

# Pre-draft concerns about Garrett Bolles' age have not come to pass

By Andrew Mason

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Google the terms “Garrett Bolles” and “overaged” and you’ll get a bushel of stories leading up to the 2017 NFL Draft citing Bolles’ relatively advanced age as a reason for caution regarding his status that year.

Bolles turned 25 years of age before his first regular-season game. His first contract expired at age 28, which is two or three years past the same point for most NFL players.

He turned 30 last Friday.

And the talking point that seemed so concerning five years ago is rarely mentioned today.

To date, Bolles has been quite durable. Of the 81 possible games played in his career, he’s missed just four — and two of them were for non-injury reasons. He missed a 2020 game at Carolina due to illness and he sat out the home win over the Chargers last year while on the COVID-19 list.

Over time, he’s also become sturdier on the mental side.

“Now, I look back at myself, I’m a lot more humble, a lot more vulnerable. I feel like I’ve grown in all aspects of my life,” he said. “I’m a big believer in the way you live your life off the field is the way you play on the field. So, I had to realize how to balance my family life [and] at the same time, being a professional athlete.”

In fact, Bolles’ life experience and career ups and downs have made him into a leader in the offensive-line room. Few players have gone from being the pariah of the fan base to becoming a second-team All-Pro as he did.

In April, he mentioned how he hired a mental-health consultant to help him with the cerebral side of the game. He made that move in November 2019, during the Broncos’ Week 10 bye. It was then that his game started to turn around. He became more effective. The frequency of holding penalties — which peaked when he had four against Chicago in Week 2 of 2019 — dropped.

Yes, the critique that the Broncos could have drafted tackle Ryan Ramczyk remains a valid one. Bolles eventually found his form, but his career hasn’t had the consistency of Ramczyk, who has been a first- or second-team All-Pro in three of his six New Orleans seasons, most recently 2020.

But as Bolles heads into his 30s with only two games missed to injury over his first five seasons, age and its accumulated effects is not a concern.

Tackles like Trent Williams, Andrew Whitworth and Jason Peters flourished well into their 30s. Compared with most, Bolles had minimal football experience before the Broncos drafted him. Thus, he doesn’t carry the accumulated wear and tear of most tackles at his age.

The concern now? Whether he can successfully re-adapt to a zone-blocking based scheme. There are similarities to what then-offensive coordinator Rich Scangarello installed in 2019. But Nathaniel Hackett's scheme is not a carbon copy.

"There are some differences," Bolles said after a voluntary-veteran minicamp practice last month. "I think it's more detail-oriented [now]; there's a lot more details."

But it also rewards athleticism and quickness, which have long been Bolles' strong points.

"I feel good. This offense is an outside-zone scheme, so you've got to be quick and agile and you've got to stay on your angle, and you've got to use your hands [and] use your feet," he said at voluntary veteran minicamp. "And I feel like with my lacrosse background, being able to move my feet, running up and down the field, I think [I] just fit this scheme really well."

If Bolles does, his best could still be yet to come.

# Garett Bolles' transformation has gone from hate to love

By Mike Klis

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Garett Bolles was talking about his transformation as an NFL left tackle.

"I know you all have razed me over the years and I appreciate that because it's made who I am today," the Broncos' starting blindside protector for going on his sixth NFL season said Thursday from the new Pat Bowlen Fieldhouse media room. "I've gone from probably one of the most hated players here to now everybody loves me."

He laughed a little as the words that had just flew off his tongue soaked in to his ever-whirring mind. Bolles then started meandering into his childhood, amusingly saying how he wasn't a kid who grew up "where everything is pretty and the grass is green and the cows are chirping."

Wait a minute. Cows what? "Mooring, chickens, whatever," he continued in his lovable way. "I didn't grow up like that. I came from the mud."

When he was through with his answer, Bolles was asked if he could identify a moment when he went from the most hated player to widely loved.

"I think in 2019 -- you're going to make me emotional," Bolles said as his eyes welled. "In 2019 we played the Minnesota Vikings. I think we had a bye week before then. That whole week I went home and power-raked my entire parents' lawn. Just trying to figure out what's best for me. I was just really angry and frustrated."

