

“Living my dream”: Broncos’ Domata Peko spurns retirement talk in pursuit of 14th NFL season

By Kyle Fredrickson
The Denver Post
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Broncos’ nose tackle Domata Peko gathered his three children at home this football season to address his future.

“How do you guys feel about me playing again next year?”

Peko, 33, is nearing the end of his 13th NFL season and the last of a two-year deal he signed with Denver upon arrival from the Bengals in free agency. Football’s physical and mental toll claims most players well before Peko’s now 200-game NFL tenure. Is it time he consider hanging up those cleats? Or charge full speed ahead into a 14th season?

Peko’s kids didn’t hesitate with their response.

“Heck yeah, dad. Go do your thing.”

PEKO BY THE NUMBERS

Looking back at the career statistics for Broncos’ nose tackle Domata Peko entering Week 17 of 2018.

200: Games

13: Seasons

50: Quarterback hits

589: Total tackles

13: Pass deflections

20: Sacks

47: Tackles for loss

5: Fumble recoveries

2: Seasons with the Broncos

That’s all the support Peko needed. And, as the Broncos enter their final game of 2018, home Sunday against the Chargers, retirement is far from the mind of Denver’s most veteran player.

“As long as I’m strong, healthy and productive out there, and still playing at a high level,” Peko said, “then I’m going to keep going.”

Peko, a 2006 fourth-round NFL draft pick, played 496 of 1,018 defensive snaps, or 48.7 percent, through Week 16 this season with 31 tackles. Peko recorded two quarterback hits and half-sack against the pass, and 9-1/2 run stuffs (gain of 3 or fewer yards) against the run, per Denver Post game charting. On a defense flush with exceptional edge rushers, Peko handles the typically uncelebrated dirty work inside on first and second downs, and all while staying healthy.

From 2007 and 2018, Peko has missed only seven regular-season NFL games with injury between the Bengals and Broncos.

“He’s been one of the most durable players ever to play at that position,” defensive coordinator Joe Woods said. “You see him come in the building every day and he always has a smile on his face. He’s a true professional. We do things to help him because he’s an older veteran. He doesn’t practice as much as the other guys during the week, but he still has a lot of juice left in the tank.”

Ask coach Vance Joseph, though, and the real test for whether a player is ready for retirement are motivation levels between February and May.

“I think the biggest factor for most veterans is the offseason,” Joseph said. “Everyone likes to play and get paid, but the issue is getting ready to play.”

Peko has maintained a similar offseason training regimen for years. He simulates many of the same individual drills he’d receive from defensive line coach Bill Kollar at UCHealth Training Center, but now with a twist. Peko’s children are ages 14, 10 and 4. They’ve grown up watching dad prepare. Now, they often join him. “I set up bags at home,” Peko said, “and we run through the same stuff together.”

It’s not all family fun. Peko ramps up the intensity as well.

“That’s one of the things that’s helped me play so long,” Peko said. “The offseason is no joke to me.”

Added safety Justin Simmons: “(Peko) takes care of his body like no other with NormaTec (compression therapy), hot tub, cold tub and steam room. We have salt baths, chiropractors and massages. Everything you think you can do to prep your body the right way.”

Should the Broncos choose to not re-sign Peko in the coming months, he’ll hit the free-agent market in search of a team that values veteran leadership and a still-running motor. The past two years have been professionally difficult for Peko with back-to-back losing seasons in Denver for the first time since 1971-’72. Although his upbeat attitude consistently ranks among the most positive in the locker room.

Season No. 14? Bring it on.

“I’m just living my dream,” Peko said. “That’s what keeps me going.”

Through My Eyes: Domata Peko Sr. returns to Cincinnati for the first time as a Bronco

By Domata Peko Sr.
DenverBroncos.com
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I remember I was at home with my family in California. It was early in the morning — I had just gotten up, and we were just getting the barbecue marinated. The third round had just finished, and the fourth round was starting. My agency was telling me I was going to be like a sixth-, seventh-round pick or a free agent, so I had time.

At least that's what I thought.

All of the sudden, my phone rings, and it's the defensive coordinator for the Bengals, Chuck Bresnahan. Then the owner of the Bengals, Mike Brown, was like, "Hey, you ready to be a Cincinnati Bengal?" I remember I got my whole family together, and we got in a circle and just said a prayer and said thanks to God. And then after that we got after it and partied it up.

I remember my rookie year I had a good game against the Broncos. It was Jay Cutler's first year, and I had two sacks against him. That was a good memory. I just remember my first year, I was behind two really good defensive tackles — John Thornton and Sam Adams. Those two guys taught me the game really well.

But the most important rookie lesson came from Justin Smith. He was a great defensive end. They called him "The Cowboy." I remember him telling me, "Hey man, you've just got to give it 100 percent. Every game, every play, every practice, give 100 percent. Give your best, man, and the camera and the film will see that and the coaches will see that." And I've just been living by that, man, just always giving my best at practice and in games and everything.

There's a quote, "Give your best and God will do the rest." So that's what I decided to do — just give my best and my hardest effort, and good things will happen.

I remember playing really good defense out there, being a top-five defense for a couple of years in a row. But there's one play that really sticks out in my head.

There was one "Monday Night Football" game in Cincinnati against Pittsburgh where they put me at fullback, and I got to run over one of the best safeties to ever play the game, Troy Polamalu, a good friend of mine.

I remember in practice I was preparing to go against a linebacker like Larry Foote or James Harrison — some really good 'backers. During the game, I was going hard. I thought it was going to be Harrison or Foote and then it ended up being the 'uso' Polamalu, man. I put my head down and ran him over, and I remember Cedric Benson scoring the touchdown, and it was a big touchdown for us.

I just remember seeing him after the game and saying, "My bad, 'uso.'" But he's a professional. He was like, "Hey man, you were just doing your job."

