

Broncos running back Juwan Thompson runs hard in memoriam

By Cameron Wolfe
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Instead of celebrating his game-winning touchdown run in Saturday's 19-12 Broncos preseason win over the San Francisco 49ers, running back Juwan Thompson sat at his locker after the game kicking himself for a first-quarter special-teams blunder.

Thompson is usually tough on himself, but Saturday was different. He wanted that day to be perfect because of what it meant.

His grandmother, Hattie Marie Simon Griggie, would have turned 63 on Saturday if she had not lost her valiant fight with cancer two years prior. Thompson said he played the game in her memory.

"It was definitely on my mind," Thompson said. "I wanted to score a touchdown for her. And I'm happy I did."

Thompson said his family gets really emotional this time of year, and he was hearing about it from his mom up until a few hours before game time.

It started to get to him.

But he had a game to play. Once the pads were on and ankles were taped, it was all about football. And on first-and-goal from the 1-yard line, the Broncos called his number and he punched it in up the middle for six points.

Then, he followed it up with another run, right up the gut, for the two-point conversion.

"I think she would be real proud of me," Thompson said. "She never saw me play, but I think it would have made her smile to see me scoring a touchdown."

Running backs usually don't like to tackle, and some prefer not to be tackled, either. But Thompson is a little different.

He seeks contact. When he was the starting running back at Duke, he also moonlighted as the special-teams captain.

"He does whatever you ask him to do, big or small," running backs coach Eric Studesville said. "He understands a lot of his role, if he's here, is on special teams."

And that's how he made the team last season. He joined a crowded backfield with C.J. Anderson, Montee Ball and Ronnie Hillman already in Denver. But Thompson made himself a valuable commodity on special teams and as a short-yardage back, which allowed the Broncos to keep him active in 15 games.

Thompson's Twitter bio references Galatians 6:9 which says: "Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up."

That defines Thompson's mind-set on special teams and how he got in the NFL as a whole.

He wasn't a star at Duke. In fact, he started just 24 of the 49 games he played and amassed only 1,244 yards over a four-year career.

As a senior, he was the team's starter to begin the year. By the end of the season, he had totaled only 355 rushing yards in 14 games.

Thompson was largely ignored in the draft process and was prepared to hang up his cleats before the Broncos saw his potential and signed him as a college free agent.

"I just wanted to give it a shot and see how much football I had left in me," Thompson said. "I was going to go to grad school (at Duke). I already got in and everything. But I worked my (behind) off. And I made the team."

Not only did he make the team, he was a key contributor. He rushed for 272 yards and three touchdowns and became the first undrafted rookie since 2006 to rush for two touchdowns in a game with his performance against San Diego in October.

"An opportunity is only an opportunity if you're in the position to take advantage of it," Stutesville said.

Now, a year later, Thompson is in the same position again.

His roster spot appears more secure, but you never know in this league.

Coach Gary Kubiak noted Thompson's special-teams prowess as the main reason he has passed Ball in the running back rotation.

Still, Thompson is not ready to let down his guard. Hard work is how he got in the league, and hard work is how he'll go out.

Juwan Thompson's full load doesn't include fullback for Broncos

By Troy Renck
DenverPost.com
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Juwan Thompson once played linebacker in college for a series against Virginia Tech. He remains open to suggestions for more minutes. For now one of last season's best training camp stories is focusing on running back, not fullback, as he attempts to carve out a roster spot.

"It's better for me to know. It helps me prepare," said Thompson, who extended the Broncos' streak of undrafted free agents making the team to 11 consecutive seasons. "I have played fullback. I can do whatever they want."

James Casey and Joe Don Duncan are working at fullback, which will return to the Broncos' offense for the first time in a decade. Thompson is big enough to serve as a lead blocker, but showed he can run last season, gaining 272 yards on 54 attempts for a 5-yard average. He also excelled on special teams.

Next tackle up. The Broncos coaches remain optimistic about their young tackles. Rookie Ty Sambrailo continues to receive first-team reps at left tackle. He has shown that he's a fast learner, but the Broncos want him to continue to add strength so he can anchor better against edge rushers, and "we will not find out how much he has improved there until we put the pads, on," Kubiak said.

