

How special-teams guru Mike Westhoff is helping fix the Broncos

By Andrew Mason

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In Mike Westhoff's recently-published autobiography, he refers to core special teamers upon whom he relies as "my guys."

"Mike would always tell us, 'Until you quit, you are my guy,'" one of his former players, Louis Oliver, relates in the book. "All Mike would tell them is, 'You will be one of our guys if you keep making plays.'"

You get enough of those guys, you've created something special. In Westhoff's last previous season — with New Orleans in 2018 — his unit finished No. 2 in the special-teams rankings compiled by longtime Dallas-based writer. Rick Gosselin.

The good news for the Broncos is this: Westhoff feels like he's already finding out who his guys will be.

"I believe that I can come pretty close to picking an active 48 — [including] my guys who are going to be active — when we play the Raiders. I really believe I'm close," Westhoff said during minicamp.

"Now, exactly who's going to make the team? I'm not 1000 percent sure. But I think I'm pretty close. And there will be some good battles, and then things will evolve as time goes on, we get pads."

That said, Westhoff doesn't have a complete picture yet. That starts with second-round pick Marvin Mims Jr., who should factor into the punt-return mix.

"We're anxious to see Mims," Westhoff said. "He's been a little bit banged up in these camps, and we want to make sure he's back healthy. We want to get the kicker-punter thing all squared away. So, there's a few things that we have to get worked on.

"But we're closer than we are further. Trust me, there's no shocks that are going to come from me. I'm going to be prepared."

'Figure it out'

Superior preparation comes as no surprise given Westhoff's experience.

This will be Westhoff's 33rd season coaching special teams in the NFL. It began in 1982 with the Baltimore Colts, when the late Frank Kush asked him during the players' strike to help in that phase when the season resumed. Westhoff devoured every ounce of information and every second of film he could find.

It didn't take him long to become one of the NFL's most respected — and innovative — special-teams coaches. Some of his ideas were so effective, they got legislated out of the game, particularly in regard to kickoff-return formations. But ever adaptive, he adjusted.

From his youngest years, Westhoff has attacked problems with a simple mantra: “Figure it out.” So integral is this to his personal philosophy that he worked it into the title of his memoir.

Now his job is to figure out how to turn one of the NFL’s chronically poor special-teams units into one of its best.

Since 2017, Denver has never ranked above 21st in Gosselin’s rankings. In Football Outsiders’ special-teams DVOA metric, 24th is the high-water mark.

Last year, the Broncos were 32nd in special-teams DVOA before Jerry Rosburg became interim head coach and fired coordinator Dwayne Stukes. The Broncos rose three spots from the cellar in just two weeks.

Imagine what Westhoff and special-teams coordinator Ben Kotwica can do with an entire summer and season.

“I’ve seen more things here that I like than I dislike,” Westhoff said of the Broncos’ special teamers. “And I’m going to be honest with you: I’m a little bit pleasantly surprised. Because it’s a little better group than I sort of thought I was gonna have.

“I don’t know how it’ll turn out. But I’ve thrown a lot at them. I’ve got a million things we do. And they’re handling it very well. They’re good kids that have worked very hard. And so, I have a very high bar. And that hasn’t gotten lowered one inch. So, I push them very, very hard. And they’ve responded exceptionally well.”

Westhoff said he watched almost all of the special-teams film from last year. He didn’t want to tear down what happened — which, as long-time Broncos fans know, was the continuation of a common thread lingering through the Broncos’ losing seasons as much as it was anything germane to last year alone.

“Here’s the thing that I do: I don’t judge what someone is doing,” Westhoff explained. “I don’t look at someone and say, ‘Oh, I wouldn’t have done it that way.’ I’ve never done that. I kind of give them the benefit of the doubt. It was a lot of good coaching points.

“And so, what I try to take from [last year] is how the guys did it. How did they execute what they were being asked to do? And so, I look at it with that in mind. There are some good things.

“Some things that I’m going to do my way; I’ve got my system. I’ve got my drawings. I know how to do this stuff, and I’m going to do that. But at the same time, I saw some pretty good things. I saw some guys I was disappointed in, but as I’ve seen them evolve now, I’m more pleased than I am disappointed.”

How Mike met Sean

Sean Payton is quick to sing Westhoff’s praises. And to watch them work, you’d think they’d worked together for decades.

But they only have roughly a season-and-a-half of prior experience together. They’d never coached together before Payton called Westhoff during the 2017 season, concerned about his struggling special teams with the New Orleans Saints.

“I had never met Sean Payton before in my life,” Westhoff recalled. “I knew who he was, but I had never met him. So, I talked with him and I said, ‘OK.’ And I did it — and I really enjoyed it. It was fun. We were a very good football team. We should have gone to two Super Bowls; we were really good. And I enjoyed it — and I helped him.”

