

Learning curve a bumpy ride so far for Broncos' Nathaniel Hackett

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN

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The images were everywhere and the headlines popped up coast to coast. In the span of roughly 14 days, first-year Denver Broncos coach Nathaniel Hackett went from a potential breath of fresh air to a coach whose team identity included penalties, clock management problems and puzzling end-of-game decisions. Hackett may be the first coach in Broncos history to have his home fans frustrated enough, during what is usually the new coach's honeymoon period, to count down the play clock before each snap in the fourth quarter of ... a win.

"I love how passionate our fans are, I really do," Broncos offensive coordinator Justin Outten said last week as he mustered a smile and echoed Hackett's it's-all-good sentiments. " ... You can take it sarcastic or whatever it may be, but just to show the passion, how much they love this game and how much they love the Broncos ... and we are going to make them proud."

Safe to say a lot has happened during Hackett's first three weeks of the regular season. It's a stretch that started with a somewhat disorganized loss to the Seahawks in a return game for quarterback Russell Wilson, who spent his first 10 seasons in Seattle. Trailing 17-16 with 1:11 remaining, a short pass on third down set the Broncos up with a fourth-and-5 from their own 45. The Broncos had two timeouts and could have opted to have Wilson get them in better position for a field goal.

Instead, Hackett sent out kicker Brandon McManus to try a field goal that was so long -- 64 yards -- only two kickers in league history have made one from that distance. McManus didn't become the third.

Denver also was flagged for 12 penalties for 106 yards, including two delay-of-game calls, to go with curious clock and game-management decisions.

Hackett, who later admitted he should have gone for it on fourth down, found himself the topic of plenty of "what was he thinking" commentaries, and a video from an ESPN telecast of Peyton Manning signaling 62 times to call a timeout during that final Broncos drive went viral.

Several of those issues continued in a sloppy Week 2 win over the Houston Texans in the Broncos' home opener, and the fans loudly counted down the play clock as it wound close to zero for much of the fourth quarter. It boiled over into a rare public admission the Broncos needed help -- and fast -- as Hackett hired long-time NFL assistant Jerry Rosburg as a senior assistant last week to help with game management issues. Rosburg was in the coaches' box for Sunday night's win over the San Francisco 49ers.

"We knew we had something, especially myself, that we had to address," Hackett said. "And then being able to get Jerry in there, and working with the people that we have ... it made me just kind of lock in and hear the information and make the best decision. I appreciate all those guys and all the extra work we put in this past week to get that process done the right way."

The Broncos are, through it all, still 2-1 heading into Sunday's game against the Las Vegas Raiders (4:25 p.m. ET, CBS). Hackett's learning curve has been on display in prime time in two of the Broncos' first three games. They also have three of their next five games -- a Thursday night game against the Colts Oct. 6, a Monday night game against the Chargers on Oct. 17 and an Oct. 30 game against the Jaguars in London -- in high visibility broadcast slots, so Hackett's progress is going to be scrutinized.

"If people want to think they know more about football than our coaches they can go ahead and believe that, but we have faith in what we're doing," said Broncos guard Dalton Risner, who grew up a Broncos fan in Wiggins, Colorado, so he understands the local passion as well as anyone. "We're going to call those plays later, and good things are going to happen and everyone will cheer ... we're going to keep working every day to make sure that happens."

That's a long way from Hackett's preseason sunshine, when he was lauded for unconventional tactics, like his hiring of "instructional designer" John Vieira, who was Hackett's neurobiology classmate at California-Davis. Hackett was commended in the preseason for his enthusiastic embrace of analytics and innovative thinking, as well as features his players heartily endorsed, such as a new players' lounge and a basketball hoop in the team meeting room.

Hackett continues to believe Vieira's presence, as well as the framework he's put in place, will pay dividends. He believes the early season stumbles are more a function of a new coaching staff.

"This is the first time a lot of us have worked together," he said. "We're new, Russ is new, we trust in what we're doing."

Said running back Melvin Gordon III: "We just have to be clean. ... We know that, we believe in what we're doing, it's early. We have time if we put in the work."

Wins, no matter how close, even like the 11-10 win over the 49ers Sunday night that featured 10 Broncos punts and just one trip inside San Francisco's 20-yard line, help Hackett's cause. A robust celebration by the players and coaches could easily be heard through concrete walls following the game.

49ers coach Kyle Shanahan, who like Hackett is his team's offensive playcaller, said last week Hackett's rough start has a familiar ring to it.

"I remember my first game, I went for it four times, and they were ones I should not have gone for," Shanahan said. "And that's when I realized, all right, you can't think like the coordinator. So there's all the experiences that you go through for the first time, but he's done this for a while ... [they have] a good coach there, and a very good offensive playcaller."

Hackett understands what comes with the role of leading a successful franchise.

"Nobody ever told me this was going to be easy," Hackett said. "I think taking this job, you knew there was going to be some ups and downs, and that was something I embraced.

"I think that for me, it's just about improving every day ... I always want to get better at everything that I do. There's always going to be scrutiny, whether you lose, whether you win, whether you tie, there's always going to be something people are going to say you can do better, and I'm going to do everything that I can to get better."

Broncos' Nathaniel Hackett still learning as rookie head coach, just as Kyle Shanahan did with 49ers

By George Stoia
The Gazette
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If anyone can relate to Nathaniel Hackett's struggles in his first year as the Broncos' head coach, it's Kyle Shanahan.

It wasn't long ago that Shanahan, who is in his sixth season as the 49ers' head coach, was a rookie head coach in San Francisco. And while Shanahan is now considered one of the best coaches in football, leading the 49ers to a Super Bowl appearance in 2019 and last year's NFC Championship game, he was once heavily criticized early in his career.

His first game? A 23-3 loss to the Carolina Panthers in which he went for it four times on fourth down, converting only once. It was the first loss of nine in a row in his first season, finishing 6-10 on the year.

"I remember my first game I went for it four times and they were ones I should not have gone for," Shanahan told Denver reporters on a conference call. "I'd never done that before and I realized, 'OK, you can't think like the coordinator.' Early on, it is a little bit harder, especially when you've got a bunch of new players."

Hackett is learning that the hard way.

Through two games, it's apparent Hackett has struggled to juggle the offensive playcalling and the head coaching duties. The Broncos have looked unorganized and out of sync, losing to the Seahawks in Week 1 and squeaking by the Texans in Week 2. They've totaled 25 penalties in two games — a franchise record — including four delay of game penalties, which is the most in the NFL. And time management has been questionable, with Hackett not using his timeouts late against the Seahawks and using them early in the second half against the Texans to avoid delay of games.

For Hackett, while most agree he's an above average playcaller, it's the game management he has to improve at.

"That's something that we really jumped into and wanted to make sure that we can get better at that," Hackett said. "That starts with me, and I'm doing every single thing I can to try to put myself in a position to be able to make quicker, faster, more efficient decisions... That is something that is new for me."

Shanahan knows what that challenge looks like — balancing playcalling and game management.

"It's not always about just getting the play in. There's a lot more that goes into it," Shanahan said. "It goes with the whole offense. You need everybody doing it together — you need the receiver substitutions, you need the quarterback at the line. There's so many things that go into it. You're always responsible for it, but it takes the whole team to do it the right way."

Broncos quarterback Russell will be the first to say that he and the team have not held up their side of the bargain, either. At the end of the day, the players have to execute, too. And the faith in Hackett among the players hasn't wavered yet.

"I trust coach Hackett tremendously," Wilson said. "I think that also we trust our team. We trust our team, no matter what the scenario is. No matter what we do, we trust that we're going to get it done and I think that's the thing. I think that you're building that and continuing to do that."

One of the biggest issues for the Broncos has been the communication between Hackett and the offense, and more specifically, Wilson. When having to make a decision, Hackett has been hesitant and slow to let Wilson and the offense know what he intends to do — hence the delay of games.

It's in those situations that Hackett has been thinking two, three or four plays ahead, which something just a playcaller often doesn't have to think about.

"It definitely has been a transition," Hackett said. "I think that you have always been a coordinator, you have always been from the standpoint that you want to score touchdowns. That's always your initial gut reaction. As I am learning more, you have to remove that emotion as an offensive play caller. You have to look at it from a head coach standpoint — what is best for the team at that time.

"I think as I continually reflect on what has happened and continually learn from it, that will make me more efficient and utilizing as many people as I can so that it's not about just trying to be aggressive all the time, but be aggressive in the right situation."

Hackett has no intentions of giving up his playcalling duties, despite some outside the organization thinking he should. Instead, he'll likely lean other members of his staff to help with the gameday operations.

But no matter who is or isn't help Hackett during games, the only way he will improve as a head coach is with time and experience. And as hard as that may be for Broncos Country, patience is what Hackett needs.

