

Why Broncos receiver Courtland Sutton is off to the best start of his career

By Nick Kosmider
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The call came in as a run, but Russell Wilson looked to his right and saw the one sight that has consistently equated to gold for the Broncos' offense.

"If we get a one-on-one with Courtland Sutton," fellow wide receiver Kendall Hinton said, "we're going to take that opportunity."

When Wilson saw the 49ers apply single coverage to Sutton on first-and-10 at the San Francisco 24-yard line late in the fourth quarter Sunday, the veteran quarterback changed the play at the line of scrimmage. He took a shotgun snap, froze the deep safety ever so slightly with a look to the left and fired a back-shoulder throw to Sutton on the right sideline for a 19-yard gain in front of cornerback Charvarius Ward. The Broncos registered their lone touchdown of the game two plays later, the go-ahead score in an 11-10 victory.

"That's just Courtland being Courtland and Russell giving him a good ball," coach Nathaniel Hackett said. "That's just so hard to defend."

The play seemed simple enough. Recognition of a coverage, a look between quarterback and receiver and an explosive pass to follow. But those plays were rarely easy for Sutton last season. According to TruMedia, Sutton was targeted on passes of 16 or more air yards 33 times in 2021, a figure that ranked 15th in the league, but he caught only nine of those passes. That 27.3 percent catch rate ranked last among 22 players with at least 30 such targets. The inefficiency could be chalked up to several contributing factors, from inefficient quarterback play to clunky play calling to the fact Sutton, who caught only 20 passes across the final 10 games last season, was still finding his form as he returned from ACL surgery.

Whatever the reasons for last season's struggles on deep passes, there has been an abrupt change in 2022. In just the first three games of this season, Sutton has already caught eight passes of 16-plus air yards — three more than any other player in the NFL — on a league-high 11 targets. That's good for a 72.7 percent catch rate.

Those deep plays have laid the foundation for the best start of Sutton's career. His overall numbers of 19 catches, 291 yards and 14 first downs are the top marks through three games during any of his five pro seasons. Among NFL players who have run at least 100 routes, he ranks third in yards per route (2.51), seventh in yards per target (10.4) and sixth in first downs per target (50 percent, 14 of 28). In a nod to his have-to-have-it playmaking, Sutton is also tied for the NFL lead with nine receptions on third or fourth down.

"For third and fourth downs, whenever we get in those situations you want to be the guy that Russell is looking for," Sutton said after the Broncos' Week 2 win over the Texans. "I want those opportunities to be able to make those plays. I want to be able to be the guy that he goes to on the big third downs and fourth downs so that we can convert them on the field. I feel like in order to be able to be in that space of an elite wide receiver, you have got to be that guy that can make those big third downs and fourth downs. You want to be that guy for us."

Broncos wide receivers coach Zach Azzanni, who has coached Sutton since his rookie year in 2018, believes the fast start for the team's top receiver is largely a progression of the things "he's always been able to do." But Sutton, Azzanni said, is also benefitting from past experience in an offense similar to the one the Broncos are running now. In 2019, the Broncos ran an outside-zone scheme under former offensive coordinator Rich Scangarello that featured similar passing concepts to Hackett's version of the system, and it produced Sutton's best pro season. He earned a Pro Bowl invite, as an alternate, after catching 72 passes for 1,112 yards and six touchdowns.

"It's a lot of the same kind of concepts, things he's already been accustomed to from that season," Azzanni said. "He already had a little bit of background, so when we put it in, it wasn't completely foreign to him, like other new systems. This is his fourth system in five years, but thank God there is a lot of carryover from that (2019) season. He understands these concepts and where to be and how to be there."

Azzanni noted the 2022 Broncos' offense creates more consistent downfield opportunities for a target like Sutton because of their heavy use of play-action and other components "that we just didn't have systematically in the last offense" under former coordinator Pat Shurmur. According to Pro Football Focus, Sutton already has five receptions this season off play-action fakes, which is only four fewer than he had all of last season.

