

# Broncos' LB Justin Strnad building case for 53-man roster: "It makes you work harder when the pressure's on"

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It was Week 2 last season at the team hotel in Jacksonville.

Justin Strnad, a Broncos inside linebacker, was picking starter Josey Jewell's brain. Before Strnad grabbed his iPad to watch more film, he quipped how unlikely it was that his extra game preparation would matter.

"There's no way I'm going to see some defensive playing time," Strnad told Jewell.

A day later, Jewell sustained a torn pectoral muscle while covering a punt.

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"And I'm thrown into the fire," Strnad said.

Jewell's season-ending injury reinforced how fluid life in the NFL can be. Strnad had missed his entire rookie season in 2020 following wrist surgery and didn't need the reminder.

In the win over the Jaguars, Strnad logged a season-high seven tackles, including four solo stops.

But as the season progressed, Strnad's production waned. The former fifth-round pick got exposed as teams took advantage of the Broncos' lack of linebacker depth. Strnad played 267 defensive snaps and made 21 tackles in five starts (Games 3-7), but only 26 defensive snaps and seven tackles in the final 10 games.

"I didn't play to the level that I wanted to," Strnad said candidly. "I know I'm capable of playing better than that."

Fast-forward a season and Strnad has a new outlook. He's stacked numerous positive training camp days together and is competing, once again, at backup inside linebacker. His takeaway from last season's baptism?

"I think mentally just being ready for anything that happens," he told The Denver Post.

Last Saturday, Strnad found himself watching the same movie he saw last season. Although he likely would've seen significant playing time this season, both at linebacker and on special teams, his value spiked on the second play of the game. Linebacker Jonas Griffith, one of two defensive starters to play against Dallas, dislocated his left elbow and left the game.

In stepped Strnad, who flashed on defense. His reactions were quick and his technique sound. He finished with six tackles (one shy of the team-high). It was the type of solid performance that engenders trust with a new coaching staff.

Strnad saw veteran inside linebacker Joe Schobert (80 career starts) signed Monday in response to Griffith's injury (timetable of 4-6 weeks). Strnad is expected to see significant playing time Saturday at Buffalo, another opportunity to show he belongs on the 53-man roster.

After last season's disappointment, Strnad looked inward this offseason.

"I worked hard to get bigger, stronger, faster," he said. "Along with that, I think just an understanding of the game. This new coaching staff has done a great job of helping us, or helping me specifically, just learn the overall game and learn concepts a lot better. I'm seeing things a lot faster, I'm able to react a lot faster. I think that's one of the biggest things about this level. Everyone's good, so it's basically, who can react faster?"

In some ways, the transition from head coach Vic Fangio to Nathaniel Hackett offered Strnad a healthy reset. Humble and hardworking, he has to make a new first impression.

"Since they've been here, I feel like I've played at a high level, and it's on me to continue to do that," he said.

Despite an uneven start to his career, Strnad said he has designs on one day becoming a starting linebacker in the NFL. To get there, he'll need the consistency and production he's thus far exhibited during camp.

On one hand, he acknowledged the comfort that some on the Broncos feel in knowing that their roster spot is secure several weeks before the season opener. On the other, he's using his opportunity to his advantage.

"It makes you work harder when the pressure's on," he said. "The pressure's on for you to provide for your family and to come out here and work hard every day. ... I take it like every day I come out here, I'm interviewing for a job."