Vance Joseph harbors no ill feelings about previous gig as Broncos head coach

By Mike Klis
KUSA
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To be a football coach is to be willing to cut off the cable and electric service at one place, and start it back up at another.

Even a successful head coach like Sean Payton moved eight times as a coach to five different colleges and three NFL teams before he became head coach of the New Orleans Saints in 2006.

Still, getting dismissed as a head coach -- the ultimate job most coaches aspire to -- must sting a little more than packing up as an assistant to a fired head coach. Vic Fangio didn't want to return to the Broncos as Payton's defensive coordinator in part because his dismissal as head coach following the 2021 season was still fresh.

Vance Joseph had a little more time. He was the Broncos' head coach in 2017-18, his teams went 5-11 and 6-10, and he was fired with two years left on his contract. He moved on to become defensive coordinator for the Arizona Cardinals for the next four seasons, then returned to Denver in February to take the defensive coordinator job under Payton.

All coaches are prideful. All have egos. All can be a little stubborn. How was Joseph able to put all that aside and return to the Broncos after it ended in so much disappointment four years ago?

"For me, it was never that,'' Joseph said. "It was a fair process. It's a league of winning. So if you don't win there's going to be change. It was never personal for me. I came here and I worked my butt off and it didn't work.

"I'm back now and my focus is to play great defense for Sean and to win games."

Joseph, 50, would have been the Cardinals' defensive coordinator for a fifth season in 2023 but the team hired Eagles defensive coordinator Jonathan Gannon to be their head coach the day after the Super Bowl. That meant Gannon would be in charge of Arizona's defense, leaving Joseph with an opportunity to interview elsewhere.

He had a chance to become defensive coordinator for the Philadelphia Eagles and possibly one other team, but he wanted the Denver job for multiple reasons.

One, it appears Joseph eventually would like another crack at becoming a head coach -- he interviewed for a couple head coach openings this past offseason -- and getting a chance to work for Sean Payton can only help his chances.

"I think coach is one of the best play callers in NFL history,'' Joseph said of Payton. "The personal groups he uses on an every-down basis is really tough to match and figure out where he's going next. He

understands defenses very well as far as fronts and coverages. He's always attacking what you're doing best.
"So going against coach there's been some good days, there's been some bad days also. He's always ahead of the curve as far as your next move. He kind of saves plays for big moments in a game that you hadn't seen in a month. Maybe a year. They kind of pop out. In the fourth quarter he pops them on you. He's a great play caller. It's tempo, he plays with it, calls plays with it. It's unique."

Another reason wanted back with the Broncos is he's always had ties here. A former University of Colorado quarterback who came off the bench for an injured Darian Hagan to lead the Buffaloes to an improbable comeback win in November 1991 at windy Oklahoma State, Joseph and his wife Holly held on to their Denver-area home even after his job took him to Arizona.

"I had a few choices after leaving Arizona,'' Joseph said. "But Denver being home, it's a great place, great fan base. We have a home here still. So for me it was home. Outside of working with Sean it was a perfect spot for me."

Vance Joseph: Return to Broncos as DC all about winning

By Jeff Legwold
ESPN
June 15, 2023

If Vance Joseph can walk the same path as one of his coaching mentors did in Denver, he figures everything will work out just fine. Joseph, who was fired as head coach of the Broncos after the 2018 season, has returned to the team as Sean Payton's defensive coordinator. And as the team nears the end of its offseason program -- the final day of minicamp is scheduled for Thursday -- Joseph said he simply believed a return was the right move at the right time.

"For me ... it's a league of winning; if you don't win, there's going to be change,'' Joseph said in his first public comments since he was hired earlier this year. "It was never personal for me. I came here [as the head coach] and I worked my butt off and it didn't work. I'm back now and that's my focus, [to] play great defense for Sean and win some games.

"I've never had [anger] in my heart, even four years ago,'' Joseph added.

