

# Nik Bonitto aims to beef up as Broncos prepare rookie for an impact role

By Nick Kosmider

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As Broncos general manager George Paton began speaking in late April about his team's first selection of the NFL Draft, he barreled through a list of qualities he believes will make outside linebacker Nik Bonitto an impact player in the league sooner rather than later.

As he waxed poetic about "the bend, the speed, the burst" and the college production, Paton also laid out what he believed to be the top priority for the former University of Oklahoma star to focus on as he transitioned to the pro game.

"He needs to get a little bit stronger," Paton said bluntly.

Enter head strength and conditioning coach Loren Landow, director of team nutrition Bryan Snyder and a host of other coaches and support staff members who form an ecosystem to help rookies like Bonitto pack on the extra pounds necessary to hold up at the NFL level.

"Loren runs my (rookie group) with me and Christopher Allen," said Bonitto, the No. 64th pick in this year's draft, which was Denver's first selection after it traded away its top two picks to Seattle in the deal for quarterback Russell Wilson. "It's just about learning from him, coming in and taking his coaching every day and working as hard as I can (in the weight room) to meet my goals and be where I want to be."

Bonitto said he weighed between 230 and 235 pounds during his junior season with the Sooners in 2021. He's in the 240-pound range now. The Broncos would like him to play at about 250 pounds during his rookie season. What the staff isn't trying to do is throw all that weight on at once, not sweating the fluctuations that will inevitably come during his first NFL training camp. As much as this time of year for a rookie is about learning the playbook, it's also about laying the day-to-day foundation that will help him learn what his body needs on a day-to-day basis.

"They're not going too crazy with me, and we're taking it day by day," Bonitto said, noting that he has appreciated the approach the staff has developed with him. "It's about learning to do it the right way." Part of the process for Bonitto has been elevating his calorie count, which has been an adjustment for a player who admits, "I don't really like to eat that much."

Bonitto has had to train himself to grab one of the high-protein shakes Snyder and his staff prepare for players and set up near the entrance to the locker room after practice. Bonitto said he has rarely been a snacker, but now he is grabbing nutrient-rich bites in between meals. Whereas Bonitto may not have given much thought to skipping a breakfast, lunch or dinner here and there in the past, he's beginning to understand that each trip to the cafeteria can be every bit as important as a film session or practice rep.

"That's part of being a pro and I think Nik has done a great job of making that transition and understanding what he needs to do when he's in the building and out of the building," said Denver's first-year outside linebackers coach Bert Watts, who, like Bonitto, was in the college ranks last season as the outside

linebackers coach and special teams coordinator at Auburn. “We have a lot of great resources here and I know he’s made leaps and bounds since he’s gotten here as far as his overall conditioning and shape, so I’m excited to see him once we get out to playing.”

Watts began his football coaching career in Colorado more than a decade ago, first at the University of Colorado and then with the Broncos in 2012, and he quickly noticed an impact of living a mile or more above sea level he also believes will help Bonitto.

“Man, that altitude will give you an appetite,” he said with a laugh.

Putting on the weight for Bonitto isn’t an arbitrary endeavor, of course. Watts coached in the talent-rich SEC last season, but even college football’s top league doesn’t compare to the sheer size players have to deal with at the NFL level. The added weight and strength the Broncos are trying to put on Bonitto is aimed at helping him ease that transition while preparing his body for a longer season than any he’s played before.

“The biggest thing college guys have to adjust to once they get to this level is the physicality of the game,” Watts said. “It’s a different offensive game. In college, a lot of the stuff is lateral run plays, read plays. There aren’t a lot of heavy double-teams edge guys have to deal with, those types of blocks. So it’s learning to deal with that physicality and match it — and not only that, but be able to make plays off of it.”

The Broncos have already seen flashes of the playmaking gene in Bonitto they believe can be menacing once the weight, strength and grasp of the NFL game fully catch up. Watts said he’s seen “elite get-off” from Bonitto since the time he arrived for rookie minicamp in May, calling it a “rare” ability to spring off the ball and put stress on tackles vertically. That quickness was on display a handful of times during the first two practices of camp this week, when Bonitto beat a tackle off the line quickly enough to set a hard edge on run plays.