It just seemed like after that play the whole city had a lot of respect for me.

The move out to Denver was tough. Being in Cincinnati for 11 years, you build a lot of relationships, and that was the toughest part for me. When you come into work, you know people not only by their last names, but by their first names. You know their kids. My kid was 1 year old when I got there, and he was 12 when I left. He grew up with the team. He grew up with Coach Lewis. So losing those relationships, that's what was really tough for us. And taking my kids out of school and having them move here and lose all their friends there, that was the toughest part.

Plus, there was football. I was a 4-3 guy coming here. Coming to a 3-4, I was like, 'Oh, that's a little different.' But I came in with an open mind, I was willing to change, willing to switch it up to be a 3-4 guy. I had to stay humble and always accept coaching.

Being coached by Bill Kollar was a big part of the success. I think — and a lot of our players will agree with me, and a lot of people around the league will say — he's one of the best defensive line coaches in the game. For him to just come and help me and mold me and show me different techniques on how to play nose guard in the 3-4 really helped me out.

Thank God I was able to come right in and fit right in. They welcomed me with open arms.

I thought I was going to retire in Cincinnati and stay there. I was one of the dudes in the middle there, in the middle of the defense that was stout and strong.

Not only that, but off the field, there are so many times of me helping the players off the field. That was one of the things I was able to do, and I was a captain there for eight years, just being a leader on that team and a leader in that locker room and in the community, man. So it meant the world to have Coach Lewis say this week that I was one of the pillars of the team.

Going back to Cincinnati, it's going to be cool, it's going to be crazy, it's going to be a whole mix of emotions.

I know I'm going to say hi to the staff, a lot of the older coaches that I had out there, but I definitely want to say hi to my older teammates that have been there — Geno Atkins, Vontaze Burfict, Dre Kirkpatrick, Carlos Dunlap. But one of my best friends is Clark Harris, their long snapper. I'm definitely going to say hi to him. We always hung out together. His kids played with my kids. They're all my 'usos' still, so I'll say hi to them after the game, because during the game, it's going to be all business.

It's going to be good to see all the fans that cheered me on for 11 years, too. It's going to be a mix of emotions, but I'm an emotional player. That's how I play this game. I'm going to be fired up, ready to go and keep doing what I've been doing.

I'm going to be happy to be back, but I'm also going to be angry to be back. I want to go out there and prove to them that they let me go too early and show the city what they're missing out on.

We wanted to go bigger than football': Domata Peko and his family have grand plans in American Samoa

By Nicki Jhabvala

The Athletic

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Lourdes Iputi was running out of time. It was believed the 8-year-old girl from American Samoa began to lose her sight when she was a toddler and now she could barely see fingers waving in front of her eyes. She couldn't read. She couldn't even learn to read. And within a year, maybe even just a few months, the chance to regain any of her vision would pass.

Unless she got needed surgery, the visual center in her brain would shut off and she would be forever blind.

Iputi's options were limited, if existent at all. There is just one hospital for the islands of American Samoa and only a few health clinics for the country's roughly 57,000 people. There was no place able to handle a case like Iputi's.

Dr. Stuart Hamilton, a retired pediatrician from South Carolina, was traveling to American Samoa last year alongside Eva and Bishop Vaifanua Mulitauaoepele (or the Peles, as they're called for short), founders of the nonprofit Mission of Hope. For decades, the Peles have made yearly trips to the islands to provide free healthcare to citizens suffering a wide spectrum of ailments and without means to obtain care. While he was there, Dr. Hamilton diagnosed Iputi with bilateral cataracts that rendered her lens cloudy and calcified. He then navigated her path to care in the United States, a laborious and costly proposition that was made possible by donations, medical grants, a willing surgeon and the open home of the Peles, who took Iputi in while she was being cared for in Columbia, S.C.

Hamilton's intervention changed Iputi's life. And now, more help is coming to the tens of thousands on the islands who are desperately in need of it, courtesy of Bishop Pele's nephew — Broncos nose tackle Domata Peko — and Peko's wife, Anna.

After hearing about Iputi, Domata and Anna agreed to fully fund a permanent health clinic on the islands with U.S.-certified physicians and nurses. Named The Domata and Anna Peko Medical Hope Building, construction is expected to begin later this year, with the plan for doors to open in 2019. The hope is that, year after year, the clinic will expand and house more physicians, nurses, scanning equipment and a pharmacy.

The hope is that it will eventually become the country's second hospital.

"There are 57,000 people on the island and there's one CT machine that is broken 50 percent of the time," Hamilton said. "There are no radiologists. No pulmonologists, no nephrologists, neurologists. I think there's one surgeon, one OB person. Nobody for ENT. There's one eye doctor, but you can't buy eye-glasses there because there's no eye-glass store. There's no pharmacy. You can go to a pharmacy at the clinic or at the hospital, but that's it."

Domata had held youth football camps on the islands in the past. But he and Anna longed to be more involved, and to leave a more lasting imprint on American Samoa. So when word got out about Iputi, Anna reached out and filled the missing piece in the Peles' plans.

"We just want to show love to my people of American Samoa," Domata said. "I wanted to do something that would help out everyone."

Throughout his 13 years in the NFL, Domata Peko has been a force on the interior of the defense line, anchoring the Bengals' front seven for 11 years before joining the Broncos in 2017. At 6-foot-3, 325 pounds, he has the frame to pancake tackles and a durability that belies the violence of his position. But off the field, he smiles widely and ends every conversation with a shaka sign and "Much love!"

"I see him coming in, he has an old convertible, hair's flying and he's always happy and smiling when he comes in the building," defensive coordinator Joe Woods said. "He has been great for this team and he has been great for the locker room."

The youngest of nine children, Domata was born in California but moved with his family to Pago Pago, the capital of American Samoa, when he was in sixth grade. In high school, he played football only his senior year so he didn't receive major college offers, but he got a call from the defensive coordinator at College of the Canyons, a community college about 35 miles northwest of Los Angeles.

