

EXCLUSIVE: Broncos' Justin Simmons admits, 'It's time to get back to winning'

By Troy Renck

KMGH

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Russell Wilson became the smiling face of the Broncos the moment he was acquired in March. He is the sun of the Broncos' universe, a star quarterback capable of creating amnesia about the past six seasons.

But the most decorated veteran with Broncos statistics? That's easy: free safety Justin Simmons. He enters his seventh season with All-Pro honors, Pro Bowl berths, Top 100 player rankings, but something is missing, gnawing at him.

"Winning. That's the only thing motivating me. My six years, going on year seven, I have never been in the playoffs. The closest I have been was 2016 the year after the Broncos won the Super Bowl. It's crazy," Simmons said in an exclusive interview with Denver7. "I have seen a lot of my colleagues I train with go on and play in the playoffs. I always feel like I am watching after the season, and it's not a good feeling to have. So this year, it's playoffs."

The Broncos open on Monday night against Seattle. Every year feels fresh because of roster turnover and infectious optimism gleaned from months of training. This year, though, should be the equivalent of Febreze because of the enormous change the Broncos have undergone. This wasn't a new shutters and door project. More like a Forever Home from Property Brothers.

"Yeah, new ownership (Walton-Penner group), new coach (Nathaniel Hackett), (relatively) new GM (George Paton). Everything I have known about the Broncos the past six years is just different," Simmons said. "There's new energy. The city is buzzing for all the right reasons. Everyone knows the city loves their Nuggets, their Rockies, their Avalanche, but the city flourishes when the Broncos are playing winning football. That's what we want to provide. It's been mediocre for way too long. It's time to get back to winning."

Wilson's history suggests he will make a difference. He has reached the postseason in eight of 10 seasons. He is also undefeated in his last three openers with 10 touchdowns and one interception.

And he debuts against a team he knows better than anyone on the Broncos. So, yes, Simmons leaned on the nine-time Pro Bowler this week.

"Oh yeah of course. You have to. You have to find out. He spent all of his career there. Was really successful. And you always want to pick his brain, and ask him, 'If they are in this situation or that one, what will they do? And will they go to this guy more? What are some tidbits we should know?'^ Anytime you can get some inside information like that it's always key," Simmons said. "I definitely picked his brain, probably more than he likes, but anything you can do to win."

Russell Wilson

Broncos kick off season on Monday Night Football at Seattle on Denver7

Simmons understands that Wilson is the focus. But the Broncos boast an intriguing defense. If the sacks and takeaways increase with more leads, it could be one of the league's best. The challenge of proving it begins at Lumen Field.

"It's going to be crazy, hostile, loud. It's going to be exciting. This is why you play — from a defensive perspective — to go in there and silence the home crowd. There's no better feeling," Simmons said. "I feel like we have a really great defense. But it doesn't matter what it looks like on paper, it matters how you execute."

Broncos safety Justin Simmons ranked No. 81 on 2022 NFL Top 100

By Ben Swanson
DenverBroncos.com
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A year after breaking into the NFL Top 100 player rankings for the first time, Justin Simmons is back. In the annual ranking of the league's top 100 players, as voted on by the players, Simmons is slotted at No. 81 ahead of the 2022 season.

The honor comes after a 2021 season in which Simmons started all 17 games and recorded 80 tackles, 1.5 sacks, five interceptions and 12 passes defensed, which helped him earn second-team All-Pro honors from the Associated Press' group of voters. His five interceptions tied his career high, as he was one of just five safeties to reach that mark in 2021.

Simmons' consistent production has been perhaps his most remarkable trait; he is one of just two safeties to record at least three interceptions in each of the previous four seasons.

While this ranking is lower than his previous (No. 45), Simmons' stock could soon be rising once again. In a poll of league executives, coaches, scouts and players, ESPN found that Simmons was ranked as the league's top safety.

'RING THEM BOYS': Why Justin Simmons paid for his high school alma mater basketball team's championship rings

By Ben Swanson
DenverBroncos.com
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The clock ticked down and the celebration inched closer for Justin Simmons.