Joseph was the Broncos' head coach for the 2017 and 2018 seasons, hired to replace Gary Kubiak, who had led the team to the Super Bowl 50 win to close out the 2015 season. That title game win is also the Broncos' most recent appearance in a postseason game. Joseph, Vic Fangio and Nathaniel Hackett were all fired as that playoff drought has continued -- Hackett after just 15 games last season. Payton was hired in February, and he hired Joseph as the top defensive assistant shortly after.

Joseph had been the Arizona Cardinals' defensive coordinator for the last four seasons.

"There's calmness to him, a professionalism to him that I appreciate,'' Payton said. "... I just think there's a poise and credibility when he presents, and that's impressive. I think he's an extremely good communicator.''

The Broncos were 11-21 in Joseph's two seasons as head coach as they struggled to find consistent play at quarterback, and the Broncos missed on more prospects than they hit in the 2016, 2017 and 2018 drafts. Safety Justin Simmons is all that remains from the 2016 draft class, and the Broncos have just four players of the 26 they selected in those three drafts combined on their current roster.

But as Wade Phillips did before him, Joseph has returned to be the defensive coordinator for the team that fired him as the head coach. Phillips was fired by then-Broncos owner Pat Bowlen after the 1994 season -- he went 15-15 in his two years -- when Mike Shanahan was hired as the team's coach.

Phillips, who had gone on to be head coach of the Dallas Cowboys and Buffalo Bills, returned to Denver in 2015 to be Kubiak's defensive coordinator, as the Broncos' defense powered the team's Super Bowl run and Von Miller was named Super Bowl MVP.

Joseph was a Houston Texans assistant when Phillips was the defensive coordinator there.

"About a week after I signed back, [Phillips] reminded me of that,'' Joseph said. "... He came back and won a championship, and that was his message to me. That I can follow his trail.''

‘It’s good to be back’: Vance Joseph faces different challenge in return to Broncos

By Nick Kosmider
The Athletic
June 15, 2023

Vance Joseph has long held a pragmatic view about his brief tenure as the head coach of the Broncos.

“It was a fair process,” Joseph said of his two-season run in the job, which ended with his firing in 2018 after he compiled an 11-21 record. “It’s a league of winning. So if you don’t win, it’s going to be change. It was never personal for me. I came here, and I worked my butt off, and it didn’t work. I’m back now, and that’s my focus: to play great defense for Sean (Payton) and win games.”

That’s why there was no bitterness he had to overcome before returning to the Broncos five years after his unceremonious exit. Joseph, addressing the media Wednesday for the first time since being hired as the team’s defensive coordinator in February, spent the past four seasons as the defensive coordinator for the Cardinals, who fired head coach Kliff Kingsbury after the 2022 season. Arizona hired former Eagles defensive coordinator Jonathan Gannon as Kingsbury’s replacement, and with Gannon set to run the team’s defense, it was clear Joseph would be looking for his next opportunity. He interviewed for Gannon’s old job in Philadelphia, but the prospect of coaching under Payton and returning to the place his family still considers home were big draws.

“This is a great place, great fan base,” Joseph said. “It was a perfect spot for me. … (Resentment) was never in my heart.”

Joseph had ample experience facing Payton’s Saints offense. Joseph’s teams played New Orleans seven times from 2006 to 2019 — six when he was a defensive backs coach (49ers, Texans, Bengals) and once as Arizona’s defensive coordinator in 2019. The Saints won six of the seven games and averaged 32 points in those victories.

Joseph likely would have lasted in Denver if his offenses called by two different coordinators — Mike McCoy and Bill Musgrave — had more closely resembled those guided by Payton in New Orleans. And, yes, having a future Hall of Fame quarterback like Payton had with Drew Brees certainly would have helped. The starting quarterbacks during Joseph’s tenure were Trevor Siemian, Paxton Lynch, Brock Osweiler and Case Keenum, and they collectively ranked 28th in the NFL in expected points added (EPA) per dropback during those two seasons, according to TruMedia.

What stood out most for Joseph while preparing for and coaching in games against Payton — and when examining the Saints’ offense at other times — was his ability to dictate terms to the defense as a play caller and scheme designer.

