

Broncos TE Austin Traylor has turned nomadic start of NFL career into opportunity in Denver

By Nick Kosmider

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When Kyle Sloter would line up at quarterback for the Broncos during training camp in August, searching for a big play to extend a series in practice, Mike McCoy always had a good idea of how things would unfold.

“Anyone who was out here in training camp saw Kyle (now with the Vikings) and Austin (Traylor) hook up more often than not,” McCoy said last week, days before he was relieved of his role as Denver’s offensive coordinator. “It might have been the No. 1 connection throughout all of training camp. Every time Kyle was in there, you’d always ask, ‘Where is 86 (Traylor)? Is he out there? That’s probably where the ball is going to go.’ ”

Traylor, a 24-year-old tight end, transformed his periodic repetitions in training camp into consistent performance, enough to earn a spot on the Broncos’ practice squad. It was a familiar role. Following his senior season at Wisconsin, Traylor was signed as a college free agent after the 2016 NFL draft by the Dallas Cowboys. He made the Cowboys’ practice squad out of training camp, then bounced to practice squads across the league — San Diego, New England, Baltimore and, last December, Denver.

The nomadic season would have been enough to give some players whiplash. But it only strengthened Traylor’s resolve to overcome more adversity, which has played a recurring role in his football career.

“I bounced around, had seen some of the league and watched tape, and I knew I was good enough to play in the league,” Traylor said. “It was just a matter of when and where I would do it at.”

The “when” came last Sunday. The “where” was Sports Authority Field at Mile High. After being called up from the practice squad last week following the release of tight end A.J. Derby, Traylor made his NFL debut in the Broncos’ 20-17 loss to the Bengals. He made a notable impact, catching four passes for 36 yards.

“I was very impressed,” Broncos coach Vance Joseph said. “He caught (four) balls, he played on special teams and blocked. He blocked very well. I was impressed with him, and it just speaks to our personnel guys finding guys on our practice squad who can actually play. It was fun to bring him up and see him have success. He played well, so he should get better and better each week.”

Traylor said the result of the game, Denver’s sixth straight loss, made it hard to appreciate any individual success he had during his debut. That didn’t keep others from congratulating him on the milestone. Friends and family back home in Columbus, Ohio had watched from afar as Traylor played for four different coaches in five seasons at Wisconsin, missed six games with a fractured arm as a senior, graduated with a degree in retailing and consumer behavior and began a circuitous football career that promised nothing.

One of the people Traylor talked to after the Cincinnati game was a friend he had known since elementary school in Columbus. They shared memories of their childhoods and talked about plans for the friend to come to Denver and watch Traylor play in person in the future.

But hours after Traylor hung up the phone, he received tragic news that had become all too familiar. His friend had been killed late Sunday night in Columbus, a victim of the city's 118th homicide in 2017, according to The Columbus Dispatch.

"Literally the greatest happiness and most pain in the last 24 hours!" Traylor wrote on Twitter the next morning. "Talked to my dawg before and after the game!"

Traylor dealt with his grief this week by giving back. He was one of about two dozen Broncos who gave time in the community Tuesday, passing out Thanksgiving meals to needy families with the help of the Denver Rescue Mission.

Sadly, Traylor had previous experience dealing with profound loss. When he was redshirting as a freshman at Wisconsin, late in 2011, a friend named David Keith Burkes, who filled a mentoring-type role for Traylor, was shot and killed inside a home in Columbus. Heartbroken, Traylor considered leaving school and returning home to be closer to his mother and his older brother, Alvin Busbee, who played Division II football at Uburna University.

But Traylor persevered through the grief, the coaching changes and the injuries. He's done the same in the NFL. Now, with tight end Jeff Heuerman still sidelined by an ailing knee, Traylor is staring at a chance to create a real impact for a team that has given him a real shot at a career that was riddled with uncertainty at the start.

"It's just continuing to prepare and be myself, really," Traylor said. "I feel like I have a decent routine in what I do. I just need to continue to do that and not get sidetracked by anything."