

Russell Wilson's call delivered another dream moment for Broncos' Kendall Hinton

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"I have to ask, as someone who has been an NFL quarterback yourself ..."

Kendall Hinton, a third-year wide receiver for the Broncos, unfurled a wide smile and hearty chuckle as a reporter began a playful line of questioning following a recent practice. It's been 19 months since Hinton became the face of the NFL's pandemic season, starting as an emergency quarterback in a November 2020 game against the New Orleans Saints after every other player at the position — Drew Lock, Jeff Driskel, Brett Rypien, Blake Bortles — was ruled ineligible due to breaches of COVID-19 protocol.

Hinton threw nine passes that day, completed one and had equipment he wore sent to the Pro Football Hall of Fame in Canton, Ohio. He hasn't seen the exhibit yet, but his grandparents have. They sent him pictures. Even after all these months, Hinton still sometimes shakes his head about that day, one he's called "a dream." He suspects that will always be the case.

"Just a crazy story," he said.

But Hinton didn't let the story stop there. He wrestled his way back onto the roster at wide receiver in 2021, made his first career start, caught 15 total passes for 175 yards and grabbed his first touchdown reception, a fourth-quarter score in a narrow Week 5 loss against the Steelers.

"It was my first two-minute drive, so I'm dead tired," Hinton said last week, chuckling at the memory of his first NFL touchdown. "But we're rolling and we get down to the 5-yard line, and we get a call where I know I'm the first read. So I'm just grinning as we left the huddle. The play worked out perfectly. I was exhausted, so I really didn't get to celebrate and enjoy the moment, but it was a big touchdown. It was a great memory, but hopefully there are many more."

Just when it seemed like there might not be any pinch-me moments left for Hinton to experience this early in his career, his phone began chirping on March 8. He was at his parents' home in Durham, N.C., when a FaceTime request popped up. When Hinton answered, Russell Wilson's face appeared.

"My mom's in the kitchen going, 'Oh, my God!'" Hinton said. "It was just pure excitement."

Other Broncos receivers have described similar rushes of euphoria when they talked to their new star quarterback for the first time, but the joy for Hinton emanated from a deeper place. He grew up about 15 miles from Carter-Finley Stadium at North Carolina State University. He was in middle school in 2008 when a young quarterback named Wilson, who stood south of 6 feet, dazzled as a freshman for the Wolfpack, scoring 21 total touchdowns and throwing just one interception.

Wilson was only getting started, and Hinton was transfixed. He was determined not to miss a single throw Wilson made. A single scramble. A single big play created by the quarterback who had often been told he

was too small to play the position. It was all very familiar for an aspiring quarterback who would eventually play the position at Wake Forest before stepping into the cameo role heard 'round the world.

"I idolized Russ coming up," Hinton said. "That was my position. I was a quarterback, 5-foot-10. He went to N.C. State, and I was from Durham, 15 minutes away. So that was somebody I always followed coming up. So this is pretty unreal."

Darius Robinson, who coached Hinton at Southern Durham High and has worked with athletes in the Raleigh-Durham area for three decades, said it's hard to underestimate the impact Wilson had on young players in the area during his college career as a two-sport athlete who was also planting the early seeds of an off-field career rooted in community service. Legendary basketball players — from Michael Jordan to Vince Carter to Christian Laettner — played college basketball in the state and turned the region into one of the country's hoops hotbeds.

But Wilson's imaginative style of play and talent for leadership created the possibility of another path.

"Russell was an influence on Kendall's movement in the pocket and his ability to extend plays and get in the open field and make things happen," said Robinson, who added that Hinton was a member of a youth council in Durham County while in high school, lending ideas about local government that could better serve young people in the community. "The person that Kendall is, buying in and knowing that a person like Russell had a mentality and a drive to be the best, that's what Kendall did for us. He didn't let people get away with not working hard. He didn't let people leave practice without running extra routes with him throwing, getting that rhythm down. Russell's (example) was perfect for him. In the recruiting process, Kendall was compared to Russell. (North Carolina State) coach (Dave) Doeren really wanted him because he reminded them so much of Russell."

Hinton instead chose to go to Wake Forest and played nine games at quarterback, accounting for 11 touchdowns as a dual-threat talent. But it was the decision he made to switch to receiver full-time as a fifth-year senior in 2019 that set him on a circuitous path that led to becoming teammates with his idol. He caught 73 passes for 1,001 yards and four touchdowns that season, all while still trying to learn the nuances of the position.

"Just think if he had been playing receiver for four years," Robinson said. "You'd be saying, 'Wow.'"

The Broncos were intrigued enough to sign Hinton as an undrafted free agent in 2020. Though he didn't make the 53-man roster out of training camp, he spent time on the team's practice squad — with a brief detour in the real world — before ultimately being called up as an emergency quarterback. But last season, as he played in 16 of the team's 17 games, Hinton displayed the talent that could give him NFL staying power.

"Kendall is doing an amazing job," Wilson said Monday, a statement that probably would have made the middle school version of Hinton drop his jaw to the floor. "He has a special gift — his gift of getting open, his wiggle and his ability to accelerate and make plays. I remember watching the film (from 2021) ... of the Cowboys game. He caught a skinny post route and just took off (for 40 yards). His ability to get open, his ability to make plays near the red zone and how he catches it, he's got that football instinct. It's the quarterback in him."

Hinton said the chance to spend time with Wilson in San Diego in March was an invaluable experience. He has incorporated the things he learned during that trip into an offseason of personal development that has focused on the finer points of his craft, like snapping out of breaks more quickly and perfecting his hand placement. You know, Hinton said with his trademark grin, the stuff other players “may have picked up in high school or college.”

All of that work is aimed at achieving another first. Hinton is trying to make an initial 53-man roster for the first time. The competition is fierce, with players like Travis Fulgham and recent draft picks Seth Williams and Tyrie Cleveland battling for what might be one available roster spot.

“That’s something you can’t control,” Hinton said. “That’s something I dealt with my rookie year, coming in and saying, ‘Am I going to last?’ But at the end of the day, you don’t control that. You just come out here every day and give your best, put in the work during the offseason and show what you can do. That’s all you can do.”

The last thing Hinton is going to do is take any time he has with Wilson for granted. If his brief time in the NFL has taught him anything, it’s that there is no sense in closing yourself off to a new dream.

“There are still days,” he said, “where I come out here and I’m like, ‘Yo, I get to play with Russell Wilson!’”