

Pat Surtain's ascension continues after the CB stifles San Francisco

By Shawn Drotar

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Following a remarkable season in which he became one of the NFL's most dynamic and dangerous players, San Francisco 49ers wide receiver Deebo Samuel was rewarded with a three-year, \$71.5 million contract extension. In the Denver Broncos' bizarre, 11-10 victory over the Niners on Sunday night, the versatile Samuel did catch five passes for 73 yards, but none of those were against second-year Broncos cornerback Pat Surtain II.

As a matter of fact, nobody caught any passes against Surtain. San Francisco quarterback Jimmy Garoppolo tested him six times, and each and every one of those efforts ended up bouncing harmlessly on Denver's mile-high turf; two of them by Surtain's own hands. Not bad for a guy that was questionable to play thanks to a shoulder injury.

"All around, it was great getting back out there with the guys. The injury... I expected it to be day-to-day, and I expected to play, which happened," Surtain explained in his usual, understated nature on Monday.

With apologies to pass-rusher Randy Gregory, who's off to a terrific start with the Broncos in his first three outings in orange and blue, Surtain has already become the one player that the Denver defense simply can't do without. Always under control and armed with impeccable technique, the Alabama product made an effortless move to the NFL last season, with many observers believing that Surtain was already among the league's top-10 cornerbacks for the 2022 campaign.

Despite his covers being targeted 15 times this season, Surtain's surrendered a grand total of 45 receiving yards on eight catches this season; 36 yards and seven of those by Seattle's Pro Bowl wideout D.K. Metcalf in Week 1. Even when his man catches it, Surtain's in position to make the tackle and finishes the job; he's allowed only five — yes, five — yards after reception on the season. Quarterbacks have a passer rating of only 63.1 against him, which would rank 32nd in the league. For reference, even New England's Mac Jones — who's thrown two touchdowns and five interceptions on the season — sports a 76.2.

In other words, Surtain's side of the field is where big plays go to die. By the end of the season, calling him a top-10 cornerback might be considered an insult.

"I probably wouldn't throw his way either," Broncos coach Nathaniel Hackett said on Monday. "First and foremost, as a person, this guy is special. I think that is what makes him such a great player up to this point. He's just going to continue to get better. Just his natural athletic ability, his ability to not panic is huge. When you take this amazing athlete, you take this guy that's so humble, a guy that wants to be coached, wants to be great, that's when you see him continually grow and get better."

Fox Sports' Brian Baldinger summarized what makes Surtain elite after Sunday's win, writing on Twitter that Surtain "can do it all; off the ball, press man, ball skills. Difficult CB to beat... always under control and trusting his skills to win."

It's not hyperbole to suggest that Surtain is already the Broncos' best cornerback since at least the "No-Fly Zone" defensive pairing of Chris Harris Jr. and Aqib Talib.

"It's all about confidence; stepping in, making plays, and doing what's best for the defense," Surtain said. The coaches put me in the best position possible for me to have that game yesterday, and play to the best of my ability. It goes to your preparation, your film study and getting your confidence going throughout the game. I think that's what leads to it."

Virtually every NFL player has talent; the raw athleticism and physicality that propels them to football's grandest stage, but not all of them develop skills. Those are the result of meticulous hours of study and repetitive practice. Not every player has the desire to spend much time on the parts of the game that are undoubtedly less fun, but most of the great ones do. If a player wants to have a long career that will have to weather some decay in talent over the years — Father Time remains unbeaten, after all — it's a must.

Almost preternaturally calm and composed, Surtain's nature is to continually work on the small things, without skipping any steps. The result's been something big for the Broncos, and in the pass-happy AFC West division, he's become as integral to the team's success as new — and far more decorated — quarterback Russell Wilson.

After handling Metcalf and Samuel, Surtain faces an even bigger test this week when the Broncos travel to Las Vegas. He'll be asked to contain newest Raiders wideout, Davante Adams, arguably the finest receiver in the entire league. Despite the Raiders' disjointed 0-3 start under former Broncos head coach Josh McDaniels, Adams has still managed to catch a touchdown pass in all three games, showing that his rapport with quarterback — and former teammate at Fresno State — Derek Carr is as strong as ever.

The Raiders desperately need a win on Sunday, and you can count on Adams — who said he was "frustrated and angry" at his team's poor start — being a big part of McDaniels' game plan. That's just the way Surtain likes it.

"I embrace it a lot, going against premier receivers like that week in and week out. You just expect that, especially coming from our division," Surtain said. "We're facing top receivers each and every week, so you just have to come out and do what you have to do. Going against a receiver like that — a top receiver — it comes down to film study and your preparation throughout the week. You can only control what you can control, going forward. It's going to be a good battle, and I'm looking forward to it."

'He's phenomenal': Why Broncos CB Pat Surtain II is drawing rave reviews

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN

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Patrick Surtain tried to recall the moment he first noticed his son, [Denver Broncos](#) cornerback [Pat Surtain II](#), possessed an unusual calm in the face of sports mayhem, and one memory from a high school game stood out.

