

Broncos wideout Jerry Jeudy has been better than most people think

By Shawn Drotar

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After a season in which Broncos' wide receiver Jerry Jeudy failed to reach the end zone despite appearing in 10 games, the former first-round draft pick has yet to display the dazzling talent that made him a top-tier NFL prospect while winning a national championship at Alabama. It's led more than a few pundits to proclaim the former first-round pick a "bust."

Despite a disappointing start to Jeudy's career, there's been more than meets the eye. And those signs bode well for a breakout 2022 campaign.

In his highly anticipated rookie season of 2020, Jeudy was targeted 7.1 times per game by then-starter Drew Lock, whose aggressive style meant an array of attempts, but less-than-ideal accuracy. According to Pro Football Focus, no receiver in the league had a lower percentage of catchable balls, but Jeudy also had an unofficial 10 drops; fully half of them in a single road game against the Chargers.

"I'm watching the ball come in; I just dropped it," Jeudy said after the 19-16 loss. "I've just got to focus on the next play. It just happened too many times today. That's unacceptable."

Jeudy caught 52 of his 62 catchable targets on the season. That's an 83.9 percent rate.

Lock was displaced in 2021 by the more-cautious Teddy Bridgewater, and Jeudy's targets dropped precipitously. Jeudy was only targeted 5.6 times per game, and a paltry three times in the red zone all season long.

Impressively, Jeudy was still among the league leaders in "cushion" and average yards of separation — putting up numbers in both categories nearly identical to the Rams' Cooper Kupp — despite a high-ankle sprain that hampered his performance and limited him to 10 games on the season. Jeudy dropped only a pair of passes in 2021, and upped his success rate on catchable balls to 90.5 percent.

Despite the underwhelming seasons for the Broncos as a whole, especially given their punchless offense, it's worth noting that Jeudy led the team in receiving yards per game in each of the team's last — and his first — two seasons. He's one of only 12 wide receivers to do so, and many of the others — Kupp, Davante Adams, Stefon Diggs and Chris Godwin, to name a few — are among the finest in the league. Of course, those players also have some of the best quarterbacks in the league throwing their way, as well. Only Jeudy, Washington's Terry McLaurin and Carolina's D.J. Moore have accomplished the feat despite working with different starting quarterbacks; usually an indicator of subpar play from the signal-caller.

However, the counting stats — 90 receptions for 1,323 yards and three touchdowns in two seasons — remain decidedly pedestrian, especially for the 15th-overall selection in the draft. There's no getting around that, nor is there any getting around Jeudy's penchant for social-media statements that don't appear to match his effort level at times. There's unquestionably some maturation needed from the 23-year-old wideout.

Perhaps the hard lessons from his highly public and unfortunate offseason court case — one which resulted in no charges filed following a verbal spat with his girlfriend — will accelerate that process. “Just knowing how to handle the situation from now on; I learned from it,” Jeudy said in June. “Now, I’m just getting ready to move forward.”

Moving forward, in Jeudy’s case, comes with an exponential upgrade at quarterback in Russell Wilson, who’s already made an impact with his young wideout.

“Having Russ is just going to make me a better player... It’s been good, just watching film, coming in here earlier and just going over certain plays and certain route concepts and stuff like that,” Jeudy explained.

“It’s been a lot of help. (I’m) just focused on the little things, the details, and just becoming a better player than I was the past two years.”

Wilson will help in a lot of ways.

“He always keeps me motivated,” Jeudy added. “He’s a great leader, great guy.”

The talent is there. While Jeudy hasn’t exploded onto the scene like Minnesota’s Justin Jefferson — the only other player from that 2020 draft class to lead his team in receiving yards per game over the last two seasons — he’s already shown improvement despite being in one of the league’s worst-designed offenses, one that the former head coach didn’t seem to have much interest in, anyway. If Wilson and new head coach Nathaniel Hackett can unlock what Nick Saban did in Tuscaloosa, Jeudy’s third time out just might be the charm. He certainly thinks so.

“I can’t wait to touch that paint. That’s my first time ever playing the game of football and not being able to score a touchdown,” he said of last season. “I know this year when I get in that end zone, you all are going to feel me.”

Broncos WR Jerry Jeudy simplifying focus entering third season: 'Just run free'

By Nick Kosmider

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Bobby Wilder thought the car must have been lost.

On a sunny day in Norfolk, Va., this past spring, Wilder, a long-time college football coach turned private skills instructor, was running a pair of young players through drills on a public field near a local high school when he saw a shiny, black SUV pull up near the field.

"All of a sudden, this 6-foot-3, shredded dude with sunglasses is walking towards us," Wilder said. "I'm asking (the players), 'Do you recognize this guy?'" All of a sudden, as he gets closer, he takes his glasses off and introduces himself and says, 'How are you doing? My name is Jerry Jeudy. I saw you guys out there working and wanted to come say hi to the kids.'"