Peko spent two years there, earned Junior College All-America honors, met his wife and then transferred to Michigan State, his launching pad to the NFL.

But much of what made Peko who he is and still drives him today resides back on the islands. His parents still live there, along with two of his siblings. American Samoa is Peko's heart and his heritage.

"The truth is there are many of our own with Samoan heritage going on to great successes in the United States," said Aumua Amata Coleman Radewagen, the delegate for the U.S. House of Representatives from American Samoa. "Without exception, they all stayed true to their Samoan or Polynesian heritage and remember their culture, their family and friends. And that's a real pleasure to see."

"Some are first-, second- and even third-generation removed from American Samoa, but that warrior spirit and the heritage remains a strong part of them, and they stay deeply involved in Samoan community wherever they go."

Even Anna, who was born in Syria, has embraced the Samoan culture and found a commonality in Eva, who is of Mexican descent.

"She's not Samoan, so for somebody to go out there to help people from another culture and to put their all into it just shows love," Anna said. "So me and her relate a lot. We're different. The majority of the family is all Samoan and they married Samoans."

In the 16 years Anna has known Domata, they've traveled to American Samoa five times, the last of which was in July to celebrate the eventual construction of the clinic. The first time Anna joined Domata, they brought hundreds of helmets and shoulder pads that the Pekos donated to high schools across the islands.

“Then every other year after that, Troy Polamalu, the former Steeler (of American Samoan descent), would go out and do a big camp and he would take a bunch of players out there and we would have three-day camps for high schoolers and volleyball camp for the girls, football camp for the boys,” she recalled.

“We just wanted to take the next step. We wanted to go bigger than that, bigger than football. We wanted our next donation to Samoa to be a permanent one.”

When Vaifanua Mulitauaopele, known to most as simply Pastor Pele, retired from the U.S. military in 1990, he and Eva stayed in Columbia, S.C., a city they’ve called home since. In 1996, the two made their first medical mission trip to American Samoa and three years later decided to take up brief residence on the islands to lay the foundation for Mission of Hope.

They’ve returned every year, bringing a medical mission team comprised of doctors, nurses and a rotating cast of volunteers, who set up shop in various villages and help hundreds at a time in need of care during their weeks-long stays. Most times they would have only three doctors on the trips, each tasked with helping those with gross organ failure or heart disease or diabetes or even rheumatic fever.

“The current medical people here are only meeting one-third of the needs of the population,” Eva said. “There are so many needs that are just falling through the cracks. It’s just not enough.”

Hamilton, a longtime friend of the Peles, founded the Eau Claire Cooperative Health Centers, South Carolina’s largest community health center system, which offers a sliding scale of fees to low-income families and denies no one care. Nearly 20 years ago, he helped establish a primary care clinic in the KwaZulu-Natal province of South Africa, home to one of the world’s highest HIV infection rates.

So when Eva asked him to join their trip last year, Hamilton had a good idea of what may come of it.

“There were people with all manner of illness untreated in late stages and their options were very, very limited,” he said. “There were few doctors, very few specialists, some roadblocks to care, some access issues for funding, people not being able to afford going to their own clinic.

“I went back again this year and spoke to (Pastor) Pele and said, ‘You know, I think you have enough of the components to put together a community clinic.’”

The Peles had the building plans. Hamilton gave them plans used from clinics he built in the past that could be adapted to the volcanic land in American Samoa.

The Peles found the staff. A number of local physicians were interviewed and they knew off-island physicians willing to relocate to help. The clinic is designed to have two providers at the same time, either one doctor and a nurse practitioner to start, or two doctors. At least one doctor and the nurse will be U.S.-certified, Hamilton said. Plus, his network from the Eau Claire Cooperative will serve as an advisory group and share electronic medical records and electronic patient management systems.

The Peles will also receive funding for the medical equipment. A Rotary Global Grant from the club in American Samoa and one in South Carolina will cover the cost of supplies for the clinic.

“I strongly support it,” said Congresswoman Aumua Amata, who met with the Peles several times about the project in both American Samoa and at her office in Washington, D.C. “In fact, I was so pleased when

I heard about Domata Peko's plan (to fund) the new private clinic on the islands. I think our people are very appreciative and happy to support it and for our people to take part — and they want to be part of the project too."

After a back-and-forth over location, the Peles received permission from the government of American Samoa to build on a plot near Lions Park, in the village of Tafuna on the biggest island of Tutuila.

"It's a very known part of the island because it's government land and it has all these abandoned houses that have been sitting there for years," Anna said. "We're going to try to beautify the area too. We want to make it an Americanized structure, basically like an urgent care center.

"We see it as more jobs for the island — everything. We're just trying to help."

The only missing piece of the puzzle was funding for the structure.

When Anna saw the social media posts of Iputi's surgeries and travels to the States, she asked Eva what else can be done to help. It was then that Eva revealed their long-held plan to try to build a permanent clinic and mentioned the need for financing the building.

"I said, 'Done,'" Anna recalled. "I just said, 'That's it. We're going to build this. It's going to happen.' (The Peles) were just in shock. We have a foundation, but we're doing all this out of pocket."

In American Samoa, nearly 55 percent of the population is believed to live below the poverty line. The country relies primarily on funding and grants from the U.S. for medical care and the only hospital that serves the islands is the Lyndon B. Johnson Tropical Medical Center, which was built 50 years ago.

"It's understaffed and under-equipped, and the hospital relies heavily on government funding, primarily from an Interior Department of appropriation account that began back in 1974," Aumua Amata said. "It's only been increased once, in 1986. The LBJ Medical Center not only lacks capacity equipment and staff, but is also in a state of serious disrepair, which has a negative impact on sanitation and the quality of care."

