

Flowing hair and short shorts: Broncos rookie Greg Dulcich turns heads with style, skill set

By Parker Garbriel

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Greg Dulcich naturally attracts eyeballs on the practice field.

The Broncos rookie tight end made his first football appearance over the weekend for Denver's two-day rookie minicamp and impressed – at least as much as you can in a no-pads environment where the menu consists of only the NFL's very basics – with the way he ran, moved, accelerated naturally after the catch, yadda, yadda, yadda.

C'mon. What's the real draw?

"Have you seen his hair? I mean, wow," first-year head coach Nathaniel Hackett marveled after the first day. "Just watching him out here, it's flowing in the wind."

This, mind you, is not the first time Denver's bald rookie head coach has complimented the extremely not-bald newcomer's cascading, curly flow. In a video produced by the team showing Dulcich arriving at the team facility after the Broncos made him the No. 80 overall selection and the third tight end picked in last month's draft, Dulcich walked into a room and Hackett quickly enveloped him in a hug, shouting, "Oh, my God, look at that hair. Oh, my God. It's so beautiful – one of the primary reasons why you're here."

During a Friday post-practice news conference, the former UCLA standout said of the mane, "It's staying forever. You can quote that," and he's keeping the mustache, too.

Noted. And can you explain the mid-thigh shorts?

"They're called shorts for a reason, right?" Dulcich said.

Good enough for his offensive coordinator.

"The shorts are really, really nice on him," Justin Outten said Saturday. "I told them he needs to get them tailored and maybe move the logo."

The hair, the 'stache, the short shorts and long socks plus Dulcich's casual dismissal of the altitude's impact – "If you're a pro athlete and you're in shape, it's not too much of a difficulty to overcome" – and his reference to teammates as "cool dudes" all suggest a right-off-the-bat comfort level that belies the reality sitting right in front of him: The Broncos just might ask a lot of him right away. In fact, just as soon as Dulcich's coaches finish weighing in on his luscious locks, their tone gathers some immediacy.

"He looks like a tight end in the NFL. That's the first impression," Outten said.

“He can really run. He’s in great shape, you can see that,” Hackett added. “Even being over here with some of the blocking drills, you can see that he’s definitely a willing blocker. So I think it’s kind of that all-purpose guy.

“I think that’s something that’s going to be very valuable for us.”

Opportunity abounds after the Broncos included starter Noah Fant in the package it traded to Seattle for quarterback Russell Wilson in early March. Now Dulcich jumps into the race with third-year man Albert Okwuegbunam as the primary competition and a group that also includes steady run-blocking veterans Eric Tomlinson and Eric Saubert, fullback/tight end Andrew Beck and a couple of undrafted free agents.

Dulcich made his name primarily as a big-play threat at UCLA, averaging nearly 20 yards per reception in 2020 and backing it up with 42 catches for 725 yards and five touchdowns last fall. Outten called his feel for route running one of his strengths, and the staff has little doubt about his ability to stretch the field vertically. If Dulcich is going to make a move toward extensive playing time as a rookie in the NFL, he’ll have to prove that he can hold his own in the run game.

“The willingness is there. The overall college mindset of being an effort guy,” Outten said of the 6-foot-4, 245-pounder who spent his first two years at UCLA as a walk-on before earning a scholarship ahead of the 2020 season. “The technique has to come, and he’s going to get there pretty shortly.”

The calendar provides enough caveats on its own – Dulcich is through rookie minicamp but has yet to work an organized practice with veterans – but Denver is also installing a new offense under a new head coach with a new quarterback. Sketching out a potential role or how exactly the staff envisions using Dulcich, Okwuegbunam and the rest of the tight ends is difficult at this point.

Some of it, certainly, will depend on what Wilson wants to do as the offensive plan comes together.

In Wilson’s 10 years with Seattle, Jimmy Graham’s three-season stretch from 2015-17 was the most productive for a tight end. He finished each of those campaigns second on the team in targets to Doug Baldwin and finished each between 5.9 and 6.7 per game. Other than that, Wilson has had a rotating, not overly talented cast that has included Gerald Everett, Zach Miller, Jacob Hollister, Will Dissly and others.

Hackett, meanwhile, spent the past three years in Green Bay as Matt LeFleur’s offensive coordinator, and the team put tight ends on the field extensively. According to Sharp Football data, the Packers used “12” personnel 29% of the time last year, second-most in the NFL. Even with a higher usage rate, though, Aaron Rodgers and Co. actually targeted tight ends less frequently than Wilson and Seattle as a percentage of pass attempts in each of the past three years.