“I think Coach (Payton) is one of the best play callers in NFL history,” Joseph said. “His personnel groups he uses on an every-down basis, it’s really tough to match and kind of figure out where he’s going next. He understands defenses very well as far as fronts and coverages, so he’s always attacking what you’re doing best. Going against Coach, man, it’s been some good days and some bad days also.”

The Broncos worked on situational football — third down, red zone — during Wednesday's penultimate minicamp practice, and Payton said there were a couple of plays he filed as ones to possibly use down the road if the right game plan materializes. Joseph has been on the other end of the process, when a seemingly obscure play from Payton shows up at the most inopportune time for the defense tasked with defending it.

"He's always ahead of the curve as far as your next move," Joseph said. "He kind of saves plays for big moments in a game that you hadn't seen in a month, maybe a year. They kind of pop out in the fourth quarter, and he pops 'em on you. He's a great play caller. The tempo he plays with and calls plays with is unique. It's tough to defend."

The admiration is mutual. Payton, who said he made it a point to greet Joseph after some of their prior matchups as coaches, was drawn to the "calmness" with which Joseph operates.

"There's a poise and a credibility when he presents," Payton said. "That's impressive. I think he's an extremely good communicator, and I think he's an extremely good leader."

There is a familiarity that extends beyond the podium where he stood Wednesday, the same one he climbed daily during his two seasons as the head coach, and beyond the place where he parks his car when he arrives in the morning. Safety Justin Simmons and linebacker Josey Jewell are starters who were members of Joseph's team in 2018. Veteran safety Kareem Jackson played for Joseph as a young defensive back in Houston when Joseph was coaching that group for the Texans. The key defensive acquisition for the Broncos in free agency this offseason, defensive end Zach Allen, spent the first four seasons of his career playing in Joseph's defense in Arizona.

Most importantly, Joseph is familiar with the standard that has been set for defense in Denver, one that has largely held up even as the Broncos have missed the playoffs for seven straight seasons, the second-longest streak in the NFL. Since 2016, the Broncos rank fifth in the NFL in defensive EPA per play. They were sixth in that category across Joseph's two seasons as head coach, and they were seventh in 2022 under former defensive coordinator Ejiro Evero.

"This has been a very good defense for a long time here in Denver," Joseph said, "so the challenge is to take what they did well last year and kind of continue that and improve. You can always improve in certain areas. It's a good group and an engaged group. They want to be coached. It's an experienced group in the back end, and it's fun to watch those guys talk through concepts and follow my lead. It's my job to marry the language of both systems and, what they've done well, keep doing that."

The marriage of terminology for Joseph has been made easier by the presence of defensive backs coach Christian Parker, who is entering his third season with the Broncos under his third head coach and third defensive play caller. He has earned the trust of the team's defensive backs, many of whom have played for the team since Parker arrived in 2021, and has been a trusted ear for Joseph as he tries to merge what he did defensively in Arizona with what the Broncos did last season — while also adding new ideas to the mix.

"He's sharp, man. He's been a great partner to work with," Joseph said. "As a veteran coach, I've coordinated probably seven years now. My tape is out there. I'm looking for ways to do different things. Speaking with Christian every day and kind of bouncing ideas off him from what he's done with (Vic)

Fangio and those guys in the past, it's been fun to kind of make some changes and grow off what they did last year. But he's absolutely smart. He works his butt off, and players love working for him. He's a star."

More frequently rushing the passer is the area where Denver's defense needs to improve most significantly. The Broncos were 31st in the NFL in pressure rate over the final nine games of the 2022 season, and the defense struggled as a result down the stretch. A healthy Randy Gregory, who played in only six games last season, would go a long way toward fixing the issue. Denver officially signed former Chiefs edge rusher Frank Clark on Wednesday, a player who had 23 1/2 sacks over the past four seasons and will be able to shift to different spots among Joseph's defensive front.

"It's one of the areas that we paid close attention to," Payton said of improving the pass rush. "We'll find a role within what we are doing and where (Clark) can help us. I think it's always a challenge to find those guys who you can say are pressure players, but he is one of them. Certainly, he's excelled in the postseason, both in Seattle and in Kansas City. That's the vision."

