

Sam Jones runs into Elway at Shanahan's on Wednesday, drafted by Elway on Saturday

By Mike Klis

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It's the night before the NFL Draft and Sam Jones is trying to relax with dinner at Shanahan's.

A standout at ThunderRidge High School in Highlands Ranch, Jones was a three-year starting offensive lineman at Arizona State, mostly as a left guard, when he gave up his senior year of eligibility to enter the NFL Draft.

Jones knew he would probably be a Day 3 selection, but still you can imagine his nerves on Wednesday night as he sat down to eat at Shanahan's restaurant, only to serendipitously spot a familiar stranger who held a one in 32 chance of controlling his fate.

"I went there trying to get my mind off things and sure enough I see John Elway sitting like three tables away," Jones said in an interview with 9News. "I'm thinking, well, do I go over and say something or not? It looked like he was done."

He texted Matt McChesney, the former NFL player who now trains Jones.

"I said there's no such thing as luck in this world, this is fate, go talk to this man," McChesney said. "Go introduce yourself."

Jones did just that and apparently, the conversation went well. Three days later, the Broncos selected Jones with their No. 183 pick in the sixth round.

"It was kind of awkward, I didn't know exactly what to say," Jones said. "I just introduced myself and told him, 'Good luck on a big weekend and I'd love to be a Bronco.' And he said, 'we'll see if we can make it happen.'"

When Elway called Jones at his parents' home in Highlands Ranch on Saturday afternoon to inform Jones he was a Bronco, he referred to the Wednesday night restaurant dinner by saying "I guess it was meant to be, huh?"

"When I talked to him on the phone I said I didn't realize we were going to be talking so soon, again," Elway said. "I'm excited for Sam. He's from Highlands Ranch and we feel like he's a good football player. He's got a chance to come in here and help us. What a coincidence we were able to meet."

"I did not know him. I knew of him. So it was nice that he came up and introduced himself and we had a nice little chat."

Welcome back home, Sam Jones.

"I wish I had words to describe what I'm feeling right now." Jones said in a conference call with the Denver media. "It's a childhood dream come true. It's just incredible."

Another oddity: Jones and Connor McGovern both work out at McChesney's Six Zero Strength & Fitness facility that is a few blocks away from Broncos' headquarters. McGovern was a fifth-round draft pick in 2016 who started five games at guard for the Broncos last year.

"I find it incredible that the Broncos, his hometown team, picks him," McChesney said of Jones. "He works out with Connor all the time. Sam grew up loving this team, dreaming of playing for this team. I couldn't be happier for him. I broke down in tears. I'm so proud of him."

While training with McGovern, the long-locked Jones learned about a Broncos team policy on grooming before he became a Bronco.

"I was actually joking with Connor the other day because I have long hair right now," Jones said. "He had long hair when he went in and they made him cut it, and I was like, 'Man, I don't want to cut my hair.' He said, 'Don't worry about it, I think only the Broncos do that.'"

Always there's a catch to a dream-come-true.

"So I guess I'm going to have to say goodbye to the hair," Jones said.

Jones is a 6-foot-5, 305-pound, muddy-knuckle, block-to-the-whistle lineman who probably needs a year to develop before he seriously pushes Broncos veteran guards Ron Leary, Max Garcia and McGovern for playing time.

Jones' parents, Forrest and Susan, get credit for instilling a strong work ethic in their two sons, Zach and Sam. Susan was a teacher for 20-plus years and is now a school bus administrator. Forrest works in the oil and gas industry.

Their oldest son Zach played two years of football at New Mexico State before back fusion surgery ended his playing days.

Sam plays on by staying put.

"I was actually just joking about that with my parents the other day," Jones said. "If I get drafted by the Broncos, I might be the only guy still living with his parents. I know my mom would like it but I think I might have to get my own place."

Dinner at Shanahan's probably wasn't the primary reason why Sam Jones will now play for his hometown Broncos. But finding the courage to introduce himself to Elway didn't hurt.

"The whole thing is just insane," Jones said.

