

Advantage, Denver: The Broncos have D.J. Jones and the 49ers don't

By Mike Klis

KUSA

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The Broncos signed D.J. Jones for this game against the San Francisco 49ers.

Not just San Francisco, but the idea of stopping teams like the 49ers, who have featured one of the most consistently strong running games in recent years. They will try to run the ball again Sunday night against the Broncos at Empower Field at Mile High (6:20 p.m. kickoff, 9NEWS).

"They do a great job of running the ball," Jones said at his locker Thursday – which he switched this week from one next to the bathroom to one hidden in a corner on the opposite side. Why? One guess.

"Could not handle the smell," he said.

About the 49ers' running game.

"That team is built on physicality," Jones said. "They're [No. 4] in the league in rushing. I'm not surprised. We've got to come out with our A game."

Jones knows. He played his first five seasons with the 49ers before signing a three-year, \$30 million contract (two years and \$20 million are guaranteed) with the Broncos in March.

The Denver defense had been porous at times against the run in recent years. Extremely active as 305-pound defensive tackles go, Jones is tough against the run.

"I'm excited to play our third game of the season," Jones said. "Of our early season. Like I told everybody else, this game isn't putting us in the playoffs and it's not eliminating us. So we've got to take it like another game, take the emotions out for myself, K'Waun. Just play our game."

Broncos' nickel back K'Waun Williams also played the previous five years in San Francisco. The standout play of Jones and Williams in their NFC second-round playoff game at Green Bay last season had some influence in those players winding up with the Broncos. Broncos head coach Nathaniel Hackett was Green Bay's offensive coordinator in that game.

"I'm so happy they're on our team," Hackett said. "For me, when their names were brought up, it was a no-brainer for me. When you go against those guys as much as you have -- K'Waun gives you nightmares just how he plays that position. He's so savvy, understands the game, and he's an incredible blitzer.

"Then you have D.J. Jones, who is a force in there playing that two-eye and penetrating. He gave us fits. We were just watching some of the stuff today with a guy, showing them about how their front plays, and D.J. is on a lot of those clips. So I'm definitely happy he's on our team."

Come Sunday night before a primetime audience, Jones, from his mostly right defensive tackle position, figures to line up across from left guard Aaron Banks or center Jake Brendel – 49ers backups last season who took on Jones in practice.

“I’m excited to see my guys, but my emotions will stay in check,” Jones said. “I’m an easygoing guy, I think, so I’m just excited to have an opportunity to play against a great team.”

And if Jones happens to disrupt his good friend Jimmy Garoppolo, so be it.

“He’s a better quarterback than people give him credit for,” Jones said. “He’s great in that system. Kyle [Shanahan, the 49ers’ coach] gives him great opportunities to show his arm strength, and he’s got great weapons around him.”

'He's eager to get this win': D.J. Jones is locked in as he prepares to face his former team

By Ellie Kinney

DenverBroncos.com

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All of Broncos Country has been looking forward to the team's "Sunday Night Football" contest against the 49ers, but perhaps no one is as eager as D.J. Jones.

The defensive tackle spent the first five years of his career in San Francisco, where he made a name for himself as one of the top run stoppers in the NFL. Now, he gets the opportunity to compete against his former teammates at Empower Field at Mile High.

Knowing the significance of this matchup, Jones was asked about it all the way back in May during OTAs. Even though the game was months away at that time, Jones already had plans to dominate.

"Simply put, I'm going to go crazy," Jones said. "I love that organization, but everybody, when you play your former team, it goes down."

With the game now mere days away, Jones' red-hot enthusiasm has morphed into a more subdued focus. In a game so strongly defined by mental fortitude, he understands the importance of regulating his emotions.

Controlling excitement is no easy task, but Jones' strategy is a simple one: treat this week like any other. "It's another game," Jones said Thursday. "It's just another game. If I look at it in any other way, I might not play good, so I'm looking at it as another game. ... Just locking in, worrying about what I can worry about, stopping the run, making it third-and-long, second-and-long, just making sure we, as a defense, are ready."

Jones may hold the mindset that this game is no different, but defensive end Dre'Mont Jones noted that his teammate almost certainly has a little extra motivation to earn a victory.

"It's his old team," Dre'Mont said. "I know in the back of his mind, I'm pretty sure he's thinking about all his former players, ... coaches and everything. I know he's eager to get this win."

As an elite run stopper, this matchup is a perfect opportunity for Jones to showcase his greatest strength. If there's one thing the Broncos can expect from head coach Kyle Shanahan's squad with certainty, it's that they will commit to running the ball.

