

Broncos defensive coordinator Joe Woods plans to keep 3-4 base defense, 'fix' run issues

By Troy Renck
KMGH
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Joe Woods has teeth. He smiled several times Tuesday.

He can be forgiven when examining his path to become the Broncos' defensive coordinator. After playing defensive back at Illinois State, Woods began his coaching career in 1992 at Division III Muskingum College in Ohio. He made less than \$100 a week while staying in the dorm and helping prepare the field.

"Eventually I became a graduate assistant, and I just kept my head down. All of a sudden 26 years later, I am here," Woods told Denver7. "Was it tough? Absolutely. Was money tight? Absolutely. But it all worked out."

Woods, 46, leaves his post as air traffic controller of the No Fly Zone secondary to the boss of the defense. He will keep the 3-4 base. Improving against the run remains a top priority.

"We will fix it," Woods said.

Woods feels prepared to lead the group. Former defensive coordinator Wade Phillips gave his coaches freedom. Woods has addressed the entire defense multiple times over the past two seasons. Denver's 9-7 playoff-free year came with disappointment and disruptions. Cornerback Aqib Talib was involved in two incidents -- one with punt returner Jordan Norwood and another with left tackle Russell Okung -- that hinted of a team divided.

"I really don't believe there was a rift or that there was a fracture in the locker room. We have a lot of competitive guys who find ways to hold each other accountable. They have done that my first two years here," Woods said. "The main thing we have to do is handle our business. Our job is to get the ball back for our offense, and that's what we plan to do."

Working in Woods' favor is the resume of coach Vance Joseph. Joseph can provide guidance having gone through the transition from secondary coach to coordinator in Miami.

"I can definitely help him with certain instances that I didn't see coming last year," Joseph said. "Again, it's a passing league, and having a coordinator with a secondary mindset, to me, is the way to go."

Joe Woods now has the Broncos' corner office. Coaching Denver's defense is a big responsibility.

By Nick Groke
Denver Post
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Between his sudden promotion last month and his formal introduction from Broncos coach Vance Joseph this week, new defensive coordinator Joe Woods finally got his wish: a prime desk at Dove Valley.

"I got the corner office, man," Woods said.

The Denver defense's newest boss will lead a unit that has ranked among the league's top five in total defense in each of the past three seasons.

"I was so happy when I got here," said Woods, who was hired as a defensive backs coach under former defensive coordinator Wade Phillips two years ago. "It was the first time in 10 years I had an office with a window. I said, 'I don't care what office I get, so long as it has a window.'"

Woods, a first-year coordinator, takes over from a titan. Phillips, who directed Denver's defense the past two years, left after the season to become defensive coordinator of the Los Angeles Rams after his contract was not extended. Phillips, with 39 years of NFL coaching experience, was the mastermind behind the Broncos' defense-led run to the Super Bowl championship a year ago.

Phillips may be gone, but expectations at Dove Valley remain sky high.

At 46, Woods is among a four-headed band of new guys at the top of the Broncos' coaching rung. Joseph, the defensive coordinator at Miami this past season, is in his first year as a head coach. Woods and special-teams coordinator Brock Olivo both are entering their first seasons as coordinators. Only offensive coordinator Mike McCoy has previous experience at or above his level. He was head coach at San Diego the past four years and before that the Broncos' offensive coordinator.

"Losing Wade, that was disappointing, obviously," Joseph said. "But keeping the system and keeping the core intact was important."

Broncos general manager John Elway and Joseph promoted Woods in large part for continuity. Woods was in charge of the NFL's best pass defense the past two seasons and plans to keep much of the same scheme that Phillips ran. Woods' secondary was so dominant, it led a Denver defense that allowed the fourth-fewest yards in the NFL this past season despite a run defense that ranked 28th in yards allowed.

In today's pass-dominant, quarterback-driven league, the Broncos have a defense built back to front.

"Teams are spreading you out more," Woods aid. "It's harder to get to the quarterback. But the thing that helped me here is the cover guys we have. We just say: 'You got him. And you got him.' We make the quarterback hold the ball, then let Von (Miller) and D-Ware (DeMarcus Ware) come off the edge."

The Broncos will continue to use a base 3-4 scheme, Joseph said. Woods benefits from the return of all-pro cornerbacks Aqib Talib and Chris Harris, plus safeties Darian Stewart and T.J. Ward. Miller, too, was an all-pro last season at outside linebacker. Ware is a free agent whose return is in question.

