

In filling in for Justin Simmons, Caden Sterns makes one thing clear: 'I'm ready'

By Andrew Mason
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Caden Sterns had two starts at safety last year. Since the Broncos drafted him, he's been their dime 'back — i.e. their sixth defensive back, which requires moving around, typically underneath between the box and the outside cornerbacks.

The work isn't the exact same as what he is expected to handle filling in for Justin Simmons over the coming weeks. But it is enough to leave him prepared for taking on the largest role in his career to date.

"He's one of the best players in the league," Sterns said Wednesday. "So, my job is to go in there and make sure there's no fall-off, be making plays and obviously communication and just making sure everybody's in line right, stuff like that.

"So, I'm looking forward to it. I think I'm pretty ready for it."

Communication is crucial to the job. Not only is Simmons one of the NFL's best safeties in terms of range, but he's also responsible for getting the entire back of the defense aligned.

It requires being a high-I.Q. player. The fact that Sterns' football intelligence has impressed teammates should help his cause.

"Caden has played a ton of ball at a high level in this league in such a short time, but he's a smart player," safety Kareem Jackson said. "We've used him in a bunch of different roles."

Perhaps most important among those roles now is the two games he played for Jackson last year — home games against the Chargers and Chiefs.

"He has a ton of experience," Jackson said. "I expect him to step in and play great."

A significant reason for Jackson's confidence is Sterns' playmaking knack.

Sterns was one of just seven defensive backs with at least 2 interceptions, 2 sacks and 5 passes defended.

The other six all played at least 500 snaps — a group that included names such as Buffalo's Jordan Poyer, Tampa Bay's Antoine Winfield Jr., Arizona's Budda Baker and Derwin James of the Los Angeles Chargers. Conversely, Sterns played 311 snaps.

The biggest difference between dime back and safety in what Sterns sees. Instead of being aligned near the line of scrimmage, he's more likely to play deep.

"A lot more vision. Things that Justin does," Sterns said. "When you're closer to the ball, things happen faster, so you've got to react. At safety, you've got a little bit more time to react.

But the adjustment shouldn't be difficult.

"I played safety the entire time in college. It's nothing new for me," Sterns said. "So, I plan to hold my own, like I did last year."

And in effect, this could be an audition for something bigger. Kareem Jackson is on a one-year deal; in his 13th season, he's effectively a year-to-year player. Solid work in place of Simmons could build confidence that Sterns is ready for a full-time starting role sooner rather than later.

"[I'm] ready as I was last year," he said. "It's the same thing this year. It's an opportunity to make plays."

Broncos look to Caden Sterns to take another leap in Year 2 as dime back, backup safety

By Kyle Newman
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While some might have been surprised by how quickly Caden Sterns established himself as the Broncos' dime back after being drafted in the fifth round last year, Sterns' former college teammate and fellow safety P.J. Locke wasn't among them.

Locke saw firsthand how quick of a football study Sterns was at Texas. Locke was a junior when Sterns came into the program as an early enrollee and promptly turned heads en route to being named first-team all-conference and the Big-12 Defensive Freshman of the Year.

"He's a really sharp player who has always been ahead of the curve when it comes to the IQ of the game," Locke said. "He's a true playmaker, too... and that combination is what everyone saw last year."

Hence the high expectations from Locke for Sterns, who will be the primary backup to Justin Simmons and Kareem Jackson.

"Caden is ready to take another step this year," Locke said. "And I know he will based off everything I've seen from him up close (in college and the NFL)."

Locke recalled one play in particular from he and Sterns' college days that underscores that belief, and shows just how quickly Sterns can acclimate to a higher level of football.

"I remember when he came in as a freshman at UT, he was an early enrollee (freshman) and we had spring ball," Locke recalled. "I already knew he had the tools from watching his tape, but there's one play I'll never forget. I was on the sideline, and he was already running with the No. 2s. He was playing safety and running away from me, on the opposite hash, and he read the play and took a perfect angle to an interception.

"That's when I knew he was for real. He was starting soon (as a freshman at Texas), and I see the same thing here, where entering Year 2 he's already got the presence of a starter in this league, even if he's not quite there yet."

Sterns wants to prove he's elevated his game to the point where should anything happen to Simmons or Jackson, the Broncos have a plug-and-play replacement waiting.

"If anything were to happen at safety with those guys, I want to make sure there's no fall-off," Sterns said. "This year I'm taking more of the mindset of, even though I'm not a starter, I'm trying to prove myself as one as far as understanding the schemes, helping some of the younger guys out at our position and just getting better with my technique and everything I do back there."

Sterns played 32% of the defensive snaps last year, the majority as the dime back in defensive sub packages, and also contributed on special teams where he played 34% of the snaps. His first pick came against the Jets

in Week 3 and he had another on the road in the Broncos' upset win over Dallas in Week 9, plus five passes defensed and 28 tackles.

"Last year, I feel like I proved I was able to play the dime, and I consistently showed I can do that," Sterns said. "So this year, it's just more about slowing the game down (in my mind) and making more plays when they come my way."

First-year defensive coordinator Ejiro Evero complimented Sterns on the versatility that No. 30 displayed over the course of training camp and the preseason. Sterns will also see action on special teams again this year after playing 34% of the snaps on those units last year.

"He can cover, he can blitz, and he can be a linebacker (as the dime) that gives you a little better coverage," Evero said.