“On the field, he’s had it since Day 1,” fellow edge rusher Bradley Chubb said of Bonitto. “He had the bend, all the intangibles that you can’t coach, that you just go out there and do. Mainly, for him, it’s learning the process of being a pro, taking care of your body and stuff like that, and I’ve seen him take that step.” Here are other notes and observations from Day 3 of Broncos training camp, which took place Friday morning in front of a lively crowd of more than 3,000 fans:

- After running through the first two practices of camp at warp speed, the Broncos slowed things down to something resembling a 50 percent tempo. That created 11-on-11 work that honed in on specific details, while also giving the 90-man roster a general “refresh.”

“That was kind of test for me because, to be able to get through this entire season, you have to learn how to practice with that jog-through mentality,” coach Nathaniel Hackett said. “It was a little bit more than our walkthroughs at night, so this really was a test. We’ve never done this before with the helmets on and everything else. Everybody was nervous about tempo violators ... but I’m really impressed with how locked in they were. We didn’t have many mental errors at all. Guys were trying to communicate and talk, which is what you want to create in that environment.”

The Broncos had their conditioning tests upon reporting for camp on Tuesday, followed by two high-speed practices. So Friday’s practice resembled something of a recovery day ahead of what Hackett said will be “a real hard day” during Saturday’s practice. The Broncos will then have Sunday off before practicing

Monday and then putting on pads for the first time Tuesday, Hackett said, in accordance with the ramp-up period outlined in the collective bargaining agreement.

- Former Broncos defensive end Derek Wolfe, a 2012 second-round pick who played eight seasons in Denver and was a member of the Super Bowl 50 championship team, announced his retirement Friday in a video shared by the team.

Wolfe then attended training camp and said he shed a tear for the first time since making his decision once the crowd at the team's UCHHealth Training Center gave him a rousing ovation.

"I had a lot of great times here, played a lot of good football, won a lot of games and won a Super Bowl," Wolfe said. "To retire a Bronco is something I wanted to do from the moment I stepped foot here."

Wolfe tallied 33 of his 34 career sacks during his eight seasons with the Broncos. He played the 2020 season with the Ravens before missing all of last season due to injury. Wolfe recently had two hip surgeries, which help crystallized the decision that "it was time to be done."

Wolfe was a key cog in Denver's historically great 2015 defense. During the Broncos' three-game playoff run that season, which ended in the title-game victory over the Panthers, Wolfe had 2 1/2 sacks, 15 tackles and five quarterback hits. That season, Wolfe said, stands alone as his most cherished NFL memory, and not only because the Broncos finished it by capturing the franchise's third world championship.

"That whole season, being able to be a part of something like that, was really special," said Wolfe, who broke down the current Broncos team in a huddle after Friday's practice. "All the plays that were made, all the games that we won that we shouldn't have, but we were just playing harder than the other team. I can't really think of anything that surpasses that."

# 'This is the best Mother's Day gift that I could ever have': How Nik Bonitto's mother watched his dreams come true during the draft

By Ben Swanson  
DenverBroncos.com  
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In a living room pressurized with the hopes and dreams shared between an NFL prospect, his family and close friends, Nik Bonitto sat on the leather couch next to his mother, Sandra Penn.

From that communal space in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, Bonitto dealt with the nerve-wracking anticipation that exists between each pick as Penn served as a voice of calmness on his shoulder.

"Wherever God wants you to be, that's where you'll end up, whether it's the first round, second round, seventh round," Penn recalls telling him. "This is where you're meant to be."

When the call from the Broncos finally came, and the dream became reality, Bonitto could hardly contain his emotions. And when the pick was announced on television minutes later, the rest of the room followed, everyone caught up in a rapturous joy.

"Yeah, it was my draft party, but it was more just being around the people that have supported me throughout my years of playing football and all the people that helped me get there — celebrating me, but also celebrating them and reminding myself that this is a family thing," Bonitto says. "I should be proud that I'm in this position, and just be happy that I'm with all the people that was me all throughout these years."

