

Broncos' Darian Stewart had hoop dreams

By Cameron Wolfe

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For all the folks who really know Darian Stewart, he goes by "Smooth." He picked up the nickname his first day on the University of South Carolina campus in Columbia, and it's stuck to him like the blistering sun on a July afternoon. If you hear his deep Southern drawl and experience his laid-back flavor, it's easy to see why.

It didn't always appear the hard-hitting Broncos safety was going to be an NFL star.

If it were up to Stewart, he would have stopped playing football after his junior year in high school. He had hoop dreams, with plans of being a point guard at the University of Memphis.

But his mother, Janice, didn't give him a choice. In a way that only she could, Janice gave a stern look and barked out a few words that made Darian conclude he had better keep lacing up his cleats.

"Thank God she did," Stewart said. "She knew better than me."

Eleven years later, Stewart has a six-year NFL career and a Super Bowl title ring. Mama knew best.

Winning and 'whoopings"

Stewart's story starts in Huntsville, Ala. The resources weren't always plentiful, but Stewart and his older brother, Jared, rarely lacked for entertainment.

Darian is the youngest of six children, but his four older sisters had left the house by the time he hit grade school, leaving him and Jared living with his single mother. Darian and Jared would get in enough mischief for eight kids while Janice was working late as a contractor for NASA.

A particularly memorable day ended with Darian and Jared accidentally driving Janice's car into a fence. One of their sisters, babysitting that day, came out of the house yelling. Jared quickly slammed the door on Darian, who got all the blame.

"Man, my sister tore me up," Darian said, shaking his head.

"He got a lot of whoopings because of me," Jared said, laughing.

They were known around the city more as a duo rather than as individuals. Their competitive nature to better each other motivated them.

"My brother is my best friend. I was always the big little brother," Darian said. "If I beat him in anything, we would have to fight."

Jared was a year older, but he got left back in the sixth grade, setting up him and Darian to be just as inseparable in school as they were at home. Jared promised he didn't do poorly in the classroom on purpose, but it was the best mistake he ever made.

Once they hit the field together at Lee High School, Jared was the quarterback and Darian was the receiver.

"We didn't have a lot of male support in the house. We just had each other," Jared said. "So I knew I had to be tough on him."

Family comes first

Darian looks away, tenses up a bit, and his voice decreases to the level of a loud whisper when he talks about his father.

"He was real distant — not into the fam," Darian said. "It was cool, though, because Mom played both parts, and I had coaches that helped us out."

His Amateur Athletic Union basketball coach, Bill Harris, would drive him from basketball practice. His high school football coach, David O'Connor, made sure he got to camps and received attention from colleges.

"He never really cared about the glory that came his way, and he had plenty," said O'Connor, who now coaches at Giles County in Tennessee. "In Darian's mind, he was a soccer player and a basketball player. That was the hardest part, selling him on football."

Another coach chatted with Janice at one of Darian's basketball games during his junior year when word began to spread that he was planning to give up football to focus on basketball. That coach's message was that Darian had an NFL future. Darian's plans to quit football ended that night.

The lack of a father in the house strengthened Darian's commitment to being a father when he became an adult.

Darian and his wife, Whitley, welcomed their now 7-month-old daughter, Hayden, last November. They sweated out arrival dates, hoping it wouldn't fall on a Sunday game day. Whitley delivered in the middle of the week, between games with the Bears on Nov. 22 and the Patriots on Nov. 29.

"It was a different type of love instantly," Darian said. "You realize how strong women are, seeing them give birth to a child. You just love them that much more."

The Stewart family resides in Charlotte, N.C., Whitley's hometown. Despite daily FaceTime chats, the toughest part of Darian's past year was being in Denver for offseason workouts and missing Hayden's first crawl. He won't miss her first steps, though. They'll all be in Denver soon.

If you don't know who he is, Darian will never tell you he's an NFL player. Family members and former coaches say Darian is among the least likely players to go broke. It took him six years in the NFL to get a chain, his brother joked. He even budgeted for that.

"He's my little brother, but I look up to him," Jared said. "I never met somebody that wrote down all his goals and achieved every last one of them. Well, except the NBA."

Huntsville's hero

Coach Stewart has a nice ring to it. Sometime after his NFL career is over, Darian sees himself coaching high school football, likely in Charlotte or in Huntsville.

He completed his third annual Stewart Standouts youth football camp in Huntsville last month with about 500 children in attendance. The camp has become one of the highlights of Darian's year, as he helps mentor and teach kids in a way that many of his high school coaches did for him.

"That would be a no-brainer for him," O'Connor said. "He's such an even-keeled person. He would star as a coach too."

More than anything, Darian wants to make a lasting impact on the city that helped make him. As far as Darian knows, he's the only player from Huntsville to win a Super Bowl. He is the city's champion, recently elected to the town's Hall of Fame.

He lights up when recalling his favorite moment of the year — besides Super Bowl 50 — when he went back to Lee High School to be honored. He chatted and shook hands with the kids and all of a sudden one screamed out, "I'm never washing this hand again."

Darian Stewart, T.J. Ward anchors of the Denver defense

By Cameron Wolfe
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walked into a Broncos defense that was already built, talented and somewhat defined.

When fellow safety T.J. Ward first lined up next to Stewart in training camp, he didn't know what to expect. Ward has played with a lot of safeties during his NFL career but has jelled with only a few.

