significantly. But the competitor drumming inside of him was ready, both to become a starter at safety and to fill some of Ward's role as a trusted locker room voice.

“It was tough in that aspect,” Simmons said of losing Ward, “... but in the same token, I have the utmost trust in my ability and what I can bring to the team. Obviously, the end of the season didn't go the way I wanted it to go as far as the ankle injury went, but I still feel like there is so much I can build on and help bring to the football team.”

In a 2017 season of dark clouds for the Broncos, one of the few silver linings was the growth and impact of Simmons, who looked at times in 2017 like a player who could have Pro Bowl nods in his future. His Pro Football Focus grade of 80.2 was fourth among all AFC West safeties behind Jahleel Addae (83.5) and Tre Boston (81.4) of the Chargers and Karl Joseph (80.8) of the Raiders. He led a youth movement at the safety position in Denver this season that featured 2016 sixth-round pick Will Parks stepping into a larger role, undrafted rookie Jamal Carter making strides after making the team out of training camp and fellow undrafted player Dymonte Thomas making the most of a late-season audition.

“With all of the experience with T.J. leaving,” defensive coordinator Joe Woods said in late December, “I felt like those guys stepped up and filled that role.”

Simmons led the charge. He finished with 63 tackles, 1½ sacks, two interceptions and a touchdown in essentially 12 games. He suffered a high-ankle sprain early in Denver's Week 14 win over the Jets and was then placed on season-ending injured reserve. As much as he blossomed in his role as a starter — he almost never came off the field — he also became a steady voice in the locker room amid Denver's

torrential struggles. His willingness to be the first player to address reporters, even after difficult losses, helped earn him the team's Darrent Williams Good Guy Award.

The award is given annually to the Bronco who best exemplifies Williams' enthusiasm, cooperation and honesty while dealing with members of the press, and for Simmons it was a reflection of his desire to carry some of the heavy weight Ward had left behind.

"We want 10 more guys like Justin Simmons," Broncos coach Vance Joseph said in December. "As a player, he has a bright future, but as a person, he's A-plus. We want more guys like Justin Simmons."

The Broncos' youth movement at safety, though, did come with growing pains. Though the Broncos finished fourth in the NFL against the pass and narrowly missed a third straight season of surrendering less than 200 yards per game (200.6), the 29 touchdown passes thrown against them were the fifth-most in the league. Tight ends, who caught a combined nine of those scoring passes, were an especially problematic kryptonite.

Still, the Broncos have reason to be encouraged by a position that should remain largely in tact this offseason as Denver reworks its roster following a 5-11 season. Darian Stewart carries a dead-cap hit of \$4.2 million next season and still provides a valuable veteran presence. Simmons and Parks are entering the third year of their respective rookie deals, and the Broncos were encouraged with what they saw out of undrafted players Jamal Carter and Dymonte Thomas. Internal development is the clearest path for Broncos at safety.

"I think there were definitely great leaps made from my rookie year to this season, but still not even close to being satisfied with where I'm at athletically, physically or even mentally," Simmons said. "I think there are so many steps that I can take and all that is going to be repetition, making sure that I find the finer details within the details that I already know to kind of execute my game at a higher level."