

KJ Hamler feels like himself again after preseason debut

By Cody Roark
Mile High Sports
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For Denver Broncos wide receiver KJ Hamler, Saturday's preseason game against the Minnesota Vikings was a step in the right direction ahead of the regular season.

The third-year wide receiver appears to be fully ready to go for Week 1 against the Seattle Seahawks.

KJ Hamler ready for the regular season

The Broncos 23-13 victory on Saturday against the Minnesota Vikings felt great, but for KJ Hamler, he felt even better.

The speedy wide receiver saw his first NFL game action since Sept. 26, 2021, against the New York Jets, the game where his season ended after a torn ACL and dislocated hip.

Hamler's return just under a year after his injury is a testament to his perseverance and dedication.

This offseason, Hamler opened up about his struggles with mental health through the recovery process and with the loss of his grandmother.

"It's been a tough journey [back from injury], to be honest," Hamler said. "There was so much stuff I was dealing with and being piled up on top of each other. At one point, just dealing with the ACL and then some more things [with] family situations. The love of my life passed, my grandmother, so that was the toughest thing. That was on my back for a while. I wish I never did it by myself. I wish I would have asked for help, because it was at one point in my life—and I'm going to just be honest with you all because I'm more vulnerable and more confident in myself by just saying it.

"At one point, I didn't want to be here," Hamler continued. "I didn't want to be in this world. There was one point where I didn't want to be heard from anymore because I lost my granny and that really hurt me. God gave me the strength to just get out of that hole because he knew I was strong enough to get through [it]. I didn't feel like I was at the time. Just getting out of that hole was very hard, very tough. Just having all of these things going on and piling on top of each other, it was a hard process. Just to see where I am at from where I started and where I'm at now, [it's] been a big change. I'm proud of myself and I know my grandmother is proud."

And KJ should be proud of himself. His teammates are proud of him, his coaching staff is proud of him, and Broncos fans are proud of him.

In Saturday's win, he played the entire first half, hauling in three receptions for 18 yards.

Broncos head coach Nathaniel Hackett said they had to take him out of the game or else he wouldn't have come out.

"We had to take him out, he wanted to keep going," Hackett said following the Broncos' 23-13 preseason victory. "He was having such a great time. I think it's great for him to be able to catch the ball, take a couple

pops. You want him to want to stay in those situations. For a guy that hasn't played for as long as he had, it's very encouraging, and he's feeling a lot better."

His first catch came in the first quarter at the 13:18 mark, reeling in a pass across the middle, planting into the turf, and making a move in the open field before being tackled after a gain of seven yards.

Brett Rypien shared postgame what it was like seeing Hamler back on the field.

"He's got such a fire and passion for the game, and you can see it every time he's out on the field," Rypien said. "I was telling some guys on the sidelines, there was one play where he was lined up in the slot and empty and there was like nobody over him. He was like, 'Brett, Brett,' getting ready for me to throw it to him. He just has so much fire, so much passion. He's a great guy to be around, he brings great energy every day, and I couldn't be happier for him."

Every rep mattered to Hamler who made the most of his time in the first half.

"Yeah, I wanted to. I really wanted to," Hamler said following the game. "I'm glad I did, I'm glad I got out there and got a lot of plays and reps in just to build up endurance in my legs. So I am glad I did all of that."

One thing Nathaniel Hackett believes in is not playing starters in the preseason, but Hamler made a strong enough case to the Broncos first-year head coach.

"I thought it was very important," Hamler said. "I really wanted to get in. Hackett didn't really want to play me, but I was like, 'Let me just get in, get a few reps and see if I am still myself.' I just wanted to be back to myself."

Guess who's back? Back again. KJ's back. Tell a friend.

Upon return to practice, Broncos receiver KJ Hamler details mental health struggles of offseason

By Ryan O'Halloran

Denver Post

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Showing braveness and vulnerability, Broncos receiver KJ Hamler on Monday detailed the mental health struggles he battled during the offseason, one full of rehabilitation from a left ACL injury and compounded by the death of his beloved grandmother.

"The devil was on my back for a while," said Hamler, who was activated from the physically unable to perform list, making him eligible to practice. "It's been a tough journey. There was just so much stuff I was dealing with that was being piled up on top of each other and on top of each other.

"At one point, I didn't want to be in this world. I didn't want to be on earth anymore because I love my (grandmother) and (her death) really hurt me."

Hamler sustained a knee injury last September; his grandmother died three months after his surgery. The ups and down of rehabilitation, he could handle. Dealing with the loss of a loved one was much harder.

"That was the lowest point of my life, hands down," he said.

Hamler said his initial way to deal with the depression was to keep his feelings to himself.

"I didn't want to talk to nobody," he said. "I was in this little cocoon, wrapped up, and kept everything to myself. As a man, we always talk (about) being tough. ... But sometimes, you have to let it out. I'm just starting to learn that now. I wish I would have never handled it (by) myself. I wish I would have asked for help (earlier)."

Hamler said he began therapy and also made a point of talking to his parents and teammates more often.

"To see me dig out of it and start becoming vulnerable and opening up more to people I trust, I'm just learning day in and day out and I'm glad I'm still here and still with the team," he said. "God gave me the strength to get out of that hole and he knew I was strong enough to get through it; I didn't feel like I was at the time.

"Getting out of that hole is very hard, just having all these things going on. It was a hard process, but to see where I started and where I'm at now, I'm proud of myself and I know my grandmother is proud."

On the field, Hamler is allowed to participate in walk-throughs and do individual work because he is off the physically unable to perform list.

"It felt good getting back out there, finally," he said. "I hadn't put pads on in a year. You have to get back in a little bit (better) shape (with pads on)."

Said coach Nathaniel Hackett: "He had been working really hard. (We'll) slowly work him back into practice because it's still a while to get him into team reps."

KJ Hamler returns, opens up about mental and emotional low point during recovery

By Mike Klis

KUSA

August 2, 2022

As it turns out, KJ Hamler's activation from an injured list was considerably more admirable than a physical comeback from ACL and hip surgeries.

In discussing his limited participation in Broncos' practice Monday for the first time since he suffered season-ending ACL and hip injuries in a game 3 win against the Jets on Sept. 26 last year, Hamler opened up about the mental and emotional issues he was dealing with that were far more serious.