Sam Jones realizes “childhood dream” in being drafted by hometown Denver Broncos

By Gina Mizell
The Denver Post
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Getting “the call” from Broncos general manager John Elway was extra special for Broncos’ sixth-round selection Sam Jones, an offensive lineman who grew up in Highlands Ranch before playing collegiately at Arizona State.

“It’s the best feeling I’ve had in my entire life,” Jones said on a conference call minutes after being picked. “I really didn’t even believe it when it was happening, and then I just still can’t believe it. I’m in shock, I think.”

Jones spent the pre-draft process training alongside Denver offensive linemen at local facility Six Zero Strength, which is led by former Bronco Matt McChesney. Jones said McChesney “pulled up in his truck, squealing (his) tires in front of my house and gave me a big hug” shortly after his selection.

“This is a childhood dream come true,” Jones said. “This is incredible.”

Sam Jones, OL

Size: 6-foot-5, 305 pounds

College: Arizona State

Age: 22

THREE THINGS TO KNOW

- Jones left ASU following his redshirt junior season after the firing of head coach Todd Graham.
- Jones started all 13 games at left guard last season and was named All-Pac-12 honorable mention.
- Jones was formerly a three-star prospect who chose ASU over Colorado, Oregon, Kansas State and others.

SCOUTING REPORT

Strengths: Gets up and out of his stance with good quickness as a blocker. ... Good athlete. ... Has movement skills to sink and redirect his weight to adjust to moving targets. ... Dips and finds some leverage at the point of attack. ... Able to hook and turn defenders out and around the run lane.

Weaknesses: Carries a sunken chest on a thin frame. ... Has difficulties maintaining necessary weight and mass for the position. ... Hand placement will run a little wide as a run blocker sapping him of needed power. ... Core strength is well below average.

Former ThunderRidge standout Sam Jones readies for NFL Combine

By Mike Klis

9 News

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To meet Sam Jones is to like him.

The latest NFL prospect from the Denver-area, Jones has quarterback good looks but offensive guard modesty who will put the hood part of his hoodie to use. Indoors.

He will say he first went to college for the primary purpose of playing football, but he needed just 3 ½ years to complete his degree in criminal justice.

His parents, a former rancher from New Mexico and an educator in the Douglas County and Cherry Creek school districts, didn't push him to get a job as a kid, but he got one, anyway, hauling furniture and appliances for a moving company.

"You don't have to think very much," Jones said, "but it's difficult."

Also as a youth growing up in Highlands Ranch and attending ThunderRidge High School, Jones didn't just dream of throwing the key block on the winning touchdown in the Super Bowl. He used to regularly watch the monotonous exercise that is NFL Combine. And liking it.

"It's crazy watching it when you're a kid, seeing those guys got through it and then before you know it, you get an invite and it's my time now, I guess," he said. "It's kind of crazy."

The NFL combine will be held Tuesday through Monday, March 4, in Indianapolis. Jones, a three-year starting offensive lineman (mostly as a left guard) at Arizona State, has been assigned the number OL18 for his workout shirts.

Other combine invitees with Colorado ties are Falcon High School running back Kalen Ballage -- Jones' teammate at Arizona State; Mullen and Alabama punter John Kimball "JK" Scott; Colorado Springs' Classical Academy and Auburn kicker Daniel Carlson; Colorado State receiver Michael Gallup and Colorado cornerback Isaiah Oliver.

Jones was highly recruited out of high school by most of the Pac-12 schools before he settled on Arizona State.

His athleticism evident, his body fresh and his education completed, Jones bypassed his final year of football eligibility to declare for the NFL Draft, where he is projected to be selected anywhere between the third and sixth rounds.

"Sam probably could have stayed another year but he made the right decision in leaving," Matt McChesney, a former NFL defensive and offensive lineman who has been Jones' longtime performance coach, said from the office of his Six Zero Strength and Fitness facility. "He's healthy. The scouts know

what they see. If Quenton Nelson is No. 1 as a finisher, Sam Jones is a close No. 2. You watch his tape, I mean he's putting people on the ground."