Through this path, Penn has been vitally important for Nik, along with his father, Vincent Bonitto, and as Nik begins his professional career, she'll remain an integral part of his support system just as she was at the beginning.

Back then, Vincent was working long days with 12-hour shifts as a distributor, which sometimes took him out of state, and Penn, a nurse, worked from 7 a.m. to 3 p.m. to allow her to create a daily routine with their two sons, Nik and Gerrard.

"Getting up early to go to school, being able to take me and my brothers to different practices at times, just pushing me whenever she comes to my games or whenever she comes to my practices, just doing all those things," Bonitto says. "It just kind of was surreal having her next to me, knowing all that she's put in for me."

Nik started playing football at 5 years old, and he was always bigger than other kids his age. Until he reached high school, he had to play with age groups a couple of years ahead of him. As a mother, football can test one's nerves, and this certainly did for Penn.

"The crazy thing about it is he always had to play two [years] up, because at that time he was always so much bigger than all the other kids," Penn says. "... He never was intimidated by that, I guess, because he

started off at such a young age playing up, always two years up. So he was never intimidated. But it was always scary for me, as a mom, you have your 5-year-old playing with 7-year-olds. And as he got older, it was still playing up, playing up. For me, it was a little scary. But for him, he handled it.”

He continued to do that until he got to high school. Even as an eighth grader, Bonitto played varsity football for Fort Lauderdale's University School.

For Penn, Bonitto's talent and drive was easy to see. She saw his competitive spirit come out in basketball as well as football, but nothing was as special to him as sacking quarterbacks. So eventually Bonitto transferred to national football powerhouse St. Thomas Aquinas High School, which had 15 alumni playing in the NFL in 2021.

Now, Bonitto will join that exclusive group in professional football.

“It seems like just yesterday he was playing pee-wee ball, then high school, then in college,” Penn says. “And now in the NFL. So it's just like, we don't see where the time went, but we're so excited because ... especially his dad said, 'He's going to make it to the NFL.' He always thought he was going to make it to the NFL, and to actually see it happening, it's just amazing.”

As he makes the jump, so too will his family. After Bonitto was drafted, Pat Surtain II's mother called Penn to congratulate her and the family and welcome them to the team. Though they'd never met, their sons had played on rival football teams in the Fort Lauderdale area and became friends during that time. Now that they're teammates, so are their mothers.

“Another one of Nikolas' teammates, Tre [Delarrin Turner-Yell], got drafted also,” Penn says. “So his mom called me and she was like, 'Oh my god, we're going to be Bronco moms!’”

Being a Bronco mom has already been quite exciting. The day after Bonitto was drafted, she joined him and Vincent for the trip to Denver, where they were able to tour UCHHealth Training Center, meet the coaches and front-office staff and more.

“It was really important,” Bonitto says of having Penn there with him for the visit. “Just because I wanted her to see all the work that she put in, too, because it wasn't just me. Her getting me through all this phases, her making sacrifices, her driving me to school 30 minutes away, those were all things that she did and that she sacrificed for me to get to where I'm at now.”

With Mother's Day then just about a week away, Penn says she repeatedly told Bonitto as they walked around the facility, “This is the best Mother's Day gift that I could ever have had.”

“Knowing that his dreams came true, all of our hard work came true,” Penn says, “that was the best for me. That was it. I don't care what I get anymore.”

# What Made him a Top Edge Rusher in 2022 Draft

By Chad Jensen

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Inside UCHealth Training Center, the response to the Denver Broncos selecting Oklahoma edge rusher Nik Bonitto with the No. 64 overall pick in the 2022 NFL draft was met with elation, and almost disbelief. Outside the building, the Bonitto pick landed with more of a thud.

Draft media types mostly panned the value of taking the Oklahoma pass rusher that early, though there were a few draftniks who had Bonitto ranked higher than 64 — few and far between. The lack of congruence between how the Broncos felt about the pick and outside media left Broncos Country somewhat ambivalent about the addition.

Now imagine how Bonitto must have felt. On one hand, he's hearing from the team that drafted him how much they loved his game and coveted him, but being a young guy fresh out of college, he's not impervious to the online criticism of the pick.

