

‘He’s a force’: With benefit of healthy offseason, OLB Bradley Chubb seems poised to return to elite play

By Aric DiLalla
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In the third quarter of the Broncos’ Week 14 game, the Broncos’ edge rusher started over the left tackle’s outside shoulder before he looped inside.

A clear lane ahead of him, Bradley Chubb grabbed Nick Mullens’ scarlet jersey and tore him to the ground.

At that moment, Chubb’s future seemed nothing but bright. That sack in 2018 was Chubb’s 12th of his rookie season, which gave him the Broncos’ new rookie franchise sack record.

The ensuing years have been tougher, as Chubb has battled ACL and ankle injuries and missed 26 games over the past three seasons. The former fifth-overall pick earned a Pro Bowl berth in 2020 with 7.5 sacks and 19 quarterback hits, but he’s otherwise yet to enjoy the type of sustained health — both in the offseason and regular season — that would allow him to return to the heights of his rookie season.

That time, though, may have arrived.

For the first time since the end of his rookie season, Chubb entered the offseason without any lingering ailments. He didn’t have to rehab from an ACL tear or undergo a pair of ankle surgeries. He’s simply been able to focus on his craft — and on providing the consistent pressure of which he and the Broncos know he’s capable.

“100 percent,” Chubb said Monday when asked if he feels like he’s returning to his old heights. “The beginning of [the offseason] was challenging for me. It was my first time in this position where I wasn’t worried about recovering from an injury or worried about this or that. For the first couple weeks, I was trying to figure out what makes me, me. What things can I do to make me feel good [that will help me] come into different workouts feeling my best? I got that formula, and I’ve been sticking with it ever since. I’ve been feeling good coming out here to practice with these guys, and it’s been fun. People say, ‘be a pro’ and ‘have that schedule.’ I feel like I finally have that down.”

On the field, the creation of — and ability to maintain — a routine has been evident. Chubb has been a constant presence in the backfield during the open media portions of OTAs, and Head Coach Nathaniel Hackett credited him with a couple of disruptive plays during Monday’s session.

“He’s done a really good job,” Hackett said. “He’s starting to feel it a little bit, both his pass rushing and his ability to stop the run. He’s a force. When he knows what he’s doing, he’s definitely somebody that we would have to take account for.”

Chubb’s teammates have noticed a difference, as well. Nose tackle Mike Purcell said a year ago, as Chubb tried to battle an ankle injury before eventually undergoing surgery, the pain was clear.

“Now, you can see him running around that edge and it’s nothing,” Purcell said. “He can bend, he can move. So he’s looking like how he was his rookie year.”

Chubb has previously noted that he’d deem the 2022 season a success if he’s able to play all 17 games — and there’s a clear benefit the Broncos would receive from that sort of availability. When healthy, Chubb has been among the league’s most disruptive pass rushers. In 2018, he was also among the most productive.

As the Broncos look to make a run back to the postseason, Chubb’s ability to rush the passer could prove critical. Patrick Mahomes, Justin Herbert and Derek Carr are just a few of the dangerous quarterbacks on Denver’s schedule, and the Broncos’ newly revamped defense will need to apply pressure. Chubb won’t have to do it alone — Randy Gregory, Nik Bonitto, Malik Reed, Baron Browning and Jonathon Cooper help comprise a deep outside linebacker room — but it’s not a stretch to call him the presumed leader of the group.

No one else on the Broncos’ roster has reached double-digit sacks, and Chubb is the lone edge rusher with a Pro Bowl nod.

For years, Chubb’s pass-rushing ability has been evident. When he’s been on the field, he’s been a force. After a frustrating set of years, the stage is now set.

Chubb appears poised to deliver.

Kiszla: Broncos linebacker Bradley Chubb is sick and tired of all the losing, especially to Kansas City. “It’s a Revenge Tour all year long.”

By Mark Kiszla
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Football eats the weak for breakfast. So a big, tough guy should hide fear and vulnerability under his helmet, buckle that chin strap and get back in the huddle. Right? Well, that’s how the stereotype goes.

Broncos outside linebacker Bradley Chubb, however, is more concerned about his mental health than how anybody might judge him.

A violent sport has battered his body and messed with his confidence. Maladies from a torn ACL in his knee to bone spurs in an ankle to COVID-19 have forced Chubb from the field, causing him to miss 24 of 65 games during his four-year pro career.

The rest of his body finally right, Chubb has humbly taken the smart move of going to work on the space between his ears. Rather than leaving that tough task to himself, Chubb started chatting regularly to a sports performance coach. The lesson here? Putting his mind at ease is as crucial as stretching out surgically repaired joints before each practice.

“It’s a matter of how I can meditate and immerse myself into having tunnel vision on the field. It’s almost like I hypnotize myself into thinking the job of football is the only thing that matters in my life when I go to work,” Chubb told me Friday, during a telephone interview after a voluntary spring workout with new quarterback Russell Wilson and Denver teammates.

Heading into a critical season when he could either break the bank with a big new contract or see his ties broken with the Broncos, Job No. 1 for Chubb is getting his head straight.

“Ninety percent of getting over injuries is mental,” Chubb said. “So I’m doing everything I can to make sure I’m in a good space and be the best football player possible for my teammates.”