Ward was pleasantly surprised that Stewart was such a good fit.

"We had an immediate chemistry," Ward said. "I think that's us being in the league for six years and he plays with a chip on his shoulder just like me. We have that same mentality. It's easy to play with."

Stewart earned the Broncos' respect, then earned a starting job. He also ended up earning the role as quarterback of the defense.

The Broncos had a lot of talent before Stewart arrived, but what he brought from Baltimore was the "missing piece," he said, to make their defense an elite group.

Ward already was the enforcer. But since joining the Broncos as a free agent during the offseason, Stewart has brought even more aggressiveness to a defense loaded with athleticism.

Denver cornerback Aqib Talib likes to call Stewart and Ward the "farmers and bangers" of the team. It's his way of saying they do the dirty work and harass the wide receivers who venture across the middle.

"We're nasty dudes that love to play football, love to hit, love to be aggressive and smart too," Ward said.

Their intelligence is what sets them apart. In today's NFL, where big hits are becoming more criticized than celebrated, a safety needs to know when not to lower the boom.

While outside linebackers Von Miller and DeMarcus Ware and cornerbacks Talib and Chris Harris take home much-deserved recognition and honors, Stewart and Ward are the heart and soul of the Denver defense from their positions in the secondary.

"At safety, you have to speak with confidence. You can't whisper on the field because that'll mess everybody else up," Stewart said. "Me and T.J., we built that chemistry from Day One. We're real vocal on the field."

When the AFC champion Broncos struggled most this season, it came with Stewart or Ward battling injuries.

In the Denver defense's worst performance of the season, Dec. 20 at Pittsburgh, Steelers star Ben Roethlisberger took advantage of the wounded secondary and threw for 380 yards and three touchdowns. He was the only quarterback to throw for 300 yards against the Broncos this season.

Backup safeties Josh Bush, Shiloh Keo, David Bruton and Omar Bolden held their own but couldn't replace the starters' capability. In the regular season, the Broncos went 10-2 with Stewart and Ward playing and 2-2 when at least one was missing.

Even as veterans in the league, Stewart and Ward felt disrespected. For most of his career, Ward was labeled a "box" safety, suggesting he wasn't good in space against the passing game. During the AFC championship game Jan. 24 in Denver, Ward was the primary defensive player assigned to the New England Patriots' most dangerous weapon, tight end Rob Gronkowski, whenever Gronkowski was split out wide in a formation. For the most part, Ward did well.

Stewart was beginning to earn a journeyman title, heading to his third NFL team in six seasons. He signed a two-year, \$4.25 million contract last March, a deal that is turning out to be a bargain even though he probably will receive another \$1.75 million in incentives based on playing time.

Sunday in Super Bowl 50, Ward and Stewart will have a huge challenge trying to slow the Carolina Panthers' passing game. Tight end Greg Olsen creates matchup issues.

Stewart (sprained right knee) and Ward (sprained left ankle) are dealing with injuries, but they participated in practice Thursday.

"It's a close-knit group," Denver coach Gary Kubiak said of his defense. "I'm glad they're all together for Sunday because it's been a tough ride, especially at the safety position."

Broncos Q&A: Darian Stewart talks Steelers, No. 1 defense, more

By Nicki Jhabvala
Denver Post
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The focus was more on the names leaving Colorado than the ones arriving. Julius Thomas. Orlando Franklin. Terrance Knighton. Rahim Moore.

The Broncos' free agent Class of 2015 had cache, and prices to match. But one arrival proved to be the most significant offseason move for the Broncos.

Darian Stewart, a safety who had played for Gary Kubiak in Baltimore in 2014, signed with the Broncos last March at a bargain rate of \$4.25 million over two years.

"I feel like I'm going to be the final piece to the puzzle," Stewart told The Denver Post then. "The secondary they have there is one of the tops in the league and adding myself, I think we can get it done out there."

Stewart, who considered playing basketball at Memphis before his mother encouraged him to pursue football, fulfilled his promise.

A recent hamstring injury kept him out of the Broncos' last meeting with the Steelers, in Pittsburgh. But he doesn't expect to sit out the next one, when Denver hosts the Steelers in an AFC divisional playoff game Sunday. In fact, he hopes to pick up right where he left off against the Steelers.

Last January, Stewart saved one of his finest performances in the Ravens' wild-card victory at Pittsburgh, where he prevented an Antonio Brown touchdown, intercepted a pass by Ben Roethlisberger and recovered a fumble.

As he prepared for Sunday, Stewart spoke to The Post about the playoffs, the Broncos' defense and more:

Q: Do you notice a different feel in playoff games?

A: "Yeah, the atmosphere is a lot different. The mistakes are critical and you have to limit those, but at the same time, it's still football. You have to go out there and play your best."

Q: What's it been like playing for defensive coordinator Wade Phillips?

A: "Fine. Relaxed. It's great to have a coach like that."

Q: Is he different from most other coaches you've had in the NFL?

A: "Yeah. I just like how he approaches everything, week in and week out. He's a hell of a coach. It's just an honor to play for a guy like that. He just lets you be you and allows you to just go play."

Q: This defense is a pretty tight-knit group, but you came in and seemed to fit in seamlessly. Does it feel like that for you?

A: "Yeah, I think it's more just doing stuff outside of work. Just getting to know each other, just getting to know your teammates off the field and just building that bond. It's great. You don't get that on a lot of teams. It's definitely important."