The first Saints team of which Westhoff was a part came within a Minneapolis Miracle of being in the NFC Championship Game. The second team found its path to Super Bowl LVIII blocked by a brutal no-call on an obvious pass-interference penalty against Nickell Robey-Coleman of the Rams. Had the right call been made, the Saints could have run down the clock to kick a game-winning field goal as time expired in regulation. Instead, the Rams got one last chance with 1:40 left in regulation, and the Saints went home.

So did Westhoff, who retired after the game. He wrote his book. He enjoyed nature, savoring in a lifelong passion. And he stayed in touch with the game by consulting on special teams.

But Westhoff knew Payton might call him again.

“After he got out, we talked,” Westhoff recalled. “He said, ‘You know, one of these days, I’m going back — and when I do, I’m going to call you.’”

And last winter — while Westhoff was snowmobiling in Jackson Hole, Wyo. — his phone rang. It was Payton.

“So, he called me. And he said, ‘Look, I’m going to Denver. I’m enthralled with the ownership. I saw a lot of things I like. Why don’t you come with me?’”

“I wouldn’t have answered the phone for anybody else, to tell you the truth ... I had a good retirement.”

Beyond the numbers

The call from Payton showed just how much one of the great coaches of the era trusts Westhoff. But another call Westhoff fielded shows the profound impact he has on players.

That call came from Hall-of-Fame-bound linebacker Zach Thomas.

Westhoff coached Thomas in Miami — and played a major role in the Dolphins taking him. He worked out Thomas personally. He even wrote the scouting report — but fudged a number, giving Thomas two more bench-press reps than he actually performed.

Why? Because Thomas was considered to lack ideal measurables. But Westhoff studied him, got to know him and knew he could flourish. So, he added to Thomas’ tally ... and with a fifth-round pick in 1996, Miami selected him.

Five All-Pros and seven Pro Bowls later, Thomas will join the immortals. But who’s to say Thomas would have forged that path if he hadn’t gone to a team with a coach who truly believed in him?

“That was from Woody Hayes,” Westhoff remembered, “who said, ‘Don’t let a number ever make up your mind who’s a football player.’”

That isn't to say numbers won't matter. But Westhoff's success is due to his ability to find the right players for his unit. His "my guys." Give him enough, and success on special teams follows. It always has.

And there is no reason to believe it won't be different with Westhoff joined Kotwica and first-time coach Chris Banjo, who played for him in New Orleans. Now, Westhoff might not stay long; at one point during a recent conversation, Westhoff said, "I'll only do it for a year, and then I'm going home."

But it's worth noting that what he leaves behind is sustainable. Look no further than New Orleans, which had a struggling special-teams unit when he came aboard during the 2017 season. In 2018, his first full season there, the Saints were No. 2 in Gosselin's rankings. The following season, after Westhoff retired, they ranked No. 1 — a spot built on the foundation he laid.

Westhoff will impart his philosophy. He'll find his guys to make it work. And with those, he should help a special-teams unit that has been among the league's worst for the last six seasons into one of its best.

Mike Westhoff: An original and not just as a special teams guru

By Mike Klis

KUSA

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There once was a story about a Chicago baseball writer named Jerome Holtzman.

The story goes that Holtzman's editor called him about the frequent use of his baseball clichés.

Third sacker. The Hot Corner. Backstop. Toe the bump. The keystone combo.

The editor suggested Holtzman no longer use these clichés .

What do you mean? Holtzman responded. Those are my words. I came up with those terms.

Holtzman, who did come up with the "save" statistic and definition that is still used today, had been a ball writer for so long that he invented the terms that were so widely used until they eventually became clichés.

Mike Westhoff is the Jerome Holtzman of NFL special teams.

"My job is so different from the job I believe I helped create," Westhoff said Wednesday following a Broncos' minicamp practice.

Job you helped create?

"Special teams coordinator," Westhoff said. "You know me, I'm a little cocky, I think I did create it. You say that and all the other special teams coaches will all be mad. Which is good, I like when they're all mad at me."

For the second time in ten years, the 75-year-old Westhoff has come out of retirement as an NFL coach to help run a team's special teams units. Not just any team. Sean Payton's teams. Westhoff was an NFL special teams coach for 30 years when he retired after the 2012 season with the New York Jets. Five years later, midway through the 2017 season, he got a call from Payton, who was then head coach of the New Orleans Saints who were sitting 7-2 with a seven-game winning streak.

"I knew who he was of course but I'd never met him," Westhoff said. "To tell you the truth the only name I knew on the whole team was Drew Brees. I didn't know anybody. Sean said he thought they were really good and he was disappointed in their special teams and he wanted me to come in and do it. So I did it. We didn't fire anyone. But I took it over. And it worked. And I had a ball. I liked Sean. I liked the way he does things. I liked our football team. We should have gone to two Super Bowls because we were damn good. We were good. And it was fun. I went in there they were 31st and when I left we were first so I'm proud of that."

