

“He’s been ballin’”: Why Michael Ojemudia is no longer competing for a roster spot, but instead a starting job heading into training camp

By Zac Stevens
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The Denver Broncos secondary is not short of top-end talent.

Pat Surtain was a top-10 pick. Ronald Darby’s making \$10 million a year. Justin Simmons is an All-Pro, Pro Bowler and one of the highest-paid safeties in the entire NFL. And Kareem Jackson is a former first-round pick who is a borderline Pro Bowler year in and year out.

Yet despite an already stacked group, one former third-round pick made plenty of noise and stole the spotlight time and time again during the team’s offseason workout program.

“OJ. Michael Ojemudia,” Pat Surtain quickly said, when asked what cornerback caught his eye during the offseason. “He’s made plays throughout these whole OTAs. He’s been ballin’. He’s been showing that he’s capable of making those big-time plays. He’s showing out these whole OTAs. So I would say him.”

After an up-and-down rookie season in 2020—where Ojemudia showed flashes, but also got beat multiple times—a hamstring injury derailed his sophomore campaign in 2021.

However, despite missing the first 15 games of the season, Ojemudia made his presence felt in his lone start of the season in Week 18 against the Kansas City Chiefs.

Playing in 96 percent of the defensive snaps, Ojemudia racked up 11 tackles and had two near interceptions off Patrick Mahomes. While he wasn’t able to bring either of them in, they still turned into two passes defended against the elite quarterback.

This offseason, the 24-year-old corner has picked up where he left off from that game.

“He’s really stepped up and really done a great job,” Nathaniel Hackett said during the team’s mandatory minicamp. “There has been a couple of instances when you have actually seen him getting better, just even through coaching. Things ‘CP’ [Christian Parker] and Ejiro [Evero] have been asking him to do and you see that stuff show up on tape. He’s had a couple breaks on some plays and he’s competing out of his mind.”

Much like he did in Week 18 against the Chiefs, Ojemudia has been holding his own going up against Russell Wilson, Courtland Sutton, Tim Patrick and the rest of Denver’s starting offense. No. 13 took the majority of first-team reps during OTAs and minicamp in place of Ronald Darby, who was nursing an injury, opposite Pat Surtain.

On multiple occasions, Ojemudia made his presence felt, including a pass break up in the end zone when Wilson tried to find Patrick in the front left corner.

“He’s gotten so much better,” Evero added during mandatory minicamp. “It’s a credit to him and a credit to Coach ‘CP’, Ola [Adams], ‘Dre’ [DeAndre Thompson] and those guys that are working with him. He’s really, really improved, which is good because we need a lot of depth at that position.”

While Darby is expected to be healthy for training camp, which begins July 27, Ojemudia has put himself in a position to at least compete for playing time, if not push Darby for the starting job.

“[He’s] making plays,” Darby himself added about the third-year corner. “He comes out ready to work each day. He pays attention in meetings, asks questions and goes out there and makes plays every day.”

Ojemudia’s play-making ability goes beyond just passes defended and interceptions. In fact, as a rookie, despite only starting 11 games, the 6-foot-1 , 200-pound corner had a team-high four forced fumbles. As a rookie, a cornerback had more forced fumbles than Alexander Johnson, Bradley Chubb and Shelby Harris combined.

During this offseason, Ojemudia continued to display his play-making abilities.

A hamstring injury did its best to derail Ojemudia’s promising young career. But over the past half a year, he’s pushed his way back to not just making the 53-man roster, but competing for a starting job during training camp.

Why Broncos CB Michael Ojemudia, after a lost season, could be a vital piece

By Nick Kosmider

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If you were to use the finales of his first two NFL seasons as the only evaluation points, it would be fair to think Broncos cornerback Michael Ojemudia was well on his way to cementing himself as a marquee defensive back in the league, not preparing to battle for a No. 4 corner role.

Take Week 18 last season against the Chiefs. Making his first and only start of the 2021 season, Ojemudia tallied a career-high 11 tackles and also deflected two passes from Patrick Mahomes, who posted just a 61.4 passer rating when targeting the former University of Iowa standout that day.

“I thought he played outstanding when we played the Chiefs,” safety Justin Simmons said of Ojemudia’s performance in a narrow Broncos loss. “I think it’s a testament to his work ethic and the things he’s doing right.”

Then there was the regular-season finale against the Raiders to end the 2020 season, when Ojemudia, then a rookie third-round pick, forced two fumbles — giving him a franchise rookie record of four that season.