Despite Joseph's experience as a defensive coordinator, he will cede defensive play-calling to Woods. And together they are focused on fixing what turned into a porous run defense last season. The Broncos allowed the third-fewest yards rushing in 2015 before falling 25 spots.

"Teams started playing us differently," Woods said, addressing the problems of the run defense. "I talked to a few coaches of teams we played against. Teams thought they could stay in their base and attack us that way. We got a lot more runs. And when we gave up a few big runs, once it starts raining, they just keep bringing it."

Woods said his goal is to carry on what Phillips built, namely, a dominant, championship defense.

But Woods' influences run much deeper. He still carries a book of notes from 1998 full of ideas about defensive schemes and philosophies. At the time, he was a defensive backs coach at Hofstra in New York. And those ideas came from Johnnie Lynn, then defensive coordinator with the New York Giants who is now an assistant defensive backs coach for Woods.

"As a coach, you have to understand each of your players," Woods said. "You have to understand what pushes them, and what buttons to push. We have big personalities. But there's a time when we have to go to work. Those guys know that. There is a time to let loose and have fun, and there's a time to get to work."

Broncos promote Joe Woods to defensive coordinator to replace Wade Phillips

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN

January 17, 2017

Just a few days ago, recently hired Denver Broncos coach Vance Joseph said the team's secondary coach, Joe Woods, is ready to be a defensive coordinator.

Joseph has backed up his words, as Woods has been promoted to defensive coordinator. The Broncos made the announcement on Tuesday.

Woods will replace Wade Phillips to guide a group that has finished No. 1 and No. 4 in total defense in the past two seasons, respectively.

Joseph said Woods "is ready for the opportunity" and "no one will outwork Joe."

Joseph has steadily filled out some of the more high-profile positions on his staff: Mike McCoy will serve as offensive coordinator, Bill Musgrave will be Joseph's quarterbacks coach, and Jeff Davidson (who was on McCoy's staff with the San Diego Chargers) will be the Broncos' offensive line coach. John Benton, who was on the Dolphins' staff with Joseph last season, will be the Broncos' assistant offensive line coach.

Also: Joseph has retained wide receivers coach Tyke Tolbert and running backs coach Eric Stutesville. Former Denver head coach Josh McDaniels originally hired Stutesville, who was retained by John Fox and Gary Kubiak, the head coaches who followed McDaniels.

Woods, 46, has been an NFL assistant since 2004 and was recommended to Kubiak by Joseph when Kubiak was putting his Broncos coaching staff together in 2015. Woods has managed one of the most vocal and Type A position groups on the team. This past week, safety T.J. Ward said, "Joe has done a great job in our room," and added that as a potential defensive coordinator, "Joe would do a great job of that too."

Joseph set the table for Woods' promotion on Thursday, when Joseph was formally introduced as the team's newest head coach. Woods, a bright coaching prospect who some in the league have said could be a head coach someday, was believed to be in line to be the Broncos' coordinator if Phillips did not return.

"Joe's a bright coach, and he's obviously ready to be a coordinator in this league," Joseph said last week. "...Joe is a guy who can obviously defend the NFL pass game. ... I love Joe. I've been a friend with Joe for a long time; he's a great ball coach."

Phillips was a wildly popular presence among the Broncos' faithful, and his departure to the Los Angeles Rams last week to be their DC was chronicled as if he were a head coach. Phillips' defense powered the Broncos' Super Bowl run in 2015.

Joseph had initially left the door open for Phillips to stay in Denver -- Joseph was with Phillips on Kubiak's staff with the Houston Texans -- and called Phillips "one of my football dads." Joseph said he and Phillips routinely spoke "three or four times a week."

But Phillips joined new Rams coach Sean McVay's staff shortly after Joseph's introduction. Joseph said last week he doesn't want to call plays on defense.

Woods now runs the part of the team that's on John Elway's mind. The team's "No. 1 priority" this offseason is to "stay great" on defense, according to Elway, the Broncos' executive vice president of football operations/general manager.

And despite almost season-long struggles to defend the run this past season, the Broncos' defense finished No. 4 overall, No. 4 in scoring defense, No. 1 against the pass and No. 3 in sacks. The defense had three first-team All Pro players: cornerbacks Chris Harris Jr. and Aqib Talib and linebacker Von Miller.

"That's the spearhead, that back end, because they're engaged, they're physical and they love to play no matter where, when or what we're playing for," Joseph said. "...When you can play man-for-man up close and middle ... if you have rushers and you have cover guys, you can play great defense, because scheme don't matter."

