Broncos DE Derek Wolfe leaned on wife's support during recovery from neck surgery

By Ryan O'Halloran
Denver Post
Sept. 9, 2018

As Broncos defensive end Derek Wolfe prepared for neck surgery last December, his right arm numb because of a pinched nerve that made it difficult for him to get out of bed and prevented him from opening a door (let alone play football) he and his wife, Abigail, had a brief conversation.

"We thought for a second that if it didn't work, we should consider retirement," Abigail said. "But that was a whisper. He was just really hopeful the whole time this wasn't going to be the end."

Later that day, the surgery was a success. Weeks later, Derek began training. And nearly nine months later, he'll make his regular season return when the Broncos host Seattle on Sunday.

Wolfe hopes the whisper of retirement turns into a roar of a comeback, a return to the player who can defend the run and provide an interior pass-rush presence; back to the player who had 2 1/2 sacks during the Broncos' Super Bowl run in 2015.

"The ups and downs in my life in general have prepared me for this game," Wolfe said at his locker earlier in the week. "Football teaches you to be consistent and not get too high or too low."

That mindset has helped Wolfe deal with the ups (six sacks as a rookie in 2012 and signing a four-year contract in 2016) and downs (a bruised spinal cord injury in 2013, a four-game performance-enhancing drug suspension in 2015 and last year's neck surgery). He hopes this season is another successful up.

"He has a lot of game left to give," Abigail said of her 28-year old husband. "He's ready to show them he's still a young buck."

If Derek does return to being an elite player, he will get to enjoy the journey with Abigail, whom he credits for providing constant support since they met in early 2016.

One scary moment

A foraminotomy is a surgical procedure that enlarges the area (called the foramen) in the spinal column to relieve pressure on compressed nerves. A small drill is used to shave a larger opening in the spine, which is originally 3 to 4 millimeters wide.

The surgery became an option when the Wolfes visited an expert in such surgeries in California. Wolfe played 11 games last year before being shut down. The neck injury was a by-product of the spinal cord injury earlier in his career. Calcium had built up in the foramen, causing discomfort that would not go away. Surgery would allow him to play again and also avoid a constant diet of anti-inflammatory drugs.

"Every time you shrug your shoulders or your head gets compressed, it pinches the nerve," Wolfe said. "What happened, it was pinching and staying pinched."

The expert provided the second opinion and it was swift, almost immediately after Derek sat on the exam table.

“The doctor said, ‘If you don’t take care of this, you’re going to lose function of your right arm,’” Abigail said. “That’s when it really hit Derek — it was much more serious than he anticipated.”

Abigail asked most of the questions in meetings with trainers and doctors.

“I felt it was my job as his wife to make sure we weren’t skipping over the little things,” Abigail said. “Doctors might have thought I was a little annoying, but I didn’t care.”

The Wolfes returned to Denver and Derek’s surgery was performed by Broncos team neurosurgeon Chad Pursmack.

“The procedure is quite common” for the general public, said Neel Anand, M.D., professor of orthopedic surgery and director of spine trauma at Cedars-Sinai Spine Center in Los Angeles who performs foraminotomy on a regular basis. “Any surgery on the spine is risky. Can things go wrong? Yes. But given all of the procedures we do, this is one of the far-less risky ones.”

Wolfe said he was “really miserable” for two weeks post-surgery, which he was told to expect, but also regained the feeling in his right arm “immediately,” which Anand said is common for a successful surgery.

Wolfe began training less than a month after surgery. His first bench press lift was 225 pounds. It’s now in the 450-500 pound area.

“I was really impatient,” Wolfe said. “I wanted to train 2-3 times a day, but (strength-and-conditioning coach) Loren (Landow) and the doctors made sure I didn’t do anything stupid.”

Wolfe was a regular participant during the Broncos’ offseason program. He was building confidence, but Derek and Abigail knew putting on pads and battling offensive linemen in practice would be the true test.

“I told him, ‘We’re not going to know if this surgery works until the first day of training camp,’” Abigail said.

There was one scary moment during the first padded practice July 31, Wolfe sustained a stinger and walked to the locker room. Abigail was watching the workout.

“It freaked me out pretty bad because I was like, ‘It didn’t work, it didn’t work,’ ” she said.

Derek knew he was fine, though, because he never lost feeling in his right arm. It was his shoulder pads that produced the discomfort. He did the foam roller and returned to the field to watch practice. Wolfe practiced the next day and has trended upward the entire preseason.

“One of our first time in pads, I said, ‘Holy (bleep), Wolfe’s back,’” nose tackle Domata Peko said. “He was hitting guys, getting off blocks. I was like, ‘Hell yeah, he’s looking good.”

A perfect match

Derek and his friends were celebrating the Broncos' Super Bowl 50 victory in Las Vegas at the Tao nightclub. Abigail, who grew up in Cheyenne, Wyo., was working in the restaurant. A mutual friend introduced her to Derek.

"I had no idea who he was," Abigail said. "I knew who the Broncos were, but the only player I could recognize was Peyton Manning. But when (Derek) walked in, I told our friend I needed to meet him. Everybody thought we would be a match made in heaven."

They married in Vail in February 2017. Abigail's first year as an NFL wife was as a caregiver. Derek sustained a right ankle injury in the preseason, which meant he couldn't drive. Abigail would drop him off at the Broncos' facility every morning at 5:30 a.m. And she led the neck surgery conversations, doing the research to ask informed questions.

"If it wasn't for her, I don't know what would have happened," Derek said. "I'm blessed to have her."

Back healthy, Wolfe is beginning the third season of a four-year, $36.7 million contract he signed in January 2016. He is comfortable living here. His wife has family and friends here. He would like to remain involved with the sport post-retirement. That makes this season important. Play 16 games for the first time since 2014 and post at least six sacks for the first time since 2012 and his future is with the Broncos.

"This is a season I can try and get an extension and retire a Bronco because I want to stay here for the rest of my career," Wolfe said. "It's a really important (year) for me personally and it's important for us as a team because of last year and the way things went. It's really important to bounce back anytime you have adversity like (the injury) and you've been knocked down. Come back, surprise people and respond well."

Said Abigail: "We just can't imagine starting all over with another team."

Wolfe on new strength coach Landow: "He knows how to create competition"

By Mike Klis
9 News
February 14, 2018

Loren Landow had been training dozens of Bronco players over the years, anyway.

Why not make him the team's full-time strength and conditioning coach?

Broncos general manager John Elway and head coach Vance Joseph are about to make just such a home-run hire. Following an impressive interview for the Broncos' vacant strength and conditioning coach Tuesday, the team is planning to hire Landow for the position once he is freed from his personal client commitments for the NFL Combine, sources told 9NEWS.

"That's one of the best hires they could have made,'' said Denver defensive end Derek Wolfe. "That guy flies around the world. He's going to Ireland in two days. They fly him all over the world to learn from him.

"And he's fun. He's workouts are fun. You want to be around him. His energy is always good. He's the same guy every single day. He knows how to create competition. And that's what you need when you're training in the offseason. Nobody wants to go to OTAs anyway because it becomes doing the same (stuff) every day. I wished I could stay and train with Loren. Now I get train with him and be OTAs and be paid for it.''

The combine, which includes more than 300 prospects eligible for the NFL Draft, will run from Feb. 27-March 5 in Indianapolis. Once the deal is finalized as expected, Landow would replace Luke Richesson as the Broncos' strength and conditioning coach. Richesson had led the team's strength program from February 2012 until he left last week to become the strength and rehabilitation coach of the Houston Texans.

"I'm so happy about this,'' Wolfe said. "I loved Luke, don't get me wrong. But Loren is the guy that I've worked with year-round.''

Landow has been a sports performance coach working in the Denver area for years. His Landow Performance website says he has worked with 70 NFL All Pros and 20 first-round draft selections.

Besides training draft or college free agent hopefuls, Landow regular trains current Broncos players Ron Leary, Max Garcia, Todd Davis and Wolfe among others. Demaryius Thomas and Bennie Fowler III also train with Landow when they're in town.

andow has also worked with Major League Baseball, NHL, WNBA and Ultimate Fighting championship (UFC) athletes, as well as gold medalist swimmer Missy Franklin.

It was during the NFL lockout of 2011 when Landow became well-known in the Denver area. With Bronco players unable to work out at team's headquarters during the offseason lockout, veteran safety Brian

Dawkins organized regular team workouts. It was Landow who coached the Broncos through those workouts. The Broncos then won the first of five consecutive AFC West titles in 2011.

Landow was a finalist for the Broncos' strength and conditioning coach in 2012. Although, the Broncos picked Richesson, Landow's depth of sports performance knowledge stayed with Elway as the position became open again six years later.

Landow specializes in modern training techniques that combined with proper bi-motor fundamentals creates "maximum human performance efficiently and effectively,'' according to his mission statement.

Once Landow joins the Broncos full-time, he is expected to distance himself as a coach from his Landow Performance, although the company will remain active as it employs 17 other sports performance coaches and a facilities manager, according to his website.

The Broncos also considered assistant strength and conditioning coaches Anthony Lomando and Mike Eubanks for the head job, as well as former Miami Dolphins and Indianapolis Colts' strength coach Darren Krein. Lomando also received strong consideration and is expected to receive an expanded role as he works with Landow.

Wolfe feels 'so much better' after neck surgery

By Dave Clark
Cincinnati.com
February 15, 2018

Former UC Bearcats star Derek Wolfe, a defensive end for the Denver Broncos, underwent a Foraminotomy procedure for nerve pain he says he's had since 2013 that forced him to miss the final five games of this past season.

He told 9news.com in Denver that he feels great now and expects to have a big season.

More from 9news's Mike Klis:

"I can turn my head like an owl," Wolfe said Wednesday in an interview with 9NEWS. "It's crazy. I can look all the way behind me. It's insane."

What's nuts is the degree of pain players who line up along the line of scrimmage must overcome in order to play on Sunday.

"I can honestly sit here and tell you that as far as my neck goes – I have to build my strength back up, but I got Loren to help me so I'm not worried about that – but it's fixed," Wolfe said. "I feel so much better. I swear I couldn't do a pushup during the season."

Broncos neurosurgeon Dr. Chad Prusmack performed the Foraminotomy in the final days of the regular season.

The procedure enlarges the passageway where the spinal nerve exits the spinal canal.

"They don't have to cut through the muscle or anything," Wolfe said. "They go in there and take out some of the bone where the nerve comes out."

While working off-campus with local performance coach Loren Landow – who will soon become the Broncos' full-time strength and conditioning coach – Wolfe is now throwing up 120-pound dumbbells on the overhead press for sets of 10.

"It's a whole new season," Wolfe said.

Wolfe has spent his entire NFL career with the Broncos since the team drafted the 2011 Co-Big East Defensive Player of the Year out of UC in the second round of the 2012 NFL Draft.

Derek Wolfe on future with Broncos: "I'm going to live here the rest of my life no matter what"

By Mike Klis
9 News
February 24, 2018

A healthy Derek Wolfe would help the Broncos improve in 2018.

Wolfe says he's undoubtedly healthy after Foraminotomy surgery and stem-cell treatment addressed the neck injury and complications that forced him to miss a combined seven games the past two years. But there is some question whether he will be a Bronco this year because of financial concerns.

"A guy of my caliber is making $12 million to $15 million a year,'' Wolfe said in an interview with 9News this week. "And I make $8 million a year. I think they're getting a pretty good deal with me.

"But if they want to let me go, this is business. I'm not going to have any hard feelings. I love this team. I love this city. This is where I'm going to live. I'm going to live here the rest of my life no matter what.''

Wolfe, though, may not be as vulnerable to leaving Denver's roster as other standouts making good money. It's not just a relatively high salary that makes an NFL player susceptible to the trading block. It's good money and having a younger alternative behind him.

Wolfe does not have a young player behind him who is ready to play at his caliber, at least not until the Broncos' past two, second-round picks Adam Gotsis and DeMarcus Walker further develop.

The two Broncos more frequently mentioned as possibly moving on -- cornerback Aqib Talib and running back C.J. Anderson – are backed up by young players who appear ready for more playing time.

Bradley Roby was not only the Broncos' No. 3 cornerback the past four seasons, his salary is about to jump from $1.018 million to $8.526 million.

At running back, Devontae Booker and De'Angelo Henderson flashed promise in 2017 and the Broncos would like to draft another running back this year.

Even relatively inexpensive quarterback Trevor Siemian could be moved in part because the Broncos may not be ready to give up on former first-round pick Paxton Lynch.

What's certain is the Broncos can't stay with status quo following a 5-11 season. No doubt, the team will confront difficult decisions with some of their better players.

"I think every team does,'' said Broncos head coach Vance Joseph. "Our goal this offseason is to keep the best players we can and find the right players for our football team. I think every team has those same issues every offseason. It's no different here.''

Broncos' Derek Wolfe promises to be more outspoken in 2017

By Arnie Stapleton
Associated Press
May 16, 2017

Derek Wolfe has never been accused of holding back his opinions.

The Denver Broncos defensive end, however, said he didn't speak up enough last season when the Broncos missed the playoffs a year after winning it all.

"When I see guys not doing the right thing, I'm going to tell them," Wolfe said during a fiery news conference Tuesday. "I'm not going to sit back and let that (stuff) slide. Me, it's either confrontation, fist-fight or say nothing. I'm learning how to not fight people if that makes sense."

When GM John Elway and new coach Vance Joseph set about to remake the roster in the offseason, priority No. 1 was adding some attitude.

Basically, they wanted more Derek Wolfes.

To help him along the D-line and staunch a leaky run defense, the Broncos added former Bengals mainstay Domata Peko , a soft-spoken, lead-by-example type who's the yin to Wolfe's yang.

In Peko, Wolfe sees a guy who can help him keep order.

"With the two of us being able to team up on it, if I don't catch it, he usually (will)," Wolfe said. "I'm more vocal than he is, if you can believe that. He'll come up to me and say, 'Hey man, should we do this?' It's just nice to have another ear in there to bounce things off of."

With the retirement of DeMarcus Ware this offseason, the Broncos need that locker room leadership.

"I've been around enough great players that I've seen how not to do it and how to do it," said Wolfe, who was drenched in sweat and still a little out of breath from a workout as he met with the media. "Over the years, just maturing. Every season for me is just a learning session. Every season is like a life. It's like a life span. You learn something new every season and last season I didn't do enough. I have to take more of a leadership role."

Wolfe dealt with a sore neck much of last season and missed two games. But he said he's healthy again and has added 20 pounds of muscle and now tips the scales at 310 pounds: "I'm moving as well as I've ever moved, so I feel great."

Peko stepped up to the podium after Wolfe walked away and let out a belly laugh, then said he appreciated Wolfe's intensity.

"It's cool. Just watching film on him over the years, he's a beast out there," Peko said. "I love the way he plays. He has that no-B.S. mentality and that's the kind of guy I want to play next to on the D-line.

"Derek is the type of guy that will let you know if you're doing some stuff wrong and get after you that type of way. But also, he's one of the hardest workers out here. He's here every day, giving his all, giving his best," Peko said. "That's the same type of way that I am. I am the type of guy that tries to lead by example, just by doing the right things, always giving my best."

Peko spent his first 11 seasons in Cincinnati before signing a two-year, $7.5 million deal with Denver. He said he's already benefited from strength coach Luke Richesson's program and working with D-line coach Bill Kollar. But more than anything, he likes the winning culture in Denver, where nine wins constitutes a crisis.

"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," Peko said. "That's what brought me here, I want to win a championship."

Derek Wolfe's savage howl of pain, rage and — finally — hope

By Nicki Jhabvala
Denver Post
December 18, 2016

The barbaric scream is Derek Wolfe's signature, his final act after bulldozing an offensive lineman, or two, and then taking down the quarterback. He will emerge from the pile, bend his knees, puff his chest and let out a howl so loud and so demanding that he cannot be ignored.

It is a celebration and a release — another sack to add to his stat sheet and of rage that has been building since he laced up his cleats and stepped on the field.

"I'm on the verge of wanting to get kicked out of every game because I just want to start swinging at people," he says, bluntly. "Every game I want to rip off some offensive lineman's helmet and start beating him with it. But I don't, because it would be detrimental to my career and my team."

It's also a nod to his past and the beginning of his future.

In the past two seasons The Wolf, as he's known, has evolved into more than just 285 pounds of pent-up anger, waiting to explode. With the departure of Malik Jackson to free agency, Wolfe has been the Broncos' top defensive lineman, improving his pass rush to rank second on the team in both sacks (5.5) and quarterback hits (19) while ranking among the game's top 3-4 defensive ends in stopping the run.

"He's been a leader on the defensive line," Broncos outside linebacker DeMarcus Ware said. "Usually you have a guy that sits back, and now he demands that mentality of 'The Wolf,' if you want to look at it that way. He plays that way every game. He plays hard. He is a competitor."

Coach Gary Kubiak believes Wolfe has compiled a Pro Bowl season, no easy feat given the rash of injuries he has endured since the start of training camp.

"I'm very accustomed to pain," he said. "My whole life has been painful. Physically, I could handle it. Then I evolved into somebody who could handle the mental problems, the day-to-day problems that you have as a human being. Because those are the things that get you."

Lost and found

It's 6:15 on a Thursday evening and Wolfe, fresh off a day of practice, treatment, weight lifting and film study at the Broncos' practice facility, has arrived at Landow Performance in Centennial, a training center owned by Loren Landow. It has been Wolfe's second home the past two offseasons. Sitting in the back office, adjacent to a row of power racks and behind a wall that bears his signed and framed No. 95 Broncos jersey, Wolfe leans back in a leather chair and reflects on that time in February.

He remembers the feeling when confetti rained down at Levi's Stadium after the Broncos upended the Panthers and hoisted the Lombardi Trophy. He remembers the parade through the streets of downtown Denver days later. He remembers the gratification, the culmination of a process that started at age 7.

“It’s not even about the ring,” he says. “It’s about the experience. Trying to repeat is extremely difficult because everyone’s gunning for you.”

And yet he loves it. The pressure fuels him.

“It’s fun whenever your back is against the wall,” he said. “For me, it’s just normal because for my whole life my back’s been against the wall. It’s either all or nothing with me.”

Some of what Wolfe missed as a kid in Ohio he has gained through football. He didn’t know his biological father. His mother struggled with substance abuse. His relationship with his abusive stepfather, who divorced his mother, crumbled long ago. When Wolfe was a teen, he moved in with his friend, whose family offered him shelter and stability. The Hoppel family raised him, he has said. But his nomadic start shaped him.

“I spent my childhood in Youngstown, Ohio. In high school we moved to a more rural area, and that whole area, there’s no place like it,” Wolfe says. “There’s nobody built the way that we’re built. … That’s just the way it is. If I can make it out of here, I’m tougher than everybody else.”

The void of the past is still very much a part of his present. It’s perhaps why he has learned to set goals but not expectations: “Those are two different things in my mind,” he says. “When you expect something, it leads to disappointment.”

It’s why his coaches over the years have been much more: “I wasn’t getting told at home, ‘Good job.’ I wasn’t getting that love at home,” he says. “My coaches were showing me that love. It was like addicting to me.”

It’s why, in part, he accepted significantly less when he signed a four-year, $36.7 million contract extension with the Broncos in January.

“Just make sure I’m taken care of and we’ll be fine,” he says. “I don’t live an extravagant lifestyle. All I need is the home that I never had when I was a kid.”

With his fiancée, Abbie Burrows, and her 9-year-old daughter, Tatum, Wolfe is constructing the life he always wanted but never got. Their new home is expected to be completed early in the new year.

“Abbie is probably the best thing that’s ever happened to me,” Wolfe says. “She makes sure that I’m fed. And that’s huge for me because finding food as a kid was not easy. When I’m going through a tough time, if I have an injury, she doesn’t baby me. She gives me the love that I need but also gives me the confidence and motivation. She’s my best friend. And Tatum — if you want to see me get soft, that little girl brings out the soft side in me.”

Painful memories

When times get tough, as they have this season with injuries, Wolfe’s mind wanders back to 2013. In a preseason game against Seattle, a cut block left him temporarily paralyzed on the field. He was carted off and later diagnosed with a bruised spinal cord. His sophomore NFL season was lost, as his physical frame and mental health deteriorated.

That was the only time he couldn't get a handle on the physical pain, he says. But even that became more of a mental obstacle. As the depression set in, he often wondered if his career passion had ended.

"You're like, 'Am I ever going to play again? The only thing that I've ever really loved, that's ever given anything to me is going to be taken away from me,' " he says. "I wasn't going to let that happen. I bounced back from that and here we are."

The memories will never be erased. They often return when the physical pain does. He calls them nicks: There was the high ankle sprain in preseason that lingered, a neck injury in the season-opener that caused stingers throughout the season, and then the elbow injury in early November that forced him to miss one game but could have sidelined him for many more.

And sandwiched in between was the stress of his mother's admittance to an intensive care unit, in late August.

"I think back to my childhood. I think back to that time," he says. "Whenever I'm going through any kind of adversity, I think, 'If I made it through that, I can make it through this.' It was the same thing this season. This season has been tough for me. I've been dealing with a lot of pain."

Bigger than football

The PG-rated version of "DEFWU" means "don't ever fool with us." But the explicit version is the mantra Wolfe has lived by since he was a freshman in college.

It comes from Steubenville, Ohio, he says, a small, blue-collar town some 80 miles south of Youngstown that has been riddled by drug use, heroin especially.

"It's right by where we grew up," Wolfe says. "The people in that Ohio Valley are so tough and hard-nosed and they kind of mind their own business, but when someone jaws at them, they're going to fight them. That's the kind of people they are. That's why DEFWU is such a lifestyle for me. It's bigger than just football."

Wolfe's lifestyle has spawned an apparel company, with its sweatshirts often donned by Broncos players. Wolfe is wearing one on this Thursday, his sleeves rolled up to expose the "WARRIOR" tattoo on his right forearm. Both are reminders of his past and his journey out of Ohio, but also of where he's going.

Last June, Wolfe returned to Ohio to accept a lifetime achievement award from the Lou Holtz Upper Ohio Valley Hall of Fame. The award afforded him a chance to talk to Holtz at length, a man Wolfe had idolized as a kid. It also gave him a chance to talk to locals who have experienced many of the same things he has.

"Getting to talk to people from that area and giving them a little bit of hope because there's no hope," Wolfe says. "There's nothing going for anybody there. Everybody just wants to be better, and there's no outlet to be better. I think that my story can give any — even if it's one kid that reads my story and it helps them, that's great."

His “Wolfe Pack Foundation” was formed to help underprivileged children in Colorado and Ohio try to find hope. He recently shipped a bag of cleats to his high school coach so his players wouldn’t have to wear the same pair of hand-me-downs for four years like Wolfe did.

His mission, for now, is broad. Wolfe says he wants to help to kids in need, but military veterans too. After watching those close to him struggle with drug and alcohol abuse, he wants to open a detox center in Colorado.

He wants to play a more prominent role in the movement for cannabidiol research and approval by the NFL to give players healthier options for treatment — options that won’t leave them addicted or in greater pain.

“I don’t take opioids,” he says. “I refuse to take them because I’ve seen too many people become addicted to it and ruin their lives. I’ve lost a couple of friends to heroin already and it all started with simple things like Percocet and the next thing you know they’re doing Oxycontin. Then they’re shooting heroin. I don’t ever want to be that person because it just destroys everything.”

Wolfe’s pain may never fully fade. But it has offered perspective, and a bit of self-awareness. It’s not about the start, he says.

“It only matters how you finish. When I’m dead in the ground, nobody’s going to be like, ‘Oh, he signed a $90 million contract,’ ” he says. “But if I can get my name in that Ring of Fame in Denver and I can be a key part of this team, then I’ll have a legacy. That’s what it’s about.”

A conversation with Derek Wolfe: Talking football, Broncos' defense, hated teams and more

By Nicki Jhabvala
Denver Post
December 18, 2016

According to Von Miller, he and DeMarcus Ware are the Splash Brothers, the NFL's version of Stephen Curry and Klay Thompson. If the sack is a three, Miller and Ware are lethal beyond the arc.