Many residents have to travel to Hawaii or the West Coast of the United States for basic health care. According to a 2007 assessment, the country had only 47 physicians, five of which received their training in the U.S. and were licensed to practice in the States.

There is a Federally Qualified Health Center in Tafuna and multiple community health centers, but up until last year residents had to pay a \$10 fee for visits, prohibiting many from seeking the care they needed. The health center in Tafuna also shut down for a week in July because it couldn't access the electronic medical records system.

"If you ever go there it looks probably like the Virgin Islands did in the 1930s," Hamilton said. "The level of development is quite modest and either you work for the government, which is the U.S. government, or you work in the cannery, StarKist Tuna Cannery. Or you're a fisherman.

"There are no big hotels, like Marriott or Holiday Inn. There are no yachts in the harbor. There are no gated communities. People are very much resigned to their fate. There's very little stated frustration or anger."

The scarce options on-island and the costly alternatives make the building of the 3,800-square-foot clinic an urgent task. Construction would ordinarily take a few months if it was being built in the States, but the climate and geography of American Samoa mean it will likely take closer to a year.

“This is a very beautiful place and it has needs in the area of healthcare and getting access to services,” Aumua Amata said. “The one word that describes us all the way around is isolation. We are geographically and economically isolated in the midst of the Pacific.”

The plans for the clinic allow for the addition of a pharmacy, which the Pecos and Peles hope to install by the end of the second year. After that, they’d like to add scanning equipment and, in the years after that, they plan to turn the neighboring abandoned structures into housing for the clinic’s doctors and nurses to ensure a medical professional is on site at all times.

Because most of American Samoa’s residents live below the poverty line, much of them are on Medicaid, adding another layer of complication to the operational budget for the clinic.

“For Medicaid, it’s a mix of federal and state money and the rules are different in every state because it’s basically a state program that gets federal funds,” Hamilton said. “So the states or the territories can introduce whatever little details that they want. So that has to be circumvented.

“That could be a bump in the road, but not a terrible bump in the road. But a bump. It could delay things a bit.”

But the clinic will not turn any patient away because of Medicaid or insurance. The Pecos have seen too many family members deal with the perils of the American Samoa healthcare system and the difficulty with travel.

“My mom and dad still live there, so whenever they get sick, they don’t even go (to the local hospital),” Domata said. “They fly to Hawaii or California to get help, to get U.S. certified doctors. That’s why this is a big deal in American Samoa.”

Perhaps in an early bit of foreshadowing, similar help was given to Hamilton 25 years ago, when Hamilton began the Eau Claire Cooperative and sought help with funding. He was introduced to Green Bay Packers wide receiver Sterling Sharpe (the older brother of Broncos Hall of Fame tight end Shannon Sharpe).

“Within four minutes, he said, ‘Yeah, yeah this is great. Let’s go with it,’” Hamilton recalled Sterling saying. “He was the spark that took us from one facility to 17 and from two doctors to 60. He was just the secret sauce. So here we are again, some decades later, and it seems to be repeating itself. This is going to be a life-changer.”

For others like Iputi, perhaps.

Last September, Iputi underwent two surgeries — one for each eye — performed by Dr. Alexander Pogrebniak, a pediatric ophthalmologist at Palmetto Health Children’s Hospital in Columbia. Her air travel that spanned thousands of miles was partially donated by Hawaiian Airlines and the rest funded by churches. Her surgeries were paid for by a local Rotary Club and its medical charity, Gift of Life, and for two months she stayed with the Peles.

The girl on the brink of going permanently blind doesn't even need glasses now. She returned to American Samoa with 20-25 vision.

"She went from zip to 100 percent," Hamilton said. "Her world has totally changed. The little blind girl who sat in the back of the class because they don't have any special ed is now an active participant."

In July, during the Broncos' break between OTAs and training camp, Domata and Anna traveled back to American Samoa for a celebration of the planned clinic. A welcoming party awaited their arrival at the airport and a days-long party ensued as the islands honored and thanked the Pekos for their contribution. To his surprise, Domata was presented with an honorary Matai title.

"It's like a dream," Anna said. "We can't believe that we're actually able to do this. It's not a normal thing to bring that much health care. Every day it's brought up, I'm just like, 'Gosh, I can't believe we're able to do this.'"

Player Q&A: Domata Peko Sr.

By Ben Swanson

DenverBroncos.com

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Domata Peko Sr.'s personality is as big as his play on the field. During a brief break in his schedule, he sat down with us to share some of the roots behind his personality, his NFL dreams and how he takes those roots and shares them with the locker room and his teammates.

Ben Swanson: For you and the rest of the defensive line, how do you ensure you can stay consistent and remain as one of the league's best defenses against the run?

Domata Peko Sr.: "Consistency is big, brother. For me, being consistent is going out there play after play and just grinding it out and going out there day by day and just trying to improve and never being complacent or content, just trying to get better. That's how you're consistent — if you never think you're there yet. You're always trying to prove, always trying to get better. ... You don't know if we're coming into this thing, coming in hot ready to go and ready to be one of the best defenses in the league."

BS: What is it you enjoy most about playing in the NFL — both big things and little things?

DP: "Me, man, I just love the life. Living the NFL life, because when I was a little kid, I dreamed about playing in the NFL and being able to live it — to live my dream — is amazing. That's what keeps me going, knowing that I'm living my dream every day."

BS: How long have you been dreaming about being an NFL player?

DP: "Since I was a little kid. I remember watching Junior Seau and Jerry Rice, back in the day, and Steve Young, and just saying, 'Man, I wish I could do that one day!' It's been a while. I've been dreaming about it since I was a little kid, and I've been living my dream for 13 years now, thank God."

BS: The Samoan nickname "uso" has become popular in the locker room because of you. What does it mean, and what bond does it signify?