"It's been a tough journey to be honest," Hamler told the media Monday. "There was just so much I was dealing with being piled up on top of each other. At one point, dealing with the ACL and little bit of more things, family situations. My love of my life passed, my grandmother. That was the toughest thing. "The devil was on my back for a while. I wished I would have never did it by myself. I wish I would have asked for help. Because at one point in my life – I'm just being honest with you all because I'm more vulnerable and more confident in myself by saying it -- but at one point I didn't want to be here. I didn't want to be in this world. There was one point I just didn't want to be on earth no more. Because I lost my granny and that really hurt me.

"God gave me the strength to get out of there whole. He knew I was strong enough to get through. I didn't feel like I was at the time. Getting out of there whole was very hard, very tough. Having all these things going on piling on top of each other it was a hard process. But to see where I'm at from where I started and where I'm at now, a big change. And I'm proud of myself and I know my grandmother's proud."

Hamler's words should have resounded deep inside Broncos headquarters. Early in the Broncos' 2010 season, second-year receiver Kenny McKinley took his own life after he became depressed following knee surgery, according to a report by the Arapahoe County Sheriff's office. The Broncos have taken several steps towards addressing mental health issues. They were one of the first teams to hire a full-time mental health specialist in Dr. Reine Evereteze. Led by Vice President of Player Development Ray Jackson, a former Colorado State cornerback standout, and team chaplain Reza Zadh, the Broncos have a comprehensive mental health and wellness program that also includes multiple psychologists on a contractual basis.

Hamler underwent his ACL surgery in early October and he said it was about three months after that he began suffering from a deep bout of depression. He said thinking about what his grandmother would have wished for him helped him gain mental strength. "I think that's the reason I'm still here," Hamler said. "I had to think about that. Had to think about people I'd have let down. My mom, my dad, my family. But that was the lowest point in my life. Hands down, lowest point in my life. To see me dig out of it and then to start becoming vulnerable with people I trust and start opening up more ... because we're so used to bottling stuff up, taking it to the chin a lot.

"So I'm just learning day-in and day-out and I'm glad I'm still with the team. Got my family around and just being on the field has been a big help."

Denver Broncos WR KJ Hamler says season-ending injury led to necessary mental health help

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN

August 2, 2022

For the first time since he suffered knee and hip injuries in the Denver Broncos' Week 3 win over the New York Jets last season, wide receiver KJ Hamler practiced with his teammates Monday.

And his short jog from the locker room to the practice field to open his day was another important step in a physical and emotional recovery from what he called the "lowest point of my life." It is a recovery that has included not only repairing his body, but the discovery he could seek out help for the personal issues that arrived in his life when football was not part of the equation.

"At one point ... the devil was on my back for a while," Hamler said. "I wish I would have never done it by myself, I wish I would have asked for help. ... At one point I didn't want to be here, I didn't want to be in this world. There was one point I didn't want to be on this earth no more."

Hamler, a second-round pick by the Broncos in 2020, was formally activated off the physically unable to perform (PUP) list Monday. He last played in Week 3 last season when, late in the second quarter of a 26-0 win over the Jets, he leaped for a pass from Teddy Bridgewater and landed awkwardly on his left leg. After doctors evaluated the damage, Hamler learned he had torn the ACL in his left knee and had a hip injury. Both needed surgery, and Hamler soon entered what would be an arduous months-long recovery. Teammates tried to keep him engaged along the way, but just over two months after his hip surgery, his grandmother, Ethel Gooding -- the person he had described as his "best friend" and "my mother" -- died at 83.

Hamler said he didn't initially tell anyone how much the combination of his injury, the separation from his teammates during his recovery and the death of his grandmother had impacted him. And that part of "climbing out of that hole" was the realization he needed to take the step of asking for, and seeking, help. "We just so used to bottling stuff up, taking it to the chin," Hamler said. "I'm just learning each day, day in, day out ... just being back on the field is a big help ... But I checked into therapy, talk to my guys more, talked to my mom, my dad. Therapy is ups and down ... some days you hear what you want to hear, some days it's not the stuff you want to hear ... you don't need to always be alone, you don't need to always isolate yourself."

Hamler said he will continue to "be vulnerable" even after his football routine returns to its pre-injury level. On the field, he said he doesn't know if he will be cleared to play in any of the Broncos' three preseason games, but he believes he will be ready to go Week 1 against the Seattle Seahawks.

"It seemed like the right time," Broncos coach Nathaniel Hackett said of Hamler's return to the practice field Monday. "... Every single step you appreciate him more and more. I'm definitely cheering for him." "I know everybody around here is proud of me, I'm proud of myself," Hamler said. "... There is a lot of people out there that are in my situation or that has been through stuff, you keep stuff held in, it gets bottled up, it's piling up and piling up until it just explodes. I'm not afraid no more to let it be known I was going through that stuff. ... Football brought me back to life, I'm grateful."

KJ Hamler becomes advocate for player mental health after sharing raw story at Broncos camp

By Nick Kosmider

The Athletic

August 2, 2022

KJ Hamler is still fast. As he made his first on-field appearance at Broncos training camp Monday, fresh off the physically unable to perform list, the third-year Broncos wide receiver wanted to make that much clear, saying he's been clocked between 21 and 23 miles per hour during conditioning sessions. But still the fastest on the team?

"Oh, yeah!" Hamler exclaimed. "Even with a knee brace, I'll never say I'm not."

Hamler hopes to use that top-flight speed often alongside Russell Wilson, and Monday's activation from the PUP list was another encouraging step in the wide receiver's quest to return to the field in Week 1, nearly one year after a devastating injury ended his second season after only three games. But even if the 2020 second-round pick debuts in Seattle and then goes on to put up the kind of numbers the coaching staff believes he can, there may not be anything Hamler does that is more impactful than what he did after removing his pads and stepping onto a podium early Monday afternoon.

In a raw and candid 13-minute session with reporters, Hamler laid bare all he endured during the past year, a dark period that left him questioning his very existence. In doing so, he demonstrated the power he can have as an advocate for mental health. "At one point I didn't want to be here," Hamler said Monday, detailing the low point of a stretch last fall where he lost football due to significant injury, grieved through the passing of his grandmother and battled depression. "I didn't want to be in this world. There was one point I just didn't want to be on Earth no more. ... The devil was on my back for a while."

