

## Broncos' Matt Russell will have big say on draft day

By Lindsay H. Jones *The Denver Post* *The Denver Post*

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Matt Russell was one of the best college football players this state has seen, a running back-blasting, hair-flying tackling machine who in 1996 won the Butkus Award as the nation's best linebacker while at the University of Colorado.

When he was drafted by the Detroit Lions in 1997, at age 23, Russell pictured himself having a long NFL career. Turns out, he was partially right.

His playing career derailed by injuries, Russell channeled the passion he had as a player into scouting. As the Broncos' director of player personnel, Russell will have a significant say in each player Denver selects in the NFL draft this week.

"For me, personally, to be back here in Colorado, it's not just a job. I'm a fan as well, and I have been for 20 years," said Russell, who joined the team's personnel staff in 2009. "When I was given the opportunity to come back here, it was one of those things where I was going to do everything I can to never leave."

Russell was raised on military bases in Japan, England and Germany, first playing soccer, including a stint on an elite English youth team as a pre-teen. But his was a football family — his father and older brother played college football at Baylor and Arkansas, respectively — and Russell was a prototypical linebacker.

"Matt was a guy that loved everything about football," Colorado linebackers coach Brian Cabral said. "He loved practice. He loved when it was hard. He was very passionate about everything with football. Every phase that had to do with the game, he loved it all."

Yet Russell's professional career lasted only 14 games of his rookie season. In the 1998 preseason, Russell tore up his right knee. A year later, Russell blew out every ligament in his left knee in a preseason game in Atlanta.

"I think I knew on my way to the ground that I was done. It was so bad," Russell said. "When I hit the ground, I had the base of my femur in one hand, and my (tibia and fibula) in the other hand."

Russell flew back to Colorado, where doctors at CU performed a second knee surgery in a year. He stayed in Boulder that fall going through extensive rehabilitation and coming to terms with the likelihood he would never play again.

"I probably was guilty of not having a fallback plan," Russell said. "I wouldn't say I took it for granted, but I never really thought about it being taken away from me, and when it was, it was a shock. Like, what am I going to do next?"

He considered buying a pass for the Eurorail and traveling around Europe, but wound up taking a graduate assistant job on the CU coaching staff. He quickly realized he didn't want to coach, but he found a career in football anyway.

During his time with the Lions, Russell befriended a scout named Thomas Dimitroff, who also lived in Boulder, and in 2000, Dimitroff introduced him to Scott Pioli, who at the time was the assistant director of player personnel for the New England Patriots. Pioli hired Russell the next season to scout the West Coast.

"I remember to the day the first time I backed out of my driveway, because you drive it. I backed out of my driveway like, all right, this is going to be crazy," Russell said.

As a West Coast scout, he was driving from Boulder to Seattle to the Bay Area in northern California to Los Angeles and San Diego, to Arizona and Las Vegas and Salt Lake City and back.

Each fall, Russell put about 20,000 miles on his pickup truck. He checked out thousands of players in his seven years as a scout for New England and Philadelphia before the Broncos offered him a job as director of college scouting in 2009.

"He just transferred all of his energy and passion as a player into scouting. It's not a surprise to me that he's successful," Cabral said. "I do know that a guy that is very passionate like he is will turn over every stone, ask very hard questions. You have to have an eye for that stuff, and he obviously has that."

In January, the Broncos promoted Russell to director of player personnel. He now oversees pro scouting in addition to the college draft preparation. He spends his days mostly in his office at Dove Valley instead of out on the road. He has even cut his shoulder-length blond hair.

"When you're in college (scouting) strictly, you get kind of detached from the team. You almost feel like you're not as much a part of it because you're on the road the whole time. But being here, you just feel a lot more involved, so that's probably the best part of that," Russell said.

"I love getting our draft board stacked. It's fun to start to target players that you really, really like, and then the challenge is getting them."

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