Jeudy, the Broncos' third-year wide receiver, had been in the area, attending a doctor's appointment with one of his daughters, when he spotted a group of kids playing on a field out the car window. Something told him to pull over.

"I saw them out there, just working hard and grinding," Jeudy said while hosting a youth football camp at the Broncos' UHealth training complex last month. "It made me reminisce about those days I was out there grinding. So I just went up there to give them a little motivation and then about my way."

Jeudy stayed long enough during his impromptu visit to play catch, take a few pictures and offer some words of wisdom for the young players on hand. It was a brief pit stop for the 23-year-old NFL wide receiver, but it was much more than that for those who were buzzing about Jeudy's drop-by long after he left.

"He had no reason to have to stop and say hi to me or to these kids," said Wilder, who is the former head coach at Old Dominion and counts current Broncos wide receiver Travis Fulgham among past players who have reached the NFL. "I bet he talked to the kids for 10 minutes. It was phenomenal. He talked to them about hard work, about being a good person, about how your opportunity will come if you stick to it, even when you have setbacks. It was inspiring."

Jeudy has faced his own high-profile setback this offseason, centered on his arrest in May on suspicion of misdemeanor charges stemming from what the receiver labeled as a "petty" argument with the mother of his youngest daughter. The charges were soon dismissed and Jeudy said at the end of minicamp in June: "It's behind me. I'm just focused on the future."

Jeudy now insists he is intently gazing at the near future — a highly anticipated 2022 season behind new quarterback Russell Wilson — with clear eyes. Optimism that hovers around Denver's new-look offense undoubtedly begins with its new quarterback, but when camp starts July 27, the new staff led by first-year head coach Nathaniel Hackett is eager to begin cementing a plan it believes can maximize Jeudy's considerable talent.

“Unbelievable,” Hackett said at the NFL combine in early March when discussing Jeudy’s skill set.

The talent has rarely been in doubt with the young wide receiver since he arrived in the NFL, but the case in May nonetheless capped an at-times turbulent first two years in Denver for Jeudy, who joined the Broncos in 2020 as the 15th overall pick in the NFL Draft out of Alabama. His rookie season was dotted with promising flashes — the leaping touchdown catch against the Jets; the electric finale against the Raiders — but also was marred by drops, an inconsistent connection with quarterback Drew Lock and a general frustration with the offense that Jeudy expressed publicly at times through social media.

Jeudy starred in training camp ahead of his second season in 2021, benefitting, he said at the time, from the veteran tutelage of quarterback Teddy Bridgewater, who counseled the receiver on how to more quickly get to his spots as he worked through his routes. His impressive August blended into a strong season opener against the Giants in Week 1, when Jeudy caught six passes for 72 yards in just 31 offensive snaps. But he suffered a sprained ankle early in the third quarter and missed the next six games.

In the nine games played after his return (he missed the season’s penultimate game against the Chargers due to COVID-19 protocols), Jeudy tallied just 32 catches for 395 yards. He has insisted his ankle was fully healthy by the time he returned in late October, but he nonetheless struggled to find a rhythm in former coordinator Pat Shurmur’s offense and felt the ill effects, like several Denver receivers, of the injuries and inconsistencies that continued to plague the team’s quarterback position.

Most notably, Jeudy, who caught 26 touchdowns in three seasons at Alabama, didn’t reach the end zone once in 10 games last season. He was only targeted in the red zone three times all year, just one more than No. 5 receiver Kendall Hinton. Of all the frustrations that gnawed at Jeudy in 2021, that one seemed to have the most bite.

“I can’t wait to touch that paint,” Jeudy said of reaching the end zone in 2022. “That’s my first time ever playing a (season) of football and not being able to score a touchdown. I know this year, when I get in that end zone, you all are going to feel me.”

Catch ball. Score touchdown. Jeudy insists he has entered his third NFL season with that kind of simplified focus. After two seasons of consistent losing, something he never experienced in college, he’s eager to fill his role for a team that believes it is ready to turn the corner. Though Jeudy missed the latter part of the offseason program with a minor leg injury, he was an engaged spectator, constantly exchanging banter with defensive teammates. He hosted his first football camp for Denver youth at the end of June and is planning to host another in nearby Arvada, Colo., before the start of training camp.

“I was never able to attend something like that,” Jeudy said as hundreds of eager youngsters prepared to join him on the field last month. “I didn’t start going to camps until I was in high school. I just want to bring people together and just have fun.”

Jeudy’s genuine optimism about what lies ahead in 2022, of course, has been buoyed by the arrival of Wilson. On the morning of March 8, moments after news broke that two-time MVP quarterback Aaron Rodgers would be remaining in Green Bay on a new contract and ended months of speculation he’d seek a trade to Denver or elsewhere, Jeudy posted a single, frowning emoji on Twitter. Less than two hours later, after news broke that Wilson would instead be the Pro Bowl franchise quarterback joining the Broncos, Jeudy posted a new emoji, this one a flame with the caption: “Oh we lit.”