Nelson is a 6-foot-5, 330-pound Notre Dame product who is considered one of the best NFL guard prospects in years, never mind in this year's draft. Jones isn't rated quite that high, in part because most of the scouting and draft websites have him weighed incorrectly.

He is not 6-5, 290. He is 6-5 and will come in somewhere around 300 and 305 pounds at the NFL Combine.

"I've heard a lot about my weight as a weakness," Jones said. "I don't know how I got listed at 290 to be honest with you. (Arizona State coaches) wanted me to play at 295 and that's what I played at, but I walk around at 300. Hopefully, if I make a team this year, I'll be at 305, 310."

He'll make an NFL team. His strength is his athleticism. He played both baseball and basketball in his youth and as guards go, he can move, bend and get his feet in position for proper angles. He can both pound the defensive tackle at the point of attack and get out to the second level and seal off the linebacker.

"I hate to say this but in New England's trap system, I think if they're looking to get a real athletic player to replace Shaq Mason at right guard (in 2019) then they have to look at Sam at some point because he's so damn athletic," McChesney said. "I mean he can get out of his stance and get to full speed by step two."

Besides his football-specific training business, McChesney also has sports announcing gigs. He was serving as a TV commentator for a ThunderRidge-Cherry Creek high school game in 2013 when he noticed the Grizzlies' terrific left tackle.

McChesney has been working with Jones ever since. Having also worked with Baltimore Ravens' starting center Ryan Jensen, Atlanta left guard Ben Garland, New York Jets' defensive tackle Michael Pennel and offensive linemen Ryan Harris, Stephane Nembot and Will Pericak, among others, what does McChesney see in Jones that makes him special?

"Physicality. And I never have to ask him if he wants to work," McChesney said. "Very rarely do I have to say, 'Hey, where are you today?' If ever. My coach in college, and now the D-line coach for the Eagles, Chris Wilson, he used to always say I'd rather say 'whoa' than 'sick 'em.' I'd rather walk up and tell you to calm down then say, 'Bro, can you get excited about being here?'"

Mom and dad get the credit for instilling a strong work ethic in their two sons, Zach and Sam. Susan was a teacher for 20-plus years and is now a school bus administrator. Forrest works in the oil and gas industry.

Their oldest son Zach played two years of football at New Mexico State before back fusion surgery ended his playing days.

Sam plays on. He'll go through the drills at the NFL Combine, then participate in Arizona State's Pro Day on March 16. Then the plan is to stay tuned up with McChesney while waiting for the NFL Draft that will be held April 26, 27 and 28.

Jones grew up rooting for the Broncos, but he is about to complete the transition from football fan to football as a way of life. At this point, there is no preference as to which team selects him in the draft.

“I just want an opportunity,” Jones said. “I don’t care where it is. I want to play football again.”

ASU football enters 2017 season with more experience on offensive line

By Mark Harris
The Denver Post
August 21, 2017

At this point last year, ASU football had just one returning starter on the offensive line from the previous group — left tackle Evan Goodman, who has since graduated from ASU.

Now, four of the five likely starters on the offensive line have some level of starting experience from last year.

Redshirt junior Quinn Bailey started all 12 games last season and redshirt junior Sam Jones started seven games before suffering a season-ending injury. Both Bailey and Jones were week one starters in 2016.

Senior A.J. McCollum started seven games at center and redshirt sophomore Steven Miller started three games as well.

Through fall camp, those four have taken most of the reps with the first team, with sophomore Cohl Cabral rounding out the group, usually placed at left tackle.

And for those players, it helps to have some experience among their fellow linemen.

"You know we've been through a lot. As a group, almost everybody in the starting lineup has played games," Miller said. "Cohl played, he didn't start at any position, but he played in the Sparky package and stuff like that, so he knows what's going on. We have that experience coming back, we know what it's like to lose and we don't like that feeling."

The Sun Devils were no strangers to the loss column last season, and the offensive line play was one of the many reasons the team finished 5-7.

Only Goodman and Bailey started every game for ASU, meaning the rest of the lineup was in flux. With linemen suffering season-ending injuries, as was the case for Jones and then-senior Stephon McCray, the line wasn't always at its best.

