

# Dwayne Stukes is setting an early tone as Broncos' new special teams coordinator

By Nick Kosmider

The Athletic

May 17, 2022

When Dwayne Stukes was a college safety at the University of Virginia in the late 1990s, his head coach, George Welsh, had a simple view on how to build a successful special teams program, a task of great importance if the Cavaliers were to gain an edge on the other powerhouse programs it played in their region of the country.

The synopsis: Not only should every player wearing a Virginia uniform be willing to play a role in the game's third phase, they should yearn for one.

"He said, 'We want the best players (to play) on special teams, as well as on offense and defense,'" Stukes, the Broncos' first-year special teams coordinator recalled last week. "So whatever it took to help the University of Virginia win games, I was willing to do. I had no problem doing that. So, yes, my love for special teams started there."

Stukes' passion for the craft was evident in his performance. He scored three special teams touchdowns during his college career and also blocked a punt for a safety against Auburn as a sophomore. He only further dedicated himself to being an indispensable special teams player when he went undrafted out of Virginia in 2000. His five-year playing career across the NFL, NFL Europe and the Arena League's Colorado Crush would have never gotten off the ground were it not for his desire to excel at special teams.

"At college, everybody is telling you, 'Oh you're great at this. You're great, you're great!'" Stukes said. "Then, you get to the NFL and you have older vets telling you, 'You're not as good as you think you are, rook.' You have to earn your position. You have to earn your spot. The only way that I was going to earn a roster spot was playing special teams. I had John Lynch in front of me. I had Dexter Jackson in front of me. I had Jermaine Phillips in front of me. I had a lot of talented safeties in front of me. So I was like, 'I want to make this team. I will do whatever it takes to make this team.'"

It's that background that has formed the approach Stukes is taking into his role with the Broncos, his first as a lead special teams coordinator since his one-year stint in that position with the Buccaneers in 2011. None of that is to suggest quarterback Russell Wilson isn't going to be lining up as a gunner on the punt team. All-Pro safety Justin Simmons won't be returning kickoffs. Stars in the NFL, with limited exceptions, don't play significant roles on special teams. But the tone Stukes is trying to set for players across the other 90 percent or so of the roster is that they should be eager to contribute to a new era of special teams in Denver. As much as the performance of the Broncos' revolving cast of quarterbacks became the easy way to explain the current five-season stretch of losing records, woeful results on special teams have also played a significant role.

The Broncos have finished 24th or worst in Football Outsiders' special teams DVOA metric every season since 2017, a five-year run that encompasses the work of coordinators Brock Olivo and Tom McMahon. Denver had three bottom-three finishes during that stretch, including a No. 30 ranking last season. The

issues have been widespread, from a lack of explosive returns to kick coverage breakdowns to frequent penalties.

The Broncos abruptly pulled the brakes on the QB carousel by trading for Wilson in March, but there isn't a one-player answer to resurrecting Denver's special teams units. That will largely fall on Stukes and the young players — with important veterans sprinkled in — general manager George Paton and his staff have acquired with the specific goal of getting better in the third phase in mind.

"I'm not going to disrespect anybody's scheme and what they did," Stukes said last month when asked where the Broncos most needed to make gains over 2021. "Is there room for improvement? We all know there's room for improvement. We were 32nd in a couple categories. We're trying to address that. But to talk about what they did last year is not really going to help us moving forward. I want to cultivate and build a standard around here with guys who want to be a part of special teams."

One player who could be integral to that plan is rookie Montrell Washington, an under-the-radar fifth-round pick out of Samford who was first brought to Stukes' attention by Broncos wide receivers coach Zach Azzanni.

"Coach Z brought him up, then I went and watched him and I said, 'This kid has talent,'" Stukes said, noting that Washington's performance against Florida in 2021, when he had 322 all-purpose yards and three touchdowns. "Anytime you have a kid at Samford that has production versus a big program, it draws your attention, right?"

While Washington should be considered the favorite to replace Diontae Spencer as Denver's primary returner, Paton mentioned after the draft that the 5-foot-10, 181-pound speedster will "have to earn" that role. That's fine with Washington, who said last week that "there is still a lot of work to be done" as he prepares to vie for that a job.

