

Evolution of offense is tailored to defenders like Su'a Cravens

By Andrew Mason
DenverBroncos.com
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It seems logical that the notion of a "chess-piece" player should not be confined to offense. Rather, the concept can also apply to the defensive players who are schemed and used to counter the blizzard of routes run by potential pass-catching targets in this air-centric era of pro football.

Su'a Cravens can be a chess piece.

Bigger than most safeties, lighter than most linebackers, but with the speed to cover running backs and the size to hold his own against tight ends, Cravens boasts a skill set and a collection of physical attributes that makes him uniquely suited to provide a defensive response to the evolution of offensive football.

"I'd have to thank the Patriots for that," Cravens said, "because you go against a team that goes five-wide, and three of the five wide are tight ends, you can't put a nickel back on a tight end, because it's a jump ball, and it's big-boy football right there. It's a mismatch the entire game.

"You can't have the big, run-through-wall linebackers that can't guard out of the backfield, because the running backs are getting shifty and they're starting to use them a lot like receivers -- look at Cleveland with Duke Johnson, look at the Patriots when they had Dion Lewis and Danny Woodhead. So it's nothing new. It's always been a matchup plan."

It's nothing new, except that defenses have a better understanding of how to use Cravens, who might have been labeled a "tweener" in previous decades but has a sound, secure role in a defense now -- that of a coverage-first player who can prevent running backs and tight ends from running roughshod through the back lines of defense.

"I think guys like me, and a guy that you previously had, T.J. Ward, he was one of the best to do it, [Arizona's] Deone Bucannon, you need guys like that on your team to be able to stay on the field all three downs so that they can cover those guys," Cravens said, "because if they don't, it's going to be a mismatch on every play."

In the short term, he is likely to be used as a linebacker in the Broncos' sub packages, filling a role that was handled by Ward during the 2015 and 2016 seasons when the Broncos used six defensive backs.

Prior to his season out of the sport, such a role would not have interested Cravens; he saw himself as a strong safety, pure and simple. But a year away infused a new appreciation for the game.

"This is one of the things I was saying: My love for the game and my personal feelings for it affected the way that I handled things," Cravens said. "So if you asked me last year, I'd tell you, 'No, I'm not a linebacker. I don't like the position. I don't know why I'm playing it, but I'll just do it.'"

"But now, for me, if they want me to play linebacker, I will play linebacker. If they want me to blitz and take on guards and tackles and get off double-teams, I will do whatever they need me to do. So I feel like I'm a strong safety, but I realize that I also have a skill set that suits the 'backer position."

Eventually, he could play his way into a role as strong safety. He will have time, as he is likely to be younger than much of the Broncos' draft class with three years left on his rookie deal.

"I don't feel like I've reached my ceiling. I don't think I've even scratched the surface," Cravens said. "I'm only 22 years old, so I think the Broncos are basically getting a rookie that has NFL experience. I just can't wait to go out there and show them that I'm an open book, I'm ready to learn, and I'm ready to take on any challenges that they present me."

Su'a Cravens ready for "a whole new world" with the Denver Broncos

By Nicki Jhabvala
The Denver Post
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Last week, as soon as Su'a Cravens found out he had been traded to the Broncos, he downloaded "A Whole New World" from the Aladdin soundtrack for a social media post.

Words couldn't aptly express his elation. But Princess Jasmine could.

"I felt like it was perfect," he said Monday as he was formally introduced by the Broncos. "... I wanted a fresh start because I didn't like the way things happened. It wasn't part of my plan. I never thought that at 22 years old I'd be at the house watching football instead of playing football. The fact the Broncos gave me this fresh start, this chance to basically create a new image of myself, I just can't wait."

Since the trade was made last week, Cravens has closed the chapter on the controversial beginning to his NFL career in Washington and opened a new one in Denver, where he hopes to compete for a starting job at strong safety and dime backer with the Broncos' remade secondary.

But in his return to the game after a year off to deal with personal and health issues, Cravens has much to prove, on and off the field. There are those who still claim he "quit" on the Redskins, the team that drafted him in the second round in 2016. There are those who, according to Cravens, believe "a false narrative."

"One day I'll be able to speak a little bit further on that," he said. "But I'm not a quitter. I'm not a guy that lacks love for the game."

After an injury-riddled first season in the NFL, Cravens told teammates last September that he planned to retire. He was later placed on the team's exempt list and put under the care of Dr. Micky Collins, the director of the University of Pittsburgh's Sports Medicine Concussion Program, for post-concussion syndrome (PCS).