Q: You guys had the No. 1 defense in the league, but had only one first-team all-pro selection, in outside linebacker Von Miller, and one second-team all-pro, in cornerback Chris Harris. Do you get worked up over the rankings and the individual honors?

A: "Nah. It's been like that for me for a while, so I don't really pay it any attention. It is what it is. People are going to have their opinions."

Q: Extra fuel?

A: "No, we just keep doing what we've been doing. That's what got us here. We have the No. 1 defense in the league. We just keep working."

Stewart backs up his words, anchors Denver's secondary

By Arnie Stapleton
Associated Press
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When Darian Stewart followed Gary Kubiak from Baltimore to Denver in the offseason, he declared himself the "final piece of the puzzle" in the Broncos' star-studded secondary.

What he lacked in the Pro Bowl trips that Aqib Talib, Chris Harris Jr. and T.J. Ward have all made, Stewart more than made up for in bravado.

It turns out that wasn't just bluster, either.

The newest member of the "No Fly Zone" has helped Denver build the league's top defense. The Broncos (10-2), who face Oakland (5-7) on Sunday, are the only team in the NFL that hasn't allowed a 300-yard passer all season.

Kubiak and defensive coordinator Wade Phillips call the sixth-year safety the quarterback of the secondary.

Save for his big pronouncement when he signed a two-year, \$4.25 million contract in March, Stewart is quiet and reserved off the field. But he embraces the role of being a big talker and a big hitter on the field.

"You're just running the show. You're the one who talks the most on the field, you have to be verbal as a free safety, being able to line each other up and just knowing the defenses and making sure your corners get the calls so they can play the right technique," Stewart said. "That's pretty much the whole thing about being a free safety is just making sure everyone's lined up."

That could prove especially critical Sunday against the Raiders with Ward (ankle), David Bruton Jr. (knee) and Omar Bolden (hamstring) all hurting. Reinforcement Josh Bush is playing in his second game of the season and newly signed safety Shiloh Keo is making his Denver debut.

"Most definitely. I think it's critical," Stewart said. "Even with the original players out there, because on the back end man, one play, one mess-up, that can be a touchdown. So, communication is key."

Stewart has collected 49 tackles, eight pass breakups, a forced fumble, two fumble recoveries and an interception this season, although his biggest hit was a pass breakup that knocked Patriots tight end Rob Gronkowski out with a knee injury two weeks ago.

Stewart replaced Rahim Moore, who left for a three-year, \$12 million deal with Houston, in the lineup. The versatile Stewart is a better tackler than Moore, best known for getting beat on Jacoby Jones' 70-yard touchdown in the playoffs three years ago.

Stewart played in St. Louis from 2010-13 after going undrafted out of South Carolina, then had a solid season in Baltimore last year, securing the Ravens' wild-card win over Pittsburgh with a late interception in the end zone.

He's having his best season yet in Phillips' defense that simplifies matters and allows for fast, instinctive play.

"He fits great," Talib said. "D-Stew fits great. Having two safeties that will come down and pop you like that puts a lot of fear in (receivers') hearts. We kind of lacked that last year from the free safety. Stew definitely brought that to the table and you can see how much it's helped us."

The Broncos have enough coverage skills to free Stewart to do what he does best: read the play and go hit the guy with the ball.

"Man, he's been a great pickup," Harris said. "He has great intelligence back there. He kind of sees where the quarterback's going to attack. We're telling Stew to just trust me and Talib to shut down receivers and go help on those tight ends. And when those tight ends are catching the ball, he's coming down and just laying the hammer and that's what we need."

Notes: TE Vernon Davis made enough progress in concussion protocol to resume practicing Thursday. ... OLB Shane Ray was sent home sick with a sore throat. ... QB Peyton Manning threw on his own for a second day. Manning will miss his fourth straight game Sunday. ... Kubiak said he wouldn't hesitate to start Juwan Thompson if he has to with Ronnie Hillman (foot) and C.J. Anderson (ankle) ailing. ... OLB DeMarcus Ware (back) is set to return from a four-week absence and NT Sylvester Williams (ankle) is expected to return Sunday after missing last week's game. ... Phillips on Von Miller's sack dances: "I don't really know what he's doing, but I'm glad he's doing it." And, no, Phillips has no two-step tips for his fellow Texan: "I can only do the YMCA and that's about it," Phillips said.

Darian Stewart, quarterback of Broncos' secondary

By Cameron Wolfe

Denver Post

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Broncos' safety Darian Stewart arrived in Denver as a relative unknown. He was the lone defensive starter coming from outside of the Broncos' already tight-knit defense.

Stewart had flashed talent during his five years in St. Louis and Baltimore, but when he arrived, he was just a guy to replace Rahim Moore.

Fast forward to December and Stewart has been the Broncos' best offseason pickup. He's an upgrade over Moore and a stabilizing force on a defense bitten by injuries and suspensions.

"He's our quarterback in the secondary," defensive coordinator Wade Phillips said.

That's a lot of praise for a new face in a secondary with three Pro Bowl starters. It's a testament to his intelligence and ability to think on the job. And of course, his play.

There was a time when T.J. Ward was the Broncos' lone safety delivering bone-chilling hits. Stewart now shares that role because, as he puts it, "the man has to go down."