Where it really got rough that season was Game 2 against the Bears when in a period from late in the second quarter until early in the third he was flagged time after time for holding -- four times his name blared across the loud speaker -- and the home crowd, the Broncos' faithful, booed him mercilessly. The holding calls continued here and there that season until the week 10 bye that brought a time of reflection and, with the help of a mental coach, a change in attitude and mindset.

"If you guys know me I have to be perfect in everything I do," Bolles said. "With having ADHD, you're mind wanders all the time. ... I dissected my whole game. And I remember going into that game, I hired somebody that is really just focused on mental and mentally becoming competitively mature. And playing this game not being erratic. Focus on being mature at that position."

"You talk about some of the greats: Joe Staley, Joe Thomas, Jonathan Ogden, you talk about all these great tackles -- Trent Williams will be one of those guys -- those guys compete at a high level but they're mature. And they're calm and composed."

"And I had to learn that. I remember going into that game and blocking Everson Griffen who's a phenomenal player. We were going at it all game long. I think we were driving the ball with about 1:30 left. I can't remember, what quarterback did we have? Brandon Allen, I believe."

With that Bolles shook his head.

“We have had so many here,” he said with a smile and a small laugh.

Indeed, Allen was making the second start of his NFL career. The Broncos had blown a 20-0 halftime lead and were trailing the home Vikings, 27-23 with 5:55 left to play. The Broncos had a chance, though, getting the ball at their own 40. In one of the two most methodical, futile drives in the Vic Fangio era – the Broncos had 18 plays not including two penalties – the Broncos had first and goal from the 4 yard line with 10 seconds left. Three incompletions later, the clock had expired. The Broncos lost a heartbreaker, 27-23.

They lost the game, but Bolles won the battle with himself.

“And so I think we were driving with a minute or so left in the game and the crowd was getting loud and I think that was a moment in my life where I felt I belonged in this league, I belong in that position,” Bolles said. “It was a severe moment. I think from that game on, from 2020 to now, I think I’ve made myself one of the best left tackles in football.”

He's got his bank account to prove it. Bolles' \$21 million cap figure for 2022 is the highest among NFL tackles.

Like everybody else around Broncos Country, Bolles is excited about the acquisition of quarterback Russell Wilson, who promises to put a stop to the Broncos' signal-caller roller coaster since Peyton Manning retired following the 2015 Super Bowl 50 season. Allen was the sixth of 10 quarterbacks who started at least one game for the Broncos the previous six seasons. Teddy Bridgewater was the latest on the list. He directed a 20-play drive at Kansas City last season when the Broncos started at their own 3 and made it to the Chiefs' 8 only to come away with nothing.

Bolles said he was playing Pickleball – a good quick-feet exercise for Nathaniel Hackett's offensive lineman as he prepare for the outside zone blocking system – when he got a text from Wilson to hook up via Face Time.

“We talked for like 10 minutes,” Bolles said. “I was just excited. I told him, 'Hey man, I know you're used to being hit. You're not going to get hit here.' I'm really looking forward to it.”

Of the Broncos' returning offensive line starters, Bolles is the biggest lock to retain his job. There will be others – center Lloyd Cushenberry III would seem to be a sure bet -- but they will have to compete to keep their jobs.

“I'm in a competition, too, man,” Bolles said. “I'm not going to take my job lightly. It's a new coaching staff, a new quarterback, a new sheriff. I mean, everyone's job is up for grabs. Just because I've been here for a long time doesn't mean I'm not going to compete for my job.”

Still, he doesn't think Hackett's new offensive system and blocking scheme will hurt his chances. Besides, a new offense, new offensive coordinator and new offensive line coach is not new to Bolles since he was the Broncos' first-round selection, No. 20 overall, in the 2017 NFL Draft.

“You know I've had like four or five offensive coordinators since I've been here,” he said. “I think everything is a little bit different. The terminology changes a little bit. But in 2019 when we had (offensive coordinator Rich) Scangarello, I believe, very similar offense. So I got to be in this system for a little bit.

“And I love this system. I think at the end of 2019 is when it started to come alive for me and started to become the player I am today. So I think that fits me really well.

"But I think our offensive linemen are special. Everyone we have in there can bring a different aspect to the game.

“But this offense, we want to get outside. We want to get the ball to our playmakers and we’ve got to create the pocket upfront and make sure No. 3’s good. Everyone has a challenge and I’m really looking forward to it.”