

How Broncos rookie Damarri Mathis put himself into the mix at cornerback

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Christian Parker had a rule for rookie cornerback Damarri Mathis when offseason practices began in the spring. At first, it seemed very antithetical to how the former University of Pittsburgh standout had carved his path to the NFL.

“I kind of put the handcuffs on him during OTAs and training camp, like, ‘You can’t press,’” Parker said recently, recounting an early conversation with the fourth-round pick. “‘You’ve gotta play off and see it all and force yourself to be able to do that.’”

Mathis built a reputation in college as a physical corner who loved to occupy a receiver’s personal bubble, often harassing his matchup from the time the ball was snapped. At the top of his pre-draft scouting report, The Athletic draft analyst Dane Brugler wrote of Mathis: “Eagerly re-routes receivers at the line. ... (He is a) physical striker and receivers feel it when he connects.” Put another way, Mathis has long enjoyed the physical aspects of playing cornerback, relished the contact. That style works has worked to his detriment at times — see: six pass-interference penalties as a senior in 2021 — but general manager George Paton and his staff generally liked the physical nature Mathis exhibited on tape in the build up to the draft.

The NFL, however, demands more from starting cornerbacks, which helps explain Parker’s mandate. During individual periods in training, Mathis and the rest of the team’s defensive backs would continue to hone their press techniques — proper hand technique, footwork, timing — but when team period rolled around, the rookie was challenged to see the bigger picture. That meant giving receivers space.

“It’s just trusting your eyes,” Mathis, who received some first-team reps last week with starter Ronald Darby out due to a chest contusion, said of the biggest adjustment between the man-heavy style he played at Pitt and the scheme full of zone principles with coordinator Ejiro Evero. “You have to trust your leverage and drive with your eyes. That’s the biggest thing.”

There are no shortage of nuanced changes a rookie defensive back has to grasp when he enters the NFL. It starts with the very dimensions of the field as it relates to the hashmarks. A player’s muscle memory in college is trained to know the boundary exists in a certain spot, only to have that wiped away when they turn pro. Parker noted that even a player like Pat Surtain II, an all-rookie performer who had a seemingly seamless transition to the pro game, had to get used to how much the field changes a cornerback’s approach. And the differences don’t stop there.

“There are certain formations and splits that are different, so you have to learn the game from an offensive perspective,” Parker said. “From the defensive side, it’s your eye progression. Playing off, it’s like, ‘OK, can I read the QB’s keys on a three-step drop? What does this exchange mean?’ You can’t just go nose-to-nose and play cat coverage every down. There are more people you are connected to and involved with. There is more communication you have to give and receive. And then getting comfortable in certain

positions where you have so much space on either side of you. With all that, you have to figure out how to maximize each rep. That's an ongoing process with him."

Parker provided a recent example of how Mathis was able to grasp all of those factors and use his natural quickness to make an impact play. It came during the second week of training camp practice earlier this month. Mathis matched up with wide receiver Kaden Davis, but was playing several yards off the line of scrimmage.

"They gave him a 'dive' release and he shaded his man's movement," said Parker, referring to a route where the receiver sells a hard inside slant before moving to the outside. "When it was time to ride, he went. That was a really good play to see his progression."

Ride he did. After recognizing the route from Davis, while peering into the backfield to see quarterback Brett Rypien's eyes, Mathis broke for the ball and made a diving catch along the sideline for his first interception of camp.

"It wasn't just the technique, but that extra effort to continue to trust himself and run underneath the ball," coach Nathaniel Hackett said of the play.

When Parker turned on the play in the film room later that day, Mathis said it was gratifying to see all the new components he's trying to master come together.

"It felt like a perfect play," Mathis said. "We went over it on tape, just being able to hold my leverage and, once (Davis) crossed the hash, being able to undercut the ball. I did exactly what he had told me to do, and it was good that it showed up on film."

The coaching staff was pleased with Mathis' performance in the preseason opener. With Darby's timeline uncertain — the veteran did not practice Tuesday — the rookie should get more opportunities in his bid to become the team's No. 3 outside corner behind Darby and Surtain, starting with Saturday's game in Buffalo.

"I just want to fully execute my job, no (missed assignments), play my technique and just get the ball," Mathis said. "The ball is so important in this league."