Against New England, Stewart went low three times on Patriots' tight end Rob Gronkowski. He dislodged the ball free on two of the hits and one caused a knee injury to Gronkowski.

Sunday against the Chargers at San Diego, Stewart again did what he does best. He says his job is to dislodge the ball from the receiver, which he did three times to Chargers' receivers coming across the middle for seemingly easy catches. His production hasn't gone unnoticed.

"D-Stew fits great," Broncos cornerback Aqib Talib said. "Having two safeties that will come down and pop you like that puts a lot of fear in (receivers') hearts. We kind of lacked that last year from the free safety. Stew definitely brought that to the table, and you can see how much it's helped us."

Moore, a free-roaming coverage safety not known for his tackling ability, didn't bring that to the Broncos. Moore, who signed a three-year, \$12-million deal with Houston in the offseason, has been a healthy scratch for the Texans' past five games.

Stewart has played 91 percent of the Broncos' defensive snaps this season, second only to cornerback Chris Harris.

What has impressed Broncos coach Gary Kubiak the most is Stewart's ability to keep a highly fluctuating unit on track.

Despite the Broncos missing Talib, Ward and now likely safety David Bruton because of injuries and suspensions at different points, Stewart has been a constant on a passing defense that has ranked best in the league for most of the season.

Stewart is second on the team with eight pass deflections and his lone interception came in the end zone during the final minute of the Broncos' opening game against Stewart's former team, the Ravens.

"I want quarterbacks to know they have to throw it somewhere else," Stewart, 27, said.

Stewart signed a 2-year, \$4.25 million deal in the offseason. The Broncos signed free-agent tight ends Owen Daniels, Virgil Green and guards Shelley Smith and Evan Mathis for more money per year, but none of them have made the impact that Stewart has this season.

Cornerback Chris Harris' eyes widened, a smile emerged and his voice got a little bit louder when he began talking about what Stewart has brought to the defense.

"Man, he's been a huge pickup, great pickup. D-Stew has great intelligence back there. He sees where the quarterback is going to attack," Harris said. "When the tight ends are catching the ball, he's coming down and laying the hammer, and that's what we need."

Through my eyes: Darian Stewart seals Broncos' win

By Darian Stewart
DenverBroncos.com
September 15, 2015

The week before our game against the Baltimore Ravens, I told our defensive backs coach Joe Woods that I was going to catch a pick this week.

Every single practice we work on making big plays and finding ways to change the momentum – but my determination to get an interception was rooted in something bigger. Before becoming a Bronco during the offseason, I was a Raven for a year.

Our goal for the game was simple: play fast and physical. That's the goal every week. Last week we wanted to accomplish that and most definitely, without a doubt, we achieved that. It was a physical game all around, but I think we were the most physical.

The game came down to the wire at the end of the fourth quarter. We were leading, 19-13, but the Ravens were driving toward our end zone.

With less than two minutes left in the game, the Ravens made their way to our red zone, but on third-and-10, something was wrong. I felt a little sharp pain through my leg.

"Go out if you're hurt," cornerback Aqib Talib told me. But it was a critical moment in the game and I felt like I had some more juice in me to finish so I just stayed in.

I was in the coverage and had good vision on Baltimore quarterback Joe Flacco and he just so happened to throw it to the seam. He put some air under it and I was able to get to it. I think if he would have put it on a straight line, I wouldn't have been able to get in front of their tight end Crockett Gillmore. But he put air under it and with good coverage from David Bruton Jr., I was able to get it – and seal our first win of the season.

It was a great feeling. I felt like I stepped up for the team and was able to make a play when it was what was needed.

Going into the game I had three interceptions in my NFL career – and I can remember every single one of them because they were almost all in red-zone situations and one was a pick-six. Now I have four interceptions in game-changing situations.

When I got back to my locker after the game, I had over 100 text messages. But I'll never forget those who have always had my back, so the first people I texted were my friends who I grew up with.

While the play was amazing and one that I'll never forget, it's time to move on. This Thursday is a new game at Kansas City and it's time to put Sunday's game to rest.

But, they say, "Once you catch one, they come in bunches."

Darian Stewart helps his new team beat his old team

By Rod Mackey

9 News

September 13, 2015

The number 26 has brought back bad Baltimore flashbacks to for a few years but thanks to Darian Stewart, that number can now put on smile on the faces of Broncos fans everywhere.

The Ravens handed the Broncos one of their worst defeats in franchise history when Joe Flacco beat Rahim Moore, number 26, late in that playoff game in January of 2013.

In Sundays season opener Flacco almost beat the Broncos again, but the new number 26, Darian Stewart, instead intercepted the ball in the end zone to clinch the win.

"I'm aware of it, but that's one guy. I'm not one to make anything out of it. It's a new guy, so I'm able to make that play," said Stewart.

Making Sundays win even better for the new Safety is that it came against his former team. Last season Darian Stewart was a Raven.

"It felt great. That's my old team and it was just good to go out there and finally get to hit them. I wasn't ever able to touch them last year, so I was active today. It was good. We knew that someone had to make a big play. They were able to get the ball all the way down to the 10. Joe came to me, so it was good."

Stewart was just a part of another great day by the Denver defense, a defense that this new Bronco believes can be special.

"I think that we can be No. 1 absolutely, without a doubt. From the rush to the secondary and linebackers, I think that we have what it takes. It's just staying consistent and just playing ball. I was thinking the other day, the potential that we have in that room is big. Every week there's someone that's going to have to see us."

