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Dean Pees feels Jimmy Smith is headed in right direction

By Matt Vensel

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The Ravens see that Jimmy Smith can be a quality starting cornerback. They say he flashes that kind of ability every game. But they also see the moments when he gets caught out of place and gets stuck on somebody else's highlight reel. That inconsistency might drive you crazy, but the Ravens feel Smith is on the right track. advertisement

Smith is in his third NFL season, and the cornerback position can sometimes have a steep learning curve. But expectations are elevated for cornerbacks who are selected in the first round of the draft. The hope is that they will star immediately, that they will be able to lock down the opponent's top wide receiver from Week 1.

Some of them do. Maybe not from Week 1, but by the time their third seasons roll around, they have been established as some of the best cornerbacks in the game. It didn't take long for Darrelle Revis, a first-round pick of the New York Jets in 2007, to start marooning wide receivers on Revis Island. Kansas City's Brandon Flowers and Arizona's Patrick Peterson are other examples of first-round corners who quickly became stars.

It doesn't always happen that way, though. It has taken many cornerbacks, even ones with a similar pedigree to Smith, time to figure out the NFL game and develop into reliable players.

"I've been around a long time and seen a lot of really good defensive backs and I've coached in the secondary quite a few years," defensive coordinator Dean Pees said Thursday. "And I would guess that if you went back and watched Ty Law his first couple of years in the league or Asante Samuel, who I coached, you'd be surprised what they looked like after the first couple of years and what they became. [Smith will] get better and better and he's got the physical talent to do it."

Of course, there are plenty of examples of players who had the physical talent and never did it. New York Jets cornerback Kyle Wilson, now in his fourth NFL season, hasn't yet lived up to his first-round billing. Malcolm Jenkins, whom the New Orleans Saints have moved to safety, struggled mightily at cornerback. Prince Amukamara, drafted by the New York Giants eight picks before Smith, has not established himself yet, either.

Pees believes that Smith will be different. He has seen moments, like the final moments of the Super Bowl, when Smith played up to his potential. He hopes he will see that more often.

"The thing about Jimmy is that he just has to become consistent," Pees said. "I thought he had a really good camp. He's had moments in games where it wasn't so good and he's had moments in games where it really was good. Again, he's a young guy learning how to play back there."

Pro Football Focus grades the performance of every player in every game. So far in his career, they have graded Smith in the green, meaning he played well, in four games. He has had seven graded in the red. In the other 16 games, he was somewhere in the middle. In the season opener in Denver, he was in the red. But he got a green grade against Cleveland.

Despite the up-and-down play, Smith has finally become a starter, working his way into the team's two-cornerback base defense. It's up to him to keep proving that he belongs there.

"I think he's got to keep growing into the position and just become more consistent," Pees said. "He's got the talent. He's got the tools. When he does it right, he's as good as anybody."

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