

NFL

49ers face questions at cornerback opposite Sherman

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An odd thing happened in 2019. The 49ers had one of the best pass defenses in recent memory, yet the season didn't reveal any real long-term answers about the future of cornerback.

More precisely, the question heading into 2020: what's going to happen opposite Richard Sherman?

The league's most productive statistical pass defense since 2009 didn't have much stability at the right cornerback spot while Sherman held down the left side at an All-Pro level. K'Waun Williams, meanwhile, proved to be one of the league's premier slot corners.

At right cornerback, youngsters Emmanuel Moseley and Ahkello Witherspoon made nine and eight starts, respectively, and leaving no clear cut starter for 2020 and will create a competitive battle once training camp rolls around in late July (or later, depending on the COVID-19 crisis).

The two players are very different. Witherspoon, who went to Christian Brothers High School in Sacramento, has the advantage of being a 2017 third-round pick, which means he's likely to get more leeway than Moseley, who was an undrafted free agent a year later.

Witherspoon has the size (6-2, 195), length (33-inch arms) and athleticism typical of his draft status. He showed early promise last season before a foot injury Week 3 led to Moseley taking over.

Moseley, meanwhile, is 5-11 and 185 pounds, and more known for his competitiveness and fearlessness than physical tools, unlike Witherspoon. Moseley started from Week 4 to Week 11 before giving the job back to Witherspoon in early December against the Baltimore Ravens (and started in place of Sherman against the Atlanta Falcons two weeks later).

Witherspoon was given the first-team nod in the playoffs after starting the final five regular season games. But he was benched at halftime in the Divisional Round against the Minnesota Vikings after surrendering a long touchdown pass to Stefon Diggs.



Cornerbacks Emmanuel Moseley, center, and Ahkello Witherspoon, right, huddle with safety D.J. Reed Jr. before the 49ers faced the Kansas City Chiefs in Super Bowl LIV on Feb. 2 in Miami Gardens, Fla.

Moseley started the NFC championship and the Super Bowl, but had a lapse in coverage on the defining third-and-15 play during the Kansas City Chiefs' comeback when he allowed Tyreek Hill to get behind him while biting on a receiver underneath.

What do the numbers say about the two?

The players, who each had one interception during the regular season (Moseley picked Aaron Rodgers in the NFC championship), had similar production with the exception of two important statistics, according to Pro Football Focus.

Moseley played 345 coverage snaps and allowed 30 catches on 51 targets (58 percent). As for Witherspoon: 337 coverage snaps and 29 catches on 53 targets (55 percent).

Moseley allowed two touchdowns in coverage. Witherspoon gave up six. Moseley allowed 1.08 yards per coverage snap, while Witherspoon allowed 1.20 (Sherman led

NFL corners with 0.44).

So the numbers favor Moseley to start in 2020, but the choice isn't so clear to hand him the job without allowing Witherspoon a shot at winning it back.

Complicating the issue is the uncertain future of the cornerback group. Sherman, Moseley, Witherspoon and Williams are all unsigned beyond the coming season, which means the team's top four cornerbacks are entering their contract years.

Which also means the position could have entirely new look in 2021. Cornerback will be among the positions projected to get addressed with an early draft pick next spring, joining offensive tackle (if Treat Williams isn't retained) and strong safety, with Jaquiski Tamm also unsigned beyond the coming season.

It all makes for a notable subplot as the 49ers seek a Super Bowl return.

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6/28/20

RANKING THE 49ERS

Alexander leads 'Hot Boyzz' but barely makes 49ers' top 15

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In this three-part series, we're going to offer our rankings of the top 15 players on the 49ers roster. This list aims to provide a summation of talent, track record and value into the future. With apologies to recent first-round draft picks Jaron Kinlaw and Brandon Aiyuk, only players that have played NFL snaps qualify.

NO. 15: KWON ALEXANDER, LB

The case for Alexander is built more on intangibles than production. Yes, Alexander flies around and makes the occasional splashy play. But he was 96th in Pro Football Focus' tackling efficiency metric among linebackers while missing roughly one of every five tackles (Dee Greenlaw was sixth-best at one missed tackle for every 21.5). How Alexander butters his

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San Francisco 49ers middle linebacker Kwon Alexander, right, is a key component of one of the league's best defenses.



ALAN CORTEZ/AP PHO

Cornerback Ahkello Witherspoon celebrates after the 49ers forced a turnover against Baltimore on Dec. 1, 2019. Witherspoon's highs have been matched with frustrating lapses that have defined his roller coaster career.

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FRIDAY MAY 29 2020
SATURDAY MAY 30 2020

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bread is the positive impact he has on his teammates. His infectious personality rubbed off on buttoned-up rookie Fred Warner, helping him turn into one of the "Hot Boyzz," which would have sounded crazy in 2018. Nick Bosa called Alexander the defense's MVP, which is no small thing, and the energy the defense played with reached a different level with Alexander on the field.