The low point had to be against Utah, when the Sun Devils gave up 11 sacks in a 49-26 loss.

But this year, ASU seems to have more depth in the trenches to overcome injuries.

"We have a lot of guys that have seen the field that aren't starting right now," Jones said. "It's really a good thing because it's a long season, somebody's going to go down, somebody's going to have something happen, and we're not going to have the same five in there all year most likely."

"We've got to have guys that are able to step up and we do have that."

The Sun Devils still have redshirt sophomores Zach Robertson and Mason Walter, who both had playing time in 2016, and redshirt senior Tyler McClure, who started three games a year ago. If injuries were to arise, the Sun Devils would have viable options.

"I think we've got good depth, some guys in the twos that can go in and play winning football for us," ASU offensive line coach Rob Sale said.

ASU hopes none of the current starters get injured, in part because the likely starting group of Cabral-Jones-McCollum-Miller-Bailey has been practicing together for most of fall camp and thus has established effective communication skills.

"Obviously communication is huge for an offensive line," Jones said. "You can't execute plays if you aren't all on the same page. And even if you are all on the same page and you're all doing the wrong thing, it's still going to work out better than half the people doing the right thing."

Sometimes, verbal communication isn't even necessary and they know what to do.

"There's times where I don't even need to say anything to Quinn," Miller said. "We see something so many times in film and we just go out on the field and we see it again and we don't even have to say anything because we know what's going on."

In stark contrast to the 2016 lineup, the Sun Devils have various returners on their offensive line this upcoming season, which could yield better results for the team in the long run.

Former ThunderRidge offensive lineman Sam Jones entering NFL draft

By Nick Kosmider
The Denver Post
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Sam Jones, a former ThunderRidge High School offensive lineman who just finished his redshirt junior season at Arizona State, is leaving school early to enter the NFL draft.

Jones made the announcement on social media Thursday.

"I'm excited to announce that I have decided to forgo my my last year of college football and enter the 2018 NFL draft," Jones wrote. "A special thank you to (former ASU coach Todd) Graham for giving me a chance and helping me grow as a man and a football player. Forever a Sun Devil."

The 6-foot-5, 290-pound Jones started all 13 games at left guard for ASU this season. He helped the Sun Devils, who finished 7-6, rank sixth in the Pac-12 in rushing at 175.1 yards per game. He played in 32 games overall during his three college seasons. Graham, the coach who recruited Jones to ASU, was fired in December and replaced by former NFL head coach and longtime ESPN analyst Herman Edwards.

Jones, an All-Colorado selection by the Denver Post in 2012 and 2013, was a four-star recruit coming out of ThunderRidge.

ASU Confidential: Funniest teammate, top athlete, favorite uniforms?

By Doug Haller
AZCentral
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The Arizona State football team has been through a month of practice.

The Sun Devils have bonded over campfires at Camp Tontozona. They've practiced in 90-degree temperatures and battled through two scrimmages at Sun Devil Stadium.

With the season opener less than two weeks away, it's time to get to know them better.

Azcentral sports recently quizzed players on several aspects of the ASU brotherhood: Who's the funniest in the locker room? The biggest trash talker on the field? Perhaps most important, what uniform combination does the team like best?

Let's find out.

Funniest teammate: Kyle Williams

Of 10 questions, this one produced the most responses. Redshirt-freshman receiver Frank Darby considered it a few seconds then proudly stated himself.

"Everybody's always laughing at me because I'm from the East Coast," Darby said. "I'm from Jersey and I talk crazy sometimes."

Sorry, Frank, but Williams has you beat.

The sophomore receiver is an honors student, but he's also known for his humor, although teammates struggled to pinpoint why.

"It's just the stuff he says," sophomore receiver John Humphrey said. "How he says it is funny."

Best athlete: Kalen Ballage

Considering the senior running back surfaced on summer "freaks" list, this shouldn't come as a surprise.

At the same time, this is a hard thing for football players to admit because deep down a part of them thinks they're the best athlete, it's just that no one has noticed it yet.