The 49ers have the most rushing attempts of any team this season, and they rank fourth in total rushing yards. While second-year running back Elijah Mitchell is on injured reserve with a knee injury, San Francisco employs various strategies to run the ball — often feeding the likes of wide receiver Deebo Samuel or fullback Kyle Juszczyk in the backfield. Their versatility in the run game will pose a challenge to the Broncos' defensive line, but Jones is prepared to meet them with force.

"We've got to bring our A-game," Jones said. "I'm pleased the way we played the first two weeks, so I'm not worried. We've just got to go in with a good game plan, which we are, and just see what happens at the end when the clock hits zero."

Much of the 49ers' rushing success stems from Shanahan's offensive scheme. The sixth-year head coach implements a lot of pre-snap motion and complex formations, which consistently keeps defenses on their toes.

"First and foremost, they are unbelievably well coached," Head Coach Nathaniel Hackett said Thursday. "They know how to run off the ball and be able to be aggressive down the field at the same time with their run blocking. They are trying to get across the line of scrimmage, both in their inside zone and their outside zone. Then you add in all the different groupings, formations, shifts, [and] motions. Deebo is in the backfield, all kinds of different people are in the backfield. I think they cause that consternation, as like we like to say, along with that they execute at a high level and they are very well coached."

Having played for Shanahan for five seasons, Jones has tremendous respect for his offensive strategy.

"We're dealing with a hell of a coach," Jones said. "He's a genius mind, so he's all about his details."

San Francisco's offense will pose a different type of threat to Denver's defensive front than the previous teams they've faced this season, but they have looked strong through the first two games — particularly against the run. They rank top-five in opponent rushing yards allowed, giving up just 78 rushing yards per game. The Broncos' defense also had the chance to practice against a similar scheme during the entirety of training camp, as Denver's offense runs a variation of the same system.

"It's definitely very helpful seeing a lot of the same schemes — the jet motions, and the outside zone," Defensive Coordinator Ejiro Evero said Thursday. "It's great that we got all of that work this camp and offseason. It's going to be helpful."

Jones has particularly been a nightmare for opposing rushers. He leads all defensive tackles in ESPN's run-stop win rate, and he is likely performing exactly how General Manager George Paton envisioned when he signed Jones in the offseason.

"I think everybody up front is just being physical," Jones said. "Linebackers are feeling [it], we're not allowing [running backs] to get to the second, third level, so I think everybody up front, our front seven, is doing a great job."

With No. 97 leading the first line of defense against a talented rushing team, "Sunday Night Football" should be a thrilling contest in the trenches.

How D.J. Jones bootstrapped his way to becoming centerpiece of Broncos' "Dark Side" defense

By Kyle Newman
Denver Post
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When D.J. Jones was a senior, he transferred to Wren High School in Piedmont, S.C., coming from a smaller program in the hopes of increasing his recruiting profile. One game into the season, coach Jeff Tate wasn't pleased with his team's slow start.

Tate challenged Jones to prove his status as playmaker. The response by the Broncos' nose tackle — who signed a three-year, \$30 million contract this offseason to be a centerpiece of Denver's defensive front — accurately sums up Jones' value as a run-stuffer both then and now.

"They were running a counter on us, and they pulled the guard, and D.J. tackled the guard and the running back at the same time, picked 'em both up like it was nothing," Tate recalled. "The running back was like 225 pounds, the guard was like 300 pounds. And as he picks 'em both up and goes to throw them down, the ball comes out, and he recovers it.

"He came to the sideline and says, 'You don't have to worry about it anymore coach, I got you.' He's been that good before and ever since, and against the best competition, D.J. would have his best games. That's why he's in the NFL, that's why he stayed there. This guy didn't get there by accident."

Can the Bears bring back the Peanut Punch and the Chicago takeaway machine? Charles Tillman gives some tips on making it happen.
No accident, but he took a winding and unusual road nonetheless.

Three high schools, then junior college, then college football's biggest stage for two seasons in the SEC at Ole Miss before the 49ers drafted Jones in the sixth round in 2017. He bootstrapped his way up the 49ers' depth chart over his first couple of seasons before becoming a starter for three years.

Now with the Broncos as one of the primary pillars of the "Dark Side" defense, Jones is looking to burnish a reputation he earned with the 49ers. Last year, Jones helped San Francisco reach the NFC Championship with a banner season, starting all 17 games, with two sacks, two forced fumbles and a career-high 56 tackles.

"In San Francisco, I proved I'm one of the best run stoppers in the game," Jones said. "My goal this year? To win. That's why I embrace the 'Dark Side' as a mentality, as a way of life. I want to show these guys on the defense the way, and just let them know that it's possible to get back (to where the Broncos once were)."

