

# Montrell Washington brings a backyard football mentality to the Broncos' return game

By Zac Stevens

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Montrell Washington has always lived life on the edge when it's come to returning punts and kicks.

"I'll catch it on the one [yard line], the two, I don't fair catch. There's no fair catch in me," the explosive returner said during his time at Samford University.

In college, the 5-foot-10, 170-pound speeder proved there was no reason to waive the white flag when a kick was in the air. As a senior, Washington combined for nearly 1,000 return yards, including topping 100 yards in four different games.

Despite being drafted in the fifth round to be Denver's next dynamic returner, Washington's never-fair-catch mentality won't carry over to the NFL.

"Oh no sir, no sir. Not at all," Washington said moments after being drafted, when asked if he'll keep that same mentality in the NFL.

"In college, you just say stuff. This is professional football, so this is completely different," Washington added. "This is business, so I will do my job. If I need to fair catch, I will fair catch, for sure."

Just because Washington will throw his hand in the air to fair catch in the NFL doesn't mean he'll approach returning kicks any different.

"I'm fearless," Washington said in the offseason when asked what makes him a dynamic returner. "I just think I'm fearless back there. Just catch it and go. It's like a game, I guess."

Despite 11 super-human athletes flying down the field at full speed looking to take him down, the smallest player on the Broncos' roster doesn't worry about getting hurt.

Instead, he treats it like being in the backyard with his friends.

"I would say it's just like backyard football," he said, describing what returning punts is like. "As kids, you throw the football in the air, and you catch it, and all your friends try to get you. That's kind of how punt return is for me when I'm back there. I feel like it's a game and I'm in the backyard. I just have to go score."

Washington models his game after one of, if not the best, returners of all time.

"I watch all of the old Devin Hester returns. Punt returns, kick returns—everything Devin Hester I watch for sure," Washington said. "Of course, Tyreek [Hill], guys like that."

Along with his mindset, one of the reasons Washington is a dangerous returner is due to his track background, where he competed in nearly every event, including the 100 meter, 200 meter, 400 meter and long jump.

Entering training camp, the return job is the rookie's to lose.

If Washington's approach to competing for the starting job is anything like his mentality returning kicks, he'll approach the summer competition without a single fear as if he's just in the backyard with his friends.

# How the Broncos are helping Montrell Washington attack rookie learning curve

By Nick Kosmider

The Athletic

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When Montrell Washington has the ball in his hands, everything else goes away. All the preparation leading up to the catch or the fielding of a kick is pushed to the background as he melts into his element. It's been this way since he began playing the game as a youngster in Canton, Ga., when he fell in love with the idea that the tiniest crease could turn into a moment that made him feel so big.

"I just black out completely," Washington, the diminutive wide receiver the Broncos selected in the fifth round of April's NFL Draft, said when asked to explain his mindset when he gets the ball with space in front of him. "At that point, it's just ball."

Washington did remarkable things at Samford University once he got the ball, no matter how it came his way. As a senior in 2021, he led the FCS in all-purpose yards with 1,938. He scored 18 combined touchdowns and is believed to be the only player in college football last season who reached the end zone via reception, rush, kick return and punt return.

What, no touchdown pass, Montrell?

"I tried," the 5-foot-10 receiver said with a laugh as the Broncos wrapped up a minicamp practice last month, recalling a play against the University of Florida last season in which he threw a pass to his quarterback after getting the ball on a reverse. "It was a little too high for my QB. I saw one of those big D-ends in the SEC, and I just let it go. He caught it, but I've got to work on my arm a little bit."

Washington's instincts, quickness and versatility — all on display in that remarkable game against Florida, during which he tallied 322 all-purpose yards and three touchdowns — helped him become the draft's 162nd pick, landing him on a roster that is in need of the varied elements he can add. But Washington has also quickly learned that in the NFL, opportunities to reach the "black-out" stage, where all his natural gifts can be put on display, don't come around consistently until a mountain of details has been grasped.

That's why the Broncos are doing their best to help microwave the development of a player who has a chance to be as impactful in 2022 as any rookie on the roster.

"Coming from college, a lot of the time they're not as complicated in the formation world, and that's just the first part," Broncos coach Nathaniel Hackett said, explaining what rookie wide receivers generally face when they enter the league. "Then you add in all the plays, all the routes, all the coverages and all the adjustments. For the wide receiver position, it's quite a bit."