In March, his alma mater Martin County High School pushed past Ponte Vedra in the second half of the 6A high school state championship game in Florida. A late rally threatened Martin County's lead, but the dwindling seconds combined with a two-possession gap all but ensured victory. For the first time in more than 40 years, Martin County was going to be state champs.

Simmons, one of Martin County's most beloved alumni and a former Tigers basketball player himself, had not been able to go watch in person like he had for the state semifinals, so that evening he watched the only way he could: by live streaming the game on his phone.

When Ponte Vedra's last-ditch three-point attempt with 0.7 seconds on the clock missed the mark and the buzzer sounded, the Tigers' excitement took them back up the court. Some sprinted the full length. Some huddled near center court.

The former Tiger took his excitement to Twitter.

"STATE CHAMPS!!! You don't gotta like it but you gotta respect it. RING THEM BOYS!!!" he tweeted shortly after the game.

Simmons, it turned out, had plans to "RING THEM" himself. To help out the school and to give the team a set of rings beyond their imagination, the Broncos' All-Pro safety told Martin County that he and his wife would put up whatever funds needed to give the students the jewelry a championship team deserves.

To him, it represented what it was: a celebration of a team coming together to achieve something bigger than themselves, something that hadn't been done in Martin County since 1979.

To the athletes, the coaches and the school, though, it was all that and more.

"It's a cool thing that he did," Martin County head coach John Leon says, "but he's just such a bigger person than buying our team rings."

In reminiscing over his salad days in basketball, Justin Simmons' glasses are no longer rose-colored.

"I was watching a few years ago — I had some old DVDs of some film when I played — and I definitely thought I was way better than I was," Simmons says. "That's for sure."

He might be underselling his skills. As a senior, he averaged 15 points and 11 rebounds per game, roaming the frontcourt as a 6-foot-2 forward/center. He'd received a scholarship to play Division-I football at

Boston College by that point, and four years later, his vertical jump would be measured at 40 inches — the best at his position in his NFL Draft class.

"We were a small team," Leon says. "He'd say, 'Coach, I'll play center and just get rebounds.' He was that guy that was like, 'Just tell me what to do.' Asking questions, asking what to do. Of course his talent was immense and he could have scored 40 if he wanted to, but I think him wanting the team to do well — I think he played center, played some forward. Most of it was blocking shots, getting rebounds, getting some dunks."

Unsurprisingly, Simmons was a glue guy for the team. Martin County assistant coach Alton Edwards, a former teammate of Simmons' in high school and middle school, says he could play any position that was asked of him.

"Probably one of the most competitive persons I ever played with," Edwards says. "He just always competed — practice, games, off the court, in the film room — he just competed everywhere. So I mean, he took the team's intensity to another level."

In Simmons' senior season, Martin County made its deepest run in the state tournament since he'd been part of the team. They won their first two games by an average of 27 points. But there was heartbreak in the state semifinals, and the Tigers lost by one point. Simmons took the final shot at the buzzer.

"Our point guard had the ball and he got doubled right away, so he passed it to me," Simmons recalls. "I dribbled up the court and went to go shoot it and I missed. So that was tough. The athlete that you are, you don't care how you miss, what it looked like, how tough of a shot it was. You miss and you had a chance to win ... so I was just bawling crying. I was pissed it was over. I was mad that I missed."

A decade later, it's just as memorable to Leon, who was Martin County's coach then, too.

"It was his last game," Leon says. "I remember it; he just broke down. Me and him were walking off the court crying together. ... This kid had already signed with Boston College, so everyone knew he was a big-time football player. But him losing, it hurt that bad. It was one of those moments, I will never forget it. It meant that much to him. ..."

"Definitely, that was his motivation — his teammates, me as a coach. It was the school. He felt like he let everyone down, you know? That was a cool thing, just to witness a guy of that caliber, and it meant so much."