DP: "It's cool. 'Uso' means 'my brother' in Samoan. It's really cool that you'll walk around the locker room and hear a lot of people saying it. Everyone's like, 'What's up, uso?' It's really cool, man. It's just a family vibe. Just showing others, 'Yeah, you're my brother. You're my friend.' That's what the team's about. It's not about yourself or me; it's about we, it's about us and it's about team. That's what I love about the word uso. It just really brings everyone together."

BS: What are other ways you stay connected to your Samoan roots?

DP: "I love listening to Samoan music and not only that, just the way I was raised, my mom and dad raised me being able to go back home to Samoa. They took me there when I was little and I learned my culture, learned my roots. All those teachings just stuck in my heart, man. I was able to just try to teach those same teachings to my kids, and those teachings are: respect, love, treating others how you want to be treated, respecting your elders and just always trying to compete and be hungry."

BS: I know music holds a lot of meaning in your life. How did that come to be the case in your family?

DP: "I think just being an islander, we're big reggae music guys. We love island music, and we love music, period. It's just being an islander. Music is a big part of our life. When you go to Samoa and you go to the islands, on Sunday ... the island just kind of shuts down. Everyone goes to church, everyone's singing, praising God and [doing so] through music and instruments, and stuff like that. Music, God, religion [are] real big in Samoa."

BS: This may be a little philosophical, but how do you describe the connection between music and personal expression and religion?

DP: "Well, I know a lot of times in church and worship, when you're worshipping God, you're worshipping Him through music, you know? That's why music is really big. For me, that's one of my favorite parts of church, going to worship and lifting my hands up to give thanks. It just gets me to a place where I feel peace and where I feel God's comfort and his love. That's why music is big for me, too."

Surprising performances along the defensive line provided silver lining for Broncos in 2017

By Nick Kosmider
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Nearly every member of the Broncos' defensive line entered the 2017 season with something to prove.

Domata Peko, at 32 years old, came to Denver to prove he had more in the tank. Adam Gotsis wanted to prove a rocky rookie season wasn't an indicator of what he could bring to the table as a former second-round pick. Shelby Harris just wanted to prove he deserved a shot from somebody. And, as a whole, the Broncos wanted to prove their failures against the run in 2016 were an aberration.

The motivations weren't hard to find, and they helped Denver's defensive line form a tight bond while becoming arguably the team's best overall unit in 2017 — a silver lining in a forgettable 5-11 season.

"Everyone is over here grinding," Harris said after the defensive line led the way in a shutout of the Jets on Dec. 10. "We play for each other. You can see it in our emotions on the field. We love the game. We love playing. I am just happy to be a part of this. It might not be the best season in our eyes, but I love the guys I am playing with. This is a blessing just being here with them."

The Broncos finished fifth in the NFL against the run, surrendering just 89.4 yards per game. It was a major leap from a 2016 performance that was 28th against the run at 130.3 yards per game. During the team's 3-1 start this season, the Broncos held opponents to an average of just 50.8 yards per game, constructing a wall against a gauntlet of talented running backs like Melvin Gordon, Ezekiel Elliott, LeSean McCoy and Marshawn Lynch.

That's not to say the defensive line was immune to setbacks, most notably when the Broncos surrendered 197 rushing yards in a loss to the Eagles. Injuries to veterans Derek Wolfe and Billy Winn and free-agent acquisition Zach Kerr at times tested the team's depth. Wolfe's injured neck especially hampered the line's pass-rushing ability. Wolfe played in 11 games but was limited in several of those, and he finished the season with just two sacks. In fact, no member of the defensive line had more than five sacks.

Still, there were several players who made big impressions and provided hope that they can be a key pieces to the puzzle as the Broncos aim to return to playoff form for the first time since their Super Bowl-winning season in 2015. That started with Peko, whose 325-pound presence as the anchor of the line was an obvious boon to the team's rush defense. His ability to hold ground even while absorbing two blocks helped the Broncos swarm to the football and earned him recognition as a Pro Bowl alternate.

There was some doubt as to whether Peko, who signed a two-year, \$7.5 million deal with the Broncos last spring, would perform at a high level after struggling in the last of his 11 years in Cincinnati. The jovial nose tackle erased it quickly.

“I had to come in here and prove myself again; show these guys, new locker room and new staff, that I can still play,” Peko said. “I had to show them that I wasn’t over the hill. I really thank God for that; for keeping me strong this season and being able to go out there and prove myself.”

Gotsis, too, silenced some doubt after struggling as a rookie. The 2016 second-round pick out of Georgia Tech played in all 16 games, starting 13, and finished with 41 tackles and four passes defended.

But perhaps the biggest revelation on the defensive line was Harris, who signed a future/reserve contract with the team one year ago. The seventh-round pick of the Raiders in 2014 had failed to find any traction in the NFL this season, and he never made it onto a roster in 2016. But he finished with five sacks this season, second on the team behind Von Miller (10).

For all the growth along the defensive line, there is still plenty to address at the position in the offseason. Harris is a restricted free agent. Wolfe’s neck injuries raise doubt about whether he can return to his dominating 2015 form. DeMarcus Walker, the 2017 second-round draft pick, showed some promise late in the season after switching back to the defensive line from outside linebacker. Will he stay there in 2018 and grow into a contributor?

It’s no secret the Broncos struggled to get to the passer this season. They could use more pressure from the defensive line, an addition that could be addressed in the draft. But the Broncos know they have a good foundation and that’s more than they could have been assured of before the start of 2017.

Seven NFL Players to Compete in 'Most Valuable Performer' Talent Show

By Scooby Axson

MMQB

January 18, 2018

Seven NFL players will compete in a talent show to see who will be crowned the MVP: Most Valuable Performer.

The one-hour interactive talent show is set to be hosted by actor/rapper LL Cool J, and will be broadcast on CBS next Thursday, starting at 8:00 p.m. ET/PT.

The show is aimed to find the NFL player who has the most off-the-field talent. A panel of celebrity judges will evaluate each player's performance during the live telecast.