Hamler first shared insight into the "dark place" he was in last season during an interview with *The Athletic* back in April, explaining that the passing of his grandmother, Ethel Gooding, coupled with rehab from knee and hip surgeries and other "personal battles" he was facing piled up in a way that left Hamler feeling overwhelmed. He delved further on Monday, saying the stretch was "the lowest point of my life, hands down." Hamler felt like he was wrapped in a cocoon, he said, curled up alone with the pain. Not being in the locker room or around teammates on the road last season as he rehabbed only intensified the isolation he felt. Even though he was grateful for his fellow wide receivers who called to check on him while he was at home, Hamler said it "started to feel like you're not on the team anymore."

Then came the call on a Saturday in the middle of January, three months after Hamler's surgeries. Gooding had been more like a mom to Hamler than a grandmother for most of his life. Every time he came home from college at Penn State, his first stop would be her house. Then, he'd take her to get her hair done or grab a bite to eat or just sit and share stories. Gooding was, Hamler said, "the love of my life."

When Hamler wasn't at home, he would talk to Gooding on the phone every Monday, as much a part of his weekly routine as film study or early morning lifts. But on the Monday before he got the call that Gooding had passed, Hamler said he and Gooding didn't have their normal Monday chat on the phone.

“It’s a lot of regret in my heart from that,” he said. “I was holding a lot of regret on myself because of that. It still kind of haunts me to this day, even though I’m better, but when you lose the woman that raised you, it’s a different feeling.”

What started to pull Hamler, inch by inch, out of what he called “a depressed state,” was a vision of what his grandmother would want for him. Gooding knew that her grandson had written down a goal of playing in the NFL when he was 4 years old. As he began setting out to turn the words on a piece of paper into reality, Gooding was always a guiding light. In the darkest moments, Hamler kept searching for that glow. “I think that’s the reason I’m still here,” Hamler said. “I had to think about that. I had to think of all the people I’d let down — my mom, my dad, my family. That was the lowest point of my life. To see me dig out of it and start becoming vulnerable with people I trust and start opening up more, we’re just so used to bottling stuff up and taking it to the chin a lot. I’m just learning each day, day in and day out. I’m glad I’m still with the team. I’ve got my family around. Just being out on the field has been a big help.”

Perhaps the biggest gain from Hamler’s experience is that he eventually learned to ask for help. It wasn’t easy. Still isn’t. But it has been a powerful tool. “As a man, we’re always taught to be tough or just block everything out,” Hamler said. “It’s, ‘You’ve got to block it out. You’ve got to be tough.’ But that’s not a prime example of a masculine man. Sometimes you’ve got to let it out. You need help. I’m just starting to learn that now. At the end of the day, I got to talking more.”

Hamler said he checked himself into therapy earlier this year. The new experience has had its ups and downs as he’s learned how to process his struggles, but even through the messy periods, Hamler said he’s learned the power that comes with opening up. He also spoke with Tim Grover, a motivational speaker and trainer who has worked with elite athletes like Michael Jordan and the late Kobe Bryant, an interaction Hamler called “a blessing.” He’s made it a point to talk more frequently with his parents, his teammates and everyone else in his support system. And he’s especially eager to talk to anyone who might be going through their own battles, in whatever form they take.

“There are a lot of people who are in my situation or who have been through stuff like that,” Hamler said. “If you keep stuff held in, you’ll bottle it up and it keep piling on until you explode, man. I’m not afraid no more to let it be known that I’ve gone through these things.”

Hamler prides himself on being the “goofy,” gregarious teammate who keeps things light and can bring smiles to the faces of his teammates simply by flashing his own. But he’s also learned that in order to be the best version of himself, he has to acknowledge how he feels in the down moments, to let the pain out. It’s why, he said, there was a time earlier in the offseason where he went to the sideline during a practice and cried, determined not to hold anything in.

“I’m not perfect. I’m human. I’m not afraid to tell you all what I’ve been going through. It’s been a tough year. But you see me where I’m at right now. I’m still here and I’m still working to be the best version of myself. I know everyone around here is proud of me and I’m proud of myself from step one to right now, and I’ve just got to keep pushing from there.

“Football brought me back to life, and I’m grateful for that.”

Broncos receiver K.J. Hamler opens up about mental health: 'Football brought me back to life'

By George Stoia
The Gazette
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K.J. Hamler is often making others laugh at Broncos practice.

The speedy wide receiver is considered one of the funniest players on the roster, being known for his goofy and outgoing personality that tends to lead to smiles among his teammates and coaches.

But on Monday, during his 13-minute media availability, Hamler candidly shared his battle with his mental health over the past year. An emotional Hamler detailed his recovery from a torn ACL in September to the passing of his grandmother in January — two incidents he said put him "at the lowest point" of his life.

"It's been a tough journey, to be honest," Hamler said. "The devil was on my back for a while. I wish I would have never did it by myself. I wish I would have asked for help. ... At one point I didn't want to be here. I didn't want to be in this world. There was one point I just didn't want to be on Earth no more."

Hamler, 23, had high hopes a season ago, planning to be a large part of the Broncos' offense. But after landing wrong on a catch attempt in Week 3, he was sidelined for the season with a knee and hip injury, taking him away from the team as he rehabbed.

"You kind of feel like you're not apart of the team anymore," Hamler said. "But the group I'm in, the receiving group I'm in, guys checked on me, called me all the time. I wasn't able to be present or physically there, but they always called me and I appreciate them."

And three months after his knee and hip surgeries, Hamler's grandmother, Ethel Gooding, died. Hamler said Gooding was more like a mother to him growing up, as he often spent most of his time with her when visiting home. She was the "love of my life," he said.

"That was my mother," Hamler said. "I took her to get her hair done. Took her to get food. Every time I came home, I saw her first. I called her every Monday. So when I missed that call on that Monday (before she passed) and then we got the call on Saturday — there's a lot of regret in my heart from that. ... It still kind of haunts me to this day, even though I'm better."

When you lose the woman who raised you, it's a different feeling."

Hamler said he's spent the past few months trying to dig himself out of the hole he's been in. He said he was in a "cocoon" for a long time before beginning to talk with his parents, teammates and coaches about his mental health. During this past offseason, Hamler said some practices he would just cry on the sidelines.

Since then, he's been going to therapy and has been more vulnerable and open about sharing his mental battles. He's no longer afraid to share his emotions.

