

Q&A with Russell Okung: Beyond the field

By Ben Swanson

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When you arrive at a new team as a veteran, what kind of things do you do that earn you respect as a leader?

I've always believed in just being an example. I think what I've learned from guys who are older than me, when I was young, [was that] the most valuable thing was work ethic and their professionalism. I try to give that to the guys and if they see that as leadership, that's fine.

For running backs and receivers, there are breakaway runs or catches. For defenders, there are big tackles, sacks, interceptions or fumbles. For offensive linemen, what plays give you the best feeling?

I would say the best feeling is, to me, them scoring on kickoff return! That's my best feeling as an offensive lineman. It's running in all phases. Honestly, my best feeling is four-minute, when you know you've got to run the ball and they know we're going to run the ball. It's kind of mano y mano.

When you were growing up, were sports big in your life?

No. Honestly, I never really liked sports much until I got older. I've always loved business and kind of wanted to get involved with that, and the next thing I know, I saw there was a cool opportunity to go to college and I was all in.

What did you major in, in college? Was there a focus within that?

I was a business major — business-marketing major.

What were your favorite classes?

It was business marketing, hands down. Business marketing, and a little bit of my philosophy class was pretty cool, too. It was pretty general, but we did some religious philosophy, stuff like that. It's a little bit of everything.

It seems it's easy for professional athletes to get pigeonholed as a person. Would you agree?

Yeah, I think there's a certain stigma that goes on with who athletes are and in most cases, that we're incapable of doing anything besides what we do on the field. I think there's a shift of guys really changing that perception and how they look at their off-the-field interests or how they present themselves off the field, as well, and on the field, too.

In that same vein, you're perhaps most well known as a "tech guy." Do you want to move beyond that?

I think we bring a variety of skill sets, one of being a football player, which I think a lot of tech companies see as valuable and a little bit as intrinsic, as well. Honestly, I just want to be known as a well-rounded guy who loves business, loves life and definitely loves playing the game.

How much reading do you do?

I try to read a book a week. It slows down mostly during the season. I mean, I'm reading all the time, whether you're talking publications, magazines. I'm always trying to get a better understanding.

What kind of books do you like to read?

A lot of tech books. Zero to One. Brad Feld — Venture Deals. A lot of tech stuff, but a lot of sci-fi. I'm, like, a complete geek too, so I love sci-fi. Star Wars-type stuff.

What about magazines?

I love GeekWire, TechCrunch, Techmeme, Hacker News. It's crazy, I don't read any sports publications. I love the Economist.

Well, you get a lot of sports here.

Yeah, right, so getting a little change-up isn't too bad for me.

From childhood to the present, what technologies have made the most impact on you?

I would say probably I always remember my first computer. It was a Windows 95 operating system. I actually took it apart. My mom was so mad at me for that. It was her work computer, too. I've always kind of loved technology and the innovation that kind of comes with it.

When you took that computer apart, were you able to put it back together?

No, not my first time. My first time, I wasn't able to, but the second time I could.

How mad was your mom?

She was livid. You know, because she used it for work. So she couldn't work the next day because she had to figure how to put it back together, but she forgave me. I think at that point, she saw something special, so she really pushed me in that area to get as much understanding as I can.

What does she do?

Well, she's always challenged me to read. That was one of our biggest things, and to learn — and to try different things, things that a lot of people from my socio-economic status wouldn't do. She's always believed in being well cultured in involving myself with different people from other walks of life.

What did she do for work with the computer?

She used to work for a newspaper. So she'd have to write certain publications or the ads, and all of that. But she's always worked like three jobs so she's been an entrepreneur. She loves design — web design. She's always trying to figure out some cool business.

Russell Okung surprises Kodu STEM Bowl winners

By Caroline Deisley
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It's not every day that a kid gets to play a video game that they designed on the scoreboard at Mile High. It's also not every day that kids get to play against one of the best offensive linemen in the nation.

