

# Dekoda Watson Q&A: Broncos LB on America's worst drivers and why it's hard to go home

By Nick Groke  
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Dekoda Watson joined one of the best defenses in the NFL in March when he signed as a free agent with the Broncos after leaving New England. The veteran linebacker, now 28, was a standout at Florida State before he was drafted by Tampa Bay in 2010.

Watson, who grew up in small-town Aiken, S.C., has traveled a long road through the NFL, including stops with the Jacksonville Jaguars and Dallas Cowboys. In his short time with the Broncos, Watson has proved to be a force on special teams, nearly blocking two punts against Indianapolis two weeks ago. Watson could soon see more time at weakside linebacker with DeMarcus Ware out with a broken forearm.

Q: I don't know what city allegiances are like in the southeast. How does a guy from Aiken, S.C., end up in Tallahassee, Fla.?

A: I needed to get out of South Carolina, period. I had to get out of Aiken. And I was a big fan of FSU and Bobby Bowden. My daddy always told me, 'If you want to go to the pros, you need to go to Florida State.' And they just happened to be my last offer — like, my very last offer. I kind of lucked out on that. I feel like they had an extra scholarship and they were like, 'Well, let's try this guy.' Because they weren't even looking my way. But it worked out. I got there and I had a great time.

Q: You didn't feel some pressure to go to South Carolina?

A: Absolutely not. We had Steve Spurrier at freaking Carolina. And Clemson didn't even offer me. So just imagine why Clemson is my No. 2 most-hated team in the NCAA.

(The interview was interrupted at this point by cornerback Aqib Talib, who was complaining about the locker next to Watson's. It belongs to second-year linebacker Shane Ray. And Talib is displeased with how messy it appears. Watson defends his locker. Ray retreats. The conversation is entirely unsuitable for print.)

A: You wanna keep going?

Q: He's on a roll. Let him go.

(Talib is on a roll.)

Talib: Your mother ever warn you with something really short? 'Now look, I'm about to put these shoes on. And when I put 'em on, this whole place better be clean!' You get three sacks and you don't know how to act."

A: That's too funny. Ok let's go.

Q: I remember a game you played in college. It has to be one of your best games at Florida State. Against Colorado in 2008, in Tallahassee. You had 10 tackles and a blocked a kick. FSU won. That loss seemed to send CU into a death spiral that season.

A: I remember that. It was not my best game. That was a good time. But you say all that, but I remember that was one of my worst games. I got negative points from the coaches. Chuck Amato was the (linebackers) coach. He was micro-managing every little thing. 'Oh, he had the wrong foot up.' If you looked on his paper, I stunk in that game.

Q: So you go from Florida State in Tallahassee, get drafted by Tampa Bay, there for four years, then sign with Jacksonville. You were almost Florida for life.

A: Yeah, a lot of people think I'm from Florida, as much as I've done down there. I was fortunate to be able to be in that area. I'm very familiar with it. I feel at home there. I love Tampa. I absolutely love Tampa. And Jacksonville, it's not my favorite, but I was still in Florida, so it was cool.

Q: Did it feel weird when you finally ended up in Dallas and New England?

A: Yeah it was different. Dallas was different. But New England was something I'd never experienced in my life. Everybody talked funny — "funny" — to me. It was different. I think everybody was angry. And just being rude. And they're the worst drivers in America. I don't care what anybody says. If I'm not mistaken, statistically, they really are the worst drivers in America. They'll cut you off in a second. But now I'm here and I love it here.

Q: Has it been all right in Denver for you?

A: I absolutely love it here. I can see myself moving here when I'm done playing. I really love it.

Q: What is it like going back to Tampa this week?

A: I'm excited. I'm so looking forward to going back and seeing the scenery. And actually my dogs are still down there. I'm looking forward to seeing them. I was trying to get them on the sideline. They're service dogs. We'll see what's up.

Q: Trevor Siemian is going back to Florida this week too. Does it raise the stakes when you go back home?

A: No. That's one of the worst mistakes you can make. You feel like you have to do so much because of the excitement. You can get caught up in it and really mess up your game. You have to focus. You really have to be hot as fire and cool as ice.