But Miller (also according to Miller) has another NBA doppelganger. He's Steve Nash, and veteran defensive end Derek Wolfe is Dirk Nowitzki.

"What Dirk did for the Dallas Mavericks early in his career, and still now, he is still the greatest," Miller explained this week. "Some of the stuff that he does for his team, that's what Derek does for us. He's a big man. He can take on more than one guy. He's able to make plays. He's able to shoot the three, that's the sack for us. He's able to get sacks and he plays the run. That's solid paint-work right there. He's our big man."

Wolfe recently opened up to The Denver Post about his past, his string of painful injuries this season and his goals, on and off the field.

But he also spoke about his evolution as a player, in becoming that so-called Nowitzki of Wade Phillips' 3-4 defense in Denver; about his contract and how he felt when Malik Jackson got $90 million from Jacksonville; about his distaste for the Patriots and a pair of division rivals; about his resentment toward the league and his hope for a drug policy drug. Here's part of our wide-ranging conversation:

When, and how, did you learn to balance your anger on the field with smart play?

"Trial and error. I spent a lot of years getting a lot of personal fouls. When I realized I was hurting the team — because, to me, it was about my pride. My high school coaches tried to tell me and I was like, 'Yeah, whatever.' Then I got to college and my college coaches really beat it into my head that you can't do that kind of stuff."

Did you idolize any players growing up, or try to learn from other defensive linemen in the game?

"You can only do so much as a player. You can only advance yourself so far. I went through that phase and I'd watch other players. I'd watch J.J. (Watt) and I'd be like, 'How does he do that? How does he run around people like that?' That's not my style. I'm going to go through you. That's my game.

"Nothing against how J.J. plays. But we play completely different styles of football. I try to play as stout as I possibly can. I don't mind if I don't make every play. I just want the play to get made. If I can make it so someone else can make the play, he can have all the glory. But I know in the film room it's because of me. I'm looking for gratification from my coaches and my peers. I'm not looking for Joe Schmo sitting on his couch watching the game. If he doesn't think I'm playing well, whatever. But as long as my coaches think I'm playing well, that's all that matters."

Which coaches have had the most influence on your career?

“My coaches in college had a huge impact on me. (Former Cincinnati head coach) Butch Jones and (former Cincinnati assistant head coach/defensive line) Steve Stripling. Those two guys had a huge impact. They took my game to a whole other level. I was holding myself back because I didn’t think I could do certain things. I didn’t think that I was capable of doing certain pass-rush moves and pushing myself to that next level. I wasn’t sure that I could do that. Then I got to the NFL and had good coaches in the NFL, but (Broncos defensive line coach) Bill Kollar came along last year and made a huge difference. It’s everything. The system. His style.

“Our system is made for our outside linebackers to get sacks. And when you got guys like DeMarcus and Von, why wouldn’t you do that? My job is to make sure the quarterback can’t step up in the pocket.”

Do you take more pride in pass rushing or in your run defense?

“I don’t know why, but nobody is ever going to give me credit for my pass rushing. It’s just not going to happen.”

Do you ever get frustrated by that?

“I used to. But now I don’t really care. I know I can pass rush.”

You have the second-most sacks on the team this season (5.5, behind Miller’s 13.5).

“I know, yeah. The way I get to the quarterback might not be pretty and fancy. But I get there. I’m going to make sure I get there and be in his face as much as possible.”

Where you do you feel you’ve improved the most in recent years?

“Pass rushing. I’m doing a lot of things to help Von out, like making sure that he’s one-on-one. Because no one is going to block him one-on-one.”

He said earlier this season that “about 10 of the sacks I have throughout my career, I’ve stolen from Derek.”

“He’s stolen a lot from me. There have been a lot of times when we’ve both beat our guys and I’m coming around to get him and I flush him right into Von’s arms. That’s been happening since I was a rookie. Obviously, he’s a great player. You can’t take anything away from that. We’re a great team. We work very well together.”

What makes this defense so close?

“Think about the things we’ve gone through. And not to knock our offense, but our offense for the past two years has put us in some situations where we had to really step up and make plays and score touchdowns. We’ve been asked to do things that a lot of defenses wouldn’t be able to step up and do. It brought us close together because in times of adversity, you’re either going to fall apart or you’re going to come together as a team. And we do a good job of coming together. We don’t point the finger at the

offense. They don't point the finger at us, like 'How come it wasn't a three-and-out for them so we can get right back on the field?' It's not like that."

Has there ever been any resentment toward the offense?

"No, not at all. Obviously you want your offense to score points. That's all we care about. As long as they can score enough points for us to win, we'll do our best to hold them. In our mind, if (opponents) don't score, they don't win. So every loss, we put it on us. 'Against Tennessee, we shouldn't have let them score that first touchdown on that first drive. Had they not, they only would have had six points and we would have won.' "

What about toward the NFL? Any resentment?

"I have a lot of resentment toward the league about a lot of things because I think their whole line about how much they care about us is a load of crap. And that's fine. But at least let me do what I got to do to get ready for your Thursday night game. … I try my hardest not to take anything other than Aleve. That's the only thing I'll ever take.

"We could get into the conspiracy theories all day about the pharmaceutical companies and how they have a grasp on every aspect of our life. The whole medical system is completely screwed up. Kids who can't function because of seizures are being cured with CBD (cannabidiol, a nonpsychoactive compound in cannabis). And I can understand now wanting THC (tetrahydrocannabinol, the compound in marijuana that gets users high). I'm a huge supporter of (CBD) and I wish the NFL would make a switch. Or at least give us the option. At least make it OK for us to do that. I should be able to explore all healthy options, because you're giving me nothing but unhealthy options."

They collectively bargained a change to the drug policies in 2014. They could change them again before the CBA expires.

"They could do such a better job. They talk about player safety this, player safety that. Look at what happened to Chris (Harris). If that guy (Titans receiver Harry Douglas) was serious about wanting to keep him away from the play, he would have hit him in his chest. No, he was trying to physically injure, not hurt — hurt and injure are different. When someone is trying to injure me and take my livelihood. This is how I feed my family. This is my life. And I'm not all about the money. I think I proved that when I took a far smaller contract than what I could have gotten in free agency. It's because I love this team, I love the game that I play, I don't want to go somewhere that I don't know anybody. I want to stay right here. I love my coaches, I love the fans. That's why I wanted to stay and I said I'll take a significant haircut to stay here."

When Malik Jackson signed his $90 million deal with the Jaguars did you have any regrets?

"No, because he's in Jacksonville. And who wants to live in Jacksonville? But good for him. I'm happy for him."

You're an intimidating guy on the field. Are you like that away from football?

“I can be cold. I’m a bit cold-hearted at times. (My fiancée Abbie) reminds me of when I’m being cold and she understands me. That’s the biggest thing is that she understand me and understands that I’m not trying to be mean. That’s just who I am.”

What are your goals on the the field?

“I just want to win. I could have five sacks and 15 tackles in a game, but if we lose it’s like it was all for nothing. The only satisfaction you get as a player, for me, is to win. To be winning. When you lose, the whole week (stinks). Your days off (stink). All you’re thinking about is that loss, and then you get on to the next team. You just want to put wins together so they start stacking up. That’s how it was for us last year. I think if we go out and get this win this weekend (against New England) it’ll make a nice turnaround for us.”

You had two of your best games against the Patriots last season. What is it about them?

“I just don’t like them. I don’t like their fans. I have a lot of friends that are Patriots fans, too, and they’re always talking (smack). And it’s fun to beat Tom Brady. It’s fun to play against Tom Brady, in general, because he is a great competitor. He’s always chirping on the field, he’s always talking. So he’s a fun guy to get on the ground. I got a ton of respect for the guy. To be as successful as many years as he has, it’s impressive.”

So are the Patriots the team you hate the most?

“I really hate San Diego. Really hate them.”

Why?

“Oh, they live on the beach, they got nice weather. They got it nice and easy out there in California with all the Liberals. And Philip Rivers just drives me nuts. I just don’t like him. But I’m starting to develop a real hate for the Raiders, as well. Because the first couple of years, they were a joke. But now that they’re good and to see their fans have zero people in them and nothing but Broncos fans, to now it’s filled. Ugh. I love their tough convict mentality, but it’s just one of those teams.”

What about Jack Del Rio?

“I like Del Rio. Del Rio is the only reason I’m in Denver. He’s the one that fought for me to be drafted here. We got a lot of respect for each other I think. He’s a great guy, a great coach, a great motivator, as well.”

Do you ever wonder what your life would be like if you didn’t have football?

“I can’t imagine my life without it because it’s been in my life for so long. The majority of my life has been football. The first six years of my life were about football too. I was playing backyard football, just waiting my turn to get on the field. Now I all I have to do is just try to make sure I’m the best person out there.”

Derek Wolfe's splash plays and dirty work making him a key cog for Broncos defense

By Cameron Wolfe
Denver Post
October 4, 2016

Broncos coach Gary Kubiak named five players of the game Sunday against the Tampa Bay Buccaneers: left tackle Russell Okung (offense), receiver Demaryius Thomas (offense), cornerback Aqib Talib (defense), defensive end Derek Wolfe (defense) and Dekoda Watson (special teams).

All received praise, but Kubiak and Broncos players in the locker room pointed out the success on the big plays and dirty work done by Wolfe this season.

"Wolfe makes it easier for sure," outside linebacker Shane Ray said. "Just the presence that he has in the middle, pushing the pocket, beating his guys, opens up stuff for us."

Wolfe has long been a stalwart in the run game, but it's his improved pass rush that has taken his game to the next level. Wolfe had 2.5 sacks Sunday against Tampa Bay, a career-high.

"Him and Sly (Williams), they control the middle of our 'D,'" Talib said. "If we're going to stop the run, it's going to start with those guys. They're the front line of our defense; we don't talk about them enough."

Kubiak added: "Derek had a great offseason, number one. He's in really good shape… He's been exceptional."

With Wolfe (four sacks, T-3rd) and outside linebacker Von Miller (5.5 sacks, 1st), the Broncos have two players ranking in the top three in sacks. Twenty-one NFL teams don't have the 9.5 sacks that Miller and Wolfe have combined.

Making progress. Outside of quarterback Trevor Siemian, tight end Virgil Green and right tackle Donald Stephenson will be the Broncos injuries to watch this week. Kubiak said Green and Stephenson were "both in the same boat" and "very close" to returning. He expects both to practice in some capacity Wednesday.

Green and Stephenson have missed the last two games with calf injuries. Ty Sambrailo has started at right tackle in his place, but he's struggled with consistency. John Phillips and Jeff Heuerman have taken the tight end snaps with Green out, but the Broncos have run more three- and four-receiver sets in his absence.

Outside linebacker DeMarcus Ware began the workout portion of his rehab from his fractured forearm Monday. Ware is still expected to be out for at least a few more weeks, but Kubiak said he's starting to make progress and will be reevaluated at the end of the week.

Reliability is a skill. For the third straight game, safety Darian Stewart was the only Bronco to play every snap on defense against Tampa Bay. He's quietly been a large part of Denver's success on defense in each of the last two seasons. He's also a free agent after the season.

Center Matt Paradis continued his streak by playing in every offensive snap in each of the Broncos first four games. He was the only Broncos player on offense or defense last season to play every snap.

Unleashed: Derek Wolfe moves from tough past to limitless future

By Ben Swanson
DenverBroncos.com
August 24, 2016

You don't know Derek Wolfe, and he doesn't care.

You catch glimpses of his life through Instagram, but what's beneath the surface can stay there for all he cares. If people only think of him as a vicious defensive end, that's fine with him.

For the longest time, Wolfe's personal life was something he wanted to keep hidden. Abuse, life in an unstable home before eventual homelessness, depression — these are things he naturally doesn't want to dwell upon.

It wasn't until this year, after finding stability with two long-term commitments — one with the Broncos after signing a contract extension in January and one with his wife-to-be in May — that he could turn toward the future.

With that peace of mind and support, Wolfe is now able to turn his focus completely to football, determined to show that his 2015 season is still just the beginning of a maturing career.

Security and loyalty are two inherently important values to Wolfe. That combination led him to sign a four-year contract extension just before the beginning of the playoffs rather than during the free-agency period, when more teams would have been able to make offers.

But Wolfe didn't want any more uncertainty. He's had far too much of that in his career and his life already.

Almost three years before you saw Wolfe terrorize Ben Roethlisberger, Tom Brady and Cam Newton en route to a Super Bowl 50 victory, Wolfe had been bound to a stretcher and loaded onto an ambulance on the field during a 2013 preseason game.

A cut block knocked Wolfe to the ground. Then, while scrambling to his feet, Wolfe received a devastating helmet-to-helmet blow from Seahawks fullback Michael Robinson. Wolfe was rendered temporarily immobile and unable to feel his extremities. After being taken to the hospital, Wolfe was diagnosed with a spinal contusion — a bruise on his spinal cord.

In the three months that followed, he discovered that he was not the same person he was before. Amid a strenuous workout routine, Wolfe could not keep his weight and dropped 30 pounds. His mental health also suffered because of stress, and Wolfe slipped into depression.

It all came to a head in late November on a team bus ride before the Broncos' road trip to Kansas City. Sweating profusely while his vision became blurry, Wolfe began having a seizure. Teammates and trainers rushed to his side as they yelled for the bus to stop. An ambulance arrived to take Wolfe to the

hospital, but he kept breaking free from the restraints, which forced paramedics to induce a coma, Wolfe recalled.

Wolfe awoke a day later, and two or three days after that, he was released from the hospital.

Wolfe's depression deepened as he became a shell of himself. He held on to hope that he could return for the playoffs, but just one day at practice convinced him that he wasn't ready. The Broncos placed Wolfe on injured reserve a little over two weeks later, just before the team beat the Patriots to advance to Super Bowl XLVIII.

What he found in recovery was the loyalty and bonds that he knew were irreplaceable. He wanted to stay with the organization that stood beside him in the hospital room, the team that stood behind him while he worked his way back into football shape.

"Going through an injury where I'm having seizures and other things like that — John Elway, he had my back the whole way through it. All he cared about was my health and seeing me get back on the field," Wolfe says. "He just wanted to see me be healthy again."

Wolfe hadn't had that kind of support and trust around him often, especially when he was growing up. His stepfather physically and verbally abused him, but when his stepfather divorced Wolfe's mother, he stayed with him because of his mother's alcohol problems. But after his stepfather got remarried, his new stepmother threw him out of the house. To keep up the appearance that he wasn't homeless, Wolfe stayed briefly with a friend, then his grandmother, then both of his aunts. He wasn't on the streets, but he didn't find a more permanent home until that friend's mother picked up on what was happening and offered him a place to stay for good.

"I felt like I had to make a decision," Wolfe says. "Do I stay here with these people who actually care about me, or do I take my chances and go somewhere else, get an even bigger payday and this and that? And I was like, 'You know what, I'd rather just stay somewhere where I'm comfortable.' … It made more sense to stay here and be where I like to be and be around the people I love to be around."

Wolfe's slow, measured recovery paid off in a huge way in 2015. Though he missed the first four weeks of the season due to a league suspension, when Wolfe returned to the Broncos' league-leading defense, he came back a different player.

"You all are going to see a new Derek Wolfe," Von Miller told media in October. "I had already begun to see it [before the suspension]. I know from my experience what it takes to change yourself and reinvent yourself. I started seeing Derek do the same type of stuff."

Wolfe was already a destructive player in the run game, but he added the pass rush moves that made him one of the league's best three-technique defensive ends. He finished the regular season and playoffs with 11 tackles for loss, as well as eight sacks, 18 quarterback hits and 64 total tackles. Wolfe garnered AFC Defensive Player of the Week honors in Week 8 against the Packers, making seven total tackles, including one for a loss, and the Broncos held Green Bay to 140 net yards.

"He's a lot better pass-rusher than he was starting out last year and he's learned a lot and he's gotten better and better," Defensive Coordinator Wade Phillips says. "The last part of the year, he was really our best inside pass rusher."

From there, Wolfe is focused less on adding to his skill set and more on fine-tuning them to be more dominant.

"I have the foundation built," Wolfe says. "So I just keep honing in, just keep mastering those skills and keep finding other ways to get to the quarterback and other ways to use my hands better. Every day I just work on something different. I just practice things I'm not good at and end up being good at it."

That focus is what makes Wolfe a great player instead of merely a good one. Now with his career and personal life in a sound place, Wolfe is in a spot where he can hone his focus without worrying about much else, which should be the Broncos' windfall.

"Everything that I've been working for my whole life is starting to come together," Wolfe says. "Now I can focus more on my family and football. Those things are what are important to me. I never really had a true family so I'm trying to build my own now."

This is just the beginning for Wolfe, who is building more than just a career he's long desired.

"When I'm an old man and I'm sitting there and seeing my wife, my kids and my grandkids and all that stuff, that's when I feel like I've accomplished something," Wolfe says. "I just want to be able to give the kids that I bring into this world a chance like the chances I didn't have."

It's very easy to see Wolfe, like many athletes, as a superhuman character. He has incredible athletic gifts and he even howls after big plays. But at the center of it all, his story is a very human one.

"That’s the beauty of life," Miller says. "Overcoming stuff, being triumphant, grinding and trying to make it to the next level — Derek is a prime example of that."

So now, in a way, you know Derek Wolfe. He still won't care, but if you see him howling even more this year, you might know why.

How Broncos' Derek Wolfe has persevered to get to Super Bowl

By Tory Zawacki
ESPN.com
February 6, 2016

As a junior at the University of Cincinnati in 2010, Denver Broncos defensive end Derek Wolfe remembers sitting on his bed, staring at $7.

It was all the money he had. He was ready to pull the trigger and declare for the NFL draft.

"I was tired of being broke. I've been broke my whole life," Wolfe recalls. "I was tired of not being able to feed myself, not take care of myself, not be able to buy myself a pair of shoes if I wanted them. I had enough."

This revelation led to a conversation with his head coach, Butch Jones.

"I was like, I'm outta here, man. I'm done," remembers Wolfe. "He told me, 'you're going to be quitting on this team, on your teammates. You don't want to be a quitter.'"

The conversation struck a chord with Wolfe; he doesn't know how to quit.

Wolfe left his childhood home of Youngstown, Ohio, when he was 11 years old to escape an environment in which he didn't feel welcome.

"I don't know my dad. And my mom, you know, she had some problems growing up," he said. "My stepdad was a stern guy. Imagine having a wife that's an alcoholic, and then you have two of your own kids, then you got this step-kid. They made me feel like I was in the way. So I just stayed away."

Wolfe had barely spent one year in middle school when his mother and stepfather divorced.

"I was staying with my stepfather," Wolfe said. "You know that feeling you get when something's not right? So I made the decision to go."

That decision led Wolfe to escape the "city" of Youngstown to rural Lisbon, Ohio. Relying on middle-school friends, Wolfe bounced around homes across the greater northeastern Ohio area. Often, it changed every month. Other times, it changed every weekend.

"As a kid, I was never alone. I was always with friends. I mean, I lived with so many of my friends in high school that the whole town helped me out," Wolfe said with a laugh. "If I couldn't afford rent that month they helped me out. I let people stay with me all the time now because I don't like being alone. I never was alone."

That would change in Wolfe's junior year of high school, when his best friend, Logan Hoppel, decided for him that enough was enough. The Hoppel family home had been a consistent option for Wolfe, until Logan decided that it would now be permanent.

"Logan was just like, 'Dude, why don't you just come stay at my house?' And I was like, 'I don't know, man. Then his mom actually came to me, and said, 'It's time for you to settle down. You're staying with us.' And so I did."

Staying with the Hoppel family not only provided a sense of home and stability for Wolfe, he said, but working on the family's Black Angus farm also gave him responsibility.

"Every bit of work ethic that I learned was from living with those people," Wolfe said. "They taught me so much about waking up in the morning and putting in a hard day's work. If you're not working hard then you're just lazy."

One daunting task in particular stands out to Wolfe from his days working on the Hoppel farm. "I skinned the bark off of these fence posts -- 500 of them. I did it the old school way with a blade, you know.

"And I thought it was going to take me maybe a day. It took me three days to do that. It was awful."

Wolfe says he's not spiteful about the struggles he endured early in his life. He said his childhood experiences awakened what would become his strongest characteristics: hunger and perseverance.

"With everything that I'd been through, I don't know how to quit. I don't really know what that feels like to just give up on something," he said. "It's a blessing and a curse at the same time because I'll just keep going until I run the brakes off of it. That's just the way I look at things."

That persona couldn't more evident on the football field, where Wolfe, in his third year with the Broncos, has started to make a name for himself. Working alongside DeMarcus Ware and Von Miller, among others, in what has been called "Orange Crush 2.0," Wolfe has two sacks and seven tackles in the playoffs. Last month, he signed a four-year contract extension worth $36.7 million to stay in Denver.

Despite his recent success, Wolfe can't help but look back at that meeting with Coach Jones at Cincinnati. Wolfe returned to school for his senior season and had 9½ sacks while earning Big East co-defensive player of the year honors.

His senior-year performance undoubtedly garnered more attention, and he was drafted early in the second round by the Broncos in the 2012 draft. Though he consistently credits the mental and physical toughness of his upbringing, it was Jones who perhaps changed the course of his career by reminding him: Derek Wolfe was no quitter.

"All he had to do was tell me, 'You don't wanna be a quitter.' I was like, 'You're right, I am quitting.' So I didn't quit. And it played out just the way he said it would -- it worked out better for me."

Derek Wolfe's renewed confidence leads to pass rush explosion

By Cameron Wolfe
Denver Post
February 3, 2016

The Broncos pass rush really took off when the interior guys, namely defensive ends Derek Wolfe and Malik Jackson took off.

Wolfe, who earned his keep primarily as a run stuffer, returned from his four-game suspension earlier in the season as a completely new player.

"It's really come along from me. I started to think myself that I could only play the run," Wolfe said. "Once I really dived into it the sacks started coming."

Wolfe has notched at least a ½ sack in six straight games this season and eight of the last nine. He credits his coaches and a renewed confidence to use his gifts.

"Everybody has a plan until they get hit, I used to resort to power all the time because I didn't want to be caught in a bad position," Wolfe said. "When I stopped worrying about that, everything kind of started coming together."

Wolfe signed a four-year, $36.7 million contract extension last month.

Broncos' hidden gems Wolfe, Jackson could steal the show in Super Bowl 50

By Doug Farrar
SI.com
February 2, 2016

Broncos end Malik Jackson has pressured opposing quarterbacks 69 times in the 2015 season—including the postseason—ranking fifth in the NFL among players at his position. But there's no question about which of those pressures was the most important; it was a big part of why Jackson's team is here for Super Bowl 50.

With 4:15 left in the first half of the AFC Championship Game against the Patriots, Tom Brady's team was down 14–9, but they were driving, Brady dropped back from his own 46-yard line and started to throw a deep route to running back James White. But before he could complete the act, Jackson barreled through the Patriots' line, casted left guard Josh Kline aside as if he was a rag doll and took Brady to the ground, forcing a throw so errant that two of Denver's defenders—linebacker Brandon Marshall and safety Darian Stewart—were in line to catch it. Stewart got there first, securing the Broncos' second interception, and Denver went on to win the game, 20–18.

"Everyone wants sacks," Jackson told me Monday. "That's how you get the big name and everything. But if you can get close to the quarterback, get around him and let him know you're there, put offensive linemen in his face, that works a lot more than just getting sacks. Now, they're looking for you—now, they're worried about you. Those quarterback hurries and pressures and hits after he throws the ball... they take their toll. I'm sure [Brady] got up and thought about it, and I know in San Diego, I caused an interception. You get around the quarterback, and you do whatever you've got to do."
Jackson has 5.5 sacks this year in a system that leaves most of the quarterback takedowns to the edge-rushing stars, and the Broncos have two of the best in Von Miller and DeMarcus Ware. But without Jackson and fellow end Derek Wolfe, this league-leading defense would not look like it does. They are the stalwarts; the men in the middle who set the tone for everything else. Brady was hit an incredible 20 times in that game, and Wolfe and Jackson were responsible for five of those disruptions.

