

# Broncos inside linebacker Jonas Griffith on way to securing Week 1 starting role: “He’s locked in”

By Ryan O’Halloran  
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Every day that Jonas Griffith lines up as one of the Broncos’ starting inside linebackers, special teams coordinator Dwayne Stukes has to come to grips with the fact he won’t have Griffith on his units.

“Do you want me to be sad going back to my office?” Stukes said with a laugh. “I’m disappointed about that. I’m happy for the kid.”

And the Broncos are happy with Griffith, who is playing alongside Josey Jewell. Griffith has the physical tools (6-foot-4, 250 pounds) and when the new coaching staff was hired, they were impressed by his 255 defensive snaps last year.

“No. 1, he’s a physical freak,” inside linebackers coach Peter Hansen said. “And then mentally, he’s very comfortable.”

Griffith took first-team snaps in the offseason program, ahead of newcomer Alex Singleton, and has continued that role during the first 10 camp practices.

“This is what you work for all offseason and I feel like, with training camp here and I’m running with the (starters), I can solidify myself,” Griffith said.

Griffith was literally the final option at inside linebacker last year. Jewell, Alexander Johnson, Justin Strnad, Micah Kiser, Kenny Young and Baron Browning all started games before Griffith was called upon.

Now? Johnson is a free agent, Young and Kiser are playing for Las Vegas, Browning was moved to outside linebacker and Strnad is a backup for the Broncos.

Griffith, who was undrafted in 2020, was acquired by the Broncos from San Francisco last August to play special teams. He sustained a hamstring injury in Week 3 and missed four games. As he recovered from his injury and returned to play special teams (155 snaps), the churn at inside linebacker was underway.

Already without Jewell (pectoral), the Broncos lost Johnson (pectoral) in Week 5 and Kiser (hamstring) in Week 6 to injury and ascertained Strnad wasn’t quite ready (replaced after Week 6). Browning and Young solidified the situation throughout the second half of the year, but Young sustained a season-ending concussion in Week 14.

Enter Griffith. Finally.

The Broncos had only six double-digit tackle games last year and Griffin had two in the final three weeks (13 at Las Vegas and 12 at the Los Angeles Chargers).

According to The Post's game charting, Griffith had one missed tackle, 5 1/2 run "stuffs" (gain of one or fewer yards) and two pass "stuffs." He totaled 42 tackles.

"Looking at last year, when he came in, I think he calmed things down," Hansen said. "We came in with confidence he would learn easy."

Aiding the learning process for Griffith is a set of 100 index cards he carries in his work bag. When he watches himself on film, he writes notes that range from his footwork and keeping the right pad level.

"It's funny because I just write down the bad plays," he said. "I'm my biggest critic. Then I memorize the cards in a way and become a student and be more consistent."

Griffith's study habits are on display during the inside linebacker meetings.

"No question," Hansen said. "I like to get things interactive in the meeting room and when I'm asking him a question, he'll answer it before I'm done. He's locked in. He knows the answers and spits them out pretty quickly."

On the field, Griffith has showed good range when in zone and man coverage and there is no doubt he will be a run-game presence.

"I love that you can fly around, play sideline-to-sideline and you can add your own twists to it," Griffith said. "That plays in my favor."

Also in Griffith's favor is he is playing next to Jewell, who is entering his fifth NFL season.

"It's definitely coming along with pre-snap communication and post-snap communication," Jewell said. "It's always a little bit of an adjustment, but I think we're doing really well together so far."

"It's fun out there playing with him. Smart guy, especially for not playing a lot of games. He's really ahead of the game so far."

Griffith doesn't want to get ahead of himself, but he offered what a Week 1 start would mean to him.

"In my head, I've played it over and over again," he said. "I envision coming out to the field for a prime-time game. It's a packed house and the stadium is rocking."

And?

"I want to show I can do everything," he said. "When the lights are shining the brightest, that's when I can elevate my game."

# Broncos inside linebacker Jonas Griffith working with first-team defense but knows every day is a “competition” to keep spot

By Ryan O’Halloran  
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Among those surprised earlier this offseason when the Broncos didn’t re-sign or draft any inside linebackers to challenge a group that includes Jonas Griffith to start alongside Josey Jewell?

Jonas Griffith.

“I was expecting them to keep one of the guys (from last year) or draft someone,” he said before Friday’s sixth organized team activity practice.

Instead, the Broncos moved Baron Browning to outside linebacker, declined to retain Alexander Johnson, Kenny Young or Micah Kiser, and passed on drafting a player. Those decisions, combined with his play late last year, created an opening for Griffith; he has lined up next to Jewell in the two OTAs that have been open to the media.

“It wasn’t (a) relief,” Griffith said of the non-additions. “You still have to do the job. That’s been my approach since being in the NFL. They can bring anybody in at any moment.”

Griffith joined the Broncos after last year’s training camp, acquired from San Francisco with a seventh-round pick in exchange for a sixth-rounder and a 2023 seventh-rounder to fortify the special teams.