One came at the end of the first quarter Sunday, with Sutton lined up tight left in a stacked formation outside Jerry Jeudy. After Wilson faked the handoff to Melvin Gordon — who then deftly picked up San Francisco's extra rusher — he maneuvered and waited as Sutton ran a deep crossing route. Once Wilson recognized Sutton was about to run beyond the underneath linebacker, Fred Warner, the quarterback delivered a strike, and Sutton caught the pass and turned upfield for a 34-yard gain. That helped set up Denver's first score of the game, a 55-yard Brandon McManus field goal.

"When the run game matches the pass game, it gives opportunities like that down the field for Courtland to create a one-on-one matchup — or be wide open, depending on the coverage," Azzanni said. "We've been trying to take advantage of those, and Courtland is one of the best in the business at 'em, so we're going to keep doing it."

Sutton is also benefitting from a fast-formed connection with Wilson. Early in training camp, Hackett said the team's new quarterback was quickly beginning to realize Sutton "might be open in even more ways than you might think." Hackett saw Wilson start to take more chances down the field with his top target, even when he was tightly covered, trusting that the 6-foot-4, 214-pound wide receiver with the basketball background would be able to make a play.

"He's got this amazing catching radius that people need to appreciate," Wilson said. "This guy, anything that you put in his vicinity, he's going to catch it."

Wilson made that proclamation after testing the theory early in the offseason. During a minicamp he organized with his receivers in San Diego in April, Wilson sent Sutton on a deep in route and launched the ball as far as he could, effectively trying to see whether Sutton could turn an overthrow into a catch.

"I wanted to see how he could go get it," Wilson said. "He cut across the field, and he just laid out for it. This is in April, and he lays out for it with a one-handed catch, dives for it, catches it right between his fingers, holds on to it and holds it up. I got the footage somewhere. It was an amazing play."

Those were the types of plays that helped put Sutton on the map in 2019 as a young receiver on the rise. Azzanni recalls the 21-yard touchdown grab Sutton made against the Browns that season, when he dove for the pass in the end zone and seemingly hung in midair before snatching the ball away from cornerback Denzel Ward. These sorts of highlights are trickling back in 2022.

“Some of the things he can do with his body when the ball is in the air is amazing,” Azzanni said. “Russell has definitely learned that.”

Despite the well-documented trouble the Broncos have had scoring the ball through three games, Wilson is tied atop the NFL leaderboard with Raiders quarterback Derek Carr — Denver’s opponent in Week 4 — with a 52.2 percent completion rate on passes of 16 or more air yards (minimum 20 attempts). He has spread the love on those throws, with Hinton, Jeudy, Eric Saubert and Andrew Beck all catching at least one pass in that range. He has placed trust in his receivers to make plays on those deep balls, often in contested situations, and Sutton has benefitted from that confidence from the quarterback.

“They call those 50-50 balls, but on our offensive side, we like to think of them more as 75-25,” Hinton said. “The quarterback gives you a chance, and you’re getting a (defensive pass interference) or we’re winning the ball. When (No.) 3 gives you that opportunity, you make it happen.”

Sutton is largely making the most of those chances, and it’s frightening to think of where Denver’s offense would be if he weren’t. Jeudy had a 67-yard touchdown in the first quarter of Denver’s Week 1 loss to the Seahawks, but he has recorded only three catches for 27 yards in the last two games while dealing with a rib injury. KJ Hamler, working his way back from ACL and hip surgeries, has yet to catch a pass in two appearances. The rest of Denver’s wide receivers — Hinton, Tyrie Cleveland, Montrell Washington — have only four combined receptions this season, and top tight end target Albert Okwuegbunam has only one catch in the past two games. The Broncos need more from the rest of Wilson’s targets.

In the meantime, Sutton seems poised to keep making plays thanks to good health, a familiar scheme that fits his talents, a quarterback who believes in him and hunger that has emanated from the four straight losing seasons he’s endured.

“He’s doing everything he can to be phenomenal, and he already is, so the sky is the limit for him,” Wilson said. “I think people need to know who Courtland Sutton is. And they’re starting to recognize how special he really is.”

Courtland Sutton values giving back to community, focused on season ahead

By Cody Roark
Mile High Sports
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Hundreds of aspiring young athletes flocked to Englewood High School to participate in Courtland Sutton's inaugural football camp. Starstruck eyes followed the Denver Broncos wide receiver around the field over the weekend.