Joseph's role is far different now from what it was six years ago, when he took over a team that was trying to find its way in the aftermath of Peyton Manning's retirement and the abrupt departure of head coach Gary Kubiak following the 2016 season. The Broncos are still amid that search from a big-picture perspective, but that's Payton's job to worry about now. Simmons estimated he's had more detailed conversations with Joseph about defense since the offseason program began in April than he had during the two seasons Joseph was his coach.

"He's in the meeting room more. He's able to coach the little things up, and we're talking formations this, that and the other," Simmons said. "That's pretty much the main difference. Seems to be the same guy that I remember him to be. And, you know, I loved him when he was here as a head coach. So I'm really thankful that we got him again."

Joseph, of course, is not the first former Broncos head coach to return to the franchise after it fired him. Wade Phillips was let go by the team after an unsuccessful two-year stint in 1994. He returned two decades later and became the play caller behind the vaunted 2015 Denver defense that helped lift the team to its third Super Bowl title. Joseph has kept in contact with Phillips, for whom he worked as an assistant for three seasons in Houston, and he called his old boss back in late February, about a week after he had been hired by Payton.

"He reminded me he was a coach, got let go, came back as a coordinator and won a championship," Joseph said. "That was his message to me. Hopefully, I can follow his trail."

‘Denver is home’: DC Vance Joseph details return to Broncos, plan for Denver’s defense

By Aric DiLalla
DenverBroncos.com
June 15, 2023

Following a four-year tenure in Arizona, Vance Joseph had options.

The Broncos’ new defensive coordinator said Wednesday that he had “some choices” as he looked for a new opportunity.

For the University of Colorado alum and former Broncos head coach, though, Denver was where he wanted to be.

“Denver is home,” Joseph said. “This is a great place with a great fan base. We have a home here still. For me, it was home.”

Joseph, whose return to Denver reunites him with several of his former players, maintained that he never harbored hard feelings following his two-year stint as the Broncos’ head coach from 2017-18.

“It was a fair process,” Joseph said. “This is a league of winning, so when you don’t win, there is going to be change. It was never personal for me. I came here and I worked my butt off, but it didn’t work. I’m back now, and that’s my focus: playing great defense for [Head Coach] Sean [Payton] and win games. I’ve never had that in my heart, even leaving here four years ago.”

That appeal of working with Payton also helped draw Joseph to Denver.

“Just watching Sean operate on a daily basis as a head coach has been fun to watch,” Joseph said. “He’s doing a great job with the culture of the football team, and his message is really strong. He spends time on his messages, and it’s been fun to watch him operate everyday as an experienced head coach.”

Joseph, who called Payton “one of the best play callers in NFL history,” stood out as the Broncos’ head coach interviewed a number of potential defensive coordinators.

“Well, there’s a calmness to him and professionalism to him that I appreciate,” Payton said Wednesday. “We always found a way to shake each other’s hand after a game or talk to each other. I just think that there’s a poise and a credibility when he presents that’s impressive. I think he’s an extremely good communicator, and I think he’s an extremely good leader.”

Back in Denver, Joseph will look to help the Broncos maintain — and improve upon — their success from previous years.

“It has been a very good defense for a very long time here in Denver,” Joseph said. “The challenge for me is to take what they did well last year and continue that and improve. You can always improve in certain areas. It’s a good group. It’s an engaged group. They want to be coached, and it’s an experienced group

in the back end. It's fun to watch those guys talk through concepts and follow my lead. It's my job to marry the language of both systems and what they've done well. [Let's] keep doing that."
Should he succeed in that process, he could mirror another former Broncos head coach that later returned as the team's defensive coordinator.

A week after Joseph was hired in Denver, former head coach and defensive coordinator Wade Phillips connected with Joseph. After a two-year stint as Broncos head coach from 1993-94, Phillips returned in 2015 as the team's defensive coordinator and helped the Broncos capture a world championship.

When they spoke, Phillips shared with Joseph their similar path.

"He reminded me that he was let go, and he came back as a coordinator and won a championship," Joseph said. "That was his message to me. Hopefully I can follow his trail."