Both players came to Denver in 2012, during John Elway's second draft as executive vice president. Wolfe was taken at the top of the second round out of Cincinnati, while Jackson had to wait a while to hear his name called—the Tennessee alum joined the team in the fifth round of that draft. Before 2015, each player had put together highlights of above-average play, but it's been the addition of defensive coordinator Wade Phillips that's helped both players live up to their estimable potential. Both men credit Phillips for implementing more player-friendly scheme that incorporates their ideas, and the flexibility to throw out what doesn't work. There is no ego in this defense—it's all about production.

"It's a whole 'nother side of defense," Jackson said. "A side of defense that fits our players a lot better. If we don't like something, he'll take it out, but if it helps us, he'll keep it in, no matter how much we run it. He's really player-friendly. We're in the 3–4, playing man, playing zone, rush four, rush five, and he lets us do our thing."

Wolfe had six quarterback takedowns during his rookie campaign, and those numbers dropped in subsequent years: four in 2013, 1.5 in '14 and 5.5 this season (matching Jackson). But Wolfe is a great case study in the value of total pressures—he has 56 total pressures in 2015, and only J.J. Watt has more total stops among 3–4 ends than Wolfe's 36.

Both Wolfe and Jackson were playing for contracts this season, and while many would think that would foster a sense of competition and distraction between the two, Wolfe maintained that it didn't affect their relationship. And it paid off for both players: just a few weeks ago, Wolfe got his big second contract—a four-year, $36.7 million extension for a player who put up those numbers despite a four-game suspension to start the season due to a violation of the league's policies on performance-enhancing substances. And Jackson will get his big deal after the season, whether it's the Broncos paying him or not.

"We get along very well. We hang out on and off the field. We practice things that most guys wouldn't practice and we encourage each other to do well," Wolfe said. "Both of us going into our contract year, you think there'd be a little rivalry but it wasn't anything like that. We both want to succeed and we all want to win and that's what makes this team so great—that everybody cares about each other and we all want each other to do well. Nobody's a little bit jealous when somebody else makes a play, and you see that a lot, especially in the NFL. It wasn't like that so much in college but in the NFL, you see that some guys get worried about the money, this and that, but all season it's been nothing but Super Bowl and that's all we've been worried about."

In Super Bowl 50, Jackson and Wolfe will face an impressive Panthers interior offensive line that's really come together. Between center Ryan Kalil and guards Trai Turner and Andrew Norwell, the Panthers' inside men have allowed a grand total of no sacks, no hits and eight quarterback hurries in two playoff games. Still, Cam Newton's protectors understand exactly what kind of challenge they're facing.

"They're really good guys and they have a really good front," Turner told me. "Phenomenal team, period, and a great defense. We just have to play our game and everything will take care of itself."

So what makes Jackson and Wolfe so good? I thought it was appropriate to ask each man about the other, and get the unvarnished scouting report.

"[Wolfe is] an animal, man," Jackson said. "The name 'Wolfe' is a great fit for him, because he's relentless—on the field, he doesn't like anybody, and he's definitely someone you can feed off with his energy. He embodies the whole mental attitude of a defensive lineman."

"I think that [Jackson is] just a gifted athlete, especially in the pass rush game," Wolfe said. "He's just good at getting his hips flipped and using his hands. He does things that a lot of guys aren't able to do."

Yes, we'll all watch to see how Denver's edge-rushers do against Carolina's offensive tackles—Miller and Ware would seem to have a distinct advantage over Michael Oher and Mike Remmers. But don't be surprised if the most impactful trench matchup is the one waged between a group of underrated players on both sides of the ball, and be even less surprised if Wolfe and Jackson take the day.

Re-signing Derek Wolfe the first step of keeping as much of the core together as possible

By Andrew Mason
DenverBroncos.com
January 15, 2016

In John Elway's first three years as executive vice president of football operations, his focus was fortifying the hollow roster he inherited by any means necessary -- which included heavy free-agent investment.

But with homegrown players maturing, the focus has changed in the last two years to keeping as many of those players as the constraints of the salary cap allow.

That defined their moves last year, with WR Demaryius Thomas and CB Chris Harris Jr. retained on long-term contracts, a fifth-year option given to OLB Von Miller and the re-signing of TE Virgil Green.

Friday's re-signing of defensive end Derek Wolfe to a four-year contract offers a strong indication that this will again be the Broncos' primary offseason thrust in the coming months.

"We always like to sign our own people, and obviously Derek, we drafted him in the second round four years ago, and so it's important for us to keep our own," Elway said.

The remaining members of the 2012 draft class have expiring contracts, and after some stops and starts, the maturation of that group of six has become crucial to the Broncos earning the AFC's top seed this season.

Wolfe's contributions are obvious, particularly in the last 10 games of the season, beginning with his AFC Defensive Player of the Week performance in the 29-10 win over Green Bay on Nov. 1. But it's just the tip of the iceberg of what the 2012 class has brought to the Broncos this year.

Second-round QB Brock Osweiler went 5-2 as the starter; third-round RB Ronnie Hillman led the Broncos in rushing; fourth-round defensive back Omar Bolden provided an explosive jolt to kickoff and punt returns; fifth-round DE Malik Jackson had a second consecutive dominant season; sixth-round LB Danny Trevathan led the team in tackles for the second time in three years.

All are unrestricted free agents, along with Miller, a 2011 first-rounder. Three non-drafted 2013 acquisitions -- RB C.J. Anderson, ILB Brandon Marshall and OLB Lerentee McCray -- are restricted free agents.

And there is plenty of value among the team's six exclusive-rights free agents, a group headlined by kicker Brandon McManus, emerging center Matt Paradis and two key backups: ILB Todd Davis and WR Bennie Fowler.

This is the NFL's version of a "first-world problem." Even though the salary cap could rise as much as $10 million, the Broncos will have to make some tough choices on who to retain -- and will have to continue trusting their draft-and-develop system for reinforcements when needed.

Elway has pointed to keeping Miller as a priority, and if no long-term deal can be reached by next month, it will likely take the franchise tag to do it.

But the Broncos have signed all three franchise-tagged players in the Elway era to long-term extensions: Matt Prater (2012), Ryan Clady (2013) and Thomas (2015); even though the process might take months, it would come as no surprise if a deal is eventually struck with their elite edge rusher.

The offseason task list is long. But by agreeing to an extension with Wolfe, Elway got off to a good start by keeping a player in whom patience has provided a handsome reward -- for the player and team alike.

"Derek was the first step, and now we do have several other free agents that we'd like to continue to work with, and hopefully can get him back here in Denver," Elway said.

Broncos sign Derek Wolfe to four-year extension

By Andrew Mason
DenverBroncos.com
January 15, 2016

When he was suspended four games to open the 2015 season, Derek Wolfe not only vowed that the mistake would not be repeated, but declared that he would return hungrier -- and better -- than before.

He did.

For the last 12 games, he ran roughshod through opposing offensive lines, using his power and resolve to push opposing guards and tackles backward. After three seasons of ups and downs -- some of which were exacerbated by injuries that sunk his second NFL season and detoured his progress -- Wolfe became the interior force the Broncos long believed he could be.

"We've seen improve over the four years that he's been here -- especially this year -- and he's just gotten better and better," said Executive Vice President/General Manager John Elway.

That's why the Broncos wanted Wolfe back on the four-year contract extension to which they agreed Friday.

"Last night, I called my agents, and the deal was already on the table, and I said, 'Look, let's just take this deal,'" Wolfe said. "I don't want to leave. I love the city, I love the team, I love the organization, the coaches, my teammates and everything.

"I couldn't be happier. I'm in a place that I love to be, so why would I leave?"

And, indeed, the Broncos feel the same way: Why would they want to let him leave?

Improvement in 2014 has led to dominance in 2015 -- so dominant, in fact, only three 3-4 defensive ends have higher overall ratings from profootballfocus.com since Week 5 than Wolfe, who grades out as the league's second-best run-defending 3-4 end in that span.

"He's only scratched the surface, and we really think that Derek has a tremendous amount of football ahead of him," Elway said, "and that's why we're so excited that it's going to be in Denver."

Wolfe earned AFC Defensive Player of the Week honors in Week 8 despite not posting a sack, a testament to the impact of pressure and being a terror against the run. He single-handedly forced a three-and-out with two run stuffs that gave the ball back to Denver's offense; by the time Green Bay saw the football again, the Broncos led by 17.

Wolfe didn't notch a sack that night, but it didn't matter. However, as a player who always wants to deliver more, it rankled him.

"Anytime I don't get a sack, I don't think I had a good game," Wolfe said after that performance. "Sacks aren't rolling around as much as they used to anymore with [OLB] DeMarcus [Ware] and [OLB] Von [Miller] and [DE] Malik [Jackson] and Shaq [OLB Shaquil Barrett] now. There are so many guys that can rush the passer that it's almost like, even if you do have a good rush, it's not good enough because they're just a little bit faster."

The lack of sacks would soon change for Wolfe. They have come -- at least a half-sack in six consecutive games to end the season, beginning with a bull rush that led to a sack of New England's Tom Brady in the Nov. 29 win.

“That’s what he's worked on," Defensive Coordinator Wade Phillips said at the time. "He’s a strong player, so [Defensive Line Coach] Bill [Kollar] has gotten him to work hard on more of a power rush -- we call it a bull rush, but it’s more of a power rush -- and be able to come off and make plays in the passing game."

This breakout season may just be the beginning for Wolfe. The conversion to the 3-4 alignment brought him to a position to which he appeared best suited when he came into the 2012 NFL Draft after a stellar career at the University of Cincinnati that culminated in a Senior Bowl invitation.

The Broncos were in their second season in the 4-3 alignment when they picked him in the second round of that draft, and he did well in spurts, although a neck injury and subsequent complications wrecked his 2013 and derailed his progress. In 2014, he got back on track, and formed a formidable inside-rush partnership with Malik Jackson.

But with Phillips, arrival, the 2015 change in alignment and the arrival of the fiery Kollar, everything came together.

"[Kollar] has made me better in so many different aspects as far as hustle, using my hands more, getting my hips turned," Wolfe said in November. "I'm not going to give away all my secrets, but he's taught me a lot of different things. He's good at taking a guy, figuring out what he's good at and forcing him to do those things."

Wolfe has always set up his teammates for sacks; Miller estimates he has "30 to 35 sacks" playing alongside Wolfe, whose interior rush has freed Miller and Ware for one-on-one matchups that they can exploit.

But with Wolfe racking up sacks of his own in recent weeks as the defense overcame injuries to finish as the league's top unit in total defense, passing defense and average yardage per play allowed, he's taken his game to the next level.

"I said it before the season -- it was going to be a different Derek Wolfe," Miller said in November. "I don't think he's finished yet.”

With this extension, the Broncos are counting on this being just the beginning of prime years and elite performance from the energetic, nasty 3-technique end that they've nurtured into one of the league's best at his position.

"We're always looking for players that want to be Denver Broncos," Elway said, "and Derek wanted to be a Denver Bronco, and we wanted him to be a Denver Bronco."

Agent: Derek Wolfe earned deal through fantastic play

By Mike Klis
9 News
January 15, 2016

The quest to keep the No. 1 defense intact has begun.

The Denver Broncos signed defensive end Derek Wolfe to a four-year, $36.7 million contract extension Friday.

"This is a excellent deal for Derek, he has absolutely earned it through his fantastic play this season,'' said Wolfe's agent Andrew Kessler. "It was very important for him to remain a Bronco, so to be able to do that and receive this type of deal is a great result for him."

The deal includes a $12 million full guarantee in signing bonus ($7.5 million) and salary ($4.5 million) for the 2016 season. He can also make $500,000 in game-day roster bonus, plus a $50 workout bonus for a first-year payout of $12.55 million.

In the second year of his deal, Wolfe has $5.5 million in injury guaranteed, which becomes fully guaranteed on the seventh day of the 2017 league season. The $36.7 million package includes the annual $500,000 roster bonus -- or $31,250 for each game he is active on the 46-man game-day roster.

“This year, Derek’s developed into one of the best 3-4 defensive ends in football,’’ John Elway, the Broncos’ general manager said.

Wolfe had 5.5 sacks this season, plus a team-most 9 tackles for loss. He was the first of the Broncos’ two, second-round draft picks in 2012. The other was quarterback Brock Osweiler.

Wolfe had 6.0 sacks as a rookie, but suffered from seizure-like medical issues during his second season of 2013.

He was suspended from the first four games of this season for violating the league’s performance-enhancement policy but finished strong as he registered all 5.5 sacks in the Broncos’ final seven games.

Next up for the Broncos is trying to re-sign free agent-to-bes Von Miller, Malik Jackson and Danny Trevathan on defense and Osweiler and running back Ronnie Hillman on offense.

Miller figures to receive the franchise tag by the March 1 deadline, which would then give the Broncos until July to sign him to a long-term extension. Osweiler and Jackson will be the Broncos’ top priorities before the 2016 free-agent market opens March 9. Each of those three players will command contracts well north of $10 million a year.

Broncos sign DE Derek Wolfe to four-year contract extension

By Troy Renck
Denver Post
January 15, 2016

Broncos defensive end Derek Wolfe rebounded from a four-game suspension with a vengeance this season. Not only was he a disruptive force on the NFL's top defense, he showed promise as a future cornerstone player.

Friday, the Broncos rewarded Wolfe with a four-year contract, locking up the first of several key free agents. The deal is worth $36.7 million and includes $17.5 million guaranteed, two NFL sources told The Denver Post.

"It's great. Derek's worked his tail off," Broncos general manager John Elway said via the team's website. "He's had a tremendous career so far — a short career, only four years. So we're looking forward to having him here for some more time. He's worked very hard and well-deserved, so we're glad that we can come to an agreement. Now he can only look forward and, hopefully, continue to get three more wins this year."

Denver wants to keep its defense together. That means this deal won't preclude others, although no more are expected to be wrapped up until the season concludes.

The Broncos will attempt to secure outside linebacker Von Miller, who can be retained on the franchise tag if necessary, and free-agent defensive end Malik Jackson and linebacker Danny Trevathan. But the Broncos face difficult decisions, given the uncertainty at quarterback, where Brock Osweiler will be a free agent, and the need to bolster the offensive line.

Wolfe, 25, stated numerous times the past few weeks that his desire was to remain in Denver.

"Last night I called my agents and the deal was already on the table and I said, 'Look, let's just take this deal,'" Wolfe told the Broncos' website. "'I don't want to leave. I love this city, I love the them, I love the organization, the coaches, my teammates and everything, so I couldn't be happier. I'm in a place that I love to be, so why would I leave?"

A second-round pick in the 2012 draft, Wolfe became a priority with a breakout season under new defensive line coach Bill Kollar. Always known as an elite run stuffer, Wolfe delivered 5½ sacks and 12 quarterback hits in 12 games this season. He missed the first month after serving a four-game ban for violating the NFL's policy on performance-enhancing drugs.

Wolfe earned AFC defensive player of the week honors in the Broncos' 29-10 victory over Green Bay on Nov. 1.

Like cornerback Chris Harris, Wolfe took a deal for likely less than what he could have received on the open market because of his desire to stay with the Broncos.

"I love Wolfe. I am so happy for him. He works extremely hard," Harris said. "Glad to have an anchor defense up front."

Derek Wolfe's improved pass rush has Broncos DE playing the best football of his career

By Cameron Wolfe
Denver Post
December 4, 2015

Look up the phrase " bull rush" in the dictionary and it'll say "a direct forceful rush." A better meaning is what Broncos' defensive end Derek Wolfe did to New England offensive lineman Josh Kline time and time again Sunday.

Late in the first quarter, Wolfe squared up Kline, going through him instead of around him, and took Patriots tackle Marcus Cannon's lunch money, too, when Cannon came to help.

Wolfe's pursuit ended with quarterback Tom Brady getting thrown to the ground for a sack. Then Wolfe let out a yell, or maybe it was a howl if you listened hard enough.

Wolfe may be the quietest guy on the defensive line, but when he plays like he did against the Patriots his performance speaks loud enough.

The cold and snow didn't bother him, either. It was his type of game.

"Man, I was having fun out there," Wolfe said. "A lot of fun."

It's easy for Wolfe to enjoy being on the field now. The 25-year-old is playing his best football of the season, and possibly the best of his career.

At 6-foot-5 and 285 pounds, Wolfe always has been known as a stout run stuffer. He displayed his skill early against New England. The Patriots ran for a mere 39 yards — with Wolfe's bone-chilling tackles for loss on running back Brandon Bolden a big reason for the struggles.

The difference in Wolfe, however, is his leap as a pass rusher.

He now has a sack in back-to-back games for the first time since Weeks 10 and 11 in 2013.

Wolfe admitted it was hard for him to watch as the Broncos' defense destroyed offenses while he was suspended for the first four games for violating the league's performance-enhancing drug policy.

He enjoyed seeing the success of the Broncos' top-ranked defense, but every time a player made a sack or a run stuff it felt like the team needed him less and less.

Questions began to arise in his mind: "Would this time away phase me out of the defense? In a contract year, what would this mean for my future?"

His teammates, however, never had a doubt.

"We know what type of player Derek Wolfe is," outside linebacker Von Miller said.

Wolfe had a career-high nine tackles against the Patriots breaking a record he set earlier in the year against Green Bay, which earned him AFC defensive player of the week.

The fourth-year defensive end says he can't take all the credit. Wolfe has what you can't teach — a tremendous work ethic, according to coach Gary Kubiak and defensive coordinator Wade Phillips. But for what can be taught — technique, leverage, skill moves — much of that comes from defensive line coach Bill Kollar.

Phillips said when Wolfe was out on suspension, the defensive end called Kollar with a question: How can I get better?

Kollar's response was simple: Get better at attacking the quarterback.

Wolfe took the message to heart focusing nearly all of his time and attention on the task. He's always had the mentality that he could win every play, now he put the time behind the technique to go out there and do it with effort and skill.

"His pass rush has gotten a lot better. I think that Bill has done a really good job with him," Kubiak said. "Derek plays extremely hard. Between the effort and the work with Bill, I think that he's a much-improved player."

That boost has been needed with outside linebacker DeMarcus Ware's pass rush out because of a back injury the past three games (and now a fourth).

Wolfe believes he's just getting started.

A look at five of the best games of Broncos defensive end Derek Wolfe's career, three of them coming in November 2015. Wolfe, who is known as a run stuffer, has 33 tackles and two sacks through seven games this season.

Year	Game (result)	Tackles	Sacks
2012	11/04 W @ Cincinnati	6	0
2012	12/16 W @ Baltimore	4	1
2015	11/01 W vs Green Bay	*7	0
2015	11/22 W @ Chicago	4	1
2015	11/29 W vs New England	**9	1

* - Wolfe won AFC defensive player of the week
** - set career-high

Derek Wolfe joins in on the fun on Denver's dominant defense

By Arnie Stapleton
Associated Press
November 5, 2015

Until last weekend, Derek Wolfe felt like he was missing out on all the fun.

He missed the first four games of the season while serving a suspension under the league's performance-enhancing drug policy. Watching Denver's defense steamroll opponents without him was hard enough but upon his return he realized he wasn't privy to all the inside jokes in the locker room and felt like an outsider.

He collected a smattering of tackles in his first couple of games back, but his biggest impact was an unfortunate one. It was his block of an opponent into Shane Ray's legs that sent the Broncos' first-round draft pick to the sideline with a sprained right MCL in Cleveland on Oct. 18.

Then, when the Broncos (7-0) shredded Aaron Rodgers and the previously unbeaten Green Bay Packers last week, it was Wolfe who led the way with a game-high seven tackles. That earned him a game ball from coach Gary Kubiak and AFC defensive player of the week honors.

"I'll tell you, if you turn the film on, he played super," Kubiak said. "Obviously, we played really good defensively, but he was special. It was his best game of the year. When you get an honor like that, everybody else is watching that film, too, so it tells you how well he played.

"I'm proud of Derek. I think that the best thing that I can say about Derek is when you miss a month, as a coach, you're scared to death of how a guy is going to come back. Derek took care of his business and when he came back, he was ready to play."

Safety T.J. Ward went down that same path, missing the opener while serving a suspension and then winning AFC defensive player of the week honors in Week 4.

He said Wolfe came back hungry just like he did.

"That's what happens when you sit out for any period of time. You should come back hungry," Ward said. "Wolfe played a hell of a game."

With edge rushers Von Miller and DeMarcus Ware hemming in Rodgers and the secondary led by Aqib Talib, Chris Harris Jr. and Bradley Roby stifling the receivers, the Packers' last hope was their ground game, and Wolfe shut that down, too. Eddie Lacy managed 38 yards on 11 carries.

Wolfe said he usually doesn't consider it a good game if he doesn't get a sack but those are hard to come by with so many premier pass rushers in Denver.

So, "I thank the Green Bay Packers for trying to run the ball at me," he said.

Wolfe did put one of four hits on Rodgers on the Packers' opening drive that set the tone for the worst game of Rodgers' career.

"I put a good hit on him. After watching the TV copy, he got up a little bit slow," Wolfe said. "I think that had a big impact. DeMarcus hit him a few times. We were all over him the whole game."

Andrew Luck is up next for the Broncos, and the Colts quarterback sure took notice of Denver's dismantling of Rodgers.

"It's not just what they've done this past weekend, it's what they've done the whole season," Luck said. "It's a heck of a defense with really good players. They're playing really well, probably as good as anybody in the league right now. Honestly, there's two premier edge rushers, three, four or five really good corners, tough safeties, inside linebackers, the guys on the interior of the D-line are all good.

"It's a well-rounded defense and you have to really fight for every yard."

The Colts (3-5) are tied with Houston atop their division but are 0-5 outside the awful AFC South.

To Wolfe, they're not a struggling team with an ailing QB who leads the league with a dozen interceptions despite playing in just six games, or one that just switched offensive coordinators, but the team that beat them in the playoffs 10 months ago.

"Yeah, that's my motivation," Wolfe said. "I mentioned that to the defensive line earlier today. I said, 'Don't forget. These guys knocked us out of the playoffs last year, so don't sleep on them.'"

___

Notes: OLB Shaq Barrett (toe) returned to practice Thursday. WR Jordan Norwood (hamstring) missed practice again. ... RB Ronnie Hillman was limited with a bruised thigh but Kubiak said he expected him to get his full workload in at Friday's practice.

Through My Eyes: Derek Wolfe returns to form

By Derek Wolfe
DenverBroncos.com
November 4, 2015

The hardest part about training when I was suspended the first four games was getting my body used to the impacts that I was going to take.

You can get as strong or as fast as you want, but you have to get used to the impacts. That was thing that I had to get used to coming back. The initial bruising that kind of healed over those four weeks and then I had to break it back down.

That was the hard part. The worst part was watching them play and not being able to play.

It was hard to train without my teammates beside me. You can't replace that feeling when you're alone. You just do without it. You have to keep in your mind that nothing's going to change. I told myself that I had to come back and just be better than when I left.

That's all I thought the whole time. How can I get better during these four weeks? What can I do to make myself a better player?

During my time away, this team's resiliency stuck out to me when I was watching the games. No matter what happens, we were going to come out on top. We're going to do everything we possibly can to come out on top.

That's the character of this team as a whole — offense, defense, special teams. It was impressive to watch. I loved watching it – but I hated watching it. You love seeing them do great but you're ticked off that you can't be out there.

After two road games, my first game at home was Sunday night, and it was hard. Especially playing here in the altitude, I could feel it.
What makes Green Bay's quarterback Aaron Rodgers so good is his elusiveness. He's so good at hiding behind offensive lineman and making you miss, then getting out of the pocket and making something happen.

Our secondary did an unbelievable job of staying on guys so they weren't open. There were times that we didn't get to him and he was in the backfield running around for 10 seconds. That's a lot of work for a defensive back.

Rodgers is also really good at getting defenses to jump offside. We had one offside penalty, a couple in the back end and the one personal foul. But those just come from people playing hard. Those are going to happen and the more you can clean those up, think about how great we can actually be. They got us one time and that's too much, but we'll clean all that up.

We can be better than that. We made a lot of mistakes. We can be even better than when we played Sunday night. The rushing yards could have been way down there, too. We let them pop a couple.

Rodgers scrambled twice and then Lacy got free on a couple draw plays, but if we take four plays out of the game, we didn't give them anything.