The finalists are Brandon Williams, Justin Tucker and Alex Collins of the Baltimore Ravens, Carolina Panthers running back Jonathan Stewart, Cody and Jacob Hollister of the New England Patriots, who will compete together, and Cleveland Browns guard Kevin Zeitler.

The contest began Dec. 1 with the first videos of 32 participating NFL players available online at Sports Illustrated's website and allowed for fans to watch and vote for their favorite performer.

Williams and Tucker are scheduled to sing. Cody Hollister will also perform with his brother on the guitar. Collins will do Irish dancing, and Zeitler will be performing tricks with a dog.

During the Jan. 25 broadcast, viewers can place their vote on the final three on CBS.com.

Domata Peko (Denver Broncos) and Robert Nkemdiche (Arizona Cardinals) are the alternates should any of the finalists be unable to compete.

Former Cincinnati Bengal Domata Peko still smiling with Denver Broncos

By Jim Owczarski
Cincinnati Enquirer
November 19, 2017

Joe Woods smiled and instinctively glanced over at the sun-splashed players parking lot behind the sprawling UCHealth Training Center in suburban Denver, the weekday home of the Broncos.

“He’s got the convertible, like a (’64) Continental, hair’s flying everywhere,” Woods said. “I mean, this dude just enjoys life. He enjoys football. It’s really been infectious for our whole defensive team.”

Ah, yes. The 1964 Lincoln Continental. A staple in Cincinnati has become a favorite already in and around Denver.

“That’s old school,” Domata Peko, Sr. said, laughing. “It’s always sunny here, so I can drive it more.”

Derek Wolfe admits he’s less inclined to smile – but the on- and off-field personality of his new teammate kitty-corner from his locker is, indeed, infectious.

“He’s all about having fun doing what you do and loving your life while you do it. I’m usually like a pissed-off type of guy, so having him there, it’s nice to have a change of speeds, you know what I mean?” said the 27-year-old University of Cincinnati alumnus - with a very straight face.

“It keeps my – especially when you’re losing like this, it’s making it more tolerable to come to work.”

Peko, Sr. of course, is always smiling. That wasn’t going to change. Not in Denver. Not in Los Angeles. Not in Carolina. Not anywhere he might have landed.

“He’s a great guy, well-spoken and loves everybody, you know?” said his cousin and Broncos practice squad member, Kyle Peko. “Anywhere he’ll be home.”

Peko, Sr. smiles. Of course, he does.

But about the one change that’s clear in his new home.

The new generational suffix atop his customary No. 94 was a nod to his cousin, who already had the family name stitched on Broncos blue, and to his son, Domata, Jr.

But it was also for something else.

“Coming to a new place, I wanted to start fresh,” Peko, Sr. said.

He admits there was some sadness and uncertainty he and his wife Anna had to face with the move, from leaving the only professional home they ever knew to having to take their children out of schools

and away from friends. But Peko, Sr. said the Broncos welcomed him warmly, and the community and fan base have come to embrace him like he had been a longtime Bronco.

“He’s a great role model, a great father, a great husband, a great person to look up to, man,” Wolfe said.

Now eight months into a new home and 10 days away from his 33rd birthday, the defensive tackle is feeling every bit the fresh start and the fresh, albeit thin, air.

He’s lost eight percent of his body fat from 2016. He isn’t being asked by Woods or defensive line coach Bill Kollar to take up blocks, instead to run downfield and shoot gaps in the Broncos’ 3-4 base defense.

“It’s been good, man, loving the city, having a good time here. Man, I feel like, s--- man, go five more,” he said about extending his career, laughing hard. “I’m just kidding. I don’t know. We’ll see.”

So, yes, Peko, Sr. is helping provide a true anchor at the nose tackle position in the Broncos’ fifth-ranked run defense, but he’s already made 16 solo tackles – just one fewer than he recorded in 2015 and 2016. He had his first sack since 2015 and he’s playing more snaps than any defensive lineman other than Wolfe.

“I’ve just been feeling really good. The different scheme is helping me out,” Peko, Sr. said, squinting from the sun. “Before in the 4-3, I was playing a different technique where I was reading more. This defense, we attack more, so I’m able to just go.

“That has been good, but I just feel like I’m in my prime, man. I feel like I’m doing good. I don’t know. I feel good here.”

He’s also being counted on for leadership. The Broncos have lost five straight games, the last two with 92 points being put on the board by Philadelphia and New England. There is uncertainty at quarterback and injuries that have slowed down key players.

In come the Bengals, a game Peko, Sr. has had circled since the schedule was released. It means something to him, for sure. And his former teammates know it.

“I think he’ll be all gassed up,” Bengals guard Clint Boling said with a smile. “He’s obviously a super nice guy. When he played, he played with some passion. I think it’s just going to be one of those things to be fun to go against him in a game in a full-speed setting like that for the first time.

“He’s played for a long time, done a good job. It’ll be a challenge. Should be fun, a fun matchup.”

The Bengals and Broncos find themselves in similar situations, with disappointing 3-6 records but feeling like a win Sunday gets them back into the AFC playoff picture. On some level, it has to be just another game. But at least this time, the first time, it’ll mean a little more.

“I want to go out there and make some plays and have fun out there and do my job,” Peko said, shearing the tightly wound tape around his wrists. “Now they’ll be on the other sideline, not on my sideline now. But it’ll be fun, man. I’ll be excited to see all the dudes and make plays for the Broncos, man, and do my job.”

Domata Peko is the roll-up-your-sleeves defender Broncos needed

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN

August 24, 2017

There probably isn't room under the radar for Denver Broncos nose tackle Domata Peko, but the 325-(or so)-pounder was an acquisition made this offseason to relatively limited fanfare.

