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Ravens' Smith continues to progress during offseason

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By Aaron Wilson Times Staff Writer |

OWINGS MILLS — Jimmy Smith stood tall across from Torrey Smith, squaring his shoulders before backpedaling smoothly and flipping his hips to run stride for stride with the speedy wide receiver.

Although Jimmy Smith didn't always maintain tight coverage on the Baltimore Ravens' top deep threat, he did a respectable job overall Wednesday during an organized team practice at team headquarters.

One year into his NFL career, Smith is displaying signs of progress following a solid rookie campaign where there were flashes of the potential the Ravens identified in him at the University of Colorado before drafting him in the first round.

Big, strong and fast at 6-foot-2, 201 pounds, Smith represents the prototype for a potential shutdown cornerback.

Rather than simply rely upon his raw talent, though, Smith is trying to harness his natural ability and apply himself to win a starting job.

"I feel like I can get better in every aspect of the game," Smith said. "I don't think I am perfect at any part. So, every day I just go out and work on my technique, my speed, my vision. I am supposed to be good at press coverage, so I work on that, too. Every part of my game, I think, can be better."

Hardly satisfied with 20 tackles, two interceptions and eight pass deflections in a dozen games and three starts last season for the defending AFC North champions, Smith has dropped roughly 15 pounds in the offseason.

His goal is to upgrade his speed, lateral mobility, backpedal and change of direction skills.

"People are fast up here," Smith said. "That's the one thing I really took from last year is that speed really kills up here. That's something I have been working on."

Smith never got into optimal condition last season due to the work stoppage that preceded the season and his ankle injury.

Now, he's noticeable leaner.

"I think the weight was kind of the non-offseason, and then flying around to teams [before the NFL draft], eating a lot and then just jumping right into camp," Smith said. "I was a little out of shape and my weight was heavier. This year, we had a chance to work out, so my weight has been level. It's been the same, 200 pounds."

Unlike a year ago during the NFL lockout where Smith didn't have the benefit of working out at the Ravens' training complex or coaching prior to training camp, he's able to take advantage of a full offseason this spring.

"I think this helps out tremendously, because we didn't get this last year," Smith said. "Rookies last year kind of got thrown in the fire. This time, we get to learn the defense a lot more, get the plays down, get a feel for everything, the tempo, the speed. So, I think it helps, especially our class, out a lot this year."

Smith is slated to compete with Cary Williams for the starting cornerback assignment opposite Lardarius Webb, the Ravens' top cornerback and \$50 million man.

Williams is coming off hip surgery this offseason to repair a torn labrum. He returned to practice on a limited basis Wednesday and is expected to be fully recovered by training camp to try to hold onto his spot.

"I just think I am going to go out there, compete and do my best," Smith said. "I am not really worried about who is going to be the starter or not. I know I am going to be playing, so my job right now is just to make sure I can do whatever helps the team."

Smith missed four games after suffering a high-ankle sprain during his NFL regular-season debut against the Pittsburgh Steelers.

Smith had his moments, including an acrobatic interception of Tom Brady in the AFC championship game against the New England Patriots.

His interception against the Cincinnati Bengals in a November game led to a Ravens touchdown.

"He can make a huge step," Webb said. "With his talent, his knowledge, I think he's going to be a Pro Bowl corner coming up next year."

Mostly, Smith relied on his athleticism as a rookie.

The Ravens are excited about Smith's upside, believing he's capable of a breakthrough season as his fundamentals and strategic ability get better.

"I expect greatness from Jimmy Smith," Ravens coach John Harbaugh said. "He expects that from himself. Jimmy has worked really, really hard. Again, it's another guy that is showing off in the way he is playing."

"He is becoming a technician out there in this offseason. He's got all the tools, very humble, hardworking guy. The sky is the limit for Jimmy." During a 34-14 loss to the San Diego Chargers where Webb was out with a toe injury, Smith got picked on by quarterback Philip Rivers. He went after Smith several times and connected with Malcom Floyd and Vincent Jackson.

He was also beaten for a touchdown against the Cleveland Browns.

"Just to add onto what I did last year, get better, learn the game more," Smith said when asked where he's improved. "There is still a lot I have to learn, but I think I can improve on a lot of things. I'm bringing whatever I can to the table."

At times, Smith was susceptible to double moves.

Strong in bump and run coverage techniques, Smith's best gambit was to jam a receiver in the chest to use his upper body strength and throw off the timing of a pattern.

"I have been double-moved before," Smith said. "It's just technique, eyes. It's really just being focused in the game at that particular moment."

Smith has been gaining knowledge from more experienced defensive backs, especially Webb and Williams.

“I look up to them a lot, because they have been in the league for a little while, a couple more years than I have,” he said. “I take little parts of their game and add it to my game and listen to what they say.”

The Ravens have placed a lot of confidence in Smith, who avoided off-field problems as a rookie after a string of character issues during his time at Colorado caused him to fall in the draft.

Now, the California native is intent on proving the Ravens were wise to take a calculated gamble on him.

As Harbaugh said, the Ravens anticipate a lot from Smith.

“I expect the same out of myself,” Smith said. “It’s tough out here, so I just think that what they say, it’s a little bit of pressure, but not too much. I think I can handle it.”

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Thursday, June 7, 2012

Lawrence Vickers shocked Texans let him go

By Calvin Watkins

IRVING, Texas -- Now that we've gotten over [the ants-in-the-pants episode](#) with Cowboys fullback [Lawrence Vickers](#), we can focus on why the Cowboys signed him and the [Houston Texans](#) let him go.

Texans running back [Arian Foster](#) rushed for 1,224 yards and 10 touchdowns last season behind starting fullback Vickers. Foster had seven games with over 100 rushing yards and three games with 30 or more carries. Foster is an elite running back, having rushed for 2,840 yards with 26 touchdowns the last two seasons.

Vickers was released by Houston when the season was over. It was an interesting decision by the Texans, given they signed Vickers to a two-year deal after the 2010 season. But salary-cap concerns forced the franchise to make hard decisions, which also included letting star linebacker [Mario Williams](#) go in free agency.

"It was a shocker, I was shocked," Vickers said. "I was shocked. Then by Foster getting his (new) deal I would think there's more reason you got somebody that's going to protect him. I guess they just didn't value the position. I guess that's what it is."

It's not like Vickers is a one-hit wonder, either. As Cleveland's fullback in 2010, he led the way for [Peyton Hillis](#) to rush for a career-high 1,177 yards and 11 touchdowns.

But Vickers hit the free-agent market and signed with Houston for the two-year deal.

After 2011 ended, Vickers was placed on the open market and sought a team that valued the fullback position. Enter the Cowboys, who have always employed a fullback on the roster. When [DeMarco Murray](#) emerged as a talented force at running back last season, he praised the work of then-fullback [Tony Fiammetta](#).

There was a thought Fiammetta would return to the Cowboys, but that changed when Vickers became available.

"That's why I'm here, because they value the position," Vickers said.

With [Felix Jones](#), [Phillip Tanner](#) and Murray as the running backs, Vickers said he has to adjust his game for them and not the other way around. Developing a chemistry with the running back is key to any successful running game when a fullback is involved. Vickers said he has to see the holes just like the running back does, or create one when there's a wall.

"It's just the same approach, even if I was going to be with the same guy," Vickers said. "You approach it the same way, every year. So it never changes, always approach each year the same way as if we're just meeting each other and we've got to get on the right page. Chemistry is a must, even being with somebody two or three years, chemistry is still the same. You're going to have different linemen and you're going to be going against different defenses (with) different things going on."