This team is really close. We're all like family. You've got to do your job for the guy next to you and that's what's important: making sure you get your job done for the guy next to you.

This is an equal opportunity team. Our defense is set up so everybody can make plays.

This season we're doing a great job. Everyone from the front seven to the backend is playing great defense. On Sunday our offense helped us out keeping us off the field the whole game. We had the least amount of snaps all year.

Now this weekend we play the Indianapolis Colts. Last year, they knocked us out of the playoffs, so I feel a certain type of way about them. It's going to be nice to go out and play again. We're going to try to get back at them, take that win back.

Derek Wolfe named AFC Defensive Player of the Week

By Allie Raymond
DenverBroncos.com
November 4, 2015

After a dominant performance in the Broncos' 29-10 win against the Green Bay Packers, defensive end Derek Wolfe was named AFC Defensive Player of the Week.
The award represents the first conference award of his career and the third AFC Defensive Player of the Week honor for the Broncos this season (CB Aqib Talib – Wk. 1; S T.J. Ward – Wk. 4).

Wolfe led the Broncos with a career-high seven tackles, including one for a loss, against the Packers in the 'Battle of the Unbeaten' on Sunday as Denver stayed perfect on the season improving to 7-0 for just the second time in team history.

His seven tackles, which is the most by a Broncos defensive lineman this season, helped limit the Packers to 140 net yards—224 yards below their season average entering the game. Green Bay's passing game produced just 50 net passing yards and the Packers' running backs combined for just 49 yards on 18 carries (2.7 avg.).

This marks the 30th time a Broncos player has taken home the award since it was initiated by the NFL in 1984. Wolfe is the first Broncos defensive lineman to receive the honor since defensive end Elvis Dumervil in 2007 (Wk. 14).

Derek Wolfe bears soul about his time away from Broncos

By Mike Klis and Rod Mackey
9 News
October 15, 2015

They are physically larger than all but a minute percentage of the world's population. They are tougher. Considerably more athletically gifted.

Imposing as football players may be in external form, though, they also experience the ordinary feelings and insecurities of the guy next door. In fact, those who perform in the greatest athletic arenas may endure greater insecurities given the cutthroat, competitive and here-today-gone-tomorrow nature of their occupation.

Derek Wolfe was refreshingly candid Thursday in his soul-bearing interview with 9NEWS sports reporter Rod Mackey. A starting defensive end for the Denver Broncos, Wolfe discussed the separation anxiety he experienced at the beginning of this season while serving a four-game suspension for violating the NFL's performance-enhancement policy -- comparing his time away to feeling, "like you've died."

He admits to what all players feel, but few discuss, that there is pressure when playing in the final year of a contract and when team expectations are Super Bowl-or-bust.

Wolfe also added the tremendous success of the Denver defense during his absence made it more difficult, not easier, on his mental and emotional well-being. The Broncos are 5-0 thanks mostly to a defense that ranks No. 1 in the league.

"I think it made it tougher because you're like, 'Wow, they're doing great without me, "What do they need me for?"' Wolfe said. "Then you come in and you're not real sure where you fit and that's kind of how it feels now. It's like they don't really need me. Going into a contract year it makes it tough."

Wolfe returned to the team last week and he was immediately inserted into the starting lineup by Broncos head coach Gary Kubiak. Didn't that make Wolfe feel welcomed back?

"Yeah, but they're already the No. 1 defense,'' Wolfe said. "All I can do is just help. That's the way I look at it. It was tough. Those four weeks were tough. Because you go all the way through training camp and the preseason and you kind of establish yourself as a leader and as a mainstay in the defense and then you have to leave and not have any contact whatsoever. You're just gone. It's like you've died, basically."

Wolfe played 67 percent of the snaps in a 16-10 win against the Oakland Raiders last Sunday – an extraordinary workload given his layoff -- and responded with five tackles.

He did train during his four weeks away with former Broncos teammates Justin Bannan and Chris Kuper. Wolfe brought his pads with him to simulate football training.

There's no denying Wolfe's desire to be great. In the past, he has admitted that desire is sometimes ratcheted up a little too high. In the Broncos' Super Bowl season of 2013, Wolfe suffered a seizure-like episode prior to game 12 at Kansas City and wound up missing the rest of the year.

Wolfe later admitted he overtrained, didn't eat right, and his body essentially haywired.

Wolfe said his time away in 2015 was in some ways worse because he was healthy during his absence.

"It's like a love-hate type of thing because you love football, but you hate the business of it," Wolfe said. "You're like, I just miss it. But then I hate these other, you know, the powers that be that kind of control everything. You get sick of that.

"On the other hand, you've just got to play, you just want to play and when you can't play that's the worst thing in the world and it's happened to me a couple times now."

As the Broncos prepare to play the Cleveland Browns in Cleveland this Sunday, Wolfe said he still sometimes feels like a new guy in the locker room.

"It's going to take me a little bit to feel like I'm part of the family again,'' he said. "Because you have to remember there are inside jokes that you don't know. People don't realize that we spend so much time with each other that so much can happen in four weeks.

"And then when you're gone it's like you're completely out of the loop. So you have no clue what they're talking about. You know the playbook and everything but you're like, "What do you mean? What are you laughing at?' It makes you feel like an outsider, again."

The game in Cleveland should help Wolfe feel at home. He grew up in Lisbon, Ohio, which is roughly 80 miles southeast of the city and a 4-hour drive from the University of Cincinnati, where he played his college ball.

"Yeah, any time you get to go back to Ohio or near Ohio, it's fun because I get to see … my story, my closest friends from high school are like family to me, and college, so that's my family,'' he said.

The Broncos selected Wolfe with their first pick in the 2012 draft, No. 36 overall, and this is the final year of his contract. He's been around long enough to know the impending free-agent market can swing from bringing a multi-million dollar contract -- or unemployment -- to a player. Depending on his year.

No wonder elite athletes battle insecurities.

"A lot of people put too much pressure on ourselves," Wolfe said. "I have those days, where I'm putting – especially being a contract year and being we've got to win a Super Bowl type of year and the feeling you have around here – some people let that pressure get to them. Sometimes I feel it but I try to block it out and ignore it."

The Broncos and every NFL coach and executive may be enlightened by Wolfe's interview that reveals the inner-most feelings of many of those Sunday gladiators. Watch the full interview on 9NEWS at 9 Sunday morning on Game Day Live.

"Yeah, any time you get to go back to Ohio or near Ohio it's fun because I get to see … my story, my closest friends from high school are like family to me and college so that's my family.''

Derek Wolfe's return could lift Broncos' defense even more

By Jeff Legwold
ESPN.com
October 9, 2015

With four games in the rear-view mirror the Denver Broncos' defense is No. 1 in a pile of categories, including total defense, sacks and third-down defense.

They are not No. 1 in points allowed per game (they're No. 2 at 17.3) and they're not No. 1 in run defense (they're No. 8). But one of the league's deepest defensive units will get a little better Sunday against the Oakland Raiders.

Defensive end Derek Wolfe, suspended for the first four games of the season for violating the league's policy on performance-enhancing drugs, has been reinstated and is on track to be in the rotation up front. And the Broncos, already making life difficult for opposing offenses, believe he will crank things up another notch.

"For one, he's Derek Wolfe, one of the best run-stopping players that we have on our team and really in the AFC West,'' said linebacker Von Miller. "It's a great, big-time player that we're getting back. We're fixing to have success on our defense when he gets back."

Wolfe, who called himself a "caged animal" this week, had promised to keep in shape during the suspension and return "better than ever,'' and he appears to have done so. Wolfe trained with former Broncos guard Chris Kuper and defensive tackle Justin Bannen during his time away, in workouts coordinated by Loren Landow, the director of sports performance director at the Steadman Hawkins Clinic.

Landow annually works with players preparing for the NFL draft and scouting combine as well as in the offseason with many players from around the league. Wolfe said he "worked hard, trained hard'' during the suspension.

Broncos coach Gary Kubiak has pronounced Wolfe ready to play Sunday against the Raiders. Though they knew Wolfe would miss the first month of the season, Kubiak elected to keep Wolfe with the starting defense throughout training camp and preseason.

"He's certainly going to help us,'' said Broncos defensive coordinator Wade Phillips. "The guy is a really good football player.''

Wolfe will likely get the bulk of his work, at least initially, on early downs. The Raiders haven't run the ball that often – they're 28th in the league in rushing attempts at 21.8 per game – but when they do run they get 4.4 yards per carry, tied for third in the league.

The two best running backs the Broncos have faced thus far, Kansas City's Jamaal Charles and Minnesota's Adrian Peterson, authored two of the longest plays they have surrendered this season. Charles had a 34-yard touchdown run in Week 2, and this past Sunday Peterson went 48 yards for a touchdown on a fourth-and-1 play.

On their opponents' other 89 rushing attempts – taking the two touchdowns out of the equation – the Broncos have surrendered just 3.13 yards per rushing attempt. And they believe Wolfe will only help that number.

"To have that run presence, we've already been good in the run and we've already been good on defense, just to get one of our stars back is great to get him back,'' Miller said. "We should see some success in some of the stuff that we've been doing. We've already had a lot of success. It's just going to be plus, plus.''

"It's going to help greatly,'' said safety T.J. Ward. " … We all know how good Derek is and what he does for this defense.''

How Broncos DE Derek Wolfe stayed in 'game shape' during suspension

By Nicki Jhabvala
Denver Post
October 8, 2015

Stamped on the right side of Derek Wolfe's chest is a tattoo of an exploding hand grenade, with shards splattered near his underarm and shoulder in graphic, but colorful detail.

Wolfe, the Broncos' 6-foot-5, 285-pound defensive end, is a step behind. The eagerness to get back has been building for weeks, leaving him bursting at the seams for his return to the field Sunday. But the ring has yet to be pulled.

"I'm like a caged animal right now," he said. " I'm ready."

In July, the NFL suspended Wolfe for the first four games of the season for violating its performance-enhancing drug policy. The league told him to stay away from the game — from his team, from its facilities, from its playbook. But Wolfe didn't stray far, thanks to Loren Landow, the director of sports performance at Steadman Hawkins Clinic in Denver, and a pair of former Broncos players.

Landow, who began working with Wolfe in April, devised a plan not only to get Wolfe in peak condition for the start of training camp and the preseason, but to also keep him in the game when there were would be no real ones.

On most days, speed and agility drills would start around 8:30 a.m. They were followed by weight training, which was often followed by positional work.

"The one thing athletes always say is, 'I need to get in game shape,'" Landow said. "Where they may have been doing all their weights and general conditioning, a lot of times what they miss out on is the conditioning that's going to resemble game playing and game tempo."

So on Sundays, and one Thursday, after sending out a group text message to fire up his teammates before their game-day kickoffs, Wolfe unceremoniously pulled up to one of his makeshift stadiums: Landow's clinic, the D1 training center in Highlands Ranch, or the soccer fields at Dove Valley Regional Park, catty-corner to the Broncos' practice facility.

As his teammates assumed their positions along the line of scrimmage on national television, so, too, did Wolfe. No smoke. No cheers. Just Landow and his fellow coaches, former offensive guard Chris Kuper and defensive tackle Justin Bannan.

"We talked about wanting to mimic the intensity and the effort needed, as close as you can, to game circumstances," Landow said. "He would actually go against Justin Bannan, who would play more of an offensive guard position. We'd always have him come out of the stance because that's key for a lineman, getting back down and exploding out — and learning to hold that stance under different cadences. Then I would call out variable plays or skills, and I'd keep it within the confines of the sport; the average play is about six seconds, and then we have a game-clock rest."

Landow created a series of drives that would last anywhere from eight to 15 plays, depending on where Wolfe was in his training. The simulations lasted for three weeks, each including more snaps than the last. For Week 1, Wolfe ran through about 40. By Week 2, he was up to 55. And in Week 3, he was at 65-70 plays, a full game's worth.

The routine, similar to the one Landow used for safety T.J. Ward during his one-game suspension at the start of the season, kept the live action at arm's length. Although nothing can truly replicate game days and its many variables — the adrenaline, the crowd — the workouts provided a structure. And the calls, and occasional dinners with teammates provided a sense of involvement, an often overlooked, but important piece of his return.

"That's the hardest part," Wolfe said. "My teammates are like family to me. When they take that away from you, it makes the days really long and it makes the sleepless nights come."

The first test of Wolfe's conditioning came Monday (and again Tuesday), when he returned to the Broncos' facility and defensive line coach Bill Kollar ran him through sled drills, pass-rushing moves and even a 200-yard sprint. Kollar tried to push him to the edge, to find his physical limits after the lengthy absence. And to see if he'd be fit to play Sunday, when the Broncos and their league-leading defense (295.5 yards allowed per game) face the Raiders in Oakland.

Kollar's conclusion? The same one Landow and Wolfe's teammates reached long ago.

"He's in good shape, I don't think there's any doubt about that," Kollar said. "He left in really good shape and came back and, man, he looks like he's ready to go."

Return of the Wolfe

Broncos defensive end Derek Wolfe ensured the game wouldn't be too far away as he served his four-game suspension for violating the NFL's performance-enhancing drug policy. Here's what some of his typical workouts with Denver-based trainer Loren Landow included:

— Speed development and agility work for 60-90 minutes, starting around 8:30 a.m.

— Weight training to follow

— One-hour break

— Positional drills with former Broncos players Chris Kuper and Justin Bannan

— Simulated game drills on Broncos game days for Weeks 1-3

Hungry like D-Wolfe

By Andrew Mason
DenverBroncos.com
October 5, 2015

Bill Kollar made sure Derek Wolfe got right back to work.

Neither the Broncos' defensive line coach nor Head Coach Gary Kubiak wanted to hesitate at getting Wolfe back up to speed after he served a four-game suspension for a violation of the league's PED policy. So Kollar put Wolfe through a rigorous workout at Monday's practice.

The session left the fourth-year defensive lineman gasping. But it didn't dull his excitement at being back.

"Just hitting the sled until you're ready to fall over. Just running [around] hoops and working pass-rush moves. He made me do a 200-yard sprint. That was fun," Wolfe deadpanned.

"He had to make sure that I was in shape and ready to go. I'm glad he did it. I'm going to come in [Tuesday] and do another one."

To be prepared to say, "Thank you, sir, may I have another?" to Kollar's grueling workout, Wolfe had to stay in shape. He said he treated the last four weeks like "another offseason," training as hard as possible while avoiding injuries.

During the first week of his suspension, Wolfe worked out with safety T.J. Ward, who served a one-game suspension at the start of the regular season. Wolfe even worked out while his teammates played.

“A lot of times I was actually working out at the same time trying to mimic the game tempo with my workouts and stuff," Wolfe said. "The last two weeks, I kind of backed off of it a little bit because I pushed really hard the first two weeks and backed off a little bit. I got to sit at home, be a civilian for a little while and just watch the game, sit back and enjoy."

It was hard not to enjoy what the defense did in the last four weeks, racking up 18 sacks and 64 quarterback hurries, according to ProFootballFocus.com. And although he loved seeing his teammates in action, he ached at what he was missing.

"It was awful," Wolfe said. "I've had to sit and watch before because of injury, but when you're perfectly healthy and you're just chomping at the bit ready to go and you feel the best you've ever felt, there's nothing worse."

Wolfe said he tried to keep in touch with teammates. He sent a group text message out to teammates before games, and said he spent time hanging out with outside linebacker Von Miller at his house.

"We stayed in contact and I'm ready to come back in like I never left," he said.

But he could only do so much, and he couldn't even take his playbook iPad with him during his suspension.

"All that I could get was from what the guys would tell me was going on," Wolfe said. "But for the most part, nothing's really changed."

Except that the Broncos now have one more starting-caliber defensive lineman at their disposal. The Broncos can carry Wolfe without releasing another player for a week, but Kubiak expects to use Wolfe against the Raiders.

"It's up to us to decide whether he'll be ready to go this week, but my expectations are that he will," Kubiak said. "It will be a big week of practice for him and it's great to have him back."

Derek Wolfe returns to league's top-ranked defense

By Arnie Stapleton
Associated Press
October 5, 2015

Denver Broncos defensive end Derek Wolfe returned to work Monday after serving his four-game suspension and declared he was "like a caged animal right now," ready to rejoin the NFL's top-ranked defense.

"It was a long month," the fourth-year pro said. "The first two weeks went by real quick and the last two weeks they were just dragging on. I'm just ready to help the team win."

The Broncos (4-0) have done a pretty good job without him, collecting 18 sacks and 11 takeaways with defensive ends Malik Jackson, Vance Walker and Antonio Smith playing superbly in Wolfe's absence.

It was a good thing Wolfe stayed in shape because D-line coach Bill Kollar put him through quite a workout while the rest of the team was doing its usual shake-out from its 23-20 win over the Minnesota Vikings.

"Just hitting the sled until you're ready to fall over, just running hoops, working pass rush moves. He made me do a 20-yard sprint. That was fun," Wolfe said. "But he had to make sure I was in shape and ready to go. I'm glad he did it. I'm going to come back in tomorrow (on the players' day off) and do another one."

The Broncos have several days to get a grasp on Wolfe's conditioning and activate him, but he said he's ready to get back in the lineup Sunday at Oakland (2-2).

"I'm ready to go. I trained hard. I mean, I had another offseason," said Wolfe, who participated in training camp and the preseason before being banished from the Broncos facility a month ago. "I'm ready to go."

Coach Gary Kubiak said "my expectations are that he will" be able to play this weekend. "So, it's a big week of practice for him. It's great to have him back."

Unlike in years past, he won't be getting the bulk of the snaps. New defensive coordinator Wade Phillips likes to rotate his linemen and Walker is coming off his best game yet.

"Well, it's the NFL. There's competition every day. It's been like that since I got here," Wolfe said. "There's always competition. That's how you get better is with competition, so like I said I enjoy it. I'm ready to go. I'm over this."

Derek Wolfe says he is a 'caged animal' in return to Broncos defense

By Jeff Legwold
ESPN.com
October 5, 2015

Calling himself a “caged animal,’’ Denver Broncos defensive end Derek Wolfe formally rejoined the league’s No. 1 defense on Monday.

Wolfe missed the Broncos’ first four games of the season -- the team went 4-0 -- because of a suspension for violating the league’s policy on performance-enhancing drugs. In his absence, the Broncos sit atop the league’s rankings in total defense, sacks, pass defense and third-down defense, and they are No. 2 in fewest points allowed.

“I’m ready to go," Wolfe said. "I’m like a caged animal right now."

“I expect him to hop right back in there,’’ Broncos coach Gary Kubiak said. “He’s been working hard. I think Derek’s a guy that takes care of himself. We know the way he can help our football team.’’

Wolfe said Monday afternoon that defensive line coach Bill Kollar welcomed him back to the team with a workout to gauge his fitness. Wolfe said he “worked hard, trained hard’’ during the suspension and that at times he scheduled his workouts during the Broncos games to “mimic the game tempo.’’

However, he said watching the team jump out to its undefeated start and seeing the kind of defensive aggressiveness Wade Phillips’ defense has shown thus far, with 11 takeaways and 18 sacks in those four games, was difficult. Wolfe was formally reinstated Monday, and the Broncos now carry a roster exemption for several days, which allows Wolfe to practice with the team before the Broncos have to make a roster move to get to 53 players.

“It was awful. It was awful,’’ Wolfe said. “I’ve had to sit before and watch because of injury, but when you’re perfectly healthy and you’re just chomping at the bit, ready to go and you feel the best you’ve ever felt, there’s nothing worse.’’

Of the defense’s efforts, Wolfe added, “I mean, what hasn’t been impressive? From the back end all the way to the defensive line has been impressive. Stopping the run … I just think that they’ve done -- from the front all the way to the back end -- everybody’s done a great job. … Crazy thing is we can be even better.’’

Wolfe’s return does make a crowded position group, in terms of playing time, even more crowded. The Broncos have kept five defensive linemen active on game days -- Kenny Anunike was a healthy inactive for Sunday’s game against the Minnesota Vikings. Against the Vikings, all five of the defensive linemen in uniform played at least 19 snaps, while Malik Jackson, Sylvester Williams, Vance Walker and Antonio Smith each played at least 30 snaps.

Wolfe worked with the starting defense in training camp and is considered one of the team’s best early-down players. He says he knows and understands that playing time is going to be spread around.

“It gets me excited. You get to come into the No. 1 defense in the league,’’ Wolfe said. “Adding help -- what else can you ask for? It’s like they’re out there getting beat up. They’re out there just dominating.’’

“Obviously, we’ve got quite a few guys there, numbers-wise. There’s some decisions to make,’’ Kubiak said of playing time for the group Sunday against the Oakland Raiders and beyond. “We have a very competitive environment there right now. … That should only make us better.’’

Derek Wolfe hopes new season brings back old form

By Jeff Legwold
ESPN.com
May 24, 2015

When the Denver Broncos watched the list of players on injured reserve grow and grow in 2013, it included defensive regulars like linebacker Von Miller, cornerback Chris Harris Jr. and defensive end Derek Wolfe.

Miller bounced back during the 2014 season with 14 sacks and was named to the Pro Bowl. Harris Jr. completed one of the most remarkable recoveries in league history going from ACL surgery to his first game in seven months on his way to his first Pro Bowl appearance. For Wolfe, his recovery from a frightening seizure on the team bus, things have taken a little longer.

For his part Wolfe said he felt "healthy" last season, but that he still didn't feel like the player he had been on the field before his incident; that there was just something missing from his game.

"I'm very impatient with things like that, when it comes to my body, my recovery and stuff like that, I'm very impatient," Wolfe said following a recent workout at the team's complex. "I thought I was going to bounce back quicker than I did. I bounced back heath-wise, but the way I moved … you still subconsciously you hesitate."

After his rookie season in 2012 -- he finished with 40 tackles and six sacks -- Wolfe looked like a high-motor player who just may get himself into a Pro Bowl discussion in the seasons to come. But then he was sidelined for 10 days in the preseason in 2013 after his arms and legs went numb following a collision in an August game in Seattle.

Then on Nov. 29, 2013, on the team's bus ride to the airport for a game in Kansas City, Wolfe suffered a seizure and underwent a variety of tests in the days that followed. He practiced just twice after that as doctors searched for the source of his troubles.

Since, Wolfe has said he had his bruise on his spinal cord from the preseason collision and he believes he came back too soon in the weeks that followed before the seizure. He lost 30 pounds at that time and by the time Broncos began their offseason program last year he said he had gained 20 of those pounds back and was entering the season with hopes of "playing just like I did before.''

And at times last season Wolfe showed the high-impact work they wanted in their lineup, but at other times he still looked to be re-gaining his football balance. He finished with 35 tackles, 1.5 sacks as he played 67 percent of the defensive snaps.

As the Broncos work through this year's offseason program Wolfe said he feels more like the player he was as a rookie, both physically and mentally.

"Definitely my footwork, my movement, quickness is starting to come back," Wolfe said. "[I'm] getting used to carrying that weight again. Going a whole year and not carrying that weight will get you."

Wolfe projects as a quality fit as a defensive end in the team's new 3-4 defense. Wolfe and Malik Jackson -- the pair have split plenty of snaps with each other in the Broncos personnel groupings over the last three seasons -- will both play at end.

Now in the final year of his original four-year deal, Wolfe sees the coming season as an opportunity to reset his game as well.

"Whatever they need me to do I'll do it," Wolfe said. "[I] thought I was going to end up [as a rookie], was with a 3-4 team … and I can get back to playing the way I like to play.

Broncos Q&A: Ordeal over, Derek Wolfe back in business

By Troy E. Renck
The Denver Post
December 7, 2014

Derek Wolfe wondered whether he would play again. A year ago, Nov. 29 to be precise, Wolfe suffered a seizure on the team bus as the Broncos traveled to Denver International Airport. His maniacal workouts short-circuited his nervous system.

After a 26-hour induced coma, Wolfe awoke. Over the previous couple of months he had dropped 40 pounds and was now down to 255 pounds. He became a shell of himself, hardly looking the part of an NFL defensive lineman. Doubt crept into his mind about whether he would be able to play again.