"The quarterback is avoiding him all day, he's getting no action, and finally the kid throws one over there and completes it, right in front of Pat," said the elder Surtain, who is a former 11-year NFL veteran and first-team All-Pro with the [Miami Dolphins](#). "And his face never changed. He never made an excuse, didn't even blink.

"It wasn't a touchdown or anything, but there was just something about that moment where it hit me just how calm he was. And I think that still serves him well and always will, especially at that position where your mistakes are touchdowns."

Others have made the same observation about Surtain, from teammates to all-time greats. Surtain is a 22-year-old cornerback who the Broncos hope can help lead the franchise from the no-playoff wilderness where it has wandered for the last six seasons. And if the Broncos are going to achieve their lofty goals this season, especially after a rocky 1-1 start, they'll need Surtain to continue his ascension into an elite cornerback.

The next step is Sunday night against the [San Francisco 49ers](#) (8:20 p.m. ET, NBC), although Surtain suffered a left shoulder injury in the Broncos' win over the [Houston Texans](#) in Week 2, and after returning to practice Thursday, his status is listed as questionable.

"[He's] always the same," said Broncos safety [Kareem Jackson](#), now in his 13th season. "Work, study, games, same approach, he's like a 10-year vet in that 22-year-old body. Patient, calm, no matter what." The elder Surtain isn't surprised.

"I think he's just always been that way, going back to when he was very young," said Surtain, who is now an assistant coach with the Dolphins. "He just seemed, even as a young, young person where nothing really bothered him, and it really didn't bother him, he wasn't covering anything up."

Champ Bailey was long the calmest face in the crowd on any football field. All of the physical attributes a cornerback needed to flourish with unwavering confidence.

Former Broncos wide receiver [Rod Smith](#) once said: "Champ didn't talk after plays, he didn't say anything, no matter what anybody said to him because he didn't have to. He knew you didn't catch the ball in front of him anyway."

Bailey is in the Pro Football Hall of Fame, and like many of the best defensive backs, he has studied Surtain with the benefit of experience and a growing anticipation of where his career might lead.

"Patience is hard, because everything about the job demands you go fast and be explosive," Bailey said. "But there is that element of patience, of when to do something, of how you move with the receiver without surrendering your balance and your positioning.

"All you have to do is watch him play and you see it. I'll tell you, I love to watch that young guy play. That's it, I guess that's the bottom line, I love to watch that young guy play. You know what he is? He's phenomenal."

From the moment he was the Broncos' first-round pick – ninth overall – in the 2021 draft, Surtain has shown he plays well beyond his years.

"I think from a competitive standpoint, he's churning in there, because he doesn't want anybody to catch a pass on him," the elder Surtain said. "But that demeanor, the way he approaches it, that's how he wants to play, that's how he wants to be."

Broncos defensive coordinator Ejiro Evero, who was an assistant with the Rams last year, remembers noticing Surtain's demeanor leading into the draft.

"There is that composure at the snap, composure at the catch point," Evero said. "There is no panic in his game."

Surtain is 6-foot-2, 202 pounds, tall for a cornerback – "long" as the scouts would say. He was one of the fastest players on the draft board at his position (a 4.42-second 40-yard dash in his pre-draft workout) and Alabama coach Nick Saban called him one of the smartest players he had ever coached.

Surtain's father said he always tried to teach his son the nuts-and-bolts elements of the position from an early age, even as Surtain piled up sports trophies of all kinds to go with an array of track and field medals.

Bailey breaks the position down into a handful of essential elements and said Surtain, unlike most young cornerbacks, is already proficient at all of them -- "as complete as I've seen in a long time, and that's before you even get to his length, speed and the rest of it."

Bailey pointed out Surtain's footwork in the Broncos' season-opening loss to the Seahawks when [DK Metcalf](#) attempted a double move early in the game, and Surtain smoothly matched Metcalf's movements without getting his own feet tangled while the ball went somewhere else.

His length prevents most wide receivers from pushing him away because his hands are already on them, and they can't reach him. And he plays with enough self awareness not to get in a wrestling match at the line of scrimmage with the bigger receivers.

And when the speed receivers try to leave him behind, "he understands the spacing, where he needs to be with the route recognition to know where they are going to go, and he has enough of his own speed to get there," Bailey said. "And he's tall, but he's not a long-strider, they can't just duck in on him because he can't get his hips around."

Surtain started 15 games as a rookie last season and finished with 58 tackles, four interceptions and 14 passes defensed – totals that earned him a spot on multiple all-rookie teams. And when he limited Metcalf to 36 yards receiving on seven catches, some of the best-known defensive backs weighed in on Twitter. [Darius Slay](#) called him "one of the best press technicians in the game," and [Richard Sherman](#) tweeted that he looks like a 10-year vet. Asante Samuel said "you are going to be a great player in the NFL."

"The technique, the patience, the anticipation," Bailey said. "He moves fast, but he's never in a hurry ... and his combination of size – no matter what any receiver tells you, that size has got to be a little intimidating – the speed, the patience, an obvious head for the game. You don't see that in somebody that young.

"He's doing things now, in his approach, with his technique, I really didn't do until my fourth or fifth year. He will play as long and be as good as health allows him to be."