Kubiak added that he saw a change in tackle Michael Schofield's approach after Ryan Clady's injury.

"All of sudden I watched him practice differently, like 'Uh-oh I better pick this up.' And he has. He has responded," Kubiak said.

Smith not present. Antonio Smith remained excused from Broncos practice. The Fort Bend County (Texas) district attorney continues to weigh whether to bring charges against Smith on a child abuse allegation. Kubiak broached the idea that there could be a resolution by Wednesday. The DA's office said Tuesday there was no update. Even if Smith is not charged, the NFL could discipline him under the personal conduct policy.

Footnotes. Kubiak remains serious about keeping his veterans fresh. Most left practice halfway through to lift weights, leaving reps for the younger players. No helmets were required Tuesday by design. ... Backup quarterback Brock Osweiler is benefiting from his additional work and laser-focus over the past few months. "I know it's a big offseason for a lot of guys, but I think for him it's been even bigger. I think he's getting better. There's a ways to go. But I know we can help him," Kubiak said. ... After a meeting with Kubiak several weeks ago, reserve tight end Dominique Jones shed 21 pounds from 286 to 265. It has shown up at practice where he looks more fluid in passing routes. ... Kubiak provided a simple message to players after practice: "This league makes you get better. It won't let you hang around the middle years of your career."

Ware, teammates give back

By Lauren Giudice

DenverBroncos.com

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DENVER- On Monday afternoon at the Boys and Girls Club of Metro Denver, kids were amazed by the size of Marvin Austin's biceps and compared their short statures to Kenny Anunike's 6-foot-4 frame.

Austin and Anunike, along with DeMarcus Ware, Ben Garland, Juwan Thompson and Steven Johnson, took a break from preparing for Sunday's game to give back to the community by spending time at the Boys and Girls Club. The Broncos played games, showed their basketball skills and took pictures with the kids.

While the kids had a great time meeting their favorite Broncos, the players also enjoyed their afternoons.

"It's a blessing, it brings a smile to our faces, a lot of us have younger siblings that look up to us and I mean we're not always around them, so being able to come out to the community and be around younger children, it's like being around those siblings that you're not around all the time," Thompson, who has two younger siblings, said.

Ware invited his teammates to join him at the Boys and Girls Club and, after their afternoon with the players, Ware provided tickets for the kids for an advanced screening of the movie "Annie."

Johnson, who Thompson said was the Broncos' best performer on the basketball court, played basketball until high school. While he hadn't played in a while, he acknowledged that he still has "a few skills." Johnson showed those skills off as he and the Broncos played against the kids on the court.

Johnson said he grew up less fortunate so he relates to the the people at the Boys and Girls Club. He had an important message for them.

"For guys like us we didn't have everything growing up," Johnson said. "We just want to be able to relay things like that to these kids, saying hey you can do anything you want in life if you put your mind to it. Always just showing your face because you never know if these kids have single parent households and stuff like that but we can serve as mentors and ultimately they look up to us because we're professional athletes, but we're just normal people and we're just always trying to give back."

When Ware was growing up in Alabama, he met Bo Jackson and members of the Auburn football team. Jackson mentored him and Ware took something that Jackson told him to heart.

“He was from Alabama and when he sort of told me it doesn’t really matter what you have, where you come from or what type of facilities you’re at, it’s what you make of it,” Ware said. “You just have to make the best of what you have and that’s what I did. Now I’m playing in the NFL, doing some of the things that he did – being a role model, a professional athlete and returning that favor because I know how much that meant to me.”

While Ware lost at pool and Thompson said he should “stick to football,” he had a great time with his teammates. Ware noted that while spending the afternoon at the Boys and Girls Club is a small act for him and his teammates, he said it’s “really big” for the kids.

Ware knows that first hand after his experience meeting Jackson and he hopes to be a mentor like Jackson was to him.

“You never know how far they [the kids] can go,” Ware said. “They could be the next president, the next doctor that’s fixing one of us, you never know.”