"There were a couple of times where I was like, 'I don't know if I can come back.' But in my heart I knew I could," Wolfe said. "I get these weird feelings when something is going to happen and when it's not. My body was telling me I was going to be all right. Once I got the game out of my mind, I started missing football. I knew then that I would be OK."

Wolfe regained his weight and his starting job this season. He has become an unsung figure on the Broncos' steadily improving defense. The former University of Cincinnati star talked recovery, food and life on the line in an interview with The Denver Post last week.

Q: Can you compare how you felt in the Kansas City game last week to where you were at this time a year ago?

A: What I went through, man, I was just trying to get back to normal. On the field, I am starting to feel like myself, instead of somebody who didn't have weight behind me, didn't have strength, all the stuff I am used to having. I feel a lot better. I can't imagine feeling any worse than I felt last year.

Q: You have maintained your weight, and appear to be stronger than ever. What's the key? I heard you have a chef to help you eat well.

A: It's Chris. I call him Cubby. I brought him out here to just cook for me. He never went to school for it. But he's Sicilian. It's in his blood. I have known him for a long time. Anytime I am hungry, he fires up the grill, makes steak, chicken. I have never had anything he's made that wasn't good. I have to eat a lot, starting when I

wake up. I eat a stack of pancakes. A big bowl of oatmeal. Six eggs. Bacon, sausage, fruit. I'll (drop) like 5 pounds when I sleep. I have done that my whole life. I eat three huge meals and a snack in between every day.

Q: Denver's defensive linemen appear to get along well. So the obvious questions are: Can Terrance Knighton dunk a basketball? And what's it like playing alongside him?

A: Oh, he can definitely dunk. He's a great athlete. We love to talk during the game. It's a job, but you still have to have fun. You have to be loose. You can't be all tight. You have to enjoy what you are doing, making plays, having fun, getting excited when another guy makes a play. We aren't a bunch of a showboating guys who are trying to make somebody look bad or outshine somebody else. We aren't jealous of each other. We want to win. A selfish guy wouldn't fit in this group. Not at all.

Q: You played college ball with Kansas City tight end Travis Kelce. Are you surprised he's developing into a star?

A: He was my roommate in college. He came in as a quarterback. Then he switched to tight end. We goofed around all the time in practice. He's just a freak of nature. He's tough to guard. He's going to get better and better every year. He has the drive and work ethic to do it.

Q: Denver's defense appeared to play its best game last week. Why do you think it all came together at Kansas City?

A: What this defensive personnel is made to do, the Chiefs' offense really complemented our strengths. We are made to stop them. So we can let loose on teams like that. Don't get me wrong, they are a great offense and a great team. It was just a good matchup. You see other schemes where misdirection and garbage offense, it's a little harder to play as fast and as free as you want. When you understand an offense and you see them twice a year, you kind of understand them better. We knew what was coming and we went after them. It's fun to play like that.

Q: Going through last year's ordeal, did you ever think what you might be doing if you weren't in the NFL?

A: Private equity I find interesting. Buying down debt. Buying notes of commercial real estate, I could get into that. I wouldn't be flipping houses or doing the construction. Maybe I could wear the white hard hat and supervise if it came to that.

Derek Wolfe file

Has made 39 starts in his NFL career, including all 12 this season

Has received a positive grade in run defense every game this season from Pro Football Focus

Was selected in the second round of the 2012 draft, the 36th pick overall

Became first Denver defensive lineman to start every game as a rookie since Barney Chavous in 1973

In 45 games at the University of Cincinnati, he made 19½ sacks and 161 tackles

Majored in criminal justice in college, and made the Big East academic honor roll as a senior

Three-year letterman at Beaver Local High School in Lisbon, Ohio, playing offense and defense

Derek Wolfe and Malik Jackson: Better together

By Andrew Mason
DenverBroncos.com
October 31, 2014

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. -- Derek Wolfe and Malik Jackson arrived in the same draft class, possess similar skill sets and found their niche in the same role: rotating between defensive end and tackle based on the down, distance and personnel grouping.

They fight for the same snaps. They push each other in practice. And more often this year, they work together. The result of their labor is perhaps the most athletic and quickest front-four sub package in the game today: Wolfe and Jackson on the inside, with Von Miller andDeMarcus Ware on the outside.

Wolfe and Jackson stunt, twist and draw double-teams. On the Broncos' last four sacks, Jackson attracted one double-team and Wolfe drew three. The calculus is simple: if one attracts two blockers, the others -- including Miller and Ware -- get one-on-ones.

"You can only double so many guys," Jackson said. "If you're not going to double D-Ware or Von, you have to pick your poison with me and Wolfe."

"You have to double-team those guys," added Miller. "If you single one of those guys then they are going to get home. It allows us to be singled on the outside.

"On every play, somebody is going to get singled and whoever it is you just have to take advantage of that matchup."

Few are better at that than Miller or Ware, who have nine and seven sacks, respectively, through seven games. Six and a half of Miller's nine sacks came when Jackson and Wolfe lined up near him.

"Just having the types of skill sets and a guy that can be one-on-two or two-on-one, it doesn’t matter," said Ware. "It’s usually me and Malik and Wolfe and Von out there, and that’s hard to stop."

Over the entire season, the Broncos rank 11th in sack rate, felling opposing quarterbacks once every 13.78 pass plays. (The league average is one sack per 16.86 pass plays.)

But when Jackson and Wolfe are on the field at the same time, the sack rate spikes to one every 6.5 pass plays. The Broncos have more sacks (12) on the 78 pass plays with both on the field than the 239 pass plays when one or neither lines up (11).

"Having an interior push and a presence with Malik and Derek, Terrance (Knighton) and some of the other guys, it allows the whole thing to work," said Defensive Coordinator Jack Del Rio.

For Jackson and Wolfe, their experience together makes it work. After competing against each other for playing time since their 2012 draft arrival, each knows the other's strengths and weakness as well as his own.

"When you practice with someone every day, and you sit by them and you know the same scheme, you just kind of know how each other plays," said Wolfe.

"(Jackson) knows how I'm going to play, and I know how he's going to play. Whoever makes the first move, the other guy's going to play off it."

Each is at his professional apex. Through experience, and, in Wolfe's case, overcoming last year's cervical spine injury, they grew into what they are today: specimens who are too powerful to contain on the outside, and too quick to corral when they bounce inside. ProFootballFocus.com ranks Jackson 10th and Wolfe 11th among the 54 defensive ends with enough snaps to be measured, and credits each with an identical tally of hurries (16).

"Smart players, tough players," added Del Rio. "I think they’re growing and doing a nice job in our system."

It is a job that will not be reflected in their individual sack numbers. Jackson has two this season; Wolfe has 0.5. But neither care much about their tallies.

"I'm not a selfish guy. At the end of the day, I could have 100 sacks in a game, and if we lose, I'm [ticked] off," Wolfe said. "I don't want to lose. I'm going to do whatever it takes to win."

But that said, Wolfe and Jackson will continue to measure their production against one other.

"They push each other a lot. They push each other for playing time, they push each other for how many pressures they’re going to get, how many tackles they’re going to get every week," said Ware.

And in watching each other, they gain tips. Jackson studied the way Wolfe handled the run in his 2012 rookie season and applied it to his game, which made him ready

in 2013 when Wolfe missed the last five games of the regular season because of lingering effects from a cervical spine injury suffered in the preseason.

"It's a friendly competition," added Wolfe. "There's never really any smack talk or anything. We congratulate each other when we do well. It's more positive motivation. We just motivate each other to do better."

And by doing so, they've already raised the pass rush to new heights when they're on the field together.

Player Q&A: Derek Wolfe

By Ben Swanson
denverbroncos.com
September 9, 2014

After a promising rookie season, defensive end Derek Wolfe had a rough second season battling a series of health issues. This year he's regained the weight and confidence he lost, fighting to pick up where his 2012 season left off.

How do you feel about starting the season?
"I feel like we've got a good squad here. Everybody's been working hard this offseason trying the best individually that they can be. When we all come together, I think we're going to be great."

What are your individual goals going into this season?
"One, I just want to stay healthy. Two, I want to hopefully become a dominant player at my position. Really, I'm just focused on doing what's best for the team. I'm not worried what my stats look like. I'm just worried what the scoreboard says at the end of the day."

People like to focus on a player's stats, but the way you play could open up opportunities for others, no?
"That's the thing about football is it's a team sport. Everybody's got their role and you've got to play your role to the best of your ability."

How have you been trying to pick up where you left off before last season in improving his pass rush?
"I'm just trying to combine the power and the technique that I bring to the game and make that one. Be strong in the run and be quick in the pass is kind of my thing."

You talked about the loss of confidence after injuries last year. How has it been trying to recover that confidence?
"It's been day-by-day. You have your good days, you have your bad days. You just got to try to stay the same every day."

How have your relationships with the D-line changed after they reacted so quickly with your seizure last fall?
"We're family. Terrance was the one who made the huge deal. Louis Vasquez was there. Von was there. Those guys who sat back there with me. It means a lot to know that they saw something wasn't right and made a big deal about it. Some people would just kind of ignore it, think maybe 'Ah, he's just tired.' Obviously they

knew something wasn’t right, so they had my back and I’m very close to those guys.”

Who were some of the most important people in the process of rebuilding confidence?
“Obviously the coaches. This whole organization really helped me out, stood behind me and kind of had my back through the whole thing. They never doubted me once in thinking I wasn’t going to come back. I stayed here in the offseason and worked with our strength coaches. Luke did a great job everyday trying to get me a plan. You know, ‘Here’s our goal today. This is what we’re going to do today.’ So he did a great job of getting me back.”

What’s one question reporters don’t ask you that you wish they would?
“I get asked just about every question you could imagine. There’s not really anything out there that they haven’t asked me. They’re always asking me how am I doing, how was the past. Everyone’s been doing a pretty good job of asking about the things I want to talk about and not the things I don’t really want to talk about.”

Not even about hobbies?
“I’m one of those guys who’s kind of into everything. Whatever’s fun at the moment, that’s what I do. I’m not really like a single-minded guy: I like to diversify my hobbies, everything. I just like to do a lot of things. One week I might be into riding 4-wheelers, the next week I might be into getting my truck fixed up. I just try to stay busy in everything I do. I like to watch a lot of movies. Sometimes my favorite thing to do is just chill, hang out at home in my house.”

Coming from a small town, do you ever look back in wonder?
“Every now and then it’s good to reflect on where you’ve come from. I try to stay away from looking in the past as much as possible.”

In high school you were a wrestler, in addition to playing football. How did wrestling in high school weigh into your development in high school?
“Your body control and your technique. Wrestling is such a technique-driven sport. It makes you very disciplined as far as your technique is and everything else. The footwork and your conditioning – nothing’s like conditioning for a wrestling match. It takes a long time to get ready for a wrestling match.”

How did going through tough months – last December, January, February – make you stronger now?
“Everybody has adversity thrown at them. I’ve had adversity thrown at me my whole life. It’s just another speed bump I’ve had to get through and find a way to make it out of it.”

Broncos' Derek Wolfe battles back from depression, scary injury

By Lindsay H. Jones
USA TODAY Sports
August 6, 2014

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. — As the weeks of the 2013 season rolled by, Derek Wolfe's hulking body shriveled away — and with it, his mental health.

The muscle definition was gone from his chest and shoulders. His waist narrowed as he lost the girth around his midsection. When his weight dipped to its lowest point in nearly a decade, all the way down to 258 pounds, it felt like he was looking at a human bobblehead in the mirror.

"My head looked real big. I just looked weird. Extremely weird," Wolfe said.

Wolfe was equally unrecognizable when he flipped on video of himself in practice and games. He saw a man wearing the No. 95 jersey, but that guy lacked the strength, power an on-field fire that made the Broncos draft him with their top selection in the 2012 draft.

"I see film from last year, and I'm like, 'Who is that guy?' " Wolfe said.

But to look at Wolfe now, all 295 well-built pounds of him, reveals only part of his remarkable comeback from a lost season that included scary incidents that, over a three-month span, twice landed him in ambulances and hospitals and even in a medically induced coma.

To see Wolfe rib his teammates again, relax while sitting in a chair off to the side of the Broncos practice field and genuinely smile shows how he has been able to reclaim his life after emerging from a deep depression.

"Mentally, physically, emotionally — I feel like I'm right where I need to be," Wolfe told USA TODAY Sports this week, just after completing a set of 40-yard gassers after practice.

His physical and emotional spiral began last August during a preseason game against the Seattle Seahawks, whom the Broncos play Thursday night in their preseason opener. Wolfe was being blocked by two Seahawks — one low at his legs, another, fullback Michael Robinson, near his shoulders and neck. Upon colliding with Robinson, Wolfe fell limp to the turf, unable to feel anything in his extremities as he was loaded onto a stretcher and driven off the field in the ambulance.

The paralysis was only temporary and after being diagnosed with a contusion on his spinal cord, Wolfe was released from the hospital in time to fly home with his teammates to Denver. Three weeks later, Wolfe was cleared by team doctors to play in the regular season opener. Physically, he might have looked OK to trainers and coaches, but it was a lie.

"That's the thing about my injury — it was more of a condition. My mental state was so out of whack, the depression, everything I went through, and I didn't know why I was going through it," Wolfe said. "When you start messing around with your spinal cord, that starts messing with your head."

Wolfe, who started every game as a rookie in 2012, started each of the Broncos' first 11 games last season and even recorded a sack in three consecutive consecutive outings from Oct. 27 through Nov. 17. Onlookers might not have noticed much was wrong, but those close to Wolfe did.

The weight loss was the most obvious red flag. No matter what Wolfe ate or how much he worked out, his weight continued to drop. He was irritable and he lashed out at people who were trying to help him. Already a self-described loner, Wolfe isolated himself further as the depression set in.

The Broncos were in the midst of their most fun regular season in years, racking up wins as Peyton Manning piled up touchdowns.

Wolfe could not enjoy any of it.

"Honestly, I was miserable every day," he said. "I was in pain, I wasn't happy about anything. I didn't feel like myself."

But he continued to get by, playing in a body that didn't feel like his own, and living with emotions he couldn't understand. But on Nov. 29, it all became too much.

Wolfe boarded a team bus bound for Denver International Airport. Just as the bus turned onto a service road, teammates noticed that Wolfe looked woozy and was sweating profusely.

"It was like someone dumped an entire bottle over his head," former Broncos safety Mike Adams, now with the Indianapolis Colts, told USA TODAY Sports recently while recalling his former teammate's seizure-like episode.

Teammates screamed for the driver to pull over. Coaches riding in another bus were alerted, and trainers called for an ambulance. Once again, Wolfe was on a stretcher, being driven away. More than a day later, he awoke in the intensive care unit at the University of Colorado Hospital in Aurora.

"When he first got there, he ripped all the (medical wires) off. He tore the bed apart. He's a big dude. They had him strapped in, but they couldn't hold him. I said, 'Why'd you do that?' And he said, 'Foxy, I have to be in a game. I'm playing a game today,' Broncos head coach John Fox told USA TODAY Sports.

"When he went out, he was on a bus to go to Kansas City. When he woke up, he was in the hospital. That would be a scary proposition. He couldn't remember a thing, so he obviously freaked out, and that freaked the hospital people out."

While the rest of the Broncos were playing the Kansas City Chiefs, Fox, who had returned to Denver earlier that week after recovering from emergency heart surgery in North Carolina, spent the day with Wolfe at the hospital. Wolfe was subjected to a battery of tests as doctors tried to figure out what was going on.

Fox recalled telling Wolfe to be honest with the physicians about how he had been feeling, both physically and emotionally. Wolfe's nervous system was overtaxed, and his mind overstressed. It was all connected.

"I felt bad for him, because they couldn't figure it out. Was it his heart? Was it respiratory? Really, what it came down to, it was really mental anxiety. He's been through a lot," Fox said.

The coach knew then that Wolfe's season was over, though the Broncos waited until January to officially place him on injured reserve. Wolfe tried to return to practice once, in late December, but was nowhere close to being physically or mentally ready to handle it.

"He needed to get away from it," Fox said.

Wolfe's road back to himself

Thus began the process of rebuilding Derek Wolfe. Even after two hospitalizations, he said he never considered that he might not play again.

"It was always, 'How quick can I get back?' That was really the issue," Wolfe said. "And the crazy thing was, the quickest way to get back to football was for me to just forget about football and worry about my life, get my life together. In doing that, it made me love the game even more than I did before."

Barred by doctors from doing any strenuous physical activity, but desperately needing to regain more than 20 pounds he had lost, Wolfe spent much of his time at home eating. He would cook pounds of ground bison and eat it by the bowlful, topped with avocado and ketchup. Needing some sort of physical outlet, Wolfe started doing yoga several times a week. That exercise has physical benefits and proved to be an emotional stabilizer as well.

"That really helped get my mind and body back on the same page," Wolfe said. "I was doing that while I was gaining weight, so it helped me keep my body control."

Wolfe chose to stay in Denver for most of the offseason, living in the house he recently bought, in order to work with the team's strength coaches once he was allowed to start lifting weights in March. He also wanted to be near his doctors.

Along the way, Wolfe forced himself to be less of an introvert and spent more time in public, launching a charity and holding a benefit beach volleyball tournament. He vacationed in Florida and has a steady girlfriend. These things had as much to do with Wolfe's comeback as anything related to football.

"It was my life. I had to get my life together," Wolfe said. "Going through that — I hate to say that I'm glad I went through it — but it was something that I really needed for me to see what is really important in my life."

Wolfe was physically cleared for full participation in the offseason program that began in April. He reported to training camp last month weighing 295 pounds, almost 10 pounds more than his playing weight as a rookie, when he had six sacks as a hybrid end-tackle in coordinator Jack Del Rio's defense.

When Del Rio looks at Wolfe now, he sees the player the Broncos drafted — and then some. Del Rio plans to use Wolfe as the starting left end in the base defense, which requires four linemen, but shift him inside to tackle in passing situations.

"First of all, it's great to see him out there, because he had a tough stretch. And he's come through it, and he's back doing the things he loves. And then for us, we're a stronger team with a healthy Derek Wolfe," Del Rio told USA TODAY Sports.

With the return of Wolfe and defensive tackle Kevin Vickerson (who suffered a dislocated hip in November), the addition of Marvin Austin and emergence last year of Malik Jackson and 2013 first-round pick Sylvester Williams, the Broncos believe they have their strongest and deepest defensive line in years.

"I'm expecting a great season out of myself," Wolfe said. "I just want our defense to be the best in the league. I don't care about my stats, I just want to be part of that type of defense."

Teammates have noticed the change, and not just the physical transformation. Since training camp began, they've watched Wolfe push around offensive teammates in practice and run his mouth during drills — signs that Wolfe has his football mindset back.

But it wasn't until the Broncos' scrimmage last week that Wolfe really felt normal on the field again. But Wolfe said he won't let himself make any "emotional decisions"

upon his return to live game action. He'll just appreciate his health and second chance he's built for himself.

"I'm having fun now. I wasn't having fun last year, because of the pain I was going through and the issues I was dealing with," Wolfe said.

"But now I'm healthy, I'm strong, I'm mentally stable."

Wolfe Looking Healthy, Strong

By Lauren Giudice
DenverBroncos.com
July 29, 2014

Defensive end Derek Wolfe has been wreaking havoc in the backfield so far during camp. Back up to nearly 300 pounds, he looks better than ever.

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. -- While most of his teammates haven't donned pads since February, Derek Wolfe has been itching to get back on the field in his gear since he was sidelined due to injury in November.

On Saturday, he finally got that opportunity.

With the team now practicing in pads, he is enjoying the opportunity to actually hit people again and on Monday, the team had its first full-tackle drill. He said football is "absolutely" fun again and that he is not thinking about last year anymore.

While he is back on the field and making plays, including helping the first team unit prevent conversions on two out of three chances in short yardage drills on Monday, he is also involved in some of the scuffles on the field.

That's the kind of intensity he played with before his injury last season and he appears to be back in his old form.

"It's the dog days," Wolfe said. "You get out here, people get frustrated, it's hot, people are tired. Some people are on the bubble so they're really pushing it and another guy might not be going as hard so they end up getting in a fight, and if one guy on the defense is in a fight, the whole defense is in a fight. That's just how we are."

Throughout camp, Wolfe has consistently created pressure off the edge and done a solid job keepingPeyton Manning and Montee Ballcontained. The player whose 2013 season was spoiled by a neck injury and the complications following that injury appears to be nonexistent.

Wolfe lost a significant amount of weight during his time away from the field. He said weighed as little as 258 pounds at one point and noted that the last time his weight was that low was his sophomore year of high school.

He gained a substantial amount of it back by OTAs. During camp, he looks healthier and stronger than ever. The way he looks mirrors how he feels out on the field with his teammates.

“Yeah I feel the best I’ve ever felt, probably in my life,” Wolfe said. “Really strong mentally, really strong physically, my size is back up, my weight’s like 295. So I feel great. I’m ready to go.”

He is starting to get used to his pads again and, even though he is being careful to not injure his teammates, he loves how competitive it is on the field. He says “on the field it’s war.”

“Obviously we’ve got to take care of each other, but when you get to tackle the running back actually – because there’s always questions, did he run through, would he have broken the tackle? Now we really get to see if he broke the tackle,” he said.

While there is competition, and depth, on the defensive line, Wolfe feels like he is good enough to start. But, he embraces the competition at defensive end said it will make him and the rest of the line better.

On Saturday, Head Coach John Fox said Wolfe has no physical hesitation since his injury from last season.

“The kid loves to play football and he loves coming to this building,” Fox said. “It’s a big part of his life and I respect that. I like the way he has come back.”

Wolfe felt that the game was almost taken away from him last season. His appreciation for the opportunity to play has reached new heights, especially when he finally got the opportunity to play at Sports Authority Field again on Sunday.

For now, he is enjoying the defense’s energy and thriving in the competitive environment.

“It’s me versus you and there’s only a couple inches between us, so we’ve got to get it done,” he said.

Wolfe Hosts Inaugural Summer Charity Bash

Lauren Guidice
DenverBroncos.com
Monday, June 9, 2014

DENVER, Colo. – Broncos defensive end Derek Wolfe hosted his first Colorado event to benefit the Wolfe Pack Foundation on Sunday afternoon.
The Derek Wolfe Summer Charity Bash was hosted at The Island and included food, drinks, music, a silent auction and a sand volleyball tournament, featuring Broncos players. Though the event was a fun way to start the summer, the goal was to raise money to help underprivileged youth in Colorado.

"Really I just want to help every aspect of these kids as far as being underprivileged and not having much," Wolfe said at the event. "I want to help them in all the aspects of life. It touched my heart. There wasn't a lot of things out there for me to do, it was just individual people that were helping me, so for me to have a foundation that helps all of those things, all those aspects – life skills, football, school, all the stuff - that's kind of what I like. "

Funds from the event will help start the Foundation's ELEVATE program, which will help underprivileged Denver youth by providing them with tutoring, ACT prep, life skill lessons and sport training. The program is a result of the Wolfe Pack Foundation teaming up with Champ Kelly's foundation, Heart Power, Inc.

Kelly, the Broncos' assistant director of pro personnel, said Wolfe has "a tremendous heart for underprivileged youth."

"We want to really affect these kids' lives and just give them an opportunity that we didn't have when we were growing up," Kelly said. "I know Derek told his testimony. He took the ACT five times before he passed it and before he got into college. If there is one kid that we can help take this test the first time and make it into college, then we've done our job."

Throughout the event, volleyball teams competed in a tournament to play the Broncos in a finale match. Wolfe, safety David Bruton, tight end Gerell Robinson, defensive end Malik Jackson, defensive back Charles Mitchell and guard Ben Garaland competed in the final match of the day, but lost 30-27.

"I'm here to support my teammate," said linebacker Nate Irving. "We're like a family, it's a brotherhood and every chance we get to support one another, we try to."

Irving didn't know which Bronco had the best volleyball skills, but he was sure of one thing.

“It’s not Malik,” he said.

Wolfe said “you can never do too much” and he plans to help people in need as much as he can.

“When I was coming up and coming through college, there was always guys coming back and helping us and telling us, ‘Hey make sure you guys give back, make sure you always give back,’" he said. "I always said when I was a kid ‘when I make it, I’m going to help somebody.' I want to be able to help somebody like I was helped."