"We're just used to bottling stuff up and just taking it to the chin a lot," Hamler said. "As a man, we're always taught to be tough or just block everything out. But that's just not the prime example of a masculine man. Sometimes you've just got to let it out. Sometimes you need help. But I'm just starting to learn that now."

Hamler also said the biggest cure has been getting back on the field. He was officially activated off the PUP list Monday and is expected to be back for the season, again hoping to be a key part of the offense. But for Hamler, getting back on the field was never his biggest hurdle. It was the challenges off the field Hamler had to overcome and is stilling battling today.

He is, though, starting to feel like his old, goofy and outgoing self again. And what he did Monday — speaking publicly about his internal battles — was not only a step in the right direction for him and his state of mind, but also a courageous and inspiring moment for others who are also struggling with mental health.

"Football brought me back to life, and I'm grateful for that," Hamler said. "I'm not perfect. I'm human. I'm not afraid to tell you all what I've been going through. It's been a tough year. But you see me where I'm at right now. I'm still here and I'm still working to be the best version of myself. I know everyone around here is proud of me and I'm proud of myself from step one to right now, and I've just got to keep pushing from there."

KJ Hamler struggled with depression before returning to the field with a new outlook on life

By Zac Stevens

DNVR.com

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Whenever KJ Hamler returned home to Michigan, the first person he visited was the grandmother who had raised him. He drove her to her hair appointments. They went out to eat. When he wasn't in town, he called her every Monday.

On January 10, he missed that call.

"There is a lot of regret in my heart from that," Hamler told reporters on Monday. "It still kind of haunts me to this day."

Five days later, his grandmother died.

"That was the lowest point of my life, hands down the lowest point of my life," he said.

The death of Hamler's grandmother amplified what was already a dark time for the 23-year-old wide receiver.

In late September, Hamler tore his ACL in a game against the Jets. He was in the process of catching a pass 20 yards downfield when a defender jumped on his back awkwardly and hyperextended his knee. He injured his hip in the process, which needed a separate surgery.

The injury knocked Hamler out for the rest of the season.

"The one thing that was the down part of being away from football was that you can't travel with the team, and you can't be around the guys," Hamler said. "I was in the house most of the time. Just being away from the guys, you feel like you're not a part of the team anymore."

His teammates called to check up on him, but it wasn't the same. At one point, he needed to go to the side of the practice field to cry.

"The devil was on my back for awhile," Hamler said. "I didn't want to be here. I didn't want to be on this Earth anymore."

Hamler checked into therapy. He spent more time talking to his parents and his friends. He thought about the people he would let down if he wasn't around. He asked himself what his grandmother would want him to do.

"Where I'm at now from where I started—big change," Hamler said. "I'm proud of myself and I know my grandmother's proud."

One of the keys was talking to the people around him about what he was feeling. When Russell Wilson and his wife Ciara arrived in Denver, they became two of those people.

“One time I just talked to Ms. C about life for like two hours,” Hamler said. “They’ve really been a big help and they don’t even know it.”

Hamler returned to the field on Monday after spending the first week of camp on the physically unable to perform list as he recovered from his surgeries. He didn’t participate fully and his availability for the preseason is still up in the air, but he plans to be ready to go for the season-opener in Seattle next month.

“It’s funny because obviously when something like that happens, you’re always really fired up for a guy to be able to come back,” head coach Nathaniel Hackett said. “Then you get to know him, and you really like him. He’s wild. Then you watch him work and you watch him study, and you appreciate it more. Every single step, you appreciate it more and more. I’m definitely cheering for him. I can’t wait for him to get out there.”

As he returns to the field, Hamler is bringing a new attitude with him.

“From my rookie year until now I used to come in kind of groggy and didn’t want to do it,” he said. “I just realized I’m more mature and I’ve grown from that. Just trying to be better. I come here with a smile on my face every day.”

That smile has been one of the bright spots around Dove Valley since Hamler was drafted. He’s a goofy presence. He’s the star of the Broncos’ social media accounts. To hear he was struggling with depression is a surprise.

“I’m living something that I wrote down when I was four years old, a dream,” he said. “Football saved my life.”

Denver Broncos' KJ Hamler 'getting better' after injury rehab, loss of grandmother put him in 'dark spot'

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN

May 26, 2022

Former Denver Broncos wide receiver Rod Smith once framed the struggles of a player returning from injury as a fight that reached well beyond the physical pain.

Smith talked about wrestling during the recovery with the constant reminders that such a major investment of time, effort and emotion was often met with little return.

"All you know is playing football, being in the locker room, interacting with people, jokes, arguments, whatever," Smith has said. "Then you get hurt and it's like you're the night watchman. When you work everybody else is somewhere else doing something else. If you're in the training room, they're at practice, if you're rehabbing, they're in meetings. You show up, work, go home and you might not talk to your teammates for days. You can't lead, you don't have impact and you don't even know when you're going to get back. That can mess you up."

Nobody has to tell current Broncos wide receiver KJ Hamler any of that. Hamler, a second-round pick by the Broncos in 2020, last played in Week 3 last season when, late in the second quarter of a 26-0 win over the New York Jets, he leaped for a Teddy Bridgewater pass and landed awkwardly on his left leg.

When doctors finished evaluating the damage, Hamler had torn the ACL in his left knee and had a hip injury. Both needed surgery and Hamler soon entered recovery.

Teammates tried to keep him engaged along the way, but two months after hip surgery his grandmother -- Ethel Gooding -- the person he had described as his "best friend," died at 83.

"I was in a dark spot for a while going through that," Hamler said. "That was probably the toughest thing for me. Now that I'm back on the field and now that I'm around all the guys and I'm being able to do a little bit of what I was able to do before, it's been uplifting my spirits. I won't say that I'm out of that dark place, but I'm getting better. I can tell you that.

"... No one has taken care of me more than her besides my actual mother," he said of his grandmother. "I used to take her to get her hair done and get her food every time I came home. She was going through struggles. She had Parkinson's disease. There were days where I didn't want to show up to therapy, but I always thought about her. She was doing therapy, so I had to go do it. I knew she wouldn't give up, so I didn't give up."

The closer Hamler got to football drills in his rehab, to catching passes as part of the daily grind, the better it got.

And then, in March, the Broncos signed quarterback Russell Wilson. Hamler has already done some limited workouts with Wilson and the team's other pass-catchers in San Diego and spoken to him about his potential impact in the offense.

