

Dre'Mont Jones playing his way from 'underrated' to one of NFL's top defensive tackles

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When talking about players on the Denver defense, the names who instantly cross the mind are Bradley Chubb, Justin Simmons, and Pat Surtain II. For the longest time it was Von Miller and now maybe Randy Gregory.

Eventually the brain moves about halfway down the starting lineup to Dre'Mont Jones, a fourth-year player who has a chance to play his way into becoming one of the league's top defensive tackles.

"That's funny you say that," Jones said this week in a sit-down interview with 9NEWS. "I don't know what the narrative on me being underrated or whatever you want to call it. It's been happening since Ohio State when I played with Nick Bosa, Chase Young. I'm pretty sure nobody at Ohio State in recent years had 9 sacks like I my last year there and didn't get the love I felt I should have.

"But it comes with the territory. I get it. It's cool. As long as I play good football that's all that really matters to me. The hype will come later."

Which follows a trend. After redshirting his first year at Ohio State, Jones was a rare 12-game freshman starter for the Buckeyes in 2016, but didn't get his first sack until his redshirt sophomore year. Sack No. 2 didn't come until his junior year, and then he 8.5 to earn one All-American team. Jones, it seems, has always been a late-bloomer.

Selected by the Broncos in the third round of the 2019 draft, Jones showed promise as a pass rusher with 3.5 sacks but struggled against the run as a rookie. He got better from there and is now in year four where new Denver defensive coordinator Ejiro Evero has Jones playing the "Aaron Donald position."

"It's an honor to kind of represent somebody who has been so great for this game for the past 9 years," Jones said of Donald. "It's a privilege to try and resemble that. I appreciate the coach believing in me and seeing something in me that resembles anything with him. It's cool."

The Aaron Donald position?

"Just moving around," Jones said. "I don't want to get too much into details but it's about doing different things. Just a very unique 3-technique."

Jones played like the great Rams' defensive tackle against the Houston Texans last week when he registered two sacks. The first came as the beneficiary of an Evero blitz call where Houston quarterback Davis Mills seemed to be eyeing linebacker Alex Singleton and safety P.J. Locke rushing in while Jones all but unsuspectingly swatted the ball out of Mills' hand for a strip sack.

"It wasn't Mills, it was (A.J.) Cann, 60," Jones said. "He took a glance at P.J. which gave me time. It was real quick. I saw him look at P.J. and then he looked back at me and his steps weren't where it needed to

be to kick out to me. He was late and I didn't really have to do much with my pass rush besides strip. I didn't have to put my hands out like I usually do."

Provided he's not limited by a late-week neck injury, Jones will be crucial for the Broncos' chances of defeating the San Francisco 49ers on Sunday Night Football tonight that will be broadcasted on channel 9. The 49ers opened as a 2.5-point road underdog but by the next morning had become a 1-point favorite – in part because Jimmy Garoppolo was back as San Francisco's quarterback following the season-ending injury to the talented-but-unpolished Trey Lance.

"To be honest, I can say it now because unfortunately Trey Lance got hurt -- I was more afraid of Jimmy Garoppolo than I was Trey Lance just because Jimmy's a savvy veteran, he's been there before and he's won big-time games and just recently went to the Super Bowl," Jones said. "Their offense is going to change somewhat now with Jimmy back there but we've got a task on our hands with Jimmy back there."

Besides his ability to rush the passer from his interior front position, Jones has gradually and significantly improved his ability to stop the run. Again, a necessary trait when playing the 49ers, who rank No. 4 in the NFL in rushing and may have the league's best run designs.

"I think I'm physical, I'm capable of doing it," Jones said of his run defense. "I think I've done a good job so far, not getting blown off the ball. Sometimes my hand placement is poor in my opinion. But I think I'm pretty stout overall. They do a lot of different things in the run game.

"How do I say it? It's very simple concepts but they like to mix it in with timing motions and different shifts just to throw you off and make you think they're going one way when they're not. This is a team I know they like to run the ball. That's their motto. So I've got to get my big-boy pants on that's for sure."

A few more 2-sack games like last week and Jones will either be in line for a contract extension from the Broncos or in prime position as an undrafted free agent at season's end. This is what the industry calls his "contract year."

"I try to treat every year like a contract year," Jones said. "Having that fire under me, get your pants hot so I'm always ready to play. Contract year is another year. It's like my rookie year all over again where I'm working my butt off trying to do everything I need to do to make plays. It is my contract year in the real world but otherwise I feel the same I always do."