

Broncos general manager George Paton believes non-stop offseason will lead to start of winning era

By Ryan O'Halloran

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When everything was buttoned up — new coach hired, new quarterback acquired, second draft completed and new ownership group selected to buy the Broncos — general manager George Paton was finally able to get away for two weeks this summer.

The Paton family traveled to Costa Rica.

“That’s our happy place,” he said last month during an interview with The Denver Post in his second-floor office. “Getting on that plane was really good.”

Also really good, Paton hopes, were the moves he made in his second offseason running the Broncos’ football operation.

The changes started less than 24 hours after the Broncos lost to Kansas City to complete a sixth consecutive year out of the playoffs and a fifth consecutive losing season, things that are unheard of around these parts.

Jan. 9: Paton fired coach Vic Fangio after three years and a 19-30 record.

Jan. 27: A travel-by-private-plane search spanning the country ended with the hiring of Green Bay Packers offensive coordinator Nathaniel Hackett, followed by a massive staff turnover.

Feb. 1: The Broncos were put up for sale.

Feb. 3: Paton promoted Darren Mougey from player personnel director to assistant general manager, solidifying him as the No. 2 person on the football side of the front office.

March 8: Paton traded three players, two first- and second-round picks apiece and a fifth-round selection for Wilson.

Late April: Paton’s second draft was completed.

June 7: The Walton-Penner Ownership Group agreed to buy the Broncos for \$4.65 billion.

Get all that?

“It was like back-to-back years of starting over,” said Paton, who was then quick to add that “there are so many great people that have been here a long, long time that I lean on.”

Paton said Year 1 of being a general manager felt “very natural,” likely because of his experience in Minnesota as Rick Spielman’s chief lieutenant.

“Very comfortable,” Paton added. “I just knew we had to get better (after last year).”

First up was hiring Hackett, who was a stark detour from Fangio.

“There are challenges of going through a coaching search and getting a bunch of new (assistant) coaches,” Paton said. “What’s the personnel that fits the schemes?”

Creating a rapport with Hackett was critical.

“The No. 1 thing for me is the relationship with the head coach and now the new owners and that doesn’t happen overnight,” Paton said. “Nathaniel and I are tied at the hip. I’m as close with him as I have been with any coach (in his personnel career).”

Paton began communicating with the ownership group after they agreed to the purchase, so there wouldn’t need to be introductory handshakes once the sale was approved on Aug. 9.

“We had great discussions through the process,” he said. “You don’t do it in one day. 100%, I’ll learn more from them than them from me (about) managing people and the entire football operation. I’ll learn a lot from them.”

Paton, in the second season of a six-year contract signed in January 2021, finally got to exhale while in Costa Rica.

“I was still taking calls and texts and you’re never really off the grid,” he said. “But it was a good time. Get up, work out, body surf for two hours. We just love getting into the ocean.”

Fast forwarding six-plus months, what Paton would really love is getting the Broncos into the playoffs.

Broncos general manager George Paton remembers late father, Tom: “Pretty amazing guy”

By Ryan O’Halloran

Denver Post

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Tom Paton had not coached high school football in 10 years, but his son George’s freshman team in the Los Angeles area needed a leader. Like so many men who will be recognized on Father’s Day, he stepped up.

“We had OK talent, but we went 9-0, were never behind and won every game by 20 points because of his leadership,” said George, now the Broncos’ general manager, during an interview with The Denver Post. “No one thought we were going to be very good, but we were doing stuff nobody else was doing. He went out like a champ.”

Tom, who instilled his family with a love and passion for football, died last November after a long fight with dementia. Sunday in California, the Paton family will have a celebration of life and scatter his ashes in the Pacific Ocean where he liked to sail.

Tom lettered in football at UCLA from 1959-61; George followed from 1988-91.

“He was self-made,” George said. “Only child. Had no money. Earned a scholarship.”

Tom Paton, who died last December, was a letter winner for the UCLA football team from 1959-61. After college, Tom started a successful high school coaching career.

“That’s all I knew growing up,” George said. “We played all of the sports, but football was obviously the main one because we were a big football family.”

All three Paton brothers (Frank, John and George) played college football. John played for Tom in high school baseball, but Tom moved to coach football at a different high school.

“He was always critiquing me, but not coaching me,” John said last summer.

