

Broncos' Aqib Talib is the latest Denver pro athlete to sign on with sports-training franchise company

By Erik Spanberg

Denver Business Journal

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A company that franchises centers for training, sports medicine and rehab programs geared to athletes has tacked the latest in a series of Denver pro players.

Aqib Talib, a nine-year NFL defensive back for the Denver Broncos, is the bold name behind the latest D1 Sports Training facility, which broke ground this month in the Dallas suburb of Carrollton. The \$6.5 million project is scheduled to open in December.

Talib -- who lived in Dallas in middle school and high school -- will own the facility.

In an interview, Talib said he was planning to open a training center in the Dallas area and was approached by D1 about becoming a franchisee.

Talib's D1 will include a 100-yard pro-style football field next to a 25,000-square-foot training and rehab facility.

His older brother, Yaqub, will serve as general manager and his two sisters will work at the D1 in Carrollton, too.

But as for ownership, "I'm the sole owner," Talib said. "It's on me."

And the star cornerback is only the latest Denver athlete to team with D1 Sports Training.

Current and former Broncos players Tim Tebow, Peyton Manning and Von Miller are among the D1 investors in one or more locations, as are former Denver Nuggets stars Chauncey Billups and Carmelo Anthony.

D1 has ramped up a franchise model in recent years that pairs a pro athlete — often from the NBA and the NFL — with a training center. A local health-care provider usually adds to the project with rehab and sports medicine clinics.

D1 -- based in Franklin, Tennessee, near Nashville -- was founded in 2003 by Will Bartholomew, who played football at the University of Tennessee with Manning and suffered a career-ending knee injury while attempting to make the Denver Broncos' roster as an undrafted free agent.

While rehabbing his knee in Tennessee, Bartholomew began informal training of high school players and soon realized he had a potential business.

And thus D1 — short-hand for Division I, the top level in college sports — was born. Specialized coaching and training is offered at the centers for youth athletes of all ages, while adults can join and participate in workout regimens that might put them next to an NFL players and other notables who are there for off-season conditioning.

Bartholomew said his 16-year-old company now has 36 centers in 13 states, with more on the way. Currently there are two Colorado locations, in Highlands Ranch and Colorado Springs.

D1 facilities range from 4,000 square feet to 40,000 square feet, though most are in the range of 15,000 square feet. The development cost for a D1 location is in the range of \$120 to \$200 per square foot, or \$1.8 million to \$3 million for a 15,000-square-foot center.

How Broncos cornerback Aqib Talib is inching closer to a Hall of Fame career

By Cameron Wolfe

Denver Post

October 9, 2016

Aqib Talib gets cozy on his basement couch after a long day at work. He pulls out his iPad. It's here where the Broncos cornerback believes he has made his greatest growth as a player.

This past week, it's all eyes on Atlanta Falcons wide receiver Julio Jones. Talib was studying presnap formations, splits, tells and other tendencies on film to see how Jones produced 300 yards in receptions against the Carolina Panthers last weekend. He wants to make sure Jones doesn't duplicate that feat against him Sunday, when the Broncos host the Falcons.

Talib tries to spend an hour or two every day watching game tape to learn the schemes of opponents well enough to "be the offensive player." His 6-foot-1, 205-pound stature, physicality and hands get the most attention, but his intelligence might be his greatest skill.

Talib hasn't always been a master of the film room. He relied on his natural instincts and athleticism until former Tampa Bay Buccaneers coach Raheem Morris and cornerback Ronde Barber sat him down and taught him the importance of film study.

"You have to know how to watch tape," Talib said. "You can't just watch guys running around on your iPad. It's a skill. I didn't even watch tape my first three of four years in the NFL. It's definitely something you have to learn."

As Talib, 30, reaches the latter part of his NFL career, he is leaning on his mind on the field more than ever. He is still playing at peak level, making three interceptions in Denver's 4-0 start. His 33 career interceptions are the most by a cornerback since 2008, when he was drafted.

With every interception, Talib takes another step toward making his case for being elected to the Pro Football Hall of Fame. His teammates and coaches rave about his playmaking ability, his high-energy personality and his underrated leadership skills.

"He's not only instinctive. He's smart. He studies," Broncos defensive coordinator Wade Phillips said, comparing Talib to Hall of Fame defensive end Bruce Smith. "Smith was a great pass rusher and all-time-leading pass sacker and great athlete, but he studied the people he played against. He knew all their moves. He knew what he was going to get every week, and that's what Talib does."

Talib peeks into the future, but he is immersed in the present. He doesn't know how long he will keep playing or what he will do after he retires from football. Talib is chasing 13, a number that would make him the NFL's all-time leader in interceptions returned for a touchdown. Rod Woodson (12), Charles Woodson (11) and Darren Sharper (11) are the only players with more TD interception returns than Talib, who is tied with three others at nine — including his idol growing up, Deion Sanders.

The mention of Sanders, Rod Woodson, Charles Woodson and former Broncos star Champ Bailey makes Talib's eyes widen. They represent the gold standard in cornerback performance.

"Hopefully by the time I'm done, when you talk about the best they'll talk about my name," Talib said. "I work toward winning championships and going to the Hall of Fame."

Chasing Champ's legacy

Asked who he thought is the greatest cornerback in Broncos history, Talib didn't hesitate naming Bailey. It's a title Talib would love to have, though Bailey's longevity in Denver almost certainly ensures that Talib won't pass him. Chasing the reverence that Bailey's career receives is something that drives Talib.

"He put in the most work here for the most time. He's probably the most respected man in the city as far as a cornerback," Talib said. "That's what I do strive for, if you can be remembered. When you start to talk about the best corners, you're going to bring up Champ Bailey's name. If you can get in that conversation, that's what you play for the game for."

Although he modeled his game after Sanders, Talib also watched Bailey intently growing up. He is still in awe of Bailey's two-year stretch from 2005-06, when Bailey had 18 interceptions — including three pick-six plays. After that, opponents stopped throwing much in his direction. Beyond his skill, Bailey was admired for his hard work and preparation. And he didn't find himself in the headlines for the wrong reasons. Talib, on the other hand, has repeatedly been involved in off-the-field incidents, most recently last week when a Dallas TV station reported that Dallas police concluded Talib shot himself in a June incident in that city. Talib has refused to discuss what happened in any detail. The NFL is investigating, and Talib could face a suspension. He is aware of the effect his off-the-field actions have on his reputation. But he hopes to be remembered more for his performance than for his off-the-field transgressions. In the locker room, he is one of the most respected Broncos.

"He never fails to get everybody laughing," said Denver defensive backs coach Joe Woods. "At the same time, he's a guy that says we have to get things together. It's time to prepare. A lot of people don't know that he's a tremendous leader, both in the classroom and on the field."

Woods said Talib often tutors younger defensive backs, teaching them the art of watching game tape to perfect technique. Talib gave the pregame speech before Denver's 27-7 rout of Tampa Bay last Sunday, telling the team to play with swagger. He then went out and intercepted a pass early in the game, setting the tone for a dominant victory.

Clint Bowen, co-defensive coordinator for Talib's last two seasons at Kansas, said Talib's charisma and effect on his teammates was apparent in his collegiate career.

Going into the 2008 Orange Bowl, Talib wanted to spat his cleats to bring swagger to the Jayhawks' on-field apparel. Mark Mangino, the Jayhawks' head coach at the time, had a policy that everyone had to dress the same, so Talib rallied the entire team, including the offensive linemen, to spat their cleats in silver tape. He succeeded.

"I know he's had trouble (off the field)," Bowen said. "But when you're around Aqib and he's just having a good time, he has such an infectious personality that it excited the people around him. He's a natural-born leader."

“His instincts are amazing”

Woods was the Minnesota Vikings’ defensive backs coach when Talib was available in the draft. Watching his game tape made Woods coin the phrase “A instincts” when evaluating cornerbacks. It’s a tribute to Talib’s rare playmaking skills, where at times he seems to run a better route to the ball than the receiver.

“His instincts are amazing. He’s always been like that. Every since we were in college, he always had great ball skills,” said Denver cornerback Chris Harris, who played with Talib at Kansas. “It might surprise other people because they haven’t seen him for so long. I’ve seen this for nine years.”

According to Pro Football Focus, quarterbacks have a mere 22.9 passer rating when throwing in Talib’s direction this season. That ranks best among cornerbacks who have played at least half their team’s defensive snaps. For perspective, a quarterback would have a 39.6 passer rating if he threw an incomplete pass every play. Talib hasn’t allowed a touchdown pass this season.

“There are a lot of good corners, but what makes a corner a great corner is when he can get his hands on the ball,” said Broncos coach Gary Kubiak. “He can make the play when you throw it his way and you make a mistake. Those guys are difference-makers.”

Talib’s teammates attribute his great hands and playmaking skills to his experience as a high school receiver. Talib recalls blowing his last chance to play receiver when he was with Tampa Bay. Morris created a 15-play offensive package for Talib, but he ripped it up in front of Talib when the young cornerback was late to work one day.

Talib still laments that mistake, but he figures his skills are best suited for defense anyway. The Broncos agree. Talib’s legacy is still being written, but history has always shined brightly upon the NFL’s great playmakers. Talib certainly is one of those.

5 impressive numbers

33 – The number of interceptions Talib has had since entering the NFL in 2008, most among cornerbacks in that time period. Former Eagles and Falcons cornerback Asante Samuel is second with 29.

5 – The number of interceptions Talib has returned for a touchdown as a Bronco, the most in team history, which is eye-opening considering he’s only played 34 regular season games for Denver.

22.9 – The passer rating opposing quarterbacks have throwing toward Talib through four games this season, per Pro Football Focus. That mark is first among cornerbacks who have played at least half of their team’s defensive snaps.

3 – The number of times Talib has intercepted Falcons quarterback Matt Ryan, the opposing quarterback Sunday. Talib has also picked off Geno Smith and Jason Campbell three times.

0 – The number of touchdowns Talib has allowed through four games. Quarterbacks are 12-of-24 for 108 yards, zero touchdowns and three interceptions against him through the first quarter of the season, per PFF. That 50 percent completion percentage puts him tied for seventh in the NFL.

Aqib Talib: The championship cornerback doesn't love social media, but digs Rihanna, and the Marc Anthony version of Hector Lavoe

By Martenze Johnson
The Undeclared
July 6, 2016

Cleveland-born Aqib Talib is (maybe) best known for being cornerback for the Super Bowl champion Denver Broncos. His heroes were Deion Sanders and Michael Irvin. He is all about the art of the interception. Talib, 30, is also known for fighting — even with one of his own teammates. He's known for getting arrested (twice in three years from 2009-11). And who could forget when he was suspended last season for poking the eye of Indianapolis Colts tight end Dwayne Allen? Talib had actually gone months without incident before he was shot in his right thigh in the early-morning hours of June 5 at a park in Dallas (though he is expected to be ready for training camp when it commences on July 28). Talib is also a newlywed and a father of three — and he weirdly refers to MySpace like it's still on-point. Talib likes Future, is about his money, and is afraid of getting the dreaded crying Michael Jordan face on social media. He also has not one game on his phone (not even Sesame Street's Elmo Calls), and he might just win Dancing with the Stars one day.

Last podcast you listened to?

Never listened to one.

Why?

Podcasts are more like radio, right? I don't do too much of the radio. When I'm in the car I'm listening to music on my phone, or I'm probably watching TV.

What's your favorite show?