But if things go as Peko and the Broncos would like, this picture of durability, stability, consistency and production will be a big reason why Denver's defense plays a lot more like 2015 than it did in 2016. Not that everybody will notice, because as former Broncos nose tackle Rubin Carter has said, "Nobody in their right mind would say they want to grow up to be a nose tackle."

The Broncos defense was at its disruptive best at times in 2016 as it finished No. 1 in the league in pass defense for the second consecutive season. The Broncos were third in sacks, fourth in scoring defense and fourth in total defense.

However, they were 28th in run defense, and down the stretch, when the Broncos needed at least one more victory to get into the playoff field, they couldn't stop offenses from pounding away at them. And they couldn't keep those offenses in the down-and-distance situations where they could turn their pass-rushers loose, as they had in '15, when they led the league in every significant statistical category on the way to a Super Bowl win.

Von Miller was held without a sack in the final four games, and the Broncos went into the offseason looking to bulk up, hence Peko's job description.

"His job is to take up two gaps," Broncos coach Vance Joseph said.

"Everybody has something dirty about their job, and for the D-line, they have to take on those double-teams and keep the linebackers clean," Broncos defensive coordinator Joe Woods said of Peko and his linemates. "He's been doing it for a long time and doing it well."

Indeed, Peko is about to begin his 12th NFL season. The fact he has been around that long at one of the most physically grueling spots on the field -- the epicenter of collisions on every play -- and played every game in 10 of those previous 11 seasons is a whole lot of good fortune mixed with preparation and desire.

"That's crazy, man," Broncos cornerback Chris Harris Jr. said. "I'm in my sixth year and he's in there with all that traffic going into his 12th year. But he's just the kind of guy we need in there."

"I'm blessed to play 12 years," Peko said. "I say God has been keeping me strong and healthy. So a big shoutout to him, the man upstairs. I just keep my routine going. I hit the hot tubs and the cold tubs every day to keep my body right."

The math is simple, really: The more blockers Peko and the team's defensive ends can occupy, the fewer get to the Broncos linebackers. Then Miller, Todd Davis and Brandon Marshall have a far cleaner path to the ball carrier, and punts follow.

Too often last season, the Broncos front was pushed off the ball and the linebackers were wrestling with guards and centers who had moved a defensive lineman out of the way to get to the second level.

"Just being behind him, you can see the difference," Marshall said. "It's going to be a lot harder to do what teams did to us last year."

"He's just a beast," Miller said. "He rushes the passer and he's solid in the run, and that's something we were missing the last year, maybe even two years. To have him there, have him shore up the defensive line, is great."

But Peko isn't just a snap-to-whistle addition, he's a presence. In practices, you can often see the 32-year-old helping one of the team's younger linemen in the art of winning the battles in the tight quarters around the line of scrimmage. Peko also doesn't ever really seem rattled by the heat, the length of practice or the fact that whenever the ball is snapped, he's often got two 300-pound offensive linemen trying to move him.

"People ask me sometimes how to keep at it; I say you don't get out of shape," Peko said. "Always stay at your best."

"It's a big addition for us," Woods said. "He's a veteran player and he's played for a long time. He not only brings leadership to us on the football field but in the classroom as well. He's very, very smart, and guys look up to him. He's done a great job so far."

Domata Peko bringing big frame — and hair — to heart of Broncos reconstructed defensive line

By Nick Kosmider

Denver Post

July 29, 2017

Everything about Domata Peko is big.

The new 325-pound nose tackle for the Broncos has been hard to miss at training camp. If you can't spot the hair that juts out of the bottom of his helmet and flows downward until it covers up the No. 94 on the back of his jersey, the giant ear-to-ear grin that seems permanently attached to his face gives him away.

If none of that works, you can identify him by the giant circular hole cut into the T-shirt underneath his shoulder pads, exposing the midsection meant for moving massive men.

"I'm just trying to breathe, get some ventilation going for the big guys," Peko said of his on-field fashion choice.

The Broncos in March signed Peko, who spent the first 11 seasons of his career in Cincinnati, to a two-year, \$7.5 million contract, an investment in the kind of size they needed to add up front after finishing 28th in the NFL against the run last season.

For Peko, the move was a chance to start fresh.

"It's exciting to come in and be a part of this great group of guys who have been competing for years," Peko said. "The back end is always on point. We've got some monsters up front. The linebackers are flying downhill. It's been amazing."

Peko's primary job at the center of the Broncos' 3-4 defense is to gobble up space and occupy blockers, leaving them more vulnerable to Denver's army of pass rushers. It's a role, Broncos coach Vance Joseph said, to which the durable Peko has been well-suited.

"He's what you want in a nose guard," Joseph said. "He's a big man who can hold a point. He's got some quickness to rush the passer on pass downs, but his job is to take up two gaps and he can do that."

The Broncos won't put on their full pads until Sunday morning, but Peko's presence along the defensive front already has been felt.

"When they brought him in, I was happy because I know that he's a great guy, a great player and a great leader," offensive guard Ron Leary said. "We've had some great battles and they're only going to get better, but it's going to help both of us — the O-line and the D-line — get better and get ready for Sundays."

The Broncos also added Zach Kerr, a 334-pound former Colts defensive end, during free agency as part of general manager John Elway's plan to increase the size and toughness on both lines. Kerr figures to provide depth behind Derek Wolfe, Jared Crick and Adam Gotsis.

DeMarcus Walker, the 280-pound second-round pick in April's draft out of Florida State, also is expected to make an immediate impact at defensive end. That's more than 900 pounds of new bodies on the defensive line who are eager to provide more nastiness than the unit possessed last season.

"It's only day three of camp so we've got a long way to go and we've got to keep pushing each other," Peko said. "It's an exciting time to be a Bronco."

Domata Peko has an extremely simple job description with the Denver Broncos

By Zac Stevens
BSN Denver
May 19, 2017

Last season, for the first time since 2010, the Broncos missed the playoffs. While there was plenty of blame to go around on all three units, Denver's defense, yes the defense, had a gaping hole that hindered their ability to reach the postseason—stopping the run.