Darian Stewart more than a safety valve for Broncos

By Troy Renck
DenverPost.com
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In an effort to create competition and microwave player evaluations, the Broncos held joint practices with the 49ers this past week. The prevailing silence was unsettling because it sat in stark contrast to the chirping of the 5,000 fans during training camp. There were no fights. No pushing. No shoving. And little talking, save for San Francisco linebacker NaVorro Bowman accusing an official of a hometown call on a juggling reception by Denver's Cody Latimer.

With one play, Darian Stewart returned the cacophony to the Broncos sideline by intercepting a pass by the 49ers' Colin Kaepernick. Denver's defense boasts 12 sacks this preseason, and with tempered optimism, general manager John Elway said it is the most talented defense since he arrived in 2011.

Interestingly, there is only one prominent new starter: Stewart. The conclusion remains easy to draw: Wade Phillips' 3-4 defense fits the personnel better, and Stewart's addition fortified a secondary that aims to be the NFL's best.

"No doubt," Stewart said. "That's the goal."

Signed as a free agent from Baltimore, Stewart took hold of the free safety position in the spring and has only tightened his grip over the past month as the Broncos face the 49ers on Saturday in their preseason home debut.

"Stewart has done a really good job, he's learned the defense, he really plays well," defensive coordinator Wade Phillips said. "He plays fast in the games. I like that about him."

Stewart struggled with inconsistency in Baltimore last season, losing his job at one point. However, he played his best game in the Ravens' playoff upset of the Steelers. Stewart replaced Rahim Moore, who signed with Houston as a free agent. They couldn't be more different. Stewart is softspoken. Moore is an energetic run-on sentence. Stewart seeks contact. Moore plays a deep center field.

Stewart's skill set makes him interchangeable with strong safety T.J. Ward, varying the defensive looks.

"The defense is just pretty much straight forward. That has helped," Stewart said. "I am believing what I am seeing. Playing with T.J. helps. You know you can count on him. He has your back. "

A stout 5-foot-11, 214 pounds, Stewart has made three tackles in 42 snaps in the first two exhibition games. With two new starters last season, the secondary required time to gain trust, finally coalescing in November. The communication has improved dramatically this season, helped by Stewart's quick learning curve.

"He's very smart and calm back there. That's what I like about him," Ward said. "You never really see him flustered, you never really see him out of position."

Performance and maintenance carry equal importance to Stewart. Playing at altitude and in a dry climate, leg issues are prevalent. Stewart has worked extensively on his flexibility.

"Every off day I find something to keep my body right, whether that's stretching or massage," Stewart said. "And it helps that Coach (Gary) Kubiak takes care of his players like he does. You are already seeing the results."

Through two games, the first-string defense has not allowed a touchdown. There are reasons to believe, Stewart insisted, that this is a preview not just another preseason mirage.

"It's just coach Wade. He challenges us. Everyone's job is to get to the ball," Stewart said. "When you have 11 guys with good speed, doing that, good things are going to continue to happen."

Stewart steps up

The Broncos feature only one defensive starter who didn't play regularly last season: free safety Darian Stewart. NFL reporter Troy E. Renck with a look at the newcomer:

- Star basketball player along with twin brother Jared at Lee High School in Huntsville, Ala..
- Considered playing college hoops at Memphis before choosing football at South Carolina
- -Made St. Louis Rams as an undrafted free agent in 2010.
- His first interception came against New Orleans' Drew Brees in 2011.
- Joined Baltimore Ravens last season, starting 14 games and delivering his best performance in playoff victory over Pittsburgh.
- Has made three tackles in two preseason games.

Darian Stewart and T.J. Ward: From the NFL Combine to the Mile High City

By Allie Raymond
DenverBroncos.com
August 12, 2015

Just a few months into his tenure with the Broncos, safety Darian Stewart is already fitting right in with Denver's Pro Bowl-laden secondary.

But one defensive back in particular that Stewart has been clicking with isn't a new acquaintance. Safety T.J. Ward and Stewart go back five years to the 2010 NFL Combine where both up-and-coming safeties met and became fast friends.

"We actually came in together," Stewart said of their first meeting. "I met T.J. at the combine. When we play each other, we actually chop it up here and there, but the relationship is good. It's good chemistry."

"It's been good," Ward said of teaming up with Stewart. "I remember D. Stew from when we came in together at the combine. We even talked and hung out a little bit at the Combine. So I knew when we signed him it would be a good fit for us. He's been playing very well. I think we're getting closer to that cohesion and chemistry."

Now five years since they first met, both Stewart and Ward have both found a home in Denver as they each prepare for the start of their sixth season in the NFL. But unlike other seasons, this year the friends will line up next to each other in the orange and blue with Stewart at free safety and Ward at strong safety.

"I'll tell you what, it's cool, man. You never know," Stewart said. "Meeting new people and to actually work with them, I think that it's good."

Stewart joins a proficient secondary that is backed by a trio of Pro Bowlers in Ward and cornerbacks Chris Harris Jr. and Aqib Talib, all of whom were stout defensive forces for the Broncos last season. The three of them already work well together, but Ward isn't worried about Stewart fitting in with them.

"I think it's kind of working," Ward said. "We're all working together. Because me, Chris and Talib have only really had one year, so we're still kind of learning each other and feeling each other and how guys play. [We're] trying to have that nonverbal communication where you already know what they're going to do. So it's almost like he's just coming in and we're still learning together."