All that being said, what matters is how the Broncos feel about Bonitto. That's what should most inform his confidence. And while the kid has a humble energy, there's no doubt that he understands how the sausage gets made when it comes to getting after the quarterback and affecting the game.

"You have to have a great motor," Bonitto said during his introductory press conference a week ago. "You have to be relentless. A lot of people think it's just moves and talent—you have to have the work ethic, that relentlessness in you to be disruptive in any way. I feel like that's what I have and that's what I can bring to this team."

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Bonitto includes himself among the best edge rushers in the 2022 draft class. And from a pure talent and traits perspective, he's not wrong.

"My relentlessness, my one-two," Bonitto said, describing what makes him a top-shelf rusher. "I have a good get-off as well. A lot of things you look for in good pass rushers and I feel like I have some of those traits. There's still a long way to go to become one of those greats in the NFL and a guy that can be talked about as one of the best in the league. I'm working towards it, I have a lot of good traits, I just have to keep working."

As an entrenched starter on the Sooners' defense the past three years, Bonitto was highly productive. He notched 19.5 sacks and 33 tackles for a loss.

Depending on how much weight one is inclined to throw in Pro Football Focus' direction, to say that the advanced analytics giant viewed Bonitto favorably would be an understatement. He earned a 94.6 pass-rush grade combined over the 2020 and 2021 collegiate seasons, which was the highest in the FBS.

That's right. Even the No. 2 overall pick in the draft — Michigan edge rusher Aiden Hutchenson — couldn't beat Bonitto in that department, according to PFF. In 2021, Bonitto was PFF's top-rated edge defender when it comes to a very important advanced metric in qualifying a player at his position: pass-rush win rate.

Bonitto's pass-rush win rate was 27.8% — the very best in the FBS. And he totaled the highest QB pressure percentage among Power 5 players at 19.8%.

The knock on Bonitto is his run defense and that's simply something the Broncos will have to coach into him. It won't happen overnight but combined with working with Denver's strength and conditioning staff to better sculpt an NFL body, he has the upside potential to become a well-rounded edge defender sooner rather than later.

Bonitto's new defensive coordinator Ejiro Evero was thrilled to land him with the last pick in the second round.

"When you talk about Nik, you're talking about a player we identified early on in this process," Evero said at Bonitto's hello presser. "A player that in college, was a highly productive pass rusher, highly productive versus the run, and [we] really believe this man is going to come in here, he's going to work his butt off. He's the character that we're looking for. He's really going to add a lot to our team. When we talk about attacking the quarterback, this is the type of player we're talking about. Let's welcome in Nik Bonitto."

That last trait Evero mentioned is of the intangible sort but it's the one that should give Broncos Country the most confidence that Bonitto can and will develop into a premier edge rusher: character. Bonitto's got it in spades, along with a great work ethic and football IQ.

Draftniks will continue to question the Bonitto pick but he landed in a very good spot because the scheme fit, in tandem with head coach Nathaniel Hackett's innovative, forward-thinking philosophies on teaching the "YouTube generation," is a good one. Plus, the Broncos have two very good vets ahead of Bonitto on the depth chart in Bradley Chubb and Randy Gregory, which buys the rookie time to grow, and gives him a couple of different blueprints to model his game.

Make no mistake. Bonitto is a twitched-up athlete who can do crazy, bendy things with his body when it comes to turning the corner that smacks of Von Miller. Broncos fans are going to fall in love with Bonitto quickly.

"I've been watching him [Miller] since I was young," Bonitto said. "Really in the game, just watching him, he's a guy I've always looked at as the pinnacle to what the great edge rusher is and he's the standard of what I want to be. Just watching him, just seeing a lot of things he's done in the game—things I want to accomplish. I know I'm going to have to work to get to where he's at and to have the success that he's had—the great things he's done in this game."

# How Broncos top pick Nik Bonitto honed his 'John Hancock' pass-rushing move

By Nick Kosmider

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It's a four-letter word that can make offensive linemen utter four-letter words.

