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Ravens rookie cornerback Smith discovered a need for cornerbacks

BY EDWARD LEE

The Baltimore Sun held a question-and-answer session with cornerback Jimmy Smith. Here are the highlights:
How would you describe your transition to the NFL?

It's only a little bit different, because I just have to get used to making more plays. That's it. It's also harder in the sense that you have to be on top of your game. You have to know everything that's going on, because you're not going to get away with half-knowing what you have to know to be successful up here. I think that's the hardest part, getting out of your old ways and finding a new routine. You have to up the ante when you come up here.

Who has helped you ease your transition to the Ravens?

(Cornerback) Domonique (Foxworth) has been really, really helpful. Now I've got (free safety) Ed (Reed) in my ear. And T.A. (secondary coach Teryl Austin) has been on me hard and coaching me well. They're getting me right.

You have said that prior to suffering the high left ankle sprain in the season opener against the Pittsburgh Steelers, you had never been injured. So how frustrating was that for you?

It was frustrating because everyone had high hopes for me. As much as I've been saying that I didn't want it to get into my head, it did. But it was never a situation where I got down on myself. I always think that everything happens for a reason. So I just thought, 'Maybe God has me sitting out for a reason.' It's worked out to the way it is, but when you first deal with it, you're like, 'Whoa, I'm out for a month possibly?' And that doesn't seem like that long, but it's a long time not to play football. And when you've got to come back and try to compete at that level when you've been out for a month, it takes some time. If you don't have patience with this, it'll get you.

How do you deal with those lofty expectations from others?

It doesn't bother me by any means. I kind of relish it. That's what I'm here for.

What's the most difficult part about playing cornerback?

Yeah, it's hard. I think that and quarterback are the hardest positions. You have to have great ball skills, you have to be able to flip your hips and run with guys who are running 4.2 or 4.3 at you. You've got to be able to do a lot at cornerback. So you have to be really athletic out there.

Are there a lot of mental adjustment required to play cornerback?

No. at corner, you don't really think too much. It's pretty much all reaction.

Have you always played cornerback?

I played free safety in my first year of playing football (sophomore year at Colton High School in Colton, Calif.). Then I played wide receiver and corner after that.

Why did you make the switch from free safety to cornerback?

My brother, Ryan Smalls, always wanted me to play corner, but in my first year, they already had two corners, seniors. So they switched me in my junior year.

Why did you make the switch from wide receiver to cornerback?

At wide receiver, I'm a dime a dozen. At corner, I'm rare because of my height, size and speed. You get a lot of people with my size at wide receiver. If you can get a guy with my size playing at corner, it usually pays off big. So you weren't persuaded by the glitz and glory of playing wide receiver to remain at that position?

Oh, I was. That's attractive to everybody. But I like to shut (receivers down). I want to make their best player not have a good day. I want to be the guy who makes other people say, 'Whoa, he's great, but this guy locked him up.'

So what's more important to you: getting interceptions or shutting down an opponent?

Interceptions are always great, and that's what every corner wants - especially up here at this level. But my game has never really been built around interceptions. It's always been about shutting my side of the field down. I think if you can do that as corner, that's worth a lot.

Who influenced you as a player or person?

My brother has pretty much been my role model. He's the one who got me into football. He would say to me, 'You can either play football or you can get straight A's.' So I started playing football. But it worked out.

Was he strict with you?

He was 28 at the time when I was 14. He didn't have any kids at the time, so he was kind of learning the ropes of being a big brother and as a guardian. Growing up, I had a lot of leeway, but I also had to act very mature in that situation - especially with my brother taking care of us and him being very young also. So he was still doing his thing. He had to take a lot of responsibility upon himself. He made sure we got good grades, he made sure we were doing good.

Were there times when you butted heads with your brother?

Yeah, just because we're brothers and everything. But it was never to a point where I said, 'I'm moving out.' It was never so serious that we couldn't talk about it. Me and my brother have a crazy relationship, but I don't think I have a stronger bond with anybody else. He's just been there since Day One. It's a weird relationship, because he's kind of like a pops, but he's not your pops, because he's your brother. The thing is, he's my half-brother as well. So he didn't have to take care of me and my other brother. So I just commend him for that.

Who was the toughest wide receiver you faced while playing at Colorado?

I faced some good ones - Maurice Purify (of Nebraska), (Jordan) Shipley (of Texas), A.J. Green (of Georgia), Dez Bryant (of Oklahoma State). And all of them, I think they just bring different things to the table. Dez Bryant is a great jump-ball receiver, A.J. Green is a great receiver, Shipley is a very crafty receiver. You had to bring different techniques to all of them.

Would you compare the Ravens-Steelers rivalry to any rivalry Colorado has?

Oh no, this is worse. This is the best rivalry because you hear about it and hear about it, but then when you play in it - and I played one down in it - it's really what everybody says it is.

Do you have a nickname?

Beans. Because of my first name, my brother used to call me Jim Bean, and then it changed to Beans, and it just stuck. Everyone calls me Beans back home. And some of the guys here call me that. Lardarius (Webb), Cary (Williams), Danny Gorrer, they call me Beans.