"I'm hungry, to be honest with you," Washington said. "Every day I have to prove myself, I feel like. I definitely have not made it yet."

Washington, who shared after being selected by Denver in the fifth round that he was expecting to have to prove himself as an undrafted free agent, said his heart was still beating fast through the first two days of rookie minicamp last week. The past three weeks have been a whirlwind he never quite imagined, one that may never have occurred were it not for his breathtaking performance against the Gators. But while there is still so much that he is processing, Washington was adamant that he's already found a comfort in Stukes' teaching approach.

"I love what Coach brings to his meetings with his intensity," Washington said of Stukes. "His mindset in the meetings, it gets me fired up every time I hear him talk. I'm not going to lie to you, I'll run through a brick wall for Coach right now."

Other players have echoed those sentiments about Stukes in a short time period, with new linebacker Alex Singleton calling the coordinator "intense," both in the film room and during on-field instruction. That demeanor was on display during the team's rookie minicamp last weekend, a healthy portion of which was dedicated to special teams technique. While Stukes stopped drills and reps at times to ensure proper respect was being given to the details of a given assignment, the sequences were often punctuated with Stukes or other members of the staff shouting, "Speed! Speed!" as players sprinted down the field

to mimic the downing of a punt. Stukes has insisted he wants to build an “attack” mentality on special teams where fast, athletic players build enough confidence in the scheme to allow those traits to flourish.

“One thing they’ve told us is, ‘Don’t be afraid to make mistakes,’” said Delarrin Turner-Yell, a fifth-round pick out of Oklahoma who is expected to contribute on special teams while battling for a depth spot at safety. “For now, they’re looking for guys who are eager to get up there.”

Stukes said he won’t “chase guys down in the building” in an effort to recruit them for special teams work. He’d rather build a culture where players are knocking on his door, asking for a spot. As much as Wilson’s arrival has closed the gap for the Broncos in the AFC West, their chances at finally winning the division may rest on just how quickly Stukes can translate that approach into better play for Denver on the margins.

# Broncos new special teams coordinator will bring no-nonsense approach

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104.3 The Fann

February 23, 2022

Anyone who has watched the Broncos special teams the past five years has seen a consistent theme. Whether the group was being helmed by Brock Olivo or Tom McMahon, it was a phase of the game riddled with blunders, mistakes and miscues.

Whether that's the fault of the past two special teams coordinators or the players is open for debate. A revolving door of players on the bottom half of the roster would suggest that it was more about the scheme than the execution, but that's a different discussion for another day.

For the person in charge of righting that ship, it's a moot point. Dwayne Stukes isn't concerned about what went awry in the past.

"I'm not here to critique the scheme from last year; that's not my job," the new special teams coordinator said on Tuesday. "My job is to get the guys this year to play at a high level. I don't want to talk about what happened last year. All I can talk about is the scheme we're going to run and how excited I am to work with the guys."

On that front, Stukes sees a lot of good pieces. He likes what he has to work with.

"We have a lot of talent on this roster," he added. "We have core special teams players on this roster. We have guys who can help and play at a high level on this roster. So I'm excited to work with the guys we have in the building."

By the sound of it, everyone will be asked to play special teams. It's a phase that will be required of everyone.

"We're not just trying to field 11 guys; that's not what we're trying to do," Stukes continued. "We're trying to raise the standard and build a culture around here where guys are excited to take part in special teams. It's a 'we' not 'me' mentality. In order for us to get where we want to, everyone has to buy in and play special teams, no matter their role on the team."

Everyone involved will be asked to play one way.

"We want to have an attack mentality," Stukes explained. "We want to play fast. We want to be physical. We want to dictate to our opponents the tempo of the game. That's our goal."

That goal will be achievable once everyone buys in.

"There are techniques we'll teach these guys that will hopefully put them in a position to make plays consistently," Stukes continued. "The culture will change as guys get familiar with the scheme. Once guys see the success of the scheme, that's when you get the buy in."

Tuesday didn't feature catchy soundbites from the Broncos special teams coordinator. There was nothing about "22 Janos," nor were there analogies about boats and wild animals.

Instead, there was a serious tone. Dwayne Stukes is a no-nonsense guy. It feels like the perfect approach for a phase of the game that has been way too loose in recent years.