Denver at full health is going to have options offensively, from a receiving corps that third-year man K.J. Hamler said last week feels like it has a lot to prove to a backfield featuring a potent pair in Javonte Williams and Melvin Gordon.

Where the tight ends group fits into that mix will evolve over the coming weeks, but Hackett told Dulcich on the phone when he was drafted that Wilson is planning on using him frequently.

“You’re going to love it,” Hackett said, according to video the team released. “This quarterback, all he’s been telling me is how he wants to keep throwing to the tight ends over and over again, so you better get your mind right, man.”

Does Dulcich end up the starter? The No. 2? In a timeshare with the talented Okwuegbunam? Time will tell, but the Broncos clearly already think he’s got more than a good head of hair on (and extending well past) his shoulders.

“Greg has done an excellent job out here learning the small amount of game plan that was presented to him,” Outten said. “He’s done a really good job with it. He’s on his details. The athletic ability that we saw on video is carrying over to the field. The adjustment after this is going to be what we need to evaluate moving forward. Obviously with a bigger playbook and more responsibility, and just kind of handling—like everything else with a rookie coming, you have a lot more time on your hands and how you handle that—but he’s been a really good pro so far with everything.”

The unique characteristic that Greg Dulcich brings to the Broncos' tight end room

By Zac Stevens

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Minutes after the Broncos selected Greg Dulcich in the third round of the 2022 NFL Draft, Denver's draft room was full of high fives, F-bombs of excitement and celebration.

As George Paton crossed Nathaniel Hackett's path on his way back to his seat in the war room, the head coach leaned in to the general manager and with a little more than a whisper, yet full of excitement, said, "He gives us something we don't have," as was captured on Behind the Broncos.

Minutes after Dulcich's first practice as a member of the Broncos, on Friday during Denver's rookie minicamp, Hackett was asked about that comment and what unique characteristic the rookie brings to the tight end room.

"Have you seen his hair? I mean, wow," Hackett immediately responded with his classic enthusiasm. "Just watching him out here, [the hair] flowing in the wind."

Eric Tomlinson, who also has near shoulder-length flow, might have a word with Hackett about that take.

But while Hackett led off his answer with a lighthearted joke, moments later, there was no joking around when Dulcich talked about his own locks of love.

"The hair's staying. Forever," he stated without hesitation, as his wavy hair lightly rested on his shoulders. "You can quote that."

While Dulcich's hair — along with his mustache — improve the hair game in the Broncos' tight end room, that wasn't the main reason Denver used the 80th-overall pick in the draft on him.

The unique characteristic that Hackett referred to on draft night was Dulcich's ability to be an all-around tight end.

"It was great to see him out here run routes. He can really run. He's in great shape. You can see that," Hackett said, transitioning to what Dulcich brings to the field. "And even being over here with some of the blocking drills, you can see that he's definitely a willing blocker. It's kind of that all-purpose guy. I think that's something that's going to be really valuable for us."

It wasn't that Denver didn't have pieces in the tight end room before, it was that the players they already had on the roster weren't necessarily viewed as all-around tight ends.

At 6-foot-6, 263 pounds, Tomlinson is a mauler in the run game. However, last season, he had one single catch for the Ravens all year.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, Albert Okwuegbunam is a potential lethal threat in the passing game, thanks in large part to his 4.49 40-yard-dash time, but has struggled his first two years in the league as a run blocker.

The Broncos believe Dulcich can find the middle ground between those two.

At 6-foot-4, 250 pounds, Dulcich was viewed by many coming out of UCLA as a receiving threat at the tight end position. As a senior in 2021, Dulcich's 42 catches for 725 yards, five touchdowns and a whopping 17.3 yards per catch clearly backed that up.

However, some scouting reports called into question his ability as a blocker. Dulcich has no idea why, but agreed with Hackett that he's a willing blocker.

"It just means I'm going to stick my head in the fire and not be afraid of anything," he said, explaining what it means to be a willing blocker. "If people got the misconception that I'm only going to go out and run routes, that's totally wrong. I'm going to do it all."

Saying that, however, the rookie understands as he takes the massive step from the Pac-12 to the AFC West, he's going to have to continue to develop his game in all areas, including blocking.

"There's a lot to work on," Dulcich admitted. "Pass game, showing some more wiggle and learning how coverages are going to be played in the NFL is going to be a lot different than college. And then run game too. Just being more explosive, coming off the ball — as you guys probably saw in the drills today — that was a big emphasis for us tight ends and I think we handled it really well."