In that 2021 playoff run for the 49ers, Broncos defensive line coach Marcus Dixon developed a keen understanding of Jones' impact on the line of scrimmage. Dixon, then an assistant defensive line coach for the eventual champion Rams, studied Jones' play ahead of the teams' showdown in the NFC title game, won 20-17 by Los Angeles.

Jones was all over the tape with a sack, a tackle, a tackle for loss and a quarterback hit in the 49ers' wild-card win over Dallas. Then he had four tackles in the divisional win over Green Bay. He followed that up with three tackles and a quarterback hit in the loss to Los Angeles.

"(He's) explosive. Relentless. Strong. Run-stopper. Disruptive. All of those," Dixon said. "I had a bird's eye view from the coaches' box and it felt like every time, 93 (Jones' number with the 49ers) was making a play."

Jones' high motor has been a trait of his since high school. He began his prep career with one season at Daniel High in Central, S.C., where he played alongside Cardinals wideout DeAndre Hopkins, Bills defensive end Shaq Lawson and fellow Broncos defensive lineman DeShawn Williams, who was a senior when Jones was a freshman.

"We knew there was something special about him even then," Williams said. "You could tell from the way he moved because big dudes aren't supposed to be that fast and quick, and by how he already knew how to use his leverage."

Family circumstances led to Jones' family moving for his sophomore and junior seasons, when he attended his father's alma mater, Carolina High in Greenville. By the time Jones transferred to Wren as a senior, his grades were in trouble. He managed to straighten them out at Wren and had offers from Tennessee and Oklahoma State coming out of school.

But Jones wanted to increase his Division I offer list, and work on his studies, too. So he went the junior college route, enrolling at NJCAA powerhouse East Mississippi. There, Jones was a two-year starter at nose guard on a pair of national title teams as East Mississippi went 24-0; Jones ended up ranked as the top junior college defensive tackle by every major recruiting service.

"For him at that time, academically and athletically, (junior college) was the best decision," Tate said. "I told him to go for a year and that people were eventually going to know who he was, if he did what he was capable of doing. Not every 18-year-old takes that advice because the world we live in now is very impatient. I wanted him to go to commit to working in class, commit to the training and game preparation so that he could get recognized. And he did."

At Ole Miss, Jones quickly carved out a role, and started every game as a senior in 2016. When he got to San Francisco after being drafted No. 198th overall, his work ethic followed, and he took advantage of positional voids in front of him.

"All those interior guys in the NFL go through those growing pains, but he kept putting in the work, kept showing up and busting his tail and understanding that it takes time in the NFL for your time to come," explained Chris Kiffin, Jones' defensive line coach at Ole Miss and also a pass-rush specialist with the 49ers in 2018 and '19.

"When D.J.'s opportunity was just about to come, we had an older, veteran nose tackle who we knew was going to move on soon, and D.J. was sharing time with some other guys. But he just kept performing, and he could rush the passer some, so when his time truly came he kept making plays and grinding his way into a starting role."

Now with the Broncos, Jones' NFL profile has risen, but his persona hasn't changed. Gregarious and affable but quiet, intense and aggressive between the lines, Jones has already emerged as a locker room leader who demands respect from teammates on both sides of the ball.

On the field, center Lloyd Cushenberry said, "You can tell he's one of those guys who came from the ground up and got it out of the mud."

In the meeting room, defensive end Dre'Mont Jones describes the other Jones as "down to earth, with a scary exterior but he's actually a really nice giant."

And in all places, even if Jones is now one of the highest-paid Broncos after signing a deal that included \$20 million guaranteed, he's still the same humble guy who is quick to remind people that "being where I'm from, I'm not supposed to be here."

But here he is, and on Sept. 12 when the Broncos open the season at Lumen Field in Seattle, it will be hard to miss the big man plugging up the middle of the Denver front.

"I feel like every great person gotta go through something, because there ain't no (such thing as) a clean slate," Williams said. "Some people take the hard route like (Jones) did, but I think that's what makes you cherish the little things. Look where he is now – so much is different but he's still the same, and that's what got him here.

"Around the locker room, we cherish his route a little bit more than just thinking he's just some guy who signed this nice deal. We all know what he had to go through to get that deal, and you appreciate him more because of it."

'She's my purpose': After the birth of his daughter, D.J. Jones returns to training camp with a new mindset

By Ellie Kinney
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Defensive tackle D.J. Jones is known for his fast hands, quickness off the ball and ability to stop the run. Now he has a new skill to add to his repertoire: dad strength.

Jones missed several days of practice last week as he recovered from a minor back injury, but his absence wasn't just for rest. On Saturday, Jones and his wife, Kayla, posted on Instagram to announce the birth of their first child.