It's a four-letter word that represents a defying of physics. It describes, in one sharp syllable, a pass rusher's ability to hurl himself full speed at a blocker, curl beneath the blocker's reach and then launch toward the ball — all while not losing a step.

It's a four-letter word the Broncos used frequently in the buildup to the NFL Draft when talking about the player who would eventually become their first pick.

Nik Bonitto has the bend.

"You can't teach that," said Jamar Cain, the former defensive line coach at the University of Oklahoma whose tutelage helped Bonitto compile 15 sacks during his final two college seasons. "Us, as college recruiters, we go out looking for that, and you can't find it. There's maybe two or three kids every year who can do that, and Nik can do that. It's nothing that I taught him. It's God-given."

Bonitto, the 64th pick in the draft, is not a perfect player. Broncos general manager George Paton mentioned on multiple occasions during draft weekend that the 6-foot-3, 248-pound outside linebacker will need to add strength to help him set the edge in the run game in the NFL and thrive against tackles who are more powerful and crafty than those he faced in the Big 12. But he arrives in Denver already armed with a rare trait. His speed rush, the move Cain calls Bonitto's "John Hancock," is predicated on his ability to launch off the line of scrimmage and then contort his body at a 45-degree angle on his way around a tackle.

It's a trait that should be familiar to Broncos fans after seeing it for so many years in the Super Bowl 50 MVP.

"I've been watching him since I was young," Bonitto said of Von Miller, who played in Denver for parts of 11 seasons before being traded last season to the Rams for a pair of draft picks, including the one the Broncos used on Bonitto. "He's a guy I've always looked at as the pinnacle to what the great edge rusher is, and he's the standard of what I want to be."

Bonitto has seemingly always been armed with the speed and ankle flexibility that are prerequisites for the bend, but learning how to harness those tools required Bonitto to deconstruct his approach as he headed into his third season with the Sooners in 2020. To that point, the product of St. Thomas Aquinas High in South Florida had amassed 3 1/2 sacks in 15 college games. There were flashes of potential, bursts of quickness and maneuverability that provided glimpses of what he could be as a pass rusher.

Bonitto just couldn't figure out how to put it all together. When Cain arrived that offseason after spending the previous year at Arizona State, he closely studied each of Bonitto's rushes. What he saw was a player



who was missing confidence, which was causing him to “panic” at the top of his rush. The first step — the get-off, in pass-rushing parlance — was there. So, too, was the “middle” of the rush, the point where an edge rusher prepares to engage with his combatant. But from there, Cain saw a player searching for the final piece. So the coach decided to work backward. While deconstructing his technique, Cain first worked with Bonitto on the finish to his rush. By working in reverse, they took Bonitto’s mind straight to the finish line so that when he got to the end of his rush, there was no thinking. The synapses were already firing.

“He already had a great get-off and great approach; he just didn’t know what to do once he got engaged,” Cain said. “So I figured, ‘Let’s teach him to rush once he’s engaged.’ Once that happened and once the confidence came, it was all downhill. Now he started to become a student of the game.”

During that first season, in 2020, Cain extolled the virtue of keeping it simple. The pair worked on perfecting the speed rush — the move that utilized that breathtaking bend — before beginning to build the counters. To emphasize the benefit of mastering one specific move, Cain showed Bonitto and Oklahoma’s other pass rushers film of Kevin Greene. The late former Steelers linebacker’s path to the Hall of Fame was built by the long arm, the move in which a rusher extends his arm into a tackle to either push him into the backfield or neutralize him long enough to read the quarterback’s movement and then break away once the quarterback moves in the pocket.

“I always tell these guys, and I told Nik, ‘You can have all these head fakes and 10,000 different moves, but you’ve got to perfect one,’” Cain said. “Once he perfected one, now we can add two.”

Bonitto notched eight sacks and 10 1/2 tackles for loss in 2020 while becoming a second-team All-American. It was a breakthrough season largely centered on the speed rush. Now it was time to expand the catalog of moves. Cain knew Bonitto would be turning pro after the 2021 season, so the two sat down that offseason and identified the things he still needed to show NFL teams over the next calendar year. They developed a power-rush move that could serve as an effective changeup to the speed-rush fastball. Then came the long arm. Then came an array of spin moves.