When Tom took over George’s freshman team, George said: “It was nervous to have him coach me because he’s pretty imposing, but it was unbelievable.”

During his NFL career, Paton has worked with coaches such as Nick Saban (Miami), Mike Zimmer (Minnesota) and last year, Vic Fangio (Broncos). Do any remind him of his father?

“A little bit of everything,” Paton said. “He was old school, but he could love the players up. He coached them hard, but they loved him and followed him.”

After his freshman year, George transferred to Loyola High School.

“It was really competitive and hard to jump in and start, but I wanted to be the quarterback,” he said.

As George worked and waited for his turn, his father helped lead his offseason training.

“My junior and senior years, I would come home and I would drag my dad to the park every night at 8 o’clock under the tennis lights and he would catch routes,” George said.

That’s right, Tom Paton, by that point in his 40s, played receiver.

“Anytime I asked him,” George said. “He never pushed me to play football even though he was a football guy. He was always there for me.”

George said his high school memories flowed to the front of his mind while attending his father’s funeral.

“Just thinking about those moments and how he was always there, like him driving me to weight-lifting at 5:30 in the morning, four days a week in the offseason,” he said.

Tom Paton’s dementia had progressed the point that he didn’t realize George was with the Broncos but he said: “I know he would have loved to come to Denver.”

Sitting in his office, George picked up a framed picture of Tom in his UCLA football uniform. Looking at the picture, George paused and said: “Pretty amazing guy.”

How a unique connection with Broncos GM George Paton landed Greg Dulcich in Denver

By George Stoia
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Around 4 p.m. Friday, about an hour before Day 2 of the NFL Draft began, Broncos GM George Paton called an old friend.

Paton wanted final confirmation on UCLA tight end Greg Dulcich and he had the perfect person to call — Thomas Bonds, whose couch Paton crashed on from 1997-99 as a scouting intern for the Bears. Thomas' brother, Jimmy, was Paton's college roommate and Dulcich's coach at La Cañada St. Francis High School.

"We really like Greg," Paton told Thomas on Friday ahead of the draft. "Is there anything else I should know?"

Thomas, who is a close family friend of the Dulcichs and talks with Paton frequently, gave Paton the final confirmation he needed. And a couple hours later Dulcich was drafted by the Broncos 80th overall.

"I told him what I knew of Greg and the family and that kind of things," Thomas told The Gazette on Saturday. "He's a great player and a really hard worker and a good kid from a good family. He's super athletic and fast and so I was surprised he had to be a walk-on because I always thought he was really gifted. I think big-play ability — he's going to bring that. It's exciting to see them try and use him in different ways like flex him out and really stretch a defense. He's a weapon. He's such a big kid and can run that well. But he was also a guy at St. Francis that was voted a team captain by his team. And you don't get that honor if you're not the hardest worker in the locker room and have the respect of your teammates.

"And I was happy to see them take him. We were all thrilled."

The Bonds brothers and Paton go way back, as both Jimmy and Thomas became good friends with Paton during college. They were both groomsmen in Paton's wedding. And Paton has especially stayed close with Thomas the past couple years after Jimmy's death in 2020.

Jimmy was a long-time high school football coach at St. Francis — which is how the Bonds family became so close with the Dulcich family — and often spoke with Paton as he pursued his NFL career. That's what makes the Dulcich pick so special for Paton, because while Paton had never met the UCLA tight end until he drafted him, he felt a unique connection with him because of his life-long friendship with the Bonds brothers.

"I don't know Greg," Paton said Friday. "My best friend and my roommate from college, Jimmy Bonds, was his high school coach. Jimmy passed away a couple years ago. I know he's up there looking down. That's for sure."

Paton always knew he wanted Dulcich, which is why he nearly didn't trade back from 75 to 80 to get him, worrying another team might jump the Broncos to grab him. Dulcich is an elite pass-catcher, averaging

over 17.3 yards per reception in 2021, totaling 42 receptions for 725 yards and five touchdowns. He's also a former walk-on, earning a scholarship during his time at UCLA thanks to his production and work ethic.

Plus, he got a glowing recommendation from one of Paton's top confidants, which might be the biggest reason why he ended up in Denver.

"Obviously, they made their plans long before he talked to me," Bonds said. "But it's an example of their due diligence and everything that they do and he was just getting that last confirmation. It was cool just knowing that connection to Jimmy and to George and that they wanted him at that position at that time. Everything just kind of worked out."