Time will only help the defensive backs find cohesion. In Ward's words, "That's only going to come with games," but they'll give the first glimpse of their progress on Friday when the Broncos head to Seattle for their first preseason game of the year.

"I think that we're there and it's only going to get better," Stewart said. "I feel like I have been doing a good job with making sure that the communication is there and getting everyone lined up. It's only going to get better as the season goes. I think that these preseason games will help us a lot."

At the moment, Darian Stewart leads Broncos' crowded race at free safety

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN.com

June 12, 2015

On a team that has won four consecutive AFC West titles, made one Super Bowl and has a defensive depth chart littered with players who were named to the Pro Bowl last season, there are not a lot of places where the Help Wanted sign is out.

However, with the departure of Rahim Moore via free agency this past March -- he played more than 1,000 snaps for the team in '14 -- free safety is one of those positions. And it's clear at least two of the players who are possible fits believe they can win the job.

There's Darian Stewart, who played for the Baltimore Ravens last season when Broncos coach Gary Kubiak was the Ravens' offensive coordinator.

"It's my position," Stewart said earlier this offseason. "It's my position to lose. When I line up, I feel like at this level you've got to have confidence. When I signed here, I knew it was my job."

And there's David Bruton Jr., who is the only player remaining from the Broncos' 2009 draft class, who believes increased playing time on defense in the 2014 season should lead to more.

As he has put it: "I envision myself playing a lot more. I envision myself starting. I'm dreaming big this season."

Stewart has worked much of the time with the starters in the offseason workouts thus far, including this past week's mandatory minicamp, at least in the base defense. When the Broncos took a more limited approach in free agency this time around, Stewart was one of their first targets.

He has dealt with some nagging injuries in the past and has started more than six games in just two of his five previous seasons.

"I'm loving Stewart right now," cornerback Chris Harris Jr. said. "He's very vocal and a smart guy. I can tell that he's going to have a physical presence. When running backs come through the hole, I feel like he's going to land the hammer on them ... so I'm loving what Stewart's bringing, how fast he's picking up the defense and the chemistry that we've already built together out there on the field. I love that pickup right now."

But Bruton figures to get some looks in training camp as well while coach Gary Kubiak and defensive coordinator Wade Phillips have said cornerback Bradley Roby could see some time at safety as well in some situations.

The feeling is Roby, who played 75 percent of the defense's snaps last season in the specialty packages, is too good in coverage not to be in the lineup more. But with two Pro Bowl cornerbacks in Aqib Talib

and Harris, the only place for Roby to play in the base defense would be at free safety, alongside strong safety T.J. Ward.

But the Broncos haven't done much with that idea yet, which means that should also be on the training camp docket.

"We have a package," Phillips said. "He's pretty proficient at cornerback, so I'm pleased with that. And that's what we wanted, to make sure he could play that position and be really good at that, and then if we play three corners coming in where he'll play some safety.

"We've got three corners that can play, and if we need to move him into a certain package, we will, and we'll do that later on."

Omar Bolden is another player the Broncos have taken a look at in one of the safety spots as well. Bolden figures to get the first extended look as the team's kickoff returner and his experience at both safety and cornerback in his time with the Broncos only enhances his value.

"We'll look at all of them and see how it shakes out," Phillips said. "I think Darian probably said it, but it's probably his job to lose. He's there right now as the first-team guy, so he's got to prove he can play."

"It's good, competition is what I need," Stewart said. "It makes all of us better. I'm up for the challenge and as long as we stay healthy it's going to be a heck of a battle."

Darian Stewart believes he will adapt quickly to his new surroundings

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN.com

May 22, 2015

One of the first things Denver Broncos strength and conditioning coach Luke Richesson tells new arrivals is that athletic life at altitude (the team's weight room is a mile above sea level) is a different and far drier proposition.

For a recently signed player like safety Darian Stewart, the message has to get through if Stewart is going to contribute to the team's defense as much as both he and the team would like him to.

Stewart's 14 starts for the Baltimore Ravens were a career best. It was also the only time in his five seasons that he had played in all 16 games in a regular season. In four seasons with the St. Louis Rams, Stewart dealt with hamstring injuries and there was a feeling among some of the coaches there that flexibility and hydration were at the root of at least some of the issues.

Lessons Stewart says he has taken to heart.

"I have a stretch guy," Stewart said earlier this week at the Broncos' suburban Denver complex. "I'm really big on stretching. No matter how bad I'm down, if I don't feel right, I make sure I get a stretch in. I feel like me staying stretched out and my hips are open, I'm good."

In his one season with the Ravens, Stewart publicly discussed making a more concerted effort to increase his flexibility and to improve his hydration habits. And that's certainly something the Broncos' players quickly learn either the easy way or the hard way.

Humidity is lower at higher altitudes, sweat evaporates more quickly than at elevations closer to sea level and according to organizations such as the Wilderness Medical Society, you can lose water through respiration at higher altitude twice as quickly as you do at sea level. It all adds up to the message Richesson and the trainers give to all of the Broncos: Even when they think they've had enough to drink, drink some more.

"You dehydrate pretty quickly, so you definitely have to stay hydrated," Stewart said. "Being up here and getting acclimated to the weather has been good. It's going to help me when we go down south to wherever we have to play at."

