

WEEK 14 NOON TODAY VS. CHICAGO
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TV: CH. 9 (100.3-FM, 1130-AM)



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Only two players from the first round of the 1999 NFL draft are still active: the Vikings' Antoine Winfield and Denver Broncos cornerback Champ Bailey.

OL' Winfield hasn't lost it: Game, smile both endure

- Football is a rough business, so how do you explain the Vikings' 35-year-old cornerback still thriving after 14 seasons in the NFL?

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Antoine Winfield gets it. He's old. By NFL standards, downright ancient. The reminders are everywhere.

It's not just that Winfield turned 35 in June and is in his 14th pro season. It's that fellow Vikings cornerback Josh Robinson was 8 years old and finishing second grade when Winfield was drafted in 1999.

It's that when you ask Winfield about the leaders he has most enjoyed playing with during his career, he rewinds to his Buffalo days and checks off Bruce Smith, Andre Reed and Doug Flutie.

"Yeah, I hear what I'm saying," Winfield said with a smile. "Guys look at me funny. Like, 'Really. You played with them? Way back when?'"

Way back when. Before every game lingered like it does now where the extreme soreness and sluggishness surface every Monday through Tuesday and deep into Wednesday evening.

No wonder Winfield's wife, Erniece, has gotten used to finding him cemented to their adjustable Tempur-Pedic bed during his down time.

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Antoine Winfield

Winfield hasn't lost his game or his smile

◀ VIKINGS FROM C1

Recovery ain't easy.

"Honestly," Erniece said, "Antoine could live in a one-bedroom apartment. He plays 'Call of Duty' up there all day long. It sounds like a battlefield in my house."

And the obvious physical signs that the Winfield who played with Smith, Reed and Flutie isn't the same one now chilling with Harrison Smith and Jamarca Sanford?

"He's getting that Brett Favre walk," Erniece said. "You know how Brett walked around like Frankenstein? Antoine's getting his Favre on."

So here's the crazy thing. Even with all the obvious aging — the senior citizen jokes from teammates, the noticeable gray whiskers in his beard — Winfield keeps finding ways for three hours each Sunday to tap into his aggressive, youthful self.

He's in the middle of a rejuvenated season, the linchpin of the defense with a team-best three interceptions and 10 tackles for loss.

It's been a unique dynamic, really. Winfield isn't just the oldest Viking. He's become the oracle for a secondary that, including the practice squad, has 10 players under the age of 26.

Consider Winfield a big brother. Wait, check that ...

"We call him 'Grandpa' sometimes," cornerback Chris Cook said. "We have to remind him. But the knowledge Antoine brings to our group is amazing. The things he sees, no one else sees. He finds the littlest details to key in on."

The cubs of the Vikings secondary have needed a protector this season. Yet Winfield might need the youngsters just as much — just to feel spry

and energetic and loose again. Which brings us to Monday nights.

Monday nights at the Winfields

For years now, Winfield has hosted weekly in-season team gatherings at his Eden Prairie home.

On goes "Monday Night Football." The Bourré card table grows lively. And Antoine Winfield Jr., now a 14-year-old freshman at Eden Prairie High School, fires up the Madden.

Best of all, Erniece, once a student at Le Cordon Bleu culinary school, provides the feast, continuing to lure Adrian Peterson back with her mac and cheese.

Everyone loves the lasagna. And the spicy enchiladas steal the show on Mexican night.

Maybe there's a reality show in here — "Monday nights at 'Tweezy's'" — a lesson in clowning and team bonding.

By this point, Erniece is no longer surprised to wake up on Tuesdays with cars still in the driveway and so many Vikings still spread around her basement.

(This is your call-out, Harrison Smith, Jamarca Sanford, Jasper Brinkley and Bobby Felder.)

"We've got these boys so spoiled," Erniece said. "They can eat. They can bond. They can chill. It's good for everyone ... I know it's big for Antoine. If he was around all 35-year-olds, his career would be over."