Offseason pickup and self-proclaimed agent Russell Okung surprised winners of the STEM Kodu Bowl on Thursday at Sports Authority Field at Mile High to celebrate their accomplishments.

"They've got some really good talent," Okung said as he took a break from the game. "They've got a good eye just for how these things work. I'm so fortunate to come here and play with them."

The Broncos Tackle STEM initiative partners with organizations like Colorado State University's Little Shop of Physics, Learn Fresh, RAFT Colorado and Ten80 Education to create positive learning experiences that encourage young students to become more interested in STEM subjects through hands-on activities.

This specific Tackle STEM project allowed kids at local Boys and Girls clubs to create and design their own video games that specifically related to the Broncos. The top two entrants won an experience of a lifetime, playing the game they created on the ThunderVision stadium scoreboard at Sports Authority Field at Mile High.

The first-place game reflected the process of becoming a Bronco player with different "stages" or levels that the player had to pass in order to progress. The creators even included a math portion with multiplication problems that the player had to answer correctly in order to move forward.

"We created an awesome game," said Michelle Vasquez, one of the creators of the winning game. Now, we get to celebrate our accomplishments for winning first place."

Playing their games on the big screen was certainly a worthwhile experience for the kids, but the surprise appearance from Okung made this more than just a celebration; it was a chance to learn from one of the NFL's top players at his position.

"We got to see that [NFL players] do take their work seriously but they can also be really fun with us and not just care about sports but other stuff that is valuable to us like technology or STEM," said Vasquez.

For Okung, the experience wasn't just another appearance either, but rather an opportunity to inspire the next generation to pursue passions in STEM, a goal that's close to home for the Broncos offensive lineman.

"For them to design these games, congratulations to them," said Okung. "I think the world is in their hands. They can do anything they want to do."

Agentless in Denver

By Andrew Brandt

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Among the dozens of striking free-agent contracts completed over the past two weeks—it's hard to believe free agency is only two weeks old—the one that has received perhaps the most scrutiny is essentially a one-year, \$5 million deal. Former Seahawks tackle Russell Okung landed in Denver after making the nontraditional decision to assess the marketplace without using an agent. Not surprisingly, the agent community derided this decision.

When the details of Okung's less-than-optimal contract with the Broncos surfaced—he has no guaranteed money—the barbarians at the gate stormed the media fortress. Shunned by Okung, agents put on their "sources" hat to communicate through the media that players are neither skilled nor sophisticated enough to deal with NFL management.

It is understandable in today's NFL for rookies to negotiate without an agent. Because the current CBA has effectively prefabricated all rookie contracts, a rookie knows exactly what he is going to make the moment he is drafted. For veteran free agents, however, there are many more variables. In these cases, the maximum agent fee of 3% can be a smart investment.

Okung was dealing with the fallout of a dislocated shoulder he suffered in the divisional round of the playoffs. With such a serious and recent injury, he was not going to receive a top-tier free agent tackle contract; teams were going to demand a one-year deal or a structure to reflect his injury, with or without an agent doing the negotiating. And Okung certainly found that to be the case in the marketplace.

The Choice

In talking to someone close to Okung (not an agent), I found the most interesting part of his free-agency experience was that the team he ended up with never contacted him. Rather, Okung called the Broncos.

Before that, Okung had drawn primary interest from three teams: the Giants, Steelers and Lions. It appears that two of them, the Giants and Steelers, loosely discussed contract parameters without making firm offers. Perhaps those teams were convinced that Okung would return to them after finding a soft marketplace with hat in hand. The Lions showed the most concrete interest and offered a similar first year to what he eventually signed in Denver (albeit with more security): \$1 million signing bonus, \$1 million guaranteed salary, \$2 million of per-game roster bonuses and \$2.5 million in playing time and playoff incentives.

