

# Steve Antonopulos honored for four decades of service with the Denver Broncos

By Aric DiLalla  
DenverBroncos.com  
August 5, 2016

Long before he became head athletic trainer for the Denver Broncos, Steve “Greek” Antonopulos sat with his dad in Eastern Colorado and watched the team on TV.

“Somehow, some way, someday, I’d like to work for the Denver Broncos,” Antonopulos told himself in 1960.

Nearly 60 years later, the Broncos players, coaches and front office members honored “Greek” for 40 years of service to the organization.

Head Coach Gary Kubiak went through his normal list of announcements to the team before turning to a presentation he said he was “flattered” to give. Kubiak went on to speak of the consistency that makes the Broncos great before he ran through a list of Antonopulos’ accolades.

From his perch at the top of the room, a surprised Antonopulos watched a video tribute to his years in Denver. He soaked in the moment as he stood between EVP/GM John Elway and President and CEO Joe Ellis. The three men have racked up a combined 84 years of service to the organization.

“I never thought I’d be here this long,” Antonopulos said afterward. “I think after my fifth year, we changed owners and I had no idea whether I’d be around here or not. I thought you worked for the same people all the time and we’ve had three owners since I’ve been here. Obviously I’ve been so blessed to be with [Owner] Mr. [Pat] Bowlen. I love him so much and all the things that he stands for. Just wow. I don’t know what to say, I’m so shook up.”

Elway, Kubiak, Keith Bishop, Wade Phillips and Joe DeCamillis were just a few of the familiar faces in the video who heaped praise on Antonopulos and his dedication to the Broncos.

“He’s the best in the business,” DeCamillis said in the video.

Kubiak then called Colorado’s longest-tenured employee in sports to the front of the room as the players yelled out his nickname. Antonopulos, whose voice clearly reflected his surprise and shock, didn’t take long to turn an event about him into a message for the team. He told the players to take advantage of the opportunity before them and to relish the chance.

“[These were] the greatest years of my life,” Antonopulos said. “It doesn’t get any better than this. [There was] not one day when I did not want to come to work.”

Kubiak presented Antonopulos with a painting that celebrated his career, and then, as quickly as the presentation began, it was over and “back to work” for the Broncos.

That’s how “Greek” wants it, Kubiak said.

As the players filed out of the team room to head to another set of meetings, that's when the best example of Antonopulos' impact on the organization was on display.

In a three-minute stretch, he faced a stream of hugs and fist bumps as everyone from Kubiak to C.J. Anderson stopped to congratulate him.

"It was unexpected," Antonopulos said, "and it was just really cool, and I love this place.

"I always have, always will."

# In Denver Broncos' front office, veterans form core for scouting, health

Jeff Legwold  
The Denver Post  
August 15, 2012

Today's question about the Broncos comes from Darryl Gibbens:

**Q:** Who is the longest tenured staff member on the Broncos? My best guess is Steve Antonopulos. I recall seeing him on the sidelines when Red Miller was coach. So, how about some nods to the heroes behind the scenes?

**A:** Darryl, your guess is right on the money, at least on the football side of the team's staff directory.

All you have to do is stroll by the vast array of team pictures the Broncos have adorning a hallway or two in their Dove Valley complex and it's clear just how long Steve Antonopulos has been with the organization.

There he is in the photos, a few spots down from Red Miller. There he is a few spots down from Dan Reeves. There he is a few spots down from Wade Phillips, Mike Shanahan, Josh McDaniels and now John Fox. The Broncos' head trainer has been with the team longer than Pat Bowlen has owned it — Bowlen is in his 29th season of ownership.

In all, this is Antonopulos' 36th season with the Broncos.

Antonopulos, called "Greek," by most everyone in the league, helped monitor the playing health of all of the players in all of those photos, including John Elway throughout Elway's playing career. Elway is now Antonopulos' boss with the Hall of Fame quarterback having been named the team's executive vice president of football operations in January of 2011.

Vice president of corporate communications Jim Saccomano is in his 35th year with the team and for most of those seasons handled media relations for the coaching staff, front office and players.

Midwest area scout Scott DiStefano, a former quarterback at CSU, is now in his 31st year with the Broncos. When he started with the team in addition to his scouting duties he also aided then assistant head coach-defensive coordinator Joe Collier break down game film.