Why Vance Joseph wanted to return to the Denver Broncos

By Henry Chisholm
DNVR.com
June 15, 2023

Vance Joseph and Wade Phillips have a lot in common. So when Joseph signed on to become the Broncos' defensive coordinator in February, Joseph hopped on the phone to talk with Phillips.

"I did about a week after I signed back," Joseph said.

Phillips, 75, served as the Broncos' head coach in the 1993 and 1994 seasons. His team struggled. He was quickly replaced by Mike Shanahan. Twenty years later, Phillips returned to spend two—much more successful—seasons as the team's defensive coordinator.

Joseph, 50, was the Broncos' head coach in the 2018 and 2018 seasons. Like Phillips, his team struggled. He, too, was replaced, but now he's back as the team's defensive coordinator.

When new Broncos head coach Sean Payton interviewed Joseph for the defensive coordinator position this offseason, his history with the Broncos was not a factor.

"I didn't even think about it," Payton said on Wednesday.

So, if Payton didn't consider Joseph's past, what exactly was he thinking about?

"There's a calmness to him and professionalism to him that I appreciate," Payton said. "I just think that there's a poise and a credibility when he presents that's impressive. I think he's an extremely good communicator, and I think he's an extremely good leader."

Part of the reason Joseph chose to return to the Broncos was the value of working under Sean Payton, a Super Bowl-winning head coach. Joseph said he's enjoyed seeing how Payton approaches his duties, especially as he tries to reinvent the culture of the Denver Broncos.

When the opportunity to work under Payton presented itself, Joseph hardly considered his past with the Broncos. He's at peace with the decision to fire him, which he sees as purely the business of football.

"This is a league of winning," Joseph said. "When you don't win, there is going to be change. It was never personal for me. I came here and I worked my butt off, but it didn't work."

If anything, returning to the city that gave him the boot four years ago fell into the "Pros" column, not the "Cons" column.

"I had some choices after leaving Arizona, but Denver is home," Joseph said. "This is a great place with a great fanbase. We have a home here still. For me, it was home. Outside of working with Sean, it was the perfect spot for me."

Only a few familiar faces remain in the locker room from Joseph's time as head coach. Garett Bolles, Josey Jewell, Tim Patrick, Justin Simmons and Courtland Sutton are the only holdovers. Brandon McManus also played under Joseph but was released a few weeks ago.

Joseph said there is no uncomfortable about returning to the locker room.

"It was basically, 'Welcome back. It's good to see you. Let's win some football games,'" Joseph said. "There was nothing special. In this business, you move around, and you change jobs often. To come back to Denver was special for me. To see those four or five guys also made it special. It's good to be back."

Joseph has been following along with his former players.

"You don't leave guys and not watch their careers," Joseph said. "You follow those guys, and you don't lose track of them."

That also applies to Kareem Jackson, who played under Joseph when Joseph was a defensive backs coach in Houston.

"He was a little fat kid when I had him as a second-year guy in Houston," Joseph said of the 35-year-old safety. "Now, he's a grown man. He's smart, and he's a great leader for our defense. It's been fun to watch."

The defensive coordinator of that Texans team was Phillips, a man with whom Joseph wants to share just a little bit more in common.

"He reminded me that he was let go, and he came back as a coordinator and won a championship," Joseph said. "That was his message to me. Hopefully, I can follow his trail."

Vance Joseph looks to follow in Wade Phillips' footsteps as former Broncos head coach turned defensive coordinator

By Vance Joseph
Denver Post
June 15, 2023

There are a few times in life when relationships are rekindled after a sour breakup. Sometimes, it takes a willingness to look past the bad moments to mend the bond.

That was the case for Vance Joseph.

Five years removed from his unsuccessful head coaching stint in Denver, Joseph has returned as the defensive coordinator with a fresh mind. He says he doesn't dwell on the back-to-back losing seasons that led to his firing after the 2018 campaign. For Joseph, the opportunity to rejoin the Broncos and work with head coach Sean Payton made coming back to Denver worth it.