His eagerness to play this season with a top-shelf quarterback has only increased since Wilson's arrival.

"Every detail matters with him," Jeudy said. "You learn a lot, just how hard he works and how focused he is when he's on the field and on the board. You realize how locked in he is. I've learned a lot. I mean, it's going to be very exciting. I feel like we are going to be a very explosive team. I feel like we've got all the pieces we needed, so we've just gotta put it together. And I am excited that is going to happen."

With Wilson under center, an offensive-minded head coach in Hackett now calling plays and a clean bill of health as he enters his third NFL camp, Jeudy seemingly has everything he needs in place to fulfill the potential John Elway saw in him when Elway made the receiver the final first-round pick of his front-office tenure in 2020. Jeudy still has to prove it as he heads into a critical third season, has to put it all together in a way that has eluded him to this point in his NFL career. There should be no more barriers to lofty success, least of all Jeudy's own talent.

"Jerry is going to be dangerous," All-Pro safety Justin Simmons said, noting the offensive staff moved Jeudy around during OTAs in ways he believes will make the talented receiver more difficult to account for. "I can't wait to watch him play and just to be let go. Just run free and do what he does best. He's one of the best route runners I think I've consistently gone up against over and over. You have to lock in, know where your leverage is and know where your help is because if you don't, he can make you look silly in practice. I'm thankful for that, too, because we go up against a lot of guys that are talented, but Jerry is special, for sure. I think it's going to be a big and great year for him."

'I know the player I could be': Jerry Jeudy eager to return to the end zone, realize potential in Year 3

By Aric DiLalla
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In his final collegiate season, Jerry Jeudy scored 10 touchdowns.

The previous year, 14. As a freshman, two.

In high school, Jeudy caught double-digit touchdowns in each of his final two seasons.

And, when he entered the pro ranks in 2020, he scored three touchdowns as a rookie.

That, perhaps, can explain Jeudy's frustration from a year ago — when he did not score a touchdown in 10 games — and why he's so eager to return to the end zone in 2022.

"I can't wait to touch that paint," Jeudy said Tuesday. "That's my first time ever playing the game of football not being able to score a touchdown. I know this year when I get in that end zone, y'all are gonna feel me."

Jeudy believes Head Coach Nathaniel Hackett's offense and the addition of Russell Wilson should help him get back to scoring touchdowns, and there's plenty of reason to believe that's true. Before Jeudy sat out the Broncos' first two minicamp practices, he got plenty of targets from Wilson during the offseason program.

Jeudy's route-running ability is unmatched by most in the league, and he's a mismatch for plenty of defenders. Some have suggested his skill set is similar to that of Davante Adams, whom Hackett and the Packers helped find great success in Green Bay.

"Jerry's going to be dangerous," safety Justin Simmons said. "I think the way that they've been using him and the way that we've had to key on him in just OTAs — training camp obviously it's going to be amped up more' but Jerry's going to have a heck of a year, man. I can't wait to watch him play and just be let go, run free, do what he does best. He's one of the best route runners that I think I've consistently gone up against over and over and over. You've got to lock in, know where your leverage is, know where your help is, because if you don't, he can't make you look silly in practice. I'm thankful for that too, because we go up against a lot of guys that are talented, but Jerry's special, for sure. I think it's going to be a big and great year for him."

Should Jeudy put up big numbers, it would send a message in his third NFL season about his ceiling as a player. As a rookie, Jeudy caught 52 passes for 856 yards and a pair of 100-yard games.

The early returns in 2021 suggested more of the same for Jeudy. In the Broncos' season opener, he caught six passes for 72 yards to lead all Denver receivers. Jeudy, though, suffered a nasty ankle injury that knocked him out of the game — and kept him out of the lineup for six weeks. Though he returned late in the year, he posted a season high of 77 yards and did not find the end zone.

Jeudy said Tuesday he knows he is capable of more.

“I’m motivated myself, because I know the player I could be and the potential I have,” Jeudy said. “Having Russell, it’s just going to make me a better player also. I’m just excited to see how this season goes.”

The second wide receiver drafted in 2020, Jeudy believes the team’s new offense should put him position to find that desired success. Jeudy said the new system “most certainly” gives him better odds to succeed.

“Coach Hackett and Russ [are] going to do a good job to put us in the best position possible to be successful in this offense,” Jeudy said. “I feel that 100 percent.”

Jeudy expects that success should extend to more than just his own stats.

“The ceiling is high,” Jeudy said of the offense. “It’s going to be a lot of big plays. A lot of opportunities and a lot of explosive plays are going to be made out there. It’s going to be exciting for real.”