He was with the Saints a year-and-a-half when he retired again after New Orleans lost in overtime to the Los Angeles Rams in the 2018-season NFC Championship Game. This time, Westhoff is four years out from last coaching. Payton carried on with the Saints until after the 2021 season, when he stepped away. Payton returned for the 2023 season, this time to lead the once-proud, but recently struggling Denver Broncos. Westhoff was hired almost as soon as Payton was.

Only instead of carrying the title he created, Westhoff is listed as Assistant Head Coach, albeit under the special teams department.

“After he left he said one day he might want to go back and he said look if I come back I want you to come with me,” Westhoff said. “I’m thinking, are you serious? And then he called. And I said, ‘OK, I’m going to do it.’ Because I had so much respect for him and what he did, and then my role with him to help him out, to get some things going, to get Ben Kotwica here, Chris Banjo who had played for me. So it’s kind of like a reunion for me. I wouldn’t have done it for anyone else but for Sean. I said I’ll give him a year. And it’s fun, I enjoy it.”

Kotwica, a special teams assistant for Westhoff with the Jets, has the Broncos’ special teams coordinator title. Banjo, who retired earlier this year as an NFL player, is the Broncos’ assistant special teams coach. Westhoff scoffed at the suggestion he has joined the Broncos as a special teams “fixer.”

“No I’m not,” Westhoff said. “I only agreed to come for a year. After a year they’d be probably be happy to get me the hell out of here. But no, I want to be an integral part of this team and this program.

“I’ll give you a good statistic for me. In my last six years in the National Football League as a coach – now I’m going to count the one game, you might not count it this way, when we lost to Minnesota, but I’ve been in four championship games in six years. So I’m used to being with a good football team ... and trust me, Sean Payton knows how to build one. So I’m here to help.”

Westhoff refers to the Jets reaching the AFC Championship Game under Rex Ryan in 2011-12, the Saints losing the “Minnesota Miracle” divisional playoff game in 2017, and then New Orleans losing to the Rams in the NFC Championship Game in 2018. Westhoff has never coached in a Super Bowl, so you can figure out how those postseason games finished.

Speaking of figuring it out, Westhoff wrote an autobiography called “Figure It Out, My 32-year Journey while Revolutionizing Pro Football’s Special Teams.” Published last year, it’s 432 pages long. Between special teams diagrams and his rich life story, there was much to tell.

Westhoff was the Baltimore Colts’ special teams coordinator – it wasn’t called coordinator, then, as Westhoff was one of Frank Kush’s assistants who coached the offensive line, tight ends and special teams -- at a time when the Colts drafted quarterback John Elway with the No. 1 overall draft pick. Elway forced a trade to the Broncos with Westhoff stating in the book he thought the team should have instead drafted Dan Marino.

In 1988, while in the midst of working for Don Shula with the Miami Dolphins, Westhoff nearly lost his left leg to cancer and a surgical mishap. In 2007, a cracked bone in his left femur resulted in Westhoff having a titanium rod inserted to replace the femur. He walks and fast shuffles through the Broncos’ special teams’ coverage drills with a bit of a hitch as he barks instructions, but otherwise he gets around better than many people 15-20 years younger.

"I'm doing fine. I'm doing great," Westhoff said, rubbing his tanned left leg. "I'm not ready to run up and down the place but I'm doing fine. Thank you for asking."

Westhoff deferred to Payton and general manager George Paton the question about last month's release of veteran kicker Brandon McManus. The Broncos have since signed Elliott Fry as their kicker with Randy Bullock getting a minicamp tryout this week.

"I like who's here," Westhoff said. "That's who I care about. I'm going to work with who's here. And if they're not good enough, we're going to try and get someone a little bit better."

Westhoff said the Broncos' special teams units – which have struggled mightily in recent years – are better than he expected. Third-round draft picks Drew Sanders and Riley Moss will help, as will free-agent signings Mike Burton, Tremon Smith, Samaje Perine and Chris Manhertz. So what is Westhoff's goal for the Broncos' special teams this year?

"That we finish first in the league," he said. "That's it. That's what I care about. I don't want to have penalties. I don't want to make mistakes. I want to make big plays. You don't have as many opportunities today as you did. I'll give you the number. My first 30 years as a coordinator in the National Football League, not counting PATs and field goals, I averaged 22 plays a game. 22. Punts, kickoffs.

"When I went to the Saints (in 2017-18)? Seven. But the Saints kicked off indoors and we didn't punt too much. But the point is the number of opportunities is reduced. So I have to take every opportunity to see if we can't make the best of it. That's my goal."

"Do I have as many chances as I used to? No, I don't. But so what. I want to do everything. We do a lot. You watch us we do a helluva lot of things. I'm not afraid to run fakes. We try things. We're going to work at it. I have a real high bar. I don't want to spend the rest of my retirement years when I'm ranked freakin' 23rd or some crap."

It's not hard to figure out. Even if he wasn't the creator of the special teams coordinator position, Westhoff is a one-of-a-kind.