

BEARS

By DAN WIEDERER | Chicago Tribune

Adam Gase savored the grand visions that spun through his mind.

Back in May, during Bears rookie minicamp and into organized team activities, Gase assessed his newest prize and quickly became enamored with Kevin White's combination of speed and size, intelligence and humility.

Drafted with the No. 7 pick, White was proving to be as good as advertised. And the Bears offensive coordinator found stimulating the thought of blending the 6-foot-3, 217-pounder into an attack that also would feature Alshon Jeffery, Matt Forte and Martellus Bennett.

"For a guy Kevin's size and the way he went 0 to 100 (in the snap of a finger), it was impressive," Gase said this week.

Several times, on deep balls from Jay Cutler up the sideline and in tight coverage, White leaped and attacked the ball to make big plays.

"Seeing that," Gase recalled this week, "I'm going, 'OK, this is what we're in for.'"

The Bears' belief in White hasn't wavered in recent months, even as the prized rookie has been stuck in an arduous rehabilitation process, his 2015 season almost certainly over after summer surgery to repair a stress fracture in his left leg.

Still, on Sunday at Soldier Field, the Bears will get an up-close reminder of just what they're missing when the Raiders bring their own esteemed rookie receiver, Amari Cooper, to town.

The contrast will be difficult to ignore. The Bears' first-round pick remains behind a tall chain-link fence with nothing but an artist's rendering to depict the future.

"Coming in 2016 ..."

Meanwhile, on the adjacent lot, the Raiders will continue celebrating their grand opening with a dazzling, state-of-the-art product that's already generating justifiable buzz.

Through three games, the No. 4 pick in the draft is on pace for 107 catches and 1,547 yards. He's well on his way to becoming the Raiders' first 1,000-yard receiver since Randy Moss in 2005. And of most importance, Cooper is emerging as a can't-miss cornerstone of a hapless franchise that now appears to be on the rise.

Through one lens, Cooper's emergence creates envious visions in Chicago of what might have been if he only had slipped three picks lower. His breakthrough also may trigger longing for the excitement the Bears could be experiencing if White were healthy.

Or for the biggest Bears optimists, Cooper's breakout is a tease toward the impact White could have when he's back at full bore. After all, in the months leading up to the draft, widespread discussion circled as to just how big a gap existed between Cooper and White.

The NFL consensus had Cooper as the higher-rated prospect. He simply was more polished, more proven in a pro-style offense and readier to have an immediate impact. But in some circles, including upstairs at Halas Hall, the grades on Cooper and White were very close.

One thing is certain this weekend: In a game that could have been a showcase for the two best receivers in a loaded rookie class, Cooper will own the stage alone.

First impressions

Bears defensive coordinator Vic Fangio didn't get very far into his review of the Raiders' 27-20 victory over the Browns last week before he had undeniable evidence of Cooper's prodigious talent. Fangio found it in the game's first play.

As Browns cornerback Joe Haden — a two-time Pro Bowl selection — attempted to jam Cooper at the snap, the Raiders rookie shoved Haden's right elbow away, broke outside on a fade route and finished with an athletic 13-yard grab near the sideline.

That was part of an opening drive in which Cooper posted 54 receiving yards, part of a day in which he totaled eight catches for 134 yards, part of a September in which he confirmed his candidacy for offensive rookie of the year.

On video, Fangio appreciated Cooper's precise route-running, the athleticism in his cuts, his explosion and savvy in open space and relayed it all to his defensive backs.

"You have to be firm because of his strength," Fangio said. "And yet his quickness and speed are things you always have to pay respect to. So you really have to do good work at the line of scrimmage, gain an advantage early and then sustain it through the down."

"He has the total package. And you see it right away."

With Cooper, it's often like that.

Raiders quarterback Derek Carr was simply an interested observer at the team's rookie minicamp in May, eager to size up the team's top draft pick. Quickly, Carr identified Cooper as "a home run waiting to happen."

In a blur, Carr watched Cooper pop a slant route so quickly that his defender fell.