The Broncos’ inside linebacker attrition began in Week 2 when Jewell sustained a torn pectoral. Griffith, though, wasn’t available to join the mix because of a hamstring injury that cost him four games.

It wasn’t until Week 14 against Detroit that Griffith played his first defensive snap of the year. He was immediately off and running ... and tackling. Over the final 4 1/2 games, he made 42 tackles (including 13 at Las Vegas and 12 at the Chargers) in 255 snaps.

“You definitely saw a couple of steps (forward) in the last couple games last year, whether it be the quickness or (in) recognizing plays,” Jewell said. “He’s a guy who is always fast and then you just (saw) the physicality start to creep up. It’s been fun watching him progress.”

Griffith missed only one tackle and had 5 1/2 run “stuffs” (gain of one or fewer yards not including short-yardage or goal-line), according to The Denver Post’s game charting.

Behind Jewell and Griffith on an unofficial depth chart are Alex Singleton (137 tackles for Philadelphia last year and 214 special teams snaps), Justin Strnad (five starts last year), Barrington Wade (52 snaps in four games) and undrafted rookies Kana’I Mauga and Kadofi Wright.

“Every day is a competition,” Griffith said. “I don’t think anything is solidified. Every day is an opportunity to show this coaching staff what I can do.”

What Griffith can do is play the run (24 of his tackles last year) and move well at a listed 250 pounds.

The Broncos have added to the defensive line with free agent D.J. Jones and fourth-round pick Eyioma Uwazurike to improve the run defense. Most of Griffith's snaps are expected to be in the base package so he will be responsible for making plays when Jones, Uwazurike, Dre'Mont Jones and Mike Purcell command blocking attention.

"That will free us up to flow and make tackles and it will help us in coverage, too, (if the line is) getting pressure on the quarterback," Griffith said.

If Griffith emerges as a starter Sept. 12 at Seattle, he will lean on the experience gained last year to keep his spot.

"You kind of have the illusion of, 'OK, I can do this,' but once you actually do it, that's different," he said. "Going out there and doing it and proving that I could do it and showing myself I could do it, it was huge for me and a confidence booster."

# After gaining confidence late in 2021, Jonas Griffith competing for starting ILB job

By Aric DiLalla  
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Jonas Griffith suspected he could play at the NFL level.

Internally, he believed he had the ability to be a full-time starter.

But until the end of the 2021 season, it was only a guess.

Griffith, who didn't begin playing football until his senior year of high school, entered the NFL as an undrafted free agent with the 49ers in 2020. Ahead of the 2021 season, he was dealt to the Broncos in a late-round pick swap — and he got his first chance.

The inside linebacker appeared in eight of the Broncos' first 12 games, but he only received special teams snaps. When Kenny Young suffered an injury against the Lions in Week 14, he took the first defensive snaps of his career.

A month later, after four consecutive starts — including three games with at least nine tackles — to end the season, Griffith at last had the evidence he needed.

“You kind of have an illusion of like, ‘I can do this,’” Griffith said Friday. “But when you actually do it, that’s a little bit different. But I would say that was a big thing for me, going out there and doing it and proving it to myself that I could do it. I feel like that was huge for me and a big confidence booster going into the offseason.”

Griffith received several other votes of confidence from the Broncos this offseason, as they first extended an exclusive rights free agent tender to keep him in Denver. The Broncos then, after re-signing Jewell and adding Alex Singleton in free agency, chose not to pursue an inside linebacker in the draft. Those moves — while at least mild indicators in the team's belief in its inside linebacking group — have not changed Griffith's mindset.

“I wasn't relieved; you still have to do the job,” Griffith said. “They can bring in anybody at any moment. That's been my approach since being in the NFL. A lot of older guys have told me that you have to be ready and prove yourself every day.”

The team's offseason moves have Griffith poised to compete for a starting spot alongside Jewell — and that role would be as more than just a spot starter. Griffith has been promised nothing, but he is in position to earn the role. During recent OTA practices open to the media, Griffith has received plenty of first-team reps.

“Every day is a competition,” Griffith said. “I don't think I have anything solidified. Every day is an opportunity for me to show this coaching staff what I can do and to improve every day.”

As he competes for the role, last year's experience has helped to change his mentality. He also gained the benefit of being able to evaluate his game on film ahead of the offseason program. What others see from that film may portend future success.

"You definitely saw a couple of steps in the last couple games of last year of where he's excelled," Jewell said of Griffith. "Whether it be the quickness of the recognition of the plays, the guy is always fast, so you always see that on the field and just the physicalness that started to creep up and come into the last couple of games. He showed that he can long-arm guys, he can two-hand them and swim off of them or arm over, and just his understanding of the game, route concepts and stuff like that. So it's been fun watching him progress so far."

Less than a year ago, Griffith arrived in Denver as a depth player the Broncos hoped could shore up their special teams. In 2022, he could be much more for the Denver defense.

"I put a lot of pressure on myself to be the best version of myself," Griffith said. "... I prepare to be a [No.] 1 [inside linebacker], and I expect to do that."