Just ask 49ers fans how it worked out for them.

"They are all experiences you go through for the first time," Shanahan said, "and (Denver) has a good coach and a very good offensive play-caller."

Broncos' early gaffes raise a question: Can Nathaniel Hackett hack it?

By Des Bieler
Washington Post
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After a string of game-management miscues, it's fair to say Nathaniel Hackett's tenure with the Denver Broncos has gotten off to a, well, rocky start. If the 42-year-old [former Green Bay Packers offensive coordinator](#) isn't already [on the hot seat](#) after only two games, it might start getting a little toasty unless he begins showing signs he is up to the task.

"I just want to be sure that I am the most efficient that I can possibly be and communicate the best way that I can," [Hackett said Monday](#). "To this point I haven't done that, and I can do a lot better."

That comment came a day after Broncos fans went to the extraordinary length of [counting down the play clock](#) as it neared zero during a [16-9 Denver win](#) Sunday over the visiting Houston Texans. The chanting was provoked by yet another Broncos delay-of-game penalty, the kind of gaffe more commonly associated with visiting teams.

Including a [season-opening loss at the Seattle Seahawks](#), the Broncos have incurred four delay-of-game calls, two more than any other team. By contrast, over the previous six years — a span encompassing three different head coaches — Denver averaged fewer than four such penalties per season. Hackett's squad has also been flagged for a league-high six false starts, and its 25 total penalties far exceeds the 18 racked up by the next-most-penalized team, the Philadelphia Eagles.

That lack of discipline would reflect poorly on any NFL coach, but Hackett also has struggled with a lack of decisiveness, not to mention some highly questionable choices when he did finally make a call.

The most notorious episode [came at the end](#) of the loss to the Seahawks before a national TV audience on "Monday Night Football" eager to watch Wilson take on the franchise with which [he spent the first 10 years of his career](#). With Denver down by one with about a minute left and facing a fourth-and-five just beyond midfield, Hackett let the play clock nearly run out before calling a timeout with 20 seconds left and sending in kicker Brandon McManus for a 64-yard field goal attempt. Predictably — given that NFL teams are [2 for 42](#) on attempts of such length since 1960 — the kick failed and questions immediately sprang up about why the debuting head coach preferred that Hail Mary-esque option over letting the [highly paid](#) and experienced Wilson try to pick up five yards for a first down.

"Looking back at it," Hackett said after the 17-16 defeat, "we definitely should have gone for it."

Last week brought a better result, but given that it was a close, low-scoring affair against a Texans squad widely expected to be one of the worst in the league, the quality of the win could still be questioned. Unfortunately for Hackett, so could his ability to translate [his area of expertise](#) — offense — into results.

The Broncos are one of just two teams yet to score a touchdown in the red zone. This despite the fact that Denver has made six trips inside its opponents' 20-yard line. By comparison, the offensively struggling Chicago Bears and first-year coach Matt Eberflus have three touchdowns on four trips into the red zone.

Denver is 0 for 5 scoring touchdowns in goal-to-go situations, and while Hackett has been criticized for taking the ball out of Wilson's hands in some situations, he also has gotten dinged for calling too many passing plays near the end zone. Inside their opponents' 10-yard line, the Broncos have run the ball just four times while throwing it 12. On those passes, Wilson has just four completions. By managing just 16 points in each of its games, Denver is on pace for its worst per-game scoring mark since the 1971 Broncos stumbled to a 14.5-points average.

Hackett was brought in not only for his reputed offensive prowess but as the antithesis, in many ways, of former head coach Vic Fangio, a one-time defensive coordinator in his 60s known for a somewhat gruff demeanor. The considerably younger and more charismatic Hackett is thought to have [the people skills Fangio lacked](#), and he promised to [bring welcome changes](#) this year in energy and [an analytical approach](#).

What Hackett did not bring was Packers quarterback Aaron Rodgers. There was [speculation](#) that the former Green Bay assistant was hired by the Broncos specifically [to lure](#) the superstar quarterback to Denver, but a person familiar with the situation said the team decided Hackett was its best choice regardless of its quarterback.

If Rodgers was the preference, the Broncos got quite a consolation prize in Wilson, [who came over from Seattle in a blockbuster trade](#) and was promptly given a five-year contract extension worth \$245 million, including \$165 million in guaranteed money. The 33-year-old Wilson [said](#) Wednesday, "I trust coach Hackett tremendously," and cited his own newness to the team as a factor in its offensive issues.

One sequence in the Texans game exemplified much of what has Broncos fans so frustrated. On third-and-one late in the third quarter, with Denver down by three but having reached Houston's 35-yard line, Hackett called for an H-back option featuring a little-used tight end/fullback, Andrew Beck. The former undrafted free agent wasn't able to beat defenders to the edge and lost a yard. Now facing fourth and two, Hackett eventually sent out McManus, who tied the score with a 54-yard field goal. But wait — delay of game! Pushed back five yards but still well inside Texans territory, Hackett opted to punt rather than attempt a 59-yard field goal that would have been five yards shorter than the one he went for in Seattle that did not have the benefit of Denver's thinner air.

The home crowd booed as the CBS broadcast crew questioned Hackett's play-calling and described the penalty as "brutal."

In the fourth quarter, Hackett had to burn his second timeout when Denver prepared to field a punt with only 10 men on the field. The missing player happened to be the team's punt returner, Montrell Washington. The coach then [used his third and final timeout](#) with more than seven minutes left because the play clock was about to expire on a second-and-11 pass play following a Texans penalty.

Little wonder, then, that Broncos fans felt compelled to start letting Wilson and Co. know when another delay-of-game flag was becoming imminent.

"I guess that was helpful," the ever-upbeat quarterback [said](#) with a chuckle after the game. "That was great our fans were into it."

In his Monday news conference, Hackett stressed the need to improve.

“We’ve got to make sure the communication is clear and concise,” he [told](#) reporters. “I need to do better at making decisions faster and quicker, and getting that information to the quarterback, and being on the same page with him.”

In fairness, Hackett has experienced some bad luck, including a major knee injury before the season to wide receiver Tim Patrick, who was expected to be a significant contributor. Starting wide receiver Jerry Jeudy exited the Texans game in the first quarter with a rib injury, further impairing Denver’s attack. In the loss to the Seahawks, both Melvin Gordon and fellow running back Javonte Williams lost fumbles on goal-line carries. If they had punched the ball into the end zone instead, the Broncos might very well be 2-0 with a more functional-looking offense. As it is, Hackett can point to his team’s [third-best standing](#) in yards per drive, at 41.2, as evidence that he is doing something right.

Still, the relatively fruitless way most of those drives have ended represents a major problem for Hackett to fix. The slow pace at which Denver has played, meanwhile, has resulted in a second-worst total of 19 drives, meaning that the team has given itself little margin for error.

If Hackett suffers more self-inflicted wounds this week, it will again be under the glare of the national spotlight — and in front of vocal Denver fans — as the Broncos are set to host the San Francisco 49ers on “Sunday Night Football.”

The first-year coach [asserted](#) Wednesday he was “doing every single thing I can to try to put myself in a position to make quicker, faster, more efficient decisions.”

“I think we’re going to have some good answers as we move forward,” he said.

Keeler: Why will Broncos, Russell Wilson will run through brick walls for coach Nathaniel Hackett? “He’s just so completely fearless.”

By Sean Keeler
Denver Post
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His dance classes, no shock, were usually packed. If Nathaniel Hackett can get 40 sweaty strangers grooving in sync to Justin Timberlake, then surely, you plead to David Schrag, surely he can beat the Chiefs.

“The one thing about him is, he’s just so completely fearless,” Schrag, one of Hackett’s old pals and a fellow UC Davis alum, told me in advance of the Broncos’ season-opener Monday in Seattle.

“He was never afraid to be goofy and be funny. But also, he learned really quickly, too.”

Every week, whenever a young Hackett put on that little headset and started stretching on that little platform, it was as if someone had popped a champagne cork inside the Aggies’ Activities and Recreation Center.

Schrag dropped in for a visit to one of the hip-hop dance classes Hackett taught on campus 20 years ago. He found some 30-40 people crammed into a corner of the room, hips swaying in time the way rows of wheat wave in the morning breeze, hanging on Nathaniel’s every word.

We ready?

Let’s do this!

“His classes were huge, and here was this big football-player guy teaching dance classes to dozens and dozens of students,” Schrag recalled with a laugh. “And I think that was mainly because — he’s a good dancer, absolutely — it was just his personality. He was just very charming. He owned the room. People loved being around him.”

Love that energy!

Work it!

“He’s always going to be that super-excited 14-year-old,” said Schrag, an elementary school administrator in northern California by day and occasional dance instructor at night about the Broncos’ first-year coach.