Southwest area scout Cornell Green started with the Broncos in 1987, so he's in his 26th year with the franchise.

Green was selected to the Pro Bowl seven times in his playing career with the Cowboys despite the fact he was an undrafted player when he broke into the league.

The Broncos video staff has had plenty of staying power. Video operations manager Gary McCune is now in his 21st season, having started with the team when Reeves was head coach. Also, video assistant Kirt Horiuchi is in his 19th season and current video director Steve Boxer is in his 16th season.

The Broncos' turf manager, Troy Smith, started with the Broncos in 1994 and is now in his 19th year with the organization.

Among the football-related staff, Elway is likely next in line with 18 years with the franchise, 16 of those coming as a player.

Then there's assistant special teams coach Keith Burns, who is in his 17th year with the team, six of those as an assistant coach, 11 as a player over two stints with Denver.

Burns also played one season each in Chicago (1999) and Tampa Bay (2004). He played for the Broncos 1996-98 (he was a seventh-round draft pick in '94), 2000-03 and 2005-06. He joined Shanahan's coaching staff immediately following his playing career.

The Broncos' equipment manager, Chris Valenti, is now in his 16th season with the team, having started in 1997, the first of back-to-back Super Bowl seasons for the Broncos.

College scouting coordinator Dave Bratten is in his 14th season with the team, his 12th year in scouting. An Arvada native, Bratten started with the Broncos as a media relations intern, working for Saccomano, in 1997.

And in what is likely a testament to the loyalty Bowlen often shows the folks who work for him, that's the list and a fairly large one in a business that, for most teams in the league, often sees so much change on the football side of things.

## Rocky Mountain News

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### The tale of the tape

When Broncos are hurting, Antonopulos is Mr. Fix-It

**By Lynn DeBruin, Rocky Mountain News**

**December 16, 2006**

ENGLEWOOD - The rookie from tiny Hugo turned the corner, entered the locker room and stared incredulously at two players settled in around a keg of beer.

"My first thought was, 'What in the heck am I getting myself into?' "

Thirty years later, Steve Antonopulos still laughs while thinking back on that first day of work in a job that has been more passion than profession, and at times more interesting than the odd St. Patrick's Day celebration he witnessed in 1976.

As the Broncos trainer, his tenure has spanned six Super Bowls, five coaches and 22 starting quarterbacks.

He has seen wide-eyed rookies become household names, watched career-ending injuries rob players in their prime.

He has seen innovations ranging from arthroscopic surgery to magnetic resonance imaging, and watched as alternative medicine moved into the mainstream.

Through it all, the guy with the small-town upbringing and two Super-sized rings, not to mention a wife he met because of his job, hasn't once regretted the path he has chosen.

"I don't think there's a day that I came to work and didn't want to," Antonopulos said. "I enjoy myself, because the day is so different."

On this day, it's 19 degrees outside and snowing and the sun hasn't even thought of getting up yet. Even the shock jocks are bored, talking to truckers on the radio, since they're about the only ones listening at this hour.

By 5:30 a.m., Antonopulos already has been at the Broncos' Dove Valley complex for an hour and a half.

The reason is simple: Though an NFL game lasts little more than three hours, getting players ready for that contest is a seven-day, full-time operation.

Despite 31 seasons on the job, Antonopulos dives into the task.

Since arriving, Antonopulos has completed the coaches' reports and players' programs, worked out and gotten in his quiet time, which includes a little *Soul Street* (first one in gets to choose the music).

"This is really the only time I sit at the desk, between now and when the players come," he said of those pre-dawn hours.

After that, his day can take any number of turns as he and his staff tend to players who need treatment and those on injured reserve, then get ready for a walk-through and, finally, practice.

Then it's more treatment afterward, and paperwork (everything from over-the-counter medications dispensed to complete treatment plans must be documented) until he's ready to leave, at 6 or 7 p.m.

"I never think about the hours, because I've been regimented for so long," said Antonopulos, who turned 58 in August.

His efforts, though, aren't lost on the players.

At John Elway's retirement and in his Hall of Fame speech, Elway thanked Antonopulos for putting him back together season after season (16 total), and surgery after surgery (12 in all).

"I wouldn't be standing here if it weren't for our trainer. Thanks for all the Band-Aids, and thanks for convincing me I wasn't hurt as much as I thought I was," Elway said in Canton, Ohio.

