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Dave Krieger: Daniel Graham just doing his job and winning

By Dave Krieger
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NASHVILLE, Tenn. — Daniel Graham has always been polite, but he's never had too much to say. At Thomas Jefferson High School and the University of Colorado, during five seasons with the Patriots and four with the Broncos, he always let his play speak for him.

But Graham's heave of the football Sunday into the north stands at LP Field after catching the touchdown that beat his hometown team spoke for him.

He professed no bitterness afterward about the Broncos cutting him six months ago. Nor did he deny the joy he got from making that catch against them.

"To get the game-winning touchdown against my former team, I was so excited," he said. "Last year was the first year I went without scoring a touchdown at all, and just to get that against my former team, it was exciting."

The Titans took possession at their 5-yard line with just less than eight minutes remaining, trailing the Broncos 14-10. Their seven-play, 95-yard drive ended with Graham catching the game-winner in splendid isolation and immediately heaving the ball into the crowd.

"I didn't expect to be that wide open," he said. "We sold the fake pretty good, and I came wide open in the back of the end zone."

Lined up on the right end of the Titans' offensive line at the 4-yard line, Graham blocked down on Broncos defensive end Robert Ayers, then released to a vacant right corner of the end zone.

The odd thing is that play never works in practice. At least, that's what Matt Hasselbeck said when I asked him about it.

"You know what? We've run that play a bunch in practice, and he's never been open," the Titans' veteran quarterback said.

"And to make it even better, Mike Otto has been open every time, our backup tackle that comes in and plays tight end on the other side. I think we've run it three or four times, Otto's caught the ball every time and maybe the quarterback's run it in once."

So what turned this no-hoper into the dagger that put Tennessee in front to stay with a little more than four minutes remaining in Sunday's game?

"When you go goal line in practice, guys aren't

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selling out and diving, but in a game, they kind of are," Hasselbeck said. "We sold a hard 'iso' to the left. The guard pulled out there for me in case it's there, I can run it. He's just going to the back corner. But it was wide open. It was a great call. I almost started celebrating before I threw the ball."

The Broncos released a group of veterans in March before the NFL imposed its lockout. At the time, cutting Jamal Williams and Justin Bannan, their starting defensive tackles, got more attention than cutting Graham. The team issued a nice statement thanking Graham for his contributions. At 32, after a nine-year NFL career that included two Super Bowl rings with the Patriots, some thought Graham might call it quits. Graham wasn't among them.

"I knew I still had a little bit of football left, and when it was time for us to finally talk, the Titans called me up and I feel like I made the perfect choice," he said.

Not only did he not score a touchdown in 2010, he had fewer than 200 yards receiving for the first time since his rookie year. Blocking was always his strong suit, dating to his days alongside Andre Gurode and Victor Rogers on the CU line, but the Broncos thought they could do better. They drafted a pair of rookies and signed two veteran free agents at his position.

The Steelers had Graham in for a visit, but he said he didn't feel comfortable there. Instead, after talking to first-year Titans coach Mike Munchak on the phone, he chose Tennessee, where he's now one of the veteran leaders in the locker room.

Just business, he says. No hard feelings. But taking the fine for tossing that ball into the stands showed how much it meant to him.

"It was just the emotion," he said. "Caught the ball and just threw it up in the stands, and hopefully that fan can have a nice souvenir."

Graham never appreciated being referred to as a sixth offensive lineman, although it was usually meant as a compliment. Few blocking tight ends have been better.

But the son of former Broncos linebacker Tom Graham always wanted to be thought of as a complete tight end.

"He was probably hungry all those years in New England, them giving those goal-line tight end catches to Mike Vrabel," Hasselbeck said, smiling. "He probably wasn't going to let that one go."

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