NFL Live, and NFL Total Access. A little NBATV to keep up on my basketball. I watch a bunch of reality TV shows due to my wife — all the housewives of everywhere.

Artist?

Future got a nice wave going on.

Favorite Future song ?

Forever Eva (2015). I like the verses. It's an old song. If I find myself listening to one of his old songs, then that's one of my favorite songs.

What's that one app you really love?

This Fidelity app. I go look at my money 10 times a day. I don't know who else loves that Fidelity app — but I know I do. Sometimes you'll see a \$60,000 decline, then sometimes you'll see a \$100,000 incline. It varies. Lately, I've been loving it.

Game on your phone you love the most?

I took them all off because when I have games on my phone, my kids always want my phone.

Which game did they play the most?

I had this game that my son used to say 'Dad, I want to play Elmo.' It's like a Facetime with Elmo. He was 1½ or 2 at the time. That used to be his favorite game. For the older kids, we had a Call of Duty game, but then they'd want to dominate the phone. It was using up all my battery.

What's your favorite meme right now?

I don't really know the memes like that. I'm not on the social networks. I don't do the Instagrams, Twitters, Facebook, the MySpace. I don't really do Snapchat. I don't really do none of them. The memes I get are the ones my teammates put in the group chat and stuff. I think, probably, the funniest ones right now have to do with the Jordan crying. I can't really think of any other ones.

Are you afraid someone will put the Jordan crying meme over your face?

Maybe. I don't know, hopefully we won't be in a situation where it's sad. Hopefully we keep winning games so the Jordan crying doesn't really involve me.

What question are you asked the most by fans?

'Why did you grab his facemask?' A bunch of kids ask me that. I just tell them 'I had to get him down, right? I couldn't let him score, right?'

Are they understanding when you tell them that?

Of course. They're football players, most of them, so they know you can't let guys score.

What's the last thing you googled?

'ESPN TV schedule.'

Before that?

'O.J. Simpson.'

He was before your time, but did you look up to O.J. as a player?

I didn't. I just probably knew he was one of the old running backs: O.J. Simpson, Jim Brown, Marcus Allen. I probably just heard of him, but I really didn't know too much about him at all.

Music you're embarrassed by the most?

I listen to Rihanna. That's not really embarrassing? I don't really like listening to country or nothing — maybe a little Hector Lavoe. Some Spanish, see. My wife put me on. But not really the original Hector Lavoe, it's the remixed Hector Lavoe that Marc Anthony sang. Because Anthony made a movie playing Lavoe (2006's *El Cantante*). I like that Marc Anthony version of Hector Lavoe.

Which pro athlete would you trade places with?

Right this second? Von Miller. He's on a great wave right now... He got that Super Bowl MVP. Now every time I'm on the internet or see something about the Broncos, it's Von, man. It has to be superfun for him.

Would you ever want to be on *Dancing with the Stars*?

After going up there with Von, I don't think I'd mind doing it. It looks like a lot of fun. He told me it's a lot of hard work. I saw him — he lost about 12 or 15 pounds, he's all chiseled up. That's from just dancing and moving around all day, doing a lot of core work.

How well do you think you'd do on *DWTS*? I'd win. If I did it, I'd win.

This conversation has been edited and condensed.

Aqib Talib, Chris Harris in sync on Broncos' Super Bowl mission

By Lindsay Jones
USA Today
February 3, 2016

It might be an odd thing to remember about a first impression, but when Aqib Talib first met Chris Harris, way back in 2007 in Lawrence, Kan., what Talib remembers is Harris' hips.

Talib, heading into his junior season at the University of Kansas at the time, saw a 17-year-old freshman who could square up to a wide receiver at the line of scrimmage, press the designated opponent and then swivel unlike anyone he'd ever seen.

"I wish I had that," Talib told USA TODAY Sports on Wednesday. "The way he plays now was the same way he played when I first met him. It's just one of them things you're born with."

In many ways, so much has changed for both Talib and Harris in the eight and a half years since they first played together at Kansas. Talib was a 2008 first-round draft pick who endured a few rocky years with the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, was traded to the New England Patriots and later signed a lucrative free-agent deal with the Denver Broncos. Harris went undrafted in 2011 and worked his way up Denver's depth chart to become a starter and eventual star.

But their bond remains. Together they form arguably the NFL's best cornerback duo and will be charged with trying to shut down the Carolina Panthers' passing game in Super Bowl 50.

While the Panthers' offensive strength is in their unique running game, with tailback Jonathan Stewart and quarterback Cam Newton's ground production – designed and otherwise – Talib and Harris know they will have an important role in limiting Newton's downfield options.

To former Broncos cornerback Champ Bailey, who started opposite Harris before he retired after the 2013 season, that means playing the same brand of physical, man-to-man coverage the duo has done all season.

"When you play a fast receiver, as a corner, I always think about, what is the easiest thing for them? Throw it up and let them run. So what do you do? You take that away, first and foremost. You can't let them run over the top of you," Bailey told USA TODAY Sports. "If you can take that away, force them to make those tough 10-yard catches and get hit. The 3-yard curls, the crossing routes. Make them catch those and get hit. Good receivers can deal with that punishment, but these guys, I mean, they're still making a name for themselves, as far as good receivers. Make them earn it."

To do that, Harris said he and Talib will have to lean on their communication – something they've been doing since their year together at Kansas. It helped, Harris said, that they played roles similar to the ones they hold now, with Talib lined up almost exclusively on the defensive left, and Harris either on the right side in base defense or in the slot in the nickel package.

"It kind of makes it easy for us to play together, because we know he's going to be on that left side. Teams know that, but they know I'm going to be everyone else," Harris said. "It makes teams think about it a little bit, and me and him we just have that great chemistry out there. He understands how I

want to play, I understand how he wants to play, and if something fast comes up that we've got to adjust to, he knows I can put us in the right situation.”

They are somewhat of an odd couple off the field, with their side-by-side lockers inside the Broncos' practice facility in Englewood, Colo. Talib is the locker room loud mouth. If the cornerbacks meeting room is, as reserve corner Kayvon Webster described it, “lit” first thing every morning, it's because Talib makes it that way.

Harris is the serious one. He's not quiet, but he won't be leading any dance parties. He will however be leading the film sessions.

“You need a guy like me with Talib,” Harris said. “I'm always on the film, I'm always looking for something I can find from the other team, I always have to do a lot of checks on the field. I kind of make it to where he can go out there and just do his thing and play and do this thing, and I can do all the extra studying.”

Broncos' Aqib Talib proves middle school teacher wrong with NFL career

By Jeff Legwold
ESPN.com
February 2, 2016

Denver Broncos cornerback Aqib Talib started playing football when he was 5.

And, all along, he had a plan for his future.

"I got in trouble in fourth or fifth grade for writing a paper on what we wanted to be when we grew up," Talib said. "I put an NFL player. My teacher told me we're doing 'really serious jobs.' So, I said, 'Just 'cause you're not that talented and you're not going to the NFL doesn't mean I'm not going.' Got me a little in-school suspension for that and everything.

"I don't know what she put on the paper. But, hey, I'm here now."

It's been that kind of week for Talib. As the cameras go elsewhere in search of quarterbacks, he continues to be the king of the one-liners.

Asked how he would break out of Alcatraz, Talib said: "I'd holla at a female guard and get a key."

As he pointed at his \$80,000 Rolex watch during media night, Talib said with a smile: "You talking about this \$80,000 Rolley -- I wear this every day."

And Talib, with microphone in hand, can be found on the team's website conducting a short "interview" with Broncos defensive coordinator Wade Phillips. Talib puts a large gold chain around Phillips' neck, and Phillips says: "Now we're dripping."

Talib asked Phillips about himself and fellow cornerbacks Chris Harris Jr. and Bradley Roby, and then closed with "drippin', baby" next to the laughing Phillips.

Remarkable journey of Broncos' Aqib Talib: 'Wild-horse rider' to big brother

By Rich Cimini

ESPN.com

February 1, 2016

Aqib Talib sends a group text every night to his fellow defensive backs on the Denver Broncos. The wording varies, but the central theme remains the same:

Set your alarms. Be on time tomorrow.

Talib is the punctuality police for the Denver secondary. He doesn't dig tardiness, and he'll make sure you hear about it if you fall asleep in a meeting or punch out early.

"He's like the big brother," safety Josh Bush said.

Talib used to be big trouble, going back to his wild days with the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, but he has matured into a team leader at the wise old age of 29. Still supremely talented, the Pro Bowl cornerback has become a cerebral player -- a film-watching, note-taking homebody who approaches the game with a serious mind.

He received a glowing endorsement from one of the all-time brainiacs, teammate Peyton Manning, who gushes about Talib's football IQ and his ability to hold graduate-level conversations in the language of X's and O's. Manning called him "a great student of the game."

Say what?

This is the same Talib who got into a fight with Bucs teammate Cory Boyd at the 2008 rookie symposium, where draft picks are taught life lessons and professionalism before their first training camp.

The same Talib who punched out a taxi driver in Tampa, resulting in an arrest on simple battery charges and a one-game suspension by the NFL.

The same Talib who was arrested on charges of aggravated assault with a deadly weapon for allegedly firing a gun at his sister's boyfriend. He was indicted, but the charges were eventually dropped.

The same Talib who tested positive for Adderall and received a four-game suspension for violating the NFL's substance-abuse policy.

"He was a wild-horse rider who could play football at a very high level," said a former member of the Bucs' organization, speaking on the condition of anonymity. "At the time, I wondered if he'd ever see the light, if the switch would ever go on.

"I would've bet against it. There were enough issues on a personal level that made you think he'd end up in big trouble and his career would be short-circuited. I'm glad I was wrong. I'm happy for him. It looks like he's turned his life around."

The Bucs, who drafted Talib in the first round, gave up on him in 2012, trading him to the New England Patriots at midseason. He was a tremendously productive cornerback -- 17 interceptions in his first four years -- but there wasn't enough aspirin in the Tampa Bay area to deal with the headaches.

After nearly two seasons with the Patriots, Talib signed a six-year, \$57 million contract with the Broncos. He has galvanized the secondary, helping them earn the league's No. 1 defensive ranking and a berth in Super Bowl 50.

"Now it's to the point where I'm the old guy in the locker room," he said, smiling. "It just kind of happened naturally."

His newfound maturity, he meant.

Oh, sure, there have been lapses -- he was suspended one game this season for poking Indianapolis Colts tight end Dwayne Allen in the eye -- but Talib is regarded among his teammates as a heady player. And intense. Energetic, too. In Denver's playoff win over the Pittsburgh Steelers, Talib sprinted down the sideline, stride for stride, with Omar Bolden on a long punt return.

"Aqib is clearly an outstanding corner, but he just has an awesome, high-energy personality that I think is contagious to not just the other defensive players, but the offensive players as well," Manning said.

Manning said he likes talking with Talib about pass coverages and route combinations, and the future Hall of Famer believes those conversations have helped him become a better quarterback. Imagine that.

Talib said he studies about 10 hours of film a week at home. In his wild-child days in Tampa, he didn't do any work outside the facility. They didn't have computer tablets in those days, and any extra film work had to be done at the team facility.

"You had to stay at work, and I definitely wasn't staying at work," he said. "So it was zero hours on my own."

During the 2008 draft, Talib's college baggage sparked a debate in the Bucs' war room, according to the former member of the organization. There were rumors of three failed drug tests in college, which probably hurt his stock. With the 20th pick, the Bucs, coached by Jon Gruden, decided to pull the trigger based on a strong recommendation from Kansas coach Mark Mangino.