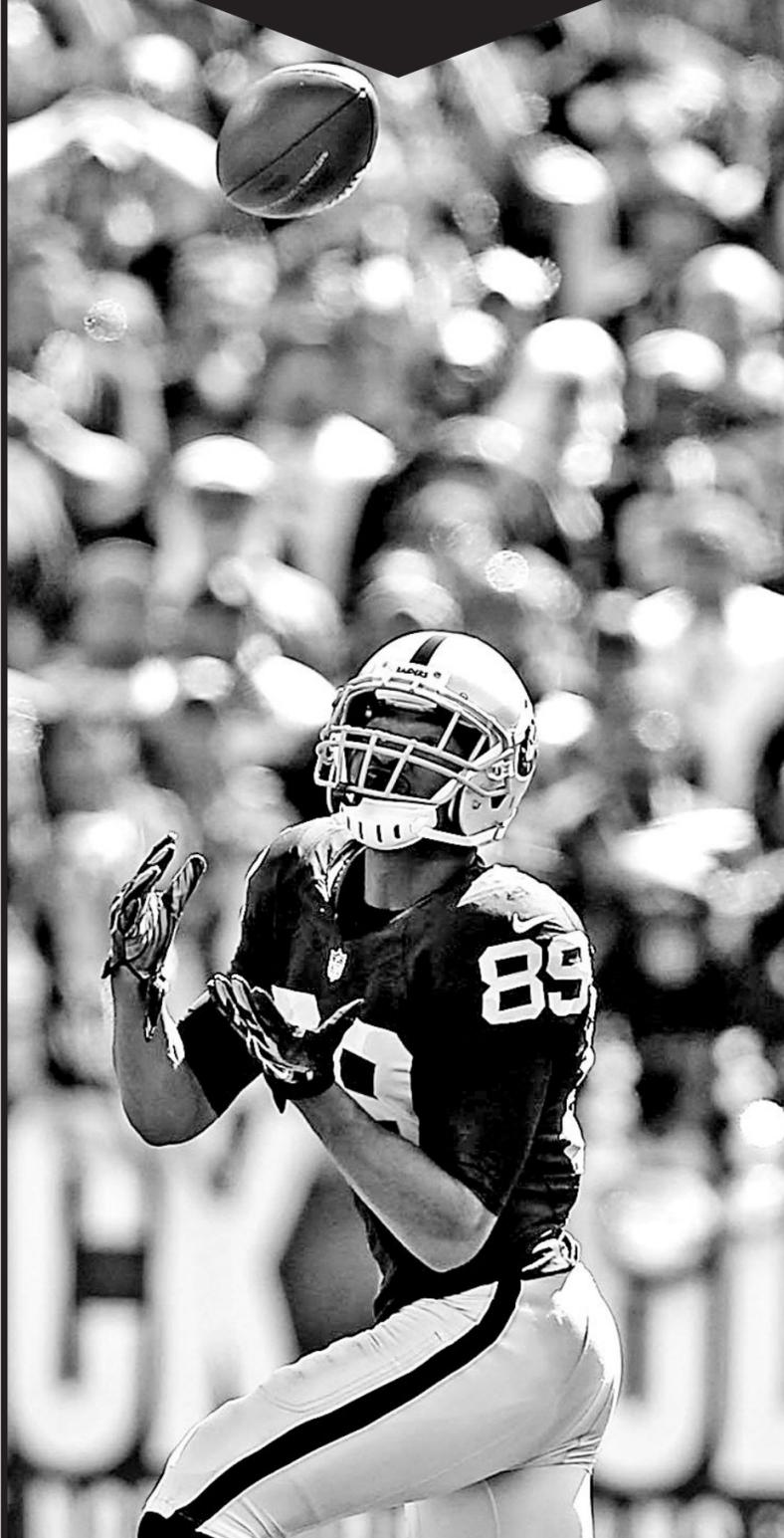
"The defender got back up as Amari made his break and he made him fall again," Carr said. "When I saw that, I knew

"There was definitely a notch of separation between those two guys. But I really liked Kevin. ... He has every physical tool to be a dynamic playmaker in the NFL."