For his part, Surtain usually accepts those compliments with a courteous nod, often says it is "exciting" and that he tries to "embrace the idea guys of that caliber like what you do, so it gives you a little bit of confidence."

Evero said he has no hesitation asking Surtain to line up against the league's best at wide receiver. After matching up with Metcalf, Surtain covered the Texans' [Brandin Cooks](#) until the injury.

"I think his demeanor shouldn't be confused with a lack of intensity," Evero said. "You see, in his play, there is a lot of fire, his personality is such he isn't going to show that intensity on his face, it's in how he plays."

Broncos cornerback Pat Surtain II prime to take step into elite company — “He has everything you want”

By Ryan O’Halloran
Denver Post
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General manager George Paton’s second-floor office at the Broncos’ facility features multiple television and computer screens he uses to call up video from a just-completed practice.

Throughout August, Paton would watch the offensive line, the back-of-the-roster receivers and, of course, quarterback Russell Wilson. He didn’t use many minutes breaking down cornerback Pat Surtain II’s morning of work.

“It’s kind of like his college tape — nobody throws at him,” Paton said. “He makes it look easy. I joke that it’s boring, but when they do throw at him, it’s pretty cool.”

Year 2 of PS2 could be pretty cool.

All about potential: Tanner Conner went from undrafted, small-school receiver to Dolphins tight end Surtain, who was Paton’s first Broncos draft pick (No. 9 in 2021), debuted with four interceptions, 14 total pass break-ups and only two penalties. The next step could be eye-popping.

“When you have a guy like him and he’s handling everything the right way, he changes our secondary,” defensive backs coach Christian Parker said. “The mental part of the game is slowing down for him and the physical part is becoming second nature.”

Surtain, 22, could be a fascinating watch for Broncos fans ... if opponents challenge him. It could be an opportunity to see Surtain ascend to elite status ... if he gets enough play-making chances. And it could be the start of a decade of shut-down corner play ... if the Broncos are able to play with more second-half leads.

Surtain wants the action.

“(Not getting targeted) is a compliment, but also, it’s like, ‘Dang, my stat sheet isn’t going to be up there (with the other top corners),’” he said. “Obviously, you’re doing something good (when not challenged). You always have to be engaged. You can’t take a play off because that’s when they get you.”

The track record of top-10 cornerbacks is underwhelming, to be kind, and disastrous to be blunt.

From 2012-20, nine cornerbacks were drafted in the top 10. Only three can be considered “hits” — Buffalo’s Stephon Gilmore in 2012 (No. 10), Jacksonville’s Jalen Ramsey in ‘16 (No. 5) and Cleveland’s Denzel Ward in ‘18 (No. 5).

Gilmore had one interception as a rookie and two in his second year. He left the Bills via free agency for New England, where he was a two-time first-team All-Pro.

Ramsey increased his rookie-year-to-second-year production from two to four interceptions and was named first-team All-Pro in '17. He was traded to the Los Angeles Rams in 2019 amid a contract squabble.

Ward had three and two interceptions in his first two NFL seasons and signed a five-year, \$100.5 million contract extension in April.

The rest didn't pan out.

Morris Claiborne (No. 6 to Dallas in 2012) played for three teams. Dee Milliner (No. 9 to the New York Jets in '13) played only nine career games because of injuries. Justin Gilbert (No. 8 to Cleveland in '14) was traded to Pittsburgh before his third season and one career interception. Eli Apple (No. 10 to the Giants in 16) has five interceptions in 73 games and is on his fourth team. And in 2020, Detroit drafted Jeff Okudah third overall (one interception in two years) and Jacksonville selected C.J. Henderson at No. 9 (he was traded to Carolina early in his second season).

The expectation for Surtain should be Ramsey-like if the Broncos want to use him as a matchup-centric chess piece.

"That's what this game is all about — you're trying to find matchups," defensive coordinator Ejiro Evero said. "You want your best players having a heavy-duty role covering their best players and things of that nature. He's one of our better players and we're always going to try to feature him in the best way."

Entering last season, Surtain was the No. 3 cornerback and projected as a move-around player, fast enough to cover the outside receiver, but also physical and technically savvy enough to work against slot receivers and tight ends. That plan, though, was nixed late in Week 1 when Ronald Darby sustained a hamstring injury.

Darby is back and the Broncos signed K'Waun Williams to replace Bryce Callahan as the nickel, allowing for the question of how Surtain can be unleashed.

"It's up for grabs," Paton said. "It obviously gives us flexibility. He can play anywhere on the field — inside, right, left, wherever — if they intend to use him like that."

Entering the season opener Monday night at Seattle, the anticipation from those outside the organization about Surtain's second year is matched by those inside.

"I'm always excited to come here and see what step he'll take next," safety Kareem Jackson said. "He never disappoints with that."

Said Paton: "Pat has everything you want (physically). Most importantly, he has the mind and he has the drive."

How Broncos' Pat Surtain II is channeling a team icon to raise the bar in Year 2

By Nick Kosmider
The Athletic
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Pat Surtain II was Superman without the cape, zooming through the air with his outstretched, 6-foot-2 frame positioned perfectly parallel to the ground below.