“It’s like, ‘Hey, guys, what are you doing?’ Just always positive and upbeat and outgoing.

“He wins people over very quickly. He’s got a very, very strong natural presence and charm. Obviously, he’s used that in his coaching life.”

Schrag hit Nathaniel's orbit when he became roomies with Hackett's older brother David. He'd occasionally visit the Hackett family in Kansas City when their father Paul was an assistant with the Chiefs, and when Nathaniel was the classic, tag-along little brother. The three would sometimes huddle up to catch the latest music videos of their favorite hip-hop and R&B acts, then go out and try and mimic their dance routines.

"We thought we were cool," Schrag laughed. "Way cooler than we usually were."

You can't fake cool. Whether it's a dance class or an NFL locker room, the audience can spot phony cool from a mile out.

"I mean, you look at what we do, and we're choreographing 11 guys throughout every single play," Hackett explained to me after practice late last week. "And there's a little bit more reaction in everything that you're doing (in football).

"But a perfectly-executed play, it looks like a dance — from the rhythm of the quarterback going back in the pocket, to hitching up, to being able to time it perfectly with a wide receiver's route, and that delivery of the ball.

"I mean, I remember my dad would always talk about Joe Montana, saying that he was one of the best dancers in the world, just being able to be back there and all the timing (that it took)."

Bogus, the new Broncos coach is not.

"He tried to do one (move) in practice," wideout Courtland Sutton recalled with a grin. "It didn't go very well.

"He said he could do it, though. I mean, if you're teaching a hip-hop class, you've got to be able to do something."

Schrag can't promise Broncos Country a playoff berth right out of the gate. Or a division title in the viper den that's doubling as the AFC West.

But he will say this: For this guy, they'll run through six brick walls trying.

If Hackett can command UHealth Training Center the way he used to command that tangle of those dancing fools back in Davis, the Broncos' glasses will never feel short of half-full. No matter how much blood, sweat or tears get spilled along the way.

"Especially with dancing, if you're afraid to just get out there and own it, you're already (sunk)," Schrag said, laughing again. "He had the moves. He definitely is legit."

Once the curtain goes up Monday night, we're all about to find out just how much. On this stage, the first step is always the bravest.

Ready for game day: How Head Coach Nathaniel Hackett puts together a game plan

By Aric DiLalla
DenverBroncos.com
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When General Manager George Paton introduced the Broncos' 18th coach in franchise history, he spoke at length about Nathaniel Hackett's infectious enthusiasm and ability to connect.

Those traits have been mentioned often over the last six months, as the first-time head coach has endeared himself to his players and staff with his positivity and an innovative approach to leading a team.

Another element to Hackett's resume, though, may be his most impressive trait — even if it's not mentioned as often as his relentless energy.

His football mind.

As the Broncos aim to return to the postseason for the first time since winning Super Bowl 50, they'll need more than Hackett's ability to transform the team culture and build chemistry. They'll also rely on Hackett to revitalize an offense that hasn't averaged more than 22 points per game since 2015.

Hackett certainly has the credentials. A 20-year coaching veteran, he has 13 years of NFL experience, including eight as an offensive coordinator. The son of longtime NFL offensive coordinator Paul Hackett, the Broncos' head coach has roots in the West Coast system and has helped quarterbacks like Aaron Rodgers and Blake Bortles reach career heights.

"His knowledge of the game is really remarkable," Paton said as he introduced Hackett.

There may be no better demonstration of Hackett's acumen than his ability to put together a game plan. The weekly process requires schematic brilliance and nearly unending work to highlight the team's strengths and attack an opponent's weaknesses.

And this is how it happens.

Hackett's process will begin where it last ended.

Almost immediately following the Broncos' previous game, Hackett will watch the tape from the day before to make corrections. On Monday evening, the coaching staff will gather to evaluate their recent performance. In that meeting, Hackett says he'll go over "some quality control stuff to see who I am, what I've been doing [and] what has been successful."

The process is known around the league as a self-scout, and it's a standard part of the Broncos' weekly plan.

The coaches then retreat to do their own work for the upcoming matchup. For Hackett, that work includes cramming in as much tape as possible on the Broncos' next opponent.

"I try to watch as many games as I possibly can [to] get a great feel on who they are [and] what they are," Hackett says.

Then, he can go to work at whittling the Broncos' playbook into a game plan.

It's important to realize that each week's game plan contains just a fraction of the Broncos' total package of plays. Through the offseason program and training camp, Hackett has essentially installed his system three different times. By the end of the second week of training camp, the installation was complete — and the Broncos' coaching staff purposefully gave their players plenty to think about. In comparison, the content of a week's game plan will seem relatively simple to master.

"It fluctuates, but it's not even close to what we've been putting on them right now," says Hackett of the percentage of total plays he'll feature in a game plan. "You want to make it as hard as you can now, so once you get to a game plan it's very specific, very situationally oriented and they know exactly what's going to happen."

They'll know, in part, because the available options do not change after training camp. Hackett says he doesn't wake up in the middle of the night during the season, searching for a piece of paper on which to jot down a new play. There may be some ideas to tweak certain elements, but Hackett largely trusts the system in place.

"Usually the way that we build our playbook [is] that we have a little of everything to attack anywhere," Hackett says.

On Tuesday, they'll again work "way into the night," according to Hackett, to begin to put together that week's plan.

"Tuesday morning, you start with the base runs, meeting with all the coaches, collaboratively putting a plan together, [so] that we can kind of mesh everything together," Hackett says. "So we'll go with the runs and the passes, ... third down, and then the rest of the day is just getting everything ready for the practice the next day."

At this point in the process, Hackett anticipates getting Russell Wilson involved. The two will talk on Monday about the previous day's game, and Hackett will look for Wilson's input on the upcoming week.

"Everything's a work in progress with him," Hackett says. "I think we're going to definitely communicate once we start getting the plan put together. We'll obviously go over the game together Monday, and on Tuesday we'll work through all those things and show him what we've got, and present it to him and show him the why."

The importance of the "why" shouldn't be discounted. In some fashion, Hackett says, putting that plan together can be an art. There's seemingly a way that passing plays and running plays fit together on a play sheet for a Sunday afternoon. A series of specific running plays, for example, might set up the perfect play-action pass. But there's more to it than that, according to Hackett.

"I think it's not just an art, but it's a collaboration and understanding your players," Hackett says. "You know, understanding what they do good, what was good to go against the defense, and that's where you want to mesh that whole thing."

The process continues each Wednesday. That's when a typical NFL player's work week begins, as they'll return to the facility for meetings and the first lengthy practice of the week.

The Broncos will begin installing the week's game plan during that opening practice, and they'll focus on the areas that the coaches delved into the previous day: runs, passes and the team's third-down plays. But the coaches' work doesn't end when the players trot off the fields. After offensive and defensive meetings with the players on Wednesday, the coaches go back to work on the two-minute offense, red-zone plays and more third-down options. They'll implement and practice those plays on Thursday and through the rest of the week.

And while they'll work to perfect that week's plan — to iron out the kinks and enhance the positives — there's not much more to be done in regards to the game plan after those mid-week meetings. There are no touchdown passes until Sunday afternoons, but the play calls that set up a downfield throw from Wilson to Courtland Sutton were crafted and decided upon long before.

"Really, the hay's in the barn," Hackett says. "It's really how much can you watch and how much can you get done that Monday and Tuesday and Wednesday; those are the grinds. Those are the ones [where you say], 'I can't feel my face.'"

In the final days before the game, Hackett says he doesn't call a mock game or have any other routines or rituals that he employs. As he prepares for Sunday afternoon, he simply relies on the instincts that come from being a longtime play caller.

"[I] just make it rain," Hackett says. "Just get up there and go. I've been doing it for a while."

Then comes the moment where the work pays off, when Nathaniel Hackett gets to be in his element.

Game day.

It's not surprising, though, that Hackett defers the attention when asked what it's like for him to get into a rhythm as a play caller. For months now, he's preached that he hopes the Broncos become a player-led team. And on game day, he knows the team's success will come not from him, but from those on the field.

"A lot of people say it's about a rhythm, but it's not really about me," Hackett says. "It's about the players getting in a rhythm. And it's just about watching those guys go out there and play. Heck, every time I call a play, it's going to be a touchdown. That's how coaches think. We're very specific in exactly what we're trying to accomplish within each play, so I think it's more about the players. You want to roll with them."

That doesn't mean there isn't a strategy to the process, though.

"When you think about a rhythm," Hackett says, "it's really getting a feel for them, you know, if Russell's getting a bunch of completions, if Melvin [Gordon III]'s toting the rock, or Javonte [Williams], or Courtland, or someone who has the hot hand, you feed them.

They're the ones that really get it going. It's really about watching those guys and getting a feel for them, and being able to adjust on the fly."