Hamler has also talked to Seattle Seahawks receiver Tyler Lockett -- who has caught 45 career touchdown passes from Wilson -- on life with Wilson behind center. And that's helped motivate Hamler through his recovery.

"I couldn't be [more] impressed with anyone in our building than KJ Hamler," general manager George Paton said earlier this offseason. "Significant injury. ... No one fights, no one works, no one has more passion."

The Broncos will continue to manage Hamler's workload as they move through the Phase 3 of their offseason program which began this week. It is the first time the team can run 7-on-7 and 11-on-11 drills.

Coach Nathaniel Hackett hasn't committed to a recovery timetable for Hamler but says what he's doing is "unbelievable." Hamler has used some of the time away from the game to create more of a life portfolio outside of football, too, perhaps the one upside from not playing for most of last season.

"I'm in a good spot," Hamler said. "Sometimes they hold me back with just to play it safe and be on the safe side, just be smart with every decision I make. I just listen to the trainers and the strength staff. I take advice from them.

"... Just playing ball again. When you take something that you love away, you have to figure out what you're going to do ... [I'm] just trying to find an identity out of football as well. That was probably the hardest part for me because all I know is football. Picking up new things, new hobbies and being around positive people that bring light and energy to your life is a big difference."

KJ Hamler full speed ahead 7 months after ACL, hip surgeries

By Mike Klis

KUSA

May 12, 2022

That awkward landing KJ Hamler had while going up to catch a Teddy Bridgewater in Game 3 last year against the Jets?

It was more than just his ACL that tore. Hamler said Wednesday his hip popped out and also required surgery to repair. Given the seriousness of Hamler's injury – team sources said there was initial fear of a Bo Jackson-like situation – it's remarkable Hamler has been running around and cutting at full speed just seven months after his surgeries.

"I'm well ahead of schedule," said Hamler, the Denver Broncos' third-year receiver with the tantalizing deep-ball speed. "Some days they've got to ramp me down a little bit and tell me to calm down so it doesn't flare up so I'm playing it smart. Just progressing every day."

The Broncos have seen enough of Hamler's speed to know he can impact a game as much as anyone. But his potential was crimped by rookie growing pains in 2020 and the knee and hip injuries last year. He caught deep touchdown passes of 37 and 49 yards from Drew Lock to beat the Carolina Panthers, 32-27 two years ago and there was an 80-yard touchdown reception from Lock in a preseason game at Minnesota last year.

Hamler was taken by the Broncos in the second round of the 2020 draft to become Denver's version of Kansas City's Tyreek Hill. Now that Hill left the AFC West for Miami, perhaps Hamler will be free to flourish – especially with the deep-throw prowess of new quarterback Russell Wilson.

The Broncos are obviously confident Hamler will be fully recovered because they didn't draft, or acquire, a speed receiver in the offseason. Hamler also has history on his side. He tore his ACL while returning a kickoff in IMG Academy's (Bradenton, Fla.) preseason game in August 2016. Hamler redshirted his freshman year at Penn State, but then had two big years as a redshirt freshman and sophomore, combining for 98 catches, more than 1,600 yards and 13 touchdowns.

In some ways his second ACL rehab was easier than the one he had 5 years earlier, in some ways the rehab was more intensive because of the second issue.

"The difference between now and then, I have more resources now," Hamler said. "And this wasn't just an ACL. I had a hip repair, too. So it was a double-whammy. That was probably the hardest part. You had to be careful because of the hip and then the knee and it was all on the same side.

"It was a longer harder process but I think this process was better than my previous process from my senior year (in high school) just because I had more resources, better technology than I did so now I'm just getting prepared and getting ready faster."

K.J. Hamler ahead of schedule in recovery, slowly exiting a 'dark place'

By Troy Renck

KMGH

May 12, 2022

K.J. Hamler boasts a smirk straight out of central casting. When he tells a story or goofs around, joy remains palpable.

That's what made the past seven months so difficult. Too often, his teeth disappeared. There was no smile. Hamler found himself in a difficult spot after tearing his ACL and ravaging his hip in Week 3 against the New York Jets. He landed awkwardly as he jumped for a pass, the subsequent injuries requiring surgery.

"I was in a dark place for a while going through that. Then I lost my grandmother (Ethel Gooding) two months after that. She was my best friend and I had to put her to rest. That was probably the toughest thing for me. Now that I'm back on the field and around all the guys and I'm being able to do a little bit of what I was able to do before — it's uplifting my spirits," Hamler said. "I won't say that I'm out of that dark place, but I'm getting better. I can tell you that."

Hamler credited his parents for their support as he rehabbed his second major knee injury. He ruptured his ACL during his senior year of high school. That left him with a recovery road map, and better resources as a member of a professional football team. He has also had an inspiration.

"(Grandma) was my rock, really. No one has taken care of me more than her besides my actual mother. I used to take her to get her hair done and get her food every time I came home. She was going through struggles. She had Parkinson's disease. There were days where I didn't want to show up to therapy, but I always thought about her.," said Hamler, who admitted he will leave the dark place when he's able to play in games again.

"She was doing therapy, so I had to go do it. I knew she wouldn't give up, so I didn't give up."

Hamler is rocketing through his rehab. He insisted Wednesday that he would be ready for training camp in late July. No evidence exists to doubt him.

"I couldn't be more impressed with anyone in our building than KJ Hamler," general manager George Paton said recently. "Significant injury and no one fights, no one works (harder), no one has more passion. The fact that I saw him running routes last month at Russell (Wilson's camp), I mean, I know he's doing well, I know his surgery went well, but when I saw him out there (running routes), it was very impressive."

Hamler features easy speed. And he's not quick, he's sudden. Last training camp, he appeared ready to break through after hamstring issues sabotaged his rookie season, limiting him to 30 catches and three touchdowns. He became a dependable deep threat, catching an 80-yard touchdown against the Vikings in the preseason.

However, he managed only five receptions for 74 yards before his season ended in pain on Sept. 26. In his third year, Hamler has reached a crossroads, his talent obvious, but the production failing to match. In many ways, he mirrors a receiving group — Courtland Sutton, Jerry Jeudy and Tim Patrick — that, save for Patrick, has delivered underwhelming numbers the past two seasons.

Now, everything is different with Wilson under center. Anything seems possible.