The Broncos went into free agency hoping to find a safety who could contribute quickly on defense. They signed Stewart to a two-year deal with a \$1.5 million signing bonus.

It may take some time for coaches to pair Stewart with safety T.J. Ward in the base defense because some of Stewart's former coaches have described him as being better in a more physical role rather than in coverage -- a description that fits Ward as well. When Ward moves to more of a weakside linebacker in some of the specialty packages, the defense has multiple roles available. Last year, David Bruton Jr. played down the stretch at safety, alongside Moore, when Ward moved to linebacker.

That leaves plenty of playing time to be carved out and determined as the Broncos move through the current offseason workouts and training camp. Bruton has said he's approaching things as if he is the starter; Stewart also pictures himself at the top of the depth chart.

"It's my position, it's my position to lose," Stewart said. "When I line up, I feel like at this level you've got to have confidence. When I signed here, I knew it was my job ... I'm feeling well. Last year I was feeling well and it's all about just staying consistent."

Broncos notes: Darian Stewart replaces Rahim Moore

By Mike Klis

9 News Sports

May 21, 2015

So long as Darian Stewart goes after the deep ball the way he's going after the starting free safety job, the Denver Broncos shouldn't have to relive the Flacco Fling, or any other long-pass nightmare this season.

"It's my position," Stewart said. "It's my position to lose. When I line up, I feel like at this level you've got to have confidence. When I signed here, I knew it was my job."

It is. The Broncos are paying \$2.25 million this year to Stewart in return for replacing Rahim Moore, who was set free to the open market and the Houston Texans.

Moore was a 3 ½-year starting safety during his four previous seasons with the Broncos, but he will be remembered for misplaying Joe Flacco's game-tying 70-yard touchdown heave to Jacoby Jones with 31 seconds remaining in regulation of Baltimore's eventual playoff win following the 2012 season.

Defending the ball over the head may be the most important play for a free safety but to Stewart it's not necessarily the most difficult.

"The open-field tackle," Stewart said. "Especially if you've got a back like LeSean McCoy. That's pretty tough. But, that's what makes you a great player, being able to make those plays."

Stewart, 26, was a second-year starter for the St. Louis Rams in 2011 but he was continually hobbled by nagging injuries in his next two seasons. His hamstring in particular was a nuisance.

But after moving on to Baltimore last year, Stewart made adjustments to his physical routine and started 14 games for the Ravens.

"I have a stretch guy," he said. "No matter how bad I'm down, if I don't feel right, I make sure I get a stretch in. I feel like me staying stretched out and if my hips are open, I'm good."

Dismissed

Bronco veteran players were dismissed for the long Memorial Day weekend following their workout Wednesday. Rookies have to come in for a little more work Thursday.

Veterans and rookies will reconvene Tuesday for the team's annual, pre-OTA golf outing.

The first of 10 organized team activity (OTA) practices will be next Wednesday.

Broncos 2-point stats

During the Peyton Manning era (2012-present), the Broncos have converted 3 of 5 two-point tries. That includes a 2 of 2 mark in 2014. It does not include that memorable 2-point conversion in Super Bowl XLVIII that had a way of sticking out in the 43-8 final-score loss to Seattle.

Kubiak's 2-point mark in his previous six years with Baltimore and Houston: 4 of 9. With the league moving back the extra-point kick to 33 yards out this year, the Broncos may be attempting more two-point conversions.

Darian Stewart 'ready to work' in Broncos' secondary

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN

March 13, 2015

Darian Stewart has been around the NFL long enough to know what he's getting himself into, and he's just fine with that.

With an opening at free safety after Rahim Moore departed to the Houston Texans in free agency, the Denver Broncos signed Stewart Friday to a two-year deal. And Stewart now joins a secondary where the free safety was the only starting position not manned by a Pro Bowler last season.

Cornerback Chris Harris Jr., cornerback Aqib Talib and safety T.J. Ward each played in the Pro Bowl in January.

"I feel like I'm the final piece to the puzzle," Stewart said on a conference call Friday from Atlanta, where he was scheduled to visit the Atlanta Falcons. "The secondary, they're one of the tops in the league, and I felt like they can get it done out there. We have a great organization and we have the personnel in place to get it done."

Moore, who got a three-year, \$12 million deal from the Texans, started 48 games in his four seasons with the Broncos. The draft class is considered to be thin at the position, so Broncos executive vice president of football operations/general manager John Elway had said earlier in the week that safety was one of the positions where the team would try to sign a player in the coming days.

Stewart played in all 16 games, starting 14, for the Baltimore Ravens last season. Some personnel executives said in recent days that Stewart was guilty of mental errors at times, but some who have coached him say they liked his willingness to stick his nose into the action and had improved his reliability as a tackler.

"I'm just ready to work. I feel like I always play with a chip on my shoulder, and that chip still remains," Stewart said. "I'm not done yet, I'm just ready to make plays. I'm excited about coming out there and getting to work and working with the secondary."

Stewart entered the league with the Rams as an undrafted rookie in 2010. The Broncos won't specifically divvy up the playing time until the new coaching staff gets the players on the field.

But defensive coordinator Wade Phillips has the personnel to do at least some mix-and-match work in the secondary in a variety of down-and-distance situations if he wishes. The Broncos used Bradley Roby on 75 percent of the defense's snaps last season, and his playing time isn't likely to decrease as offenses aren't going to stop running plenty of three- and four-wide receiver sets against Denver.

