

Under the Headset: Outside Linebackers Coach Fred Pagac

By Caroline Deisley
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With some of the best pass-rushing talent under his wing, Outside Linebackers Coach Fred Pagac has helped make the Broncos' edge rushers one of the most vicious defensive units in the league. In Super Bowl 50, Von Miller's performance earned MVP honors in the Broncos' 24-10 rout over the Carolina Panthers. Pagac, a coaching veteran of 38 years, is now in his second with the Broncos. In his first season, Denver finished at the top of the charts in nearly every category, including sacks (52). With the team leading the league in sacks through seven weeks, including 7.5 from Miller, Pagac sat down with us to talk about the accomplishments he's reached with the Broncos and the talent he coaches.

You've coached some pretty elite talent over the years. What's it like coaching guys like Von Miller and DeMarcus Ware?

It's a great opportunity. They're great kids — fun to coach. I've been coaching for a long time and I'm having more fun than I've ever had.

DeMarcus is the epitome of a leader that any coach would want on his team. What do you learn from him as a player?

You learn from everybody. When you're a coach, obviously, you do what players can do. You listen to them. If you have respect for them, you're going to listen to them. I have great respect for the group that we have and the group that we have.

Shane Ray is already starting to show the type of player he can become. What's a crucial factor in his growth?

He's just got to continue to mature. He's a young kid, and he has two great players in front of him. Hopefully, they're two great examples and they are. Von Miller right now is playing as good as I've seen him play. Shane has the opportunity to learn from two great players in front of him along with Shaq [Barrett] and along with Dekoda [Watson] and [Vontarrius] Dora.

How do you plan for the absence of a guy like DeMarcus Ware? What guys have stepped up in his absence?

Hey, you could lose somebody anytime. The next guy has to be ready to go. He missed a few games last year. We went ahead and played ball and guys have to step it up and play.

Von's talked a lot about the double-teams he's started to see this season. How do you factor for that and still have an effective pass rush?

Von's got to play what he sees. You have to react to what he gets. Football is a game of reaction. They're going to start the reaction and you go from there. He has to do to the best of his ability to get to the quarterback.

After spending 22 years coaching at Ohio State, what do you see from linebackers coming out of college now? What's the state of linebackers in college football?

They're good athletes, very good athletes. Obviously, the players are a lot more advanced now as far as speed and strength and things like that. Athletes are getting better and better.

After 38 years of coaching, you won a Super Bowl last season. What did that accomplishment mean to you?

It's the epitome of coaching. It's the pinnacle. It's what you strive for, hunt for and now, the only problem is you want the next one.

For you, was it any more special that it came off an incredible performance from one of your outside linebackers?

No, it's just that we won. That's the key.

Fred Pagac, Broncos' outside linebackers coach, keeps eye on ultimate prize

By Nicki Jhabvala
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For more than 15 years, Fred Pagac had tried to avoid the spotlight. The moments of fame for the coach were not only unimportant but unwelcome.

But in the waning seconds of the Broncos' AFC championship victory over New England, Pagac got caught. CBS cameras zoomed in on him dancing on the Denver sideline with outside linebacker Von Miller as quarterback Peyton Manning trotted onto the field for the final kneel-down play.

"I try to stay under the radar," Pagac said. "But obviously I didn't make it under the radar there."

The man who has made a habit of blending in on the sideline and hiding behind layers of blue Broncos garb was outed. Labeled initially as just "a" Broncos coach, Pagac was later identified to the viewing public.

But for the past 12 months inside the walls at Broncos headquarters, Coach Pug, as he is known, has had trouble going unnoticed.

A former tight end with 38 years of coaching experience at the college and pro level, he arrived in Denver last February as part of Gary Kubiak's new staff. As the Broncos' outside linebackers coach, he was tasked with implementing Wade Phillips' 3-4 defense.

He was given plenty of talent to work with, two elite linebackers in Miller and DeMarcus Ware. The drafting of Shane Ray and the rise of Shaquil Barrett gave him four outside linebackers he could rely on.

Pagac accepted Kubiak's job offer believing this gig was his best shot at getting the ultimate prize, a diamond-encrusted, too-bulky-to-wear Super Bowl ring.

"I think that way every year," he said, pointing to his left ring finger. "But there was a great opportunity to get to the big dance."

In his first year in Denver, Pagac has molded and honed the collection of edge-rushing talent into the best in the NFL (see 52 sacks).

He and other first-year Broncos positional coaches — Bill Kollar (defensive line), Joe Woods (defensive backs) and Reggie Herring (inside linebackers) — helped to transform a defense that ranked third in total defense (305.2 yards allowed per game), ninth in passing yards (225.4) and tied for ninth in sacks (41) a season ago into one that led the NFL in all three categories this past season.

Pagac also helped Miller's total quarterback pressures (sacks, hits, hurries combined) jump from 58.5 to 69. And Pagac helped Miller and Ware earn their fourth and ninth career Pro Bowl selections, respectively.

"Those two guys are certainly talented players, but to get them to play the way they've played, he's done a great job, as have the rest of the coaches on defense," Phillips said. "I'm riding the train, clanging the bell. That's all I do."

Miller credits Pagac for making first team all-pro, the only Bronco to earn such an honor this year.

"He didn't coach me like he had been with me through four years," Miller said. "He coached me how I needed to be coached. He pushed me every single day and got it out of me this year."

Pagac has little explanation for his ways — "Just coaching," he said. Players say he's demanding, but not unreasonable.

"He pushes you, but you want to be the best you can for him," Barrett said. "But he can get upset and get mad with you, if you push him to that point. I think we've only gotten to that point once, the whole linebacker group."

Those rare moments are traced back to one thing. One huge ring.

"We'll be talking about sacks and we'll be like, 'DeMarcus has 130 sacks!' or something," Ray said. "And (Pagac) will be like, 'Well, how many rings does he have?' "