By the time his final season at Oklahoma ended — with seven more sacks and a team-high 15 tackles for loss — Bonitto had effectively branched out from his strong speed-rush foundation. When he was asked upon arriving in Denver last week to name his favorite pass-rushing move, Bonitto replied: “Any move when I can just beat the guy off the edge.”

“Whether it’s ‘dipping-and-ripping’ or ‘ghost long arm’ or ‘cross chop’ — anything like that,” he added. “Anything with any one of those moves definitely are my favorites. I’m just trying to work for anything, work on any move I can get in my bag, just help me get more pass rush moves in my repertoire.”

It all starts with the four-letter foundation. When Cain got the job at Oklahoma, he also watched film of Bonitto’s days as a high-level basketball player, when he played on the same AAU team as Darius Days, a former LSU standout who is a second-round prospect in the upcoming NBA Draft. When Cain would see Bonitto, a point guard, burn past defenders and explode to the rim, he could immediately see the NFL correlation.

“When you’re dribbling the ball and you’re trying to turn that corner, most guys who are able to do that have a good, flexible lean and can explode up into a layup,” Cain said. “You’d see (Michael) Jordan turn that corner, where he’s bending and then he explodes straight up. Those are the basketball aspects that Nik has.”

They are traits, Denver defensive coordinator Ejiro Evero said last week, that helped the Broncos identify Bonitto “early in the process” as a player they wanted to target with their first pick. And the bend is why Paton was a bit dismayed Friday when Bonitto was still on the board as the pick approached.

“Nik Bonitto at 64?” Paton asked after the selection, his reaction captured in a video released by the team.  
“Holy ...”

You can guess the four-letter word that came next.

# 'Baby Feet' Bonitto had good feeling about Broncos from earlier visit

By Mike Klis

KUSA

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Vincent Bonitto could tell his son was excited about the NFL team he had just met.

It was the final week NFL teams could bring in one of their 30 draft prospects for a visit. Nik Bonitto, the oldest of two sons raised by Vincent and Sandra Bonitto and an edge rusher from the University of Oklahoma, had just finished his top 30 visit with the Broncos on Monday, April 18.

"He called me from the airport after his visit here, saying how much he loved it," Vincent said. "And he didn't do that after his other visits. This was the only one where he called me after it was done. He loved the way his visit went here. Everything about it."

Bonitto won his Dove Valley audition. The Broncos didn't get a chance to draft a player until the No. 64 pick overall and when it finally arrived, Bonitto was their choice. Even though the Broncos had five other quality edge rushers, Bonitto's talent was so impressive, general manager George Paton took one more.

"You can't have enough," Paton said. "You look at our division, all the quarterbacks, you can't have enough pass rushers."

Before Paton sat down with 9NEWS for a chat Saturday, it was Nik Bonitto who occupied the interviewee chair, as his parents sauntered along the sidelines at the Pat Bowlen Fieldhouse.

"It was crazy how it all happened," Bonitto said. "It was one of my last 30s. I had a really good feeling about it. Meeting the coaches, meeting all the guys upstairs. It was a great vibe. Great place, great city. I couldn't really ask for anything better. Just had a great feeling once you guys came up. I knew I was going to have a good chance of getting that call."

### Loving parents made for Bonitto's happy childhood

Nik and his brother Gerrard were raised in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. Dad has been working for a wine distributorship the past 17 years and mom worked in a nursing home.

Vincent Bonitto is of Cuban and Jamaican descent and Sandra is Haitian. They were married 23 years before their recent divorce.

"We're still best of friends," Sandra said. "Best of friends."

They sat at a table together while Nik made the media rounds inside the Pat Bowlen Fieldhouse early Saturday afternoon.

"His nickname was 'Baby Feet,'" Sandra said with a smile. "It was the way he ran, the way he moved. 'Baby Feet.' The people back home, that's what they call him, 'Baby Feet.'"

“He started playing football when he was 5 years old,” Sandra said. “It was a struggle to get him to go (to practice) sometimes because at that age he wanted to play his video games. But it was always between football and basketball for him growing up. He was good at both but it became evident fairly early on that football was his calling.”