Broncos RB Juwan Thompson brings heady, physical approach to game

By Patrick Saunders
The Denver Post
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Juwan Thompson was different from the other little kids. He wasn't tall, but he was stocky, with big arms and shoulders much too wide for a 5-year-old.

"His babysitter called him 'Little Hulk,' " recalled Thompson's mom, Ramona Griggie. "So ever since Juwan was little, we've called him our 'Incredible Little Hulk.' "

The Hulk's not so little anymore.

The Broncos' rookie running back is a 5-foot-11, 225-pound block of granite. The Duke graduate's combination of physical power, maturity and intelligence has made him one of the surprise contributors on a talented Broncos team now considered the favorite in the AFC to return to the Super Bowl.

Though Thompson's carries have been limited, he has been an effective special-teams player and has produced when called upon after No. 1 running back Montee Ball suffered a strained groin during Denver's Week 5 victory over Arizona. Thompson, used primarily as a short-yardage back in the Broncos' victory against San Diego on Thursday, had 24 yards on seven carries, including two touchdown runs.

"Juwan's special. I'm not at all surprised he's made it with the Broncos," Duke coach David Cutcliffe said. "Of all of the running backs I've coached, I'd say he was the most intelligent. He was so aware of everything we did on offense. He was so prepared, so mature."

Which, of course, made him a perfect fit to be part of quarterback Peyton Manning's backfield. Cutcliffe, who was Manning's offensive coordinator at Tennessee and remains one of the quarterback's closest confidants in football, urged the Broncos to sign Thompson after he was passed over in the draft.

"I talked to (offensive coordinator) Adam Gase, (general manager) John Elway and Peyton," Cutcliffe said. "I told them that Juwan would be a good fit. He's smart, he's tough and he's great in pass protection."

An honors student at Woodward Academy (a prestigious prep school in Atlanta), Thompson graduated from Duke with a major in sociology and a minor in

education. He had already been accepted to graduate school at Duke and was planning to become a coaching assistant after being bypassed in the NFL draft. Then the Broncos called. He made the team after an impressive training camp.

"It was an easy decision," Elway said.

Thompson's forte is his versatility. In Cutcliffe's wide-open, share-the-wealth offense, Thompson was one of six players to have at least 60 carries last season. None of those Blue Devils had more than 113 carries.

In a game against Virginia Tech, Duke used Thompson as a linebacker to shadow quarterback Logan Thomas. Thompson made three tackles in six plays.

"We had seen what he could do on special teams, we knew he could tackle, so we gave him a shot," Cutcliffe said.

Thompson was born in the U.S. Virgin Islands. His mom moved him to the Atlanta area when he was not quite a year old. His grandmother, Mary Thompson, still lives in the Virgin Islands and follows every Broncos game anyway she can.

"Juwan is huge in the Virgin Islands — the biggest thing since Tim Duncan," Griggie said with a laugh, referring to the San Antonio Spurs' star power forward who was born and raised on the island of St. Croix.

Thompson's mom gushes with enthusiasm when she talks about her son.

"He hated missing school. He always wanted perfect attendance," she said. "He was a cool kid, but a smart cool kid. And always polite and respectful."

Cutcliffe echoed those sentiments, but added a caveat.

"Juwan never fell into trash talking on the field," he said. "But he would hear what was said. He paid attention. On special teams, I could seem him change directions to take on a certain guy. He knew how to send a message."

In other words, for all his gentlemanly ways, you don't want to make the Little Hulk angry.

Thompson snapshot

- Born in U.S. Virgin Islands
- Loved playing basketball growing up. Could dunk by the eighth grade and was a 200-pound, 3-point shooter by his sophomore year at Woodward Academy in Atlanta.

- Began focusing on football as a junior. Ran for 1,622 yards and 22 touchdowns as a senior, earning honorable mention all-state honors.
- Was courted by 25 colleges, including Stanford, but chose Duke.
- Finished his four-year college career with 24 starts, 1,244 yards rushing and 56 receptions.
- Signed with the Broncos as an undrafted free agent and made the team with a strong preseason (29 rushes, 143 yards) and as a force on special teams.