Jones noted that Kayla and their daughter, who was born on Aug. 4, are both in good health. Upon returning to UCHealth Training Center on Monday, Jones received an outpouring of support and excitement from his teammates and coaches.

"Everybody was happy for me," Jones said. "Asking name, weight. [It's] all new to me, but it's an exciting time for me and my family."

Fellow defensive lineman Mike Purcell was especially elated for Jones. As a father himself, Purcell understands what it's like to become a parent for the first time.

"You never know what to expect until it happens yourself," Purcell said. "To actually have your own kid ... it'll change everything."

For Jones, becoming a father will certainly bring changes to his off-field life — particularly the amount of sleep he gets each night. But on the field, the birth of his daughter means he now has even more to play for.

"She's my purpose," Jones said of his daughter. "My family's my purpose, this team is my purpose."

Playing for the people he cares about most — his daughter, his wife, his parents, his siblings and his teammates — is what fuels Jones to perform to his highest potential. In his introductory press conference on his first day as a Bronco, he became emotional talking about the importance of his new three-year contract. To Jones, his payday meant that he could provide financial stability for his family.

Taking care of his loved ones has always been Jones' motivation on the field, and that sense of purpose is even stronger as a new father.

With a newborn daughter to play for, Jones will look to bring his dad strength to the defensive line in 2022. The Broncos signed Jones in free agency over the offseason with the goal of revamping the team's ability to stop the run, and Jones plans to do just that.

"My profession, what I do, is I stop the run," Jones said. "Whether you're on the goal line, midfield, it don't matter. I take pride in stopping the run and helping my teammates to stop the run just like me. We've got some great players and I'm excited to see what we can do."

Purcell, who took many snaps in Jones' place with the starting unit during his absence, had high praise for Jones and what he can bring to the Broncos' defense.

"He's a hell of a player," Purcell said. "I've seen him ever since he came into the league. He came [to San Francisco] the year I left, and to see what he's become, the [explosiveness] and versatility that he has, flexibility, all of that — it's amazing to see what his power is."

As the first preseason game approaches, Jones is not too concerned with whether he'll get playing time. As a sixth-year veteran, he's seen bright lights and packed stadiums many times before. No matter what Head Coach Nathaniel Hackett decides to do, Jones is all for it.

"I'll do whatever they need me to do," Jones said. "If they put me out there, I'll be out there. If not, I'll be on the sideline cheering my guys on."

With a days-old baby at home and a different logo on his jersey, Jones has started two new chapters of his life this season. As he embarks on these journeys simultaneously, he will look to become both the best teammate and the best father he can be.

D.J. Jones has always been able to wreck a backfield, but his path to a prime role with the Broncos wasn't linear

By Nick Kosmider

The Athletic

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The weathering effect of time has failed to erode Jeff Tate's memory of the play.

In 2012, when D.J. Jones was a senior at Wren High outside Greenville, S.C., where Tate is the longtime head coach, the defensive lineman had 41 — yes, 41! — tackles for loss. Many of those game-wrecking scenes have blended in Tate's mind, but there is one glorious exception, a jaw-dropping highlight that hovers above the rest.

Wren was playing a division opponent early that season, a team that was "huge" at every position, according to Tate. A slow start to the game left the coach frustrated. He let his star defensive player hear about it, imploring Jones to elevate the energy.

"He didn't say anything," Tate said of Jones' reaction to some admittedly hard coaching. "He just glared at me."

On the next play, Wren's opponent ran a counter, with the guard pulling in Jones' direction, building up steam and hoping to pave a hole for the running back trailing behind him. In a flash, the 300-pound defensive tackle had slipped into the backfield. What comes next still causes Tate, who has seen a lot in his decades of coaching, to shake his head.

"D.J. tackles the guard and the running back, picks them both up and throws them to the ground," Tate said. "The ball is fumbled, and D.J. recovers it. And when I say they were huge, the lineman was over 300 pounds and the running back was 200-plus pounds. We're talking about grown men as far as high school football is concerned, but even on the collegiate level, those were big kids. He picks them up and just slams them. It was like, 'Oh my gosh!' It was superhuman. You show somebody on video and they'll say, 'I can't believe he did that.' He was that explosive."

When the Broncos began their free-agent meetings earlier this year, similar feats of speed, strength and ferociousness — now seasoned with a decade of college and professional experience — kept popping up when the personnel staff would turn on Jones' tape. There was January's NFC wild-card game against the Cowboys, when he swam past Connor Williams, leaving the left guard to flail at his feet as Jones made a beeline for Dak Prescott and buried the Dallas quarterback for a 14-yard loss. Or the time, two seasons ago, when Jones lined up over the right guard in a Sunday night game against the Eagles, then stunted underneath, torpedoing to the left side of the formation before plowing over a running back and sacking Carson Wentz. Or the play in a prime-time game against the Seahawks in 2019, when Jones bulldozed center Joey Hunt so quickly that Russell Wilson had no time to move before being swallowed in the backfield.