Interestingly, Hackett says he doesn't always use a first-quarter script, a pre-designed and distributed set of plays that allows the offense to essentially feel out the opposing defense. He'll make sure the offense knows what's coming in the early moments, but he says he doesn't use a true script.

That is, except for Week 1.

The Broncos' regular-season opener is rapidly approaching, and Hackett says he's spent time thinking about his initial moments as the Broncos' play caller.

When he takes the field at Seattle's Lumen Field as a first-time head coach, he already knows what play he'll dial up on the very first snap.

"It'll be great," Hackett says after a recent training camp practice. "I already know exactly what it is."

Hackett chuckles when asked if he wants to reveal that play.

"Hell no," he says with a laugh.

Then he turns and heads into UCHHealth Training Center.

The Broncos' next game plan won't put itself together.

Nathaniel Hackett showed that he can play the heavy when it's necessary

By James Merilatt

104.3 The Fan

August 2, 2022

It wasn't exactly Bill Parcells sparring with the media at the podium. It wasn't anything like Mike Ditka using press conferences as a bully pulpit. But it was something.

For the first time since being hired in January as the head coach of the Broncos, Nathaniel Hackett showed that he has two sides. Everyone has seen the happy-go-lucky, joke-cracking version. On Monday after a training camp practice that was less than stellar, we all saw the stern, semi-ticked, none-too-pleased edition.

"Coming off of a day off, some of us have to get used to that," Hackett said after practice, referring to the fact that the Broncos didn't practice yesterday and returned out of sync today. "Some of us had a bit of a slow start. We've got to address that."

Again, not exactly a Jim Mora-type rant. It wasn't a Mike Gundy-like soundbite for the ages. But it was meaningful.

Hackett showed that he's got an edge to him. He demonstrated that it's not going to be all you-know-whats and giggles. When players don't do what they're supposed to do, he's going to notice it. And he's going to address it.

This has been a question about the head coach since he was brought on board. While most people love his enthusiasm, energy and positivity, there has been some concern about how he's going to handle the moments when a stern approach is necessary. On Monday, we began to get the answer.

About midway through practice, the offensive players gathered for a pep talk from Russell Wilson. The quarterback took his cue from his head coach.

"I was upset because it hadn't been going very well and he felt that, so he brought them up," Hackett explained after practice. "That was great."

As is his style, the coach eventually tried to turn a negative into a positive. He chose to focus on the fact that the offense bounced back after the regroup huddle, playing well in the red zone and improving overall.

"That's gonna happen in a game," Hackett said of the slow start. "It's about how they respond."

It was also about how the head coach would respond. And on Monday, he passed a bit of a test. Facing his first moment of adversity, Nathaniel Hackett showed that he can be an old-school coach when needed.

'He's having a blast': Happy-go-lucky Broncos coach Nathaniel Hackett is no typical NFL taskmaster

By Parker Gabriel

USA Today

August 2, 2022

In the early stages of Denver's second training camp practice Thursday morning, Russell Wilson and the Broncos quarterbacks were working in tandem with centers on run game and bootleg footwork. Wilson, though, had a running back with him as well.

He turned and pitched the ball to first-year head coach Nathaniel Hackett, who everybody in the area knew followed his track and blocker perfectly because he provided a running commentary as he carried out the drill.

Hackett's typically easy to hear on the practice fields here. During the offseason program this spring and summer, the new head man earned a reputation as the offense's loudest and most frequent trash-talker. He jawed with veteran safety Kareem Jackson, himself a noted talker. He saw safety Justin Simmons and others working on a minicamp drill that featured something from the offense's script for a later portion of practice and called the group out, saying, "Oh, don't work on that now! Don't be scared!"

On the first day of training camp Hackett said that, in what he considers the true West Coast offense fashion, he and his coaching staff are "bombarding" the Denver players with information right out of the gate, but the fact of the matter is that the Broncos are also bombarded by Hackett's energy on a daily basis as well.

"Everybody talks about it and it's infectious," tight end Eric Saubert said. "He's a really positive guy and he teaches you in that way and he truly cares about what he's doing."

Like many first-time coaches, Hackett has borrowed extensively from others he's worked with as he puts together his first training camp as the man in charge. On Friday, Denver hardly got past a walk-through pace after going full-speed on the first two days of camp. The reason? That's what he learned in Green Bay the past three years.

"It's always about that three-day thing, Day 3 is where all kinds of bad stuff happens," Hackett said. ... "You want to be sure you're fresh and then you go back real hard on that fourth day. That's what we'll be kind of continuing on as we go forward."

Since arriving in February, though, the day-to-day approach has been his own unique, energetic brand. "At first I thought, you know, give it a week, he may calm down," center Lloyd Cushenberry said. "But nah, every single day he's the same guy, which we love."

Talk of energy and positivity can sound like idle offseason chatter, but general manager George Paton this week credited Hackett's energy level, saying it had "rebooted the entire building."

“He has a lot of positive energy, but we’ve focused on the day-to-day and getting better every day,” Paton added. “We don’t worry about what’s going on outside. We know what’s going on within these walls and we are fired up within these walls. Our guys are excited.

“It does us no good to talk about it. We have our expectations within our walls, and we’re fired up to go get it.”

That’s the wrinkle: Everybody in the organization readily acknowledges that the bar raised considerably – internally and externally – when the franchise traded for Wilson in March. Hackett and a relatively inexperienced coaching staff are tasked with ending the NFL's second-longest active playoff drought at six seasons and doing so while playing in perhaps the toughest division in football.

If Hackett is feeling nerves or pressure at this juncture, it’s difficult to tell.

“For him? Have you seen him out here? That man’s out here living, man,” running back Melvin Gordon said. “He’s having a blast. When he brings that type of energy, it’s contagious. Obviously, he gets serious when he needs to get serious. He taps in. I’m sure he’s going to have his days, but for the most part, he’s out here, having fun, flying around. And he brings that to us, and that’s the energy we bring.”

Gordon said he heard a couple of defensive players walk off the field after practice the other day and say, “Man, that was fun.” Not the way it was previously under head coach Vic Fangio.

“It’s a little different, man,” Gordon said with a smile. “But COVID didn’t help with that situation, especially my first two years here.”

Training camp gets long in a hurry, and there is undoubtedly adversity ahead at some point after what was overall a quiet offseason program and a smooth first week of work this month. No coach is able to be the good cop all of the time, but Hackett explained recently why he thinks positivity toward his players at virtually all times is his standard operating procedure.

“I think that’s my job, to create that relationship,” he said. “Yeah, you can be a friend, but even with your friends, your brother, your family, my kids, you put your foot down and there are things that you stand for. The idea is for them to know that, and when they know that, then we’re good.

“There’s a line, I guess, but it’s just about having a great relationship and communication.”

Ultimately, what happens from Sept. 12 in Seattle and onward will matter most. In the meantime, players are adamant that this feels different than years past, and it’s not just about the quarterback leading the huddle.

“Big difference. Big difference,” Cushenberry said. “Especially throughout camp as the days get longer and throughout the season, you want that energy. Years past, the days have been a lot longer, kind of dragging along. We didn’t have a lot of energy. With Hackett, the guy you see in the media, that’s how he is every single day.

“It’s not an act, that’s him every day. It’s been great.”

There's no reason to worry about Nathaniel Hackett's personality

By John Davis
104.3 The Fan
May 21, 2022

After six-straight seasons out of the playoffs and five-straight miserable years below .500, the Denver Broncos have re-energized their fan base. In the past week, we have seen the Broncos release their schedule with a fun video involving the trio of Hall of Fame quarterbacks Peyton Manning, Russell Wilson and John Elway, with a cameo from new head coach Nathaniel Hackett.

In another post on social media this week, Broncos players were seen bowling. Hackett was there having a great time with his squad.

Hackett is unlike any head coach we've seen in Denver. He's excitable, positive and it appears connecting with his players on a personal level is important to him.

Some people have wondered if players can take Hackett seriously with his over-the-top enthusiasm and willingness to be goofy at times.

The answer is yes, they can take him seriously. How Hackett acts in a social media video (filmed in May) or at a bowling alley has nothing to do with his ability to motivate players.

Ignore Hackett's exuberance towards just about every situation. That's just his personality. What makes Hackett perfect for the Broncos is that he understands it's about the players. Hackett is aware that without the talent on the field, he can't win.

Nathaniel Hackett is exactly what the Broncos needed. Broncos Country just went through three seasons of Vic Fangio.

Under Fangio, the Broncos turned in uninspired performances and late-game collapses. Fangio was always quick to toss blame to the players he was supposed to lead, but was patting himself on the back after victories.

Fangio's blame-game style of coaching got the Broncos nowhere. A good leader assesses what went wrong and what they can do to not allow it to happen again. A bad leader points the finger.