Roommates Nelson and Thompson adapting to bigger roles

By Ben Swanson

DenverBroncos.com

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ENGLEWOOD, Colo. — Juwan Thompson and Corey Nelson push each other every day on the practice field, and then the two roommates get in Thompson's car and pick up where they left off when they get home.

That must be a fun place to be right now with the rookies growing into bigger roles that the coaching staff has grown more comfortable in giving them. Inside their apartment, they've created a supportive atmosphere for one another in which they drive each other to get better.

"We constantly remind each other whenever we're home to study a little bit before we get to our regular activities that we want to do," Nelson said. "We just make sure that we tell each other to study a little bit and that's what's helping us to adjust perfectly. We kind of have each other's back as far as watching who comes in and who comes out of our plays."

As the two undergo the adjustment process to NFL life immediately after college, living together has helped them immensely in understanding their plays. "Even though it's offense and defense, two totally different sides of the ball, it's still a lot to take in on both sides of the ball," Nelson said.

With that kind of environment powering one another to get better and learn more, you can begin to see why those two have begun making bigger impacts for the Broncos. Thompson burst onto the scene as of late, making substantial contributions on the ground when he relieves Ronnie Hillman, and Nelson has recently gotten some good time on the field in nickel defensive lineups.

Thompson's initial breakthrough came against the Cardinals in Week 5 as he barreled into the end zone for an 8-yard score. After a promising preseason in which he rushed for an average of 4.9 yards a carry and a total of 143 yards on the ground but no touchdowns, Thompson finally found the end zone when it mattered in the regular season.

He beamed as he walked through the tunnel after the final whistle, sharing the moment with Nelson.

"It was a lot of joy that day," Thompson said. "I was walking off the field with my roommate, Corey Nelson. We both got a lot of burn in the game that day. So we made some big plays and we were just happy for each other."

"I just try to be supportive for him, just kind of let him know he's not alone and whatever he does, just do it to the best of his ability and I'll do the same," Nelson said.

And then Thompson got the chance to return the favor when Nelson had his big game against the Jets in Week 6. Nelson saw plenty of time on the field in the Broncos' nickel defense for 36 snaps and he ended up leading the Broncos in tackles that game with seven.

"We were both hype," Thompson said. "I saw his first play on defense: He was just shedding off those blockers and made the tackle, made it look easy like he's a veteran. I was excited and happy for him. I saw the stats at the end of the day: seven tackles. I was like, 'Man, did you know you had seven tackles?' He was like 'Nah, I didn't know! Almost double-digits in the first game.' It was a proud moment to see it."

Their friendship had all started when the 53-man roster had been set. The two were looking for apartments, and it just made sense to be roommates.

"We work maybe 11 hours a day, it seems like: sun up to sun down, just about," Thompson said. "So you're barely home, so it's like there's no reason to spend all that money. We might as well save some of that money for this first year."

Now that they've gotten situated, the added company has been an added benefit as they get to know each other more, and as they grow on the team.

"I mean, you don't want to go home [to an] empty home by yourself, can't even talk to anyone," he added. "Sometimes we sit down in the living room and just chat it up, or we might both be in there studying, just watching something. And then Isaiah [Burse] lives right down the street, so he'll come over. We'll just all bond together. We're all rookies trying to have a good time so when we have downtime, we all try to come together and it's good to have someone on your team right there around the corner if you've got questions."

We've seen their dedication turn into blooming and increasing roles as the coaching staff sees their potential coming to fruition on the field. And it's not just from the coaches, but their teammates have noticed, too.

"Corey, he stepped up and played a big game," Chris Harris Jr. said after the Jets game. "And our defense is complex, too, so for him to come in and play on the road like that and kind of just get thrown in, I got to tip my hat to him."

A couple weeks later, Thompson rumbled through the line for two touchdowns against the Chargers, and Peyton Manning took a moment to recognize the running back's efforts on Thursday night.

"I think it tells you the confidence that we have in him," Manning said. "[Offensive Coordinator] Adam [Gase] and [running back] Coach [Eric] Stutesville are more than happy to put him in there in critical situations. End of the game, trying to get a first down, around the goal line, had a couple of goal line plays to him. So that's a nice little addition to our offense. He's been great running the ball and he catches the ball well out of the backfield as well."