Harris said, "If we had to lose Wade, at least we get to keep Joe."

Broncos linebackers coach Reggie Herring also interviewed with Joseph to be the Broncos' coordinator. Herring and defensive line coach Bill Kollar have been on Phillips' staff with multiple teams.

Several Broncos assistants on defense have a year left on their contracts, so they would have to receive permission to leave if Phillips asked them to join his staff in Los Angeles.

For his part, Joseph said Thursday he would like to have his coaching staff filled out within the next "week, week and a half."

How Joe Woods became air-traffic controller of Broncos' No Fly Zone

By Nicki Jhabvala
Denver Post
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On the first day of Broncos training camp, in late July, Joe Woods dug into his “bag of tricks” and pulled out the No Fly Zone’s latest accessory. Weeks later the defensive backs would don custom blue-and-orange tights that served as colorful reminders of their place among the NFL’s best secondaries. But first, Woods made them wear something a little more functional: blinders.

To Woods, the Denver defensive backs coach since 2015, the blinders were a common tool, one he had used since he was a coach at Hofstra in 1998 trying to turn a group of raw athletes into refined defensive backs.

To his collection of Pro Bowlers and other veterans, the blinders were kind of weird, and drew a few laughs, along with confused looks, as players tried to navigate the field without a periphery.

“He’s always looking for a way for us to get better and improve, especially fundamentally and our technique every year,” Denver cornerback Chris Harris said Woods, 46. “That was just another way.”

In recent years, the Broncos’ secondary has not only embraced but boasted about their preparation for gamedays, a routine founded on film study and technique. The game-changing takeaways and air-tight pass defense keyed the Broncos’ Super Bowl run last season and have defined their attempted title defense in 2016. A lot of it traces back to Woods, the No Fly Zone’s air-traffic controller.

Now with nearly 25 years of coaching experience as well as one flashy Super Bowl title ring, Woods could be next in line for a coordinator job, if not more.

“He’s tremendous,” said Broncos coach Gary Kubiak. “When I came here, one of my very close friends in this business — he’s a defensive coordinator in Miami (Vance Joseph) and a really good coach — told me, ‘You go get this guy.’ I didn’t know Joe. Boy, was he right. He’s been special.”

Ending and Beginning

The crazy part is Woods’ journey started with just a conversation. It was 1992 and Woods had finished four years as a defensive back at Illinois State. He was preparing for a future without football.

For a few minutes, anyway.

“It was after our last game and we had to go in and turn in all our equipment and do our check-out stuff,” Woods said. “I walked through the hallway and our position coach, John Bowers, said, ‘Hey, did you ever think about coaching?’ I said, ‘No.’ He said, ‘You want to give it a shot?’ ”

He did and he would, starting as the defensive backs coach at Muskingum College in Ohio.

"I always remember making \$187 every two weeks trying to figure out how to make my car payments and eat, and I was living in an old fraternity house," he said. "The way I made money was I had to clean out all the bunks in there and they paid me, and I used to line the fields before high school games. That's how it started."

It would lead him to six more schools as a positional coach, before he made the leap to the NFL as part of Tampa Bay's secondary coaching staff.

"It's just like, 'Man, I've arrived,'" Woods recalled. "Making that transition to the NFL was just an eye-opening experience."

In part because of the players. With the Buccaneers, he was the rookie among cornerbacks Brian Kelly and Ronde Barber, a five-time Pro Bowler still regarded as one of the best slot corners in league history. And in part because of his colleagues, who included then-defensive backs coach Mike Tomlin and assistant Raheem Morris, both of whom became NFL head coaches.

Tampa Bay was the launching pad, but also a stop for refinement before Woods would go on to Minnesota and work with Pro Bowlers Antoine Winfield and Darren Sharper and later a rookie cornerback, Xavier Rhodes; to Oakland, where he would be paired with Hall of Fame-bound safety Charles Woodson; and to Denver, where he has a quintet of elite defensive backs in Harris, Aqib Talib, Bradley Roby, T.J. Ward and Darian Stewart.

"I always was a big film watcher going back to my high school," Woods said. "But it really took off when I got to Tampa with Mike Tomlin. Mike taught me a different way to watch tape, because he used to play offense. I really learned how to watch tape from an offensive perspective. It started in high school, but that's when I really got fine-tuned, with Mike Tomlin."