More than a decade ago, Josh McDaniels believed he could run a star quarterback out of town and still win. The result was McDaniels lasting less than two seasons in Denver.

The two most-arrogant coaches the Broncos have had in the past 20 years just so happen to be the two least successful coaches the Broncos have had in the past 20 years.

There have been questions if Hackett and quarterback Russell Wilson have too close of a relationship. Who cares if they do?

Wilson and Pete Carroll were not on the same page and Wilson left Seattle. The Brady-Belichick relationship fractured and now the Patriots head into year three of watching their all-time best player succeed elsewhere.

John Elway and Dan Reeves had a rocky relationship and ultimately Reeves was fired from the organization. In the end, a quarterback and head coach that get along will be better than the alternative.

Bill Belichick doesn't look so hot without Tom Brady and Mike Shanahan won one playoff game without John Elway. It's pretty clear who makes who look good. Instead of flexing a big ego and resisting, Hackett embraces that opportunity to work with his star quarterback.

The Broncos are in the midst of a cultural shift and can't have any semblance of the last three seasons. Hackett is the antithesis of Vic Fangio. The Fangio-led Broncos were slow and boring, and the Hackett Broncos are excited and full of energy.

Many have wondered if Hackett's demeanor will change if the Broncos go on a losing streak. That remains to be seen and he'll have to prove himself when that time comes. It's on Hackett to put his players in the best position to win. As of now, there's no evidence that Hackett's approach won't work.

There has been a cloud of negativity around the Broncos for some time. With Hackett and Wilson leading the way, that cloud has dissipated. Creating camaraderie with his players will only help to serve Hackett in his first head coaching job.

We don't know if Hackett's collaborative and friendly personality will lead to success. What we do know is being stubborn and egotistical towards your players leads to losses, just ask Josh McDaniels and Vic Fangio.

Here's how Nathaniel Hackett plans to rein in his naturally 'aggressive' tactical style

By Andrew Mason

DNVR.com

April 1, 2022

Nathaniel Hackett knows that on game days, he might need someone to save him from himself.

His instinct is to be bold. Go for it on fourth-and-3 from your own 32-yard line? That's the sort of thing that the Broncos' new head coach might do if left to his own, fire-away mindset.

But one of the attributes that has helped make Hackett a successful coach over his years rising through the NFL this has been a keen sense of self-awareness. He knew that if he got the chance that he now possesses — to call the shots as a head coach — he would need someone to rein him in from time to time.

"Yeah, I'm going to definitely need somebody to kind of tone me back a little bit, because I'm naturally an aggressive guy," Hackett said at the NFL Annual Meeting this week.

"I love to be able to call plays. I get bored standing on the sideline. That happened a couple of times during the season — Aaron [Rodgers], myself, Matt [LaFleur, Packers coach], we're all like, 'Let's get the ball!' You just want the ball; you want to keep going. But, obviously, there's the right thing to do it, so you're going to want somebody to kind of be sure that you're doing the right thing in the right situation."

And that "somebody" will find that the "right situation" has changed a bit.

Consider this on fourth downs, for example: Last year, NFL teams went for it on fourth-and-2-to-5 yards 301 times last year — or an average of 0.553 times per game. That was a dramatic increase from the figures of 218 attempts and 0.426 times per game in 2020 and 222 attempts and 0.433 times per game in 2019.

But the percentage of plays of fourth-and-2-to-5 yards dropped precipitously from 2020 to 2021 — from 58.3 in 2020 to 52.8 last year. The more that defenses see these situations, the better they can prepare for them.

"Now, it's all changing, because more people are starting to go for it," Hackett said. "So, originally, it was funny, everybody was like, 'Oh, you've got to go for it in all these situations,' but at that time, the sample size was a little less. So, I think that now, we're seeing some great sample size as we move forward to realize that as aggressive as you want to be, you probably should hold back in certain situations.

"But it'll be a lot of the flow of the game. I think there are certain numbers that matter, and then at the end, it's just a guideline for how the game's going itself."

And then, his analytics person will be there to help remind him that discretion can be the better part of valor, as the cliché goes.

“At some point, we’re going to get one,” he said. There’s a guy that I know, and you know me, I like to always be a little bit different.”

Another thing that will be different: guiding the game as a play caller and running the entire team. This places him on the sidelines, from which he has called plays before.

“The good part about being down on the sideline is you get to see the guys; you get to see how they are emotionally, and you can see how you can help them,” he said. “That change is what’s unique. As a play caller, you have to be calm, you have to be relaxed. You have to be sure you’re getting the best play for the quarterback at that moment and for the whole offense. At the same time, you’re going to get fired up at times.

“I think that balance is the thing that you have to kind of negotiate down there. But again, upstairs, you don’t get to feel how the other guys are doing. They’re both great. I think there are good things about both, but now, I’m very excited to be on the sidelines as a head coach doing it.”

But that excitement will be tempered — by the voice in his headset who will provide a reasoned take to which Hackett knows he should listen.

Hackett got inexperienced but young, hungry and diverse coaching staff idea from Green Bay

By Mike Klis

KUSA

March 2, 2022

Every time Nathaniel Hackett stands in front of a microphone and addresses a large room of people, it's easy to see why he won the interview.

He doesn't smile. He grins with wide eyes. He bounces, he uses hand, arms and body language with a strong, vibrant voice.

No offense to Vic Fangio, the Broncos' previous head coach. But Nathaniel Hackett is a 180-degree swing in enthusiasm and personality. The guy who won the interview, it seems, has been much the same at work the past 5 ½ weeks as the Broncos' new head coach.

"Everything that we thought he would be after interviewing him," general manager George Paton said of Hackett in a sit-interview here Tuesday with 9NEWS. "The energy, I mean very efficient. Hired a like-minded staff. A young staff. Great synergy in the building. A lot of juice, he brings it.

"You know, it's not all fun and games. He's a grinder, he works at it. And he's very aggressive."

After Hackett got the Broncos' head job on January 27, he set about making near complete wholesale changes to the Broncos' coaching staff. He replaced such NFL veterans like offensive line coach Mike Munchak with first-time offensive line coach Butch Barry. He replaced longtime defensive line coach Bill Kollar with first-time defensive line coach Marcus Dixon. He's got new position coaches who were hired straight out of college.

And he did it on purpose.

"I looked back at my experience in Green Bay," Hackett said in his sit-down interview Tuesday with 9NEWS. "At Green Bay it was unbelievable. We had a first-time quarterbacks coach, first-time wide receivers coach, first-time O-line coach, first-time tight end coach and first-time head coach. Looking at it from that standpoint after working with people that had a lot of experience and had been in different areas, all over from the NFL, just how we bonded, how we all worked and the appreciation everybody had for the jobs -- I thought that was real important to create. A bunch of guys that are going to work together, be humble.

"Think about what's right for the Denver Broncos, not necessarily about what they've done. I think it was about guys being great teachers."

Yeah, but this is the NFL. A grown man's league. Is Paton concerned about such heavy coaching turnover from experienced to inexperienced?

"No, I'm not," he said. "These guys are really confident. I sat in some of the (assistant coach) interviews with him and to hear him talk about our team and free agency. ... You've got to start somewhere. The

main thing is they're all on the same page. I keep talking about synergy but it's really good with this staff. These guys get there early, they work out together. They love being around each other. I think that translates to the field with the players when they know the coaches are all on the same page."

Out with the old. In with the new. The Broncos weren't the only team who hired a bunch of unknown assistants this offseason, although they were unique in their hiring of a coach to the coaches. John Viera, Hackett's neurobiology college classmate, is the Broncos' new Instructional Designer.

"I just know he's the smartest guy I've ever met," Paton said of Viera. "I've seen some of his videos, too—I'll let (Hackett) explain it because it's a little out of my realm. But really encouraged in the way he's going to help teach not only our coaches how to teach, but really keep our players engaged in meetings. I think that's hard in this day and age."

Paton added he had never heard of an Instructional Designer until he first interviewed Hackett on January 15 in a Green Bay hotel conference room.

"He blows you away in an interview, and then brings up a teacher for the coaches," Paton said. "I've never heard of it, but it's pretty cool. I like it. Very progressive of Nathaniel and our building needs that."

"He's just teaching them how to teach from the standpoint of how to use different PowerPoints, how to use different testing, interactive testing, and all the different things that he uses when he's just teaching people biology," Hackett said. "I think it's the same thing. Any teacher that we've all had—your favorite teacher was probably your favorite subject. I want everybody to have football as their favorite subject."

Also by design, the Broncos wanted greater diversity with their coaching staff. Hackett promised this during his initial head coach interview with Paton and he's delivered. Counting interns and quality control coaches, 12 of Hackett's top 22 coaches are Black, up from four on Fangio's staff in 2021.

