

New nickel back K'Waun Williams believes he can be "missing piece" in Broncos secondary

By Kyle Newman

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The secondary has been a strength of the Broncos over the past few seasons, but nickel back has often been a weak link in that defensive backfield due in part to Bryce Callahan's inability to stay healthy.

K'Waun Williams, officially signed to a two-year, \$7 million contract Wednesday, is here to change that.

"Pat Surtain is a young corner who's going to blossom moving forward, (Justin) Simmons is a Pro Bowler," Williams said. "And I'm here to be a missing piece to the puzzle and provide an inside presence in the slot for these guys."

Callahan was limited to 16 starts from 2019-21 due to various injuries. Looking for stability, the Broncos signed Williams. Increased production and dependability at the position should boost an already-strong secondary that ranked eighth in passing yards allowed per game (214.8) in 2021 and fifth with 22 passing touchdowns allowed.

Williams missed a handful of games due to knee and ankle injuries in 2020, but besides that he's been healthy. And he's coming into his own, having played a career-high 72% of San Francisco's defensive snaps in 2021 with the majority of those coming at the nickel. He posted four passes defensed and an interception while playing a key role in the 49ers reaching the NFC championship game.

The 30-year-old said the potential to win a Super Bowl "absolutely" factored into his decision to sign with Denver.

"There's a lot of new additions from the guys that (general manager George Paton) is bringing in, and moving forward, I see the progression of an organization that's ready to win," Williams said. "I'm ready to get to work... I've been (to the Super Bowl), been close, played in NFC Championships. Moving forward, we're trying to win it here."

Physicality is a notable part of Williams' game. In addition to four career interceptions over 96 games (41 starts), Williams also has seven sacks and 11 forced fumbles. He's able to cover speedy pass catchers in space, while also laying the boom to ball-carriers.

"Getting the ball is everything," Williams said. "When coaches send me on the blitz I want to get home (to the quarterback)... If I'm getting out of coverage, I want to be a presence inside while I'm rushing. It's something I've been doing since I was a rookie in Cleveland, and I love it."

Williams came into the league as an undrafted free agent out of Pittsburgh, where he was a three-year starter. He played 10 games for the Browns across 2014 and '15 while also seeing time on special teams, but didn't get his first career start until 2017 with the 49ers.

He's eager to be a playmaker on a Denver defense that's struggled to generate takeaways. In 2021, the Broncos were tied for 21st with 19 takeaways.

"Attacking the ball and playing physical — that's going to be our standard on the defensive side of the ball," Williams said.

CB K'Waun Williams arrives in Denver with Super Bowl expectations, brings more to Broncos than coverage abilities

By Aric DiLalla
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In coverage, K'Waun Williams has proven himself as one of the league's top slot cornerbacks.

Entering each of the last two seasons, Williams has been recognized by various outlets as one of the top 10 slot players in the NFL — and he's backed it up with his coverage.

Williams, though, is more than a player who can apply tight coverage and make instinctual, athletic interceptions.

He's also a threat behind the line of scrimmage.

Throughout his career, Williams has been a menace in opposing backfields. Last year, he tied a career high with five tackles for loss and also added a sack and two quarterback hits. Since entering the league, Williams has seven career sacks, 21 tackles for loss and 12 quarterback hits.

It may not be his primary responsibility as a cornerback, but he prides himself on his ability to make an impact in that realm.

"When coaches send me on a blitz, I want to get home," Williams said Wednesday during his introductory press conference. "I want to provide a presence. ... If I'm getting out of coverage, I want to be a presence inside while I'm rushing. It's just something that I've been doing since I was a rookie, and I just love it."

Williams said he blitzed from the slot "a little bit" during his collegiate career at Pittsburgh, but he took advantage of some early opportunities during his first two seasons in the NFL.

"Being able to blitz a few times and getting home, getting some sacks early, it just built confidence," Williams said.

Williams, who said he wants physical play to be the standard on Denver's defense, also has a knack for knocking the ball free. He's recorded 11 forced fumbles in his career, including six over the last three seasons and a career-high four in 2019.

"Getting the ball is everything," Williams said. "Providing the offense with more opportunities to make drives — that's what we do on defense. We just want to get a takeaway [or big play] any way possible, whether it's a forced fumble, TFL or just making big sacks. You've just got to be there and make plays for your defense and [be] able to sacrifice for the team and make plays when your number's called."

The Broncos' new slot cornerback will aim to mesh his blitzing ability with his coverage skills to serve as a "Swiss Army knife" in Denver's defensive backfield. His 27 career passes defensed and four career regular-season interceptions showcase his potential to do both at a high level.

And with Pat Surtain II, Justin Simmons and Ronald Darby among the pieces around him in the secondary, Williams said he believes he could help complete the unit.

"I'm here to be the missing piece of the puzzle for the guys here and provide an inside presence in the slot for these guys," Williams said.

Williams also arrives in Denver with high expectations. After a Super Bowl appearance and two NFC Championship Game appearances with the 49ers, he knows what it's like to win. That's his goal in Denver, as well.

"Absolutely," said Williams when asked if he has Super Bowl expectations. "I've been there. I've been close. I've played in a Super Bowl. I've been to NFC Championships.

"Moving forward, we're just trying to win here."