Attention to Detail

Rhodes' memories of film sessions with Woods are vivid but far from unique. He remembers the extended meetings and hours spent watching cut-ups of first downs, second downs and third downs, red zone, two-minute football and more.

"Joe would keep you in the meeting room forever," Rhodes said. "But it's a good thing. One memory I have of him: Everybody would be out of meetings, getting dressed for the practice, and the DBs would still be in meetings watching film. He was a dude that loves what he does. He always wanted to critique you and watch film."

More than even his players could imagine.

"I remember Xavier, when we drafted him, he came in and said, 'Hey, Coach, I hope you don't get mad at me because I'm going to be in there watching film with y'all all the time,'" Woods said. "I used to cut up all his tape and meet with him every Friday at the end of the week during the offseason. After about a month he said, 'Hey, Coach, I know I said I wanted to watch film, but you hold me hostage.'"

Rhodes' story mirrors that of others who have worked with Woods. Leslie Frazier, the Ravens' secondary coach and former Vikings head coach, recalls meetings in Minnesota where Woods referenced specific routes on specific downs by specific receivers some six years prior.

"I'm like, 'Man, Joe. I'm just thinking about what happened last week and you're going back five, six years,'" Frazier said. "That was Joe.

Broncos cornerback Kayvon Webster said Woods will sometimes dig up film decades old. Harris has said Woods "laps" him in film study to not only tip off his players to opponents' formations and situational plays, but also the tendencies and nuances of certain receivers.

"A lot of coaches in the league are just like, 'Hey, this is your guy. You're going to just line up on him,'" Harris said. "But Joe is kind of like, 'Hey, this is your guy. He's good at this and this, and you might want to do this on him.' So he gives you a little more."

The Broncos (8-4) lead the NFL in pass defense (an average of 192.7 yards allowed per game), interception return yards (284) and points off takeaways (103) heading into Sunday. Since the start of last season, the Broncos have scored 10 defensive touchdowns, second-most in the league. Woods' secondary has accounted for seven.

That bag of tricks carries results.

Woods named defensive backs coach

DenverBroncos.com

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ENGLEWOOD, Colo. -- The Broncos agreed to terms with Joe Woods to coach the team's defensive backs, it was announced on Wednesday.

Woods has 23 years of coaching experience, including 11 seasons as an NFL defensive backs coach with Oakland (2014), Minnesota (2006-13) and Tampa Bay (2004-05).

During his eight years with the Vikings, Woods coach cornerback Antoine Winfield, who made three consecutive Pro Bowls (2008-10) under his instruction.

Woods entered the NFL as a defensive backs coach with Tampa Bay, helping the Buccaneers rank first in the NFL in pass defense (172.1 ypg) during his two seasons (2004-05) with the team. Cornerback Ronde Barber earned first-team All-Pro recognition from the Associated Press following both of his seasons playing for Woods.

Prior to joining the Buccaneers, Woods was the defensive backs coach at Western Michigan for three seasons (2001-03). He also spent three years on the staff at Hofstra (1998-2000) in addition to coaching defensive backs at Kent State in 1997 and Grand Valley State from 1994-96.

He began his coaching career at Muskingum College in 1992 before stints at Eastern Michigan (1993-94) and Northwestern State (1994).

A four-year letterman as a safety at Illinois State, Woods was born on June 25, 1970, in North Vandergrift, Pa.

Broncos hiring Joe Woods as defensive backs coach

By Mike Wilkening

ProFootballTalk

January 28, 2015

The Broncos have added an experienced defensive backs coach to their staff.

Joe Woods, who oversaw the Raiders' secondary in 2014, has agreed to become Denver's defensive backs coach, the team said Wednesday night.

The 44-year-old Woods has worked with NFL defensive backs the last 11 seasons. Before his season with Oakland, he had stints with Minnesota (2006-2013) and Tampa Bay (2004-2005).

The news of Woods' addition comes on the same evening Denver reached a deal with Wade Phillips to become defensive coordinator.

Get to Know Coach Woods

By Rebecca Corman

Raiders.com

March 3, 2014

The Raiders added Joe Woods as one of two new defensive backs coaches, February 6, 2014. Woods previously coached in the NFL for the Tampa Bay Buccaneers (2004-05) and the Minnesota Vikings (2006-13). He also has extensive experience at the college level.