"A continuous process just flying to Micky Collins in Pittsburgh and going through the concussion testing, going through multiple different tests on computers physically, going to optometrists and things like that until he felt that, in his best medical opinion, I was ready to play," Cravens said. "I went about five or six times throughout a four- or five-month period where I spent basically a full 24 hours at the office working with him before he felt comfortable giving me the green light."

"There was a point that I thought I was done with football, but that love for it and that need to compete, that need to be on the field and be with your brothers, that never went away."

Cravens was medically cleared in December and reinstated in February, which kicked off trade negotiations with the Broncos. But the strange turns of the last eight months have given him a new perspective on the game, on his career and his start with the Broncos.

“As a kid you think I’m going to play until I’m about 40 years old, retire, have a house on the hills, things that like that,” Cravens said. “But when you actually get into the gist of things and realize this is a job and doesn’t matter who you think you are, the ability you may have, it can all be gone the next day. I never really looked at it that way. I just thought football will always be there.

“But having it taken away, with no choice ... it kind of matured me in way to where I never take that for granted again. No practice, no missing out on rehab or, ‘I don’t feel like icing today.’ Things like that, I’m 100 percent committed to.”

Previous concussions and bouts with PCS are believed to increase a player’s susceptibility. But Cravens said he begins his next phase with the Broncos without hesitation or fear of recurring symptoms.

“I know what I’m signing myself up for,” he said. “I’m aware of my situation that I was in and I’m aware of the dangers of the game. I experienced it first hand. I’m still willing to go out there and put everything I have on the line.”

If all works out, Cravens could be a key contributor to the Broncos’ defense, with the size and athleticism to help stop holes in the run game and plug leaks in coverage against tight ends. And his versatility puts him in competition with multiple players, most notably starting safety Darian Stewart and dime backer Will Parks.

“Will and I have been competing since high school. We’d do camps, then we get into the (Pacific-12 Conference) and he’s laying people out and sending me the clips telling me, ‘You can’t do what I do,’” Cravens said with a smile. “When we get here it’s going to be a healthy competition. It doesn’t matter if he’s on the field, if I’m on the field or whoever’s on the field, as long as we’re winning. That’s all that matters at the end of the day.”

Broncos Su'a Cravens talks music, commitment to Broncos

By Troy Renck
KMGH
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About the singing.

When Su'a Cravens learned he had been traded to the Denver Broncos he broke out in a show tune as if he were standing in front of Lionel Richie, Katy Perry and Luke Bryan on ABC's "American Idol."

Cravens met the media Monday, and explained his joy.

"Once I found out I had to express myself and let everyone know how happy I was to be coming here," Cravens said. "It was organic. I downloaded 'A Whole New World.' I thought it was perfect."

Cravens relishes a fresh start. He arrives in Denver with a chance to make a difference, while rebooting his career.

Last season proved difficult, if not confusing. He did not play, and was not medically cleared until December after five visits to internationally renowned sports-related concussion expert Micky Collins in Pittsburgh. Through those exams regarding post-concussion syndrome, Cravens came to an understanding about his personality changes and mood swings.

However, he suffered criticism. His commitment was questioned. He admitted he was called a "quitter," and explained that someday he would reveal the entire story of his last year in Washington, how he went from a second-round draft pick to a ghost.

Monday, though, was about looking through the windshield.

"Having it taken away with no choice, it matured me in a way that I will never take it for granted again. There was a point where I thought I was done with football. But the need to compete and play with your brothers never went away. I love football," Cravens said. "The fact that the Broncos gave me this fresh start, I am thankful for the opportunity."

Beginning in February at the NFL combine, the Broncos zeroed in on Cravens for a reason. He potentially addresses a glaring need as a hybrid safety/linebacker. Cravens views himself as a safety, and should vie for playing time with Darian Stewart and Will Parks, a longtime friend. Cravens possesses the size to provide run support -- a version of former safety T.J. Ward perhaps -- while improving the team's porous coverage against big targets in the passing game.

"I love the pick up. He's perfect for our defense," Broncos nose tackle Domata Peko told Denver7. "He can play multiple positions and can really cover tight ends."

Cravens knows the Broncos defense as a fan. He admitted that he was drawn to their games because of the way Denver plays. It did not hurt that after he joined the Broncos he spoke with general manager John

Elway -- Cravens' uncle played with Elway at Granada Hills High School, but the safety was too starstruck to mention it -- and All-Pro linebacker Von Miller.

"I think we have something brewing," Cravens said. "They wanted me here."

Cravens smiled throughout his press conference. He bubbles optimism about his new team, and could not hide his excitement about the facility and new digs. Enough to break out in song? Not Monday.

But if Cravens can provide the versatility his athleticism suggests, it will be music to the Broncos' ears.

