

49ers Clips – May 9, 2017

Local Media

Cornerback now, surgeon later, Ahkello Witherspoon is 49ers' renaissance man

By Nick Wagoner, ESPN.com

http://www.espn.com/blog/san-francisco-49ers/post/_/id/24952/cornerback-now-surgeon-later-ahkello-witherspoon-is-49ers-renaissance-man

Predicting the best NFL rookie on every team

By Nick Wagoner, ESPN.com

http://www.espn.com/nfl/story/_/page/32for32x170509/predicting-best-2017-rookie-all-32-nfl-teams

National Media

Seahawks' mailbag: Will Seattle re-sign fullback Marcel Reece?

By Bob Condotta, The Seattle Times

<http://www.seattletimes.com/sports/seahawks/seahawks-mailbag-will-seattle-re-sign-fullback-marcel-reece/>

Will Holden brings versatility at tackle to Cardinals' offensive line

By Josh Weinfuss, ESPN.com

http://www.espn.com/blog/arizona-cardinals/post/_id/25512/will-holden-brings-versatility-at-tackle-to-cardinals-offensive-line

Ravens running back Terrance West signs restricted free-agent tender

By Jeff Zrebiec, Baltimore Sun

<http://www.baltimoresun.com/sports/ravens/ravens-insider/bal-running-back-terrance-west-signed-restricted-free-agent-tender-20170508-story.html>

Cowboys leaders making a point to empower Dak Prescott takeover

By Clarence Hill, Fort Worth Star-Telegram

<http://www.star-telegram.com/sports/nfl/dallas-cowboys/article149272944.html>

Minter, Benwikere quietly blending into Bengals defense

By Jim Owczarski, Cincinnati Enquirer

<http://www.cincinnati.com/story/sports/nfl/bengals/2017/05/08/cincinnati-bengals-defensive-free-agents-kevin-minter-bene-benwikere/101440218/>

Local Clips – Full Version

Cornerback now, surgeon later, Ahkello Witherspoon is 49ers' renaissance man

By Nick Wagoner, ESPN.com

Whether he was on a soccer field, baseball diamond, basketball court or football field, or in the classroom, new San Francisco 49ers cornerback Ahkello Witherspoon has always been one of those people who succeeds at just about everything he tries.

That was particularly true when it came to sports. Growing up in the Sacramento area, Witherspoon earned a reputation for his ability to perform well at any and every sport. As he grew older, he often heard this question: If you are a jack-of-all-trades, how will you ever master any of them?

"I definitely got that," Witherspoon said. "One of the things I heard a lot was if you are good at a lot of things, you'll never be great at one thing. That's one thing that kind of always resonated with me, and I thought about it and thought I want to try to be great at everything I do. That's kind of where my mentality changed growing up. My father as well, he kept pushing me to be versatile as an athlete and as a person. That's something I pride myself on being."

And it's something Witherspoon doesn't intend to stop being anytime soon, even now that he has a full-time job as an NFL player. The 49ers selected the 6-foot-3, 200-pound cornerback out of the University of Colorado in the third round of this year's NFL draft with no reservations about his commitment to football.

Witherspoon's athletic background is varied, and so are his interests outside of sports. As a kid, soccer was his best sport, and he played through his freshman year of high school. He played outside midfield, and his favorite soccer teams were FC Barcelona, Bayern Munich and Borussia Dortmund.

When he wasn't perfecting his footwork on the soccer field, Witherspoon was a center fielder for the baseball team. He lettered twice and drew attention from the Toronto Blue Jays coming out of high school, though he says he hasn't been in touch with them recently. On the basketball court, Witherspoon averaged 16 points and seven assists as a high school senior. He was considered good enough to play any of the three sports in college.

So how did Witherspoon become a football player? It started with the massive growth spurt that was his entire high school experience. He started as a 4-foot-11 freshman and exited a 6-2 senior. Witherspoon waited until his senior year to try football. In honing his skills in other sports, Witherspoon immediately recognized how his diverse sports background translated to football.

