

Justin Bannan back with Denver Broncos' defensive line

By Mike Klis *The Denver Post* *The Denver Post*

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As it turned out, Justin Bannan never left the Broncos. He just took a one-year detour to St. Louis.

Bannan, a 10-year NFL defensive lineman and a former University of Colorado star, returned to the Broncos when both sides agreed on the terms of his new one-year contract Wednesday.

Bannan started a career-high 16 games for Denver in 2010 before joining the Rams. He made 14 starts for them last season.

"I feel like I belong in Denver," Bannan said. "I feel like I have a lot of unfinished business here. I never felt right about leaving. There's a business side of it, and unfortunately that side happened. But it's just nice not having to move again."

Bannan signed a five-year contract with the Broncos before the 2010 season, but he became a free agent rather than take a substantial cut in pay. Even while playing for the Rams last season, Bannan kept his home in the Denver area. He and his wife, Sommer, have a 7-month-old son, Kash.

Bannan partially fills what had become a gaping hole in the interior of the Broncos' defensive line. One starter, Brodrick Bunkley, left as a free agent and signed with the New Orleans Saints. Another starter, Marcus Thomas, remains a free agent. And top backup Ryan McBean has been slapped by the NFL with a six-game suspension.

Two other Denver defensive tackles, Kevin Vickerson and Ty Warren, were the projected starters going into last season, but they suffered season-ending injuries.

The Broncos aren't done bolstering their defensive line. They are expected to nab a tackle in the first three rounds of the NFL's April 26-28 draft.

Bannan isn't ready to settle into a part-time role. Although he turns 33 next week, he has been a regular starter in three of his past four seasons.

"I'm coming in to start like I always have," Bannan said. "I feel great. I feel like I'm still playing at a high level."

Bannan made plenty of money the past two seasons. He had the playing time. But after his Broncos finished 4-12 in 2010 and his Rams went 2-14 last year, Bannan is tired of losing.

He believes the Broncos — now led by quarterback Peyton Manning — will have more success in his second stint here.

"Obviously we have a quarterback who, to me is the hardest guy in the NFL to play against," Bannan said. "He's a human computer on the field. I'm proud to be back. I take a lot of pride in this town. I couldn't ask for anything more."

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Broncos sign Justin Bannan

Associated Press

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. -- [Justin Bannan](#) expects his second stint with the [Denver Broncos](#) to go much better than his first.

The 11th-year defensive tackle signed a one-year deal Wednesday to return to the team he played for during a 4-12 season in 2010, the worst in franchise history.

Now, he gets to play between Pro Bowl pass-rushers [Elvis Dumervil](#), who missed the entire 2010 season, and [Von Miller](#), the 2011 Defensive Rookie of the Year.

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"It's a blessing," said Bannan, who was released by the [St. Louis Rams](#) over the winter. "I've played against this guy more than enough, a couple times in the playoffs. I've played against him many times throughout my career. He's definitely, without a doubt, the hardest player I've ever played against, bar none. The guy can play a defense like no other.

"Even when I was in Baltimore, we just called him 'The Baltimore Killer,' because he was the only guy that could literally take a defense down and pick us apart. He could methodically do it. To me, he's the greatest player I've ever played around or played against in my career."

Bannan is just as jazzed to play alongside the pass-rushing duo known as "Doom & Gloom."

"It's going to be incredible," Bannan said. "It sure would have helped me if I had Elvis there in 2010. Losing him was tough; it was a big blow to the defense. It seemed like we lost a lot of guys that year on defense. Playing with Elvis and what I've seen from Von Miller, the guy is just a phenom. I still have friends on the team and talking to them last season and during the offseason, they had nothing but the best things to say about Von Miller and what kind of a player he is."

Drafted by Buffalo after a standout career at Colorado, Bannan has played in 144 NFL games with the Bills (2002-05), Ravens (2006-09), Broncos and Rams.

Bannan started all 16 games for the Broncos in 2010, but when he declined to take a substantial pay cut in 2011, the Broncos released him. He signed with St. Louis, where he started 14 games, collecting 35 tackles and one sack.

"At the end of the day, it is just business," Bannan said. "I think it's easier for the other side to say it is just business. Sometimes, you do take it personal. Or it just hurts. It's never fun to get fired. It's no fun to lose your job. But I will say, they didn't dislike me as a person or a player. ... I just went through the same thing again in St. Louis. They got rid of a lot of the so-called older players who had higher cap numbers."

Although more than half of Bannan's 57 career starts have come over the past two seasons, he's lost 26 games since leaving

Baltimore.

"It's no fun to lose, especially coming from Baltimore, where I was in the playoffs three out of the four years I was there," Bannan said. "I was used to winning and used to being on a great defense. And then came over to Denver in 2010 and we had a real tough year."

He had an even tougher year in St. Louis, where the Rams went 2-14 last season.

Bannan, who turns 33 next week, helps fill a huge hole in the middle of the Broncos' defensive line, where one starter, [Brodrick Bunkley](#), left for New Orleans in free agency and the other, [Marcus Thomas](#), remains a free agent. Top backup [Ryan McBean](#) is facing a six-game suspension to start the season, and two other tackles, [Kevin Vickerson](#) and [Ty Warren](#), are trying to come back from season-ending injuries.

The Broncos likely will grab a defensive tackle in the draft, too. But Bannan has every intention of starting again in Denver.

"I feel great. I feel just like I did when I came here the first time," Bannan said. "I definitely feel like I'm on a mission. I'm hungry. I want to win. I want to be on a great team and I want to do my part. So, I'm more than motivated this year to prove to the new guys that are there what I'm all about."

Bannan played in Josh McDaniels' ill-fated 3-4 scheme in Denver. Now he'll be playing in John Fox's 4-3 system that better suits his skills.

"I just got done playing the 4-3 all last year. To be honest, I'm more comfortable in 4-3 than I am in 3-4," Bannan said. "Really looking back at it, when I came here to Denver (in 2010), that was the first year I ever played a true 3-4 and played that type of technique. That was the first time in my career. By the end of the year I felt really good at it, but it took some time to learn. If it comes down to playing more of a 4-3, more of an attacking-style defense, that's going to be more up my alley."