The scene took place near the end of Broncos training camp last month. Quarterback Russell Wilson had quickly moved the offense up the field on a promising two-minute drive, connecting with wide receiver K.J. Hamler on consecutive passes to move his unit into field-goal range. On a second-and-long play, Wilson spotted receiver Courtland Sutton, who had sat down on his route near the first-down marker on the right sideline. The quarterback had estimated that the rangy corner covering his top target, the defensive back who had been his biggest adversary throughout camp, was too far away this time to spoil the play. There was simply too much ground for Surtain to cover to close the gap and get in front of the big-bodied wide receiver.

The 22-year-old Surtain knew differently. He had already computed the calculus in his head. He knew when he had to break. Knew the spot he needed to reach before he could leap. Knew how to get to the ball. At the end point of the all those calculations, as detailed preparation collided with his uncommon size and athleticism, Surtain made a breathtaking dive toward the pass and deflected it before it could reach Sutton's hands. The offense would later settle for a long field goal. It was a jaw-dropping play made in a camp full of jaw-dropping highlights from Surtain. The play was a combination of all of his impressive traits — ability to prepare, anticipation, quickness, physicality, length — but it was best summed up by a teammate's more simple description.

"Man," Hamler said afterward, "PS2 is a freak of nature."

As the Broncos prepare for Monday night's 2022 regular-season opener at the Seahawks, Surtain is Denver's most indispensable defender. The second-year player is coming off a season in which he was an unanimous all-rookie selection after recording four interceptions and 14 passes defensed, the latter of which ranked 11th in the league and was tied with Green Bay's Eric Stokes for the lead among rookies. According to TruMedia, Surtain gave up only one touchdown pass among 505 coverage snaps in 2021. Opposing quarterbacks managed just a 51 percent completion rate and a 61.3 passer rating when targeting Surtain, according to Pro Football-Reference.

A frightening consideration for opponents? Surtain might just be scratching the surface of his potential, evidenced by a camp in which throwing deep against him was about as effective as starting a campfire with a wet match.

"He's comfortable now, but he's still learning," veteran Broncos cornerback Ronald Darby said of Surtain. "That's the scary part. He's as good as he is, and he's still learning."

Surtain's desire to devour film has already become a hallmark of his young career. For example, when the Broncos began working on their Week 1 game plan against the Seahawks, the route concepts and tendencies

from top Seattle targets DK Metcalf and Tyler Lockett were already familiar to Surtain. During the time between OTAs and the start of training camp, Surtain dove through clips of various wide receivers on Denver's schedule this season. The team game plans would come later, of course, but Surtain wanted to get a jump on mastering the nuances of his opponents' various play styles.

"You start on it early, before training camp," Surtain said. "Just keeping an eye on them, keeping an eye on tendencies, looking at route concepts, all of that, and what they like to do. You can always get an eye on them early."

The Broncos recently provided insight into the detail Surtain puts into film study, producing a video in which he and All-Pro safety Justin Simmons dissected a handful of plays from training camp practices. Surtain called up a second-and-medium play in which the offense split out three wide receivers, with a running back lined up eight yards behind the under-center Wilson and a tight end sitting in a three-point stance off the right tackle. Right away, Surtain, lined up on the outside against Sutton, determined a play-action pass was coming. More specifically, he knew what kind of pass — and what kind of route — was on the way.

"In my mind, when I see play-pass — obviously, with the tight end protecting, too — I'm thinking deep shots down the field," Surtain says in the video.

The breakdown went deeper. Surtain said he expected a double-move from Sutton that would fake an out route toward the sideline before turning back up the seam. Sutton indeed faked to the outside, but Surtain noted the receiver's "shoulders weren't committed to the out, so I just stayed on top." Sure enough, Surtain remained in perfect position in front of Sutton, allowing the cornerback to leap and deflect the deep pass away without making contact over the top of the receiver.

Surtain doesn't limit his study to current players. Defensive backs coach Christian Parker often puts together cut-ups for Surtain of past players at the position. The cornerback devours those videos, searching for various components he can add to his own game.

"He always wants to watch all that stuff because he's always looking for something," Parker told *The Athletic*. "He always wants to do extra things, watch extra film, and that makes him fun to coach."

Parker recently went on an archival hunt, putting together a cut-up of Hall of Famer and former Broncos cornerback Champ Bailey for Surtain. During his 15-year career, 10 of which were spent in Denver, Bailey intercepted 52 passes, deflected 203 more and scored five return touchdowns. His rookie year numbers in Washington in 1999 — five interceptions, 16 passes defensed, one return touchdown — were eerily similar to the line Surtain produced as a rookie last season (four, 14, one).

During a recent episode of *The Pivot Pod*, featuring Surtain II and his father, Patrick Surtain, as guests, former NFL running back Fred Taylor relayed a conversation he recently had with Bailey about the younger Surtain.

"I asked him what he thought about you," Taylor told the rising Broncos star. "He said, 'With his size, his potential, the rookie campaign that he put together, he definitely has Hall of Fame potential.'"

