

# Sports



## NFL

THE RAIDERS, PREPARING FOR A GAME AT THEIR FORMER HOME, REMAIN POPULAR IN LOS ANGELES. 4C

## ON 49ERS

# Rookie Witherspoon emerges as top CB, but 49ers need two

### SANTA CLARA

The award for most impressive 49ers rookie of 2017 is up for debate. The award for most surprising rookie is not.

The only time cornerback Ahkello Witherspoon made headlines in the summer was when the callow, unsuspecting rookie was blasted backward 8 yards into the end zone by running back Carlos Hyde.

Accolades were liberally delivered to receiver Trent Taylor, tight end George Kittle and running back Matt Breida



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throughout the offseason. The best that could be said about Witherspoon, a third-round selection who started playing

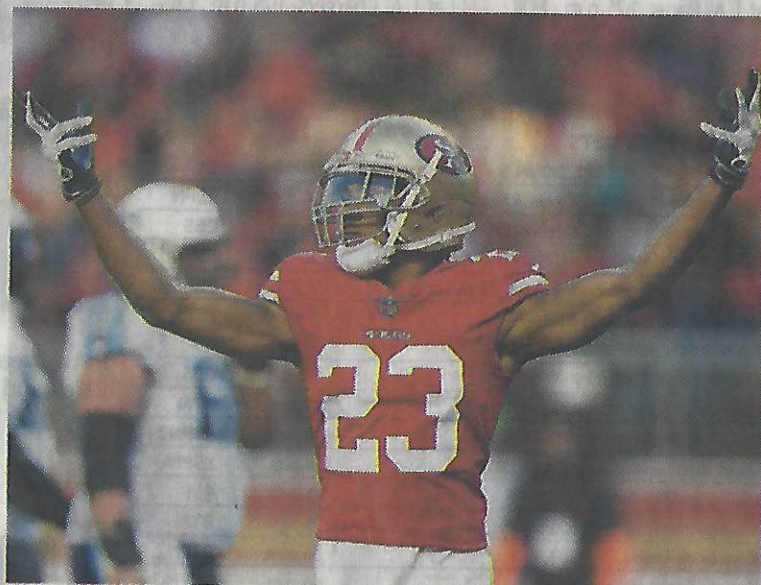
### COMING UP

**Sunday:** 49ers at L.A. Rams, 1:25 p.m.; FOX, 680, 1320

football seriously only as a senior in high school, was that he was an interesting project. Witherspoon wasn't even in uniform for the first four games of the season.

Five months after his welcome-to-the-NFL moment with Hyde, however, Witherspoon

SEE 49ERS, 4C



D. ROSS CAMERON AP

Ahkello Witherspoon started playing football seriously only as a senior at Christian Brothers High School. The third-round selection wasn't even in uniform for the 49ers' first four games of the season.



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clearly is the best cornerback on the team, one who's been throwing his own weight around – just ask Houston Texans tailback Lamar Miller, who had to go to the sideline after a hit from Witherspoon – and who had his second interception of the season on Sunday against Jacksonville. He hasn't given up a touchdown since Week 12.

Entering the draft, the knocks on Witherspoon were that he was too inexperienced, too intellectual, had too many other pursuits and wasn't rough-and-tumble enough as a tackler. Witherspoon, who grew up in Sacramento and played at Christian Brothers High School, wants to be a doctor, has the voice to be a singer and is an accomplished outfielder and left-handed batter who is still being considered by major-league baseball teams.

A player with options and intellect may scare some NFL general managers, but not John Lynch, who knows a thing or two about anti-egghead bias in the league.

"Well, we like smart football players, and he's certainly that guy," Lynch said after drafting Witherspoon in April. "Sometimes I think, having played at Stanford, sometimes people question: 'Can smart guys love

football?' And I don't think just because you have other interests and because you do well in school means that you don't love football."

The 49ers' general manager looks brainy for a number of reasons this year. Acquiring quarterback Jimmy Garoppolo and gambling on linebacker Reuben Foster top the list. Drafting Witherspoon is part of the conversation, too.

The problem for the 49ers is that NFL defenses, particularly the one San Francisco uses, require two high-end cornerbacks. The team they just faced, the Jaguars, are a good example.

They drafted a big, athletic cornerback, Jalen Ramsey, with the fifth overall pick in 2016. The following offseason they doubled down on the position by signing free-agent A.J. Bouye to a five-year, \$67.5 million contract. It's no coincidence that, even after Sunday's lapse in Santa Clara, the Jaguars have far and away the top pass defense in the NFL this season.

Meanwhile, Witherspoon is the only outside cornerback the 49ers have under contract for 2018.

With opposing offenses shying away from Witherspoon, teams have been picking on veteran starter Dontae Johnson and he's

been given "a breather" in recent games. Johnson is scheduled to be an unrestricted free agent in March.

One of his replacements, Tyvis Powell, allowed a 32-yard reception, Jacksonville's longest play of the game, on one of his 17 snaps Sunday. Another young player, Greg Mabin, would have had a chance to make an impression but suffered a calf injury in practice just as he was being penciled in for playing time.

All of which points to a cornerback spree in the offseason.

The Rams' Trumaine Johnson, who will square off against Garoppolo and top receiver Marquise Goodwin on Sunday if he's not given a day off like other Rams star players, is a possibility on the free-agent market.

The top cornerback in the draft, Alabama's Minikah Fitzpatrick, will play Monday in the Sugar Bowl and would be a perfect fit in the 49ers' system. But it's hard to see Fitzpatrick falling to the 49ers, who currently have the eighth pick but who could drop out of the top 10 altogether with a win on Sunday.

That might force Lynch to roll the dice again at the position. Considering the hot streak he's on, why not?

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about the team at  
sacbee.com/sf49ers.*