"I think we needed a reboot in the building," Paton said. "And it starts with diversity. I think when you have a diverse staff you have diverse thought. You make better decisions when not everyone's the same. That was an emphasis with Nate in our interviews. And they're good coaches. Nate's not checking a box. He's hiring the best coaches and a number of them happen to be minorities."

OK, so there's a lot more energy and enthusiasm with the Broncos' new head coach and his assistants. But how will be after a three-game losing streak?

"Same way," he said. "This is the greatest – that hasn't happened a lot. But, hey, this is football. And there's going to be adversity. That's just how it is. You can't win every game. You're going on streaks good and bad. And I think in the end it's the person that you are and you don't change, and they feel that strength. The players have to believe in it and you have to hold people accountable. Myself included. When people feel that stuff that's how you build a great team."

By the way. Any chance Hackett can pick up the phone and try to convince Aaron Rodgers, his quarterback the previous three years in Green Bay, to come to Denver?

"Ha, ha," he said. "That's a good little sneak in though. That's good."

Nathaniel Hackett's road to becoming Broncos' coach: "Born to be a leader in NFL"

By Ryan O'Halloran
Denver Post
February 7, 2022

Two months earlier, he was an offensive coordinator for a 3-1 team that had Super Bowl aspirations after reaching the AFC Championship Game the previous season. He was the recipient of league-wide praise for his play-calling, innovative scheme design and willingness to adjust his plan to the strength of his personnel.

Everything was going right for Jacksonville Jaguars assistant Nathaniel Hackett. The team was winning. The quarterback was playing well. The running game was primed to be one of the league's best.

With a second consecutive quality season, Hackett would have been on the 2019 head-coaching radar, the culmination of a journey that started 16 years earlier.

But then he wasn't.

Following a Jaguars' seventh consecutive defeat, dropping their record to 3-8, Hackett was preparing for a Monday morning staff meeting when he was summoned to coach Doug Marrone's office and fired, the fall guy for a franchise-wide breakdown-of-a-season.

Hackett never saw it coming.

"Atrocious," said Nathaniel's father, Paul.

"100% (scape-goat)," said Jaguars quarterback Blake Bortles, who was benched on the same day. "We had some injuries, I wasn't playing well and for whatever reason, he took the blame for that after all he had done the previous season. He caught a lot of that (heat) unnecessarily."

"It wasn't our fault," then running backs coach Tyrone Wheatley said. "It hurts to be fired, especially when you take a team that was dismal for so many years and (have success)."

But with the setback came opportunity. A chance to join new coach Matt LaFleur in Green Bay. A chance to coach quarterback Aaron Rodgers. And a chance to grow as a coach at an organization with a winning culture.

Three years and two months after getting fired by the Jaguars, Hackett, with his wife and four kids watching from the front row, was introduced as the Broncos' new coach.

"(Getting fired) was a tough thing for Nate, but looking back, it may have been the best thing for him and that goes for a lot of coaches," said Todd Wash, who coached with Hackett in Tampa Bay and Jacksonville. "Sometimes, you move on and excel at the next spot. He stayed positive, continued to work and got (the Broncos') job."

Since Hackett was hired on Jan. 28, The Denver Post interviewed nearly a dozen of his family, friends and former bosses to paint a picture of what the Broncos fans can expect. The overwhelming verdict? Denver is getting a coach who is equal parts off-the-charts smart and innovative, eccentric and genuine.

“He’s put his time in,” Bortles said. “His resume, his background, being around his Dad for the start of the ‘West Coast Offense,’ what he’s done at Syracuse, Buffalo, Jacksonville and Green Bay and knowing him on a personal level, I told him I can’t wait to watch him get an opportunity to do this because he has definitely earned it.”

Life in a football family

Hackett was born into a football family, which meant he was constantly in new schools, meeting new people, learning new parts of the country.

He was born in Fullerton, Calif., (Paul was USC’s quarterbacks coach), followed by two years in Cleveland (Browns quarterbacks), three in San Francisco (49ers quarterbacks, receivers and tight ends), three in Dallas (Cowboys passing game coordinator), four in Pittsburgh (an assistant and then head coach for the University of Pittsburgh) and four years in Overland Park, Kan. (Chiefs offensive coordinator).

Hackett attended three different grade schools in Pittsburgh, but was “lucky” to attend one high school — Blue Valley Northwest — in the Kansas City suburbs. He decided to head back west to attend his parents’ alma mater — California-Davis. But coaching wasn’t on his radar even though he was a linebacker and long snapper for the Aggies.

Medicine, not football, intrigued him and he majored in neurobiology.

The Aggies reached the Division II playoffs in all of Hackett’s four seasons, going a combined 41-9 and twice reaching the NCAA semifinals. He was the program’s top redshirt practice player in 1998 and won the “Aggie Pride” award in ’02. Away from football, he taught hip-hop dance and was president of the Lambda Chi Alpha fraternity.

Paul Hackett, who was then head coach at USC, saw “very little” of his son’s college games, but would try to dash north from Los Angeles if the Trojans had a day game and the Aggies a night kickoff.

“What I followed was his incredible performance as a long snapper,” Paul said. “He had one of the great careers — driving rainstorms, snowstorms, all kinds of weather — and he was really brilliant at it.”

Nathaniel’s goal while in college was to become a doctor, specializing in orthopedics and working in the emergency room. But then coaching called. While finishing his undergraduate degree, Hackett was asked by coach Mark Johnson to assist in coaching the linebackers during spring practice of 2003. He would attend a 10-hour lab class in the morning/early afternoon and then shift into football mode.

“I remember being in that lab and it was very quiet and serious, and I might have tried to play a couple of practical jokes and I don’t think a lot of people liked the jokes — I thought they were really good jokes,” Hackett recalled.

He shocked himself with a quickly realized revelation.

“You’re out on the field and you’re with your brothers and your coach and at that moment, I’m like, ‘I really need to try this (coaching) thing,’” he said.

His father was the New York Jets’ offensive coordinator when Nathaniel decided he wanted to be a coach.

“A little bit (surprised),” Paul said. “He had a lot of outside interests and that (allowed) him to slow down his decision-making process until he was really sure after college that, ‘I may give this a try.’”

Climbing coaching ladder

To get his foot in the coaching door, Nathaniel sent letters to 30 college programs in search of an entry-level position. He received two replies — rejections from then-Boise State offensive coordinator Chris Petersen, who was an assistant for Paul at Pittsburgh in 1992, and Notre Dame.

Hackett was set to remain at Davis and attend graduate school until a former Davis assistant coach, Keith Buckley, called him about the chance to work at Stanford for coach Buddy Teevens. Hackett was hired as an assistant to the coordinators in the fall of 2003.

“Basically prep for just about anything from an offensive standpoint,” said Teevens, the coach at Dartmouth since 2005. “You have a young guy come in and you give him what he can handle and they loaded him up. He was meticulous about the details, very good with the follow-up work. He was impressive right off the bat. ... There wasn’t a clock for him. He was in at the crack of dawn and stayed until the job was done. Tireless.”

Working at Stanford was Hackett’s first exposure to the offensive side of football and where he met his wife, Megan, who was a graduate student sharing a residence with several football players. They were married in July 2006 and have four children (two sons and two daughters) ages 9-13.

Teevens was fired after the 2005 season and Hackett was set to become the linebackers coach at Western Michigan, where Stanford assistant Bill Cubit had been hired as head coach. He lasted three days, at which point new Cardinal coach Walt Harris retained Hackett to coordinate recruiting and coach the specialists.

Hackett appreciated the opportunity but wanted to focus on coaching instead of recruiting/coaching and entered the NFL.

Shortly after, Jon Gruden hired Hackett to be Tampa Bay’s quarterbacks coach for the 2005 season. After the season, offensive quality control coach Kyle Shanahan left to become the receivers coach in Houston. Nathaniel was hired as his replacement and worked under receivers coach Richard Mann.

For two years, father and son were on the same coaching staff.

“It was fantastic,” Paul said. “We got to spend a lot of time together at off-the-field things and in the evening. He was hungry and thirsty and going 100 miles an hour as a quality control person. Great fun.”

In 2007, Wash joined the Buccaneers as a defensive quality control coach; he and Hackett would be the defensive and offensive coordinators, respectively, for the Jaguars in 2017-18.

“You saw how organized he was with the tasks Coach Gruden would give him,” said Wash, currently the Detroit Lions’ defensive line coach. “It was a really good group — high energy, great to work with, but Nate was definitely the bell-cow. Non-stop, 24/7.”

After the 2007 season, Hackett was offered a two-year contract by the Buccaneers but opted to join the Buffalo Bills in the same quality control role. In ’09, he was the right-hand man for Alex Van Pelt after he was promoted to offensive coordinator. The Bills staff was fired, leaving Hackett unemployed and questioning his route.