It all starts with knowing where to line up. Hackett said his offense will feature a healthy supply of motions, shifts and "those little jet sweep, fly things everybody sees." That means a receiver has to know the responsibility that comes with virtually every skill position on the field because all that movement can take him just about anywhere in the formation. It becomes about understanding the entire concept of a

play — “What are we trying to accomplish?” — versus homing in on one specific role since that role can change in an instant.

“Coming from Samford, I’m not saying we weren’t complex, but everybody kind of knew what I was doing back then,” Washington said. “It’s, ‘Oh, he’s running a fade.’ Or, now I’m in the backfield, ‘It’s a screen!’ Coming here, now it’s: ‘OK, move here. Go there. Come outside. Move inside.’ So understanding the formation, I don’t want to say it’s the No. 1 (priority) because obviously there are the plays, but they literally go hand in hand. But you have to know the concept because the concept won’t change. The only thing that changes is the formation.”

The learning for Washington during the offseason program began early in the day. A bus would pick him up from the hotel the rookies stayed at near the workout facility at 6:15 a.m. At 6:30 a.m. “on the dot,” Washington and other first-year offensive players would gather for a small meeting with veteran quarterback Russell Wilson, who took it upon himself to guide the rookies through the day’s practice script. The nine-time Pro Bowler would provide his own insights into each play while also fielding questions, and Washington made it a point to blurt out any that popped into his head.

“It’s so good to get that one-on-one time with him, and I’d ask him as many questions as I could,” Washington said. “And he knows the answers, so every chance I get, I’m definitely asking him a question or two, for sure. Just trying to learn, that’s my biggest thing.”

The offseason practices that were open to the media offered insight into other ways the Broncos have sought to help the rookie playmaker tackle the considerable challenges that come with the transition to the NFL from the FCS. Fellow receiver Courtland Sutton, who has become a more vocal figure as he enters his fifth season, was a constant presence in Washington’s ear during drills, demonstrating details on things like proper hand placement when presenting a target to a quarterback. The 23-year-old rookie said Tim Patrick, Jerry Jeudy and KJ Hamler have been quick to answer on-field questions as well.

A play during Denver’s final minicamp practice last month also provided a window into the added work the team’s assistants are putting into the development of the young players. Washington began a play during an 11-on-11 period in the slot and burst up the seam at the snap. As backup quarterback Brett Rypien let a deep ball fly, Washington appeared to have a step on cornerback Donnie Lewis Jr., but as the ball approached Washington’s hands, Lewis was able to swipe the ball away. At first glance, it looked as though the sequence had simply been the result of an excellent defensive play, but wide receivers coach Zach Azzanni was quick to pull Washington aside and drill him on a detail that could have prevented Lewis from having a chance to swipe at the ball.

“He was basically saying, for me on that play, I was out a little too far wide,” Washington said of Azzanni’s tutelage afterward. “I mean, in college or high school, you can get away with being a little wider than usual. But in the NFL, you have to be on it with everything. So I was out a little too far wide, and that kind of made the DB be able to run up and actually be able to hit the ball. If I was at my landmark, I would have been able to just run past him. The little things definitely matter at this stage, for sure.”

Of course, grasping the nuances of becoming a reliable NFL receiver isn’t all Washington has on his plate this offseason.

The Broncos need a jolt in the return game. Denver is one of only six teams since 2015 that has not returned a kickoff for a touchdown, and it ranks 28th in average yards per kickoff return (21.48) during

that span. The Broncos also have just one punt-return touchdown since 2016 and are 18th in punt-return average (8.22) during that stretch. They also own the league's worst mark over the past six seasons when it comes to average starting field position after punt returns (their own 22.7-yard line), according to TruMedia, and are 29th in the same category after kickoff returns (own 24.5).

In Washington, the Broncos believe they have a player who could add the explosive element they have lacked for more than half a decade, a player who can put the offense in more advantageous spots when it begins drives.

"We just thought he had some dynamic traits as a return man — as a receiver as well," Broncos general manager George Paton said after the team used one of its three fifth-round picks on Washington. "He's really good with the ball in his hands. He has incredible ball skills. As a punt returner, as a kick returner, Coach (Dwayne) Stukes thought he would be our guy. We'll see — he has to go earn it — (but) he has some dynamic traits that you can't teach. We feel he will upgrade us there."

Returning kicks is where Washington has most routinely demonstrated an uncanny knack for turning slivers of space into big highlights. Take his 98-yard touchdown return against Florida last season, when he seemed to be trapped in a sea of Gators, only to emerge and leave trailing defenders further and further in his wake. Washington describes moments like those as "backyard football."