"I'm back now, and my focus is to play good defense with Sean and win games," Joseph said after Wednesday's minicamp session in his first time speaking to reporters since his hiring in February.

This isn't the first time the Broncos have brought a previously fired head coach back as defensive coordinator. Wade Phillips was shown the door as head coach in 1994 before returning as the coordinator in 2015, orchestrating an elite defense that helped win Super Bowl 50.

After Joseph was hired, he called Philips, who reminded him of his accomplishments.

"Hopefully, I can follow his trail," said Joseph, who spent the past four seasons as the defensive coordinator for the Arizona Cardinals.

Joseph said he did everything he could as the head coach for the Broncos. In a league that demands winning, Joseph knew a change was coming after Denver went 11-21 over his two seasons leading the team. He didn't allow his ego to get in the way after he got fired. He never carried a grudge toward the organization.

"It was never personal for me," Joseph said. "I came here, worked my butt off, and it didn't work."

The idea of Joseph returning to Denver after a failed coaching stint never crossed Payton's mind. The former New Orleans Saints coach cared only about Joseph's leadership, communication skills and ability to run a defense.

Payton said his staff consists of coaches who are teachers. Some are old, some are young, but each brings a unique trait and experience. When it comes to Joseph, Payton admires his calmness.

"There's a poise and credibility he presents," Payton said. "That's impressive."

Joseph is happy to be on the same sideline as Payton instead of the opposite side, calling him one of the best play-callers in NFL history. Joseph highlighted the difficulties of figuring out Payton's next move, noting his personnel groups are hard to match.

He praised Payton for always being ahead of the curve, knowing what opposing defenses are going to do next.

"He saves plays for big moments," Joseph said. "(Plays) you haven't seen in a month or maybe a year would pop out in the fourth quarter. It's tough to defend."

In his return to Denver, Joseph wants to continue what the Broncos' defense did well last season. Football Outsiders ranked Denver's defense 10th in the league in DVOA in 2022.

He called the defense an experienced group that's eager to learn.

"It's fun to watch those guys talk through concepts and follow my lead," Joseph said. "It's my job to marry that language."

Joseph is excited to work with safeties Justin Simmons and Kareem Jackson and linebacker Josey Jewell, all of whom he coached in the past. He said he's impressed with how Simmons' career has evolved over the years. He also called star cornerback Pat Surtain II a "special" player.

"(Surtain's) best trait is his intelligence," he said. "He wants to get better every single day."

Simmons said he enjoys having Joseph in the meeting rooms more. When Joseph was the head coach, Simmons said he was a little less hands-on due to having more responsibilities on the team.

"I've talked to (Joseph) more in the past few weeks than when he was the head coach," Simmons said. "He's able to coach the little things, and we are talking formations. I loved him when he was here as a head coach, so I'm thankful we got him again."

This time, Vance Joseph could be the right man at the right time

By Andrew Mason
104.3 The Fan
February 24, 2023

This is more like how it was supposed to work.

When the Broncos hired Vance Joseph as head coach in 2017, there really wasn't much to go on that indicated potential success as a head coach.

The organization sold him as a "leader of men." Remember that phrase? Frankly, was the kind of thing you do when the resume is as thin as a promise, at least as far as head coaches go.

Indeed, "promise" was the biggest thing Joseph had in those days.

Joseph had just one season of experience as an NFL coordinator when he last joined the Broncos. And it wasn't a particularly good one; Miami ranked 29th in total defense and 20th in defensive DVOA.

But Joseph had the connections — to departing head coach Gary Kubiak as a three-year assistant on his Houston staff, and to John Elway's right-hand man, Matt Russell, as a former CU teammate from the program's 1990s salad days and a graduate assistant under Gary Barnett around the turn of the century. And thus, the job was his.

No need to belabor those years. Joseph had some game-management snafus, particularly in the 2018 season. Discipline waned, which is a reason why Vic Fangio's "death by inches" manta resonated, particularly with John Elway. Game-management issues contributed directly to a pair of 2018 defeats.