The son of a three-time Pro Bowler who played 11 seasons in the NFL, Surtain has fielded lofty comparisons to his father and other NFL stars since he entered high school at powerhouse American Heritage in South Florida. He tends to take them all in stride, unwavering in his approach regardless of the praise or, far more rarely, the criticism that follows. But Surtain admits the Bailey comparisons are meaningful.

“When you get those type of guys who recognize your play is at a high caliber, that means a lot, especially coming from a Hall-of-Fame player, one of the greatest ever to play the position,” Surtain told The Athletic. “Coming from a player like that, of his caliber, when he was in his playing days he was great as well, so just hearing that from him speaks volume.”

As for what he gained from the Bailey film study, Surtain said the Hall of Famer’s “IQ and instincts” stood out most. The ability to anticipate and react quickly is what made Bailey so hard to beat. Across the 2005 and 2006 seasons alone, Bailey intercepted 18 passes and scored three touchdowns.

“What he reads, what he sees out there, obviously I can’t see what he sees from his point of view, but on film you can tell a lot from his tape,” Surtain said of Bailey. “His demeanor, his technique, it’s all stuff I’ve learned from.”

Bailey recorded just 13 interceptions over his final seven seasons, in large part because quarterbacks simply started to avoid him. If the end of last season was any indication, Surtain might soon face similar treatment. During his final five games last season, only once was Surtain targeted by an opposing quarterback more than five times. In the first 11 games of the season, quarterbacks crossed that threshold seven times.

Training camp illustrated the peril for offenses that test Surtain too often. Though Wilson and Sutton connected for one impressive touchdown over Surtain in the back of the end zone during a red-zone drill midway through camp, deep passes against Surtain routinely ended in the cornerback knocking the ball away or covering the receiver so tightly, he had no room to make a catch.

Quarterbacks have largely approached Surtain the same way since high school. At American Heritage, he made five interceptions across three varsity seasons, an impressive number when you consider opponents’ cautious approach: “I don’t remember anyone even ever trying him,” former high school teammate Brandon Johnson said. It was the same thing at Alabama, where Surtain had four interceptions in three seasons, as quarterbacks were typically content to avoid his side of the field. Surtain is disciplined enough to know his statistics don’t always reflect the impact he can have for a defense.

“It’s also a compliment if another team’s quarterback doesn’t look your way,” he said. “Obviously, you’re doing something good. On the stat sheet, it’s not going to come out the way you want it to come out, but at the end of the day, you know you did something well.”

Parker served as an assistant in Green Bay during cornerback Jaire Alexander’s second and third NFL seasons, the latter being the 2020 campaign that would result in his Alexander’s first Pro Bowl berth. Though Alexander began facing fewer targets, his impact grew nonetheless, Parker said, because of the “mentality and demeanor” he carried onto the field. It was a confidence that translated to teammates. Parker sees the same thing in Surtain now, a growth that helps explain a dominant training camp and, his position coach believes, an equally dominant season to come.

“There’s a certain demeanor the great ones have. Even if they didn’t have numbers on their jerseys, you’d know who those guys are. Pat carries himself that way,” Parker said. “Now, it’s doing it all the time, taking control and being a vet, because you’ve played a lot of games. It’s just continuing and understanding that process. You’re really close to taking that next step, but his ceiling is so high. He wants it. He knows how good he is, but he doesn’t let that cloud the process he has to go through to be great.”

Pat Surtain II and the family legacy that goes well beyond his famous father

By Ben Swanson
DenverBroncos.com
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On the busiest day before National Signing Day in 2018, there was a traffic jam in front of a contemporary-style home with large windows and sharp angles at the end of a cul-de-sac in Plantation, Florida, some 25 miles north of Miami.

Over the course of several hours, groups of cars had pulled up to the end of the street and parked. Pat Surtain II says there were six groups, while his father and high school coach, Patrick, recalls five.

However many there were, these vehicles carried some of the most powerful men in college football. They were coaches representing some of the country's most prestigious programs, Nick Saban from Alabama, Ed Orgeron from LSU, Dabo Swinney from Clemson and Mark Richt from Miami among them.

They each had made the pilgrimage with the same hope, but only one of them would be lucky enough to land the high school senior who was considered the top cornerback in the country. As the deadline for Surtain II's decision approached, they arrived at the Plantation home to make one last pitch, crowding the street as they did so.

"Neighbors were probably looking at my house like, What's going on here? Cars just everywhere," Surtain II says.

Each team would get about 45 minutes or an hour in the living room with the Surtains, and in the meantime, the group that was on deck would wait its turn.

"They're waiting outside," Surtain says. "Nick Saban would leave, Dabo Swinney would come in. It was crazy."

"You'd look outside, it's another set of coaches," Surtain II says. "It's back-to-back-to-back."

The recruiting process had been grueling — "hectic," in Surtain II's words — and he'd been going through it for a long time. Schools sometimes would work in visits during Surtain II's lunch break at American Heritage School. Saban once asked if he could land his helicopter at school for a recruiting trip (perhaps not just for Surtain II; American Heritage had several top recruits). Surtain II's first offer, he says, came from LSU when he was still in middle school in eighth grade — "supposedly," he says with a wry smile. Thankfully, it would all be over pretty soon with the NSD deadline on Feb 7.