In the offseason, John Elway addressed that hole in a large way, literally. On a single day in free agency, March 11, the Broncos added a combined 659 pounds on the defensive line with the signings of Domata Peko and Zach Kerr. Now, with over half of the offseason workout program under his belt with the new team, Peko already knows exactly what his role will be on the defense.

"I'm coming in here trying to be a run stopper like I've been doing, and do that to the best of my ability," he said. "Their run-average [last season] was way too high for being a great defense."

Led by the best pass defense in the league, Denver's defense finished tops in many statistical categories last season, however, stopping the run was close to the bottom. The Broncos defense gave up the fifth-most rushing yards per game (130.3), the 14th-worst yards per carry (4.3) and the 14th-most rushing touchdowns.

Fortunately, Peko's 11 years with the Cincinnati Bengals have all been focused around eating up offensive lineman to stuff the run.

"Being in the AFC North, it's a really tough run-type of division," he said. "Being a nose guard for over a decade, that's what I do. I like to clog up the middle of the field. I like to fill in those run lanes that were kind of lacking last year."

Last season, while the run defense wasn't the fault of one player, the man in the middle of the defensive line was Sylvester Williams. Williams, who signed with the Tennessee Titans this offseason, was never a true nose tackle meant to take on multiple blockers in an effort to stop the run. However, that's what Peko's been doing his entire career and what he'll continue to do in Denver.

"I'm playing nose guard. It's the same thing I've been playing in Cincinnati. I'm playing nose guard right now and that's what I've been doing for years and that's what I play," he said. "It's a little bit different now. It's a 3-4 compared to a 4-3, but it's all to say that I'm lined up right over the center and that's what I've been doing. That's where I make my money. Right there in the middle of the field."

The biggest concern with the big man is his "older" age. Peko will turn 33 in November and already has 11 seasons of physical NFL caliber football under his belt. But in the two short months he's been with the Broncos, he's taken full advantage of their staff to get him in peak condition.

"I'm in year 12 but I feel good. My body is feeling great," Peko said as he stood in a sopping wet sweatshirt coming off a workout. "I feel like I'm in the best shape that I've ever been in. I'm getting

stronger than I've ever been. The weight room staff over here is no joke. They're doing a great job with me—[Strength and Conditioning] Coach Luke [Richesson] and also with [Defensive Line] Coach Bill [Kollar], he's a heck of a coach...I really love it here."

With his body bigger and better than ever, his mentality toward the game every second he's awake hasn't faded, either.

"I still love waking up in the morning and coming out here to hit o-linemen and hitting running backs," he said grinning ear to ear. "That's fun to me. I love that stuff."

Denver courted Peko for his ability to stuff the run. Peko ultimately chose Denver for their ability to lead him to the promise land.

"In Cincy, we're always talking about, 'Oh, I want to win a playoff game. I want to win a playoff game.' But over here, we're talking about winning championships. That's what brought me here, I want to win a championship."

Peko's ability to stop the run in Denver could ultimately be the deciding factor to whether he earns the Super Bowl ring he's chasing in the Mile High City.

Domata Peko knows expectations are higher in Denver

By Aric DiLalla

DenverBroncos.com

May 16, 2017

Domata Peko hasn't played a game yet for the Broncos, but he's well aware of the standard in Denver.

It's no secret the Broncos have more Super Bowl appearances (7) than losing seasons (5) under Owner Pat Bowlen's direction. And that resume creates expectations that Peko knows are higher than in most other NFL cities.

That's even true in Cincinnati, where Peko played his first 11 seasons and helped the Bengals make six playoff appearances in an eight-season stretch. But the Bengals could never find that elusive playoff win.

"In Cincy, we were kind of always talking about, 'Oh, I want to win a playoff game. I want to win a playoff game,'" Peko said. "But over here, we're talking about winning championships. That's what brought me here. I want to win a championship."

The 32-year-old nose guard chose Denver in part because of his desire to win a title and in part because his cousin, defensive lineman Kyle Peko, is on the roster. Kyle's presence gave Domata stability even in light of a move away from a city where he had played his whole career.

But Peko has also found familiarity on the football field. Though he's transitioned from a 4-3 defense to a 3-4, he's still in a spot where he's very comfortable: right over the center. And that's where, as he said Tuesday afternoon, he makes his money.

"Being in the AFC North, it's a really tough run type of [division]," Peko said. "And being a nose guard [for] over a decade, that's what I do. I like to clog up the middle of the field. I like to fill up those run lanes that were kind of lacking last year."

Peko's teammates along the line are tough, just as they were in Cincinnati, but he senses a different kind of intensity in Denver. And they're expecting improvement.

The Broncos are months away from seeing the results, but even in walkthroughs, Peko said he has sensed the chemistry between Derek Wolfe, Jared Crick, Adam Gotsis and a number of other players in Defensive Line Coach Bill Kollar's room.

"Coach Bill, he's a heck of a coach," Peko said. "He really gets after you, and what I love about Coach Bill is that he has no favorites. If you're a young guy, if you're an old guy, he's going to tell you how it is. So I really love it here."

Peko may be closer to "old guy" on the scale, but Strength and Conditioning Coach Luke Richesson has him in "the best shape I've ever been in."

If that's the case, then Peko should be poised for success in the Broncos' plans to become more physical against the run.

Because if there's one thing Peko enjoys, it's hitting people.

"I still have that hunger that I want to get a ring," Peko said. "I want to win a championship, and that's what keeps me going. Also my family, playing for my children, my wife – those are motivations. I think that's what's keeping me young, keeping me live.

"You see guys, when they get a little older, they start losing their love for the game but for me, I still love waking up in the morning, coming out here, hitting O-linemen and hitting running backs. That's fun to me. I love this stuff."