To see themselves relentlessly push one another to improve and then watch as they get called on in bigger roles has been a rewarding feeling for the young running back and linebacker.

"We're both supporting each other," Thompson said. "We've both got to eat. At the end of the day, they're going to feed you the ball—go out there and get it done. When he comes off to the sideline, I'm supporting him. When I come off, he's supporting me. It's a good feeling. It's kind of like having a brother right there on the field with you at all times."

Juwan Thompson gives Broncos' ground game a lift

By Arnie Stapleton
Associated Press
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ENGLEWOOD, Colo. (AP) — Rookie Juwan Thompson gave a big boost to the Broncos' thin running back rotation by participating in all of Friday's final tuneup for the New York Jets.

Coach John Fox says Thompson had a good week of practice, and "we're counting on him for the game."

The undrafted rookie from Duke hurt his knee Sunday against Arizona. He missed Wednesday's workout and was limited Thursday.

With starter Montee Ball sidelined by a groin injury, Ronnie Hillman got most of the snaps with the starters this week and is to make his first NFL start Sunday. Thompson and C.J. Anderson will divvy up the rest of the carries.

The Broncos brought in veterans Mikel Leshoure and LaRod Stephens-Howling for tryouts Tuesday but decided to stick with Ball's three backups for now.

"I've been very pleased with the way they've gone about their business," Fox said.

Thompson was hurt late in the third quarter Sunday after Ball had already left. But with Anderson inactive, he returned in the fourth quarter and scored his first career touchdown on an 8-yard run.

"I didn't know what to do when I got in there," Thompson said. "It was so unexpected because I wasn't expected to play the rest of the game. But I had to step up when Montee went down."

The Broncos' running game has struggled this season, with two dozen carries either going for no gain or negative yardage. Denver faces another tough run defense Sunday — the Jets rank sixth in the league.

"I'm still a rookie," Thompson said. "So every team is going to be a top-five defense to me because I'm still getting used to the speed of the game and those guys up front."

Hillman, Thompson rev up run game

By David DeChant

DenverBroncos.com

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EAST RUTHERFORD, N.J. -- Over the course of Peyton Manning's 17-year career there's been a time or two where defenses have simply dared the offense to run the ball.

"I felt like they said, 'You're not going to beat us with the pass today,'" Ronnie Hillman said. "They paid for it.

"You're going to have your days when teams are going to pick their poison, and they picked the wrong one."

The Broncos attacked the Jets' sixth-ranked run defense Sunday about as frequently as they went to the air, rushing 33 times in 68 plays and picking up 138 yards, good for a 4.2 yards-per-carry average. Just as importantly, the runs were consistently effective, as Denver picked up seven first downs compared to 13 through the air. The balance, which was no doubt motivated by the Jets' emphasis against the pass, proved to be a big part of the Broncos' 31-17 victory.

"They were dropping a number of defenders on some downs and distances and that's why the running game ended up opening up," Manning said, who noted that Rex Ryan's use of his linebackers to jam outside receivers showed a lack of fear of Denver's ground attack.

"The way the Jets played us, my guess was that they didn't think much of our running game coming into the game."

The sustained success on the ground came in Hillman's first NFL start, made in Montee Ball's absence due to a groin injury. Hillman became the fourth Bronco and first since Clinton Portis in 2002 to have 100 or more yards in his first career start, finishing with 24 carries for 100 yards (4.2 average) despite taking several carries late in obvious running situations against the Jets' stout front.

"It was exciting," Hillman said of getting the starting nod. "You just know that you've got to produce right away. You're not counting on somebody in front of you to start it off, and then you come in. So it was kind of nice to just get out there and just play -- not have to worry about anything."

Hillman's opportunities have been intermittent since Ball was drafted in April of 2013, with a six-week span last season where he dressed in one game and didn't

take a carry. His 24 totes on Sunday were a career high, exceeding his 22 carries against the Ravens in the playoffs following the 2012 season when Knowshon Moreno went down with an injury against a defense that similarly was daring the Broncos to run.

