

How Albert Okwuegbunam has impressed his new Broncos coaches

By Andrew Mason

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At various points during OTAs and minicamp, the Broncos offense operated without wide receivers Jerry Jeudy and KJ Hamler and tight ends Greg Dulcich and Eric Tomlinson.

Albert Okwuegbunam did his best to fill the void. He showed that he could become a preferred target of Russell Wilson in the Broncos' offense. He frequently made plays down the seam and in the red zone.

And that happened because of the work he put in outside of the field.

"Albert has really stepped up mentally," offensive coordinator Justin Outten said during minicamp. "his playbook is not easy and then with the position that he plays, you know he took a gigantic step during that second week of OTAs."

That continued manifesting itself in the third week, which began when Okwuegbunam was part of the play of the day from June 6.

Yes, Okwuegbunam's 4.5 speed gives him a natural advantage. But one of the areas in which he has improved is his ability to find gaps in zone coverages. That, combined with Wilson's ability to manipulate safeties and linebackers, led to some long gains during OTAs.

"He's a very talented player and a very explosive player," Outten said. "[He is] just honing in on the details that allow him to come through with all of his talent instead of just limiting himself to one aspect or the other."

Okwuegbunam sensed that happening even before Phase 3 of OTAs.

"I feel like a big thing for me is just my approach of really just grasping the offense," he said in May. "That's one thing that I really wanted to take to a whole new level this year as I'm getting older — just having a way better grasp on our offense and defense. Just slowing the game down mentally for me."

But for all he does as a pass catcher, blocking will likely determine the extent of his playing time. Injuries to Dulcich and Tomlinson gave Okwuegbunam more opportunities at minicamp, and Outten liked what he saw.

"I thought that he did a really good job of owning his job and not trying to do too much," Outten said. "I thought he did a really good job in the run game protection and the pass game, opening up and rolling."

What happens when the pads go on at training camp will tell the true tale. The Broncos know he can operate in space as a "move" tight end. But he must deliver as a run blocker and occasional pass protector in full-contact work to grow beyond his projected role and hold off Dulcich.

As the first two years of Okwuegbunam's career showed, that has been a challenge for him.

"That's the challenging part — putting your face on somebody, an edge guy like [Bradley] Chubb, and running your feet," Outten said.

But Okwuegbunam has answered one question: He is a "willing" blocker.

"The willingness is definitely there, and it keeps going up each and every day," Outten said. "That's exciting to see."

And if Okwuegunam can be a serviceable enough blocker to warrant every-down use, the Broncos will have what they need at tight end.