Su'a Cravens ready for fresh start with Broncos, says 'I'm not a quitter'

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN

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In an NFL career in which he has missed more games than he has played, Su'a Cravens wants everyone who's willing to listen to understand just how glad he is to be on the doorstep of a fresh start.

The Denver Broncos completed a trade for the 22-year-old safety -- he'll turn 23 in July -- last week. Cravens, who was a second-round pick by the Washington Redskins in the 2016 draft, did not play last season because of post-concussion syndrome.

He was medically cleared to play in December and after a somewhat messy exit from the Redskins arrives as a low-risk investment for the Broncos, as Cravens says he's ready for a return to the field.

"I love football," Cravens said Monday, during his first visit to the team's suburban Denver complex. "... But sometimes you have to be mature about situations, and when it came to last year, it wasn't really about what I wanted, but what I needed to do.

"I don't like the way things happened; it wasn't part of my plan," Cravens added. "I never thought, at 22 years old, I'd be at the house watching football instead of playing football. So the Broncos gave me this fresh start, this chance to basically create a new image of myself. I can't wait."

Cravens, who has also had knee and elbow injuries in his NFL career, had missed time in his rookie season with a concussion and then had post-concussion symptoms return last season. As a result, he has not played in a regular-season game since Dec. 11, 2016, as there were rumors he had contemplated retirement, and the Redskins designated him as "injured reserve/left squad" all of last season.

After some initial questions last year about why he felt "something wasn't right" with his health, Cravens was eventually treated by Dr. Michael Collins at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center concussion program. Cravens said he went for extended appointments with Collins "four or five times" last year before Collins cleared him to return to the field in December. "He felt in his best medical opinion I was ready to play," Cravens said.

Cravens said he had seen all of the social media offerings as well as other reports that he had walked away from the Redskins and his teammates. But he called many of those items a "false narrative" and said that he had spoken to several former Redskins teammates in recent days, including Mason Foster, Preston Smith, Will Compton and Junior Galette.

"I'm not a quitter," Cravens said. "I'm not a guy who lacks love for the game. Definitely don't know where the 'quit in college' came from."

Before the trade to Denver, Cravens discussed with Collins the chances of having additional concussion issues if he continues to play.

"We're all grown men," Cravens said. "I know what I'm signing myself up for. I'm aware of the situation I was in. I'm aware of the dangers of the game and experienced it firsthand. I'm willing to go out and put everything on the line."

Su'a Cravens glad to be 'where somebody wanted me'

By Austin Knoblauch

NFL.com

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After Su'a Cravens' 2017 season derailed by injury and personal issues, it was initially difficult to see how the dynamic safety would reclaim his promise as a potential rising NFL star.

That pessimistic outlook might have faded a little bit this week when the Denver Broncos signalled their faith in Cravens by acquiring him in a trade with the Washington Redskins.

"I wanted to play football where somebody wanted me," Cravens told Nicki Jhabvala of The Denver Post. "I can tell that Denver actually wanted me on this team. It wasn't just, 'This is smart for our team.' It just seemed like they really felt like they could use me and felt like they could put me in the best position to be successful."

Cravens' tenure with the Redskins ended in disappointment after it originally looked as if he'd be roaming the Washington secondary for years to come. Selected in the second round of the 2016 NFL Draft, Cravens showed his promise in 11 games that season. He also dealt with injuries, and he was diagnosed with post-concussion syndrome prior to the start of the 2017 season. The diagnosis, coupled with the personal issues he was dealing with off the field, left Cravens contemplating retirement. It also prompted the Redskins to shut him down for the season by placing him on the reserve/left squad list.

The ordeal left Cravens eager for a new start.

"I never felt like I could be myself with the Redskins," Cravens said. "... It's a blessing obviously to be drafted by the Redskins and I will always thank them for giving me my opportunity. But I just think after my rookie year when I had those injuries, I just felt like things kind of changed. Once I had my last injury, I just felt like it might be in everybody's best interest if we just start off fresh."

In Denver, he'll get that chance. Cravens could see plenty of playing time in the Broncos' post-No Fly Zone secondary, and he'll be able to combat the idea he quit on the Redskins last year.

"A lot of people have the perception that I quit," Cravens said on SiriusXM NFL Radio, per The Washington Post. "I don't look at it that way. I look at it as I took care of what I needed to do. My health is most important. Once I handled that, then I could come back. I didn't really have the option to return, even when I did get cleared. I'm just ready to get back out on the field and play."

Time will tell if Denver will indeed offer "A Whole New World" for Cravens.

Denver Broncos acquire safety Su'a Cravens from Washington Redskins

By Nicki Jhabvala
The Denver Post
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As the NFL's annual meetings neared its end, Broncos general manager John Elway continued to make moves to bolster his defense.

