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How Former First-Round Pick Can Rejuvenate Ravens' Pass Defense

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By [Shawn Brubaker](#) | Yahoo! Contributor Network – Mon, Jul 1, 2013 10:30 AM EDT

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COMMENTARY| Calling a third-year player a bust might be unfair, but in [Jimmy Smith's](#) case, the description has been accurate so far. [The Ravens](#), accustomed to first-round picks being Rookie of the Year candidates, have seen Smith struggle to earn reps in what has been a mediocre secondary. Now in his third year, Smith is facing a make-or-break season, and early indications are that Smith is primed for his best season as a pro.

Coming out of the University of Colorado, Smith was a physical, athletic cornerback with all the physical tools, but he was determined a character risk by most teams. [The Ravens](#) took a risk on him thanks to his size-speed combo, and he has rewarded their trust by staying out of trouble. In a career full of struggles, that has been one of the bright spots.

That having been said, Smith got away with plenty of illegal coverage in college. Watching his game film, one can see Smith regularly draped over opponents in a way that gets flagged every time in the pros. He clearly had the physical ability to succeed, but Smith's bending of the rules wouldn't work in the pro game.

So far, it hasn't. Smith was penalized seven times last season, despite seeing a limited role. While Smith excels in a press-man scheme that allows him to bump the receiver within five yards of the line of scrimmage, Smith was constantly playing at

least 10 yards off the line of scrimmage. Despite the cushion between Smith and his assignment, Smith would still try to play physically, often resulting in penalties.

That can't happen this year. The Ravens are a team that struggles with penalties, and for Smith to earn a starting job, he can't be part of that problem. Pass interference and holding calls, both automatic first downs for the offense, are too costly for a starting cornerback to commit on a regular basis.

Part of the problem, admittedly, has been Smith playing out of position. Too often has Smith been lined up far off the ball, which neutralizes his best attributes: his physicality and his makeup speed.

For a guy like Corey Graham, playing off the ball makes sense. Graham is quick and instinctive, so he can easily react to opponent's routes. Smith, though, has stiff hips and developing instincts, so naturally he would struggle as a read-and-react cornerback.

In 2013, Smith would be better served playing close to the line of scrimmage, where he can bump receivers off their routes and use his excellent speed to make up for any mistakes. With the speedy duo of Michael Huff and Matt Elam playing safety, Smith can afford to be aggressive and take some risks: He just can't do it illegally anymore.

With an improved pass-rush featuring Elvis Dumervil, Chris Canty and a healthier Terrell Suggs, the Ravens should be more willing to take risks in coverage. This alone should help Smith improve from last season's debacle.

An improved work ethic should also play a big role in helping Smith get his career back on track. By all accounts, Smith has finally started to seize the opportunity in front of him this offseason. He lost 10 pounds by committing himself to a difficult boxing regimen, which has already helped Smith with his movement skills and should also help with his durability.

That focus on durability is crucial for Smith, as the corner has been plagued by groin, ankle and sports hernia injuries in his short career. After recovering from those injuries, Smith is as healthy as he has ever been. With improved durability, a healthy Smith should be a vastly improved Smith.

Ultimately, Smith's career is in his hands. He is making the important step of becoming a professional, taking his film study and conditioning more seriously. With a little luck in the health department, Smith looks ready to seize a starting role for the first time and finally make good on the promise that made him a first-round pick.

Shawn Brubaker is a graduate of the Catholic University of America. He has been a [Baltimore Ravens](#) featured columnist for Bleacher Report for two years and is currently a co-host of Ravens Central Radio.

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