One player declined to even answer: "I don't want to start anything," he said.

In the end, however, most everyone chose Ballage. After all, it's hard to argue against a 6-3 back who can reach speeds of 22.6 mph while wearing 15 pounds of pads.

Junior quarterback Manny Wilkins, however, wouldn't let it go without offering a playoff jab.

"It's Kalen," Wilkins said, "but he's not a freak athlete in any other sport. He can't play baseball. He can't play basketball to save his life."

Most likely to succeed after football: Brady White

This question produced three responses: White, Williams and sophomore running back Nick Ralston. White, however, was the clear winner.

"Always a quarterback," senior defensive lineman Alani Latu said with a smile.

Like Williams and Ralston, White is in Barrett Honors college, where he carries a 3.6 grade-point average. The sophomore quarterback has been limited this preseason while he continues to recover from a foot injury suffered last season, but at some point, this season or next, he's expected to get back in the mix.

Hardest hitter: DJ Calhoun

No division on this issue.

It not only was the overwhelming response (although one player briefly considered senior linebacker/safety Marcus Ball), it took the shortest amount of time for those surveyed to answer.

It's simply what the senior linebacker is known for.

Said Calhoun: "I'll take that."

Toughest to tackle: Demario Richard

This came down to Richard and Ballage, but in the end, while most agreed Ballage might be the hardest to catch, the 5-foot-10, 220-pound Richard was the hardest to bring down.

"At least with Kalen, I can get a shot on his legs," redshirt-freshman cornerback Chase Lucas said, "but Demario is so low to the ground, it's hard to even hit him."

A senior, Richard has rushed for 2,169 and 14 touchdowns over his career.

Biggest trash talker: Manny Wilkins

Asked this question, Wilkins smiled.

"I know I'm up there," he said. "It's probably me."

Correct.

"Manny Wilkins, by far," Humphrey said.

"Has to be Manny," Latu said.

At least Wilkins has company in this regard. While Darby pointed out that coach Todd Graham frowns upon trash talk, Humphrey, senior rush linebacker Koron Crump and freshman safety Langston Frederick also got votes.

Best leader: Sam Jones

After a Camp Tontozona practice, offensive coordinator Billy Napier lined up his group for sprints. As long as everyone went 100 percent, the running would be limited, Napier announced.

Didn't happen.

Napier identified a loafer after the first sprint and Jones, a junior left guard, quickly let that player know in certain language that it best not happen again.

So this wasn't so much of a surprise. Jones broke the ceremonial rock after ASU's final summer conditioning session. He also has been named a captain.

"He's one of the better leaders we've had here in the last five years because he's got some courage," Graham said. "He's not afraid to say something. ... It's just sometimes we got to get the PG version."

Breakout offensive player: Jalen Harvey

Last season, the junior receiver had 21 catches for 330 yards. So far this preseason:

"I call him, 'The warrior,'" receivers coach Rob Likens said. "He is the heart and soul of our meeting room. I know unless one of his legs fall off, that dude is going to practice that day and he's going to bring his 'A' game. I know that. I don't even have to motivate him. It's all internal for him."

RELATED: ASU in good shape at receiver position

Williams, Humphrey and freshman running back Eno Benjamin also received votes.

Breakout defensive player: Chase Lucas

Evan Fields received votes, but the freshman safety has missed most of preseason practice with an injury. Lucas, on the other hand, is battling for a starting spot at cornerback.

"He shows me different looks in practice that I've never really gone against," Humphrey said. "He's just a hell of a corner."

A redshirt-freshman, Lucas played offense at Chandler High. This is his first significant action on the other side.

Favorite uniform: All black

Alani Latu liked the "Desert Chrome uniforms" (white jerseys, copper helmets) the Sun Devils wore last season at Oregon, "but I don't think we'll wear that one again," he said.

So he went with all black. As did most of his teammates.

Wilkins: "All black."

Humphrey: "All black."

"I love the black," Darby said. "We should go out and beat every team so it should be like a funeral in our house."