Elway also aptly described the working relationship he and so many others have had with the guy they affectionately call "Greek" or, in some cases, "Pops."

"For 16 years, he's a guy that is your best friend when you're not hurt and a guy that you can't stand when you are," said Elway, who was moved to tears as he thought back on everything the two men had been through.

"Then, as soon as you're not hurt, you love him again. . . . But he has the players' best interest in mind. You can't always say that about all the trainers in the league."

## Inner sanctum

There's no question some years are busier than others, some weeks crazier than the next.

The week leading up to the game Sunday at San Diego was a prime example, as the Broncos listed 17 players on the injury report (including 13 new injuries) heading into their road game.

"What's exciting is to see them Sunday and Monday, and by the next week, they're playing," Antonopulos said of the walking wounded. "That's what it's about, doing your little part to help them get back on the field."

For Chargers week, that meant a crowded trainers' room, aka the inner sanctum.

Media members trolling the locker room for quotes often curse the training room for what it doesn't allow - access. This 6,000-square-foot area is part treat, part retreat.

It provides a place where players can hide from reporters, eat lunch in peace, study or even take a nap before practice.

It also is a place where they are pushed to get better, where pain often goes hand in hand with healing.

"You can't have thin skin back there," veteran safety John Lynch said. "It's no holds barred, as much as the locker room, maybe worse. You can't make the club in the tub and you can't help the club in there. As much as (Antonopulos) loves you in there, he's trying to get you out."

The photos on the walls - not the ones of Elway dressed as the Easter bunny or as Elvis Presley for Hallo-ween, but those of Super Bowls past - stress the ultimate goal.

"It's all about winning," Antonopulos said. "That's what people don't realize. Anyone who works in this environment knows the highs and lows of this job are incredible. There are highs and lows in every job, but there are extremes in this job, and everybody is affected."

That part hasn't changed in 30 years.

It was the same when John Ralston was coach with his Dale Carnegie, positive-thinking approach.

It was the same through fireballer Red Miller, who stayed until he got it done, even if it was 2 or 3 in the morning.

It didn't change with Dan Reeves, who brought structure to the organization, or Wade Phillips, who was caught in the transition.

It has remained the same with Mike Shanahan, a perfectionist whose entire focus is football.

What has changed is that players are better prepared physically and mentally.

If they aren't, they don't make it.

"Tom Jackson had a lot of skill, but he wasn't a guy who liked to work out," Antonopulos said of the team's Ring of Fame linebacker.

"He was a great player and did what he had to, but today, there are not players on this team that don't do everything they need to do to prepare themselves, and it's year-round."

## Keeping up

The trainers, likewise, have grown with the times.

"It used to be the physicians would do the surgery, put them in a cast, and two months later we'd be working with them," said Antonopulos, who contemplated becoming a physician but said he lacked the self-esteem coming out of high school. "Now, we're moving them in the recovery room in certain instances. We're finding it expedites the healing process."

The staff has grown in other ways as well.

In 1976, Antonopulos had a staff of two, with one student intern to help during two-a-days that lasted six to eight weeks and involved as many as 140 players.

"It was amazing. We probably didn't give them all they needed in those days, because we didn't have time to do it," he said.

Today, the Broncos have three full-time trainers, a full-time intern and six to eight additional interns to help during the summer.

That's not counting the gurus who help out at Dove Valley during the week.

There are two massage therapists, a specialist in active release techniques (Mike Leahy), a chiropractor (Shawn Caldwell) and a muscle activation specialist (Greg Roskopf).

"You would think a guy who's been in this business for (30) years would be a curmudgeon, or into old-school techniques; you know, spit on it," Lynch said of Antonopulos. "He's a great mix of old school, where you've got to be mentally tough and physically tough, but also . . . very forward thinking. A lot of trainers would be paranoid of that many gurus being around."

As Antonopulos says, he might as well get the best ones and bring them in, since the players will go to them anyway.

What makes Antonopulos special, kicker Jason Elam said, is that nobody is better at knowing how aggressive with treatment he can be.

Then there's his ability to know what players need, particularly psychologically.

"It's a stressful time for guys when they're hurt and jobs are on the line, so he's a sounding board for a lot of people," Lynch said.

"Not just injured players. Mike (Shanahan) uses him to get a pulse of the team a lot. He's just got tremendous instinct. He's been doing it for so long, he's just a tremendous asset to this team."