"As kids, you throw the football in the air, and you catch it, and all your friends try to get you," he said. "That's kind of how punt return is for me when I'm back there. I feel like it's a game and I'm in the backyard. I just have to go score."

But even this seemingly simplistic mission is more complicated in the NFL. Washington has marveled at just how high Broncos punters Sam Martin and Corliss Waitman booted the ball into the air during offseason practices. And once the ball begins scraping that higher atmospheric plane, he noted, it moves in different ways. And those differences are further pronounced based on whether the ball has been booted by a right-footed punter (Martin) or a lefty (Waitman).

"Once again, it's all the small things," Washington said. "It's: 'OK, boom, this is what I have to do for this guy. This is what I have to do if it's this guy.' The little things become the biggest thing."

Stukes, the special teams coordinator who first began watching Washington in the pre-draft process after Azzanni brought the speedster to his attention, said he was pleased with the returner's progress from the start of rookie minicamp in early May through the end of veteran minicamp in the middle of June. He noted Washington also had to adjust to the fact that members of the punt team in the NFL can get downfield faster to cover the kick, hastening the decision-making for a returner.

"I think he's become more comfortable," Stukes said. "Any time you return in college — and you've done it extensively — and then you come to the NFL game, it's a little different. In college, guys can get out freely, can cover on a punt. But to me, he's comfortable knowing he has guys that can actually block for him on the outside and the interior. I think it works (when) 11 guys work together for us to have success. I think he's done a great job from Day 1 to now, improving with his catch mechanics, absolutely."

As Washington prepared to return to Georgia two weeks ago for a small respite before training camp, he said he was embracing the heavy batch of summer homework ahead of him. A potential trip to California sometime near the middle of July beckoned, a chance to build further chemistry with Wilson at the

quarterback's palm-tree-lined compound. He wants to be prepared for the quizzes — in the film room and on the field — that he knows will pop up frequently if he gets that invitation. In the education of a rookie NFL wide receiver, there's always something to learn.

"I know I can use this time to really pick up and understand the concepts," Washington said. "With that, I can definitely get ahead of the game and get back ready to work and understand what I'm doing."

# Denver Broncos think rookie Montrell Washington can unlock return game

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN

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Year after year, the Denver Broncos have wandered the special teams wilderness in search of a successful returner with little to show for their effort.

In fact, their hopes to flip the field in the third phase of the game have become a first-rate problem. Long-time NFL writer/columnist Rick Gosselin compiles special teams rankings, using 22 categories, that have long been a must-read for coaches and players throughout the league. He ranked the Broncos last for kickoff returns last season and 27th overall.

“We need to be better on special teams, much better,” said Broncos general manager George Paton. “We know that.”

Enter the smallest player on the Broncos roster, the 5-foot-8 7/8-inch, 181-pound Montrell Washington, a rookie poised for a potential big impact. At Samford University in Birmingham, Alabama, Washington averaged 11.1 yards per punt return with one touchdown in 2021, but in 2019 averaged 21.9 yards per punt return with a touchdown.

The Broncos haven’t returned a punt and a kickoff for touchdowns in the same season since 2013 when the smallest-ever Broncos player, the 5-foot-5 Trindon Holliday, had an 81-yard punt return touchdown to go with a 105-yard kickoff return for a touchdown. Holliday, even as he battled ball security woes late in his tenure with the Broncos, was the last Broncos’ returner who consistently made opposing teams add a worry line or two.

Paton selected Washington as one of three fifth-round picks for the Broncos in last month’s draft. Washington was not among the more than 300 players invited to the scouting combine, but the Broncos saw potential for something they haven’t had enough of.

“We feel like he can be a dual returner for us, he’s explosive,” Paton said. “He’s explosive. He is. It was a major emphasis. I applaud [Broncos special teams coordinator] Dwayne Stukes for the work he and [assistant special teams coach] Mike Mallory put into it, their evaluations.”

Stukes said it was Broncos wide receivers coach Zach Azzanni who first brought Washington to his attention in the weeks before the draft. And it was Washington’s effort Nov. 13 against Florida that jumped off the game video.

In that game against the Gators, easily the most difficult opponent Samford -- an FCS school -- faced last season, Washington caught 10 passes for 124 yards to go with a touchdown, completed a pass for 16 yards and returned a kickoff 98 yards for a touchdown.

“Coach Z said, ‘I have a receiver that I like, he’s a small slot receiver. Would you mind watching him as a returner?’” Stukes said. “I put the tape on, obviously. I know there’s a lot of Florida graduates out there,

so I apologize. But anytime you have a kid at Samford that has production verses a big program, it draws your attention, right? ... And I said, 'This kid has talent.'"