— ESPN analyst Todd McShay on White and Cooper

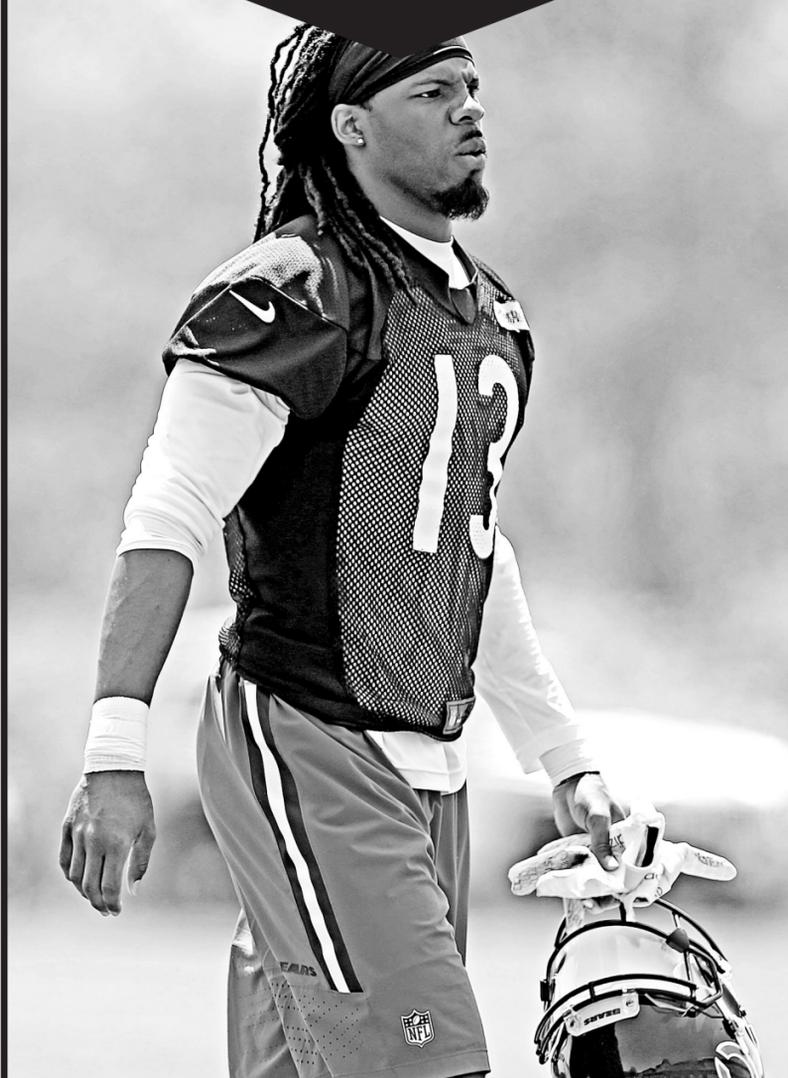
Health

As No. 4 draft pick Amari Cooper flourishes in Oakland ...



Watch

... No. 7 pick Kevin White waits it out with the Bears



"Right now, everybody's trying to figure out how to cover this guy. You don't really see rookies play at the speed he's playing at. It's honestly remarkable."

— Bears CB Alan Ball on Cooper

his quickness and route-running abilities were very special."

Former NFL quarterback and current CBS analyst Phil Simms recalled his first in-person moment of wow.

It came on the practice field at the Napa Valley Training Complex during Raiders training camp. One-on-one drills began and on his first rep, Cooper became a human bottle rocket. Simms couldn't believe how Cooper could win his matchup in the play's first millisecond.

"And then it wasn't only that quickness, it was the ability to accelerate to full speed within the second or third step," Simms said. "Then he somehow could find another gear and, as he's hitting that other gear, he could put his foot in the ground and make his break without missing a beat."

Simms laughed thinking back.

"I didn't leave there thinking that this was an impressive rookie," he said. "I left that day thinking, 'He's as good of a receiver as I've ever seen in my life.'"

Right in sync

No matter how big and fast White was, the Raiders never were going to pass on Cooper, fully understanding what his polished skill set could do to enhance Carr's development.

Through the season's first three weeks, with the duo connecting 17 times for 273 yards and a touchdown, it has become obvious just how quickly they have jelled.

When Carr sees Cooper in man coverage, his confidence skyrockets. The Raiders also know the quicker they get the ball in Cooper's hands, the faster he can unleash the prowess that has allowed him to rack up 178 yards after the catch, tops in the NFL.

"I believe I was always blessed with that ability," Cooper said. "You really don't want to think about (what to do) after the catch when the ball's in the air."

"What's best for Derek is that he gets Amari from scratch," Gase said. "He's the first guy in the NFL to work with him, so their relationship clicks in right out of the gate — that's such an important advantage. They don't have to work through a lot of differences in what they prefer and how they operate. It's more, 'This is the way we do it.'"

Last week, Simms sat in the booth for CBS' broadcast of the Raiders' victory and on the first series linked Cooper's potential with three prestigious words: Hall of Fame. This wasn't, Simms insists, some caught-in-the-moment hyperbole. Simms knew he wasn't alone with how he felt.

On the eve of last week's game, Haden likened Cooper's off-the-snap explosion to Percy Harvin's. Raiders teammate Charles Woodson invoked the name of Jerry Rice in the way Cooper attacks every route.

Simms himself has labeled Cooper a more explosive Marvin Harrison, a taller version of Steve Smith.

In Lake Forest this week, Bears cornerback Alan Ball felt his own eyes bulging as he studied Cooper's three-game emergence. He noticed Cooper's purpose with his hands at the line, the power in his body and the grace with his feet.

"Wow," Ball said. "Right now, everybody's trying to figure out how to cover this guy. You don't really see rookies play at the speed he's playing at. It's honestly remarkable."

The waiting game

As Cooper charges on, White will remain a spectator, his itch to return intensifying. He will soon resume traveling to away games, assimilating into life as an NFL player as much as possible.

By all accounts, the 23-year-old rookie has been attacking his rehab with his upbeat charisma.

And the Bears believe it shouldn't take long for him to emerge as an alpha dog in a receivers room that right now is notably laid-back.

But the on-field dividends of the Bears' investment won't be seen for some time. So for now, the franchise must trust that its side-by-side assessments of Cooper and White — "Incredibly close," Gase said — were on target.

"Kevin's long-term potential hasn't just gone away," Gase said.

ESPN draft analyst Todd McShay was certain in April that Cooper was the better draft choice. In all his years assessing college receivers, McShay said only three players had a library of tape more impressive — Calvin Johnson, A.J. Green and Julio Jones.

But, McShay insists, White's size, speed and drive can't be forgotten simply because his NFL debut has been delayed.

"There was definitely a notch of separation between those two guys," McShay said. "But I really liked Kevin. ... He has every physical tool to be a dynamic playmaker in the NFL."

That remains the hope in Chicago, part of a patience-testing waiting game. Across the field Sunday, Cooper and the Raiders can show how it looks when the promise is realized.

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