Lineman returns to his love: the football field

By Eddie Pells
Associated Press
Tuesday, June 3, 2014

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. (AP) — The seizure, the weight loss, the false-start of a comeback. Derek Wolfe endured them all while always keeping one goal in mind: Getting back on the football field.

"That's my life, that's my love," the Broncos defensive lineman said Monday, after the team's latest offseason workout. "It's what I love to do. Take that away from me and I'd have a rough time."

That Wolfe kept football on the front burner through the difficult times is a testament to the third-year veteran's love of the game. This was not, by any means, your typical football injury.

Wolfe suffered a seizure during the bus ride to the airport for Denver's flight to Kansas City last Nov. 29. He ended up in the hospital for several days, and was put in a medically induced coma while doctors performed procedures to rule out a brain tumor.

Out of danger and released from the hospital a week later, Wolfe hurried back, and was at practice as the Broncos prepared for the AFC championship game against New England.

But he had dropped about 20 pounds and was low on energy. He couldn't get much done, even working on the edges of the defensive line — not the interior, which is where he was used to playing.

"I wasn't feeling right, and I didn't tell anyone I wasn't feeling right," he said. "That came back to bite me. It's kind of my fault. I tried to push it aside because we were playing great and I didn't want to miss out."

He missed the Super Bowl — not such a terrible game to miss, it turns out — and now he's getting ready for the 2014 season, playing on the inside, and back at his ideal weight at around 290 pounds.

"He's a motivated kid," coach John Fox said. "Football's a pretty big part of his life."

The lessons learned from his harrowing weeks on the sideline: "It's taking things in stride, saving my energy for game day," Wolfe said.

Other linemen, including Malik Jackson, have stepped up in Wolfe's absence. There are no guarantees the 2012 second-round draft pick, who has 10 sacks over his first two years, will get his starting job back.

He doesn't shy from the competition. Says he appreciates it, in fact.

Simply being back on the field is the reward that means the most to him right now.

"Something happens and you don't know if you're going to be able to play again," Wolfe said. "To be out here and to feel better than you've ever felt, it's an emotional feeling. It's a happy occasion."

Notes: Draft picks Cody Latimer (WR), Matt Paradis (C) and Corey Nelson (LB) all signed their rookie contracts with the Broncos on Monday. All were at practice.

Derek Wolfe good to go again for Broncos with scary ordeal over

By Mike Klis
The Denver Post
April 27, 2014

Even when Derek Wolfe was not of sound mind or body, his competitive instincts never betrayed him.

It was the final Saturday night of November, and while the Broncos were gathered for a team meeting at a Kansas City-area hotel conference room in preparation for the next day's game against the rival Chiefs, their starting defensive end was coming out of a 26-hour, medically induced coma.

Hospital doctors made a mistake. They should have kept Wolfe comatose for at least 27 hours.

"I remember waking up and trying to rip the breathing tube out," Wolfe said.

The first voice Wolfe heard was that of his brother, Josh Pastore, who had flown in from New Jersey. Wolfe had been trying for months to get his brother out to Colorado for a visit.

The first words Wolfe spoke: "About time."

Then he saw Corey Oshikoya, the Broncos' assistant trainer who had stayed with Wolfe from the moment Terrance Knighton yelled "Stop the bus!" from the back seat of the team bus to the airport a day earlier.

From his hospital bed in Denver, Wolfe asked "Osh" if he would be able to play against the Chiefs the next day in Kansas City.

Oshikoya reminded Wolfe that he was in an intensive care unit.

Last week, as he sat in the office of Broncos strength and conditioning coach Luke Richesson, Wolfe still was struggling to precisely describe how he had fallen so ill last season.

A 23-year-old elite athlete who was the first player the Broncos selected in the 2012 draft should not have stressed his nervous system to the point he was sleeping only two hours a night, losing weight no matter how much he ate, and getting loaded into the back of an ambulance with a heartbeat of 20 and blood-sugar level at 40. (The blood-sugar level should have been between 100 and 140, considering he had just eaten a meal.)

The Broncos drafted Wolfe with the No. 36 pick overall early in the second round as much for his fierce style as the fact that he was a rare 295-pound defensive tackle who had the agility to rush the quarterback.

But after getting six sacks and leading NFL rookie defensive linemen in playing time percentage, Wolfe's second pro season began with two bouts of food poisoning and a preseason neck injury that was diagnosed as a contusion of the spinal cord. His weight dropped to 265 pounds, and he had only one sack through the Broncos' first seven games.

Through it all, the maniacal Wolfe was training three times per day.

Doctors said Wolfe suffered a slight seizure during the team's bus ride to Denver International Airport on Nov. 29, 2013. But what really happened is Wolfe short-circuited his nervous system. He had pushed his body to such extreme limits, his body couldn't take it anymore.

He credits the Broncos' medical team, led by trainer Steve "Greek" Antonopulos, and yoga classes with bringing him back.

"Yoga really helped connect my mind and body back together," Wolfe said. "Because really the issue was my nervous system had become so disconnected from my body that I didn't feel like myself. I didn't look like myself. I didn't sound like myself. Nothing that was going on was me. I wasn't playing like myself. Even during the season, I wasn't playing like I normally play. The physicality I like to play with, I didn't have it because I didn't have the weight. I had the strength, but the weight wasn't behind it."

"Stop the bus!"

The day after Thanksgiving last year, Wolfe looked fine as he said hello to a reporter in the Broncos' locker room. He was about to eat a big lunch. His weight was 275 — 10 pounds lighter than the weight he had settled on as a rookie, but also up 10 pounds from earlier in the season.

He had been playing well, getting sacks in three consecutive games through a key home division victory against the Chiefs on Nov. 17, which was a Sunday night national TV game.

The Broncos were about to play the Chiefs again, this time at Kansas City. As always, Wolfe headed to the back of the bus. He sat by himself in one row, just behind Shaun Phillips. Louis Vasquez was seated across the aisle. Von Miller was seated directly behind Wolfe and Knighton was behind Miller.

"Felt great at practice, felt good getting on the bus," Wolfe said. "I get on the bus and it felt like I was getting carsick. That's all it felt like. Next thing you know, I'm in a dead sweat. And my vision starts getting blurry. And then my teammates starting asking 'What's wrong?' And I couldn't respond. I couldn't say anything. I could just feel my body shutting down."

Wolfe's teammates were confused at first, then scared.

"He was sleeping and Von looked at him and he was sweating profusely," Knighton said. "There was sweat everywhere. That just didn't look right. Me and Von were like, 'Wolfe! Wolfe!' And he wasn't responding."

A couple of players tried to wake him up, have him sip from a water bottle. NFL players have been long programmed to remain poised through tense situations. But serenity now wasn't getting it done.

Knighton yelled: "Stop the bus!"

As Wolfe was being loaded into an ambulance, he started vomiting. Then he started fighting.

"They said I was so strong, they couldn't hold me down," Wolfe said. "I was ripping out of restraints. They had to induce a coma because I was so out of control."

On game day, Sunday morning, Wolfe received a visit from coach John Fox and his wife, Robin. Fox was away from the team because of his own medical issue. The Broncos beat the Chiefs that day and after the team plane returned to Denver, Knighton and Miller went immediately to the hospital to check on their teammate.

Wolfe looked awful.

"I couldn't really explain to the doctors how I was feeling," Wolfe said. "I was going through serious depression. I had never dealt with that before."

The stress of worrying about his neck injury, his weight loss and his performance had burdened him even before he was hospitalized.

"Then after that happened, (the depression) was twice as bad," Wolfe said. "When you're hurt and you're feeling sorry for yourself, you're going to go through a little depression. But the worst part of the aftereffects was, I would look in the mirror and I didn't know who I was looking at. The issues I was having with problem-solving were ridiculous. I couldn't feel any emotion."

"Something's wrong"

Near as Wolfe can figure, the first food poisoning episode before training camp, followed by a bad batch of spinach during camp, "started my downward spiral."

His weight was down when the Broncos played a preseason game at Seattle on Aug. 17. Wolfe was high-lowed by two blockers and wound up leaving the field in an ambulance.

"Normally that wouldn't have happened to me," Wolfe said. "I'm normally confident when I play, but because I was light, I was fidgety. I felt like every time I hit somebody, I had to put everything I had behind it."

He rested for three weeks, but he was in the Broncos' starting lineup for the season opener against Baltimore. Looking back, he said, he probably should have taken more time off.

"Really, it was my fault," Wolfe said. "I should have been more aware of what was going on. I had symptoms that I was not reporting, symptoms I was ignoring to myself because I was afraid of

wondering if the issue was my neck. Really, it wasn't my neck. The neck injury had something to do with me losing all that weight. And losing all that weight had something to do with my nervous system being screwed up.

"But the issue was, I didn't rest after that neck injury. I didn't let them let me rest. I felt fine. I was 100 percent. Greek was like, 'Hey, you should rest.' But if you feel fine, go. There were no signs that anything was wrong."

Wolfe grinded through until Game 7 at Indianapolis, when a collision with a fullback shot pain through the neck area again. That's when Wolfe started having headaches, and the pain prevented him from sleeping. Yet he had those sacks in Games 8, 9 and 10.

There was one more game, at New England, but no more after that.

Wolfe came back for one practice, on Christmas. He weighed 258 pounds that day.

"I thought it would make me feel better coming back and I get here and after I watched the film (of that practice), I was like, 'Who is that out there?' " Wolfe said. "That's not me. I was too small. I was moving around real lethargic. And while I was out there, I was getting these headaches.

"I went home and called my brother — he was back in Jersey — and I said, 'Something's wrong with me. I can't move.' "

Back in business

There were dark periods after the episode. Wolfe said his depression intensified. He shut himself inside his home. He kept his family away, except for his good friend "Cubby" and his brother Josh, who had returned from New Jersey to stay for a month.

About the only other people who could occasionally get through to him were the Millers.

"Von and his mom and his dad — his mom will call me still and make sure I'm all right," Wolfe said. "Von's like family."

Wolfe said he was still in a fog through the Broncos' AFC playoff victories over San Diego and New England. He started feeling like himself again the week of the Super Bowl.

"I was on the plane," he said, "and I was like, 'How am I not playing in this game? How could I be so stupid to let this happen?' "

Wolfe had started yoga — and nothing more — in late January and continued on through March. He started lifting weights March 1.

When the Broncos started their conditioning program last week, Wolfe was a full participant. For dinner Tuesday night, he had a large rib-eye steak, two chicken breasts, corn on the cob, asparagus and mashed potatoes.

"And I was still hungry," he said. "So my appetite is back. I stay away from fast food. But Ted's Montana Grill has definitely helped me put weight on."

Wolfe weighed 270 pounds March 1. He was at his playing weight of 285 last week. He might allow himself to get up to 295 by the start of training camp, which would give him 10 pounds to play with during the season.

"Honest to God, I feel better than I've ever felt," Wolfe said. "In my whole life I've never felt this good. It just shows I needed that rest. The body needed to heal. I have no pain in my neck. I'm sleeping better than I've ever slept. I'm not on any kind of medicine. No supplements. Nothing.

"No doubt in my mind that I'm going to be better than I ever was."

If only this Wolfe cried out

A timeline of what Broncos starting defensive end Derek Wolfe endured last season:

Training camp 2013: Wolfe gets food poisoning from spinach. It's his second food poisoning episode in two months.

Aug. 17: Down at least 10 pounds because of the food poisoning, Wolfe says he didn't feel like himself while he played in a preseason game at Seattle. Wolfe is high-lowed by two of the Seahawks and suffers a neck injury. He is carried off the field on a backboard and into an ambulance. Tests are negative, although Wolfe has suffered a contusion to the spinal cord. He is cleared to fly back to Denver with the Broncos.

Sept. 5: Wolfe makes a start and contributes four tackles to the Broncos' season-opening victory over Baltimore in Denver.

Oct. 20: A collision with an Indianapolis Colts fullback shoots pain through Wolfe's neck. He endures headaches and struggles to sleep afterward, but doesn't report the symptoms. "You don't want to let your team down," he said. "We're on a run. Plus, I had like (three) sacks in a row. So I'm thinking, 'I can't really stop now.' "

Nov. 29: The Broncos' buses leave for Denver International Airport and a trip for a game two days later against the Kansas City Chiefs. Wolfe falls asleep and starts sweating profusely. He can't respond to teammates. Terrance Knighton calls for their bus to stop and for medical personnel. Wolfe receives his

second ambulance ride in three months. He is placed in a medically induced coma for 26 hours and spends four days in a hospital before he is released.

Christmas: His weight down to 258 pounds, Wolfe practices for the first time since his episode on the bus. But he again falls ill after practice and is shut down for the season. "When you're down like that," he said, "it's always in the back of your head: 'Wonder if I can't play anymore?' But as soon as I got that thought, I'd snap it out of my head. No way. Nothing's going to keep me down."

Late January 2014: Wolfe begins taking yoga classes three times a week. He credits yoga for helping him feel healthy again.

March 1: Wolfe's weight is back up to 270 pounds. He starts a light weightlifting program under the direction of Broncos strength coach Luke Richesson.

April 21: The Broncos begin their offseason conditioning program. Wolfe is a full participant.

April 22: For dinner, Wolfe has a rib-eye steak, two chicken breasts, mashed potatoes, corn on the cob and asparagus. His weight is up to 285 pounds.

Derek Wolfe still has big role with less weight for Broncos

By Mike Klis
The Denver Post
November 29, 2013

As players dispersed Thursday afternoon to celebrate Thanksgiving, no one needed a hearty meal more than Derek Wolfe.

So long as spinach wasn't a side dish.

Wolfe was a 295-pound defensive tackle when the Broncos drafted him in the second round last year. He has played his second NFL season at 275 pounds. His preferred playing weight is 280 to 285.

"I got food poisoning before I hurt my neck," Wolfe said. "So I had a rough six weeks where it was just hard to put weight on. That's why this season has been such a grind. The neck was a lot of stress. And the thing about me is when I'm stressed I lose weight."

A spoiled serving of spinach had Wolfe doubling over for a spell during training camp. Then during a preseason game Aug. 17 at Seattle, Wolfe got high-lowed by two blockers and wound up immobilized on a backboard and removed off the field by an ambulance.

A quintessential tough guy, Wolfe hasn't missed a game this season.

After registering six sacks and 40 tackles as a rookie, Wolfe has four sacks and 16 tackles with five more regular-season games to play.

Some of Wolfe's weight loss was by design. Since joining the Broncos, his versatility has moved him from end in the base defense to tackle in the nickel package.

"I can't pass rush off the edge at 290," Wolfe said. "I can, but it's not as effective. I can't bend the way I want to bend."

One reason the Broncos drafted Wolfe with the No. 36 overall pick is they loved his manic intensity. It's also a characteristic that has Wolfe beating himself up more than he should.

"Every aspect of this game I take personal," he said.

Wolfe Feels 'Blessed' To Be Back In Action With Broncos

By Jesse Sarles
9News Denver
October 1, 2013

DENVER (CBS4) – During the first half of the Broncos win against the Philadelphia Eagles Broncos defensive lineman Derek Wolfe said he got so fatigued that it hurt to sit.

Wolfe said on Xfinity Monday Live he's never been as tired in his life as he was in the second quarter on Sunday after a fast start by Eagles quarterback Michael Vick and their fast-paced offense.

"They tempo-ed us pretty well, and it's a high powered offense. So they keep going and going and coming at you," he said. "So it's not easy to substitute guys in. You're going to have to play seven to eight plays straight at a fast tempo at no rest."

But for Wolfe, it never hurt so good. The Broncos defense eventually got things figured out, and the final score was a very enjoyable 52-20.

Wolfe said doing fast-paced, no huddle drills against Peyton Manning and the Broncos offense in practice helped them prepare for what the Eagles threw at them. He also praised defensive coordinator Jack Del Rio for the for the attitude and swagger he has given the defense.

"Obviously Jack did a great job of putting in a scheme that made it simple for us as defensive linemen to just line up and go," he said. "And that's pretty much what we did the whole game. We just lined up and went."

Wolfe said on Xfinity Monday Live that he doesn't take winning for granted. And he doesn't take playing for granted either after what happened to him in Seattle six months ago.

"It's kind of weird to watch yourself get hurt. I don't really like watching it," Wolfe told CBS4's Vic Lombardi as footage of his scary injury against the Seahawks during the preseason was shown during the CBS4 show. "I bruised my spinal cord and it could have been a lot worse than it really was. I'm blessed. I'm lucky to be here."

Lombardi asked Wolfe if he believes professional football is safer with a slew of new rules that have been instituted in recent years.

“It’s not a safe game and you sign up for that. I’m not mad that it happened. It’s part of the game; it comes with the territory,” he said.

“Are you playing any differently since it happened?” Lombardi asked Wolfe.

“Absolutely not,” Wolfe said. “You don’t think about that when you’re playing the game. If you do, you’re going to get hurt even worse.”

There’s a reason why you haven’t seen much of Wolfe in the Denver media lately. He was holding out on doing any interviews this season until he got a sack. And that happened on Sunday.

“They left the tight end one-on-one with me. And (Wesley Woodyard) actually missed it. He still wants half of that but I’m taking the whole thing,” Wolfe joked.

Derek Wolfe: Pack Mentality

By Brandon Moree
DenverBroncos.com
September 10, 2013

In his second NFL season, Derek Wolfe is looking to step into a leadership role.

EDITOR'S NOTE: The following was the cover story in the Gameday program from Aug. 29, when the Broncos took on the Arizona Cardinals. Wolfe was back on the field to start the team's Week 1 win.

Inked on Derek Wolfe's right arm is a ferocious-looking representation of a wolf. Naturally.

"It's my name," he said with a smile. "I'm not going to go get a lion."

It's been there since the start of his sophomore year at the University of Cincinnati. And while he says the motivation for it was merely nominal, it seems to be a fitting representation of a tenacious defensive end constantly hunting down ball carriers with his own pack of teammates on the defensive line.

*****

That pack mentality was never more evident than in the Broncos' second preseason game, when Wolfe was taken off the field in an ambulance.

A hit to the neck, after he had already been blocked to the ground, left the defensive end without much feeling in his extremities.

"It was pretty scary laying there on the stretcher, being numb," Wolfe said. ""Once I got into the ambulance and started moving I could start feeling everything again. I could move everything the whole time, it was just everything felt kind of fuzzy. Obviously when you shock your system like that it has to kind of reboot."

Wolfe said the injury ended up being diagnosed as a cervical strain, but it "looked a lot worse than it was." After all the tests came back negative, Wolfe was able to fly back to Denver with the team.

"They clapped for me when I got on the plane," Wolfe said. "I got yelled at for not giving a 'thumbs up' when I was on the stretcher. 'Wood' (Wesley Woodyard) keeps giving me a hard time about that, the whole time. I was extremely happy to be on the plane with (them). I look at this team as my family so it was good to be there."

With regards to his timetable to return, Head Coach John Fox said that Wolfe was "coming along very well." The defensive end said that "everything is back to

normal” and that he’s just waiting for the pain to subside before he’ll receive another MRI and be cleared to play. He doesn't want to put a timetable on his return, but he didn't shy away from aiming for the club's home opener against the Baltimore Ravens.

And when he's back out there, expect to see the same tenacious play from the lineman that has already made him one of the most important cogs on Broncos defense.

“If you play scared you’re going to get hurt again,” he said. “So don’t count on me playing scared.”

*****

In his freshman year at the University of Cincinnati, Wolfe played in seven games as a defensive tackle and picked up three tackles and a sack. After that season, he put a wolf on his arm and started every game between then and the time he graduated with a degree in criminal justice.

Now Wolfe is staring down the start of his second season in the NFL. And it’s also his second season under Defensive Coordinator Jack Del Rio.

Having that continuity from last season has made the offseason and preseason a time for improvement instead of instruction. That’s a luxury he wasn’t always afforded as a Bearcat as he worked with three different defensive line coaches and two different head coaches in his four years.

“Learning a new defense and new techniques is hard on anybody. It’s tough,” Wolfe said. “It’s better to have those techniques already set in stone. You come in and you already know what they want from you. You can get better, you’re not learning again.”

Wolfe had an impressive rookie campaign to build on, too. Just like the last three years of his college career, he started every game in the 2012 season. He was fourth on the team in sacks with six takedowns – Von Miller said he probably took four away from him, too – and he registered 40 tackles.

“I thought last year was a really special year for him," Del Rio said during minicamp. "And the refreshing part is that he came back hungry for much more. Not a little bit more, but much more. He really has his eyes set and his heart set on being a great player in this league. He knows he has to work to do that."

*****

Just as soon as rookie defensive tackle Sylvester Williams arrived in Denver, he knew that Wolfe was the guy he wanted to follow because “he was going to do the right thing.”

That’s exactly the kind of leader Wolfe said he wants to be.

"The thing I take from him is play hard all the time," Williams said. "He’s a hard-nosed type of guy and he gives 100 percent to everything he does. In the weight room, this is the kind of guy that’s doing extra reps and some guys are struggling to get all the reps they’re supposed to do."

Having been in Williams’ position just a season ago, Wolfe has plenty of wisdom to offer the rookie. Wolfe was the first player selected by the Broncos in 2012 – although it was in the second round – just as Williams was who the Broncos used their first pick on in the 2013 NFL Draft.

“I know you feel like there’s a lot of pressure on you but just forget about that,” Wolfe said he told Williams. “It’s just football when it comes down to it.

“We’re just playing football still, just like you’ve been doing since you were little, just football.”

But younger players aren’t the only ones taking note of Wolfe’s effort and following suit —Woodyard called him a "freak of nature."

“Derek Wolfe had an amazing rookie year," Von Miller echoed in August. "I think everybody knew he was destined to be (a leader) right when we first brought him in. He’s just a worker. His sophomore year, I think he’s going to have an amazing year. You can just tell by the way he’s working on the field. It’s hard to go against him. I’m all for him."

*****

Every pack needs a leader. The Broncos defensive line in 2013 is no exception. And this Wolfe, through his focus and work ethic, is looking more and more like that leader.

“I’d like our defensive line to lead to league in sacks. I’d like to see our defense be number one overall in everything,” Wolfe said. “That’s what I’m striving for – to get our defense to be the best in the league.”

Like the stealthy wolf, Wolfe doesn’t need to be loud or boisterous to take charge. In fact, his approach is quite the opposite.

“I’m not the type of guy to be, ‘rah-rah,’” he said. “I’m more of a, ‘I’m going to be leading in the front, if you want to follow, follow.

“If not, stay in the back.'"

Wolfe: 'Don't Count On Me Playing Scared'

By Gray Caldwell
DenverBroncos.com
August 22, 2013

Defensive end Derek Wolfe said "everything is back to normal" after his neck injury, he's just waiting for his pain to subside before he returns to the field.

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. -- Derek Wolfe considers himself very lucky.

Laying on the field, numb after a hit to his neck by Seattle Seahawks fullback Michael Robinson, the defensive end feared the worst.

He didn't lose consciousness, so he knew exactly what happened. But he couldn't feel his extremeties as he was carried to an ambulance, which drove him off the field.

“It was pretty scary laying there on the stretcher," Wolfe said. "Once I got into the ambulance and started moving I could start feeling everything again. I could move everything the whole time, it was just everything felt kind of fuzzy. Obviously when you shock your system like that it has to kind of reboot."

Wolfe said the injury ended up being diagnosed as a cervical strain, and it "looked a lot worse than it was."

But that doesn't mean he wasn't scared until he heard a definitive diagnosis at the hospital.

"When you’re in a hospital and they’re using a lot of big words, you’re not really sure what they’re talking about," he said. "But they did a really good job letting me know that it wasn’t as serious as I thought it was once the scans came back all negative and stuff. I’m extremely blessed.”

He was humbled and a little emotional seeing all of the support he received from fans on Twitter, and when he was able to fly back with the team, it was a huge relief.

Linebacker Wesley Woodyard joked on Monday that the team gave Wolfe a hard time for sitting in first class on the flight to Denver, but the team was glad to see him back on his feet.

“They clapped for me and stuff when I got on the plane and everything," Wolfe said. "I was extremely happy to be on the plane with (them). I look at this team as my family, so it was good to be there.”