But Joseph was done no favors by quarterback selection. No benefits from a roster that had gradually gone hollow, lacking depth at key spots.

What we know now is different than what we knew then. Retrospection has that way of clarifying things. What we know now is that the Broncos weren't in need of a "reboot," and weren't a few tweaks away from being right back in the Super Bowl groove. What we know now is that the team was aging with a gradually crumbling roster.

So, he went to Arizona as defensive coordinator in 2019. Talent was there for stretches of his years there: Budda Baker, Chandler Jones, J.J. Watt (when healthy), Jordan Hicks and the position-less Isaiah Simmons, who Joseph eventually learned how to maximize.

Still, the rankings don't flatter Joseph in his five years as a defensive coordinator, including his single Dolphins season.

DEFENSIVE DVOA:
2016: 20
2019: 20

2020: 10
2021: 6
2022: 24

TOTAL DEFENSE:
2016: 29
2019: 32
2020: 13
2021: 11
2022: 21

SCORING DEFENSE:
2016: 18
2019: 28
2020: 12
2021: 11
2022: 31

The funny thing is, success under Sean Payton will likely propel Joseph to another shot. And I expect he'll do much better, if he does.

But the reasons to hire Joseph go beyond the numbers and to his demeanor.

He's hardened by experience. Listen to his press conferences as Arizona's defensive coordinator. He speaks not as a deer in headlights, but more of a sage. He talks with the wisdom earned by experience — some of it awful.

Joseph chooses not to live with anger over what transpired in Denver, of an organization that made him the head coach but did nothing to temper public expectations to a more reasonable level for a team whose foundation needed more than just some patching of cracks to repair.

And for all the evidence you need, look no further than his return to Colorado today. That's a mature perspective many of us struggle to find, myself included. Fortunately, Joseph has it.

Joseph isn't Phillips or Vic Fangio as a tactician. But it took decades for them to get there.

Most defensive coordinators don't reach their apex immediately; it takes years of tinkering, adjustment and adaptation. Joseph is further down that road than he was as Broncos head coach. And if he's learned well from his past experiences, he can put together a defense that complements what Sean Payton wants to accomplish.

Just because Joseph wasn't the right person in 2017 doesn't mean he can't be the right person today.

Broncos hire of Vance Joseph as defensive coordinator gives stout unit continuity

By Nick Kosmider
The Athletic
February 24, 2023

When Vance Joseph prepared to return to Denver in Week 15 last season as defensive coordinator of the Cardinals, the moment invited reflection. Only Joseph felt no need to rehash the particulars of his failed two-season tenure as the head coach of the Broncos from 2017 to 2018.

“I’m over it. It was never a sore spot. It was a great opportunity to be a head coach in the NFL,” Joseph told reporters in December. “I wasn’t the first guy (to be fired) and I won’t be the last. It was never any ill feelings. It was just a job; it didn’t get done and you move on.”

That pragmatic view of his old job with the Broncos helps explain why Joseph has agreed to take a new one with the franchise five years after it fired him — this time as the defensive coordinator under new head coach Sean Payton, multiple sources confirmed to The Athletic.

Joseph went 11-21 as Denver’s head coach. The struggles of his tenure mirrored those of the coaches who followed him in Denver. Vic Fangio went 19-30 in three seasons after replacing Joseph, and Nathaniel Hackett was fired just 15 games into his tenure as Fangio’s replacement. Each of those first-time head coaches were felled, at least in part, by an offense that failed to reach even an average level of efficiency.

Though Joseph has insisted in multiple interviews he has no resentment left over from his time in Denver, he has a better understanding of the issues he faced, particularly as it related to roster construction.

“Having that quarterback and those pieces you need to flip your team and improve, you’ve got to get it done,” Joseph said in 2021 during an appearance on The Dave Pasch Podcast when asked to reflect on his time as Denver’s head coach. “Once you have your team set and you’re moving forward and you don’t have those pieces, it’s impossible in this league to improve and move on and try to find an identity with your team if you don’t have a quarterback or offensive line. The player-picking season is so important to changing the culture because you won’t change the culture without winning. You can be a great coach and preach the right things and teach the right things, but if you can’t win and have a winning product, it’s hard to convince anyone around you that you’re the right guy if you’re not winning.”

