

Few picks, just picked on

Like Chargers fans, Jammer longs for more interceptions

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June 11, 2006

On the baking asphalt of a Scripps Ranch parking lot, between Wells Fargo and Vons, on any given Wednesday of this year a man has been working for your approval.

Quentin Jammer knows what he has and has not been, and he actually feels pretty good about his play at cornerback for the Chargers.

But he wants to be more. And he cares what you and his peers think too.

“Yeah, it ticks me off,” he said. “But the people who think I'm not very good, I love them too. Those are the people who motivate me to go out and do more.”

He wants to be recognized as one of the best and knows he must first become one of the best.

“I'm good,” he said. “I'm not content with being good. I want to be great.”

So it is that 40 minutes into a workout one recent Wednesday that Jammer is dragging three 45-pound plates on a sled chained to his waist, backpedaling full-speed 30 yards across a parking lot.

“It's unbelievable the difference in his commitment last year to this year,” said Vince Gabriel, Jammer's personal trainer. “It's from a two to a nine.”

It is on Wednesday's that Jammer leaves his Carmel Valley home to go to Fitness Quest in Scripps Ranch. That is the day the Chargers rest from their four-times-a-week offseason workouts, affording Jammer some time for this kind of extracurricular torture.

Gabriel recalls working with Jammer the day before training camp last year.

“He's in 100 times the condition he was that day right now,” Gabriel said.

Just 15 minutes into a series of stretches – or “muscle activation,” as Gabriel calls it – sweat is starting to show through Jammer's shirt. And regardless of what greater San Diego might think

of Jammer's skill at cornerback, there is no denying he is in shape. It is clear he is being tested here.

Over the next hour, Gabriel will yell (encouragement, mostly) and Jammer will groan and grimace.

“This is for speed,” Gabriel exclaims at one point while a contorted Jammer throws a 12-pound medicine ball violently against a brick wall.

“You've got to be able to stop faster than anyone else on that field. Jump up. Stick.” At this point, Jammer is launching himself upward and landing on the balls of his feet.

“Find it,” Gabriel shouts with each throw of a football, all tossed with varying speed, to divergent locations and at different points in Jammer's jumps. Easy enough, except a belt around Jammer's waist is attached to cables attached to a contraption on the floor.

Following the backward sprints across the parking lot, Jammer takes one 45-pound plate in each hand and sprints up a flight of stairs.

“As fast as you can,” Gabriel hollers from below.

The entire sequence of exercises is designed to be specific to what Jammer needs to do to be a better cornerback – reaction to the ball, body control, balance, first-step quickness, agility.

Some of that (jumping, finding the ball, backpedaling) would seem obvious. But even carrying the weights upstairs is an attempt to improve his grip.

“I've had trouble holding onto the ball,” he said.

Yes, he has.

That will come as one gigantic understatement to the legion of e-mailers and callers to the newspaper and sports talk radio that has all but deemed Jammer to be Ryan Leaf. See, Jammer was the No. 5 overall pick in the 2002 draft, and it has been easy for fans to note he has exponentially more pass interference, holding and illegal contact penalties than he does takeaways.

“I know the fans are down on me,” Jammer said.

He adds, “My hardest critic is me.” And not wanting to leave out anyone, he adds: “And my wife and my little brother.”

Jammer knows what fans want. It's what he wants.

“Everyone wants stats,” he said. “I haven't got the interceptions. I'm disappointed in that.”

It is pointed out to Jammer that he tried in different ways last offseason to increase his ball skills, including laser surgery on his eyes and various drills to increase ball awareness.

“It worked,” he said. “I got my hands on a lot more balls.”

He laughed and said, “I’ve just got to catch them.”

The truth is, Jammer was a combined split second or two from being in the Pro Bowl. He dropped at least four interceptions in 2005. Had Jammer held on, seeing as two of them were in the end zone and appeared to be ripe for a coast-to-coast scoring run, there can be little doubt he would have been celebrated instead of vilified.

Jammer acknowledges he has a bad habit of looking away from the ball at the last second. He said he does so “for some odd reason” but knows it might have to do with the fact, “You always have in the back of your mind you want to make big plays,” and he might be looking for where to run.

Jammer, with just six interceptions in his four-year career, makes no promises about becoming an interception machine. He has always been and will always be a player more valued for the plays he does not allow than the plays he makes.

“I’d love to have more picks, and that’s something I’m really working to get more picks,” he said. “But as far as interceptions go, a lot of times those are a little bit of skill and a lot of luck. I can still have years where I can get five or six picks. I think I can still be a big-play corner. But my whole thing is to shut down a receiver. My responsibility it is to make sure I shut down the other receiver. That’s my main focus, because we play some pretty good receivers.

“I’m to the point where I’m fed up with fans who don’t really know what I do. The only way I can silence the fans is to get interceptions. They want to see picks. I pride myself in my receivers not catching passes, not catching TDs. If you can take a team’s No. 1 receiver out of a game, that’s as good as a turnover.”

Yet he still works. For your approval and his own.

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