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Ravens showing sharper corners this season

Young players Jimmy Smith, Cary Williams give team more physicality in secondary

By [Ken Murray](#), The Baltimore Sun

8:14 PM EDT, August 21, 2011

The biggest answer that came out of Friday's preseason game for the Ravens is that they are better this season at cornerback — perhaps much better.

Jimmy Smith, the first-round pick who came with a caution flag, held his own against the Kansas City Chiefs' Dwayne Bowe in his M&T Bank Stadium debut at left corner. Cary Williams, a third-year player out of Washburn University, might have taken the lead for the starting job on the right side with another strong outing.

Smith is 6 feet 2, smooth and already plays with the nerve of a veteran. Williams is a slender 6-1, all arms and legs, and he plays with a giant chip on his shoulder.

By contrast, last season's starters, Chris Carr and Josh Wilson, were 5-10 and 5-9. Maybe not coincidentally, the Ravens ranked 21st in NFL pass defense, giving up 224.9 yards per game and a total of 22 touchdown passes.

The bigger, more physical secondary is also better in another area: depth. That luxury allows veteran corner Domonique Foxworth, who missed the 2010 season with knee surgery, to return at his own pace.

Foxworth played sparingly in the 31-13 win over Kansas City and is still trying to regain the quick burst he had before the injury. His recovery is not without complications.

"It's been stressful," he said after Sunday's practice. "But the encouraging thing is seeing how good the rest of the corners on the team are. I think last year, one of the most difficult things for me to deal with was leaving a bit of a hole on the team that you feel responsible for. But this year, we are really deep and really talented. So no matter what happens with any one or two guys, we have more guys who can step in and do just as good a job."

That depth includes Carr, who returns after flirting with free agency, and nickel back Lardarius Webb, a former starter. Even Danny Gorrer, a second-year free agent, has had his moments this summer. And the addition of Bernard Pollard (free agency) at strong safety looks like another upgrade in the secondary.

The Ravens' secondary gave ground grudgingly against the Chiefs on Friday. Matt Cassel completed just six of 14 throws for 73 yards, and overall, three Kansas City quarterbacks hit just 20 of 39 passes.

The Bowe-Smith matchup was riveting in the first half. On Cassel's first pass, Smith, body-to-body, tipped a third-down pass that Bowe, also 6-2, still caught for 14 yards and a first down.

Bowe was targeted twice more against the Ravens rookie. One pass fell incomplete, and the last time, Bowe turned a quick fade into a 26-yard pickup when Smith pressed him. Smith said he should have played off but felt confident enough to press.

"I'm a rookie," Smith said. "I'm definitely going to make rookie mistakes. I don't think my game is where I want it to be, [or] where a shutdown corner should be. I think I had good coverage; he just came out with some good catches."

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Ravens coach John Harbaugh thought it was a good experience to prepare Smith for what's ahead.

"I'd say it was kind of mixed — good news and bad news — because now Jimmy has the chance to understand how those completions are really made," Harbaugh said. "Just being close to a guy is not covering a guy in this league. ... I think for him to understand how fast the back-shoulder fade gets in there on you, it's just an experience for him that he will learn from real quickly."

The Ravens' new look on the corner produced positive results: Smith finished with three tackles, and Williams had three breakups, including one against Bowe. Williams also missed what appeared to be a certain interception when Cassel threw behind intended receiver Jerheme Urban (who deflected the ball), and he gave up a short touchdown pass at the end of the half when he bit on an outside move from the receiver.

Except for the touchdown allowed on an all-out blitz, Harbaugh said, Williams played "very well. He had no other minuses that I am aware of. He had a bunch of broken-up passes on those quick look throws. He did a good job."

After working all week with the first team, Williams made a statement with his physical play. In the NFL, he has had to overcome playing at a small Division II school and a lack of big-time competition. Now, though, he thinks his hard work is paying off.

"I feel like I belong," Williams said. "You have to have confidence in yourself. I felt I belonged last year. You just have to roll with whatever the situation is, whatever the coach feels is best for you, and that's where I'm at right now. I just go with the flow."

Asked whether he thought he deserved to be the starter, Williams demurred.

"Every day, I have to work on something. It's nothing that I'm worthy of yet because I haven't proved myself. I'll continue to get better, and eventually a decision will be made by the coaches. I'm not here to make that decision. ... My job is to make it hard for those guys," he said.

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Posted: Monday August 22, 2011 1:48PM ; Updated: Monday August 22, 2011 3:03PM



Steven Marrocco > INSIDE MMA

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Take a look at Brendan Schaub's UFC record and you see a surprisingly straight and tidy upward tack since his consciousness-losing setback at the end of *The Ultimate Fighter 10*.

Looking in the rearview mirror of the resume, every one of Schaub's opponents is infused with purpose. Chase Gormley and Chris Tuchscherer? Confidence builders. Struggling one-time contender Gabriel Gonzaga? Street cred. The legend on his last legs, Mirko "Cro Cop" Filipovic? A gateway to top-tier matchups.