"It's a blessing and a curse, to be honest," Surtain says. "If you feel you're a big-time athlete, you want to be in that position, and he was."

All this was more than what the elder Surtain himself had when he was a promising young cornerback finishing high school. Truthfully, he'll say that's fine with him, because he'd always wanted more for his children.

For generations of Surtains, this is the legacy that connects them. The father-son cornerback connection is important and the most evident between the two, but what's bigger is that through situations that can test the will of even the strongest of people, the Surtains have persevered.

That's how it's been for Surtains for generations, and as essential as the father-son cornerback connection seems for Surtain II, the stronger one that connects them is one that goes deeper than football.

I. 'I wouldn't be the person I was today if I didn't have that upbringing'

To understand how Pat Surtain II reached the NFL, first you must understand how his father did so decades earlier.

Patrick Surtain grew up a long way away from Plantation and the immaculate modern home with its finely manicured yard and pool out back.

He had grown up in far more humble beginnings in the Magnolia Projects, which was considered one of the roughest parts of New Orleans. The colonial-style public housing was originally built in the early 1940s, but by the 1980s, when Surtain was a child, they'd grown neglected as public funding shrank. One former resident of the area later reflected that he didn't recall ever seeing green grass there; what he remembered was dirt, broken glass and dead bodies.

Amid it all, Surtain's mother, Pamela, was the glue for the family. She provided for them largely on \$80 a week working for a dry cleaner, as she, Patrick and her other three children shared a two-bedroom apartment that she rented for \$38 a month.

Surtain became a state-champion quarterback in high school — he even helped his school top Isadore Newman in a duel against Peyton Manning in 1992. Surtain was not as hotly recruited as Manning or his own future son, but he earned a scholarship to continue playing football at Southern Mississippi — where he would be converted to a cornerback.

"It was rough growing up, but at the same time, I wouldn't be the person I was today if I didn't have that upbringing," Surtain says. "It was impoverished, but at the same time, that didn't matter to the people in that community. We were a community — everybody knew each other. We got along. Obviously you had your crime, you had your murders and your robberies and the drugs and everything, but as a little kid growing up, I think I was shielded from that because my family was really well known in that community and they knew I had a really, really special gift ... me and my older brother. Just being in that situation, it taught me a lot and it made me want to work to get out of that situation and obviously provide for my family in other ways."

Over the next few decades, the fruits of Surtain's labors paid off. He was drafted in the second round by Miami, where he became a three-time Pro Bowler. Through his subsequent contracts with the Dolphins and, later, the Chiefs, he was able to purchase a five-bedroom house for his mother and establish his own long-term roots in South Florida.

Through football, Patrick was paving the way for the next generation of Surtains — including Pat — to grow up in safer and more stable surroundings.

II. 'I could really do this. I could change my life forever'

Midway through high school, Surtain II sat down with his father and constructed the plan that would lead him to the NFL — now he just had to make it happen.

Scattered around the perimeter of Surtain II's childhood bedroom are the mementoes that naturally pile up when you're one of the most gifted athletes in the country.

Jerseys from his youth teams. Photos from high school football games. A miniature cutout of himself. Helmets from his old teams. And there's just a pile of medals, mostly track and field championships.

One of those medals is for a state title in the 4x100 relay. As it so happens, each of American Heritage's sprinters on that relay team ended up in the NFL: Surtain II, Tyson Campbell, Anthony Schwartz and Marco Wilson.

That, perhaps more than anything else Surtain II can say, speaks loudest about the kind of talent that American Heritage has there. His father says about a dozen children in the area in Surtain II's graduating class ended up reaching the NFL.

"It's crazy," Surtain says. "Me being from New Orleans, I knew how crazy it was, but this is times five. Times five. And it starts at the little league level. The little league games are sometimes more tense than a high school game, or NFL or college games. At 5 years old, pee-wee ball. It's a culture around here. They live and die football at an early age."

Surtain II says he never felt pushed into the game by his father. An active child, he was practically obsessed with playing sports — almost any sport. Basketball, baseball, track, soccer and, of course, football had their place in his life. But football "felt natural," Surtain II says, and he "just fell in love with it."

From there, Surtain II started his path toward becoming the best young cornerback in the country, though it wasn't until after his sophomore year of high school that he really thought the NFL could be in his future. Sometime between those two school years, as his father prepared to go from an assistant coach at his son's school to head coach, they sat down together to establish a five-year plan.

The goals were lofty, of course: finish out high school, go to a college for three years and then go to the NFL. There were smaller goals that flowed from there, daily ones, but they all supported that main objective.

"It was just something like that that led me to think, Man, I could really do this. I could change my life forever," Surtain II says. "I just was dedicated to the grind."

To put it lightly, success followed.

"Back-to-back state titles," Surtain says. "Won 31 straight games. Finished number 2 in the country his senior year. We had, what, five or six guys drafted off that team. It was a national powerhouse."