Equally encouraging for Denver's ground game was a solid performance from undrafted rookie Juwan Thompson, who scored his first career touchdown last week. Against the Jets, he took eight carries for 38 yards (4.8 average), displaying his power throughout the day and some agility and acceleration on a 16-yard carry in the third quarter.

"It just helps me get more comfortable," Thompson said. "Practice is practice, but the game is totally different."

"As I get more and more reps, I'm getting used to everything and the speed of the game, and today helped a lot."

The overall surge on the ground was a welcome sight after the team averaged 2.7 yards per carry against the Seahawks and Cardinals and ran the ball just 33 percent of the time.

"It's something we work on," Julius Thomas said. "It doesn't always go as planned, and sometimes we get a bad reputation about that or people have negative comments towards our offense for what's going on, but it's always just such little things when it comes down to executing those run plays. We were able to hit some of those creases today."

The fact that the Broncos took the Jets' looks that heavily favored coverage and punished them with the run should bode well for the future, as it's something Manning and Co. have seen frequently and certainly will see in the future. Whether it's Hillman, Thompson, C.J. Anderson or Ball, when he returns, the teams' backs certainly plan on making defenses pay if they show a lack of respect to the Broncos' run game going forward.

"It's definitely a pride thing," Hillman said. "They felt like we couldn't run the ball. It bit them in the (butt)."

Juwan Thompson takes advantage of opportunity with touchdown

By Ben Swanson
denverbroncos.com
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ENGLEWOOD, Colo. — An undrafted rookie, Juwan Thompson had his work cut out for him to simply make the roster. Nothing was given, and so the running back decided to take instead. Thompson proved his worth, leading the Broncos in rushing yards in the preseason with 143 total yards on 29 carries for an average of about 5 yards per carry, and the team signed him to the 53-man active roster.

Still, he was the fourth running back on the depth chart after starter Montee Ball, Ronnie Hillman and C.J. Anderson.

When Ball left Sunday's game with a groin injury, Thompson would rely on the preparation he had built that stems from Head Coach John Fox's 'next man up' mentality. With Hillman getting the bulk of the carries following Ball's injury and Anderson inactive for the game, this would be Thompson's first chance for snaps running the ball.

"I was prepared for it from the beginning of the week, even from the beginning of the season," Thompson said. "Coach always told me he wants to see me play and wants me to get in at some point and he just felt that this week was going to be that opportunity, not knowing that Montee would go down. He was just saying 'Just be prepared' because we only carried three backs that week."

Though he was prepared to enter the game, running for 15 yards on three carries, he certainly wasn't prepared for his touchdown.

"It was a big shocker," he said. "It was kind of like it was overwhelming at the same time and I wanted to celebrate but my body just stiffened up on me to the point where I was like 'What can I do? I haven't been here before.'"

The end zone was unfamiliar territory for him as an NFL player, as he was unable to cross the goal line in the preseason despite an impressive rushing yardage total. Instead, he got his touchdown in the fifth week of the regular season on an 8-yard run on a historic day in which the offense set franchise records

"I mean, you've got 80,000 people there watching you and then in the preseason, I had never gotten into the end zone. I just had a lot of good runs, I just never had

that opportunity to be there. Next time, hopefully I'll have something up my sleeve, given that opportunity."

From the way it sounds, Thompson was more uncomfortable after scoring the touchdown than when he got put under the bright lights to run the ball. Despite the sudden change and being thrust into a bigger role before a bigger audience, Thompson said he got into rhythm with ease though he said he thought he'd be a bit nervous.

"I felt pretty comfortable for some reason," he said. "I just went out there and it felt comfortable, just like in practice. I got my job done at every time that the opportunity came."

Though he hadn't played much with Manning and the first string offense, he said he felt at ease because of the similarities between them and the second string. Plus, he had a great resource in Manning to help him make sure he didn't forget anything as far as pass protection or ensuring he's wasn't running the wrong route.