To date, Simmons and his former coach are still tight. Simmons goes to games and camps when he can, and the school makes sure he has a seat behind the bench

"That's my guy," Simmons says. "He's a big reason I'm so successful. Obviously in my career, but just in life. I really appreciate his insight and his trust to kind of hand me the keys a lot of the time while we were playing basketball. One of the reasons why I like to think I'm a good problem-solver when I'm playing safety back there is I can figure things out — because Coach Leon made me figure things out when I was in high school. That just helped me a lot. ... I love him like a dad. He's been so inspirational for me."

That Martin County's most prolific athlete may also be its most prolific local also factors into all of this.

He departed Stuart, his hometown, starting in 2012 for college in Boston and then moving on in 2016 for the NFL in Denver, but he's never truly left the area. His wife, Taryn, also graduated from Martin County, so they come back for extended periods annually.

Beyond the Simmons' athletic interests, they also have impressive profiles in the community. Justin and Taryn run the Justin Simmons Foundation, where they aim to make an impact on the lives of children, and that includes events in Stuart.

"Everyone looks up to him because he's what we all want to become later on in life," former Martin County student Ryan Davis says. "That's our dream, to be what he is and where he is. To see how he did it — he did it the good way, and he's always been such a good guy and always gave back to everybody — it just shows an example. He gives us an example of what we need to do, the work we need to put in, and if we do end up making it far, to give back to those who work for us and who put in the time for us."

Simmons' athletic successes make him something of an ideal for student-athletes like Davis, who was a senior on Martin County's championship team and graduated in May. But it's what Simmons does on top of that that makes him idolized.

"He's a professional athlete, so everybody around here is obsessed with Justin," Edwards says. "It's been like that since probably in 12th grade. He basically became a bigger-than-life figure around here. But you would never know it talking to Justin. He's still stayed the same person as he is. But if you come around Martin County and say Justin Simmons' name, everybody lights up. He's basically the Martin County LeBron James."

Simmons doesn't want to necessarily be seen as anything that big, though.

"That's where I'm from, you know?" Simmons says. "... I want it to be normal that I'm being seen in my hometown. Because I was able to do something special, in terms of making it to the NFL, and obviously the percentages there aren't always in your favor. But I want to be there. I want to be seen because I went to the same schools, had the same academic classes, played on the same sports teams — and it's possible to be from where we're from and do something big and to chase your dreams and chase your goals. You can't do it alone, and so that's part of why Taryn and I love to do our charitable work. We want to be assets to help kids reach their goals, their dreams. Anything they have that they want to accomplish."

But if he is going to be seen as the Martin County LeBron James anyway, it makes sense that he'd give an assist on the rings. He and Taryn talked it over, and shortly after the championship victory, the wheels were set in motion. Edwards estimates he heard about it within half an hour of the game.

"We were just like, 'How cool would it be to get these guys something [in honor of something] that hasn't been done at our school for a while now, to win a state championship?'" Simmons says.

Typically in this situation, the school would work with boosters, community members and/or sponsors to gather resources for championship rings. Instead, they didn't have to worry about that.

"Oh yeah, absolutely," says Mark Cowley, Martin County's former athletic director. "... Justin stepping up like this saved us a bunch of money."

Simmons even encouraged them to go further than they would have: "Justin, he said, 'Bling 'em up, baby. Let's get them done the right way,'" Cowley says.

In June, about three months after the game, the team gathered at the restaurant Fresh Catch to meet one last time as a team and to get their rings.

"We knew it was our last time together as a team," Davis says. "... It was just a special moment to cap off the season. ... It just showed all the work finally paid off with the rings."

And when Coach Leon says that he thinks "it's a legacy thing," he's talking about the rings' importance for the kids, but he could very well be referring to Simmons' decision.

"That's a lifelong memory that they're going to be able to share with their grandkids," Leon says. "... The rings mean just a place in history, and the fact that Justin did that for us definitely just adds to the family environment that we have here — community. We had a parade. We had grandparents, we had teammates from the '72 and '74 team come out, things like that. So I think Justin's a part of that, that whole family."

How Justin Simmons and RISE are helping Broncos Boys & Girls Club members understand their potential to bring about change

By Ben Swanson
DenverBroncos.com
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Each Wednesday in the multipurpose room at the Denver Broncos Boys & Girls Club, the floor in front of the television is cleared, sofas pushed to the edges of the room to make room for five rows of plastic-backed chairs.