As Dulcich's career in Denver begins, he committed to keeping his flow in the Mile High City. One way he can make sure passes flow his way in the NFL is by proving he's the all-around tight end Hackett and the Broncos believe he is.

How a coach's lasting impact continues to inspire Broncos TE Greg Dulcich — and his new GM

By Nick Kosmider

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The text chain comprised of proud dads had already been buzzing Friday night when the Broncos came on the clock to make the 80th pick in the 2022 NFL Draft.

The fathers of former football players at Saint Francis High in La Canada, Calif., had grown close through years of attending practices, helping with fundraisers and traveling to games. Even after their sons had graduated, the text chain remained strong, frequently pinging with updates about what their now-adult kids were up to as they spread themselves across the country. Now, one of their own was about to be drafted into the NFL, and George Dulcich felt like the messages might not ever stop.

Greg Dulcich, the kid who “somehow fell through the cracks” as a high school recruit, as his father put it, forced to walk on at nearby UCLA, was suddenly about to realize the pro football dream he had hatched in middle school. This was his moment, but it also belonged to someone else. So when the Broncos called Dulcich ahead of the televised announcement to tell him he had been drafted, the texts quickly turned to the man they knew was celebrating as hard as anyone, wherever he was.

“The same kind of comment was pouring into the chain,” George Dulcich said. “They all said, ‘Coach Bonds is smiling somewhere.’”

Jimmy Bonds’ was Greg Dulcich’s football coach at Saint Francis, but he was also more than that. He was an advocate. A friend. A guiding force.

“When I see him playing,” Bonds once told a reporter after Dulcich had begun his college career, “it’s like watching your own son playing.”

When Dulcich announced in an Instagram post in January that he was forgoing his final season of college eligibility to enter the draft, he thanked Bonds “for giving me the strongest foundation possible in both faith and football.”

“He did so much for me and his door was always open,” Dulich told The Athletic on Friday in a quiet corner of the Broncos’ training facility, moments after he was introduced as the team’s new tight end. “That’s what was great about him. You could talk to him about anything. He truly loved his guys and we loved him back.”

Bonds died on Oct. 28, 2020, after a battle with cancer at the age of 51, less than two weeks before Dulcich was set to begin his redshirt sophomore season at UCLA. Bonds, a former quarterback for the Bruins, had experienced a swelling of pride seven months before he passed. It came on March 26, 2020. Dulcich was back home with his family, classes and practices at UCLA temporarily shut down in the early days of the pandemic, when he got a call from UCLA coach Chip Kelly to tell the young tight end, who happened to be celebrating his 20th birthday that day, that he was being put on scholarship after two seasons as a walk-on.

“A great present,” Bonds told a reporter at the time.

Soon after the news trickled down, Todd Wolfson got a text message with four words: “I told you so.”

It was from Jimmy Bonds.

“We would always talk about college recruiting, Jimmy and I, just because he and I had been doing it so long,” said Wolfson, Dulcich’s basketball coach at Saint Francis for four years and a close friend of Bonds. “We’d bounce college recruiting stories back and forth. He would always be saying, ‘I just can’t understand why no one offers this kid.’ Then, during his sophomore year, he started making some waves. And Greg would always text me, ‘I told you so. I told you so.’ Jim knew it. It took some other coaches a while to realize how good of a talent and how great of a kid he is.”

Dulcich had some small-school interest coming out of Saint Francis, but Power 5 offers were nowhere to be found. That confounded teammates like Michael Bonds, a former Saint Francis quarterback and the nephew of Jim Bonds, who threw passes to Dulcich for one season in high school.

“He surprised everyone every day at practice or at games with the things he would do,” Michael Bonds said of Dulcich, who caught 50 passes for 1,168 yards as a senior wide receiver at Saint Francis. “He just was a freak athlete. He kind of just went unnoticed in that Pasadena Valley with all those other athletes around.”

Bonds kept making phone calls behind the scenes, perplexed as to why a player with Dulcich’s size — already 6-foot-3, 212 pounds in high school with a ready-to-grow frame — production and character was going largely unnoticed. He also continued to encourage Dulcich, telling him that he would ultimately find his opportunity. It would be up to him to be ready to seize.

“Coach Bonds was always on Greg’s side,” George Dulcich said.

Those injections of confidence helped Dulcich make a quick impression when he walked onto the field for his first practice at UCLA in June 2018.