As for his recovery, Wolfe said his neck is sensitive right now, but he'll be back on the field "as soon as I feel better."

He went through a full upper-body workout in the weight room Thursday, which he called "a good sign." Head Coach John Fox said Wolfe isn't on any medication anymore, and has a full range of motion. The defensive end is just waiting for the pain to dissipate before he receives another MRI and is cleared to return to the field because he doesn't want to reinjure himself.

But he won't be thinking about the injury in live-game action.

“Well, if you play scared you’re going to get hurt again," he said. "Don’t count on me playing scared.”

Fox said Wolfe is "coming along very well," and while the second-year pro didn't want to put a timetable on his return, he didn't hesitate to point to Sept. 5 against the Baltimore Ravens as his target.

“In my head, I say, ‘Yes,’" he said of playing in Week 1. "I plan on being out there on the field. But obviously everything takes time. As soon as they clear me to go, I’m ready.”

Wolfe says he hopes to be back by opener

By Arnie Stapleton
The Associated Press
August 22, 2013

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. (AP) — Derek Wolfe put in a full upper body workout in the weight room on Thursday, then the Denver Broncos defensive lineman thanked his teammates and fans for their prayers and well wishes after he was taken via ambulance from CenturyLink Field in Seattle last weekend.

Wolfe said he hopes to be back in the lineup by Denver's Sept. 5 opener against Baltimore, less than three weeks after fears that he had suffered a cervical spine injury.

"It's amazing how much you don't like to practice until you can't do it anymore," Wolfe said. "And it's real humbling whenever you can't really feel your extremities for a while. I get a little emotional about it because this is what I love to do and I couldn't imagine myself doing anything but this game."

Wolfe said he holds no grudge against Seahawks fullback Michael Robinson, who slammed into him after he'd been cut by Seattle's Luke Wilson on a running play. Wolfe's head and neck were compressed by the hit and he lay on the turf for a couple of minutes in the silent stadium before being strapped to a backboard and being taken to a hospital.

Tests were negative and he was allowed to fly home with his teammates after the game.

"Yeah, they clapped for me when I got on the plane," Wolfe said. "I got yelled at for not giving the thumbs-up when I was on the stretcher."

At that time, though, Wolfe wasn't sure he was OK. He said the numbness in his arms and legs didn't start to dissipate until he was on his way to the hospital.

"I could move everything the whole time, it was just everything felt kind of fuzzy," he said. "Obviously, when you shock your system like that, it has to kind of reboot. As of now, everything is back to normal. As soon as the pain goes away, I'll be all right. I've got full motion back."

Wolfe said the right side of his neck is still sore and once that subsides he'll undergo another MRI to get clearance to return to action.

He's determined to make sure this scare doesn't change the way he plays.

"Well, if you play scared, you're going to get hurt again, so don't count on me playing any scared," he said.

The Broncos are counting on the second-year pro who had six sacks from the tackle position as a rookie last year to help fill the void with All-Pro linebacker Von Miller suspended for the first six games of the regular season.

Denver's pass-rush worries were exacerbated this week when defensive end Robert Ayers (foot) got hurt at practice, leaving Malik Jackson and Shaun Phillips as the primary pass-rushers.

Cornerback Champ Bailey ditched his crutches Thursday but still had a walking boot on his strained left foot, and his replacement, Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie, hurt his back while trying to make an interception in the end zone and hobbled to the trainer's room but returned to the field about 10 minutes later.

"He got a bump in the back. He's fine," coach John Fox said.

Derek Wolfe update: Denver Broncos defensive lineman will "probably be back by Week 1"

By Mike Chambers
The Denver Post
August 23, 2013

Derek Wolfe said he felt lucky Thursday. The defensive lineman, who left the Broncos' preseason game in Seattle last weekend in an ambulance, will be back playing football soon. He hopes to be a starter in the Sept. 5 season opener against Baltimore.

Wolfe suffered a cervical strain in the Seattle game. The pain he feels is from the surrounding muscles only.

"Looked a lot worse than it was," Wolfe said after receiving off-field treatment during practice Thursday. "It ended up just being a cervical strain, which is scary, but I'm just happy I can be back on the field."

He added, "I'll probably be back by Week 1."

Wolfe won't play Saturday night in the Broncos' third preseason game, against St. Louis in Denver. He wouldn't put a timetable on his return to practice, but coach John Fox said "he's coming along very well."

Secondary scare. Cornerback Dominique Rodgers- Cromartie suffered what appeared to be a back injury about 20 minutes into practice Thursday, but eventually returned to the field and will be fine, Fox said.

Rodgers-Cromartie signed a one-year, $5 million contract with Denver during the offseason and is the team's second-highest-paid defensive player.

"He's got a bump on his back, but he's fine," Fox said.

Welker update. Slot receiver Wes Welker didn't participate in 7-on-7 and 11-on-11 drills Thursday, but he would be available to play Saturday if it were a regular-season game, Fox said. Welker is recovering from a sprained ankle.

"If we had a game tomorrow, he'd be out there," Fox said.

This Wolfe Won't Cry

By Cynthia Zordich
NFL Player Engagement
July 26, 2013

When he was in 5th grade, a buddy asked him to have dinner at his house. Hungry as he was for a good meal, starving as he was for some company, his pride pushed him aside and answered first. "No thanks. Gotta get home."

"I always said no," admits Derek Wolfe, the Denver Bronco's second year D Lineman. "I didn't want anyone feeling sorry for me and I didn't think anyone would actually want to be with me for any other reason. I figured it was just pity."

True pity was the fact that he was raised to believe he was worthless. Raised by a man who raised his fists, raised his voice and destroyed the core of a young boy who was not his own, reminding him every day that he wasn't. "I wasn't his kid. He kept me around to abuse me. To break me down."

Not knowing who his real father is to this day, the stepfather had married his mom when Derek was just 3 months old. Together, the man and the boy rode the rollercoaster of her addiction and together they drove late nights through the tiny town of Lisbon, Ohio to look for her. Once found, strange men would protest her departure and a fight would usually ensue. Come dawn, while most kids were slipping into their fuzzy slippers, Derek Wolfe was sliding out of a pickup with a bruised stepfather and a wasted mother in tow.

The inevitable divorce came and with it went Derek Wolfe and the stepdad to a tiny town in Ohio called Beaver Local. Understanding that it was a choice to keep him in the pack, Derek Wolfe was grateful to the man and he showed that gratitude by keeping the constant beatings and verbal demoralization to himself through junior high.

Wicked came the new stepmother and before the end of her first night, a fight broke out over the dinner dishes. "We ate our first meal together. I remember thinking, this could be nice. Like family. Instead she got up from the table and told me to do the dishes." Something from her tone sucked the rose color right out of his glasses. I said, "How about if we do them together?"

It was either his audacity or mere presence that set her off. The maiden in distress cried wolf and Derek was unceremoniously tossed out.

Months later, stepdad asked him back, but by then his bruises had healed nicely. He had bounced from his friend Logan Hoppel's house to his Grandma's and then his two aunts', so he would appear to be "visiting" instead of homeless. But mothers know, some anyway, and Kris Hoppel saw that a boy was suffering and asked him to stay for good. Soon he became family and at 15 he emancipated himself from his mother who had been cashing in on his existence by cashing his government checks to support her habit.

At that same time, he started to thrive under the structure of family, guidance, affection and good old-fashioned farm work. It was on the Hoppel farm that he honed a work ethic and thrived on contributing and kinship. The Hoppels are a big wrestling family too and it was on the mat that the 270-pounder conquered the demons that might put a weaker man on his back. He went 32 and 2 his senior year with a trip to the state championship. The Hoppel clan spoon-fed kindness to the young man until the only hunger he would feel would be the hunger to succeed on the farm, on the mat and on the field - as in football field.

College coaches began mapquesting their way to Negley, Ohio by Derek's junior year to meet the 6'5" tackle who in ten games had racked up 30 tackles, 5.5 sacks, 9 tackles for a loss and 5 deflections. While he appreciated them all rolling up their pant legs for a visit, Derek had a good reason to commit to Cincinnati and that was Adam Hoppel, Logan's older brother. Truth was, he'd gotten used to the familiarity of family in any form and having his network close felt like the right thing to do.

The Hoppels would caravan to Cincinnati for all of his games. "It was the first time in my life that I was opening up to anyone and I knew I needed them in my life." His newfound brotherhood would extend to the Pastore brothers, Josh and Jamin. "I am a strong believer that in life you're going to become who you have around you. The Hoppels and the Pastores kept me straight. They taught me how to treat people, how to work hard and how to get results from that hard work."

The life lessons of his extended family would result in a stellar start in Cincinnati. Derek would see time as a true freshman and start 13 games as a sophomore where he finished with 41 tackles, 5 sacks, a forced fumble and recovery and a quarterback hurry. Newspaper articles in Beaver Local shed a spotlight on the promising young prospect and with that, his mom saw great opportunity, for herself. "She called to get back in my life. She wanted money and I didn't have it. She called the university for it. She threatened to sue."

Sad truth was that Derek Wolfe didn't have it. In fact, junior year he only had $7.00 to his name and the worry of it almost made him make the mistake of a lifetime. "I knew it wasn't the right time to leave for the league," Wolfe reflected. Cincinnati had finished 4 and 12 and although his numbers were respectful, they were clouded by the record. "I called Josh and told him I was going. He didn't lecture me or judge me. He didn't force his opinion on me. He didn't ask why and I didn't go into it. He just read between the lines and sent me enough cash to get through the school year, in case money had anything to do with my decision. That is family. I let him in - in my way and he showed me he cared - in his."

Derek Wolfe's senior year at Cincinnati would prove the importance of that wait. He tallied 70 tackles with 31 solo stops, 21.5 tackles for a loss and 9.5 sacks. He was declared the BIG EAST Co-Defensive Player of the Year, a First Team All BIG EAST selection at defensive tackle, named to five All-American teams, and a Second Team All-America selection at defensive tackle by the Associated Press and Scout.com. The wait, was in fact, worth its weight in gold, as Derek Wolfe became the 36th overall selection in the 2012 NFL draft.

The Hoppels and the Pastores hosted Derek's draft party on the farm. A family moment shared by good people who saw a suffering soul and gifted him with arms opened instead of hands out. "My family doesn't care about ball. They care about my life. They ask me - how is your life?" He is grateful and knows all too well how susceptible players can be to being played. "People point and say, 'There he is', but what am I to them, really? When all the lights are shut off and I'm not playing anymore, what am I then? No one in the football world cares. Why? Because you can't do anything for them anymore. My brothers and I always say, 'Are they do or die?', Before I let anyone in, I always ask that. This way I avoid people who are in my life for the wrong reasons."

Letting love in for the first time didn't exactly kill him but, he admits, it nearly did. He met her in Florida during off-season training. She was an athlete like him and his connection to her was quick and fierce. "Letting someone like her in for the first time was like removing layers and layers of layers." In the end, the chiseling left him too vulnerable, too open, too pure. He had given heart, mind, body and soul and the responsibility of nurturing his needs and calming his fears of re-abandonment was too much for anyone - especially a creature as fragile as himself.

"When she cut it off, all the hate came back. I had to find a way to get it off. Hate is like a poison. Everything hurts when you hate." So he did what most boys do when they get hurt, he called his mom. He didn't know what to expect. He didn't even know what he wanted. He just thought it might feel good. "I was already crushed, so I figured, what could hurt more?"

It had been four years since he last saw or spoke to her. In the last year alone he got his degree, moved across the country, started in 16 pro games and signed a four-year contract with the Broncos. In that same year, his mom got a fatal diagnosis, battled a brain tumor, recovered from surgery and signed a new lease on life. She was sober. She was straight. And she seemed to be glad he called. He called Josh and asked him to make the trip with him. Perhaps he was hoping Josh's innate ability to read into things might help him make sense of his need to see her.

It would seem his biggest fear might be her rejection. Instead he contemplated the loss of a larger need. That which fueled his passion, lit up the football field and paid his bills. "I was afraid to let go of my anger because it drives me. Deep down though, I knew it was becoming reckless. I had to re-channel the fire, before it became destructive."

Considering the current epidemic casting a shadow on the league, with a 75% increase in player arrests since 2012 (there have been over 30 since the Super Bowl), perhaps Derek Wolfe is on to something. Players are valued for their violent collisions, for laying a player out. We revere the field assassin. *On the football field, that can get you in the Hall of Fame. On the streets, it can get you in the penitentiary. "There are a lot of us guys that use anger as fuel. The game becomes the vehicle. The roads we choose - well that's on us."

They would meet in Lisbon. He picked the date. The time. The place. "When you are forgiving someone for something they did to hurt you - it gets to be on your

terms." He has decided that he is doing this for himself and he doesn't feel that this is selfish. "There came a point when I realized that in order to have a healthy relationship with anyone - even myself, I'd have to let go with my mom.

Where he braced himself for indignation, he instead found regret. She admitted that he had not been a priority in her life, that she had not been a good mom, that she was wrong. She expressed sorrow in words and gesture and hoped for a relationship. By the time he left, he had forgiven her, even though she never asked him to.

And while the world of naysayers shake their heads at a seemingly naive boy, about to be lured back into the trap, Derek Wolfe is wise to the worry. "All she has asked for and all I am willing to give is time. The gift of time. Talking, checking in, just answering the phone when she calls." It's a choice she knows he has and he has an arm's length of reasons not to. "Every time I answer the phone she says, thank you." It's a big step and for the first time in Derek's life, he feels he is worthy to receive that love and ready to believe it might be real.

He credits his newfound clarity to the Hoppels and the Pastores. It is Jimmy Pastore that he publically refers to as dad. He remains grateful for the time they continue to invest in his life, honing his work ethic, his business principles, his character. "What they taught me most is that to care about yourself, you have to care about other people."

They taught him this, not in words, but in action and reaction to his own needs and in their constant reassurance that he matters in their lives.

A rookie no more, Derek sees the world differently now. He no longer feels like he is on the outside looking in. "Everyone is chasing happiness. Turns out, the only time I ever felt happy was when I was miserable. The release of anger was pleasing and I understood that as happiness." Like many with a cross to bear, he had something to prove. Life had tested him, tried him and he responded to the blows with brutal force. But he's a quick study and after one rookie season he has learned that you can't let the fight inside destroy you. "Look," he said, spinning a Wilson game ball in the air, "this little football has given me everything I have. A face, an identity, an income, a purpose. " This is a personal affirmation. A refusal to link his name to a staggering stat that has NFL execs clamoring to find a solution. "Anger is just an energy, you have to take it and channel it into something else. Don't react with your temper, react with your talent."

This off-season, Derek Wolfe has honed that talent and is poised to build off of a rookie season where his skills were proven (he led the Denver's defensive line in snaps (over 1000), recorded 40 tackles, six sacks and batted down two passes) and his leadership abilities unleashed, early on. Veteran players like Wesley Woodyard, Kevin Vickerson, and Von Miller already respect him for his on and off the field work ethic and the 2013 first pick Sylvester Williams, acknowledges that he already follows his lead. Wolfe is hungry again, not for love or money, not for food or friendship. He is hungry for a ring and he'll huff and he'll puff 'til he gets one.

* Excerpt from Zordich/Lyon When The Clock Runs Out/Letting Go/Triumph Books

Wolfe a 'Man on a Mission'

Entering his second NFL season, defensive lineman Derek Wolfe has taken on a leadership role and is hungry to build on a six-sack rookie campaign.

Gray Caldwell
DenverBroncos.com
Jul 8, 2013

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. **--** In a room full of grizzled NFL veterans, it's not often that a second-year player can just walk in and claim a leadership role.

But that's exactly what Derek Wolfe has done.

"We needed guys to step up in that role -- he has accepted it," 12-time Pro Bowler Champ Bailey said. "I like it. He works hard, he’s here every day. He thinks he is going to be the best at his position and I love that confidence about him.”

Wolfe's work ethic, which Bailey called "very impressive," is how the second-year defensive lineman believes he has been able to earn the trust of his teammates so early in his career.

“If you can look past the experience levels — I think that anybody that plays this game respects hard work," Wolfe said. "I just try to lead by example and do the right things and usually people will follow.”

Sylvester Williams, the club's first-round pick in the 2013 NFL Draft, acknowledged he is already following Wolfe's lead. He said he knew before he even got to Denver that he wanted to "stick behind him" and take his cues from Wolfe's non-stop motor.

Defensive Coordinator Jack Del Rio saw that leadership developing as early as the middle of Wolfe's rookie campaign.

Now, rookies and veterans alike are realizing what the Broncos have in the 6-foot-5, 285-pound lineman.

Four-time team captain Wesley Woodyard called Wolfe "a freak of nature," and defensive tackle Kevin Vickerson said he's seen the second-year player "coming into his own" and doing more than just talking the talk -- "he's showing it, too."

But his biggest fan on defense might be the Broncos' single-season sack leader, Von Miller.

Miller estimated that he "probably took three or four sacks away" from Wolfe last season, when the rookie would've had the sack had he not gotten there a split-second earlier. So he considers Wolfe's six-sack season more like a double-digit campaign.

Wolfe's thoughts on the matter? "As long as we're getting them to the ground, that's all that really matters."

"Derek Wolfe had an amazing rookie year," Miller said. "I think everybody knew he was destined to be (a leader) right when we first brought him in. He's just a worker. His sophomore year, I think he's going to have an amazing year. You can just tell by the way he's working on the field. It's hard to go against him. I'm all for him."

Having just turned a Defensive Rookie of the Year campaign into an even better sophomore season when he was the runner up for the league's Defensive Player of the Year, Miller was asked about how Wolfe will handle the transition.

In his answer, the two-time Pro Bowler compared Wolfe to the player who won Defensive Player of the Year.

"I talked to him about (Texans DL) J.J. Watt and the jump that he had from year one to year two," Miller said. "I think he can do the same type of stuff. I think you just keep working hard; I think he'll have the same type of effect for our defense."

Del Rio might not have mentioned Watt, but he said he's been pleased with Wolfe's response to a season in which he became just the second defensive lineman in Broncos history to start every game during his rookie campaign.

Wolfe's six sacks ranked third on the team, and he led all NFL rookie defensive linemen in play-time percentage. And he's far from satisfied.

"I thought last year was a really special year for him," Del Rio said. "And the refreshing part is that he came back hungry for much more. Not a little bit more, but much more. He really has his eyes set and his heart set on being a great player in this league. He knows he has to work to do that."

"There is no shortcut to building your skill level and I think Derek is really a man on a mission," he continued. "I like that about him. A lot of young guys come off a big year and they would have a tendency to get into that, 'I have it figured out' type of thing. And he is not approaching it like that at all. That's a really good thing for all of us."

As far as Wolfe is concerned, he's got just one goal.

"I just want to put my rookie year behind me and I just — I want to win," Wolfe said. "That's all I want to do. I don't really care what my stats look like.

"As long as we win and I have a ring on my finger at the end of the year, that's all that really matters."

Williams, Wolfe Bond Over Work Ethic

Rookie Sylvester Williams has been shadowing Derek Wolfe as he transitions to the pros, and Wolfe has been impressed with what he's seen.

Gray Caldwell
DenverBroncos.com
Jun 4, 2013

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. **--** As soon as Sylvester Williams arrived in Denver, Defensive Coordinator Jack Del Rio already knew who the rookie defensive tackle reminded him of.

Last year, a young defensive lineman named Derek Wolfe stepped into Dove Valley and immediately made an impact. By the end of his rookie season, he had started every game and finished third on the team with six sacks.

"Both of these young men, you've watched them come in the building — they both have approached it very similarly," Del Rio said during the team's rookie minicamp. "Come in kind of determined, serious, mature in their approach. I think you're going to see Sylvester be able to come in and impact us in a similar way."

It only makes sense that the two linemen have bonded quickly.

Wolfe, who has taken it upon himself to step up as a leader in year two, said he has taken Williams under his wing as the former University of North Carolina Tar Heel makes the transition to the pros.

"He's got a ton of potential and he wants to learn," Wolfe said. "So I just tell him, 'Hey, just come with me.' When we're lifting he's with me and on the sidelines he comes over and he stands by me. He's really good at learning and he's doing a really good job."

Williams said Wolfe was a player he immediately knew he wanted to seek out once the rookies joined the veterans in the club's offseason conditioning program.

"When I first came in he was one of the guys that I kind of keyed in on as a guy that I was going to stick behind him because I knew he was going to do the right thing," he said.

The biggest lesson he's learning from his fellow lineman is the importance of hard work.

That's not a foreign concept to Williams, whose drive paved the way from factory worker to junior college standout to a key cog in the Carolina defense and eventually a first-round pick.

"The thing I take from him is play hard all the time," Williams said. "He's a hard-nosed type of guy and he gives 100 percent to everything he does. In the weight room, this is the kind

of guy that’s doing extra reps and some guys are struggling to get all the reps they’re supposed to do."

The weight room is where Williams feels his work to step into the NFL game begins. He said his work with "Coach Luke" -- Strength and Conditioning Coach Luke Richesson -- has been one of the most important aspects of the OTA period.

Another is his work in the film room.

Defensive tackle Kevin Vickerson said Williams needs to work on his technique using his hands, because when he uses his hands, he can "dominate." The rookie has taken that advice to heart, "watching as much film as (he) can" to pick up on offensive keys so that he can simply react instead of hesitating to read the play before he gets his hands on the offensive linemen in front of him.

“I definitely see myself getting better every day," Williams said. "Every day I say, OK, something I didn’t do as well the day before, I feel myself getting better. So it’s a steady progress."

That work ethic isn't lost on Williams' teammates or his defensive coordinator.

"That is what I like about the way he’s started here, that he’s come in here very determined, very serious, very mature, very much about his business," Del Rio said. "That is good for all of us.”

Woodyard, Bailey, Wolfe Leaders on Defense

Defensive Coordinator Jack Del Rio said three players stand out to him as the leaders of the Broncos defense.

Gray Caldwell
DenverBroncos.com
May 21, 2013

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. -- Earlier this offseason, Von Miller called the Broncos' locker room one of the best in the NFL.

Part of that, Defensive Coordinator Jack Del Rio confirmed on Tuesday, is the abundance of leadership.

Speaking specifically about the defensive side of the ball, Del Rio pointed out two Broncos in particular that the rest of the unit looks up to.

"I think Wesley Woodyard stepped forward last year, became a leader for us," he said. "Champ Bailey, because of his stature, is a constant force here. So those are the two guys that jump to my mind."

"Guys always emerge," he continued. "I try to talk about, 'Look, this is our defense, and you need to embrace it and make it your own. Take ownership.' Part of that is having leaders step up and take charge."

Another player that the defensive coordinator expects to take a step toward that leadership role is second-year defensive lineman Derek Wolfe.

While it was hard for him to be a leader as a rookie, Del Rio said Wolfe began to emerge as one as the year went on. Miller said Wolfe has completed that transition this offseason.

"He's already the leader in the defensive line room," said Miller, who doesn't consider himself a vocal leader and prefers to let his "actions on the field speak for (him)." "I think everybody knew he was destined to be that right when we first brought him in."

As for Woodyard, he said he "absolutely" prides himself on working his way from an undrafted free agent to a team captain and leader on defense.

"It’s something that I’m excited about – getting a chance to be looked at as one of the leaders on the defense," he said. "I think that Champ has the back end and me up front – I think right now it’s going pretty good. These first few days, it’s too early to say anything, but we’re right where we want to be at right now. We have our same defense in and it feels comfortable and everybody is having fun. That’s what it’s all about."

Draft Memories Fuel Three Broncos

For Eric Decker, Derek Wolfe and Wesley Woodyard, the draft doesn't always bring back positive memories. But all three use it as motivation.

Gray Caldwell
DenverBroncos.com
Apr 17, 2013

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. -- The 2013 NFL Draft kicks off in just eight days. But one of the most exciting events of the NFL offseason doesn't always conjure fond memories for the players involved.

"It's one of the most stressful times of your life as a player, going through that," said defensive lineman Derek Wolfe, a second-round pick in 2012. "It's hard to put into words the feelings that you get. Because you have no clue what's going to happen, what's in store for your future. So you're just waiting around to see who wants you."