"Peyton is on another page with the playbook because he knows it inside and out so you just have to be prepared for a lot more," Thompson said. "I just know: When in doubt, ask him. Because you don't want to be wrong out there, even though you want to feel like you know everything and let him know that he's 100 percent secure that I'm in the backfield and nothing will go wrong, but there's going to be a point where I'm not going to remember something and I don't want to make that mistake in getting him hit or running the wrong route and messing up the scheme."

All in all, he stepped up admirably, helping the running game gain traction in the second half. As he jogged off the field with his roommate Corey Nelson after the game ended, his smile lit up the stadium as the sun went down over the Rockies.

And he got a keepsake to go with his touchdown. The ball from the first NFL touchdown of his career will go to his mother when she comes to visit. Now he just has to figure out what to do when he gets to the end zone the next time.

Broncos Q&A: Juwan Thompson comes wrapped as Duke's gift to Denver

By Troy Renck
The Denver Post
October 5, 2014

When he closed his eyes as a kid, Juwan Thompson dreamed of becoming the next Michael Jordan, not the next Peyton Manning. Thompson didn't grow up watching football. For good reason. He starred in hoops in Atlanta. By age 16, he had morphed into a bruising 3-point shooter who could dunk at 200 pounds. That's when he first began thinking about attending Duke. Having experienced too much drama with his high school program, he said, he shifted his focus from basketball to football during his junior year. He rushed for 1,622 yards and 22 touchdowns as senior at Woodward Academy, leading him to the Blue Devils — as a football player.

Thompson forged his identity through his versatility. Duke used a stable of running backs, leaving Thompson with scant opportunities. He left his stamp on special teams, and even started one game at linebacker as a senior.

Signed as an undrafted rookie for \$3,500, Thompson forced the Broncos to keep him by having a terrific training camp. "It was an easy decision," general manager John Elway said.

Now a sculpted 220 pounds, Thompson is excelling on special teams in the NFL while also serving as a reserve running back. He sat down last week and talked Duke, the Mannings and autographs with The Denver Post.

Q: What was it like when you found out you made the team?

A: It was an overwhelming feeling. A lot of joy. But I knew everything was about to turn up. I just approached it like every day was an opportunity. Just because I was undrafted didn't mean I didn't have a chance. You have to be willing to sacrifice and play multiple positions. I was relentless in my drive, and tried to take advantage of every opportunity.

Q: Many players see special- teams duty as a necessary evil. You embrace it. Why?

A: You don't really understand until you are on them. I learned in college how much it can help the offense and defense, and even determine the outcome of a game. I embrace it. I want to do multiple things, not be a one-dimensional guy. I'd say I prefer delivering a big block to a big hit. Mainly because with a big block it means a touchdown is probably coming behind you.

Q: Until recently, Duke was considered a forgotten football program. What led you there?

A: It was a place I looked to originally because it's where I wanted to play basketball. When I saw the letter come in, I knew it was a school I wanted to go to, whether it was for sports or academics. The program didn't matter. I knew you could rebuild because my high school had to rebuild. I didn't want to go to a big school where there were a million stars everywhere, and you don't get looked at because of the politics. Duke was a good fit for me.

Q: Your senior year, you played linebacker one game?

A: I didn't know if I could say yes or no or if I even had a choice. I had like five or six tackles on kickoffs at that point and they wanted one of the more athletic guys to shadow (Virginia Tech quarterback) Logan Thomas. They felt like I was one of the better tacklers on the team. I had three tackles in six plays. I kind of wish I had started playing there at the beginning of the year.

Q: You met Peyton and Eli Manning at their Duke passing camp. Did you start thinking then that you might end up with the Broncos?

A: Actually, I thought I was going to New York with Eli. That was my thinking at the time. Coming to Denver, I had a little comfort, having met some of the guys. But I knew it wasn't going to be like, "Hey, what's up, Peyton," like he was going to be my best friend on the team. I was coming here to work and earn the players' respect.

Q: You sign a lot of autographs. Why is that important?

A: If I see it in my mailbox, or if there's somebody waiting out front, I want to sign. Some say it can be overwhelming. So far it's been great. I love being able to put a smile on someone's face. I wasn't a big autograph collector. My best is probably the football signed by Peyton and Eli when they were throwing at Duke.