## Friends, not employees

Through the years, some injuries stand out more than others.

Some have been tougher to take, like those to good guys Ed McCaffrey (broken leg) and Courtney Brown (knee problem).

Some have been outright scary, like the one when wide receiver Clint Sampson went up to catch a pass in 1984 and instead caught a helmet on his chin.

"He was knocked unconscious and wasn't breathing, so that was a high-anxiety moment," Antonopoulos said. "He came out of it and would be OK. Those kind of potentially catastrophic things are what raise the anxiety level and keep you humble, keep you focused on what's going on."

It was similar two weeks ago, when linebacker Al Wilson had his neck bent backward while trying to recover a fumble. With tingling in his shoulders and numbness in his hands, Wilson had to be strapped to a backboard and taken to a hospital via ambulance.

Wilson would be OK and play a week later, but precautions had to be taken nonetheless.

"Any time you have a potential head or neck injury, there's anxiety issues there until you know whether he's OK or not," Antonopoulos said.

"In Al's case, he's the kind of guy when he's hurt, you know he's hurt. When he's not hurt, he doesn't answer your questions. That's part of knowing the player and what you're dealing with."

## 'Living a dream'

After so many years, Antonopoulos is considered by many of his peers as tops in the profession. Certainly, he'd rank at the top if miles of tape were the measuring stick.

Running back Reggie Rivers once figured that Antonopoulos probably had taped 500,000 ankles in his Broncos career.

"And that was eight, 10 years ago," Antonopoulos said. "I couldn't tell you. I don't pay attention."

He also can't tell how many more he'll have taped when all is said and done.

"I've always said as long as I continue to have passion to do what I do and enjoy doing what I do and stay healthy, I could do this forever," he said. "I'm living a dream that I had growing up in eastern Colorado."

Turns out the kid from Hugo turned the right corner 30 years ago.

## Training room

### A DAY IN THE LIFE

Wednesday is the busiest day of the week for Broncos trainer Steve Antonopoulos. A snapshot of his Wednesday before the Chargers game Dec. 10:

- 4 a.m.: Arrive at Broncos complex.
- 5 a.m.: Work on coaches' reports and players' programs. There were 13 new injuries the previous Sunday, 17 players on the injury report and seven on injured reserve. All will need treatment.
- 6:15 a.m.: Guard Ben Hamilton is first to arrive, for treatment of a thigh injury. Injured players must report by 7 a.m.
- 9 a.m.: While players are in meetings, treatment begins for players on injured reserve. Matt Lepsis is doing pool therapy and having soft tissue and range-of-motion work done. Additional paperwork is completed.
- 10 a.m. Most players have their ankles taped before practice begins at 1:30 p.m. On most days, Antonopoulos will tape 15 ankles.

- 11:15 a.m. to noon: Team walk-through. Training staff is on the field.
- 1:30-3:30 p.m.: Practice. Trainers are on the field in case of injury.
- 3:30 p.m.: More treatment. Last player leaves about 6:30 p.m.
- 6:45 p.m.: Leave complex.

#### NO CLOCK WATCHING

83 hours is a reporter's estimate of the time Antonopulos spends on the job during a typical week during the regular season, not counting travel or staying at the team hotel. Antonopulos said he doesn't keep track of the hours and couldn't confirm that estimate.

#### HE SAID IT

- Antonopulos, on his favorite Broncos player, former quarterback John Elway:

"We were together for 16 years, from the day he walked in with a big old zit in the middle of his forehead until the day we both cried when he retired. That's pretty special."

- On his favorite Elway memory, the helicopter run against Green Bay in Super Bowl XXXII, captured in a five-photo sequence in Antonopulos' office, and the celebration that followed:

"He didn't need treatment that night . . . maybe for his headache."

- On new quarterback Jay Cutler: "Sure, it's an exciting time and every- body sees the potential, but it was different when John (Elway) came here, because we never had anything like this before. This was the No. 1 quarterback, the No. 1 pick in the draft and the guy who was going to lead us to the Promised Land."

- On how the Super Bowl - he has two rings - helped him meet his wife:

In January 1998, he received a call from a former high school classmate, a woman he had not spoken with for 20 years. She was looking for Super Bowl tickets. Though he didn't have any, he agreed to meet her for drinks in San Diego. They started dating and were married four months later. "I call her my Super chick," Antonopulos said of Susan.

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