“When you’re in that (quality control-type) position for so long, it’s grueling and it’s hard and you get to find out how much you really love this game and how much you’re really willing to put in,” Hackett said. “I’m glad I went through all those tests.”

Marrone, who coached with Paul Hackett on the Jets from 2002-04, was hired as Syracuse’s head coach in ’10 and called Nathaniel about a job, which he accepted coaching the quarterbacks and tight ends and coordinating the passing game. A year later, he was promoted to offensive coordinator, his first play-calling post.

After the 2012 season, Marrone was hired by the Buffalo Bills and told Hackett: “You’re my coordinator.”

Jacksonville to Green Bay

In two years, the Bills went 6-10 and 9-7 and ranked 22nd and 18th in points per game; Hackett coached up a rookie quarterback (EJ Manuel) in the first season and a veteran quarterback (Kyle Orton) in the second year. Amid an ownership change, Marrone resigned and new coach Rex Ryan didn’t retain Hackett.

In 2015, Jacksonville coach Gus Bradley hired Marrone (offensive line) and Hackett (quarterbacks). Bortles set a franchise record with 35 touchdown passes (tied for second in the NFL), was seventh in passing yards (4,428) and had a league-high 18 interceptions.

“Outside of the guys who taught me how to play the game growing up and how to understand it, I owe everything to Nathaniel,” Bortles said. “His ability to break things down and simplify them — he took the complexities of schemes and explained them. He has a good way with words that allows you to feel comfortable with the information he’s giving you.”

After seven games in 2016, Bradley fired offensive coordinator Greg Olson and promoted Hackett back to the play-calling chair. The Jaguars went 1-8 (Bradley was fired with two games remaining) and Marrone was promoted to coach and retained Hackett. The Jaguars drafted running back Leonard Fournette fourth overall in 2017 and literally ran the offense through him. In improving from 3-13 to 10-6 with playoff wins over Buffalo and Pittsburgh before losing at New England, the Jaguars finished first in rushing, sixth in yards and fifth in scoring.

“You have to understand who you are (as a team) and that’s what (Hackett) did,” said Wheatley, who coached with Hackett at Syracuse, Buffalo and Jacksonville and is now the head coach at Morgan State. “And when you know how to use (the personnel) and you know how to motivate the players and they understand what their role is, you can go out and have great synergy and play.”

Four-plus years later, Bortles still laughs about the words used in a Hackett play call, led by references to Star Wars and the Justin Timberlake-led band NSYNC.

“The creativity and imagination was unlimited,” Bortles said.

Even the most creatively worded play calls won’t work when the execution goes downhill and Hackett couldn’t stop the snowball in 2018. After being fired by Jacksonville, Hackett had a month to re-group and joined LaFleur’s new staff in Green Bay as the non-play calling offensive coordinator.

“The shock of Jacksonville sort of centered him again to realize what this business is all about,” Paul Hackett said. “He went to Green Bay trying to be the best lieutenant he could possibly be and at the same time, open up and learn. I give a lot of credit to (LaFleur), he gave him a lot of responsibility and they worked together beautifully.”

The Broncos were wowed by the entire Hackett Experience — offense, defense and special teams knowledge, leadership skills, his genuine nature — during their first interview Jan. 14 in Green Bay. Two weeks later, he was being introduced as the new coach.

“We always hoped this sort of thing would happen,” Paul Hackett said. “It was pure joy that someone recognized his potential at a fairly young age (42) and he’s going to get an opportunity that, in my opinion, he was born to do.

“He was born to be a leader in the National Football League.”

'I couldn't be prouder': Longtime coach Paul Hackett relishes son Nathaniel's chance to lead Broncos

By Aric DiLalla
DenverBroncos.com
February 3, 2022

Paul Hackett spent 18 years in the coaching ranks before he earned a head-coaching opportunity.

At 42, Hackett was named the head coach at the University of Pittsburgh. After three years at Pitt and five seasons back in the NFL as the Chiefs' offensive coordinator, he took the reins as the head coach at the University of Southern California.

As Hackett looks back now at his two stints leading programs, he considers himself fortunate to have had those opportunities during his nearly four decades as a coach. But he also said the pride he felt when his son Nathaniel was named the Broncos' head coach this week far outweighs the satisfaction he got from his own accomplishments.

"This is much better," Paul told DenverBroncos.com. "This is much better. ... This is the height of our profession, the height of our business. The finest athletes, the finest technology, the finest strategy — this is the very, very top. The last three years as a family, we've just loved everything that [Packers head coach] Matt LaFleur did, everything that the Green Bay Packers did for Nathaniel. We've just loved it. Now, to have a chance to be in charge, it's great."

Paul was asleep when he and his wife got a call after 2 a.m. on Thursday from Nathaniel to share the news, but the call jolted them awake.

"He woke us up and we were just beside ourselves," Paul said. "We did not sleep the rest of the night. Just marveling at how wonderful this opportunity is."

Paul, who spent nine years as an NFL offensive coordinator and helped instill the principles of offensive football in Nathaniel, believed his son's opportunity would arrive at some point. While he wasn't sure when Nathaniel would be tapped for a job, Paul said Nathaniel's work with quarterbacks at each of his stops made it a possibility. Whether with Syracuse, the Bills, Jaguars or Packers, Paul said he's seen his son do "really, really extraordinary things with that position."

And while he told his son to have patience as he waited for his opportunity, Paul always hoped it would happen.

"We were thrilled," Paul said. "When you have a lifetime in football like our family does, 25 years in pro football for me and now Nathaniel in pro football for [almost] 15 years, it's always that goal that you look at. You don't want to talk about it too much, you just sort of feel it ahead of you. The fact that the Packers have had such a wonderful past couple of years, it was just exciting that someone recognized it and was able to give him this opportunity. This is the height of our profession. He's got a lot of youth and enthusiasm, and we as a family are just totally thrilled. I couldn't be prouder."

Nathaniel's career in coaching is far from a surprise. While Paul said his son was never pushed toward football, he grew up around locker rooms. Those days, his father said, were when Nathaniel started to develop his ability to make connections. As a coach's son — moving from city to city — there was hardly another option.

"I think that because of the atmosphere he grew up in, as you can imagine, we moved every three years almost," Paul said. "He was with all kinds of different teams, all kinds of different schools. He was always pressed into situations that were about meeting people, meeting new people, different kinds of people. The theme being football. He was always sort of a natural. A great confidence having been around the finest athletes in the world in the game of football was part of his life from a very young age. I remember Andre Rison coming to Kansas City and the two of them kind of just sort of checking it out. And Neil Smith and Derrick Thomas. It was just what he did. He loved it."

And, of course, there were the lessons Nathaniel learned from his father himself.

"My dad is one of the best men I've ever met," the Broncos' new coach said during his introductory press conference. "Growing up as a coach's kid, you see a lot of stuff. He'll tell a lot of people, 'I'm sorry I put them in the locker room,' and he'll apologize every now and then — but it was amazing. I loved my dad and what he was doing; I loved his work ethic. It was always great when dad came home. It was about being with dad. He's the best. Just seeing the ups and downs of this profession was something that was valuable for me [and] for my kids and for us to stay strong and be together with my wife and my kids. He taught me [that] there is going to be adversity, and just like we talk about adversity with the team and how we try and how we triumph over that, [you have to] do that with your own family. It's almost like the training started super early when there was some adversity stuff throughout his career. He's definitely affected me as a coach."

While both Nathaniel and Paul have found success as offensive play-callers and quarterback whisperers — Paul led five top-15 scoring offenses as an NFL coordinator — Paul said his son is the more patient of the two. He also believes that when the pressure is on, Nathaniel has an ability to stay calm. Both men, though, thrive as teachers — and Nathaniel learned several years ago from his father what it took to teach at the highest level.

"I remember I brought him in when I was at Buffalo, and I asked him to just watch me, critique me and tell me how I can be better and how I can be a better coach from a developmental standpoint," Nathaniel said. "It was a good idea at first and then it got really bad when he came to dinner with 20 pages of notes. I was feeling really good about my coaching style until he started giving me all of the advice. It was one of the best things that happened to me. It changed a lot of the things that I did. He was in everything from how I presented meetings, on the field — it was great. I think that's also why I want to do things here to be able to help coaches get that and [help them find out] how they can develop and how they can learn how to teach better. He's done so much for me."

His father, who chuckled as he remembered that story, said the key to teaching is far from complicated.

"I've always said this," Paul said. "'It's not what you know, Nathaniel. It's what they know.' And what you can get them to know is the key to this game of ours, particularly at the quarterback position."

As his son begins his tenure as the Broncos' head coach, Paul noted that it's also important for his son to also remain true to himself.