Q: You graduated from Duke with a major in sociology and a minor in education. What were your plans if football didn't work out?

A: It was important to get my degree. I graduated two days after the draft. I walked the line, did the whole thing, then next day left for camp. I was prepared to be a teacher or a grad assistant. I had been accepted into grad school. So I had a backup plan ready, just in case.

Juwan Thompson file

Starred as a young basketball player. Could dunk by eighth grade, and was a 200-pound, 3-point shooter by his sophomore year.

Ditched hoops for football as a junior at Woodward Academy in Atlanta. Ran for 1,622 yards and 22 touchdowns as senior, earning honorable mention all-state honors.

Started one game as a freshman at Duke, and began showing his versatility on special teams.

Rushed for a career-high 457 yards as a sophomore, earning the Bob Pascal Award as the school's most outstanding offensive back.

Finished his four-year career with 24 starts, 1,244 rushing yards and 56 catches.

Started at linebacker his senior against Virginia Tech, shadowing quarterback Logan Thomas, finishing with three tackles in six plays.

Signed with the Broncos for \$3,500 as undrafted free agent, and made team with strong camp as a running back (29 rushes, 143 yards) and special teams ace.

Bibbs, Thompson looking to prove themselves vs. Cowboys

By Ben Swanson
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ENGLEWOOD, Colo. — For players who don't start atop the depth chart, the final game of the preseason is perhaps the biggest game of the year. The lights are brighter on them as the starters usually take a breather before the regular season begins.

With the last round of cuts to get the roster to 53 players coming shortly after Thursday's game, that's the last time for a player to put an exclamation point on their preseason résumé.

The Broncos will be looking to cement their running back depth after that game, and could be left with difficult decisions to make, with rookies Juwan Thompson and Kapri Bibbs' futures in Denver hanging in the balance.

"I definitely think that this is a great opportunity for me and Juwan," Bibbs said. "We're going to get a lot of snaps on special teams and the offense. It's going to be the most playing time we've gotten this preseason and this is going to be a lot of our film for the Broncos to watch and for all 31 other teams to watch as well. This is a big game."

Thompson understands the importance of this game and knows that he'll have to lay everything he has out there on the field. "Every game you want to give it your all. You want to show them different abilities every time, and show them that they're not making a mistake choosing you. This is another preseason game, but it's a game to showcase my talents."

Bibbs and Thompson have both had promising moments this preseason. Bibbs has totaled 52 yards on 12 carries (4.33 yard per carry average), and Thompson has carried the ball 16 times for 102 yards (6.38 yards per carry) with two catches for 19 yards.

With Thursday's game in mind, both are looking to show a bit more of their repertoires and to add to their records.

"I don't think I've proven myself enough because, me as a football player, I want to be the best at this position," Bibbs said. "I want to work as hard as I can to be the best at this position, I want to work as hard as I can to be the best at this position."

Not only for myself to think that I'm the best, but for other people to think that I'm the best as well and to see that out there on the field so that's what I'm striving for right now. Obviously people don't think, 'Kapri Bibbs is the best NFL running back,' but that's what I'm working for and that's what I want to be."

Thompson, too, has his goals. "I just want to continue to make the right corrections and keep growing as a player," he said after practice Tuesday. "At the end of the day, Coach is going to see the differences between each player and I'm just going to try to do my skill set my way and do the things right that he's teaching me."

Many veterans understand the tough position younger guys are in when it comes to waiting on those tough decisions.

"My main message to the young guys is to play all out, because they're the ones who's gonna play most of the time during the game," special teams captain David Bruton said. "I always realize how important the fourth game is, to play well, to put good film out there regardless of your position on the team."

How important can it be? Well, just ask Head Coach John Fox.

"I've seen guys make a showing—or the reverse of that—that affect the final pick," Fox said. "These guys understand that. They understand that every one of these [games] is a résumé. It's on tape and gets sent throughout the league, so even if it doesn't work out with the Broncos due to our situation, it's an opportunity to put a good showing on tape for somebody else."

"These guys have tough jobs—it's a tough way to earn a living. They earn every penny."