Woods had not planned to be a coach, but an opportunity shortly after his college playing days at Illinois State, started his career that has spanned more than two decades. "My senior year I played at Illinois State, and I was on my way down to check out of the equipment room, and my position coach just asked me, 'Joe, did you ever think about coaching?' And I was like, 'No, I never really thought about it, but if I had an opportunity, I would definitely do it,'" said Woods. "And he said, 'There will be an opportunity here for you in the spring after graduation to help me.' And I did. And when I did it, I just loved being involved in the game because I just loved football. It just kind of took off from there."

The Pennsylvania-native has worked with defensive-minded coaches throughout his career. "I'm really just a guy that has a lot of knowledge; this will be my 11th season in the NFL," said Woods. "Through my experiences at Tampa Bay being with a good defensive staff, Monte Kiffin, Mike Tomlin, Joe Barry, those guys down there, and my experiences with Minnesota winning two divisional titles, going to the NFC Championship, I'm just a guy that has knowledge, coached young guys, veteran guys, guys in between, so just a lot of experiences I feel like I can bring."

Woods joins a Raiders staff led by another (former) secondary coach in Dennis Allen. "It's great because just over the years when I was in Minnesota, and especially my time in Tampa, we played against New Orleans, so I'm very familiar with what [Allen] did defensively and how he grew when he went to Denver," explained Woods. "I'm familiar with the schemes. It was something I actually looked at. From that standpoint, I like working for Dennis just because of his experiences as a defensive coach and also he sees the game the way you see it because he was a secondary coach. It's easier because of the communication. He understands what I'm talking about and I understand what he's talking about, so I'm really excited about working with Dennis from that standpoint."

He's also looking forward to working closely with mad-scientist defensive coordinator Jason Tarver. "Tarver is great. I think he's a great defensive coordinator because he has a great defensive mind," said Woods. "He's experienced a lot of different defensive schemes and he is very, very smart and he can recall things at the snap of your finger. He can always tell you the whys and whenever you talk to somebody, whether its offensive football or defensive football, when they can tell you the whys, those are the guys you really want to work under."

Woods brings a different coaching style to the table. "I'm a guy that is probably more of a players' coach, understanding how they're feeling, but at the same time, I know there's a fine line," he explained. "I'm a guy that's going to get on a player and try to get the best out of him, but at the same time understand how to be fair. That's probably me in a nutshell as a coach."

He will be balancing a unit comprised both veteran and young players. The mixed dynamic is something Woods is used to from his previous coaching positions. "With a veteran guy you have to understand that he's been in the game a long time and he understands football and he may see it a different way," said Woods. "In Minnesota, I coached Antoine Winfield. He was 15 years in and those guys have earned a certain level of respect just because they've done it at a high level, but at the same time you have to make sure to get them to do it your way. There's a little bit of give and take when it comes to coaching a veteran guy that has his type of pedigree."

Coaching a younger player is much different than working with the experienced guys. "When it comes to a younger guy, I've coached a lot of rookies at my time in Minnesota just because that's what we drafted. They're different," Woods explained. "They have to learn and understand how to play in the NFL. You have to get them up to speed fast because the NFL is a show-me game. They don't care if you're a rookie or a veteran, they just want results. So you have to spend more time just to bring them up in terms of the scheme and get them to perform at a high level early in their career."

Making that dynamic work is worth it for Woods, who grew up respecting the Silver and Black. "I grew up a Steelers fan so you always thought of those teams like Pittsburgh, Oakland Raiders, Dallas Cowboys," said Woods. "You always thought about a lot of tradition, you thought about a team that intimidated people. That was just the persona that I always knew or thought of in terms of the Oakland Raiders. You know it was an organization that had a lot of history."

Coming in, Woods wants Raider Nation to know the type of person they're getting on the coaching staff. "I'd want them to know that as a person they're getting a quality individual that's going to come in and not only do his best job as a football coach, but also be a good person that's going to help make these guys better on the field and off the field," said Woods.

Woods wants to help the Raiders defense, specifically the secondary, put a great product on the field. "The thing you have to understand about coaching football is that your job is to put them in position to make plays and to help them make plays in terms of what you're coaching them to do. That's my whole focus," said Woods. "I love football. If I had to stay in the office 24 hours a day to get it done, that's what I'm going to do. That's the way I've always been. I'm a grinder, but I'm going to do whatever I need to do to produce results on the field."

He's looking forward to being a part of the Raiders. "I know the fans here are very passionate about football. You can see it just from watching tape," he said. "They just want to see you win and that's why I'm here – to win."