"Don't be afraid to come up and talk to me, ask me questions," the Broncos fifth-year receiver said during the opening moments of his camp. "I'm here to enjoy the camp just as much as you guys."

Sutton's infectious energy captured the young minds and attention of those in attendance.

As he made his way around the field, playing quarterback, defensive back, or demonstrating receiver drills, his hands-on approach showcased how much he values the opportunity to give back to the next generation of football players.

Aside from Sutton's presence at the camp, former Broncos fan-favorite receiver Brandon Lloyd showed up to support and lend a helping hand.

In between rotating stations with camp participants, Sutton came over and spoke with Mile High Sports for an exclusive 1-on-1 interview.

When he was younger, he recalled the impact youth camps had on him growing up.

"I think the biggest thing is the memory," Sutton said. "This is something that I know myself, being able to go to a camp like this, it's something that you remember. Coming here with your buddies in the summertime, enjoying and being able to play some ball, being around good people, it's a memory that will last."

Sutton doesn't take his position as a leader in the community for granted. Seeing the excitement in the eyes of the young camp participants, the value of positively impacting the life of somebody else is something he believes you can't put a price on.

"If you could sit there and make a kid's day by just playing catch with them, it's huge," Sutton reflected during his camp. "I know for myself that was huge having anybody that was at any level higher than where I was coming out, all you want to do is sit and listen, catch passes from them, see if you could race them. Just trying to make sure the kids enjoy themselves while they're out here and have as much fun as they can."

As the Broncos prepare to report for training camp on July 27, Sutton plans to continue to put work in during the team's brief period off from team scheduled activities. After wrapping up mandatory minicamp, the star receiver plans to get together with his teammates as the offense continues to ramp things up ahead of the season.

“Minicamp and OTAs were really good,” Sutton said. “It’s huge to make sure we don’t have a dropoff rolling into training camp.”

For the veteran leader and a variety of his teammates, that means that they’ll reconnect with new Broncos quarterback Russell Wilson for a second session at Wilson’s compound in San Diego, California.

Since the Broncos traded for Wilson in March, Sutton and his teammates have spent extra time working with him to get on the same page with a brand new offensive scheme with the mindset that they can get off to a hot start come the regular season.

“That first opportunity of getting to see how he operates was amazing,” Sutton reflected on the team’s first trip to San Diego. “[Russ] is a scholar of the game, he really makes sure he understands everything he possibly can, but he’s also huge on the things that people might not talk about as much. Making sure he’s taking care of his body, getting enough sleep so that his body can recover.”

As he enters his fifth year in Denver, seeing how Wilson does the extra things is something that has trickled down to other players in the locker room. Wilson’s presence is the tide that raises all ships, and Sutton is excited for the opportunity to be one of his top receiving options in 2022.

Recently, Sutton graced the cover of Mile High Sports Magazine’s June issue, sharing his passion off the field about golfing. We asked Courtland about which Broncos teammate he would choose to pair up with if he was invited to “The Match” and who he’d choose to face.

“I think I’d probably pick [Broncos kicker] Brandon McManus,” Sutton said on Saturday. “Great golfer, great friend and I think he and I would work well together. The two people we would go against? He’d probably pick another kicker. I’d love to play against Larry Fitzgerald. I heard he’s a really good golfer. It would be a lot of me picking his brain more than us playing golf. If I could play against Larry, that would be fun.”

The expectations for the Broncos are high entering the season, but Courtland’s calm demeanor and constant will to find opportunities to get better will hopefully help the team take the necessary strides here in 2022.

Courtland Sutton raises \$47K at UHealth's Healthy Swings charity event

By Zach Segars
Mile High Sports
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On Tuesday, UHealth and the Denver Broncos held their 'Healthy Swings' charity event at Coors Field, and Courtland Sutton was the star of the day, raising over \$47,000 dollars for the American Cancer Society.

"It's huge being able to do something like this, but I think it's even more fun to be able to do it with my teammates and all of us being able to come together and do something for something that's bigger than us, something that's way more meaningful than anything we can think of," Sutton said at the event. "So to be able to do it all together, it's huge."