The Bucs did their homework, discovering Talib's tough upbringing may have contributed to his problems. He grew up in the projects in Cleveland, surrounded by drugs, violence and poverty. His mother spent eight months in prison because she stabbed a neighbor with a steak knife, stemming from a dispute over \$50. Talib, too, ran afoul of the law, receiving two years of probation for burglarizing a home in his neighborhood.

Talib lived with his father in Trenton, New Jersey, from the fourth grade to seventh grade, eventually reuniting with his mother in Texas. He acted out because ... why not? Many coaches and talent evaluators believe in the talent-trumps-character credo, allowing gifted athletes such as Talib to skate through the ranks. His talent was so prodigious that it got him to the NFL.

A lot changed when he was traded to New England, where he met coach Bill Belichick, an old-school sheriff who doesn't stand for any nonsense. Talib felt reborn in the Patriots' culture of ultra-accountability.

“One thing I have to say about that establishment over there: They’re very professional,” Talib said.

“You go there for one season and your professionalism will go up a plus-2. If you’re at seven, you’ll be a nine.

“That definitely helped my professionalism as far as preparation for the game, how to handle the media, my behavior on the field -- everything. I really learned how to be a professional over there. I went there a seven and came out a nine. I’m working on being a 10.”

At 6-foot-1, 205 pounds with 32-inch arms, Talib was born to be a press corner. The arrival of defensive coordinator Wade Phillips has allowed him to play more man-to-man than last year, the ideal marriage of skill set and scheme. He finished with three interceptions, including two for touchdowns.

Talib wants more.

“You can’t have a complete career, in my opinion, without that Super Bowl ring,” he said. “It would definitely be a major stamp on my career.”

Six more nights until Super Bowl 50.

Six more chances to be the texting big brother.

Aqib Talib's clutch play ends yet another Broncos melodrama

By David Ramsey
Colorado Springs Gazette
January 24, 2016

In the instant before the biggest snap of his football life, Aqib Talib examined the eyes of Tom Brady.

He watched as Brady scanned the field before a two-point conversion. Stop the conversion, and the Broncos were on the road to Santa Clara and the Super Bowl. Talib refused to consider the alternative scenario.

Brady first took a long glance at Rob Gronkowski. This made sense. Gronk, the world's finest tight end, had just caught a touchdown, cutting the Bronco lead to 20-18.

Next, Brady took an even longer look at Justin Edelman. Talib saw a revealing glimmer in the eye of his former Patriots teammate. Everyone in the stadium expected the ball to head in Gronk's direction.

Everyone except Talib.

"I got my hand on the ball," Talib said.

Talib got his right hand on Brady's pass, swatting the ball away from Edelman. That right hand rescued a season, propelled the Broncos to the Super Bowl and ignited a tidal wave of joy across the Front Range.

In 20 years, Broncos fans still will talk about this moment. They'll talk about the way their Broncos - and that blasted Brady! - toyed with their emotions during the fourth quarter. And, mostly, talk about the instant Talib placed his right hand on that pass.

The Broncos should never have allowed the game to arrive at this final two-point showdown. The Broncos dominated the first three quarters. They attacked Brady with vicious fury. They pushed the Super Bowl champs to the edge of extinction.

But of course it ended like this. In this season of high drama, 14 Broncos games were decided by seven points or less. The Broncos won 11 of those 14 games. They were seldom dominating with a creaky quarterback and a struggling run game. They're headed to the Super Bowl anyway.

Chris Harris wasn't shaken as he lined up on the two-point conversion for yet another journey into tension.

"It's been like this all year," he said. "We're used to this. Our guys don't panic."

Talib, his premonition correct, bolted in front of Edelman and knocked the ball high in the air. He was joined in pass coverage by a surprising companion, 293-pound defensive end Malik Jackson, who clobbered Edelman an instant after Talib swatted the pass.

"I felt it pop up," Talib said of the pass. "I don't want to say it was scary. I never use the word scary, but it was an intense moment."

Intense?

This moment traveled somewhere beyond intense. Rod Smith was standing with the Broncos on the sideline. Smith, the Broncos' all-time leading receiver, had suffered through a draining fourth quarter.

"It was brutal," he said. "Brutal."

But after Talib knocked the ball into Bradley Roby's hands, Smith sprinted toward the barrier separating fans from players. He wanted to leap into the arms of those who adore the Broncos, just like he did in the old days.

"I tried to jump in the stands, but I couldn't make it," Smith said with a pained laugh. "I'm too old."

Bronco defensive coordinator Wade Phillips worked with his own premonition. During practice last week, the Broncos worked constantly on defending a Patriots two-point conversion.

Phillips boasts a brilliant defensive mind filled with surprises. Who else would place the lumbering Jackson in pass coverage? But Phillips, like many superior minds, simplifies his message.

The goal of his two-point defensive scheme?

"Don't let 'em catch it," Phillips answered in his East Texas drawl/mumble.

The Broncos were often magnificent this season. They were just as often fortunate. Patriots coach Bill Belichick is a genius. I get that. But football's Mr. Grumpy seemed to forget the existence of field goals in the fourth quarter. He kept gambling on fourth down. And kept losing. Belichick's out-of-the-box thinking doomed his team.

Still, Brady and Gronk almost sent the game to overtime. They terrified a few million fans. Go ahead and admit it - the Patriot duo scared you, too.

Talib and Harris and their defensive teammates were calm. This team has declined to make life easy for itself all season. They revel in showing their fans football melodramas that veer toward tragedy.

Talib saw something in Brady's eyes, which allowed this perilous journey to arrive at a joyous conclusion.

Broncos' Aqib Talib teaching the art of the interception

By Nicki Jhabvala
Denver Post
October 31, 2015

Aqib Talib knew the ending before the play clock started. Eight yards behind the line of scrimmage he stood, bent in his two-point stance as the processor in his mind scanned the Cleveland Browns' offensive formation and he awaited the call from Broncos defensive coordinator Wade Phillips.

Second-and-12. Twelve personnel — one running back, a tight end-receiver combo on each side of the line. Shotgun. Now they're motioning for "empty."

The Browns' lone running back scurried to the left sideline, giving the them five receivers to push upfield.

But Talib remained still, in his stance. Eight yards back. His mind still sifting through the possibilities before his eyes locked in. A quick double-take from Browns quarterback Josh McCown sealed his fate.

Game over.

Talib keyed McCown's three-step drop for final confirmation before quickly breaking in front of receiver Travis Benjamin to snag the pass and sprint 63 yards to the Cleveland end zone. Upon arrival, he stopped to blow kisses to the Browns' fans, as if to thank them for allowing him to display his work.

"Oh, I knew it," Talib said. "I knew if he threw it to my side I was going to score."

In six games the Broncos' secondary has nine interceptions, including a pair in each of four victories. Talib, an eighth-year cornerback who arrived in Denver in 2014, has claimed three and returned them for an NFL-high 123 yards, including two touchdowns.

The Broncos have a long history of great defensive backs, from Billy Thompson to Louis Wright to Champ Bailey, and many others in between. But in Talib's year and a half in Denver he not only has played a central role in the defensive resurgence of the Broncos, he has all but turned the interception into an art form — a calculated but graceful dance he seems to perform with ease.

The basic moves are learned and developed by observation in the days, sometimes weeks, before showtime. For nearly four hours a day, Talib sits in front of a screen, first at Broncos headquarters and then at his home, reviewing, rewinding, restarting game footage until an opponent's oft-used formations and its quarterback's tendencies are emblazoned in his mind.

"If you pay attention in meetings at all you have an idea of what the other team likes to do on first and second down, on third down, and in the red zone," he said. "Everybody has an idea."

He had an idea that the Browns would resort to a select few routes in a 12-personnel formation, and that McCown's lengthy windup might give away his plan. He had an idea that in Week 1, Baltimore's Joe Flacco would look to throw quickly when facing a blitz. Talib jumped in front of Steve Smith for the pick and 51-yard score. He also had an idea that in Week 2, given the situation and read from Alex Smith's three-step drop, he could break in front of Kansas City's Jeremy Maclin to steal a short pass.

"Aqib is a really smart, instinctive player," Phillips said. "He knows what's happening out there. In the Kansas City game right before the half when he intercepted the ball when he went out of the field, he said, 'Coach, they're fixing to throw it quick.' They threw it quick and he intercepted it. He's got that kind of mentality. He's into the game and he studies the guys that he's playing against really well."

Phillips' 3-4 scheme has created a ripple effect that starts up front. The scheme relieves the defensive line of some assignments so it can focus on pressuring the quarterback and forcing him to get rid of the ball quickly, often resulting in short routes by receivers. Talib's studies and quick first step allow him to "jump" the routes as soon as the ball leaves the quarterback's hands.

"Our cornerbacks are pressing and saying, 'I really have to make this play right here. I have to force a play,' and then (the opponent) ends up making a mistake," fellow cornerback Chris Harris said. "That's what we try to do."

Talib and Harris, who were teammates at the University of Kansas before joining forces again in Denver, have relied on their studies, instincts, experience and athleticism to guide them.

Harris' duties are often broader and more complex, playing in motion on the right side. He has two interceptions this season, including one he returned 74 yards for a touchdown at Oakland to seal a Denver victory.

"To me, they are top two tandem in the league," Bailey said. "Maybe the Jets are better, but they are right there. Chris is at the top of his game and still has room to grow. Talib is in his prime. You are seeing that. When you have corners like that, it makes all the difference."

That difference on defense has carried the Broncos through their first six games, leading them to victories in all despite a struggling offense.

Their biggest test awaits, though, Sunday night in Denver against Green Bay quarterback Aaron Rodgers, who is as heady in the pocket as the Broncos are in the defensive backfield.

But when Talib and Harris arrive at Sports Authority Field at Mile High on Sunday, they will do so equipped with more than a few clues to how it will all end.

Just as they always do.

Aqib Talib playing at a "premium" once again for Broncos

By Nicki Jhabvala
Denver Post
September 17, 2015

Aqib Talib sat back in his two-point stance, his eyes fixated on his target, his fingers fluttering as the urge to pounce ran through him.

Kansas City quarterback Alex Smith, at his own 20-yard line in the second quarter, dropped back and eyed Jeremy Maclin turning toward to the right sideline.

The adrenaline coursing through Talib's veins took over. As the ball left Smith's fingers, Talib lurched forward to snatch it out of the air and sprinted up field 9 yards.

Interception. Another Aqib Talib interception.

Talib would call it a "premium look." His coaches would likely call it a big play.

But it was more.

The pick was his second in as many games for the Broncos and one that put the ball back in Peyton Manning's hands for a touchdown drive to close out the first half.

The pick was also the 29th of Talib's career, tying him with Asante Samuel for the most by an NFL cornerback since 2008.

The pick changed the momentum and gave the offense a chance — another chance — to put points on the board.

"We called a blitz," Talib said. "I knew the ball was going to come out fast. I just took advantage of the situation. Interceptions are always momentum-changing plays. It doesn't matter when they come."

The Broncos' defense gave a taste of its potential in the preseason that has been realized in games that now matter. Their bounty of edge rushers have wreaked havoc on quarterbacks, just as they vowed to do in camp.

And in two games, the defense has accumulated three red-zone takeaways, equaling their season total in 2014.

But it has been Talib, an eighth-year veteran who played wingman to Chris Harris last year, who has come up with the crucial plays. The game-changers.