"I had nightmares against him and the 49ers," Wilson said last week of Jones upon being introduced as Denver's new quarterback. "He's a tremendous football player."

As awe-inspiring as his instances of quarterback hunting can be, plays like the one Jones made in Chicago last season are what bear a resemblance to that memorable highlight at Wren nearly a decade ago — a sequence that best explains why he was heavily pursued by the Broncos in free agency. On a first-and-goal in the third quarter — the 49ers were 2-4 at the time and facing a 13-9 deficit in a must-win game — Jones muscled through a double-team in such a blur that he nearly took the handoff from Bears quarterback Justin Fields, settling instead for a thumping of running back Khalil Herbert that created a 4-yard loss. Chicago settled for a field goal and the 49ers staged a comeback victory from there, kicking off a stretch of 10 wins in 13 games that they rode to the NFC Championship Game.

As Jones piled up 10 tackles for loss while playing for San Francisco in 2021, impacting countless other plays with his penetration, Broncos general manager George Paton saw a missing piece in Denver's defense. He quickly moved atop the list of the Broncos' top free-agent targets.

"I thought we needed to improve our run defense," Paton said, the memories of collapses in that aspect of the game during losses to the Browns, Raiders, Steelers and others last season still gnawing at him. "We needed to close games better. We couldn't get off the field when we needed to last year, due in large part to our run defense. D.J. is one of the better run defenders in the league. The thing I like about him is he can rush the passer as well. He's quick, he's athletic and he's really instinctive."

The three-year, \$30 million contract Jones signed with the Broncos last week is a recognition of his standing as one of the league's more dynamic, up-and-coming defensive linemen. Among defensive tackles who start new contracts in 2022, only the Colts' DeForest Buckner (four years, \$84 million) and the Eagles' Fletcher Cox (one year, \$14 million) have a higher average annual value in their deals than Jones, according to Spotrac. For Jones, the contract is also the representation of a journey that was never quite as simple as many of his ferocious bursts into the backfield would suggest.

The dream began with ribs and coleslaw.

David Jones Sr. was a college football player in the 1970s at North Carolina A&T, but he always felt most at home in front of a barbecue grill. In the early 1990s, he was a burgeoning pitmaster in Dallas with an entrepreneurial spirit and his own BBQ sauce recipe he had tinkered with for years. Armed with that and a won't-take-no-for-an-answer mindset, Jones Sr. elbowed his way into the Dallas Cowboys ecosystem, eventually becoming an executive chef for a franchise, awash in its glory years, that embraced any excuse to chow down.

"If someone got a new hat," Jones Sr. told The Sacramento Bee in 2017, "they would have a party."

D.J. Jones followed his dad — affectionately known in the BBQ world as Big Dave — to work so frequently that some of his earliest memories revolve around those Cowboys teams and the rich, smoked-meat smells that permeated every visit to the team's headquarters.

"Emmitt Smith held me and Troy Aikman held me as a toddler," Jones said. "Looking back, it drove me. I always wanted to reach my full potential (in football)."

The path to that goal wasn't always linear for Jones. Before he got to high school, his family moved to South Carolina to help take care of his ailing grandmother. Life revolved around food and football, but because the former paid the bills, the family frequently moved within the state as Big Dave began to expand his business. Jones attended three high schools, working after school on the grill and devouring

plates of brisket when the work was done. Jones played defensive line in high school, but it wasn't until he got to Wren before his senior year that he put on the weight that would suggest an NFL future.

Until then, Jones, whose quickness off the ball has always been a defining trait, believed he could play defensive end or even be an off-ball linebacker as his career progressed.

"D.J. used to always tell me he didn't want to play defensive tackle," said Will Tate, Jones' position coach at Wren. "He said it was too many people in there trying to block him. He said, 'Put me at end so I only have to work on one guy.' Or he'd say, 'I think I could play running back.' He very well could have played some of those because he's such a freak athlete."

Jeff Tate, who is Will's father, understood Jones' desire to play other positions. This was a player who ran a 4.9-second 400-yard dash as a senior at 300 pounds. The head coach recalls watching Jones leap from a flat-footed position in the back of the end zone and dunk the ball over the goal posts during breaks in practice. But as the brisket caught up and D.J.'s frame began looking more like Big Dave's, it was clear his future was in the trenches. That became more obvious as he began taking on triple-team blocks as a senior and still found his way into the backfield on seemingly every snap.