Q: You were at Rangeview High in Aurora this week. That's cool. Do you have a background talking to kids?

A: I was a social sciences major in college. I wanted to get into education. I graduated early and they told me I needed to do an internship right away. But that was during the combine. So I decided to wait. Without a doubt, I feel like I can connect with kids. I was one of those kids who didn't do the things I

needed to, as far as my grades were concerned. There are a lot of kids who are athletic, but if your grades don't match, it means nothing. So I tell them straight up, I'm speaking from experience, I didn't do well. But it's not over. You can work on it.

They were asking questions. It wasn't like I had to beg for their attention. They really wanted to know more and get better. It wasn't really about football. It was more about education. I told them, I don't care how good you are, if your grades aren't up to par, what use is your athletic ability?

# Dekoda Watson devotes himself to make education a priority in his hometown

By Ben Swanson  
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Growing up in the small city of Aiken, South Carolina, linebacker Dekoda Watson can remember the last people who made their way to the NFL from his alma mater of South Aiken High School. Michael Dean Perry and Ray Roundtree's careers had much different arcs; Perry was a six-time Pro Bowler and a two-time All-Pro during his 10 years in the NFL, but Roundtree's NFL career was all too short: just four games in 1988.

Watson may not have the Pro Bowls of Perry and he may have longevity beyond Roundtree, but that undeterminable time at the top for a select few over the past four decades is part of a message he wants to impart on the youth of his hometown.

Since 2012, Watson has addressed his goal of giving kids in Aiken a brighter future with his Koda's Kids Foundation, a non-profit that provides scholarships to one student from each of the seven high schools near Aiken that draws students from the city.

"My foundation provides opportunities for the kids and giving themselves a chance by knowing how to go about certain things and how the real life is," Watson says. "I'm not promising everybody a scholarship or everybody's going to be a star athlete or anything like that, but I can say that their education is promised if they work hard at it."

The scholarships are the crown jewels of the organization's outreach, but it goes further with events like its upcoming golf tournament (June 17), white gala (June 17) and free football and cheer camp (both on June 18). The two pillars for Watson, as has been the case in his own life, are fitness and education.

That's why the coaches at his football camp aren't professional athletes, though some were. There's Myron Rolle, a former sixth-round NFL Draft pick who was arguably even more talented in the classroom, earning a Rhodes Scholarship to study at Oxford University. Another is a strength and conditioning coach with the Dallas Cowboys.

"You've got to have a backup plan," Watson says. "You've got to make sure you have something in case your number one doesn't work out, and that's just the way life is."

"I've got athletes coming to the football camp, and a few of them are not even playing football in the NFL. Some actually have daytime jobs, and what I'm trying to say is, 'OK, this football thing didn't work out, but they did also graduate and they are having a great, successful career and they have something to fall back on, because whether it's they couldn't prove themselves in the NFL, whether they got hurt, whether something happened where they could not continue their NFL career, they still have the education to fall back on.'"

If you were to sum up Watson and his foundation's message in one word, it would be "involvement." Watson strives to stay involved in the community that raised him to drive children to reach great heights like he did, regardless of whether that's in sports or any other field.

"We have to stay involved, whether that's the parents, whether it's the guardian, whatever the case is," he says. "Stay involved in your child's life because it pays a great dividend. If you show that you don't care, they're going to do anything in their power to try to get attention from you, whether it's good or bad."

Watson's heart is set on expansion, too. He's looking at pushing his foundation's reach north from Aiken and southwest to Augusta, Georgia. And instead of just a weekend, Watson wants to see his foundation have events all week in Aiken.

All this goes toward the education aspect with the yearly awarding of college scholarships to seven deserving high school students.

But he's not looking for the best student from each school; he wants to find the extremely deserving students who fly under the radar and have a great mindset.

"When you go to graduations, they always have the one person who gets all the doggone awards, just every single one," Watson says. "And I was upset with that, because growing up, there were people that busted their behind and worked their butts off, but they may not have got the notoriety or whatever the case is. So I'm looking at those types of people."

These are the students who remind Dekoda Watson of himself. The dedication to education is what he wants to give back to Aiken, and that's just what he's doing.