Washington arrives with the most expectations as a returner since Isaiah McKenzie in the 2017 draft. McKenzie lasted just 12 games with the Broncos after seven fumbles overall.

Washington was a significant part of Paton's special teams theme as the draft moved through Days 2 and 3. Fellow fifth-round pick, safety Delarrin Turner-Yell, as well as cornerback Faion Hicks, a seventh-round pick, were selected with special teams duties at the top of their rookie to-do list.

All Washington wants is to be part of a solution with his natural return skills.

"I don't know, I can't really describe it, I would say it's just like backyard football," Washington said. "As kids, you throw the football in the air, and you catch it, and all your friends try to get you. That's kind of how punt return is for me when I'm back there. I feel like it's a game and I'm in the backyard. I just have to go score."



# 'He's lightning in a bottle': How Montrell Washington went from unknown prospect to NFL Draft pick

By George Stoia

The Gazette

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Montrell Washington never expected to be drafted Saturday.

The Samford wide receiver was sitting in his Canton, Georgia, home casually watching the NFL Draft when Broncos general manager George Paton called to select him 162nd overall.

"I wasn't even worried about the draft to be honest with you," Washington said on Saturday, just minutes after being drafted. "I just worked and if it happened, it happened. If it didn't, I knew I worked hard at what I did and if it didn't happen, I would have been pleased with the outcome.

What did the Denver Broncos Look for on Day 2 of the NFL Draft?

Denver Broncos general manager George Paton discusses what he was looking for on the second day of the NFL Draft. Head coach Nathaniel Hackett also gives an update on Broncos linebacker/edge Baron Browning.

Paul Klee: Air Force, CSU have memorable NFL drafts — while "NIL" threatens to toughen CU Buffs' climb "I was watching it, but I'm just ready to get out there and get my one shot and do what I do with that one shot, however it works out."

Washington wasn't alone in thinking he wouldn't get that call this weekend.

CBS Sports ranked him as the 371st best player in the draft. The Athletic's Dane Brugler had him ranked the 70th best wide receiver. And Pro Football Focus didn't even have him ranked in their mock draft simulator.

Many outside the Broncos organization are skeptical of how the just over 5-foot-9, 181-pound, do-it-all speedster will pan out in the NFL. But for those who have coached or played alongside him, they believe he'll be the steal of the draft.

"That's why the NFL is fun," said Stephen Jackson, who was Washington's high school offensive coordinator. "They don't give a (crap) where you came from or where you played. They want to know one thing — can you play? And Montrell can play."

Watch Washington's high school and college highlight reels and it's easy to see why the Broncos took a chance on him. He makes defenders disappear with his elite agility and quickness. He models his return game after former Chicago Bear Devin Hester, who is considered one of the greatest return men of all time. And he could provide a missing piece to a roster full of talent. He's expected to be Denver's punt and kick returner, which has been a Broncos' struggle recently, owning the fifth-worst punt return unit and 11th-worst kick return unit in the league last season.

“We feel like he can be a dual returner for us,” Paton said. “He’s really good with the ball in his hands. He has incredible ball skills.”

Woody Paige: George Paton makes honor roll in acquisitions  
Washington still has much to prove, having not even practiced yet, let alone played a game. But it’s his potential that has the Broncos excited. And it’s his journey from an unknown prospect to an NFL Draft pick that could turn doubters into believers.

“He’s the energizer bunny. He’s lightning in a bottle,” Samford head coach Chris Hatcher said. “He’s one of the top competitors I’ve ever coached and one of the top practice players I’ve ever coached. He just loves football and loves competing.”

Jackson spent most of 2014-16 finding new ways to get Washington the ball.

The former Cherokee High School offensive coordinator knew he had a special talent on his hands, after watching Washington play junior high football. And once Washington joined varsity his sophomore season in 2014, it was up to Jackson to get him the football.

“We had him at running back, outside receiver, inside receiver, snapped him the ball directly, ran him on reverses — just anything that allowed him to have the ball with a little bit of space,” said Jackson, now the offensive coordinator at Milton High School.

As a junior, he had 65 receptions for 605 yards and five touchdowns; six carries for 46 yards, 18 kickoff returns for 441 yards (24.5 average) and one touchdown; and six punt returns for 46 yards.

But his senior year?