Wide receiver Eric Decker agreed that the actual draft weekend was the most stressful aspect of the event, but the leadup to it was even harder for him.

After suffering a foot injury in his final season at the University of Minnesota, Decker wasn't able to showcase his skills at the NFL Scouting Combine or a Pro Day.

But when he finally got the call that he was headed to Denver in the third round, the whole process was worth it.

"It was a big relief," he said. "I was excited for the opportunity to play the game that I grew up loving. To be with such a great organization, I cherish that moment every day that I'm here."

For linebacker Wesley Woodyard, the actual draft never brought a happy ending.

After earning first-team All-SEC honors in each of his final two seasons at Kentucky, where he ranked eighth in school history in tackles, Woodyard waited seven excruciating rounds but never heard his name called.

"I thought I would never get to play this game again," he recalled. "I think that set in to me. I remember when I drove out here to go to the airport. It was dark, raining. I shed a few tears."

"Thinking about not having a chance to play this game pushes me every day," he said. "It's always there. And my thing is: being undersized and being undrafted, those chips will never go away for me, man."

Woodyard didn't let the snub hold him back. Instead, he made the team as an undrafted free agent, going on to start six games as a rookie. Fast forward to last season, and Woodyard was a team captain for the fourth consecutive season, starting 14 games as the only player in the league to record at least 100 tackles, five sacks and three interceptions in 2012.

Now, some incoming draft prospects are even compared to Woodyard.

"I think that's what everybody wants to be -- compared to somebody," he said. "Especially if you respect the game of football, you want guys coming after you to look up to you."

For better or worse, draft memories never go away for many NFL players. And for those that feel they should have been drafted sooner -- or at all -- it can serve as fuel for a long and successful career.

"When somebody does something like that to you or something like that happens in your life, it always has a special place in your heart -- it kind of sticks with you your whole life," Wolfe said. "It kind of puts a little chip on your shoulder. But all that really matters is where you're at now. It doesn't matter what happened in the past. But you can definitely remember that feeling."

Denver Broncos Q&A: Rookie defensive lineman Derek Wolfe

Patrick Saunders
The Denver Post
December 9, 2012

Derek Wolfe looks like he's carved out of granite. He's not simply a huge man, he's rock solid. Little wonder the National Strength and Conditioning Association recognized Wolfe as its 2011 athlete of the year when he was a senior at the University of Cincinnati.

Wolfe's work ethic stems from his teenage years toiling on a farm in Negley, Ohio, a tiny hamlet only a mile from the Pennsylvania border.

"There was a lot of stuff we had to do," Wolfe said. "The farm I lived on had probably about 110 head of cattle and there were always chores. We had 70 acres to maintain. There was big stuff and little stuff, general maintenance. Anything from getting the cows fed to using a weed whacker to keep the place in shape."

Wolfe grew up in football country, but he was no fan of the powerful Pittsburgh Steelers. That made his 9-yard sack of Steelers quarterback Ben Roethlisberger in the Broncos' season opener that much sweeter.

Q: Did life on a farm help prepare you for the rigors of college and pro football?

A: I think so. Things that need to be done, you might not always want to do them, but you have to do them. So that becomes part of your life, part of who you are. Still, you find a way to put some fun in it. I mean, nobody really likes to bale hay, but when you've got a bunch of guys out there pitching in and doing it together, it becomes kind of fun."

Q: You've made a name for yourself because of your fitness level. Is that because you wanted to be a better athlete? Or because you enjoy the pain and agony of working out?

A: You love to hate it. You love certain things about it, but not all of it. Nobody likes to get sore and beat up by working the weights, but if you think about how much better you're going to be when it's over, you realize it's going to pay off. It's worth it.

Q: You also got involved in martial arts. What prompted that?

A: I do a little jiujitsu and some boxing. I was a wrestler in high school too. I still do martial arts now, at least every once in a while, because it keeps me flexible.

Q: Your diet is pretty strict, but you must like to splurge now and then.

A: I end up gorging sometimes. I like pizza. Plain old pizza. Thin-crust pizza with pepperoni. If I have a cheat meal, that's going to be my cheat meal.

Q: When you signed your NFL contract, did you reward yourself with anything?

A: I bought a truck. It's a Ford Raptor F-150. It's slick race-ready. It's cool, it's a lot of fun. I haven't really splurged on anything since then. With the season and everything, and being a rookie and everything, I really haven't had much time for anything except football. There is something new every day.

Q: You came from an area where people live and die with their football. What was it like on Friday nights when you played for the Beaver High School Beavers in Lisbon, Ohio?

A: That's what you dreamed about growing up — playing under those lights. You didn't dream about the NFL or even college, you dreamed about those Friday nights. Then when you started playing on Fridays, you started thinking about playing on Saturdays. Then when you start playing on Saturdays, you start dreaming about playing on Sundays. There is always a goal.

Derek Wolfe file Position: Defensive end

Height: 6-foot-5

Weight: 300 pounds

Hometown: Negley, Ohio

College: Cincinnati

Draft: Second round, 2012, by the Broncos

Career stats: 12 games, 12 starts, 32 total tackles (20 unassisted), three sacks for 21 yards, one pass defended

Catching up with … Broncos DT Derek Wolfe

Paul Dehner Jr.
GoBearcats.com
October 31, 2012

University of Cincinnati product Derek Wolfe will return to town this weekend for the first time since capturing a share of the Big East title last season at Nippert Stadium.

The No. 36 overall selection and first pick of the Denver Broncos will take on the Cincinnati Bengals at Paul Brown Stadium. Wolfe finished first in the Big East and fifth in the nation last year with 21.5 tackles for loss and provided the dominant force on the Bearcats defensive line with 9.5 sacks.

His rookie year with Denver (4-3) opened with a bang as he racked up three sacks and stands second on the team behind Von Miller in tackles for loss with five. He spent the year playing half his time at defensive tackle and the other half at the defensive end position.

For Sunday's game he anticipates busloads trekking from his hometown of Lisbon, Ohio and filling up PBS for his homecoming.

I had the opportunity to catch up with him this week to talk about the whirlwind of being drafted, chip still residing on his shoulder and his take on close friend, former teammate Walter Stewart.

Rookie year what you expected?

DW: Obviously, I would like to have a few more snaps, but, you know, other than that it has kind of gone how I thought it would. It stated off a little slow and starting to get the hang of things now. I'm starting to kind of get it. The game is starting to slow down for me a little bit and plays are starting to come my way.

What was it like getting that phone call on draft day?

DW: It feels like a house being lifted off your back because it's the most stressful thing I've ever been through. Where you are going to be, where you are going to live, what kind of job are you going to be doing, what kind of defense are you going to be playing in. It's just a big monkey off your back when you get that phone call.

Then it's kind of like a surreal moments because you are doing nothing but doing phone interviews and talking to coaches and talking to media for two days straight. When it's all said and done, OK, now the real work starts. It's not time to take a break it's time to put the foot on the gas pedal and work even harder.

Any chance to reflect on your rise from off the radar junior year to first pick of the Broncos following your senior season?

DW: Honestly, no. To me it's just nothing but eyes forward. Don't look at what you've done and what you have been through

Kind of a homecoming here after going to UC, any extra juices to play at PBS?

DW: It's kind of, listen, everybody you know is going to be there so make sure you don't look stupid. Make sure you perform. Because, obviously, growing up there were a lot of people that doubted me. I'm sure some of those people will be in the stands rooting for me, but don't give anybody any reason to say, 'See, I told you he didn't belong here.' That's kind of like the thing on my back. I always want to make sure I belong and do what I have to do to do that.

That's what motivates you?

DW: I love to prove people wrong. Oh, you are just one of those guys that works hard you are not really a good pass rusher. OK, so that's what motivates me. Obviously I was the first pick and everything but falling out of the first round, that is a chip on my shoulder, too. I just have to prove everybody wrong that I would have been worth that pick. So, all the people that passed up on me that is something I work to prove them wrong.

Feel like with what done so far you have proven you belong?

DW: I haven't proven anything yet because I'm not even done with my rookie season. After I've played a few years then I'll know I belong.

You say you talk to those guys at UC a couple times every other week, have you been able to talk with Walter Stewart since his injury?

DW: I haven't gotten to talk to Walt about it but that is a tough situation. I am pretty close to the kid anyways just from we came in together, went through that growing process together and he's putting a great year together then something like that happens. It just shows you that you have to play every snap like it is your

last because you never know if it is going to be over. Breaks my heart. It really does. Talk about a guy that does everything right. He's a great leader, he does everything right. When something like that happens, it just - I don't know how to explain it, it just doesn't make sense to me.

Denver Broncos rookie defensive lineman Derek Wolfe a big hit so far

Lindsay H. Jones
The Denver Post
August 11, 2012

Finally, as Derek Wolfe planted his hand in the Soldier Field dirt Thursday night, he was staring down a live target. After weeks of being told "Don't touch the quarterback," Wolfe couldn't wait to start a pass rush and finish it. Sure, Thursday was just a preseason game, and nothing that happened in Chicago will stick on Wolfe's NFL record. But with two sacks and another tackle for a loss, Wolfe made a good first impression.

"Obviously I want to be starting, so I'm going to do what I have to do to start. I'll keep my head down, keep grinding, keep pushing," Wolfe said. "You get what you deserve in this league. And if you deserve to start, they'll put you in there."

It's exactly the type of statement the Broncos expect to hear from their top pick. Still, he was largely an unknown prospect when the Broncos drafted him at No. 36 in April.

As the Broncos settle into the middle of the preseason and three more meaningless games, maybe it's time to fire up Google and track down some University of Cincinnati defensive highlights. What those Wolfe highlights reveal is a defensive lineman who routinely overpowered his opponent, and ran over and around offensive linemen en route to sacking the quarterback.

In four seasons with the Bearcats, Wolfe had 19½ sacks, including 9½ sacks last season. He also had 21½ tackles for a loss in 2011, stats usually associated with a defensive end, not an interior lineman.

"That's why they liked me — because of what I did in college," Wolfe said.

One of Jay Rodgers' first tasks in his new job as Broncos' defensive line coach was to find a role for Wolfe in the rotation of tackles and ends. Rodgers took over the job in mid-May when Wayne Nunnely retired. The only problem was, Wolfe wasn't allowed to be at Dove Valley because of an NCAA rule that prevents newly drafted players from joining their NFL teams until their college class graduates. At the University of Cincinnati, the graduation ceremony was June 9, meaning Wolfe was forced to work out on his own in Ohio while the rest of his teammates and coaches were going through organized team activities in Denver.

"There was no staying up to speed, because I wasn't allowed to really have contact with the coaches at all," Wolfe said. "I just tried to stay in shape. You can always control what type of shape you're in, so that's what I worried about."

Wolfe spent much of that month doing CrossFit, mixed martial arts and boxing training, all designed to maintain strength while improving his cardiovascular endurance.

"In football, you do something quick, then stop and do something else. It's a lot of stop, go, stop, go. Not a lot of rest," Wolfe said. "(CrossFit and MMA) is about getting your lungs in condition. Anyone can grab a weight and lift it once. It's about how many times can you lift it and do it right."

There was no question about Wolfe's fitness when he was allowed to join his teammates. And once training camp began, Wolfe has thrived in the practice setting. The biggest challenge, he said, has been adapting to the mental rigor of camp, with hours of meetings and film session as he learns an NFL defense in a room full of veterans.

"We've kept him at one position, for the most part, which has simplified things," Rodgers said.

That position is strongside defensive end, where he occupies the second slot on the depth chart behind Jason Hunter. The defensive ends on the other side of the chart are Elvis Dumervil and Robert Ayers.

As the preseason has progressed, the 6-foot-5, 300-pound Wolfe also has seen increased work in the "sub" packages, sliding inside to tackle when the Broncos move into their nickel defense for passing situations. With veteran defensive tackle Justin Bannan sidelined by a strained calf, Wolfe has taken plenty of snaps with the first-team defense.

"He's got a bigger body than most ends do and he's got a chance to play a little more inside," Rodgers said. "Now, as time goes on and he learns the defense, he'll have the ability to play any place he wants to play."

And that's what Wolfe showed Thursday against the Bears. His first sack, in the first quarter, was considered a "coverage" sack; Bears quarterback Jason Campbell had nowhere to go and no one to throw to. For Wolfe's second sack, he bull rushed his way to take down Josh McCown for an 8-yard loss.

"Derek's a monster. He's really making our offensive line work hard. He's coming off the edge strong. When he's lined up inside, he's blowing up the middle. He's putting pressure on the quarterback. From what I've felt in the pocket and seen on film, I think Derek's having a great camp," said quarterback Brock Osweiler, a fellow second-round pick and frequent training camp opponent.

About Wolfe

Position: Defensive lineman

Height: 6-foot-5

Weight: 300 pounds

Age: 22

Hometown: Libson, Ohio

College: Cincinnati

Drafted: Second round (36th overall in April by the Broncos)

College career

Played 45 games; started last 38

Had 19½ sacks in his career, including 9½ as a senior

Big East co-defensive player of the year and second-team All- America honors as a senior

---

Rookie report

Derek Wolfe was the first of the Broncos' draft picks on the field in Thursday's preseason opener at Chicago. NFL reporter Lindsay H. Jones analyzes how those players performed in their Denver debuts:

Derek Wolfe, defensive lineman: With two sacks, and a tackle for a loss, already making the Broncos look smart for passing up higher profile tackles to wait to draft him at No. 36.

Brock Osweiler, quarterback: He'd like to forget his first pass, which skipped short of its intended receiver. But Osweiler, playing the third quarter, went on two complete four of his next six passes, including a touchdown to Jason Hill.

Ronnie Hillman, running back: Traveled to Chicago, but did not play as he continues to recover from a minor hamstring injury.

Omar Bolden, cornerback: Played most of the second half at the inside and outside cornerback positions. Credited with making one tackle.

Philip Blake, offensive lineman: Still playing with the third-string offensive line, though his versatility as a guard and center will help his case to make the 53-man roster.

Malik Jackson, defensive lineman: Playing with the third-string defense in the second half, Jackson recovered a fumble.

Danny Trevathan, linebacker: The sixth-round pick got plenty of work as a weakside linebacker in the second-string base defense and nickel packages. He suffered an ankle injury late in the game, but the injury isn't considered to be serious.

Woody Paige: Peyton Manning new leader of Broncos' arms race

Woody Paige
The Denver Post
July 29, 2012

Historically, the most scrutinized upraised right arm is in the Orion constellation. Next, now, is the upraised right arm in the Broncos' training camp.

This appendage belongs to Peyton, and unlike Orion who used a club, his weapon is a football.

We have become accustomed in Denver to analyzing elevated arms, right and left, from John Elway's to Jay Cutler's, Mike Hampton's to Ubaldo Jimenez's, and, of course, Tim Tebow's.

As Hemingway did, we've often said farewell to arms: Jake Plummer's, Aaron Cook's, Tommy Maddox's, Cutler's — which he claimed was stronger than Elway's — and Tebow's, which nobody is quite certain about.

We have welcomed Manning's arm, even though its strength after four neck surgeries has been questioned.

After Saturday's practice at Dove Valley, Brandon Stokley — a former Broncos wide receiver trying to become a current Broncos wide receiver — might as well have sang "Hakuna Matata" from "The Lion King."

No worries.

Stokely said Manning's 2012 arm is no different from Manning's arm between 2003 and 2006, when Stokely caught more than 100 passes Manning threw. "It's the same. That's about all I have to say about it," said Stokley.

To those thousands of curious Broncos supporters who showed up for morning practice Saturday, the dozens of national and local media personnel, the wide receivers and cornerbacks, coaches and sycophants, Manning's arm worked and looked just fine, thank you. He threw long and short, in and out, with speed and accuracy. He's probably at 90 percent and rising. And he was sweating and smiling.

Del Rio has made it clear already what happened up front last season is not what he's looking to see this time around. He wants the team's tackles to be bigger, more physical and more productive across the board.

Heading into the draft, versatility up front is what separated Wolfe from most of the other defensive linemen on the board. Watch the game video and you will see Wolfe consistently won matchups all across the defensive front — at end, at tackle and even on the nose.

His 21.5 tackles for loss were the most by any interior defensive linemen at a major college program. It's what the Broncos hope to see more of as Wolfe gets more and more comfortable with the playbook.

"He's got natural finish at the quarterback ability," Del Rio said. "He just has a way of being slippery when it's time to rush the quarterback and we need some push inside from our tackles."

Broncos DT Derek Wolfe is quickly making up for lost time

Jeff Legwold
The Denver Post
July 28, 2012

As the Broncos were busy trying to get of the NFL draft's first round last April, they still had their eyes on the guy they believed could be a productive part of their defensive front.

A guy they believed would be more productive than most of the other, more high-profile names that had been floated around them leading up to the draft.

So, when, two trades later, the Broncos finally made their first pick, at 36th overall, it was Derek Wolfe.

And while the Broncos have had to wait a bit to see Wolfe work, they certainly like what he's done so far in training camp. Because of NCAA rules and the University of Cincinnati's school calendar, Wolfe missed virtually all of the Broncos' offseason programs.

By rule, an NFL rookie cannot report to his team until his class has graduated. The University of Cincinnati didn't have its seniors graduate until mid-June so Wolfe was only able to attend the Broncos' three-day minicamp.

The players then departed for what remained of the offseason and had no contact with the coaching staff. So when Wolfe reported for training camp Wednesday, he was simply tossed into the playbook pool.

"Now, he's going to be swimming for a while because of all that missed time," said Broncos defensive coordinator Jack Del Rio. "... He's a little frustrated by that. We're here now, he's working, he is a worker."

Despite being behind, the Broncos have big plans for Wolfe and he has big plans for himself.

And with each passing day the expectation is the head start other players had on him will continue to erode.

"He's a guy that really cares. He's a high-energy guy. He's going to be a load when he's playing end, he'll be a mismatch, he can slide down and play tackle and will do both," Del Rio said. "I like the way he started camp."

Broncos' Derek Wolfe "expects to contribute" as a rookie

By Mike Klis
The Denver Post
June 12, 2012

There is an earnest quality to Derek Wolfe that the Broncos hope never dissolves.

He is a conscientious sort, dedicated to his craft. He wants to do well. It bothers him that he doesn't know the playbook as well as he should. But with all due respect to Wolfe and his top-grade characteristics, he is a defensive tackle.

How many plays does a defensive tackle have to learn?

"If you mess up, just do it hard," Wolfe said. "If you're going to mess up, just run to the ball. You can't coach effort."

Apparently, among his many gifts, Wolfe is smart. The rookie defensive tackle participated in his first NFL full-squad practice Tuesday when the Broncos opened their minicamp, which will continue today and conclude Thursday.

For starters, Wolfe felt three weeks behind. Soon after he became the first player selected by the Broncos in the recent NFL draft, No. 36 overall, Wolfe was told to scram. Go home to Lisbon, Ohio.

Because his college, the University of Cincinnati, didn't hold its commencement exercise until June 9, NFL rules would not allow Wolfe to participate in the Broncos' 10 organized team activities (OTAs), held over the past three weeks.

Upon his return, Wolfe got plenty of reps. It was with the second team, along with veteran Ty Warren. Wolfe and Warren may be the favorites to become the Broncos' starting defensive tackles eventually, but now both are behind Justin Bannan and Sealver Siliga.

Bannan and Siliga were impressive during OTAs as they took advantage of the absence of Wolfe and Warren. Wolfe was kept away against his will. Warren stayed away in protest of the Broncos' initial pay-cut proposal.

All is well now. The Broncos' coaching staff is trying to force-feed Wolfe. It had him working at defensive end in Denver's base 4-3 defense, and moved him inside to defensive tackle in the nickel package.

It's not unusual for a player coming off an extended layoff to get little more than "mental" reps for a couple of practices or so. Was Wolfe surprised he got in for so many plays on his first day back?

"I expect to contribute," Wolfe said. "They didn't draft me with their first pick not to play. There are some expectations that I'm trying to live up to."

Back in April, as the Broncos lined up the defensive tackle prospects who would be available to them in the draft, Wolfe spurred some discussion inside the Dove Valley war room. The devil's advocate stance was his "tweener" size. Wolfe played at about 285 pounds during his senior year at Cincinnati.

Smallish frame. Humongous results. Wolfe led NCAA major-college defensive tackles with 9½ sacks. When the Broncos drafted him early in the second round, they kept raving about how he gave his all on the field.

"Great motor," Broncos coach John Fox said after his team's minicamp workout Tuesday. "He plays with the type of passion we want here in our football players."

Wolfe is 295 pounds now. The hope is that by his second or third NFL season, he becomes a 310-pound defensive tackle and nothing but.

It can take a while for even the most talented of defensive tackles to figure out the NFL game. B.J. Raji was the ninth pick in the 2009 draft, and he started only one game for the Green Bay Packers as a rookie before becoming a dominant playmaker his second season.

In that same draft, 6-4, 295-pound defensive end/tackle Tyson Jackson was the No. 3 pick of the Kansas City Chiefs. Jackson still is trying to figure it out. He has two sacks in three seasons.

The Broncos are planning on Wolfe playing plenty as a rookie. Maybe it will be as an inside pass rusher in the early part of the season, but as an every-down player at some point.

He showed signs Tuesday of being a quick learner. By the end of practice, he was running stunts with Jason Hunter, in which Wolfe lined up inside, then moved right to pass rush from the outside.

"You got to know I've had my nose in the playbook since I've been here," Wolfe said. "It's starting to come. It's hard to just look at it and know what you're doing when you're not on the field and not having the coaches there."

Derek Wolfe eager to get his NFL career started with the Denver Broncos

By Mike Klis
The Denver Post
June 12, 2012

Derek Wolfe was given a three-week free pass.

He didn't have to endure the drudgery of the Broncos' offseason practices. He wasn't asked to take copious notes during those boring position meetings. He didn't have to wake up early or stay late at the team's Dove Valley headquarters.

Wolfe even got handsomely paid during his sabbatical, receiving a contract that paid him a $2.27 million signing bonus.

He was free, rich — and absolutely miserable.

"It was frustrating," Wolfe said. "Frustrating to get behind like that."

Wolfe is a defensive tackle from the University of Cincinnati who in late April became the first player drafted by the Broncos. They waited until the second round, No. 36 overall, but he was the first off their board.

He participated in the Broncos' rookie camp in early May, but then was ordered, against his will, to stay away from the 10 organized team activity (OTA) practices that spanned the past three weeks.

NFL rules stated Wolfe had to wait until after his Cincinnati graduation class walked through its ceremony Saturday before he could rejoin the Broncos — even though Wolfe remains a few credits shy of his degree.

So, forgive Wolfe if he's more gung-ho than others about participating in the Broncos' three-day minicamp session that starts today and marks the final segment of the team's offseason program.

"I can't wait to get on the field," said Wolfe, who spent the past three weeks working out near his hometown of Lisbon, Ohio. "It'll come fast. It's just something that's frustrating that you get punished for something you can't control."

The Broncos' OTAs missed not only Wolfe but practice on extra points and field goals. Barring a last-minute breakthrough in negotiations, Matt Prater, the Broncos' kicker the past four seasons, is expected to remain an unsigned holdout through the minicamp.

Prater was tendered a $2.6 million franchise-tag salary for 2012, but because he hasn't signed it, the team can't fine him if he misses the otherwise mandatory minicamp sessions. Prater is holding out in hopes of increasing bargaining leverage for a long-term contract.

Wolfe already has his long-term deal after he and the Broncos agreed to a four-year, $6.25 million contract while he was away. In the Broncos' ideal plan, Wolfe and veteran Ty Warren eventually will become their starting defensive tackles this season. But as both essentially missed the OTA period — Warren was an unofficial contract holdout until reporting last Wednesday — veteran Justin Bannan and first-year player Sealver Siliga have a legitimate chance of altering plan A.

Where Wolfe fears he fell behind is with the playbook. He studied all he could, but those defensive plays are nothing more than diagrams from D.J. Williams' Twitter account without having the chance to implement those assignments on the field.

"The physical part I'm not worried about," Wolfe said. "I don't like to go out there and not know what I'm doing. I can't wait to get back out there."