Against Baltimore on Sunday, Talib saved it for the third quarter, when he flew in front of Ravens receiver Steve Smith and returned the ball 51 yards for a score.

The Broncos' offense would continue to limp to the finish. The defense would win it, an interception by Darian Stewart in the waning seconds sealing the victory.

At Kansas City, the trend continued at the start and in spurts. Manning was sacked three times. Manning threw a pick-six. And the offensive line looked shaky, at best, until the veteran quarterback engineered a game-tying drive in the final minute.

The defense continued to wreak havoc, to the tune of four sacks, two interceptions and three fumble recoveries — the last of which, by Bradley Roby in the final 30 seconds, gave the Broncos an improbable victory.

The defense won again.

And Talib again came up with the premium look, the big play. And chances are he'll be back in the same stance in Detroit in Week 3. Eyeing his target and waiting to pounce.

Talib's tallies

Broncos cornerback Aqib Talib intercepted a first-half pass against the Chiefs on Thursday night to give him 29 picks since 2008. That number is tied for the most during that span. A closer look at the list:

Player	No.
Aqib Talib	29
Asante Samuel	29
Tramon Williams	27
DeAngelo Hall	26
Richard Sherman	24

Wade Phillips: Harris Jr. and Talib the best CB duo he's had

By Ben Swanson
DenverBroncos.com
August 11, 2015

In 38 years of NFL coaching, Defensive Coordinator Wade Phillips feels that this 2015 Broncos team has the best starting cornerbacks of any team he's ever been with, even rivaling those he's coached in the Pro Bowl.

With a Pro Bowl selection apiece in 2014, Chris Harris Jr. and Aqib Talib certainly have the accolades to their name to justify such praise. Harris had perhaps the best season of any cornerback in the league last year with the highest rating by Pro Football Focus and highlighted by the fact that he didn't give up a touchdown all year. Talib, meanwhile, put up a terrific season of his own, punctuated by four interceptions, of which two were returned for touchdowns.

"They're probably the best," Phillips said. "I've had a lot of really good corners. The latest, the guys in Houston, were really good, but these guys are the best, I think, that I've been around. They rate with the Pro Bowls that I've coached. They're that kind of players."

Talib's big plays in camp drew rave reviews, especially from Head Coach Gary Kubiak, who said: "To me, the difference in this league between a good corner and a great corner is guys that have ball skills. [...] That's what separates him. If he gets his hands on the ball, like I told the guys the other day, 'Let's go to work,' that will be a touchdown, not just turnover."

In turn, Talib discussed Harris' rise as a prominent defender.

"I love it. It's my little brother," Talib said. "It's like my little brother getting the recognition that he deserves. [It's] long awaited, so I'm as happy for him as anybody."

However, the position's talent runs deep into the roster at cornerback beyond Talib and Harris, Phillips added.

"They're really talented, and our other guys — [Bradley] Roby's coming along and [Tony] Carter's coming along."

The skills at the position have been a big point of discussion when it comes to their abilities in helping the defensive line and linebackers put pressure on opposing lines and quarterbacks. They certainly seem poised to do that for Phillips' defense.

As icing on the cake, should Harris and Talib be selected to the Pro Bowl again, it would mark the first time a cornerback duo made the Pro Bowl in multiple years in the free-agency era, and the first time at all in the last 25 years.

Aqib Talib says Broncos secondary 'definitely' best in the league

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN.com

August 9, 2015

It's the relentless optimism that fuels the annual fresh start that is training camp, but let's just say the Denver Broncos are excited about the potential of their defense. And that might be an understatement.

Because, oh, how the Broncos are pumped about the new scheme and the personnel they have to play it. The reality will unfold in the coming months in how, or if, the Broncos can close the deal on the field to be in the Super Bowl conversation.

But in the sun-baked days of training camp, the players have consistently lauded the get-after-it simplicity of Wade Phillips' scheme and how it fits the team's personnel. So much so that when cornerback Aqib Talib was asked if the Broncos have the best secondary in the NFL, he said "definitely."

"I don't feel like we were too far from the top last year," Talib continued. "I think we graded out at the end of the year, we graded out pretty good. We want to grade out as the top secondary in the league this year as far as interceptions, yards, all that. With this defense, we definitely have a chance to do that."

The Broncos have five players on the depth chart this year that played in the Pro Bowl this past January. And four of those players play positions (edge rushers and cover corners) that many in the league say lay the foundation for the best defenses.

Von Miller and DeMarcus Ware give the Broncos plenty of potential on the edge. Toss in rookie linebacker Shane Ray and defensive end Malik Jackson, who was second on the team in sacks in 2013 with six, and the Broncos have the ability to create pressure.

Behind that pressure is the secondary Talib has pushed to the front of the line. Talib, cornerback Chris Harris Jr. and safety T.J. Ward all went to the Pro Bowl in 2014.

But the Broncos haven't met their Super Bowl potential over the past three seasons, and that includes a defense that had one sack and no interceptions in the playoff loss to the Baltimore Ravens in 2012, no sacks and no interceptions in the Super Bowl loss to the Seattle Seahawks in 2013 and no sacks in the playoff loss to the Indianapolis Colts last January.

The Broncos were No. 3 in total defense last season, at 305.2 yards allowed per game, but they were tied for 16th in scoring defense (22.1 points allowed per game). The Broncos defenders say they've been good, but they want to be better, more impactful, more game-changing. They recovered just five fumbles all last season, for example, and only three teams recovered fewer.

"It's been wonderful," Talib said of Phillips' defense. "His defense is straight to the point. Not a lot of thinking, but a lot of playing. It helps out our whole defense. It allows us to play fast."

Talib and Harris have been, unquestionably, the team's top two cornerbacks thus far (Bradley Roby is No. 3). Talib returned an interception for a touchdown in Saturday's practice. The Broncos have plenty of speed at the position after those three as well with Kayvon Webster, Tony Carter and rookie Lorenzo Doss.

"From first to third group, I think we have a good depth at cornerback -- maybe the best in the league, actually," said safety Darian Stewart.

"Well, we can play man [and] boy, that's a great sign," coach Gary Kubiak said. "When we're pressuring people being in zone-type blitzes or man blitzes, we can lock up on the back end. That's just very encouraging ... I think we're going to have a lot of flexibility on the back end. We're a man-under football team. If you're going to beat us, you're going to have to beat man coverage. They're not going to let you dink and dunk the ball around."

Aqib Talib expects more speed, more big plays, better ending for Broncos

By Nicki Jhabvala

DenverPost.com

June 2, 2015

Aqib Talib doesn't want to talk about Deflategate or the footballs Tom Brady throws.

"That's New England's problem," he said Tuesday. "We got enough problems in Denver."

The Broncos' secondary, however, isn't one.

In his first season in Denver, Talib teamed with Chris Harris, his former Kansas teammate, to form one of the league's finest cornerback duos.

Harris, Talib and safety T.J. Ward all made the Pro Bowl and safety Rahim Moore parlayed his play into a sizable raise as a free agent. Bradley Roby also impressed as a rookie and is now being asked to take on multiple jobs in the secondary, at cornerback and maybe some safety.

On the whole, the Broncos' secondary was a force and they got their due.

But the sour, and unexpected early ending to the season trumped the accolades. Especially for Talib, who had perhaps his worst game of the season in the playoff loss to Indianapolis trying to cover receiver T.Y. Hilton.

"I feel like we were recognized enough," Talib said. "It could be better, but if we had finished later in the season, we would have gotten even more recognition, so that's what we worried about."

With a new set of coaches and a new playbook, Talib is hoping for a longer playoff run after the upcoming season.

The Broncos' cornerback group is one of the few constants on a team that has undergone numerous changes along the sideline and in personnel.

"All of us in the back end, we're learning a whole new defense together," he said. "There's a lot of knowledge in that back end, so we're all able to help each other out in different ways."

Talib, however, made one change on his own soon after the loss to Indianapolis.

"I got a new trainer out in Dallas," he said. "We do a lot of different things, working on staying low, changing directions. He has a totally different approach to training, so I have changed it up this year."

The secondary will continue to morph as defensive coordinator Wade Phillips installs new packages and schemes in his 3-4 defense.

Harris and Talib combined for seven interceptions a season ago, the second most among cornerback tandems behind San Francisco's Perrish Cox and Chris Culliver (nine).

In 2015, Talib will tell you to expect more speed. More big plays. More freedom to adapt to what an offense presents.

But as the changes unfold, he and Harris — and Roby, too, as he tries to improve the C-minus grade he gave himself for last season — have an advantage.

"We're going to try to raise each other's level even higher," Harris said. "He's seen that I didn't give up any touchdowns last year, so I'm pretty sure he's going to come out there and be like, 'OK, I'm going to try to do that and not give up any touchdowns.' Just that competition between me and him is going to make each other better and make us better. And I like that."

Chris Harris Jr. and Aqib Talib: Unlikely pair turned deadly duo

By David DeChant
denverbroncos.com
December 20, 2014

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. – When Chris Harris Jr. and Aqib Talib first met in 2007, they carried slightly different football pedigrees.

“I was like a little kid,” Harris recalls, laughing. “I was 17 when I first showed up to KU and [Talib] was ‘The Man’ there.

“...I was just trying to find my way there at the time.”

Talib had been named first-team All-Big 12 in 2006 as a sophomore after leading the country in passes defensed (28) and the conference in interceptions (six). He would go on to add five more picks (two for touchdowns) and even dabble at wide receiver (four TD catches) as a junior, finishing the year as Kansas’ first unanimous All-American selection since Gale Sayers in 1964

But the biggest Jayhawk star in recent memory was more than willing to support the unheralded freshman, Harris, who had come to Kansas on his only scholarship offer out of high school. After JUCO transfer Kendrick Harper, who was penciled in as the No. 2 cornerback, went down with an injury before the season began, Talib took Harris under his wing.

“Chris had to step in, and I felt like it was my job to make sure he stepped in right,” Talib remembers. “[I] kind of just made sure he played with that swag, made sure he knew everybody on the D had confidence in him.

“That was like my little brother there.”

The two parted ways after one season in Lawrence, but circuitous routes eventually reunited them in Denver.

Talib departed Kansas after his junior year and became the first player out of KU to be a first-round pick in 15 years, going 20th overall in the 2008 draft to the Buccaneers. While Talib collected 15 interceptions in his first three NFL seasons, Harris was grinding away at KU, playing safety when necessary and climbing to second in Jayhawks history in tackles.

The versatile, undersized corner was overlooked by teams come draft time and had to wait through the NFL’s lockout before he could sign with a team, picking the

Broncos shortly before training camp. In the years since, Harris battled to earn a special teams role, worked his way into a starting role on defense and overcame a torn ACL to earn a five-year extension he signed last week.

"It just goes to show you, it don't really matter how you do it, you've just got to get it done," Talib said of Harris' path to today's success. "My route was different than Chris. We're at the same spot now."

"Before this [year], my cousins and my family, they used to always joke around, 'What if y'all play together again?'" Harris said. "It's crazy that it actually happened."

With Talib on a six-year deal that he signed in March, the Broncos now have each member of the former Jayhawk duo under contract through the 2019 season. The likelihood of an All-KU starting cornerback pairing is beyond miniscule – only seven current NFL players are Kansas alums and three are on the Broncos: Talib, Harris and Steven Johnson.