"It's big," Witherspoon said. "Just body awareness, especially soccer. The footwork, body awareness -- as well as, like, baseball, being able to track the ball, [and] basketball, that short-area agility to cover laterally, like playing defense in basketball. So I think all the sports kind of culminated to where I am as a football player."

Witherspoon landed at Colorado after a one-year stop at Sacramento City College. Upon his arrival in Boulder, Witherspoon began to seriously explore his many non-football interests. As the grandson of renowned blues musician Jimmy Witherspoon, whose song "Ain't Nobody's Business" topped the R&B charts in 1949, Ahkello Witherspoon is an accomplished singer and drummer. In the classroom, he majored in ecology and evolutionary biology with dreams of becoming a surgeon. Witherspoon is nine credits away from finishing his biology degree, something he plans to do in the offseason during the next couple of years.

From there, Witherspoon plans to go to medical school when his playing career is over.

"Med school, it's happening no matter if it's a year or 12 [away]," Witherspoon said. "It's my passion. I have always been interested in how things work, and I think the body is a great place to kind of jump in and figure it out."

Hearing a player say that something other than football is a passion might normally set off alarms for NFL teams. If anything, it appears Witherspoon's many interests made him more appealing to 49ers general manager John Lynch.

"Sometimes people mistake smart football players ... they question, can smart guys love football, and I don't think just because you have other interests and because you do well in school doesn't mean that you don't love football," Lynch said. "And we talked a lot about why he loves football. I think you can ask any player, 'Do you love football?' And they're going to say, 'Yeah, I love football.' But I find it intriguing to say, 'Why do you love football? What is it about the game?' And Ahkello really communicated his love for the game and why he did, and [coach] Kyle [Shanahan] and I both got really comfortable with it."

Of course, that doesn't mean the Niners believe they're getting a finished product. In fact, Witherspoon is still something of a football neophyte, and he has a long way to go to reach his potential. At his size, with 33-inch arms, Witherspoon has the making of the ideal press corner in coordinator Robert Saleh's defense. But while Witherspoon has proved physical enough to jam receivers at the line of scrimmage, he still lacks ability as a tackler.

"It needs to improve," Lynch said. "It's something that [Colorado coach] Mike MacIntyre helped me a lot with because I like physical players, and I think what helped is that I saw examples on film where he can do it, and I think that's why you go get guys like Solomon Thomas and Reuben Foster to draw that out of them. I always believe when you put people in a room that are exhibiting the way we want to play, the other guys have no choice if they want to be on the field. And so I think Ahkello, it's something that we raised to him and we didn't hide from it."

During Witherspoon's pre-draft visit with the Niners, Lynch showed the cornerback video clips of times when he made tackles and other clips of times he didn't get the job done. Becoming more physical, especially in the run game, is at the top of Witherspoon's priority list.

"He showed me this is kind of what's encouraging to me, is that it's not a fear thing, you're willing to do it, it's just getting experience," Witherspoon said. "It's like when you're out there on the football field and you see two guards pull, it's like something new that you are seeing instead of diagnosing and just going and blowing it up. That's kind of what he told me he was going to have me come in and do, is just keep exposing myself to new situations."

If Witherspoon can become at least a serviceable tackler, he should have a chance to play early in a secondary that has an opening for a starting outside corner. Witherspoon had 22 pass breakups last year, best in the nation, so the Niners believe his coverage skills can translate quickly.

"I think people say a big upside, and I really believe with Ahkello that there is," Lynch said. "But yet, I think we can throw him out there next year and he can play. He's demonstrated that he can hang with big-time receivers."

It's just one of Witherspoon's many talents.

Predicting the best NFL rookie on every team

By Nick Wagoner, ESPN.com

San Francisco 49ers

LB Reuben Foster

Operating under the assumption that his shoulder holds up for the full season, Foster will start from the get-go and should instantly improve the league's worst run defense. Foster will probably begin at weakside linebacker next to NaVorro Bowman in the middle, but he'll eventually become the middle linebacker and center of the defense (though maybe not this year). Foster's ability to stay on the field for all three downs gives him a slight edge over fellow first-round pick Solomon Thomas.