"By the end of his senior year, teams were just trying to figure out how they could block him," Will Tate said. "They would quit blocking some of the other guys and would take the center and both guards, and wherever D.J. was lined up, they would go try to find him. They couldn't block him that way, either. He just refused to be blocked. It was amazing to see a guy do what he did. You could not run the ball."

For all of Jones' dominance — he was a high school All-American in 2012 — he wasn't hotly pursued by some of the country's biggest programs. Some, Jeff Tate said, were concerned about whether Jones could have the same impact at the next level due to his 6-foot frame. Others were concerned about his standardized testing scores. Though Jones committed to Oklahoma State, he eventually realized his best route was to begin his career in junior college. That's how he landed in Scooba, Miss., the small town depicted in Netflix's original "Last Chance U" series that has long boasted the powerhouse East Mississippi Community College football program and not much else.

"Just books and ball," Jones told a reporter during his rookie NFL season in 2017.

For Jones, it was a shock to the system. Not because of the amenities Scooba lacked. It's not as if Piedmont, S.C., where he played at Wren, was a sprawling metropolis. But Scooba meant being away from his family. Away from the strong, daily support system upon which he has always leaned so heavily. Away from Big Dave's cooking. If Jones wanted to continue fueling his dream, he knew it meant he had some growing up to do.

"That was the beginning of my adulthood," Jones said. "Going to junior college and being on my own and having to figure things out. But I also had a family, and it started from there. Everywhere I've been, I've had a family. Coming here to (Denver) is another family to be added to the list. Scooba was everything for me."

As Jones was finding himself as a player and person far away from the big-school spotlight, he realized how much winning drove him. During Jones' two seasons in Scooba, East Mississippi went 24-0 and won two national championships. He's chased the feeling ever since, and his desire to win the ultimate team prize has only been further fueled by the near misses in San Francisco. After finishing his career at EMCC,

Jones transferred to Ole Miss for two seasons before getting selected by the 49ers in the sixth round of the 2017 NFL Draft. Jones worked his way up from a third-string nose tackle role as a rookie to a full-time starter by his third year in the league in 2019.

That was the season, of course, San Francisco went 13-3 and won the NFC championship. But Jones wasn't along for that playoff ride, which ended with a heartbreaking loss to the Chiefs in the Super Bowl. A badly sprained ankle late in the season had landed him on injured reserve and kept him out of action during the postseason.

"That was really hard for him," said Will Tate, who has remained close with Jones since that lone season at Wren. "He's like, 'Did I miss my chance?'"

When the 2020 season — and the pandemic that defined it — took the 49ers on a cruel detour to isolation in the Arizona desert, Jones was initially distraught. He was newly married — he had proposed to his longtime girlfriend, Kayla, at Levi's Stadium before a game in 2019 — and was now away from his wife. The holidays were approaching, and the 49ers, booted out of town by a Santa Clara County COVID-19 policy, were experiencing a new kind of loneliness in an already lonely season.

"It was devastating at first," Jones said. "We didn't know how long we were going to be there."

But much like he had done upon arriving in Scooba, Jones used the time in Arizona to find himself. Football became the only break from isolation. Practices became a refuge. Jones, who would soon be entering a contract year — he eventually signed a one-year deal with the 49ers to return for the 2021 season — used the time to reimagine who he wanted to be in the next stage of his career and life.

"It's where things really opened up for me," he said. "I was able to figure out what I wanted to do, what I had to do. And now, by God's grace, I'm here."

Born of that reflection in an empty hotel room came Jones' career season with the 49ers in 2021. He played in every regular-season game for the first time. His performances against Dallas in the wild-card round and against Green Bay in the divisional round one week later — he had four tackles and played a major role in limiting the Packers to only 67 rushing yards on 20 carries — once again helped moved San Francisco to the doorstep of the Super Bowl. They came up short, of course, losing 20-17 to the eventual champion Rams.

As Jones prepared to enter free agency, a chance to finally get to — and play in — a Super Bowl was at the top of his priority list. When he was back in South Carolina on March 8, visiting old friends and coaches, news broke that Wilson, the quarterback Jones had tried to bring down in so many NFC West matchups over the years, was being traded to the Broncos.

"He said, 'Wow, that changes a lot of things,'" said Will Tate, who was with Jones when he saw the league-altering news. "He wanted to be with a team where he could win at the highest level."

Jones is a long way from Scooba now. He's secured a contract that should take care of his family — including the newborn he and Kayla are expecting this summer — for life. He's eager to help Big Dave, who continues to grind away at his passion in the food business and is set to open a new storefront in Greenville called Big Dave's All-American BBQ. As Jones spoke about his father during his introductory

news conference last week, tears began forming for both men, and they soon began cascading down his father's cheeks.