Not overjoyed with either the marketplace or the prospect of signing with Detroit, Okung started reaching out to other teams. He preferred to stay close to the West Coast, having played his entire career in Seattle, and noted the Broncos' culture of success, Ryan Clady's uncertain status and the team's desire last year to acquire Joe Thomas. Okung negotiated with the Broncos from a position of weakness because he pursued them, and wrangled a deal that became heavily criticized: a two-part contract with a realistic first year followed by option years at a much higher level.

The first year consists of a \$1 million bonus for completing 90% of the team's offseason workouts, followed by a \$2 million roster bonus for being on the team in Week 1 and a \$2 million salary. It also includes \$3 million in playing time incentives: \$1.5 million for 80% and another \$1.5 million for 90% (Okung played 79% last year).

The worst-case scenario for Okung is that he earns \$1 million for participating in the Broncos' offseason workout program and is released before training camp. Most likely, Okung will make somewhere between \$5-8 million this season with the Broncos, the team of his choosing. Next year, he will either trigger the "second contract" with the Broncos at a much higher level—it averages \$12 million over four years—or become a free agent again. The contract is certainly not as "end of the world" as the agent community would have us believe, but there are some deficiencies.

Risk Allocation

The deal's overall structure—a one-year "prove it" concept followed by an option for additional years at a much higher level (\$12 million average)—is common among NFL player contracts. Whether through a second-year option, roster bonus, or simply a large salary, the vast majority of veteran deals are really year-to-year propositions, with the risk moving from the team to the player. Even the largest contract in terms of overall value this year, Joe Flacco's, has no guaranteed money after this season. Further, the structure of an option after a "prove it" year is not uncommon for players coming off an injury such as Okung. Indeed, a free-agent quarterback named Drew Brees received a similar deal 10 years ago as he returned from a shoulder injury.

Having said that, I am not sure why Okung did not simply agree to a one-year deal. I understand his thinking: the \$12 million average over the subsequent four years is impressive, and perhaps more than he could get as a free agent next year. However, he has handed the team the total discretion over his future. If he struggles, they will cut him, but if he performs as a top tackle, he has lost the opportunity to enter the market again without the stigma of injury. A one-year deal, in his situation, may have been preferable.

As to the one-year deal, it should have had some "early money" to ensure Okung's presence on the team this year. Although the \$1 million workout bonus—payable after the offseason program is completed in June—is "practically" guaranteed, Okung should have requested/demanded immediate commitment (through a roster or signing bonus) rather than having to wait until after the workout program. He should have held firm in requiring some of or, ideally, the entire \$2 million September roster bonus due and payable for being on the roster now, not when the season begins, which would ensure his presence on the team beyond the workout program. The Broncos may have resisted, but some compromise of that \$2 million could have been forged through negotiation. Further, with this relatively low compensation level, the playtime incentives start at far too high a threshold (80%).

Contract negotiations ultimately are less about money than they are about risk allocation. In this contract, Okung takes the vast majority of the risk. An agent could have been firmer in being the "bad guy" in not agreeing to a contract until there was less risk to the player.

Perception

Okung's situation brings back vivid memories for me of agent-less negotiations I had while negotiating on behalf of the Packers. As a former agent and friend to many players, a few players trusted me to

negotiate directly with them without the use of an agent. In retrospect, I found these negotiations as difficult as any.

Player contract negotiations are raw. I had to tell players directly that they were not as good as they thought; agents have value to teams as a buffer in presenting the team's position. I also learned that no player—or team executive, for that matter—wants to feel the other side “got over” on him or her. The NFL player, agent and team executive community is a small one; the chatter moves quickly about who “got screwed.”

The Broncos' contract negotiator, Mike Sullivan, is a former agent (he negotiated Aaron Rodgers' rookie contract with me). Even though Okung approached him, he and the Broncos do not want Okung hearing how team-friendly the deal is. That perception will affect the team's relationship not only with Okung, but also with other players. Again, the deal is not as bad as the agent community would have us believe, but the internal relationships here bear watching as the contract continues to be ridiculed in league circles.