"I think you have to follow your heart," Paul said of his advice to his son. "You have to be yourself. The thing you don't want to do is try to be a head coach like somebody else, try to be like somebody. When you've been 15 years coaching and you're in your 40s, you've established who you are, what you are. Nathaniel's very comfortable with who he is and I think I will say trust yourself. Be yourself and trust yourself."

Of course, it's easier to find success when one has the right opportunity — and Paul said he senses his son has found that in Denver. He believes his son and General Manager George Paton are "talking the same language." As a father, he said, that's wonderful to see for his son.

And, yes, even after five seasons as the Chiefs' offensive coordinator, it won't be difficult to throw himself behind the Broncos.

"Without a doubt," Paul said of cheering for the Broncos. "This is my son. Without a doubt. I'm going to be all in. We had some great battles. The [John] Elway-[Joe] Montana Monday night game was the one that I remember the most. ... That's one of the great football games of all time. There's great history. Coming to Mile High and the crowd screaming and yelling at us. ...

"This is a whole new era. This is about my son now. I'll probably be more nervous now."

'This is the guy for the Denver Broncos': How Nathaniel Hackett became the Broncos' new head coach

By Aric DiLalla
DenverBroncos.com
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Until the early hours of Thursday morning, Broncos fans were unaware who would become their next coach.

Nathaniel Hackett didn't know much earlier that he was on the precipice of becoming an NFL head coach.

"Four days ago, maybe?" Hackett joked Friday when asked when he first believed it was possible for him to become a head coach.

His longtime dream, though, became a reality as he officially signed his contract on Friday to become the Broncos' 18th head coach in franchise history.

And as he was introduced to the media on Friday, the details became clear of his journey from one of 10 candidates to the team's new head coach.

From the first time the Broncos interviewed Hackett on Jan. 15, it became evident that he was a strong candidate for the job.

"Nathaniel impressed us with his intelligence, his innovation and his strong leadership qualities," General Manager George Paton said Friday. "We met with Nathaniel — the initial interview was in Green Bay — [and] he blew us away. It was a four and a half hours about everything. He walks in the room, he lights it up."

Paton and his six-person search committee met with 10 candidates, and the group was determined to have the interviews in person. Hackett's personality and infectious energy translated quite well and proved the value of the in-person sessions.

"When we met as a committee and we talked about what we wanted to get out of the interviews, we just felt it is a huge decision, obviously," Paton said. "This will be the biggest decision I make in my career. It's a huge decision for the organization. To depend on a zoom call, it just seemed ridiculous to me. We wanted to go, we wanted to get to know these candidates in person. You get a different feel when they walk into the room, their presence, the feel of the body language. I just applaud [President/CEO] Joe Ellis and this organization for giving us the resources to do what we had to do. Really, for us, it was a game-changer. When this guy walks into the room, you're not going to get that on Zoom. I guarantee it."

After completing the rest of their first-round interviews, the Broncos welcomed Hackett to Denver for their lone second interview with a candidate. Paton estimated that Hackett spent nine to 10 hours in Denver on Monday, and they enjoyed a now legendary meal at Los Dos Potrillos that Paton said helped seal the team's decision.

"The more we talked with Nathaniel, the more we realized he was the right leader for the Denver Broncos and really the perfect choice to reboot this organization," Paton said.

Still, Paton spent another two and a half hours on Zoom with Hackett on Tuesday to continue to build their relationship.

"We brought him here that Monday and he spent the whole day, and the least amount of time he spent with anyone was me," Paton said. "... Everyone wanted to meet him, he wanted to meet everyone. I really wanted to make sure he was comfortable in this organization, with the people here. I was comfortable, but I just felt he and I needed to have some more conversations. There's so many things involved in a coaching search when you're talking about staff and the people in the building. We had a one-on-one conversation on our initial interview for a half hour, but like I said, we're very process-oriented and I just felt I needed a lot of time with him one on one. Because we're going to be living with each other. We're partnered. We're tied at the hip. It's him and I and our staffs and the [people in the building], but it all starts here with our relationship. And I am so sold on that and him and our partnership and I'm just excited to get going."

When Hackett flew back to Wisconsin on Monday night, he said he remained uncertain whether he would become the team's next coach. The communication between himself and the team over the following days, though, helped put him at ease.

"I think In the end, I felt great," Hackett said. "I felt how great they felt. Again, it's about the communication. I thought we had great communication throughout the whole process. I think that's what you're looking for. That trust and communication. I didn't know. You never know. In the back of the head as a coach and how that stuff works, you never know 100 percent. Once you get that opportunity and you hear it, that's when you know it's real."

And as Paton and Co. deliberated their next move, it became increasingly clear to the Broncos' general manager that it was time to move forward without speaking to another candidate for a second time.

"I spent a lot of time, like I said, with Nathaniel — and there was no reason to go on," Paton said. "I was sold. We wanted to go through the process, there were a lot of great candidates. This was a really good group of candidates that we interviewed. I spent a lot of time with him, and I knew how I felt. I talked to the staff, I talked to the leadership and was like, 'What are we doing? This is the guy for the Denver Broncos.'"

"We pulled the cord and made the decision and couldn't be more excited."

Energy and ingenuity: Why Nathaniel Hackett's personality may be his biggest strength as a head coach

By Ben Swanson
DenverBroncos.com
January 29, 2022

In his first hours on the job, new Broncos head coach Nathaniel Hackett has already met the expectations General Manager George Paton set.

"He walks in a room, he lights it up," Paton said in an opening statement to the media, and minutes later, everyone in the Broncos' team meeting room could understand why.

Over the next hour, Hackett spoke about the normal topics — football philosophy, his vision regarding the quarterback position, his background in the game — and at times went well beyond them. He spoke of which "Star Wars" character he most identifies with (Han Solo, for the record), his time learning neurobiology at UC-Davis and his practical jokes in those neurobiology classes, all with the same kind of exuberance that is core to who he is and why he was so sought-after as a head-coaching candidate.

"His enthusiasm is infectious," Paton said. "His knowledge of the game is really remarkable. He's going to bring a lot of juice, he's going to bring a lot of energy to our building. We did a lot of background on all the candidates and the word that kind of resonated other than his football acumen was 'connection.' Nathaniel has a unique ability to connect with everyone he touches."

As the Washington Post's Nicki Jhabvala wrote in an October profile, Hackett is a "Renaissance man" unlike most people in the NFL coaching world. Because that allows him an ability to make inroads with so many people, Hackett is able to open up communication easily up and down an NFL roster.

"He's a unique competitor who's all about winning, but he's different than any coach I've really been around," Paton said. "He has a lot of other interests, he's all about family. Any communication you have with Nathaniel, it's about his family. It was very refreshing. He's about cultivating relationships. He's big into the arts, helping others, volunteering in the community, which is why I think he connects with so many different types of people."

And then there's the positive energy he brings, which, he said during his initial interview with Paton and the Broncos' search committee, will be a constant.

"Energy is something you're always going to find from me as a leader," Hackett said. "Always going to have energy, always going to bring the juice — just simply because I love it. I love what I do for a living, and it's a lot of fun if you let it be fun."

It was hard for Hackett to pinpoint on Friday exactly where that outlook comes from, but it's always been in him, he said.

"I think it's just kind of how I've always been," Hackett said. "I've always enjoyed life, grateful for everything that I have and the people that I'm allowed to be around. Yeah, I guess it's just thanks to mom and dad. And my grandma was very charismatic too, so I got a lot from her."

In his line of work, Hackett utilizes it to his and his players' benefit; he works it into meetings and how he teaches so that they enjoy being around him as much as he enjoys being around them.

"It's just got to be that genuine juice, that genuine energy," Hackett said. "It's got to be who you are. It's got to be just vibrating through the whole facility. Everybody's got to feel it. It's not just one person you have to save it up for, [like] your star player. It's got to be with anybody and everybody. So I just think it's something that's so important. This whole generation, this whole world, is changing. I mean, I call it that YouTube generation world. Just meetings are different from when I first started, on how I try to keep people's attention and inspire them and keep them excited. So I think that as a coach, you always have to have that excitement and energy to find different ways to approach it and can get them all fired up to learn and get better each day."

But while that all sounds good, Hackett acknowledged that success must follow to meet the larger expectations after an introductory press conference.

"I want to create this environment where people want to come into this building and work and have fun doing it," Hackett said. "But let's make no mistake: It's only fun when you win football games. So we've got to win, and that's what we want to do. I'm so excited to work with this organization with these players, meeting each one of them, getting to know them. This is a young, hungry football team. We've got to get over the hump, we've got to be excited about it and we all have to do this. ..."

"It's about people, it's about communication, it's about talking with one another. It's about all of us coming together and making something special here and really making Broncos Country proud, because that's what it's all about. We've got to win some games."