The journey, from running around at picnics while his dad cooked for the Cowboys to signing a life-changing contract with another cornerstone NFL franchise, was worthy of that reflection for D.J. and the emotions it created. But as David Jones was congratulated on the soon-to-be-opened restaurant by a reporter after the news conference, he replied that his barbecue business, even after decades of work, was only getting started.

"We haven't arrived yet," he said.

He knows his son believes the same thing.

"I'm itching to finally play in a big game," D.J. Jones said. "It's going to take steps. Might not be this year, may not be the next, but I feel they put something together here that will eventually put us on top."

From barbecue to the Broncos: How family life played a central role as D.J. Jones arrived in Denver

By Ben Swanson
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For D.J. Jones, football has not been the family business central to most of his life. Barbecue has.

For as long as the new Broncos' defensive tackle can remember, his father, David, has made his living from making barbecue and barbecue sauces. It started small in 1990, when the family lived in Dallas and David opened his first restaurant, a little shop with seating for maybe 15 people, and it continues strong today.

"Selling barbecue is how I raised my family," David said Thursday after his son's introductory press conference. "... It was just a dream come true. I had made the sauces first, and then I aspired to try my hand at a restaurant — which, we tried, and we've been doing it ever since."

Barbecue as business blossomed for David, and for some time, he catered meals for the Dallas Cowboys, which turned into a point of pride and motivation for D.J. as he looked at his own future in the league.

"Emmitt Smith held me, Troy Aikman held me as a toddler — it drove me," D.J. said. "I always wanted to reach my full potential."

He would start his way on that path before long, after the Jones family moved to Greenville, South Carolina, bringing with them the barbecue business, of course. And as with most, if not every, family raising a child with NFL dreams, the Joneses had to make tough decisions to enable him to best find opportunity to continue on that path.

"Wow, where do you start?" David said. "I mean, you do what you have to do. We made a lot of sacrifices early on. The first high school he went to, the program fell apart and we took him to another high school, which was in the suburbs. And so instead of doing it the wrong way, we actually tried to find a house in that area. It wasn't the house we wanted, it was an old trailer, but we sacrificed for him and we dealt with that old trailer for a little while until we could move to something better. We sacrificed a lot."

Follow new Broncos defensive tackle D.J. Jones' first day in Denver, from being fitted for a new suit to his introductory press conference, to portraits with his family and more.

It's easy to understand why family, then, meant a lot to D.J. as he considered his options in free agency. And when he signed his contract on Wednesday with his family all watching and taking videos on their phones, the best surprise may have come when the ink had already dried. Executive Director of Football Operations/Special Advisor to the General Manager Kelly Kleine presented a gift bag to D.J. and his wife, Kayla, who is expecting their first child. For the little girl, Kleine had included a teeny cheerleader outfit.

That gesture may have confirmed that he had made the right decision.

"DJ is a very family oriented person, and that's why he got recruited, that's why he went to Ole Miss," David said. "If you want to get his attention, the hype and stuff don't impress him. Family impresses him."

He's not a guy who'll be out in the street much, he's home-bound. So he got a feel for what they're about here and the head coach, and he was sold on it. Family."

As D.J. prepares to raise his first child, what he saw his family do for him will serve as a model for him as a father, he said. Hearing that at the press conference, David couldn't help but tear up.

"It's a blessing," D.J. said. "What they've done for me over the years is beyond my reach. I couldn't repay them. There's nothing I could do to repay them. All I can do is be a great father to the child that I have on the way because of the way they treated me. I have three older sisters that deserve the world. ... Pop's crying. I love you. I love you. I love you, mom. I love you, daddy. I love you, Kayla, and the baby in your belly. It's everything."

Meanwhile, the family business — which donates a portion of its sales to D.J.'s charitable foundation — will change just slightly. Big Dave's All-American BBQ's "The 93 Sauce" will probably need a new label to accommodate for a new orange-and-blue No. 97 uniform.

The focus, though, will remain the same.

Broncos suit D.J. Jones just fine

By Mike Klis

KUSA

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D.J. Jones had a problem. He had a muscular 305-pound body and a three-year, \$30 million contract. He brought along a nice ensemble of clothes for his big press conference in Denver.

But he didn't have a suit.

And Jones, the Broncos' prominent new defensive tackle, believed he needed one after he had just met his prominent new teammate Russell Wilson at their new team headquarters in Dove Valley. Wilson was dressed impeccably for his 2:03 p.m. Wednesday press conference at Broncos headquarters.

Jones, sans suit, had a press conference at 2 p.m. the next day.