Rushing the quarterback is hard enough without carrying mental baggage. Injuries can test a religious man’s faith. Chubb, however, has refused to surrender to the self-pity of asking: Why me?

“When I talk to God,” Chubb said, “it’s more like asking: What do you want from me? What are you trying to teach?”

Chubb is not Josh Allen. And never will be. A 275-pound linebacker selected by Denver at No. 5 overall in the 2018 NFL draft, two slots ahead of where Buffalo found a steal of a deal by grabbing Allen, will never be a franchise quarterback.

But if anybody still has a problem with John Elway’s draft error? That’s fine. Just don’t expect Chubb to get lost in your book of regret or define himself but what he’s not.

“I didn’t get to where I am by worrying about how you or anybody else thinks about me,” said Chubb, who recorded 12 sacks as a rookie but has been credited with taking down a quarterback only 7.5 times in three ensuing seasons marred by injury. “I don’t let nobody talk me into thinking about how I view myself.”

If Chubb feels the eyes of anybody on his back, the one person in football he has the greatest desire to please is former Broncos teammate Von Miller.

“When I was coming up in high school and college, he was my guy; he was the football player I wanted to be ... When I got drafted by the Broncos and the first time I sat to him in a meeting room, it was scary crazy, because I was like, “Yeah, that’s Von Miller right there,’ even though I would never admit to him how impressed I was,” said Chubb, laughing at the pressure he felt to earn the respect of his sports idol.

“Von is the gold standard of pass-rushing. And he wasn’t afraid to share his knowledge with me or anybody else on the team. So everybody that puts on a Broncos uniform and rushes the quarterback ... we all, not just me, feel an obligation to Von.”

“It’s a Revenge Tour all year long,” said Chubb, vowing to end a losing streak against the Chiefs. “When you keep coming up short against a team, you get animosity for them.”

The NFL is a bottom-line business. In a contract year, Chubb knows what’s at stake.

“When it comes to the business side of it, whatever happens at the end of the year happens,” Chubb said. “My job is to go out and help the Broncos win more games than we ever have in my five years. My job is getting as many sacks as Bradley Chubb has ever had in the NFL. That’s what Year Five is all about for me.”

OLB Bradley Chubb focused on staying available, feels benefits of healthy offseason

By Aric DiLalla
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Bradley Chubb likely approaches the 2022 season with goals of recording timely sacks and game-altering forced fumbles.

As he returns for the Broncos' offseason program, though, his stated focus is more granular.

"There are many things that [would make it a success]," Chubb said Thursday as he looked ahead to the season, "but my main thing is playing all 17 [games] and making sure I can do that. Everybody knows I haven't been the healthiest player out here. I just want to make sure I'm doing everything I can to stay on the field for my teammates and for myself."

Since the start of 2019, Chubb has missed a combined 24 games as he's dealt with ailments including an ACL tear and two ankle injuries.

When Chubb has been on the field, though, he's been among the league's best. In 2018, as he played all 16 games, he recorded a franchise rookie record 12 sacks, and he made the Pro Bowl in 2020 as he recorded 7.5 sacks, nine tackles for loss and 19 quarterback hits.

Head Coach Nathaniel Hackett said at the NFL Annual Meeting that he believes in that potential — and that Chubb just needs to be available to achieve it.

"He could be another dominant guy," Hackett said in late March. "We all know he was rolling early. I remember when we played in 2019. We were really nervous about him. He was rolling. For him, it's get out on the field, be available and get after the quarterback as much as you can. It's that simple."

As he enters the 2022 offseason, Chubb said he feels healthier than he has been since the end of that 2018 season — and he believes in the impact that a full offseason can have on his play.

"It's a [real] advantage, for sure," Chubb said. "Whenever you have the chance to take the offseason for what it is and better yourself — mentally and physically — it takes you leaps and bounds from where you were in the beginning. Just to have that peace of mind and be able to focus on football — it's been fun. It's been amazing. I'm glad to be able to continue to work."

Chubb, who is entering the final year of his rookie deal, said he's focused on turning that work into his best football rather than worry about his contract status.

"I'm not thinking about it at all because at the end of the day, I know I didn't put my best foot forward last year on the field and that's what it comes down to — making plays and doing things for this organization to help us win," Chubb said. "I feel like I wasn't in that position last year, but that's my main thing. You asked me what my goals are. It's to play 17 and win these games — as many as possible. That stuff is going

to come. If you stress about it, then you start doing things you don't need to be doing. My main thing is tunnel vision, looking forward and trying to help this team win."

Chubb will aim to help the Broncos win in a similar system to the one in which he starred for former head coach Vic Fangio. Chubb said Thursday the system is "a lot of the same things with different verbiage."

The intriguing aspect — and perhaps one of the defining factors of the Broncos' season — is that as Chubb aims to stay on the field, he'll do so alongside free-agent addition Randy Gregory. The former Cowboys rusher posted six sacks and three forced fumbles in 10 games last year — and when out there together, they should form a dominant pair.

"The sky is the limit, man," Chubb said of pairing with Gregory. "The sky is the limit. We're watching film now on the things we did good and bad last year. Just to see how explosive he is off the line — he's hitting tackles and bending them backwards and making guards buckle when they come to pull him. [He's] disruptive in the run game and all that. I feel like if we play on that same level together, the sky is the limit.

"I'm excited to get on the field with him, get moving, bounce ideas off each other and get rolling."