All that put Surtain II on a collision course with the most successful college football coach in history — Nick Saban.

As the 2017 college football season came to a close, Saban and Alabama were in fairly dire need of cornerbacks. An unprecedented six cornerbacks were departing after the season, which meant that Saban

was able to offer not only a chance to join the national champions but to do so with a pretty good shot at playing from Day 1 as a true freshman, if all went well.

And while Surtain II also seriously debated an offer from LSU, which had natural ties for him because of his family's Louisiana roots, Alabama — given its tremendous track record at the collegiate and pro levels, its resources and unimpeachable coaching — was too much for Surtain II to pass up.

"I kind of gave him the pros and cons of each program and let him know that, This is the decision that you have to live with," Surtain says. "I don't have to live with it. I'm going to support you whichever way you go, but this is going to be a decision that you will have to live with. It was hard. It was some tears and some really mental anguish going on because he was so torn. He was so torn. I think his main thing was he didn't want to let anybody down. I had to let him know: You're not letting anybody down. It's your decision and your decision alone."

By himself in the hours before signing day, Surtain II made up his mind.

"It went down to the midnight oil," Surtain says. "At 1 or 2 in the morning, he came in and said, I've made my decision. I want to go to Alabama."

"Obviously, the rest is history."

III. 'She's the one that helped build the stage'

While the Surtain legacy from the outside appears to be centered on football and centered on the family's two most successful athletes, Pamela's as big a part of the legacy as Patrick.

Three years later, the five-year plan was about to reach completion.

On April 29, 2021, Surtain II and nearly a dozen family members and close friends were there with him to watch him enter the NFL. The three incredible years as a starter at Alabama, which included a national championship and 2020 SEC Defensive Player of the Year honors, put him in position to be drafted early in the first round.

There in Cleveland, his father was struck by the differences between this draft and his own in 1998. One hundred and fifty of his closest friends and family members watched as he was drafted in the second round.

Twenty-three years later, the Surtains were joined by a crowd of about 35,000 fans in Cleveland as they watched Surtain II become a Bronco in the first round with the ninth-overall pick.

"It was truly special," Surtain says. "But it comes full circle to see your son do it and actually be at the draft. It was surreal. Just hearing his name called and you could see, when he got that phone call, everything was peaches and cream. When they got that phone call, it kind of hit him — and hit all of us."

Amid the celebration following the call Surtain II received from the Broncos, he embraced his father in the green room — and took hold of the framed photo of his father's late parents, which he thinks his dad brought from home.

"I really don't know," Surtain II says. "My dad had it. It caught me by surprise. It was probably a surprise that he did. I didn't know he took it. But looking at that moment, it just made me capture the perspective — like, she's here with us sharing a special moment with the family. I already know she was proud of that moment up in the heavens above."

Pamela had always been a key part of Surtain's life, and when his son was born, she formed a similarly important role as a protective grandmother.

"That was her baby," Surtain says. "That was Granny to him. And she went out of her way to protect him. That was the guy. He couldn't do no wrong in her eyes. She loved him immensely, and I know he thinks about her all the time. ... I know she's looking down on him, seeing that he's doing great things. It was a special relationship. It was a special relationship between those two. Obviously, he has a special relationship with his other grandmother as well. We're really family oriented people, and that means a lot to us."

In March, Pat Surtain II returned to his hometown of Plantation, Florida to visit his high school alma mater and his childhood home.

As Surtain II grew up, family was a constant part of life and among them, Pamela was a consistent presence, especially at his games. He'd rely on her for advice, for a kind word on a hard day. And the same way that her son was humble in spite of his achievements, she helped instill those traits in her grandson.

"She taught me a lot, just how to be respectful, how to be a great man in this world," Surtain II says. "I learned a lot of life lessons from her. I could tell because of the way my dad is, how humble he is, how he approaches life, I could tell that she instilled that into him. And then when I was able to be around her as well, she instilled that into me as well."

While the Surtain legacy from the outside appears to be centered on football and centered on the family's two most successful athletes, Pamela's as big a part of the legacy as Patrick.

"She's the one that helped build the stage," Surtain II says. "She's the one that helped raise my dad into becoming the person that he is. ... You could just tell by the way that he acts, how he treats people, how humble he is. And I look up to my dad. He was such a great role model, not only for the family. He inspired so many people around him. That's the type of guy I want to be, at the end of the day — a type of guy that inspires people, lifts up people. A type of person where they can lean on me for anything."

"But my grandma, she was a tremendous figure in our lives and our family. I always look at her as an inspiration of mine, too. ... She's a very key part of my heart. As I go on through this football stage in my life, I'm going to always look at the memories we had and the things she taught me and the things she instilled in me."

IV. 'What if I didn't have all this, the legacy behind me?'

The legacy Surtain II hopes to uphold — in football and outside it — is hefty, but he wouldn't have it any other way.

Surtain II occasionally thinks about what it would be like to not be a Surtain, to not have the luxuries that his father's NFL career has afforded him.