"I think it's a lot of stuff we have to prove to everybody and everybody has their own personal stuff they want to prove. My first two seasons were not what I wanted or I predicted to happen. But it happened, so just. ... I feel like we are the best (receiving) corps in the league, hands down. Other people can say whatever they want. That's just my opinion," said Hamler, who has talked with Seahawks slot receiver Tyler Lockett on how to build rapport with Wilson.

"We are going do anything and everything, work our butts off and get back on the field and show everybody what we can do."

Broncos wide receiver KJ Hamler's speed 'ain't going nowhere' after recovery from ACL injury

By George Stoia
The Gazette
May 12, 2022

KJ Hamler is not lacking confidence heading into his third season.

Despite coming off an ACL injury, the Broncos wide receiver expects to have the best year of his career, as he's already ahead of schedule on his recovery. Hamler said Wednesday he expects to be 100% by the start of training camp in July and that not only will he keep his speed — considered his best skill — but he will actually increase his speed.

"Oh yeah, my speed ain't going nowhere," Hamler said. "I should be faster."

KJ Hamler talks about his recovery from ACL and hip injuries from last season and discusses how expectations have changed with the offseason addition of Russell Wilson. But Hamler's confidence during his recovery hasn't always been this high.

The 22-year-old said he was in a "dark spot" after the injury, which occurred Week 3 last fall. He not only tore his ACL for the second time in his career, he also injured his hip, which dislocated when he came down after making a catch. And not long after, while rehabbing, Hamler lost his grandmother, who he called his "rock."

"She was my best friend and I had to put her to rest. That was probably the toughest thing for me," Hamler said. "Now that I'm back on the field and now that I'm around all the guys, and I'm being able to do a little bit of what I was able to do before, it's been uplifting my spirits. I won't say that I'm out of that dark place, but I'm getting better. I can tell you that."

The Broncos are certainly happy to have Hamler back and hope he'll be out of that dark place come September, as his speed is something they missed a season ago. With the addition of quarterback Russell Wilson, Hamler's productivity is expected to go up by playing a similar role as Seahawks receiver Tyler Lockett did with Wilson — a speedster that's a threat on Wilson's deep ball. Through his first two NFL seasons, in 16 games played, Hamler has 35 receptions, 455 yards and three touchdowns.

And Hamler seemed to be in a better place Wednesday, expressing his excitement to play with Wilson and in coach Nathaniel Hackett's offense. He feels as though this could be a breakout season for him.

He's ready to step out of the dark place, as getting back on the field with his teammates this offseason has been the biggest cure.

"Just playing ball again," Hamler said. "When you take something that you love away, you have to figure out what you're going to do. I've been picking up new hobbies and things like that because I'm not just football. When I'm on the field, I'm just football. Just trying to find an identity out of football, as well. That was probably the hardest part for me, because all I know is football. Picking up new things, new hobbies and being around positive people that bring light and energy to your life is a big difference."

'My speed ain't going nowhere': KJ Hamler reflects on a challenging and lengthy injury recovery and his path forward

By Aric DiLalla
DenverBroncos.com
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KJ Hamler's recovery has been even more impressive than previously understood.

It was already shocking to see Hamler doing toe-tapping footwork drills during the team's voluntary veteran minicamp sessions; one video posted to Twitter caused a fan to reply, in all caps, "doesn't even look like he got hurt."

But as Hamler revealed Wednesday, it wasn't just a torn ACL that he was recovering from; he also had his hip repaired, as he also hurt it on the same play.

"It was kind of a double whammy, really," Hamler said. "That was probably the hardest part. You have to be really careful because of the hip and then the knee, and it's all on the same side."

This isn't the first time the young Broncos receiver has dealt with a serious injury rehab process, as he recovered from an ACL tear during his senior season in high school. But now, with more advanced technology and greater resources, Hamler said he feels like he's able to improve more quickly.

"I'm not starting from scratch; I'm starting from experience," Hamler said. "When people saw me running routes at 19, 20 miles an hour seven months out and I'm running 25-yard outs and stuff like that, it's just — it's a mentality. Twenty percent is mental. After you get past that hump, it's fine. So I really wasn't scared to go out there and do any routes or cut any type of way. I just try to do it how I used to, and it just felt normal."

The process, however, was much more difficult emotionally because while he was going through the physical challenge of rebuilding strength and motion in his knee, he lost one of the most important people in his life in his grandmother.

"Man, that was my rock, really," Hamler said. "Nobody else really took care of me more than her, besides my actual mother. I used to take her to get her hair done, get her food every time I come home. And she was going through struggles. She had Parkinson's disease and things of that nature. It was days I didn't want to show up to therapy, and I always thought about her. She's doing therapy, so I've got to go do it. I know she wouldn't give up, so I ain't gonna give up."

In the early months of the recovery, Hamler was in "a dark spot" in his life, he said, but what will finally get him out of there is simple.

"Just playing ball again," Hamler said. "I feel like when you take something that you love away, you kind of figure out, like, 'What am I gonna do?'"

Since being able to return to football activities, Hamler has focused on figuring out what he's going to do on the field with the Broncos' new quarterback, Russell Wilson.

To best identify his potential given Wilson's arm strength and accuracy, Hamler has spoken with Seahawks receiver Tyler Lockett. Like Hamler, Lockett is a speedy receiver and was able to capitalize on those skills; over the past four years, Lockett has caught 36 touchdowns.

"Just being in his ear, always asking him questions," Hamler said of the advice he received from Lockett. "Just basically being a sponge and absorbing stuff, because Russ wants stuff very specific. 'I want it at this spot at this time, this area.' So just picking his brain. I kind of see myself playing that Tyler Lockett role this year, so just trying to be a sponge and just listen to him."

While Hamler is not yet 100 percent — he said he plans on being back in time for training camp — he said he's "progressing every day" and "well ahead of schedule."

It may have surprised people, but perhaps they should have expected his recovery to have gone this quickly. After all, speed is what Hamler knows best, and once he's fully back, that's what he expects from himself.

"My speed ain't going nowhere," Hamler said. "I should be faster."

From Darkness to Light: How K.J. Hamler is overcoming a devastating injury to become Denver's version of Tyler Lockett

By Zac Stevens
DNVR.com
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Last year, the start of the NFL season was a nightmare for K.J. Hamler.

His ACL was torn. His hip had popped out. And his grandma — who was his “rock” — passed away.

“I’ve been in a dark spot for a while now,” Hamler said on Wednesday, opening up about his past nine months. “Just going through that and I lost my grandmother, like two months after that, and she was like my best friend, had to put her to rest. So that was probably the toughest thing for me.”

