

The 1983 NFL draft is referred to as “the year of the quarterback” and is considered one of the strongest drafts in NFL history. The Denver Broncos had thirteen rookies make their team that year including me and their choice at quarterback Gary Kubiak. Gary was a ninth round pick out of Texas A&M but the Broncos expected him to challenge Mark Herman for the backup role and eventually replace Steve Deberg as the starter. Gary had been a three sport high school star in Texas and had put together an outstanding football career as an Aggie. Athletic and smart Kubiak was going to be the Bronco’s future quarterback.

Kubiak came to Denver in June with the rest of us rookies to work out at the team facility, get to know his future teammates, and prepare for training camp. In July the Bronco’s brought rookies and a few nonstarter veterans to rookie camp. This was the week before the veterans joined them in Greeley and reported to training camp. Gary was a star at rookie camp with his accurate passes and his quick mastery of Dan Reeves offensive system. Then to Gary’s’ surprise the Bronco’s pulled off one of the NFLs biggest steals in history. They traded quarterback Mark Herrman and their 1983 first round pick Chris Hinton to the Baltimore Colts for the first pick of the 1983 draft, future Hall of Famer John Elway.

To Gary’s credit he competed with John instead of pouting. When it became clear that John would be the Bronco’s franchise quarterback Gary realized that he could still be a leader on our team. He prepared as if he were going to play in every game and developed a solid friendship with Elway. They supported each other by talking between offensive series letting each other know what they saw the oppositions defense doing. Gary and John roomed together at training camp and on the road. Elway’s leadership qualities are well documented but Kubiak’s leadership may have been even more impressive. There was no free agency in the NFL in the 1980s so unless the Bronco’s traded one of them, or John got hurt, Gary wouldn’t play in games. From the outside it looks like he spent his whole ten year career languishing in Elway’s shadow, but he embraced his role of helping John excel and became a valuable team leader.

Gary was always prepared when John was injured and his precision short passing game confused opposition defenses who had prepared for Elway’s strong arm and scramble game. Not only would Kubiak learn the offenses’ game plan but each week, but he would also take the extra time to study opposing quarterbacks’ tendencies. Throughout the week in practice Kubiak would show our defense individual decision making and release points of the quarterback we would face in the upcoming game. Gary also came up with game day rituals to support his teammates. After stretching and before the coin toss Gary would shake my hand and say “hold up the class Meck”. It was a little thing, but it reminded me to take advantage of and enjoy my opportunity to play. I knew if our roles were reversed and I was standing on the sidelines holding a clipboard, Gary would be giving his all on the field.

Big things like leadership are a combination of little things. Leadership is not a title or an assignment, it’s a choice. Gary consistently and clearly showed his commitment to our team’s success. The Denver Broncos were a much better team and won more games because of Gary Kubiak’s leadership. Working with and studying under Dan Reeves, Mike Shanahan, Chan Gailey, Raymond Berry, Jim Fossil, Joe Collier, and Wade Phillips, Gary learned the game of football from the sidelines and is now one of the longest tenured head coaches in the NFL.