But Talib and Harris also represent the rarity of a team signing two cornerbacks long term. Outside of the Broncos, only the Cowboys (Brandon Carr, Orlando Scandrick) and Packers (Tramon Williams, Sam Shields) have multiple cornerbacks currently signed to contracts of at least four years in length (excluding rookie deals).

"The passing game's a big part of the game right now and so you cannot have enough good cover guys," Executive Vice President of Football Operations/General Manager John Elway said Monday. "To be able to have two guys like we have in Aqib and now Chris to be under contract, it's very, very important."

The value of the shutdown duo has been apparent this season, as the Broncos are tied for the league lead in passing yards per play allowed (5.74). Each corner has collected three interceptions – the pair even combined for one in Seattle, with Talib tipping a pass and Harris reeling it in – and Harris ranks as Pro Football Focus' top cornerback. Perhaps even more valuable is the versatility that the pair brings in their body types and styles of play, which seem as different as their college pedigrees.

The 6-foot-1, 205 pound Talib has excellent size for the position, with lanky arms that prove useful for press coverage and reaching to deflect passes away. Yet, he still has the athleticism and fluidity to make up ground or break on a football in a hurry.

That skillset lends itself to playing with an eye on the quarterback at times, as Talib did when he nabbed a fourth-quarter interception of Philip Rivers last Sunday.

Harris, meanwhile, noted Monday that he may always be “an underrated player just because of my size and the way I came into the league.” He measured 5-foot-9 and 190 pounds at his pro day coming out of college, but more than makes up for it with an uber-competitive energy and crisp technique.

Whether playing in the slot, at right corner or on the left, Harris is a machine at mirroring his counterpart face-to-face, backpedaling smoothly and driving on throws with ferocity.

In those varied characteristics lies an added versatility against different offenses. Aided by depth with Bradley Roby, Kayvon Webster and Tony Carter, the coaching staff can elect to keep Talib and Harris on their traditional left and right sides respectively, or they can mix and match to adapt to any collection of receivers.

A week ago, that meant Talib taking the 6-foot-5, deep-ball specialist Malcom Floyd, while Harris followed the well-rounded and talented Keenan Allen, leaving Roby on Eddie Royal. The trio caught 6-of-19 targets for just 79 yards.

“Jack [Del Rio] uses it to his ability however he feels, with deep-ball guys or underneath guys or quick guys,” Talib says. “He’s got a guy who can match up with any receiver who he goes against.”

“We can match them how we think, how it should work best for us,” Del Rio added. “They have the ability to do a lot. They can each play inside or out, left or right. And so that versatility frees up us defensively to do a lot.”

With both Talib and Harris making long-term commitments to Denver – and Roby just getting started – the Broncos’ defense should be able to lean on that versatility for years to come. The old Kansas teammates have already played more games together as pros than they did in the Big 12, so perhaps they could even develop more chemistry moving forward.

Those days at KU seem distant today, especially considering the detours each player confronted before their Mile High reunion. But even with seven or so years under their belts since their first meeting in Lawrence, the sibling-like relationship between Talib and Harris remains much like it once was.

“He’s a vet in the league now,” Talib says, “but I mean it’s still the same relationship. He still talks to me like I’m his big bro. I talk to him like he’s my little bro. It’s still the same old relationship.”

Harris agrees, saying he still looks up to Talib. Now with more than a single year to play together, Harris wants to see how high the old Jayhawks can fly.

"Right now, we're the future of the secondary, and it's going to be us for a while here," Harris said. "I mean right now, I think we're top five on defense, so we want to keep that as long as we're here."

Aqib Talib, Broncos CB, named AFC Defensive Player of the Week

By Joe Nguyen

The Denver Post

December 17, 2014

After recording a season-high eight tackles and snagging an interception to seal a 22-10 win against San Diego on Sunday, Denver Broncos cornerback Aqib Talib was named the AFC Defensive Player of the Week.

It's the second time the 28-year-old has received the honor. He won the NFC award with Tampa Bay in 2010.

This is the 27th time a Broncos player has earned the AFC Defensive Player of the Week award, and first since Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie won it last season.

Aqib Talib saves the day with key interception

By Troy E. Renck
The Denver Post
December 14, 2014

SAN DIEGO — The Broncos signed Aqib Talib in March for December and January. Denver brought in the cornerback, the best Peyton Manning said he faced last season, to equip the defense with fangs. He brings attitude and breathtaking athleticism.

"There aren't many defensive backs with his ability," said Hall of Fame defensive back Rod Woodson as he surveyed the Broncos in pregame. "There's not much he can't do."

Money aside, Talib joined the Broncos for games like these, for plays like this. The Chargers, hanging on with white knuckles, faced second down from their 27-yard line, trailing 19-10. The clock taunted them, only 4:27 left. Hope of extending their season, of avoiding the indignity of the Broncos clinching their fourth consecutive AFC West title at Qualcomm Stadium, hung on this drive.

Quarterback Philip Rivers, long the Broncos' favorite villain, took a shotgun snap, and tried to squeeze a dart over the middle to receiver Malcolm Floyd.

"I was doing what (defensive coordinator) Jack (Del Rio) wanted. He does a great job of making the same things look different," Talib said. "With five minutes left, it was time for the defense to end the game, man."

The roar of the Broncos' crowd — the schedule insisted this was a road game, but the orange splashed stands suggested otherwise — told the result before the scoreboard.

"Obviously, I would like it back," Rivers said.

Talib undercut the route, making his biggest interception since securing a victory against the Jets on Oct. 12.

"He made a great play. We were in control, and then that was it," cornerback Chris Harris said. "When we get up 10 or close to that, it's over for teams really because they have to throw at me and 'Lib. the whole time."

The Broncos amended the record book last season with a prolific offense. They made history Sunday, winning their 12th consecutive division road game, tying the San Francisco 49ers' league record established in 1990.

They did it with Manning sick and tired. They did it with a defense that showed once and for all it was sick and tired of last year's reputation.

"We wanted it to come down to us," said defensive tackle Terrance Knighton.

The Broncos' four-game winning streak features a heavy dose of Ground Gase, the offensive coordinator leaning on running back C.J. Anderson. The jarring shift, however, would not work without touchdown prevention. The Broncos held the Chargers to 288 yards, two weeks after suffocating the Chiefs, who had only 151.

"A bunch of guys on the same page," defensive end DeMarcus Ware said. "And they brought in some game-changers. That's what you are seeing."

Injuries, and the pressure it added to the secondary, made this performance one of the Broncos' most impressive. The Broncos lost weakside linebacker Brandon Marshall in the second quarter to a right foot injury. He will have a magnetic resonance image exam on Monday, same as Danny Trevathan (possible hyperextended left knee).

"It's crazy, man. We just got a chance to finally play together," Marshall said. "Hopefully we will be back soon."

Denver rendered San Diego one-dimensional, yielding only 56 yards rushing. Using a dime package with the Chargers relying on the pass, the Broncos trusted Harris and Talib in man coverage. The instructions were simple: Harris was responsible for Keenan Allen with Talib focused on Floyd. Allen finished with three catches for 18 yards before injuring his foot. Floyd made three receptions for 34 yards.

Talib played the percentages with his interception. He diagnosed the play and took a calculated risk by jumping the route. It's the kind of plays the Broncos viewed in person and on film last season when Talib starred for New England.

"He is exactly who you thought he was," safety Rahim Moore said. "He puts the work in. Everything is paying dividends. I am proud to be his teammate."

Aqib Talib: Return to Pats

By Jeff Howe
Boston Herald
October 31, 2014

FOXBORO — Aqib Talib still has nothing but love for the Patriots. In fact, Talib nearly re-signed with the Pats last offseason before landing a six-year, \$57 million contract with the rival Denver Broncos.

“I definitely came close, man,” Talib said yesterday by phone. “It was a negotiation, and it came down to the language of the contracts. I just went with what I feel was best with me and my family. I can’t remember the logistics and everything. It wasn’t bad at all. The offer wasn’t bad. It was just the language of the offer, how the payout comes. It was some language that I wasn’t trying to hear.

“Me and my agent went with what we thought was best for us and my family.”

That spawned an intense offseason arms race that included the Patriots’ counterstrike of Darrelle Revis, and it all led to Sunday’s monumental showdown between the AFC Championship Game contestants at Gillette Stadium, where the conference’s top seed is on the line.

Talib, who is thrilled in Denver, was admittedly geeked up for the clash, as he couldn’t stop gushing over his career revival during his season and a half with the Patriots. The Pats acquired the 2008 first-round pick in a November 2012 trade with Tampa Bay, and Talib restored an uncertain reputation with an organization that harnesses one of the greatest spotlights in sports.

Bill Belichick and the players adored Talib, and he reciprocated the infatuation. He was a model teammate and shutdown corner who erased the likes of Jimmy Graham and A.J. Green on any given week. The Patriots were 20-7 during Talib’s tenure and went to back-to-back AFC title games, which offered a stark contrast from his playoff drought with the Bucs.

“It was great,” Talib said. “When I got traded, I kind of was mad and sad at first. But at the same time, I knew I was getting a chance to play with a great organization in New England. And once I got there, the locker room was sound. It was a tight locker room, a group of good guys. I just relished the opportunity to get a chance to go compete on all those TV games. It’s like a stage. You get Monday night after Sunday night, playoffs, so it was just a great opportunity with a great organization.

"It makes you appreciate your job more when you're winning games like that. You want to wake up and come watch the tape from the game before. If we played on Sunday, you want to come to work on Monday because there will be a lot of positive energy in the building. Everybody is going to be happy. You can watch the plays. You won the game.

"It makes you appreciate the job more when you can come to work happy."

Talib said the mixed emotions from the trade quickly evaporated.

"It didn't take long at all," Talib said. "I actually got the call from the personnel guy in Tampa, and maybe five minutes later, I got the call from my brother. And my brother called with a whole different (perspective). I'm thinking he's going to call and say, 'Man, forget the Bucs, to hell with the Bucs.' But he had nothing to say about the Bucs. All he had was positive things to say, and he was like, 'Man, you get to go play with Tom (Brady). You get to go play on the stage. You got a Sunday night. Your first game back will be a 4:30 game against the Colts.'

"He was just excited. He saw it as an opportunity immediately, and he kind of made me realize that."

Talib was a reputable cover corner with Tampa Bay, but a forgotten man in the smaller market. He believed people got to finally appreciate his talent playing in New England.

"I played local football in Tampa. I played good football," Talib said. "I'd been doing it in the shadows, but since you can't make it on local TV since the fans in Tampa didn't sell out the games and the owners didn't buy the tickets, you can't even get on local TV. They didn't have prime-time games, so it kind of gets overlooked in Tampa. That's how I feel."

Talib did say he cleaned up his technique because Brady exposes anything less than perfection at practice, and Belichick honed his skills, too.

So on Sunday, Talib will seek out all of his former comrades who made his time with the Patriots so special.

"Bill makes you want to impress him," Talib said. "He makes you want to watch film. He doesn't bite his tongue for nobody. If he feels like you're not putting the stance at the line or something like you're lacking in your technique, he's going to tell you. A lot of coaches will kind of let you mess up and keep messing up, but Bill is going to correct you every single time that you do something that you're not supposed to do. So that criticism and that critique, that makes you a much better player.

"It's exciting to get a chance to go back there and play against a lot of good friends in that great atmosphere. It will be fun. It will be a lot of fun."