Wednesday morning, Denver acquired safety Su'a Cravens from the Redskins in exchange for a 2018 fifth-round pick (No. 163 overall) and a conditional sixth-round selection in 2020, an NFL source confirmed. The deal included a total of six draft picks, but the four others were swaps. In the fourth round this year, Denver moves from No. 109 to 113, and in the fifth round, Denver falls seven spots from No. 142 to 149.

The trade is the Broncos' fourth this offseason and leaves them with eight draft picks. It also adds to a secondary that, in the last six months, lost veteran safety T.J. Ward and cornerback Aqib Talib.

In Denver, Cravens will help to fill a void left by Ward, a thumper on the back end of the defense whose versatility allowed him to be a hybrid of sorts at linebacker and safety. Cravens will vie for the starting safety job with Darian Stewart, a veteran whose \$4.5 million for 2018 is fully guaranteed, and also compete with Will Parks as the Broncos' nickel linebacker. Third-year safety Justin Simmons will assume the other safety spot.

Only 22, Cravens was selected by the Redskins in the second round of the 2016 draft after a standout career at Southern California. As a rookie, he played 11 games (three starts) recorded 33 total tackles, one sack, one interception and five pass breakups. But Cravens left the team last September and, despite briefly considering retirement because of personal and health issues, was placed on the Redskins' reserve/exempt list.

Cravens suffered a concussion in a Week 4 win in 2016 and later sought treatment for post-concussion syndrome. He also dealt with an elbow injury his rookie year and suffered a knee injury in the 2017 preseason that required surgery. According to his agent at the time, Cravens was deemed asymptomatic from his post-concussion syndrome and was medically cleared in early December.

When Cravens was reinstated by the NFL in early February, the Broncos took notice. Talks ensued with the Redskins and Cravens not-so-subtly dropped hints on social media about his desire to come to Denver. He also fired his agent and signed with Denver-based agent Peter Schaffer.

Earlier this offseason, the Broncos dealt Talib to the Los Angeles Rams to clear \$11 million in cap space and make way for Bradley Roby's rise to the No. 2 cornerback spot. Veteran Chris Harris takes over the clear No. 1 corner and newcomer Tramaine Brock arrives as likely the third corner — an unofficial starter in the Broncos' 3-4 defense — although coach Vance Joseph said he expects Brock to compete for the No. 2 spot, as well.

When Ward was released last September, Simmons was elevated to a starting role and Parks moved up as the team's linebacker in sub-packages. The Broncos ranked among the top five in the league in total

yards, passing yards and rushing yards allowed, but the secondary was gashed with big plays often throughout the season.

Eliminating those plays is and has been a point of emphasis heading in 2018 for the Broncos. Trying to maintain their top-ranked defense while also revamping their offense is an act almost three years in the making.

“We’re always trying to make our football team better,” Elway said at the NFL combine in February. “We’ve got to get better on the offensive side, but we want also to try and be as good or maintain defensively, if not get better.”

Cravens’ contract is a boon for the Broncos as they continue to retool. He has three years remaining on his rookie deal, is due only about \$651,000 in salary for 2018 and has a cap charge of about \$1 million.

Plans to acquire him have been in the works for weeks, even though Redskins coach Jay Gruden immediately tried to quash any talk of trading Cravens in February. “We’re not trading him,” he told The Washington Post during the combine. “... He’s still a member of this football team and we have every intention of seeing where he’s at.”

Discussions carried on, however, and at the league’s annual meetings in Florida, Elway and Redskins general manager Bruce Allen finally reached an accord. And it’s a win for all sides. Washington lost an athletic safety with potential, but got something in return. Denver may have received a key piece of its future on the cheap.

And Cravens got the fresh start he wanted: as a Bronco.

Redskins safety Su'a Cravens reinstated by NFL

By STAFF

NFL.com

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Su'a Cravens took a big step in moving closer toward playing in 2018.

The NFL reinstated Cravens off the reserve/left squad list Wednesday, a move that opens the door for the Washington Redskins safety's return to the playing field next season.

Cravens, who left the team before the start of last season as he dealt with ongoing concussion issues, was reportedly contemplating retirement before he was medically cleared to resume football activities in December. It was unclear whether Cravens would ever play again in the NFL after the Redskins placed him on the reserve/left squad in mid-September.

With Cravens moving closer toward playing, the big question is whether he'll be able to assume the role he once had in Washington. As a rookie, Cravens appeared in 11 games (three starts), totaling 34 tackles, one sack, five passes defensed and one interception and appeared poised for a breakout season before leaving the team.