And Paton made sure to let his old friend be the first to know, sending Bonds a one-worded text moments before the selection.

"Dulcich."

Woody Paige: George Paton makes honor roll in acquisitions

By Woody Paige
The Gazette
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The draft grade is a "B," as in Broncos. The overall off-season grade is an A-plus, as in Russell Wilson.

Upon first scrutiny, the Broncos' nine draft choices are solid but not sensational. Upon reflection, the Broncos' acquisition choices were stupendous.

The Broncos no longer are inconsequential. This is a roster that will be in play, in prime-time games, probably in a game in Europe and in the playoffs this year.

For the first season since 2015, the Broncos could even defeat the Chiefs once and finish above .500 in the AFC West.

So, when the draft concluded Saturday, Broncos general manager "Trader George" Paton, missing a first- and a second-round pick and doing more dealing than the Bent Brothers at their old fort in Colorado, had added nine players, but none named Luke Warm.

Rather than choosing "the best available player," Paton plotted and planned to pick for specific positions of need. The Broncos drafted an edge rusher, a tight end, two cornerbacks, a safety, two defensive linemen, a kick returner and a center.

Thank goodness, thank Wilson and thank Paton, the Broncos did not have to draft a lousy quarterback.

Last draft, and Paton's first, the list turned out to be exceptional, with a half-dozen players contributing constantly. This draft won't produce any immediate full-time starters. Linebacker Nik Bonitto (64th), tight end Greg Dulcich (80th), cornerback Damarri Mathis (7) and defensive lineman Eyioma Uwazurike (116th) could slide into the rotation as rookies, and wide receiver Montrell Washington (162nd) might be the returner. The rest who stick will be special teamers, injury fill-ins and roster reserves or practice squaders.

The Broncos did not have a first-rounder for the only draft since 2012, when John Elway dropped down to 36th to take Derek Wolfe.

Think of Russell Wilson as the Broncos' ninth pick. The Seahawks used that spot for Charles Cross. The Broncos might have preferred linebacker Quay Walker from Georgia or Washington cornerback Trent McDuffie (a Chiefs pick). Paton wouldn't have chosen any of the six wide receivers who went in the first 16 picks.

With the No. 9 selection and without Wilson, the Broncos wouldn't have drafted a quarterback from this year's underwhelming ensemble. Only Pitt's Kenny Pickett, who drew no intriguing interest from the Broncos, managed to go in the first round at 20th to the nearby Steelers. No other quarterbacks were picked until the second day and third round. The Falcons got Desmond Ridder at 74th, the Titans, mystery man Malik Willis at 86th, and the Panthers Matt Corral at 94th. The Patriots picked Bailey Zappe in the

fourth round (137th), and Sam Howell went to the Commanders seven picks later. Carson Strong, somewhat oddly, was undrafted.

Despite being the home team at the draft, the Raiders didn't participate until the third round after giving up their first two choices for Davante Adams. Vegas had four picks through five rounds. The Raiders were virtually in the same situation as the Broncos, but they graded out to a "C," as did the Chargers. The Chiefs keep winning the division in the season and in this draft with a "A," based primarily on K.C. improving its defense with two first-round plums.

In most drafts, the Broncos prioritize defense, and this year was no different. They drafted only three players for the offense while picking six for defensive assistance.

Paton gets the A-plus because he acquired Wilson in the monumental trade and signed a horde of free agents, including Mile High risk-reward Randy Gregory, nose tackle D.J. Jones, tight end Eric Tomlinson, safety K'waun Williams, offensive tackles Billy Turner and Tom Compton, cornerback Bless Austin, backup quarterback Josh Johnson and inside linebacker Alex Singleton. He also brought back Melvin Gordon and Kareem Jackson.

That's a haul, and the Broncos haven't been so loaded since their last Super Bowl championship.

The Broncos now have starters and quality reserves with seven wide receivers, five tight ends, 10 offensive linemen, three running backs, three quarterbacks, six edge rushers, three nose tackles, five defensive ends, three inside linebackers, six cornerbacks and five safeties.

They will sign another running back, a wide receiver, an offensive tackle, an inside linebacker and two more defensive backs as undrafted free agents.

The Broncos continue to trend upward, but their grade must remain incomplete until the 2022 season is over.