Broncos' Aqib Talib seals win over New York Jets with pick six

By Troy E. Renck
The Denver Post
October 12, 2014

EAST RUTHERFORD, n.j. — Ego fuels cornerbacks. They play on an island, left vulnerable to explosive passes in a game in which rules favor the offense. No confidence, no chance.

Just as important as mental toughness is selective amnesia.

The Broncos' Aqib Talib delivered a streaky performance Sunday, but when it mattered most, the crowd alive with a final burst of optimism, he crushed its dreams with an interception of a pass by Geno Smith, returning it 22 yards for a touchdown with 15 seconds left.

"We were in a cover two. We knew he had to get the ball out of his hands quickly," Talib said. "That's why we called a play where we all had our eyes on the quarterback."

Talib read Smith's intentions, jumping the route on a pass intended for Jeremy Kerley. Talib didn't require formal introductions from the end zone. This marked Talib's fifth interception return for a touchdown since 2009, second most in the NFL during this stretch, one behind the Chicago Bears' Charles Tillman.

"It just wasn't a good enough ball," said Smith, who finished 23-of-43 for 190 yards. He was forced to throw often as the Broncos held the Jets to 31 yards rushing.

"Obviously, they were playing sidelines," said Smith. "I tried to get the ball there, and I didn't give Jeremy a good enough ball."

The Broncos focused on takeaways last week. They entered the game with three this season, creating chatter about punch-causing fumbles and securing errant passes. Talib's interception represents a potential lit fuse.

"Turnovers, man, they come in bunches," Talib said. "Hopefully that will be the spark that gets us going."

Talib kept the ball. Sort of. He handed it to his fiancée in the stands.

"I have the ones from my touchdowns, but I think my nephews throw them around in the yard," Talib said. "But you gotta get them."

Nothing came easily for Talib. He missed a chunk of the second half with cramping in his calves because of dehydration. He also surrendered a touchdown pass to erstwhile Bronco Eric Decker, who returned Sunday after he missed last week with a leg injury.

Hochman: Catching Aqib Talib's "foul football" at a Broncos game

By Benjamin Hochman
The Denver Post
October 9, 2014

According to a recent study, the odds of a spectator catching a foul ball are precisely one in a gazillion.

Then there's those fans who forever say they caught a foul ball, and then we come to find out that they actually "retrieved" a foul ball. It ricocheted off a big fella's belly, bounced down six rows, finally sputtering out on the ground next to your seat, where you reached down and picked up the baseball, an accomplishment mirroring the thrill and danger of scratching your leg.

Now consider that one Denverite this Broncos season caught the equivalent to a "foul football," heaved high into the stands by a player after a play. Not retrieved, but actually caught.

"I've gone to Broncos game for 11 years, I've never even seen a ball thrown in the stands," said Bill Randall, who has hands like Bill Russell.

In the Broncos' second game of the season, Denver led Kansas City 24-17, with 3:08 left. You might recall it was third-and-5, and the Chiefs had the ball on their 39. Alex Smith fired a dart, which was snatched by Denver cornerback Aqib Talib, who easily and blissfully zipped all the way to the end zone.

"I thought it was over," said Talib of his touchdown, giving Denver a 14-point lead.

And so, he chucked the thing up into the north stands, trying to reach his family and friends in a luxury suite. Instead, the ball sailed into a cluster of orange and blue, snatched by Randall, 51, who stands 6-foot-3 like Demaryius Thomas (but probably runs like Philip Michael Thomas).

But amid his fellow flabbergast fans, Randall spotted the flag.

Offsides.

Yep, the Broncos' Quarterback Alex Smith had jolted offsides, nullifying the interception and giving the Chiefs a fresh set of downs with a fresh new football.

Up in the north stands, Randall posed for pictures, while the Chiefs drove toward the south stands. Ultimately, Terrance "Pot Roast" Knighton batted down Smith's fourth-down pass attempt in the red zone, preserving a victory.

So this week, I co-hosted a radio show with 102.3 ESPN's Nate Kreckman at Govnr's Park Tavern. We interviewed Talib on-site, and during the commercial break, fans brought jerseys and hats for the cornerback to sign. A tall gent approached him and said, "This is the ball you threw in the stands."

It was the rarest of reunions, or actually, the rarest of meetings. Plucked out of a gathering of 76,900 fans, Randall plucked the pass out of mid-air, and now here he was, meeting Talib. The two posed for a photo and, of course, Randall had Talib autograph the football.

"Now, the only way to complete it is," Kreckman deadpanned, "you've got to get Quanterus Smith to sign it."

Talib's competitiveness pushes defense

By Ben Swanson

DenverBroncos.com

October 13, 2014

EAST RUTHERFORD, N.J. — A little less than two years ago, Aqib Talib cut through the Indianapolis Colts' offense like the calm, early-evening breeze in the Massachusetts air with the temperature hovering a little bit above freezing.

He had just plucked a pass intended for Reggie Wayne out of its flight path and was headed in the other direction, turning his defensive teammates into blockers and turning his offensive opponents into wannabe tacklers. Catching the ball on the Colts' right hash, he crossed the field toward the opposite sideline, quickly sprinted upfield, cut back to the middle to gain blockers and then made his way for the left pylon.

It was his first interception for the Patriots and he turned it into a 59-yard touchdown.

His first interception for the Broncos had an identical end result, though the rest was completely different.

As a Patriot, Talib caught a badly overthrown pass.

As a Bronco, Talib caught one that was underthrown. Still, he turned that one into a touchdown, too.

The Jets were down seven points with 56 seconds left in regulation. They needed a touchdown, but the Broncos had pinned them at their own 5-yard line on a punt. With 95 yards ahead of them, quarterback Geno Smith had his work cut out for him, and they hadn't had much success on offense up to that point. Smith had completed 22-of-41 passes to that point for 183 yards and had been sacked four times, though to his credit he did have two passing touchdowns, including the one to pull within seven points earlier in the fourth quarter.

Denver's defense had forced New York to turn almost solely to their passing game after holding their rushing offense to 31 yards on 15 runs.

So Smith dropped back for his 42nd pass of the day. The Broncos dropped back in a cover-two defense. The Jets ran vertical routes, looking to gain yards in a hurry. Talib kept his eyes on Smith, who threw the ball behind receiver Jeremy Kerley. Catching the low ball before it scraped the turf, Talib didn't have to make any cutbacks back and forth across the turf this time. The 22-yard return began and

ended quickly and directly, with Talib picking up a couple blocks before he high-stepped into the end zone.

The play effectively ended the game, putting the Jets' deficit into two-score territory. After the game, Smith said "It wasn't a good enough ball," while Head Coach Rex Ryan said "We were trying to make a play and force the issue. It got out of his hand a little too quick."

"It felt good, man—first pick of the season. As a defense, we got a chance to end the game again. [I] feel real good for the defense," Talib said.

For teammate T.J. Ward, it was hardly a surprise to see Talib come up big late in a game. "Just when it's time to make a play, he seems to always be there. He seems to always be knocking the ball down. If he's not intercepting, he's got his hands on it, making tackles, assignment keys, crucial situations," Ward said. "I say Talib is a clutch corner for us."

Not only had Talib and the secondary come up big with time winding down, but they had been a key part to holding the Jets to 204 total yards. Though New York had a couple promising drives, they were often taken out of rhythm by Denver's pass rush, which had four sacks and nine hits on the quarterback. Though the Broncos' defensive linemen and pass rushers are talented enough in their own right, they got a lot of help in getting time to get to Smith from the coverage containing the Jets' receivers.

The secondary's competitiveness is something that drives them, and for those who know Talib, they know he's as competitive as they come, and that just helps fuel the entire secondary.

"It doesn't matter if we're playing ping pong, he wants to win," Chris Harris Jr. said. "That's the type of guys we need on this team to get us over the top."

"We're all eager to make plays," Ward said. "So when we're out there, we're like, 'Who's going to be the first one to make a play? Who's going to be the first one to get a pick this game? Who's the first one to get a big hit?'"

"It's a team full of competitive guys," Talib said. "We thrive on that stuff. I feel like that's why Jack [Del Rio] brought me, D. Ware and T.J. here because of our competitive nature. We're just a competitive defense as a whole. That's what we do. If we're called on to end the game, then we're going to try to end the game."

It had to be much-anticipated for Talib, who would have had his first interception as a Bronco on a pick six a month ago against Kansas City, but it was called back for an offside penalty. He was also close on a interception against the Seahawks, but

wide receiver Ricardo Lockette wisely interfered with Talib, taking a penalty to prevent the turnover.

"You know, we've been talking about that a long time," Von Miller said. "It was great when you still got working and working and working and finally has a breakthrough with success. It's a wonderful feeling and I'm happy for Talib, happy for all the guys that were able to go out there and get this win done."

Aqib Talib has something to prove

By Jeffri Chadiha
ESPN.com
October 3, 2014

DENVER -- Denver Broncos cornerback Aqib Talib craned his neck, patiently scanned the options and trusted his instincts when pondering the choices before him. He didn't have much time for lunch on this spring afternoon, so Noodles & Co. would have to do for a man who had recently signed a six-year, \$57 million free-agent deal. As Talib stepped slowly toward the cash register, he continued contemplating the various pasta selections when an unassuming gentleman tapped his right shoulder from behind. "Don't worry about this one," the man said. "I'll take care of your lunch today."

Talib couldn't help but smile at the gesture. The last time somebody bought him a meal, he was standing in line at a Dunkin' Donuts outside Boston last fall, waiting for 25 breakfast sandwiches that a New England Patriots fan was eager to purchase on his behalf. The difference then was that Talib was already deep into his first full season with the Patriots after being traded from the Tampa Bay Buccaneers. This time, before even lining up in a game for the Broncos, Talib was feeling instant love from the Mile High City.

The takeaway for 28-year-old Talib was that new beginnings can trump old baggage. For a man who has been suspended or involved in a legal run-in at every level of his career, Talib is out to prove something critical in his first year in Denver: that the Broncos made a sound investment.

"When you've been around the NFL long enough, you hear about the A-1 franchises," Talib said. "I was lucky to be with one in New England, and now I'm with one here. You're talking about being around people like Peyton Manning, John Fox and John Elway every day. It doesn't get much better than that."

Sitting in a folding chair outside the Broncos' locker room after an August practice, Talib talked passionately about his new team. He fidgeted with a pair of cellphones while answering questions, and he joked with teammates who walked by. In many ways, Talib appeared to be a man eager to put his best foot forward. At his best, he's funny, personable and candid.

But Talib didn't pretend he didn't know what was coming in that interview -- especially at a time when player conduct is under the microscope. If his story really is one of redemption, it won't just revolve around all the abilities and skills that earned him his first Pro Bowl selection last season. It also has to be about the issues that left many observers questioning Talib's decision-making and his future.

The fights with teammates. The arrest for slugging a cab driver. The ugly tussle with his sister's live-in boyfriend three years ago that led to an indictment for aggravated assault with a deadly weapon -- although charges were later dropped because of insufficient evidence. Talib drew so much negative press in his first five NFL seasons that the Broncos must have been holding their breath in June when Dallas police erroneously named Talib as someone who had been arrested when, in fact, older brother Yaqub Talib had been picked up for public intoxication.

But as the NFL struggles with an assortment of criminal issues that have made people question the state of the league, Talib feels as if his ability to avoid trouble since being traded out of Tampa Bay midway through the 2012 season indicates that he's on the right track.

"I feel like I have grown a lot," Talib said. "When you're young, you start off wanting to go to the NFL. Then you want to be a first-round pick. After that, you want to be a starter, and then a Pro Bowler and then a guy who plays in playoff games. I'm at the stage now where I want to be recognized among the best at my position."