It was just everything else that happened between those two eyebrow-raising performances that have placed Ojemudia into prove-it territory as he enters his third NFL season, eager to show he can stay healthy and turn the kind of performances that have capped his first two seasons into regular occurrences. The Broncos may have already penciled in three starters at cornerback in Pat Surtain II, Ronald Darby and, at nickel, newcomer K’Waun Williams, but important depth spots beyond remain up for grabs as the team approaches its second week of OTA practices. Ojemudia is the most experienced player battling for those rotational roles, but he faces ample competition in rookies Damarri Mathis (fourth round) and Faion Hicks (seventh) and third-year veteran Essang Bassey, among others.

“My mindset don’t change; I’m always putting that work in,” said Ojemudia, who was selected with the No. 77 pick by then-general manager John Elway in the 2020 draft and played in all 16 games as a rookie, making 11 starts. “Whether I’m the first or second guy on the (depth) chart, I’m always ready when they call my name. That’s the mindset I took into this offseason.”

Though injuries pressed Ojemudia into a substantial, trial-by-fire role as a rookie, Denver last offseason added Surtain, Darby and Kyle Fuller (now with the Ravens). That moved Ojemudia down the pecking order, but a strong early showing in training camp put him in position to maintain a depth role in the secondary. Then came a freak play during Denver’s second preseason game in Seattle, when Ojemudia felt his leg catch on the turf at Lumen Field and immediately feared the worse.

“The way it looked (initially), they thought it was an ACL tear or something like that,” Ojemudia said. “I’m just glad I got out of it with a hamstring strain.”

That hamstring strain, though, sent Ojemudia to the injured reserve list before the start of the season, and his wait was only beginning. Though there was initial hope Ojemudia could return shortly after the mandatory three-week stay on IR, the injury turned out to be serious enough to threaten the 24-year-old cornerback's entire second season. Ojemudia finally saw action in a special teams role in Week 17 against the Chargers before starting in place of the injured Surtain in the finale. Though he hinted he was frustrated not to be active sooner, Ojemudia said the opportunity to play meaningful snaps to close the season was an important launching pad into his third season.

"I mean, we ain't gonna speak on that," Ojemudia said when asked if he felt like he was ready to play before Week 17 last season. "Maybe a little bit, but them hamstring strains, you have to take your time with that. I'm just glad they let me roll and get my feet wet (against Kansas City). I showed what I can do and I'm just trying to build off that performance."

A look at the Broncos' recent injury history at cornerback illustrates the need for quality depth behind the aforementioned likely starters. In 2020, free-agent acquisition A.J. Bouye suffered a shoulder injury that kept him out until Week 6. Bouye was later suspended for the final four games of the season for running afoul of the league's policy on performance-enhancing substances. That absence came amid injuries to Bryce Callahan, Bassey and others, leaving the Broncos to sign corners off the street for much of the final month of the season. Despite fortifying the position through the draft and free agency last offseason, the Broncos were still in a bind at times in 2021 due to injuries to Darby, Ojemudia and Callahan, and due to the on-field struggles of Fuller.

The Broncos believe, for good reason, they have a bonafide star in Surtain, a unanimous All-Rookie Team selection last season who was also voted as a first alternate to the AFC Pro Bowl squad after intercepting four passes and deflecting a team-high 14. Employing a lockdown corner, particularly in the pass-happy AFC West, is a good place for any secondary to start.

"Not a lot of guys coming out of college, especially at corner, can get thrown into a starting role and play as good as he did," Darby said of Surtain. "To me, he had a Pro Bowl year last year. I know he's going to continue to build onto that."

Still, the Broncos need to develop other components of the secondary they can consistently count upon. It's part of the reason they added the speedy Mathis — the former University of Pittsburgh standout ran a 4.39-second 40 at the combine — in the fourth round, used a late-round pick on Hicks (Wisconsin), retained Bassey and signed undrafted free agent Ja'Quan McMillian out of East Carolina. Chances are the Broncos will need one or more players in that group to play valuable snaps at some point in 2022. Such has been the attrition at the position.

Few know that better than Ojemudia, who insists he has put a frustrating season on the sideline firmly behind him. He was a noticeable presence during Denver's initial OTA practice last week, making a couple of key plays in the red zone on a day that was otherwise dominated by Russell Wilson and the offense.

"The older you get, the more you've got to take care of yourself," Ojemudia said. "Spend money on your body. Keep up with it. You can't just leave the building. You've got to keep up with it, get treatment before you leave. I treat my body like a pro now. I just want to help the team however I can. I know, at some point, I'm going to get into the game. I'm just getting ready for whenever that time is."