Nearly 30 teenagers and a few adults filter into the room and take their seats, ready to start another session of the educational program conducted by RISE, a nonprofit organization that “educates and empowers the sports community to eliminate racial discrimination, champion social justice and improve race relations.”

As they get a quick bite of pizza, it appears that for the sake of time maybe they’ll skip one of the other weekly rituals this time, but the kids quickly protest and Broncos safety Justin Simmons is called to the front of the room.

Before they dive into issues of social justice and inequality, they need to warm up with some physical movement, and this is where Simmons comes in.

From the front of the room, the Pro Bowl safety leads them in a series of stretches. They bend to touch their toes, roll their heads in clockwise circles and stretch their arms up to the ceiling.

With the calisthenics over, Simmons takes his seat and the physical actions shift to mental activity as RISE instructor Chris Chavez begins to go through the day’s topic and discussion points. Simmons’ involvement isn’t done, though. Over the course of the afternoon, he remains an active participant, as he has over the past two years of the educational sessions.

The program’s curriculum, which was completed Wednesday, features the teaching of historical leaders and key moments but is largely centered on discussion, talking through the definitions of equity, identity and privilege and working through hypothetical scenarios or case studies to gain a better understanding of societal challenges and the ways people can advocate for change in the face of prejudice and other issues.

“I’m really appreciative of RISE and just the conversations that they’re pushing,” Simmons says. “The thing I appreciate about RISE when I go is everything is surface-level, but it’s really the conversations once you start scraping off what’s on the surface. It’s really those conversations that are really powerful and can really help build. And so I’m really thankful for RISE and their whole team, their organization and what they do and how they do it. It’s definitely been special working with them.”

Simmons began working with RISE more than a year ago, when participation was limited to video-conferencing sessions. He was a consistent presence and something of a mentor, as he has been particularly active in social-justice spaces in recent years.

But if the kids viewed his participation at first as a brief special appearance, that must be largely gone as he ensures he's as much a part of the meetings as they are.

"It's been great," club member Naja'Ray says. "Just having him there, having him involved, knowing that he cares, showing up. I know last year we did it online, but him actually being here every week, every Wednesday, just like the rest of us for an hour and 45 minutes is great. Just to see him come all the way out here is just amazing."

Another club member, Austyn, adds that Simmons is able to put kids at ease to voice their opinions in a group setting, which can understandably be challenging.

"I think he really helps more kids feel kind of more comfortable and open up," club member Austyn says. "Because obviously talking to a group of people is scary. It gives you anxiety. And I feel like he's there to help and help kids be more relaxed and more open, to feel more comfortable to talk about whatever topic we're on. He wants them to know it's OK for you to feel how you feel and let your opinions out."

The work Chavez does at the club isn't just for kids, though. There's multi-generational involvement, from the young teens to older adults who work at the club. But the subject matter suits that, as elders can share their knowledge and at the same time learn from the younger generation.

"I think that's what makes the Boys & Girls Club special, like all in all," Simmons says. "You have people that care, and we're talking about with RISE at the Denver Broncos Boys & Girls Club and the specific group of people that I get to have the honor and pleasure of being around. It's cool to see how tied in everyone is to their community and how important these conversations are and, honestly too, how much they want to learn and listen to each other and just adapt and have different points of view and hear people out. Everyone has different experiences; it doesn't make one more right than the other, but it's just people living life and trying to figure it out."

While Simmons may appear to be a larger-than-life or a guiding figure to some in the room, he's there for the same reason they are, to learn.

"I came into RISE just with kind of an open mindset to learn," Simmons says. "I just wanted to sit back and just hear a different perspective than mine. Especially when it's a different age gap."

"... Just different people with different experiences in life, so it's cool to get to go in there and sit down and hear like how their perspective on what's going on in the world in terms of the social justice topics and everything that's happening in local neighborhoods, between community and police and just getting real feedback. They live that life every day. As a player, I feel like there's times where you're kind of removed from that — those specific situations. So it's just cool to get to sit down and kind of just hear a different perspective. I think that perspective is everything; it gives you a different view on how maybe you do things maybe moving forward."