A man’s character is developed from his parents and first impression says the Broncos got a good one with their first pick of the draft.

“They’re parents that are going to support you, be there with you every step of the way,” Nik said. “They love me a lot, they want the best for me. I have a little brother, he’s the same way. Gerrard. We’ve always pushed each other growing up playing sports. So a great family vibe.”

Dad said Nik played varsity football as an eighth grader and freshman at Nova Southeastern University School, a private college preparatory school, but when head football coach Roger Harriott took the same job at his alma mater St. Thomas Aquinas, Bonitto followed him to the high school powerhouse that boasts such alumni as Chris Evert, the Bosa brothers, Michael Irvin, Geno Atkins and Brian Piccolo among many other former pro athletes.

Bonitto played on two state champions as a sophomore and junior at St. Thomas Aquinas and the school has won three more state championships since he left. Harriott and Broncos head coach Nathaniel Hackett briefly crossed paths. In late January 2010, Harriott announced he was leaving his head coach position at University School to become running backs coach at Syracuse, where Hackett had just been hired as offensive coordinator. Two weeks later, though, Harriott had a change of heart and returned to University School.

It took 12 years, but Harriott and Hackett were reconnected again with Bonitto as their bond.

A 4-star recruit out of high school who had all the major college programs after him, including Alabama and Ohio State, Bonitto chose the Oklahoma Sooners. It couldn’t have been easy playing defense for the run-and-gun Lincoln Riley-coached Sooners. With Alabama transfer Jalen Hurts as their quarterback during Bonitto’s redshirt freshman season, Oklahoma averaged 42.1 points a game while their defense allowed 27.3. Oklahoma’s defense was better in 2020, allowing 21.7 points while Spencer Rattler quarterbacked an offense to 43.0 points a game. Bonitto was a full-time starter that year and had 9.0 sacks in 10 games to earn second-team All American honors.

During his junior and final season at Oklahoma in 2021, Bonitto had 7.0 sacks in 11 games as the Sooners, who switched from Rattler to Caleb Williams at quarterback midseason, averaged 39 points while surrendering 26. Under Riley, the Sooners were built around a hurry up-and-score offense and relied on pass rushers like Bonitto to hurry up and catch their breath, pin their ears back and harass the opposing quarterbacks into playing-from-behind mistakes.

“We always had great conditioning staff so they always prepared us for those track meets but when you have guys like Kyler Murray, Jalen Hurts, even going back to last year, Spencer Rattler, Caleb Williams, you know those guys are going to put up points so as a defense you know you’ve got to be out there at any second,” Bonitto said. “You should want that as a defensive player, you should want more reps, you should more opportunities to go against the offense. Knowing that and having that in the back of our minds, we were always ready to go.”

Before he was drafted by the Broncos, the 6-foot-3, 248-pound Bonitto was occasionally compared to Vic Beasley, who was similarly built and led the NFL with 15.5 sacks in 2016 before falling off. But now that he's a Bronco, Bonitto's speed, bend and flexibility instantly became linked to Von Miller, who had 117 sacks during his 10 ½ seasons in Denver, counting the postseason, and still hasn't fallen off.

"He's been a guy I've been watching since I was very little," Bonitto said of Miller. "Just watching the way he approaches the game. Things he can do on the field not many can do and I take pride in learning from a guy like him. Wanting to be a great like him. Just seeing how he is and all the things he's accomplished are things I want in this game."

Paton said at both his post-draft press conferences Friday and Saturday that Bonitto needs to get stronger – as all incoming rookies do. As Bonitto sat in the chair for his 9News interview Saturday, he already looked a little bigger than he did on tape. So he got the message.

"Most definitively. I'm getting stronger," Bonitto said. "Not gaining too much weight, but gaining a little bit. I feel like it's definitely going to help me. I still have to grow and get stronger in a lot of different areas. That's something I definitely take pride in this offseason."

There was the good vibe from his top 30 visit to Broncos headquarters that led to getting picked by the Broncos 11 days later. And there was the thrill of a Facetime call from new Broncos star quarterback Russell Wilson in the minutes following his No. 64 overall selection.

