

Gary Kubiak, Broncos coach, finds 'comfort' with football analytics

By Nicki Jhabvala
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Denver Broncos head coach Gary Kubiak is in the minority. While an old-school coach in some ways (he still appreciates paper playbooks), he's unafraid of new technologies.

So hearing him say he finds comfort in having Mitch Tanney, the team's director of football analytics, stationed in the coaches' booth during games should come as no surprise.

"When you're calling plays and involved in the game and yet you're involved in the time, all of a sudden, you've got somebody up there who is totally involved in that," Kubiak told local media last Friday. "I just listen to him, 'Hey, Mitch, talk to me here. What do you think?' He's in my ear the whole time. It's a very comforting thing."

Tanney was hired by the Broncos in March after spending two seasons in a similar role with the Bears and earlier serving as a manager of football products and sports analytics for STATS, LLC.

Five games into the season, Tanney's knowledge has been embraced by Kubiak.

As my colleague Troy Renck wrote last week, Kubiak isn't hesitant to take risks during a game — when it makes sense to do so. He relies on statistics and experience as a guide to decision-making.

In fact, Kubiak and the Broncos have relied on advanced technologies, perhaps, more than most NFL teams.

The Broncos were among the first NFL teams to use PlayerLync's digital playbook technology, and they still use it in conjunction with their paper notebooks.

And in practice, many players are seen wearing Catapult devices on the back of their jerseys. The devices have GPS tracking and three inertial sensors to collect data on players' movements and exertion in real time to help prevent injuries and overuse.

In recent years, more and more NFL teams have turned to advanced statistics and technologies to improve the performance and health of their players. But not all coaches see their value.

"Sometimes they view technology as threatening the way they coach," said Brian Kopp, Catapult's president of North America. "It's like anything new, especially anything with data or technology that may cause a disruption to their workflow, there's a hesitancy."

On Fridays, following practice and media availability, Kubiak meets with Tanney to review the ways teams' handled certain situations and how, in looking at the statistics, they would have handled them. Kubiak stays aware, and open.

"I think it's a new addition that's very much warranted," Kubiak said of Tanney. "I'm glad to have him."

CRAZY STATS

- Broncos cornerback Chris Harris has not allowed a touchdown in coverage since Nov. 24, 2013, when the Broncos lost to the Patriots in overtime. That's 28 games. No touchdowns.
- Through Sunday, Denver owns the league's third-worst passer rating (64.3) in the red zone in 2015. Only the Cardinals (60.7) and Eagles (55.9) are worse.
- Talk of Peyton Manning's decline isn't all subjective. Here are his numbers through the first five games of each season with the Broncos:

Season	Record	TDs	Interceptions	Sacks	Yards/pass att.
2015	5-0	6	7	12	6.53
2014	4-1	15	3	6	8.01
2013	5-0	20	1	5	9.52
2012	2-3	11	3	10	7.61

Broncos crunch the numbers in crunch time, now more than ever

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN.com

October 9, 2015

The Denver Broncos offense has run three plays on fourth down this season and scored touchdowns on two of them.

Now that's some fun with numbers.

Those key plays are likely the byproduct of an afternoon meeting, usually on Friday, that Broncos coach Gary Kubiak has with Broncos' director of football analytics Mitch Tanney, a former college quarterback who was once the national runner-up for Division III Player of the Year.

"It's really good; it's a comfort zone as a coach," Kubiak said following Friday's practice. "When you're calling plays and involved in the game and yet you're involved in the time, all of a sudden, you've got somebody up there who is totally involved in that. I just listen to him, 'Hey, Mitch, talk to me here. What do you think?' He's in my ear the whole time. It's a very comforting thing. What I do every Friday afternoon ... I go spend about an hour with him upstairs and we just review what's going on around the league and how would we have handled things. I think it's a new addition that's very much warranted. I'm glad to have him."

Last winter, Broncos executive vice president of football operations/general manager John Elway, a self-avowed "numbers guy," was sorting through a pile of resumes in search of the right person to add a stepped-up analytics program to the team's way of doing its football business.

Tanney, who worked for the Chicago Bears previously as well as Stats LLC, is in the coaches' booth during games and on a headset to communicate with Kubiak.

"He's always thinking ahead," Kubiak said. "As a coach, your mind is on the play and his mind is on everything else that's going on. He's been very impressive and the thing that I like about him is that he played. He's an ex-player, so he has a real perspective of some of that, too, I think."

Those discussions came into play when the Broncos kept the offense on the field for fourth-and-1 situations against the Detroit Lions and this past Sunday against the Minnesota Vikings.

In Detroit, it was a Peyton Manning pass to a leaping Demaryius Thomas for a 45-yard catch-and-run for a touchdown just before halftime. Last Sunday it was a 1-yard pass from Manning to Daniels for a score on a fourth-and-goal from the Vikings' 1.

This week, Manning touched on what those kinds of plays mean for an offense when the coach tells the players to go for it.

"When he [Kubiak] calls that, he's displaying confidence in you," Manning said. "It's nice when you can come through for him and the coaches to make him glad that he did it and make him say that it's OK to do it again. Where if you don't get it, the next time that it comes around, who knows which way you'll go."

As far as what Tanney usually advises on fourth down, Kubiak said; "I can tell you what analytics guys say on fourth down: They say, 'go for it,' every time."