"Sometimes, I just be thinking like, What if I had it different?" Surtain II admits. "What if I didn't have all this, the legacy behind me? What if I grew up in a sort of way like a majority of kids grow up?"

In other words, perhaps: What if he'd grown up in the atmosphere his father did?

"Obviously his lifestyle was different from me," Surtain II says. "I grew up around the NFL lifestyle in a calm, peaceful area. He grew up in a sort of violent drug area in the projects. So obviously his background was different from mine, but we all had the same type of personality, same type of determination, at the end of the day. His work ethic was different from mine, because you know he had a family to feed, he had people that's looking to him, towards him, just to be that dude to change their family's lives forever. I'm looking to be that dude to carry on a legacy."

Growing up, Surtain II resented the idea that he had it made just because of his last name. Obviously, he understands it's afforded him certain comforts and genetic abilities, but as a football player, he wanted to make sure that if you took the name off of his stats or off the back of his jersey, he'd stand out just as much.

"Being down here and having the same name as me," Surtain says, "a lot of people think that, OK, things are going to be given to him. He's Patrick Surtain II, he doesn't have to work as hard as other guys to get it. But I think he saw that and took offense to that. Like, Nah, I'm my own person. Even though I have my dad's name, I'm going to show you I'm the best at what I do. And he did it at the high school level, he did it at the college level. ... The eye in the sky don't lie — you cut the film on and you see what kind of player he is."

But beyond perhaps some askance looks or whispers, the heavier psychological burden of also being named Patrick Surtain may be that he's constantly being measured up against his father. Is he as physically gifted? Is he as skilled in man-to-man coverage? How about zone coverage? Will he be able to make it to the NFL? Will he be as accomplished in the NFL? Maybe these are trivial concerns, but to Surtain II they may not be.

Regardless, Surtain II never wishes it away — neither the benefits nor the burdens.

"I would never ever change the way how I would be," Surtain II says. "I just think that when I look at it, being named after my dad, I just think that he did that because he'd seen something special in me. Like, You know what? I want to give him the same name because I think he could do probably bigger or better things than I have done."

"It just carried on that legacy, that family legacy."

‘When I’m locked in ... I can tell I’m hard to beat’: After stellar rookie season, Pat Surtain II looks to improve consistency in Year 2

By Aric DiLalla
DenverBroncos.com
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A year ago, Pat Surtain II was simply one of the next promising draft prospects.

And before the next draft has even arrived, Surtain has already proved himself not just among the best players from last year’s class — but also as one of the top cornerbacks in the league.

“Pat — I don’t even know if I want to put expectations on him,” safety Justin Simmons said last week. “I feel like I’d be selling him short. ... You can tell in his technique. Anyone who watches the game and watches the corner position and his approach [can see] his technique. I said it before, but he just has been drilled and coached at such a young age that it’s just natural. Any time you have those basic fundamentals as a player, the sky’s the limit. You can go above and beyond the expectations that you have for yourself. There’s no doubt in my view that Pat is arguably — and this is just my opinion — obviously going to be a top-five corner in this league for as long as he wants to play, every single year.”

Three-time first-team All-Pro Richard Sherman called Surtain’s rookie film “teach tape,” and General Manager George Paton has repeatedly spoken highly of the first first-round pick of his career.

As Surtain approaches Year 2 in Denver, he’s focused on adding consistency to a level of play that led to one of the best rookie seasons for a cornerback in team history.

“I just want to build on consistency, technique, fundamentals and those sorts of things,” Surtain said Tuesday. “I think I can improve on more film study, of course — recognizing offensive patterns and offensive concepts. [It’s about] slowing the game down a little bit in the second year.”

The baseline is already set high. Surtain became the first Broncos rookie to pick off four passes since 1976, and he’s one of two Broncos in the last decade to record that number of interceptions. Surtain was also named the AFC Defensive Player of the Week after a win over the Chargers, earned All-Rookie honors at the end of the year and was the first alternate for the Pro Bowl.

And yet, Surtain can foresee clear growth as he continues his career.

“[I’m] just getting more comfortable,” Surtain said. “The first year, I was getting my feet wet a little bit, but now I can see myself growing each and every day.”

Surtain said he can see himself living up to Simmons’ expectations, but he’s not planning to skip any steps as he looks to cement himself among the league’s best.

“I can view myself as that,” said Surtain when asked if he’s a top cornerback. “Of course I’ve got to build on that and focus on — day in and day out, week in and week out — preparing the right way. Just

consistency, like I mentioned before. I'm going to work toward that, but I'm going to focus on what I need to do first."

There are already signs that teams view him among the elite cornerbacks in the league. Surtain held Terry McLaurin, Tyreek Hill, Odell Beckham Jr. and Ja'Marr Chase all to zero yards during snaps in which he was in coverage this year, and he can sense that quarterbacks stayed away from him at times.

"I could tell that when I'm focused, when I'm locked in, when I'm relying on my technique, making sure I'm on top of that, I can tell I'm hard to beat," Surtain said. "... The technique part and the fundamentals part, when all that comes together, quarterbacks would tend to shy away."

There's no shying away, though, from the reality that just a year into his career, Surtain is already among the NFL's best.