As for most players with baggage, Talib's story is complicated. He spent the first 11 years of his life in rugged East Cleveland, an area, where Talib said, "You saw gangs, drugs, shootings, people getting jumped and girls fighting each other." Talib became so used to his rough surroundings that he was hardly fazed when his mother, Okolo Talib, spent eight months in prison after being indicted for felony assault for attacking another woman with a knife in 1996. He and Yaqub spent that time with their father, Theodore Henry, who lived in Trenton, New Jersey, after he and Talib's mother divorced.

As bleak as Talib's environment was, there was no questioning his athletic ability. When neighbors dumped old mattresses on the street corners for garbage pickup, a young Talib performed cartwheels and backflips on them, leaving his mother wondering how an 8-year-old could be so nimble. When she moved her family to the Dallas area before Talib started sixth grade, that athleticism became even more obvious when he started playing organized football. He became a standout at Berkner High School in Richardson, Texas, and an All-American at Kansas after that.

But Talib also had red flags hovering all around him. The Tampa Bay Times reported that Talib received two years' probation toward the end of his senior year at Berkner for breaking into a house. He also garnered multiple suspensions in his first two years at Kansas and admitted to testing positive three times for marijuana during his college career.

The Buccaneers, nevertheless, selected Talib at No. 20 in the 2008 draft. In 2010, he received a one-game suspension for punching a cab driver in St. Petersburg, Florida, the year before. Later, he was indicted in Garland, Texas, for the 2011 incident in which police alleged that Talib had assaulted his sister's live-in boyfriend after the man hit Talib's sister. The case was dismissed before going to trial.

Despite Talib's having intercepted 17 passes in his first four seasons with the Bucs, most people knew him because of his behavior off the field.

"I was putting myself in bad situations," he said. "I wasn't thinking about the consequences. I would know I wasn't supposed to be in a place, and I decided to go anyways."

Added former Bucs general manager and current ESPN analyst Mark Dominik: "If you look at everything that's happened to Aqib, he's had a lot of incidents where there wasn't sufficient evidence to have charges [stick]. He found trouble sometimes, and sometimes trouble found him. But I do know he was a great teammate. The guys he played with loved him."

Some of Talib's issues in the NFL might have been influenced by personal problems. Talib moved his father to the Tampa area after being drafted, but Henry developed serious health

issues within a couple of years of relocating. Doctors worried about Theodore's high blood pressure and a lung disease known as sarcoidosis. He grew so ill that he couldn't walk 20 feet without grimacing and gasping for air.

"Aqib and his father were very close, but there were times when we would go two days without ever seeing him because he couldn't leave his room," said Talib's wife, Gypsy Benitez. "I would get concerned about Aqib because it would affect his job at times. His anger would boil over. I think his father being ill was very hard for him to deal with."

Things didn't get any easier for Talib when the NFL suspended him four games for violating the league's banned substance policy in the 2012 season. Talib thought he was getting off to a good start with his new coach, Greg Schiano, at the time of the suspension. But on Nov. 1, 2012, as Talib talked to his wife about a home they were looking to purchase in Dallas, Schiano called to say the Bucs had traded Talib and a seventh-round pick to New England for a fourth-round selection in the 2013 draft.

"Aqib was surprised when we told him [about the trade], but he also knew that was the last straw," Dominik said. "Even when we told him the news, he had that cornerback mentality. He wasn't going to show you how much it hurt him."

Said Talib: "When a team trades you, they're basically saying they don't need you anymore. It definitely made me want to never be in that situation again."

The people who've spent time around Talib argue that, even with his issues, there is ample reason to believe in his maturation.

"With some of the things that have happened off the field, Aqib is more worried about his reputation," Benitez said. "He's always loved football, but he's so dedicated to it now. When he's home, we hardly get any downtime with him because he's always studying or watching film. ... He really wants people to know he's a good guy."

Seattle Seahawks defensive end Michael Bennett played 3½ seasons with Talib in Tampa Bay and said, "I don't know anybody who's still talking about his off-the-field issues. I think he's really grown as a man." Added Broncos cornerback Chris Harris, who played with Talib at Kansas: "He was wild when he was young, but he's totally different now. A lot of guys go through some things and never learn. I feel like he's learned."

Talib didn't waste much time making an impact for the Broncos in their 31-24 season-opening win over Indianapolis. When Colts quarterback Andrew Luck fired a pass deep up the seam late in the first quarter, Talib darted in front of tight end Dwayne Allen and deflected the ball into the hands of Broncos safety Rahim Moore for an interception. After the Broncos secured the victory on the Colts' final drive, Talib jogged off the field with admiring fans cheering his name near the tunnel. Unlike his teammates -- some of whom stopped to toss wristbands and gloves into the stands -- Talib kept running right into the tunnel with a focus in his eyes that suggested this was just the start of bigger things in Denver.

At 6-foot-1 and 205 pounds, Talib is exactly the kind of rangy, athletic cornerback who can be a cornerstone for a Broncos team looking to return to the Super Bowl. Colts wide receiver T.Y. Hilton said Talib "is long and he can run with you and he's physical." Miami

Dolphins wide receiver Mike Wallace added that Talib is so intense that "he takes it really hard when he loses a rep, let alone a game."

The question, however, isn't whether Talib has the talent to be a difference-maker. It's whether he can avoid the situations that have resulted in his past problems, many of which come down to anger management. Aside from a four-game suspension for violating the league's policy on banned substances in 2012, all of Talib's issues in the NFL revolved around anger and violence. Dominik said that "if somebody confronts Aqib, he's not backing down an inch." Talib is even more direct about his aggressiveness. "Growing up the way I did, you get tested all the time," he said. "That's why I don't get nervous when they ask me to cover somebody like [Dallas Cowboys Pro Bowl wide receiver] Dez Bryant all game. I don't get scared of anything."

There is a common refrain that emerges when people talk about Talib after spending a significant time around him, an observation that comes down to one basic sentiment: *He's really not a bad person*. Even though Talib fought with teammates on two occasions in Tampa -- he scuffled with former running back Cory Byrd at the 2008 rookie symposium and swung a helmet at former left tackle Donald Penn during a fight in practice a year later -- Dominik spoke highly of Talib's work habits, saying few players practiced as hard or competed with as much passion.

A former college teammate said Talib routinely was kicked out of practice for fighting at Kansas, but Talib's former head coach, current Iowa State offensive coordinator Mark Mangino, remembered a player who motivated his teammates and raised the performances of a couple of underachieving teammates on a Jayhawks team that finished 12-1 in 2007.

Talib was such a rare mix of personality and unpredictability that when a KU assistant once ripped him for being suspended, the same coach went to Mangino later and said, "There's something about that guy that makes you root for him." Added Mangino: "I tell people the same thing all the time. The people who hear something about the issues Aqib had may rush to judgment about him. The people who really know him end up liking him."

Talib maintained that attitude when he arrived in New England. The new environment helped -- "I knew [Patriots coach] Bill Belichick doesn't put up with anything," Talib said -- but so did Talib's life experiences. He and Benitez already were raising two children (his 7-year-old daughter, Kiara, came from a previous relationship, and her 7-year-old son, Fabian, has a different father), and they were expecting the birth of their son Jabril (who is now 1). Talib also had more motivation than ever.

Using study habits he learned from former Bucs cornerback Ronde Barber, Talib quickly became a critical presence in the New England secondary. He settled down off the field, as well. When New Year's Eve arrived in his first season with the Patriots, he turned down a party invitation and instead celebrated with his family at home. They threw confetti at midnight, danced in their pajamas and reveled in the potential of their new life in the Northeast.

Although most people didn't realize it at the time, Talib proved how much stronger his resolve had grown in a Thursday night game against the New York Jets on Sept. 12, 2013. Talib's mother had called him earlier that morning to say she'd been unable to reach Henry on the phone. A couple of hours later, Talib heard the news: His father had died in bed that morning. Refusing Belichick's offer to sit out, Talib wound up with two interceptions, two

pass deflections and a forced fumble in a 13-10 win. "I kept thinking about him all game," Talib said. "I felt like I had so much energy that day. I really believe he was with me."

Henry's death is still an extremely painful reality for Talib to face -- "He hasn't been to his father's grave since the funeral," Benitez said -- but he doesn't deny the impact his dad had on his life. "He showed me how to take care of a family," Talib said. "We had four kids in our family, and he took care of us and our mother whenever we needed something. He showed me what it means to be a man."

Talib sees the value in those lessons as he contemplates his new life in Denver and the success he enjoyed with the Patriots. "Going to New England was important for him because they told him, 'You're good, and we need you,'" Okolo Talib said. "But he'd just had another son. His father was getting sicker. He had to deal with life now. He had to grow up."

This partly explains why Talib was in such a hurry to leave the locker room and join his family after Denver's season-opening win. He laughed about a couple of plays while dressing next to his fellow defensive backs, then quickly recognized his opportunity to depart as a throng of reporters focused their attention on Harris. Talib had done exactly what was expected of him after Denver signed him this offseason. His plan is to keep putting more space between the man he once was and the one he's ultimately trying to become.

"Some guys would just be happy with the money," Talib said. "I saw guys do that when they got paid in Tampa. I take the opposite approach here. When I'm done, I want people to know exactly why they brought me in. I want to make sure I earn all this money."

Talib: Ready to make an impact

By Lauren Giudice

DenverBroncos.com

August 25, 2014

Cornerback Aqib Talib was pursued by the Broncos because of his tough, physical playing style. The offseason has given him time to adjust to a new defense and he is now ready to spearhead the Broncos' revitalized secondary.

Aqib Talib remembers the last regular season game he played at Sports Authority Field at Mile High vividly. He recalls limping off the field to get an X-ray, wondering if he would be able to come back in the game.

He had studied Demaryius Thomas thoroughly during the week leading up to the Patriots-Broncos AFC title game, but was only on the field for just over two drives. A collision with former Patriots teammate Wes Welker knocked him out of the game.

Without Talib, the Patriots secondary struggled and Peyton Manning had 289 of his 400 yards passing after his departure. The Broncos went on to win the game 26-16 and punched their ticket to Super Bowl XLVIII.

Manning and Offensive Coordinator Adam Gase consider Talib to be one of the toughest corners they faced last season. When the orchestrators of the greatest offense in NFL history call someone a difficult corner to face, it's a true testament to his abilities.

So, when Talib became available, the Broncos wasted little time and signed him to a six-year contract on the first day of free agency.

"Obviously he has all that length and on top of that a lot of athletic ability with that length," Welker said during OTAs. "So it makes it really tough and he's a confident guy. I don't want to say scrappy, just because he's kind of a bigger guy. He mixes it up pretty well out there and I think he intimidates a lot of guys with his size and does a great job of transitioning as well for as tall as he is."

After the disappointing end to his 2013 season, Talib returned to Sports Authority Field for the Broncos' first preseason game of 2014. The welcome he received from Broncos fans at both the Summer Scrimmage and preseason matchup was impressive. Fans were clearly yelling "Aqib" from the crowd, to which he responded with a wave.

"It was a warm welcome," Talib said. "I didn't really know what to expect, but it definitely was a warm welcome so I was excited about that."

During practice, Talib can often be found laughing with his teammates, joking around with coaches or dancing to the music that blares during stretches. He said that because he is the youngest of four kids, he is "always the one playing around."