The 'Healthy Swings' event is a fundraiser in which a collection of cancer survivors, media figures, and Denver Broncos players compete in a home-run derby, with dollar amounts awarded depending on how far the ball is hit.

"Coming together with our patients and our sports partners to have a great time and raise money for this important cause demonstrates our focus on helping people live healthy, extraordinary lives," Manny Rodriguez, UHealth's chief marketing and experience officer, said. "Thanks to research and advanced treatments, many of the UHealth patients who participated in the home run derby today are living cancer-free lives and serve as a beacon of hope for those still fighting this terrible disease. UHealth is excited to support the American Cancer Society and their groundbreaking research, impacting the future of cancer treatment."

In total, \$255,000 dollars were raised for cancer research, with Sutton raising more than 18 percent of that total. Despite being the event's best slugger, Sutton downplayed his baseball ability ahead of his at-bat.

"I grew up playing baseball, but once college came around, it was all football, and I swung a bat every now and then, but it's been some time, so hopefully I don't embarrass myself too much out there," Sutton said, crediting Brandon McManus and Quinn Meinerz as the odds-on favorites.

Broncos receiver Courtland Sutton feels poised for big season with Russell Wilson as his new quarterback

By George Stoia
The Gazette
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When Broncos wide receiver Courtland Sutton signed his four-year, \$60 million contract extension 142 days ago on Nov. 22, he didn't know who would be throwing him balls in 2022.

Sutton trusted general manager George Paton to make the right move and he trusted himself to perform at a high level, no matter the quarterback. And it worked out for Sutton and the Broncos, landing nine-time Pro Bowler Russell Wilson in March.

"I had no conversations with them about the quarterback situation," Sutton said Tuesday of contract negotiations. "Rumors are rumors. I had no idea who was going to be our quarterback going into the upcoming season, all I knew is I wanted to be a Bronco.

Russell Wilson was traded from the Seattle Seahawks to the Denver Broncos mid March and the NFL world is still buzzing. Broncos receiver Courtland Sutton said "the juice is just different" when he described Wilson. The Broncos added to their offseason acquisition list by signing former Dallas Cowboys DE Randy Gregory. Marcellus Wiley and Emmanuel Acho decide if Russell Wilson will live up to the hype surrounding him in Denver.

"God works in mysterious ways. We got the contract done, and we got Russ. Everything is right in front of us."

Sutton and his fellow Bronco receivers are certainly the biggest winners of the Wilson trade, having little stability at the quarterback position the past six seasons. In his four seasons in Denver, Sutton has caught passes from six different quarterbacks. And despite the inconsistency of who has been throwing him the ball, he's become a premier receiver in the league, totaling 175 receptions for 2,658 yards and 12 touchdowns.

Having already spent time with Wilson in San Diego where Wilson hosted him and other Broncos for a private workout, Sutton knows his game, on and off the field, is going to be elevated.

"His knowledge of the game is to a different level," Sutton said. "You can tell that it comes to him so easy. And he wants everyone around him to be able to understand it the way he understands, it so that we can play as fast as we possibly can."

Justin Simmons, Broncos defense hope to uphold defensive standard as Russell Wilson leads offense Sutton also said he feels as healthy as he's ever been, after returning last year from an ACL injury in 2020. After playing in a brace all last season, he's spent this off-season without the brace and said his "body feels amazing."

With Sutton healthy and nearly the entire receiving corps returning, the Broncos' offensive expectations are high next season. Sutton hopes to return to play again at an elite level, as he showed he can in 2019

when he made his first career Pro Bowl. And he's expected to, with Wilson under center and coach Nathaniel Hackett calling plays.

But Sutton isn't the only one who has high expectations. Wilson has brought new expectations to Denver, and everyone from the receivers to the employees can feel it.

"Everyone in the building understands the expectation, the standards, are being risen to everyone's best — from the cooks to the equipment guys, video — everyone in the building understands that we have to operate at a different level, operate at a different standard," Sutton said. "It's Russ, plus coach Hackett and the new coaching staff. Everyone is bringing that new juice, that new energy into the building. I think everyone is buying into it and understanding what the standard is."