"These guys keep him young. And that's why we keep inviting them over every Monday."

'The way he plays is all heart'

Winfield's pull remains extensive. Just the mention of his name so often opens a faucet of praise.

Take Lovie Smith, the Chicago head coach who had his hands on



File photo by BRIAN PETERSON • briamp@startribune.com

Antoine Winfield has played 187 NFL games with Buffalo and the Vikings.

Winfield in 1995 as the defensive backs coach at Ohio State. He's still struck by Winfield's ever-present smile and savvy, plus his ability to process the game like Will Hunting doing middle-school math.

"Every coach that's ever had a chance to work with Antoine will say the same thing," Smith said. "You learn things as a coach just from seeing how he plays."

Then there's Harrison Smith, the rookie who values playing alongside Winfield but enjoys watching him on film nearly as much.

Smith is continually struck by the manner in which Winfield finds ninja-like ways to knife around and make tackles in the backfield.

"He'll be on his hands and knees, somehow cut under an offensive lineman, get up and make a tackle," Smith said. "It's stuff I've never seen. The first time I saw it, I just laughed."

Sanford offers a name as a parallel: Ray Lewis. And, no, he doesn't mean Winfield gyrates after big plays or delivers frequent impassioned sermons. He's not saying that. But ...

"Everything he does comes from the heart," Sanford said. "And the way he plays is all heart. He's the smallest guy on this team. But pound-for-pound, he's by far the toughest."

When he talks, players listen

Leadership is a big deal to Winfield. Mostly because he's been

around so many poor leaders during his career.

He won't name names. But he can give you common characteristics.

"Too many guys play selfish," Winfield said. "They don't play within the scheme. They're just out trying to get a new contract. They're just trying to make big plays. And instead they're giving up big plays. You can't win like that."

Winfield's most publicized leadership contributions this season came after the Vikings bungled through a 23-20 loss in Indianapolis in Week 2.

A few days later, Winfield spoke out and spoke loud in a team meeting. He didn't single anyone out.

"I called everybody out," he said.

But Winfield did it in a manner so rousing that an entire room snapped to attention.

"There wasn't a single guy looking down," Cook said. "Nobody was looking left or right. The respect we all have for Antoine is for real. You listen to what he says and you take it in."

Winfield called for greater toughness, greater physicality, greater investment.

And then he and the Vikings dialed in that week and delivered what may still be the most surprising result of this NFL season, a 24-13 mauling of San Francisco. The Vikings won three of four after that, too.

"So many new faces here," Winfield said. "So many young play-

ers. They needed to hear it. You have to take each season as its own and invest in it. You never know how many opportunities you'll have to be on a good team, to have a chance to go to the playoffs. And when you're in a game that's winnable, you have to win it."

He paused.

"Otherwise, you let too many little opportunities pass and you're suddenly playing meaningless games in December."

Winfield understands what he is saying. Just last Sunday, the Vikings tripped all over themselves in Green Bay, falling 23-14 and sliding back to 6-6.

"Took a winnable game and somehow found a way to lose," Winfield said. "It's frustrating. That eats at you."

Especially when the time left is so precious.

The retirement question

So now comes the finishing stretch. Four games and probably only two "Monday Night Football" gatherings left.

Maybe it's encouraging that last week's loss stung the way it did, further evidence Winfield still has plenty of passion in the tank.

Ideally, he'd love to finish this year out, then charge into the final season of his contract. But there will be physical and business variables to the equation.

So Winfield tries to stay in the now, a veteran who can't see the finish line to his career but knows it's not far off.

Just how far though?

"Great question" Winfield said. "And I have no answer. I know the end is near. But I'm going to play as long as I still feel good, as long as I'm still productive, as long as I still feel like I can still run and cover people and tackle people the way I do."

Right now, that's check, check and check. And thus come the pleas.

"Us young guys aren't letting him walk away," Sanford said. "We need him."

The feeling may be mutual.