On Sept. 26, against the Jets in Week 3, the former second-round pick’s season ended on a single play. Not only did Hamler have to have surgery to repair his ACL, he had to have surgery to fix his hip.

“This wasn’t just ACL. I had a hip repair too. It was kind of a double-whammy,” Hamler explained. “That was probably the hardest part, you got to be careful because of the hip and then the knee and it’s all on the same side.”

But Hamler is beginning to see the light after such a dark time in his life.

“Now that I’m back on the field and around all the guys, just being out there and being able to do a little bit of what I was able to do before, it’s been uplifting my spirits,” Hamler stated. “I’m not going to say I’m out of that dark place, but I’m getting better. I’ll tell you that.”

“Playing ball again” is the medicine that will get him out of his dark place entirely. Fortunately for Hamler and the Broncos, his recovery is “well-ahead of schedule.”

“The fact that I’m out there when I’m not even supposed to be out there [is impressive],” Hamler said. “I’m out there early doing a lot of stuff that people didn’t expect me to do, it tells you how hard I work. I work my butt off a lot just to get back ready.”

No one agrees with Hamler more than George Paton.

“I couldn’t be [more] impressed with anyone in our building than K.J. Hamler,” Paton said at his pre-draft press conference in April. “Significant injury and no one fights, no one works, no one has more passion... I mean, I know he’s doing well, I know his surgery went well. But I saw him out there and [it’s] very impressive.”

With the Broncos’ offseason training program underway, Hamler isn’t just on the field, he’s running routes — at what appears to be full-speed — and catching passes from Russell Wilson.

“I’m in a good spot,” Hamler said confidently. “Some days [the trainers] got to ramp me down a little bit and tell me to calm down so nothing don’t flare up. Now, I’m just playing it smart and progressing everyday.”

Seven months after his devastating injury, the 178-pound speedster was hitting 19 and 20 miles per hour on the field. Running 25-yard outs now feels normal to him.

With just over two months until the start of training camp, and four months until the start of the regular season, Hamler is hopeful that he’ll fully be back for both major milestones.

As for his speed? Well, Hamler isn’t worried about that one bit.

“My speed ain’t going nowhere. I should be faster,” Hamler stated without a doubt.

Hamler plans to use that speed — believed to be in the 4.2s — to not only bring a deep threat to the Broncos’ offense, but to give Russell Wilson Denver’s version of Tyler Lockett.

“I kind of see myself playing that Tyler Lockett role this year,” Hamler said.

There are plenty of similarities between the two speedsters. Both were Day 2 picks — Hamler in the second round and Lockett in the third. Lockett checks in at 5-foot-10, 182 pounds, with Hamler clocking in at 5-foot-9, 178 pounds.

But Lockett — with help from his seven years with Wilson in Seattle — has the accolades that Hamler is looking for, including three All-Pros.

In fact, in Lockett’s first season with Wilson, in 2015, he had 51 receptions for 664 yards and six touchdowns, numbers Hamler hasn’t approached in his two years in the NFL.

In the past three seasons, Lockett has topped 1,000 yards every year. In the previous four seasons, he has combined for 4,251 receiving yards, 312 receptions and 36 receiving touchdowns.

“I feel like my biggest role is being a deep threat, you know, something like Tyler was,” Hamler said. “Me and Russ have to have those talks as well. Me and the coaches have to have those talks as well. Anything I can do to produce to give this team a winning chance, I’ll do it. It don’t matter.”

In order to be the next Lockett for Wilson, Hamler has spoken to Tyler himself. Lockett’s advice to the third-year receiver was to always “be in [Wilson’s ear].”

“Always ask him questions. Just basically be a sponge and absorb stuff because Russ wants stuff very specific — ‘I want it in this spot at this time, this area,’ so just picking his brain,” Hamler explained. “Just trying to be a sponge and just listen to him.”

Despite not one, but two devastating injuries, Hamler has flown through his recovery process. He plans to bring that same blazing speed to the field and Russell Wilson by Week 1.

How Broncos' KJ Hamler pushed through 'dark place' to emerge ahead of schedule in ACL rehab

By Nick Kosmider

The Athletic

April 25, 2022

When KJ Hamler landed in San Diego last month, joining some of his fellow receivers as they convened with Russell Wilson at their new quarterback's sprawling, palm-tree-lined compound, he was expecting to spend the bulk of the weekend as something of a spectator.

After all, it had still been less than six months since Hamler leaped up for a Teddy Bridgewater pass in a Week 3 game against the Jets and felt the searing pain when his leg planted awkwardly on the grass, suffering a torn ACL and other significant damage in his left knee. He had only just progressed to running in the grass, under the watchful eye of trainers, when he received the invitation to join Wilson in California. Hamler was simply eager to be around teammates and learn from Wilson, "soaking up all the information I could" as the nine-time Pro Bowl quarterback dialed up film sessions and began charting his visions for his first season in Denver.

So when Hamler found himself running routes for the first time since late September, finishing one with a slight jump to grab a Wilson pass in the end zone, he didn't only surprise his teammates on hand or members of the Broncos staff who marveled at the video clips that began hitting their phones. He surprised himself.

"It wasn't expected, but I just kind of jumped in," Hamler said with a laugh during an interview with The Athletic, his first since the injury. "Russ puts those things on the money."

General manager George Paton had checked in frequently with Hamler during his rehab process, impressed by his positivity and his commitment to daily progress. But even he was taken aback when he saw videos of the third-year wide receiver running routes in California on March 22.

"I couldn't be more impressed with anyone in our building than KJ Hamler," Paton said. "Significant injury and no one fights, no one works (harder), no one has more passion. The fact that I saw him running routes last month at Russell's, I mean, I know he's doing well, I know his surgery went well, but when I saw him out there (running routes), very impressive."

Scenes like the one in San Diego last month highlight a rehab for Hamler that is "well ahead of schedule," Paton said Friday. Not that anyone is putting a timeline on the wide receiver's return. Though Hamler said, "I expect myself to be ready before the season," he is not allowing himself to skip too far ahead in his thought process. That's because days like the one in California last month, when he took another big step forward on the sun-soaked grass, are only part of the recovery process. And moments like that one didn't always seem guaranteed in the days and weeks after the knee buckled and the pain set in.