Washington had a school record of 93 receptions for 1,086 yards and 10 touchdowns; 74 carries for 801 yards and seven touchdowns; eight kickoff returns for 283 yards (35.4 average) and one touchdown; and five punt returns for 95 yards. He was a first-team All-County, Region and State selection, and was named team MVP and the region’s offensive player of the year. He also broke the school record for single-season all-purpose yards with 2,265.

“The speed was something no one had seen before,” Cherokee head coach Josh Shaw said. “You couldn’t give him an inch of space.”

Washington’s most iconic play in his senior season in class 7A, the highest in Georgia football, came against Milton High School when his teammate, who was being tackled, unexpectedly tossed him the ball and Washington reversed field, made five defenders miss, and took it 70 yards for a touchdown.

“He was a killer,” said Andrew Harris, who is Washington’s close friend and former teammate at Cherokee and Samford. “He was the best high school football player I had ever seen.”

Washington garnered little attention from colleges, mostly because of his grades. Shaw said it was a battle to keep him eligible each week.

“His freshman year academically was a little rough and we spent the next three years trying to dig him out of a hole,” said Shaw, who has been Cherokee’s head coach since 2012. “He turned things around and that’s honestly what I’m most proud of.”

Washington worked hard to get his grades up, and eventually found a home at Samford.

“I switched everything up,” Washington said. “I was able to get an offer from Samford, Kennesaw State University, and Valdosta State, and Wingate [University]. Those were my only offers. I chose Samford University — one, my best friends from high school (Harris) went there and they threw the ball a hundred times a game, so I had no choice.”

Like Shaw and Jackson, the Samford coaching staff was unsure of where to exactly play Washington but knew he had to be on the field.

“The biggest thing about Montrell was — what was he?” said Hatcher, Samford’s head coach since 2014. “He wasn’t the best running back. Maybe not always the best wide receiver. But he was the best guy with the ball in his hands that I’ve ever coached.”

He contributed all four years at Samford, playing wide receiver, running back and return specialist. And similar to his time at Cherokee, he had a breakout senior season.

In 2021, he led the FCS with 1,967 all-purpose yards, including 813 receiving yards, 742 kick return yards, 243 punt return yards, 140 rushing yards and 18 total touchdowns — three of which were on special teams. He finished his career with five kick or punt return touchdowns.

“You don’t really want to change your offense around for one guy, but as time went on, we learned what a special player Montrell was,” Hatcher said. “Once he showed that he could be that electric playmaker, we would have been crazy not to get him 20-30 targets a game.”

It was Washington’s performance against Florida on Nov. 13, 2021, though, that put him on the radar of NFL teams.

In a 70-52 loss, Washington had 322 all-purpose yards (179 returning, 124 receiving, 19 rushing) and three touchdowns, including a 98-yard kickoff return for a touchdown and a one-handed touchdown grab. He was the first FCS player since 1998 to record a rushing touchdown, receiving touchdown and kick return touchdown against a Power Five team.

“We expected it from him — I shouldn’t say expected — that’s just how he played each and every week,” Hatcher said. “It didn’t matter what the competition was ... On that given Saturday, he proved what he could do against the very best competition in the country.”

Since the season’s end, Washington has spent most of his time training with Harris and former CFL cornerback Willy Dorcin.

He wasn’t invited to the combine, but did work out at several pro days. He also had private workouts at Cherokee High School with several teams. And he impressed in those workouts, recording a 4.38-second 40-yard dash. Though, according to Harris, he’s seen Washington clock a 4.25 before.

“When it’s time to work, he knows how to flip that switch into his zone,” said Harris, who played at Samford from 2015-18 and is now a professional trainer. “He knows how to get into his zone and stay in his zone.”

Washington’s speed and versatility stand out. But it’s also Washington’s work ethic and competitive personality that the Broncos want.

Those who have coached and played with him use the common term “locker room guy” when describing Washington, which is exactly what the Broncos prioritize.

Washington has a long ways to go, as Paton said he will have to earn his spot on the 53-man roster. And that won’t be an easy thing to do, with a talented receiver room that consists of Jerry Jeudy, Cortland Sutton, Tim Patrick and K.J. Hamler, plus a veteran kick returner in Tyrie Cleveland.

Washington has been counted out before. And still, he made it to the NFL. Now, it’s time to prove his worth.

“It’s a great story in itself,” Hatcher said. “The guy persevered. He never quit. To be honest with you, I think there were days he probably thought about it, but he didn’t. And he ended up living out a tremendous dream of being a college graduate, an All-American and now gets to perform at the highest level in the NFL. It’s what dreams are made of and it couldn’t have happened to a better person.”