"I was scrambling yesterday," Jones said in an interview Thursday with 9NEWS, whose inquiry about his nice suit led to a remarkable story. "I had some nice clothes, but when I saw Russell, I said, 'OK, he set the bar.' What I had was not going to measure up. Not close."

Jones placed a call to his agent Brian Ayrault about his plight, and the agent talked to Broncos' contract guru Rich Hurtado, who turned "The Great Suit Caper" over to the team's chief communication officer, Patrick Smyth.

Who knew just the guy. He called Chris Smith, a store associate of Andrisen Morton fine men's apparel in Cherry Creek. The store's prior and current clients included John Elway and John Lynch, among others.

When Smith took Jones' measurements from Smyth over the phone, he knew he wouldn't have a suit anywhere near the fit hanging from his store's racks. So Smith and Smyth worked with store owner Craig Andrisen himself, who hunted down a couple suits for large people from a warehouse.

Smith put two suits together and asked for Jones to come down to the store by 9:30 a.m. Thursday morning for tailoring. The Broncos had young up-and-coming scout Chaz McKenzie drive Jones down to the store.

The charcoal gray suit with a crisp white shirt, burnt-orange striped tie with matching pocket square, plus brown pebble grain monk strap shoes, matching brown belt and gray socks only set Jones back about \$2,000. That included the rush tailoring and delivery to Broncos' headquarters by 1:30 p.m. Thursday. As he approached the Broncos' team meeting auditorium stage for his 2 p.m. presser, Jones was dressed to the model standard Wilson had set the day before.

"I got to get my guys exact name. Andrisen Morton," Jones said. "Took great care of me. Great care."

With his mom, dad, brothers, wife and daughter-on-the-way sitting in the front row of his press conference room, Jones reflected on how far he's come.

"Still coming," said his dad Dave later. "We haven't arrived yet."

Dad was a major influence. He opened his first barbecue restaurant in Dallas, Texas in 1990. D.J. came along five years later.

“Yes sir, if you ask him he’s a master chef,” D.J. said of his dad. “I think it’s all in the sauce, but growing up around a restaurant was a great thing because I got to meet people there every day. I got to be social and learn how to cook, which is big. And I got to eat.”

Which didn’t hurt him become an NFL player.

“No sir, it did not,” Jones said.

Besides his barbecue business, Big Dave was a master chef for the Dallas Cowboys through the 1990s. You know, the Emmitt Smith, Troy Aikman, Michael Irvin, Jimmy Johnson years.

“Hey, all I know is when he was there we were winning Super Bowl after Super Bowl,” Jones said. “He enjoyed his time there and he’s enjoying what he’s doing now.”

A few years back, Big Dave started bottling and selling two sauces. One is “The 93 Sauce,” named after D.J., who wore No. 93 in his five seasons with the San Francisco 49ers, and the other is called “Bold Hawaiian Gold.” Going to have to change the first label to “The 97 Sauce” as Jones is switching numbers in Denver.

After high school, Jones played two years at East Mississippi Community College. Even if East Mississippi is no ordinary junior college – it’s football program went 24-0 in Jones’ two years there – he could not imagine then he would one day become a \$10 million a year player.

“Not in that moment,” he said. “All you had there was books and ball. Some great people, but books and ball was pretty much all you could focus on. I think that’s the reason we went 24-0.”

During his press conference, Jones said the addition of Wilson through trade was a major reason why he chose the Broncos.

“We had a lot of love from teams, but I felt like this was home from the jump —especially when they made the move on Russ, I knew it was somewhere I wanted to be,” Jones said.

He was a 4-3 defensive tackle with the 49ers, but will now adjust to the 3-4 front in Denver where defensive tackles can sometimes be called ends.

“In college (Ole Miss) I was in a similar front,” Jones said. “I’ve always loved this system. I’ve always loved letting the game come to me. I’m so excited to play in this defense.”

From the viewpoint of a 49er player looking in at the Broncos, Jones said he considered Denver to have “a legendary organization.” Which in so many words is what Wilson said the day before.

“That’s because it’s the truth,” Jones said. “When you hear something a lot you know it’s the truth. So many people have come through here. A lot of championships have been won around here and that’s what we’re trying to return to.”

So it's not all about the money.

"No sir, money isn't everything," he said. "It's about relationships. It's about how you treat people. It's about winning to me. I want to win. I know Russ said that a lot. But we come from the same philosophy. I don't want anything other than to win.

"He's a competitor. I love to compete myself. He's a great quarterback. He made a lot of plays against me and other teams. Won a Super Bowl and I want to be a part of something great. I want to win. They did a great job of bringing him in and bringing me and I'm excited."

The Wilson influence is already apparent through Jones' appearance on the Broncos' roster. And his appearance, period. Nice suit, D.J.