Now at Saturday's UFC 134, another legend close to sunset, Antonio Rodrigo Nogueira: the title eliminator.

Whether this seemingly well-orchestrated push to the summit is the 28-year-old Schaub's doing, or the result of winning four consecutive fights, or in reality, both, he's on the ramp up -- well ahead of Roy Nelson, who knocked him out to win *TUF 10* only to run later into a Brazilian roadblock by the name of Junior dos Santos.

What Schaub has lacked in fan buzz, he's made up for with a series of savvy career moves. After beating Gonzaga, he called out Frank Mir, a former champion twice his stature. He knew he wouldn't get the fight. But he also knew his call-out would generate some fleeting attention, which would boomerang in the form of a better opponent, one he likely wouldn't have gotten if not for a few headlines.

"I shot for the moon and I landed on Mirko 'Cro Cop,'" he told SI.com. "That's not a bad gig."

He said nobody wanted to fight Nogueira, so he volunteered. If he lost, he reasoned, it was because he was too green. If he won, he had another legend in the bag.

"When they were asking people to fight, no one said anything," Schaub said. "Then when the fight got confirmed, it was like, 'I wish I had that fight.' Yeah, you weren't saying that before."

And you can't blame him for playing the game. Two years after Dana White declared the UFC's big-man division the best its ever been, the distance between middle of the pack and top of class at heavyweight is still relatively short. You can make a splash pretty quick if you play your cards right, and Schaub, with some good wins and good old-fashioned self-promotion, is in a good position.

"I'm not OCD about it, but I definitely set goals, and I'm smart about my future, that's for sure," Schaub said.

Nogueira, he hopes, is the final bullet point in the list of reasons he's deserving of a title shot.

"That would be five wins straight. If I can beat Nogueira convincingly in his own backyard, I think you look at the layout of the heavyweight division, and I've got a good argument for it," Schaub said.

He's mostly right, although you can also argue he's merely piggybacking on a few dying stars, ostentatiously climbing the ladder rather than fighting all comers. "Cro Cop" and "Big Nog," after all, are not the fighters they once were. Filipovic will fight one last time, a sympathy gesture after back-to-back knockout losses capped by Schaub's last-minute hammer at UFC 128. The 35-year-old Nogueira is 2-3 in the octagon and has sat out the past year-and-a-half. Oddsmakers say he has about a 30 percent chance of winning the Aug. 27 fight, which takes place at HSBC Arena in Rio de Janeiro.

It certainly speaks to the matchup's anticipated severity when questions about the former Pride champ's current abilities dominate interviews. The mere mention of "same" and "Nogueira" in the same sentence are enough to set Schaub off on a prefabricated response about how the Brazilian's home-court advantage serves to mitigate what are likely symptoms of years of taking punishment.

Regardless of whether he's fighting a legend or a shell of one, Schaub plans on making a statement by slugging it out with Nogueira.

"I really pride myself on being one of the best strikers in the UFC, especially the UFC heavyweight division," he said. "It's something I have to go out there and prove time after time, and man, what a great way to prove it against guys like Gonzaga, 'Cro Cop,' and Nogueira."

Consider, also, that the up-and-comer is facing what could be the biggest challenge of his career without one of the most important influences in his career, and that his preparation for this fight has traveled anything but a straight line.

Three months prior, Trevor Wittman, patriarch of Denver's Grudge Training Center and a longtime coach, told Schaub he needed some family time and wouldn't be able to help him train for Nogueira. So Schaub flew elsewhere, traveling to East Coast to work with Renzo Gracie and Frankie Edgar's boxing coach, Mark Henry. Then he went to Florida to roll with Rashad Evans, then neck-deep in preparations for his fight with Tito Ortiz at UFC 133. And then to Albuquerque, N.M., where renowned trainer Greg Jackson helped dial in a game plan for the fight.

"When you're with the same group of guys all the time, we know what each other is going to do," Schaub said. "You don't get the same nerves as you do when you go in a new gym and you're sparring with different sparring partners, and you don't know how many rounds you're going to go. It's almost the closest you can get to a real fight when you walk into a new gym.

"I've been saying forever, I've got to switch it up. I'm a good boxer. I think I can box with anyone in the UFC, but this is mixed martial arts, and you've got to be good at all aspects of the game. It was perfect timing. I think everything happens for a reason, and I've definitely gotten better from this."

The pressure is on to deliver. Schaub has gotten himself this far, but at some point he's got to deliver the type of performance that gets fans talking. He hasn't done that yet, and stopping the once-unstoppable Nogueira might be the perfect opportunity.

If he wins Aug. 27, he'll pitch a title shot to UFC executives. He may not get it, of course, but he'll be closer than ever just three years into his MMA career.