"It was crazy. Knowing the guys has done so much in this league," Bonitto said. "And all the things he's accomplished and for him to give me a call on my big night it tells me where he's at. He's a very humble dude. Showed me how important I am to this team and now I want to run through a wall for that guy. That was a great time for me to be able to meet him."

Bonitto is projected to receive a \$1.4 million signing bonus as part as his four-year, \$5.8 million first professional contract with the Broncos. He and the rest of the teams newcomers will report back to Broncos' headquarters on May 12 for the start of rookie minicamp.

# Broncos draft pick Nik Bonitto isn't running from Von Miller comparisons. He's embracing them.

By Sean Keeler  
Denver Post  
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Nik Bonitto is one of those quiet types with loud skills, an introvert by nature. But a pushover, he ain't.

Just ask the new Broncos outside linebacker's father, Vince, who offered up a tale about the time his son got into the face of Jason Taylor, then his coach at St. Thomas Aquinas High in Fort Lauderdale.

Respectfully, of course.

"They didn't get into an argument, but let's say it was just an exchange of different philosophies for the game," the elder Bonitto recalled with a grin. "And Nik wanted to rush the quarterback and they wanted him to be more of spy. So second quarter, he goes out there, he gets two straight tackles for losses."

Taylor got the message. So did Roger Harriott, Aquinas' head coach.

"He doesn't have a problem with standing his ground and defending his position," Harriott told The Post in a phone interview Saturday. "He's not a pushover, either. There are introverts that are pushovers that don't like confrontations. I don't think he has a problem with that at all."

He hasn't had much of a problem handling opposing blockers, either.

In 2020, the 6-foot-3, 248-pound pass-rushing specialist recorded eight sacks in 10 starts at Oklahoma en route to being selected as an Associated Press' second-team All-American. Last fall, the Broncos' second-round pick (No. 64 overall) racked up seven sacks and 15 tackles for loss over 12 starts.

"When we talk about affecting the quarterback," defensive coordinator Ejiro Evero said of his new toy, "this is the type of player we're talking about."

And how's this for irony? With one of the draft picks acquired in the trade that sent Von Miller to the Rams last fall, the Broncos may have found one of Miller's successors off the edge.

"He was a guy that I've always looked at as the pinnacle to what a great edge rusher is," Bonitto said of the Vonster. "And (Miller is) a standard of what I want to be. So just watching him, just seeing a lot of the things that (he's) done in the game, just things I want to accomplish ... I'm gonna have to work to get to where he's at."

He might idolize Miller, but his game, frame and ceiling might be closer to that of another Hall-of-Fame pass-rusher: Taylor.

For one, the pair's builds aren't dissimilar — long, lean and mean. For another, Taylor was Bonitto's coach during the latter's senior season at Aquinas.

“(Taylor) told me, and I’ll never forget it,” Vince recalled. “He said, ‘At this point, where Nick is, Nick was better than (me) in high school.’”

High praise. A high bar, too.

One that the younger Bonitto can reach for considering that he logged a 35.5-inch vertical jump at the scouting combine a few months back. Truth be told, his father said, basketball — not football — is the Broncos linebacker’s first love.

“(Bonitto) can cover receivers, man,” Harriott added. “Don’t let the size fool you. He’s as quick as a cat. He has tremendous basketball skills. Which definitely transition to football.”

Bonitto’s combine 40-time: 4.54. His 20-yard shuttle-time: 4.23. Yeah, that translates.

“I feel I like it definitely helped with football,” the Broncos draft pick observed, “just because having to guard (hoops) guards back in the day, you’re going to have to have quick feet, you’re going to have to have great lateral movement.

“And I feel like a lot of those things come into play when it comes to pass-rushing and getting (blockers) off the spot and beating guys, making guys move in space, making plays in space, as well as the drop in coverage. So a lot of those (things) in basketball definitely translated.”

Just ask Taylor.

“(After the disagreement), Jason was like, ‘I didn’t want to tell him,’” Vince recounted with a smile, “‘but (Nik) was kind of right.’”