In turn, the teenagers are able to gain the knowledge that can reshape their lives and perhaps the community they call home.

“To be able to hit the youth with this kind of knowledge, this kind of education, these tools at such an earlier age is definitely super beneficial,” Chavez says. “I think it will provide that kind of lasting change and leadership opportunities for them to stand up. Just like how today we’re talking to them about [how] it takes a little bit of courage to be able to stand up for something. So the fact that we’re creating a space to make it vulnerable but also empower, I think, will have lasting effects.”

In recent years, as Simmons has felt the urge to become more vocal about inequities that he sees, it’s something that he’s recognized more and more, too.

“The other thing that I’ve learned, even from working with the kids today, is that if there’s something that I don’t like and I’m a part of that community, I have the power to change it,” Simmons says. “And obviously it takes a lot of work and a lot of work but there are some things you can get involved in. You can go to the courthouse. You can get involved with laws that are being passed or brought up in your state or your counties. You have a say. I feel like growing up, I maybe knew it but not to the extent that I know it now. The only reason I like talking about it and publicizing it is not for the fact of notoriety, but it’s more of just, ‘Hey, you guys can be involved too.’ I’m pushing the narrative because I do have a platform. It’s useful to take advantage of it. But this also affects more than just me; it also affects all of us and you can get involved. If there’s something you don’t like, we can talk about it and get involved.”

Justin Simmons comes home to put on first event through his foundation

By Bryan Cooney

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Giving back has been a big part of former Martin County star and current Denver Broncos safety Justin Simmons life shortly after establishing himself as one of the NFL's best at his position.

Creating the Justin Simmons Foundation in 2020, Simmons has held multiple events in the Denver area including holiday events around Thanksgiving and Christmas the past two years.

On Thursday, Simmons finally held his first event in his own backyard, named "An Evening with Justin Simmons" at the Mansion at Tuckahoe that featured a live auction raising funds for local organizations and brought in community leaders to recognize their work through charity.

The event also provided children from the Martin County chapter of the Boys and Girls Club an evening of fun with laser tag, music, food and a chance to meet Simmons.

"It's important for these kids to see I'm from the same area they're from," Simmons said. "They can look up to me, they can look up to high school kids like our boys basketball team winning states. In our community, we're champions of our community and it's important for these kids to see that."

Local organizations including the Boys and Girls Club that Simmons highlighted during the event included Reverse the Door, helping non-violent offenders from avoiding returning to jail or prison by giving them the tools to become a productive member of society, Who Got Game, which aims to provide employment opportunities, housing opportunities and a healthier lifestyle for the disabled and those less fortunate, the Treasure Coast Sports Association helping underprivileged kids reach their goals and Project Lift, which aims to improve the lives of at-risk teens through vocational programs teaching skills they can use out in the world.

During his event, Simmons welcomed a special group from his alma mater that have put Martin County on the map.

The Tiger boys basketball team, the newly-minted 6A state champions, were guests of honor by Simmons, celebrating the program's fourth state championship and first since 1979.

A former Martin County basketball player under current head coach John Leon, Simmons followed the Tigers all season long, attending numerous games after wrapping up this past season with the Broncos.

"Nobody can ever take that away from them that they will forever and always be the 2022 6A state champions," Simmons said. "It's such a cool feat for them and I'm so happy for them and I know the city is behind them and so excited. They deserve to be recognized in every shape, form and fashion."

Simmons is hopeful this event will be one of several he will be able to hold on the Treasure Coast as he gains more support for the foundation.

Things like youth camps, grants for organizations and scholarships for local students for college are among many Simmons is eyeing for the future as he continues striving to be among the top defensive players in the NFL.

"I want to keep exposing the smaller organizations locally that can have the ability to have a major impact," Simmons said. "A long-term goal for us is that, hopefully we'll be funded more regularly to where we'll be able to do grants, scholarships, help underprivileged kids, kids going off to college. Mentorship programs out of our foundation, those are some of the long-term goals were looking forward to build towards."