“The first day I got to UCLA we were at summer workouts, and I’m beating all the guys on scholarship on the sprints and stuff,” Dulcich said. “I’m like, ‘All right, I’m supposed to be a slow dude that wasn’t worth a scholarship, but here I am, tearing it up.’ I knew from that moment I was going to be (in the NFL).”

Dulcich was pressed into wide receiver duty during his redshirt season on campus due to injuries at the position, but by 2019 he had become a full-time tight end and caught eight passes for 105 yards as a backup at the position. Heading into spring practice in 2020, the Bruins were counting on Dulcich to take a leap after the team lost underclassmen Devin Assisi to the NFL Draft. Derek Sage, UCLA’s tight ends coach from 2019 to 2021, had already seen Dulcich dominate practices during his first two seasons on campus. But now he had blossomed from 228 pounds to 241 and had somehow only become faster.

“He had four of the best spring practices I’ve ever seen, and that’s what put him on scholarship,” Sage said. “We only got through four practices and then COVID shut everything down. He was put on scholarship after that, so think about the gravity of that. He showcased what he had for four practices of fully buying in to being the full-time tight end. That was enough for Coach Kelly to say, ‘Let’s put this kid on scholarship.’”

Eleven days after Bonds died, Dulcich began the 2020 season by catching four passes for 126 yards, including a 52-yard touchdown, in a game against the University of Colorado in Boulder. For many onlookers, it was the first sign that Dulcich, now on scholarship and playing a major role in UCLA's offense, could be an impact player at the next level. For Bonds, had he been able to watch that day, the performance would have been no surprise. He believed there were very few limits to what Dulcich could do on the field. That's why the group texts last Friday night, messages that imagined Bonds watching with pride as Dulcich got selected, kept pouring through the chain.

There was one person in the thread who knew that it was who was drafting Dulcich that made the story all the sweeter.

Tom Bonds was living in Northbrook, Ill., in early 1997, just outside of Chicago, when he got a phone call from his brother.

Jim Bonds had been roommates at UCLA with a teammate named George Paton, who was just about to take his first job in the NFL as a scouting intern with the Bears. He needed a place to crash. So Jim volunteered the couch of his brother, who had also become friends with Paton in college.

"Jimmy called me on a Saturday afternoon and said, 'Hey, George just got hired by the Bears. I told him he could stay with you for a couple days. Is that OK?'" Tom Bonds recalled. "I said, 'That's fine.'"

Paton moved out two and a half years later.

"We had a lot of fun," Tom Bonds said last week, laughing at the memory.

As Jim Bonds found his way to Saint Francis (he began coaching there in 2000), Tom Bonds pursued a career in financial services and Paton began working up the front-office ladder in the NFL, the three men remained close. When Jim Bonds passed away 18 months ago, less than three months before Paton moved to Denver to take his first job as a general manager, the two men who lost a best friend pulled closer.

"I think I help fill a void for George when he's missing Jimmy and George does the same for me," Tom Bonds said. "It's a pretty special bond."

Despite the connection to Bonds, Paton had never met his late friend's star player before Dulcich landed in Denver on Saturday afternoon. The Broncos' interest in one of the country's top tight ends was based on his explosive capability after the catch, his precise route-running ability, his strong reputation as a leader and a long list of other characteristics the team studied during an exhaustive evaluation process. They heard from coaches like Sage, who detailed the intense work ethic that helped Dulcich improve significantly each season at UCLA.

"He's a true student of the game," Sage said. "We would practice in the morning and come back for meetings at night, and he's already watched the cut-up I made. He'll be texting me at 2:30, 3 in the afternoon saying, 'Hey, what did you think on that Y-cross play?' He studies the shit out of it. It's really important to him to be the best player he can possibly be."

Paton drafted Pat Surtain II in the first round in 2021, nearly two decades after he had worked in Miami with Patrick Surtain Sr., then a cornerback for the Dolphins. It was during his time with the Dolphins that

Paton also got to know Hall of Fame pass rusher Jason Taylor, who later moved on to coaching defense at St. Thomas Aquinas High in South Florida. Among Taylor's first star pupils: Nik Bonitto, the No. 64 pick by the Broncos last week.

Spend enough time in the NFL and the connections begin popping up everywhere.

"Maybe I'm just getting old," Paton cracked.

Coincidence or kismet, Paton was determined Friday night, even amid the frenetic environment of the draft, to appreciate the full-circle feeling that came with dialing Dulcich.

"Coach Bonds would be proud, wouldn't he?" Paton said to Dulcich.

"I think so," Dulcich replied. "Everything I do, I'm doing it for him."