Players like Omar Bolden, who has played at both cornerback and safety for the Broncos, could also get some situational work, as could safety David Bruton Jr., who often played in the team's seven-defensive back look last season.

Stewart said he's simply ready to dive in wherever he's needed.

"One thing about this league, the more you can do, the better off you will be." he said. "My versatility, it helps me a lot. But not just with the safeties -- just trying to know where everyone's at. I take pride in that. It all plays its part, especially with run fits and on the back end."

Stewart added he met Ward at the 2010 scouting combine, when Ward was coming into the league after finishing his career at the University of Oregon. Stewart was actually listed as a strong safety prospect by many teams before that draft.

"I think we will work together just fine. ... He's a good dude," Stewart said. "He's a thumper and I think I add to their bunch. It's great with my versatility, playing back deep and getting the ball."

Safety Darian Stewart, Broncos agree to two-year deal

By Mike Klis

The Denver Post

March 13, 2015

These Broncos are nothing if not adaptable.

A year ago, their free-agent motto was: You get what you pay for.

Their new rallying cry for 2015: It's not how much you spend on a player, but whether that player is worth the price.

If this were a boxscore, the Broncos appear to be 4-for-4 in value, not costly free-agent signings this season after they reached two-year agreements Friday with safety Darian Stewart and left guard Shelley Smith.

Stewart, 27, was told by Broncos authorities he would replace Rahim Moore as the starting free safety.

"Correct," he said Friday in a conference call with the Denver media.

Smith, also 27, received the type of money — \$5.65 million over two years — that suggests he will replace Orlando Franklin at left guard.

Last year, the Broncos' top four free-agent acquisitions — Aqib Talib (\$57 million), DeMarcus Ware (\$30 million), T.J. Ward (\$22.5 million) and Emmanuel Sanders (\$15 million) — received multi-year contracts worth a combined \$124.5 million.

This year, the Broncos' four new free-agent players — Owen Daniels (\$12.25 million), Stewart (\$4 million), Smith (\$5.65 million) and Vance Walker (\$4 million) — signed for an estimated \$25.9 million combined. Almost \$100 million less.

Oh, and by the way, Broncos general manager John Elway and coach Gary Kubiak are getting along quite nicely, thank you. Three of the Broncos' four new players have Kubiak connections. Daniels and Stewart played last season for the Baltimore Ravens, where Kubiak was the offensive coordinator. Smith, a former Colorado State standout, was with Kubiak's Houston Texans in 2010-11.

With the Broncos, Stewart joins a secondary that has three Pro Bowlers in strong safety Ward and cornerbacks Chris Harris and Aqib Talib. Harris received a five-year, \$42.5 million contract extension in December.

And don't forget Bradley Roby, a first-round draft pick who had an impressive rookie season in 2014.

"I feel like I'm going to be the final piece to the puzzle," Stewart said. "The secondary they have there is one of the tops in the league and adding myself, I think we can get it done out there."

Stewart visited with the Broncos on Thursday, then met with the Atlanta Falcons on Friday before making his decision. He was speaking from the Atlanta airport waiting to fly home to Charlotte, N.C.

The Broncos must still address center, right tackle, fullback and defensive line, but those positions will either be filled in the draft or with even deeper discounted free agents.

Otherwise, the bulk of the Broncos' work is done. Daniels replaces Julius Thomas at tight end, Walker essentially replaces Terrance Knighton along the defensive line, Smith will have an edge on Ben Garland in the competition to replace Franklin at left guard and Stewart is to replace Moore.

What It Means: Darian Stewart the newest safety

By Andrew Mson
DenverBroncos.com
March 13, 2015

Darian Stewart's game-clinching interception late in the fourth quarter on Jan. 3 cemented Baltimore's wild-card win over Pittsburgh and capped a season in which he delivered his most consistent start-to-finish performance in his five seasons to date.

His tackling improved. He cut his mistakes in coverage. He worked at both strong and free safety, enhancing his value.

And now he gets to play with a first-team secondary that already features three Pro Bowlers, all of whom are locked in with long-term contracts for the next three years of more.

"I feel like I'm the final piece of the puzzle," Stewart said. "The secondary, man, they're one of the [best] in the league, and adding myself, I think we can get it done out there."

As a tackler, Stewart turned a corner in 2014. ProFootballFocus.com credited him with eight missed tackles, a rate of one every 6.625 opportunities that ranks 42nd among 87 safeties who took at least 25 percent of their team's defensive snaps.

That's a much better rate than the man he will replace. Moore had 12 missed tackles, and with one miss every 4.583 opportunities, he ranked 75th of the 87 safeties.

Tackling was the area in which Stewart made his biggest leap last year. In four years with the Rams, he had 36 missed tackles, according to ProFootballFocus.com -- one every 4.138 opportunities.

In his St. Louis years, Stewart too often went for the massive, shoulder-leading shot rather than the proper form tackle. With the Ravens, he improved his fundamentals, and that helped him minimize big plays and reduce the yardage after the catch permitted -- from 6.12 yards per reception from 2010-13 to 5.71 yards, per ProFootballFocus.com.

If Stewart can continue to improve at containing plays deep when the need arises, that will free strong safety T.J. Ward to attack on intermediate routes.

"He's a thumper, man, and I think I add to that with my versatility and playing back deep and getting the ball," Stewart said.