"For a while, I was in a dark place," Hamler said. "I'm not going to sit here and lie to you. I was in a dark place."

In an offensive meeting last week, the Broncos' offseason program now well underway, new head coach Nathaniel Hackett was cycling through cut-ups of various plays over the past few seasons when a route from Hamler's rookie season in 2020 popped onto the screen.

Hamler cringed and turned to his receivers coach, Zach Azzanni.

"He said, 'Man, Coach, I was so much different as a rookie than I was last year,'" recalled Azzanni, the lone member of the offensive staff under Vic Fangio who was retained by Hackett. "He goes, 'I don't even like to look at that. That was awful.' I looked at him, like, 'Yeah, that sucked.'"

The good-natured ribbing in the meeting room underlined the growth Hamler made as he began his second NFL season. To be sure, Hamler produced his fair share of highlights as a rookie. The second-round pick out of Penn State posted 30 catches for 381 yards and three touchdowns — a game-winner on the final play against the Chargers and two deep scoring catches in a late-season win against the Panthers. But he had been limited at times by fundamentals that were in need of refinement. Azzanni left Hamler with a list of targeted improvements to work toward before arriving for the offseason program in 2021.

"He's a very explosive, very twitchy, very fast kid — we all know that — but, yet, he couldn't get out of a break very well," Azzanni said. "So as fast and quick as he was, if he had to run an intermediate route, he could get covered."

KJ Hamler was solid as a rookie, but his game still needed plenty of refinement. (Bob Donnan / USA Today) While Hamler was drilling his technique, turning sharper, more precise cuts into muscle memory, he also honed in on injury prevention. His rookie season had been dented by a series of hamstring injuries, and he was determined not to be affected by that ailment in his second season. He began adhering to a strict diet and hydration plan and improved his flexibility.

By the time training camp rolled around, Hamler often looked unstoppable. Rarely a practice went by without the 5-foot-9 wide receiver hauling in a deep pass down the sideline from Bridgewater or Drew Lock. In the opening preseason game against the Vikings in August, he coasted into the middle of the field and then turned on the accelerator, hauling in a deep throw from Lock and breezing into the end zone for an 80-yard touchdown. In the regular season, Hamler had caught five passes for 74 yards, including a nifty 28-yard grab early in the game against the Jets, but those stats didn't paint the full picture of the stress his speed and improved precision was putting on defenses.

"He was hitting his stride," Azzanni said, "playing fast and confident and strong. Then it happened and it obviously derailed our offense, but also his season as well."

The gains Hamler had made before he clutched his knee on the warm September day were part of what made the injury so devastating. He had torn his ACL during his senior year of high school, and while the knowledge of the journey ahead would eventually be beneficial in Hamler's recovery, it tortured him in those early days and weeks. He knew of the isolation to come, the loneliness that can be attached to rehab.

"I was going through some personal battles," he said.

Then, on Jan. 15, still just two months removed from surgery, Hamler received word that his beloved grandmother, Ethel Gooding, had died at the age of 83. Gooding had always been a constant source of

support and warmth for Hamler. They would talk on the phone “damn near every week,” he later wrote in an Instagram post, and Hamler would always make a beeline to his grandmother’s house whenever he would return home during breaks at Penn State.

“That was my best friend,” Hamler said. “That was my lady.”

The Broncos work hard to limit some of the isolating feelings that can arise for players during rehab. They encourage teammates to check in consistently with injured players. Coaches, front-office staff members and others in the building do the same. But in those days and weeks after his grandmother passed, dealing with grief and the uncertainty that comes with a major injury, Hamler was tempted to internalize it all.

“All of this stuff kind of built up and it was just where I wanted to be to myself,” he said. “I cope with things different than a lot of people. I always want to do things on my own and prove I can do things on my own. Sometimes, you do need help.”

And sometimes a shot of good news doesn’t hurt either.

By the time Hamler was finishing a physical therapy session at Broncos headquarters March 8, he had pushed himself into a better place, throwing himself fully into the recovery process. “Win the day,” he kept telling himself.

“Once he figured out the regimen of what this is going to take, he kind of really dove in the deep end and really had a great attitude and hit it full speed ahead,” Azzanni.

Hamler was preparing to head to the weight room early last month when a trainer relayed the news that was beginning to pulse through the building, igniting a soundtrack of joyous outbursts.

“He was like, ‘Yo, we just got Russ!’” Hamler recalled. “I’m like, ‘Whaaaat?!’ It was something you dream about. Something you don’t expect to happen and then it does.”

A couple of days later, Hamler was in the middle of a promotional photoshoot when his phone pinged with a FaceTime request. Hamler saw the names of Courtland Sutton, Tim Patrick and other receivers on the caller ID, but he didn’t recognize the other number. And he hadn’t seen the text message that Wilson had just sent, alerting his new teammates that he was about to call.

“So I open it, I’m the first one on, and I see Russ,” Hamler said. “I just start screaming, like, ‘Ohhh, this is crazy!’ It was a great, great experience, it was a good day.”

The new relationship was an immediate shot in the arm.

“The juice that Russ brought made him take it to another level,” Patrick said of Hamler.

Not only did Hamler want to continue pouring himself into the rehab process ahead, one that was pushing closer toward football-related activity, he also wanted to learn how to turn himself into the perfect complement for his new quarterback. Hamler immediately imagined himself in the same role as Tyler Lockett, the jet-quick receiver who turned himself into the top deep-ball threat in Seattle for a quarterback who loves to go long more than any other QB in the NFL.

“I’m a big fan of Tyler’s game and me and him have talked a lot,” Hamler said. “I’ve just been picking his brain, like, ‘How does Russ handle these situations?’ It’s being a sponge, absorbing knowledge from two Pro Bowl guys. I put on Tyler’s film and I’m like, ‘OK, he did this and he did that.’ And then it’s, ‘OK, I can do all this.’ I’ve just got to go out there and play and get back on the field.”

Nobody is putting pressure on Hamler to produce like Lockett when he does return to the field. The Seahawks receiver caught 255 passes for 3,286 yards and 26 touchdowns from Wilson the past three seasons alone. But at this point, having seen him embrace his vulnerability and push forward during a rehab process that has challenged him at every turn, the Broncos are probably done being surprised by what Hamler can accomplish.

“I do know KJ and I do know his spirit and his toughness,” Azzanni said. “If anyone can come back from this for this season ahead of schedule, it’s him.”