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Bailey healthy and more comfortable

By **Graham Bensinger**
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Editor's note: Each week during the season, Graham Bensinger will be talking with high-profile NFL figures for ESPN.com's Weekly Conversation. This week he checks in with Broncos cornerback Champ Bailey.

Graham Bensinger: I was talking to one of your brothers about you and your brothers Boss and Ron growing up. You used to get in a little bit of trouble, huh?

Champ Bailey: (laughs) What do you mean? Not too much ... Nothing major.

Bensinger: You're at your cousin's house and decided to venture into the attic. What do you recall?

Bailey: (laughs) Okay. So we did do that. We were going up there just trying to be nosy kids. Then, all of the sudden, the ceiling caves in. It was too much weight. We fell through the ceiling. It was hell from there.

We were in our uncle's house. Our family is very close. He lined us up and gave us all a spanking.

Bensinger: What was it like growing up?

Bailey: We had all of our family around us. It was good because we had a lot of love around us. We grew up in a small town in Georgia. There was not a lot of opportunity in our town. We knew if we wanted to get out of there we either had to do well in school or play football.

Bensinger: I've been told you got your jumping skills from your uncanny ability to do flips when you were younger. What do you think of that?

Bailey: My jumping ability enables me to do flips. It just comes natural. My dad was a good athlete. A lot of my cousins and uncles were good athletes. I just have good genes.

Bensinger: You and Boss used to love doing flips ...

Bailey: We would do flips all of the time! All of our friends would do them, too. It was like a neighborhood thing.

Bensinger: Have you ever considered doing that after you return an interception for a touchdown?

Bailey: Oh, no! (laughs) It's a little different when you have full pads on! I know I can do it, but why take that chance? I'll showboat and then mess it up and probably end up breaking my neck. That'll be one of my most embarrassing moments. I don't want to do that.

Bensinger: The Redskins are taking on the Cowboys in your first NFL game. You look across the line and see Troy Aikman, Emmitt Smith, and Michael Irvin. What's going through your mind?

Bailey: Nerves. My nerves are bad at this point. I grew up watching these guys. I remember Emmitt Smith when he played at Florida. I wanted to be just like him. When I was eight-years old, my first football number was 22 because of Emmitt Smith. It was weird because now I'm lined up across from him. I've got to tackle him. I've got to cover Michael Irvin. And I've got to

prevent Troy Aikman's passes from being completed. It was a dream come true.

Bensinger: You intercepted one of Troy Aikman's passes. What was that like?

Bailey: It was a good feeling. I get a pick in my first NFL game. It sinks in and then it's like damn that was off of Troy Aikman!

Bensinger: How much confidence did that give you?

Bailey: A lot, I'll be honest with you. It gave me a lot of confidence to pick a guy like Troy Aikman, who never throws interceptions. It made me realize I can play and make plays in this league.



Byron Hetzler/US Presswire

Champ Bailey got his first interception of the season Monday night against the Ravens.

Bensinger: The toughest player you've ever gone up against is who?

Bailey: Hines Ward. He's tough in a lot of ways.

Bensinger: How so?

Bailey: He's not your typical receiver. He's not super quick, but he plays hard and never takes a play off. If you blink, he'll make a play. That's what makes him so tough. He'll sneak up on you.

Bensinger: What combination do you most look forward to playing?

Bailey: The ultimate combination right now is Marvin Harrison and Peyton Manning. You can definitely measure your skill by how well you play against them.

Bensinger: How pumped do you get for a game against the Colts?

Bailey: Very. I try to stay cool and calm because I want to stay sharp. The more relaxed I am, the better I play.

Bensinger: The Broncos drafted a QB that's already being compared to John Elway! What do you think of Jay Cutler?

Bailey: Awesome. He's got a big time arm and a lot of confidence. I love the way he plays. He hasn't shown me anything yet, but as long as he's healthy he's going to be a great QB.

Bensinger: If you're the head coach, at what point do you make the change in QBs?

Bailey: I don't know. I think every year a guy has to prove himself. It doesn't matter whether it's during the season, in training camp, or the offseason. You have to keep proving yourself. Every year there's a measuring stick. It will be an open battle whenever he [Mike Shanahan] thinks Cutler has just as good of a shot as [Jake] Plummer. I don't know when that will be. Let's just see how Jake performs. That's really what it's based on.

Bensinger: Last season, you had a torn hamstring and a separated shoulder. What was that like for you?

Bailey: It was tough because I've never had to deal with a lot of injuries throughout my career. I learned a lot from being injured. I definitely used my head a lot more to play the game.

Bensinger: How difficult was it for you to play through those injuries?

Bailey: It was pretty difficult. I pushed myself pretty hard. I came back too early from the hamstring injury. The shoulder wasn't that serious because it was in place, but it was just nagging. It was scary to think about the potential of it popping out.

Bensinger: How much more willing did you find QBs were to try and squeeze the ball in to receivers next to you?

Bailey: I did get increased action when I was coming back from those injuries. When I was hurt the ball was definitely coming my way. It enabled

me to make a lot of plays. If you're throwing it in my direction, you may get me a couple of times, but I'm going to make you pay at least once or twice.

Bensinger: That's what I found so remarkable. Since you were injured it seemed as if people all of the sudden thought it'd be okay to throw your way. You look at the number of interceptions you were getting -- you would think opposing offenses would learn real quickly. To what extent do you think it allowed you to get more interceptions?

Bailey: My anticipation allowed me to get more interceptions. I knew a lot more because I was studying a lot more. I knew I couldn't run as fast or stop when I wanted to. I knew my body wasn't going to enable me to do that. I started watching more film and tried to anticipate things more. That's how I was able to make some of the plays when I was hurt.

Bensinger: What did you most gain from watching the film?

Bailey: It increased my awareness. Your awareness keeps your career going. When coaches look around the league at what players they want ... they want players that are smart and that can rub off on the rest of the team. When your physical ability begins to diminish, if you have that awareness and understand the game, you'll be fine.

Bensinger: How much has the time you devoted to watching film last season carried over to this year?

Bailey: That's what makes me more dangerous now. I know exactly what it takes to become able to anticipate things happening in a game. I've used that this year. I haven't gotten a lot of action, but my awareness is so much better than what it was. I feel so much more comfortable and I'm healthy.

Bensinger: Since there are few balls coming in your territory, how crucial is it for you to have patience?

Bailey: It's very crucial. If this would have happened three or four years ago, I would have probably lost focus. I'm more intelligent now. I'm more aware of what's going on and what people are trying to do to me. It's easy to lose that focus because you're not getting action so you feel left out. I create ways to get into action. I try to be more active in the run game and everything like that.

Bensinger: Given your success, you know you're feared, but how much have you been surprised with how much you've been avoided this season?

Bailey: I'm surprised because it has definitely happened more than I expected. It's a little out of the ordinary to not see any passes. I might get one or two a game on average. That's not a lot of work at all. It's surprising that people won't at least try something.

Bensinger: What's the key to taking away the left defensive side?

Bailey: My history. I hate to say that, but I haven't really done anything this year. Your history is what precedes you. People are going to notice the way you play. I've been able to play a certain way consistently and they know that's what I'm capable of doing. The fear of making a mistake coming my way has been what's helped me take away the left side of the field.

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