One thing that hasn’t changed since Joseph left Denver: Patrick Mahomes and the Kansas City Chiefs rule the AFC West. Mahomes, the two-time MVP, made his first NFL start against Joseph and the Broncos in Week 17 of the 2017 season. It was his first in what is now a streak of 11 straight wins against the Broncos for Mahomes. It’s a challenge Joseph, who also lost to Mahomes as Arizona’s defensive coordinator last season, knows well.

Payton clearly sought experience as he searched for a coach to run his defense. Rex Ryan, the current ESPN analyst and former head coach of the Jets and Bills, interviewed for the position as well. Payton also talked to former Lions head coach and Patriots assistant Matt Patricia this week, according to multiple reports, as Joseph went through a two-day interview process with the Eagles.

So what made Joseph stand out? His defenses when healthy have been stout. The Broncos ranked sixth in defensive EPA (expected points added) during Joseph's two-year tenure in Denver. The Cardinals struggled during Joseph's first season as coordinator in 2019 and again in 2022 while ravaged by injuries, but Arizona ranked 10th in EPA across the 2020 and 2021 seasons, the latter of which resulted in a playoff berth. Joseph, a former University of Colorado quarterback, has also been regarded throughout his career as a strong and energetic leader and tireless worker liked by players, a profile that fits the kind of coaches Payton has often sought to lead his defenses.

The move to hire Joseph should also create some continuity for the Broncos' defense in a number of ways. First, Joseph calls an aggressive, 3-4 defensive scheme similar to the one orchestrated last season by Ejiro Evero, who is now in Carolina as the defensive coordinator under new Panthers head coach Frank Reich. The Broncos blitzed at the league's fifth-highest rate in the NFL last season under Evero, and though Joseph's teams typically haven't brought extra rushers that frequently, some of the philosophies about when to bring pressure — and from where — are likely to carry over.

There is also continuity between Joseph and two of the key, vocal pieces on Denver's defense. Safety Justin Simmons was a two-year starter under Joseph, and linebacker Josey Jewell was a rookie during Joseph's second season as Denver's coach in 2018. Both players are impact starters for Denver's defense who are responsible for communicating calls to other members of the unit, so their familiarity with Joseph could help ease the transition.

Joseph and Payton are also expected to retain two young, well-respected assistants from last year's defensive staff in secondary coach Christian Parker and defensive line coach Marcus Dixon, a source told The Athletic.

Parker, whose first season with the Broncos came under former coach Vic Fangio in 2020, has overseen the development of All-Pro cornerback Pat Surtain II, but he also helped fourth-round rookie Damarri Mathis step into a starting role at cornerback last season following an injury to veteran Ronald Darby. Simmons had 11 interceptions during Parker's first two seasons as Denver's secondary coach, the most among NFL safeties during that span.

Dixon, who joined the Broncos' staff last season after serving as an assistant defensive line coach for the Rams' championship team in 2021, received praise from Evero last season for his work in developing rookie defensive linemen Matt Henningsen and Eyioma Uwazurike, and veterans DeShawn Williams and Dre'Mont Jones also had career-best sack production.

It is not unprecedented for a franchise to bring back one of its former head coaches as a coordinator. Wade Phillips was fired after going 16-16, with one playoff berth, during a two-season run as Denver's head coach from 1993 to 1994, and he returned as the team's defensive coordinator under Kubiak in 2015. He helped orchestrate one of the best defenses in league history that year, the engine behind the team's Super Bowl run. The late Gunther Cunningham was fired by the Chiefs in 2000 after two seasons as their head coach, also going 16-16, only to later serve as the team's defensive coordinator from 2004 to 2008.

The past clearly isn't haunting Joseph. And it's why another chapter in Denver is set to begin.

"I don't relive it at all," Joseph said back in December. "It was a great experience and I enjoyed my moments there. I grew up there from college to becoming a young adult, so for me it was home and I have no sore spots there at all."