He is sincere during press conferences, and his responses to questions are often humorous, meriting chuckles from the media.

"I don't care what position you're playing, it's football," he said. "It's a fun game so I mean I'm excited to come out here and do this. I've been doing this since I was five or six years old so I come outside and play football and it's not a serious moment. It's a game. It's naturally fun."

During the Broncos' first preseason game, he was laughing with Seahawks cornerback Richard Sherman about a holding call he had incurred earlier in the game. Talib will often joke with the receivers he's covering.

While he is still the fun-loving player who is glad to give a grin and a wave to his new fan base, Talib brings something else other than his skill and energy: toughness.

In just his second drive as a Denver Bronco, he had his first big hit -- he lowered his shoulder and plowed down Seahawks wide receiver Phil Bates. This is what the Broncos were hoping for when they signed him. After the departure of Champ Bailey following the 2013 season, the Broncos needed someone who could be a dynamic, physical playmaker.

Talib, whose confident attitude mirrors Bailey's, believes he can be that.

He is a corner who thrives in one-on-one coverage, with the Patriots putting him in that role last season. Talib covered some of the best receivers in the league last season, including Thomas, and was successful more often than he wasn't.

"I like to compete," Talib said. "Anytime I get a chance to be 'mano y mano' with somebody, it's all competition, man. I love it."

"Sometimes if you can't beat them, join them," Head Coach John Fox said during training camp. "I think getting him has helped us a lot. He has a big, long body and is very skilled. He is a very physical corner. He plays the game—both run and pass—remaining physical. He is good with his hands in press coverage. Those are just to name a few [things]."

Talib said he hasn't seen a need for added toughness to the Broncos' defense. As someone who witnessed firsthand the Broncos' defense in the AFC title game, he said he saw no lack of defensive fortitude.

"They weren't soft about their defense against us [the Patriots]," Talib said. "That's my opinion on it. They brought us in because we were free players, John [Elway] had a chance to come and get us. I don't want to say they brought us in because the defense wasn't tough because I played against them in the AFC Championship and I played against a tough defense."

The defense that played in that AFC Championship and the Super Bowl looks very different from the one that took the field in the Broncos' first two preseason games. While Talib alone has the potential to revitalize the secondary, he is one of several prominent defensive acquisitions.

Talib, along with safety T.J. Ward and defensive end DeMarcus Ware all joined the Broncos within less than 24 hours.

Ware called it "an investment in brutal nasty."

There's no doubt that the three will add a component of physicality and attitude to the defense. Even if, like Talib said, the team doesn't need it.

During training camp, Fox said he witnessed Talib grow more comfortable with the defense each day. Talib said understanding the playbook is important, but with the cornerback position, it's more important "what you do on the grass."

While Talib joined unfamiliar teammates in Denver, one of them he is well-acquainted with.

He and fellow Kansas product Chris Harris Jr. will be collaborating in the secondary this season. The two played together for one season on the Jayhawks and Harris believes that with the help of Talib, a defensive turnaround is a true possibility.

"We know that we've got to put a lot of work in and build up the chemistry, just knowing what Talib is going to do with my eyes closed," Harris said. "So once we get to that point as a defense as a whole, and understanding what everybody's doing, we have the potential and the talent to be able to do it. So top five [defense in the NFL] is definitely a realistic goal."

When Talib was asked what a successful season would be for him, he had a simple response.

"The Super Bowl."

Aqib Talib gives Denver Broncos defense a new identity

By Troy E. Renck
The Denver Post
July 31, 2014

Aqib Talib jogged off the field toward the north tunnel Wednesday, a clear path to escape from the persistent drizzle at Sports Authority Field at Mile High. Hearing his name, the former New England Patriots cornerback stopped and resumed his strong connection to his new fans.

He exchanged hellos and grabbed a football to sign.

"Man," he said, pressing the black Sharpie onto the wet leather, "I don't know how this is going to come out."

Consider it a metaphor for Talib's arrival in Denver.

The Broncos signed him because they believe he's an upgrade over Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie, and wouldn't mind if he conjured up images of Champ Bailey circa 2010. Talib's career, once defined by an erratic trajectory because of injuries and a suspension, is trending upward after his first Pro Bowl appearance.

For a defense seeking an identity, if not personality, Talib is the frosted side of life's mini-wheat. Always talking, usually dancing, and mostly thinking.

"People don't know that he's very smart," safety T.J. Ward said. "He's physical, and he brings that energy. When he's out there, he's chirping, and it's great to play with a guy like that."

Talib left the rival New England Patriots because of the Broncos' aggressiveness. Unable to agree to terms with Rodgers-Cromartie, they switched directions and signed Talib to a six-year, \$57 million deal with a \$5 million signing bonus. The money was good. So was the opportunity.

"I am not trying to get to the Super Bowl," Talib said. "The goal is to win it, man."

Talib presents problems for defenses because he gives options to defensive coordinator Jack Del Rio. The 6-foot-1, 205-pound Talib can lock down top receivers and provides sound tackling in the running game. He should complement the underrated Chris Harris, and he represents the type of big, physical cornerback general manager John Elway prefers.

"Del Rio's scheme is perfect for me," Talib said. "It's really not just man (defense). It's a mix of zone and man. It gives you a chance to look at the quarterback and break a little bit and a chance to play on the line of scrimmage. It's kind of the best of both worlds."

During one-on-one drills Wednesday, Talib matched up with receiver Emmanuel Sanders, preventing a long touchdown and timing his break perfectly to disrupt a short route. Even in practice, it becomes evident why Peyton Manning said Talib "was the toughest cornerback" he faced last season.

"I want to challenge myself," Talib said. "Going against Peyton is a great workout. He uses his eyes to take you out of the play. It makes me better."

Improvement for the Broncos hinges on Talib returning to the form he displayed during the first half of last season. He ranked among the league's top cornerbacks in various coverage grades. A quadriceps injury, not a hip as was listed on the Patriots' injury report, sidelined him for three games, and left him compromised upon his return.

Finally healthy, he loomed as the Patriots' most important player in the AFC championship game, but he exited soon after colliding with Wes Welker.

"I am not talking about last year. Last year is over. It wasn't my hip, man," said Talib. "It's a new year. I feel great. I am ready to go."

Talib represents a calculated risk. Given his confidence and bravado, he also brings exactly what was lacking in the Broncos' defense.

"I embrace the cornerback role. I'm just out here being myself. If that's a leader, mentor or whatever it is, I let everyone else worry about that," Talib said. "I just study my plays, and I am going to help out any way I can."

What Talib Brings to Broncos

Andrew Mason

DenverBroncos.com

March 11, 2014

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. -- Well, that should answer the few lingering questions about whether the Broncos are "all in" for 2014.

For the second consecutive year, the Broncos delivered a jolt to the free-agency market -- and did so by taking the top cover cornerback away from the team they beat for the AFC crown, Aqib Talib.

In signing Talib, the Broncos grabbed the most troublesome member of the Patriots' secondary during the teams' two meetings last season. Talib shut down Demaryius Thomas for most of the Patriots' 34-31 win in Week 12, and was not beaten for a significant play until Thomas fought past him for the game-tying touchdown late in regulation.

Talib's presence was illustrated by his absence after he was injured when Wes Welker collided with him in the AFC Championship Game two months later. Without Talib, Peyton Manning was able to dice the Patriots secondary all over the field, and the Broncos sailed to the win.

In leaving the Patriots, Talib departs the place where he turned around his career. The reason why Talib was in New England to begin with was a litany of issues that ranged from an altercation with a teammate to a pair of suspensions, including a four-game ban in 2012 for violation of the league's policy on performance-enhancing substances. Tampa Bay dealt Talib to the Patriots for a fourth-round pick during the 2012 season.

But in New England, none of those issues arose. His only problems were injury-related -- specifically, a hip problem that hindered him at midseason and led to some performances that were off the standard he set early in the 2013 season. According to various accounts, Talib emerged as a leader in the Patriots' locker room.

If Talib keeps himself on the right track, the Broncos have a fast, physical cornerback who can handle man coverage and help free newly acquired safety T.J. Ward up to lower his shoulder for some big hits.

And while the Broncos took a player from the Patriots, the exchange could work in the reverse. Linebacker Wesley Woodyard was reportedly en route to New England

to visit with the Patriots. The dance between the two title contenders continues, and the music is likely to keep playing throughout 2014.

Broncos get power, athleticism at cornerback with Aqib Talib

Troy Renck
The Denver Post
Thursday, June 5, 2014

As always, Aqib Talib's mouth moved fast Tuesday, answering questions with candor and humor. As always, Talib stared forward, gears cranking, deliberation unnecessary. As always, he provided an illuminating response on suffocating an opposing receiver.

The Broncos signed Talib, with his accompanying carry-on baggage, because he's more comfortable on an island than Gilligan.

"I like to compete. Anytime I get a chance to be *mano a mano* with somebody, it's all competition, man," Talib said. "I love it."

After the Broncos got smothered in the Super Bowl, general manager John Elway promised changes. He wanted an edge, if not a razor. The Broncos' offense can tap dance around anyone, but he needed a defense that could punch opponents in the throat.

Talib, who received a six-year, \$57 million contract with \$11.5 million guaranteed, entered the conversation, one that began in the days leading up to the Nov. 24 game at New England. Broncos offensive coordinator Adam Gase devours film, analyzing nuances and tendencies with alarming precision. Talib jumped out at him.

"We felt like he was the toughest guy we went against. He matched up and gave (Demaryius Thomas) everything he could handle," Gase said, echoing quarterback Peyton Manning's comments last week. "He does such a good job of staying with his guy. He can mirror as well as anyone I've seen in man coverage."

Receiver Wes Welker describes the 6-foot-1, 205-pound Talib in terms that apply to him. Despite his elite athleticism, Talib grinds, embracing the menace role.

"I don't want to say scrappy, just because he's kind of a bigger guy. He mixes it up pretty well out there," Welker said. "I think he intimidates a lot of guys with his size and does a great job of transitioning, as well, for as tall as he is."

Disguises rule the NFL, with the offense and defense attempting to fool each other until scant seconds remain on the play clock. Talib and cornerback Chris Harris provide

defensive coordinator Jack Del Rio freedom to change fronts and blitz because of their ability to stand firm and press at the line of scrimmage.

"He's physical and capable of shutting down some of the top receivers," Del Rio said of Talib, who also collared tight end Jimmy Graham in a head-to-head tangle last season. "He understands what he wants now for himself and the team. And he's picking up our system."

Talib owns an advantage. He pairs in meetings with Harris, who said, "I am there to help him." The former college teammates — they helped Kansas win the 2008 Orange Bowl — talk often, accelerating Talib's learning curve in a role reversal from their days with the Jayhawks.

"With some of the new language, Chris will put it to me like something we had at Kansas. It gives me a better understanding," Talib said. "Yeah, I was the big brother. I'm still the big brother. But the little brother can help out a little bit."

Talib willingly left the Patriots, always a risky move, given their success. He didn't hesitate when the money became right in Denver, pointing to the quarterback.

As always, Talib owns an opinion, even on Manning vs. Tom Brady.

"The question (on the NFL Network) was, 'Who won last year?' It was an honest opinion. I mean, who had the better last year?" Talib said. "If you throw that many touchdowns and you won the last head-to-head, then you've got to say (Manning) had the better year."

Broncos get power, athleticism at cornerback with Aqib Talib

Troy E. Renck
The Denver Post
Wednesday, June 4, 2014

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