

Raiders cornerback Jack Jones looks to take defense to next level

By TASHAN REED | The Athletic

Henderson, Nev. • Jack Jones was all smiles when he stepped to the lectern next to the Las Vegas Raiders' practice fields Wednesday. The 26-year-old cornerback has quickly become a fan favorite and was playing the best ball of his career toward the end of last season, so it was no surprise he was in a good mood. His smile turned staid, however, when he was asked what he needs to do to be recognized as one of the best corners in the NFL.

"I believe I'm a premier corner already," Jones said. "I'm not really worried about what you'll say, I just go out there and play ball."

Jones' focus this year is helping the Raiders defense take the next step. The unit finished ninth in the NFL in scoring defense last year, but with defensive coordinator Patrick Graham back, nine starters returning from 2023 and a major addition in defensive tackle Christian Wilkins, an improvement should be well within reach.

"My goal this year is to be the No. 1 defense and make the playoffs," Jones said.

A pivotal piece of that effort will be getting more consistency out of the third-year cornerback. Jones has played at a high level whenever he's on the field. In his seven games with the Raiders last season after, he quickly became the team's No. 1 corner. He was consistent in coverage, provided run support and frequently made plays on the ball.

The issue for Jones has been his ability to stay on the field. He suffered a season-ending knee injury as a rookie with the New England Patriots in 2022 and then was suspended while on injured reserve for missing a rehab session. In the ensuing offseason, he was arrested at Boston's Logan Airport when two loaded guns were found in his carry-on luggage.

Those charges were eventually dropped, and he was a starter to begin the 2023 season, but he suffered a hamstring injury in Week 1 and was placed on IR. He returned to play last October but would soon miss time at the Patriots' team hotel before the Week 9 game. He was subsequently benched and cut after Week 10. Jones didn't have any injuries or off-the-field issues once he signed with the Raiders in Week 11. The next step for him is showing he can remain available and disciplined for a full season.

"The (Raiders coaches) know my intent is good," Jones said. "As long as my intent stays good, then I don't think we'll have a problem."

Coach Antonio Pierce and assistant head coach Marvin Lewis have plenty of experience working with Jones. Pierce coached him at Long Beach Poly High from 2014 to 2015 and at Arizona State from 2019 to 2021 before they reunited with the Raiders last season. Lewis also overlapped with Jones at Arizona State. That familiarity has helped them keep him on course.

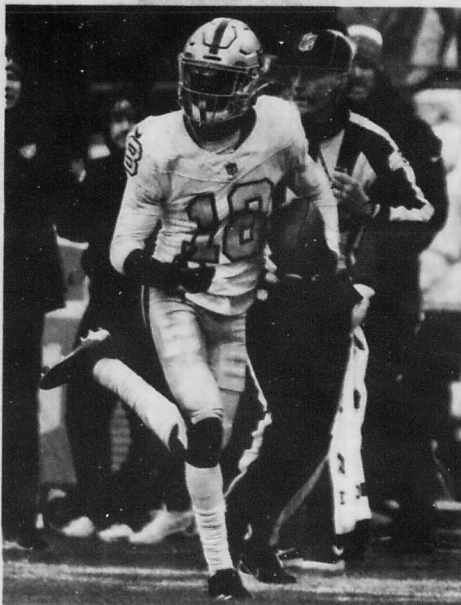
"We're trying to iron Jackie out a little bit," Lewis said. "He's a very talented young man. He has a knack for making football plays. ... He's still in the process of learning to be a pro day in and day out. ... But his teammates know what they're going to get out there on the field. We've just got to make sure we keep all of those things positive all the time."

If Jones can pull that off, he has the chance to become a true impact player for the Raiders. That would elevate the collective ceiling of the defense as the players work toward making it an elite unit.

Here are some other notes from the Raiders' fifth session of offseason team activities.

White getting starter reps at running back

As expected, running back Zamir White has handled most of the reps with the starters after Josh Jacobs signed with the Green Bay Packers this offseason. White was productive in four starts last year while Jacobs



Las Vegas Raiders cornerback Jack Jones returns an interception for a touchdown during the first half of a game against the Kansas City Chiefs on Dec. 25, 2023, in Kansas City, Mo.

was injured, and that has helped him adjust to that full-time role. He isn't setting specific statistical benchmarks for himself this season but instead is focused on growing as a player overall.

"That built up a lot of confidence moving into this year," White said. "I need to improve at everything: catching, running the ball, one-on-one making guys miss and all that stuff. I want to be better at everything." As usual, the third-year running back went back to his hometown of Laurinburg, N.C., this offseason for a training regimen that consisted of lifting in the gym, running outside and training his growing stable of horses.

With no pads or contact during OTAs, White's primary focus has been on learning offensive coordinator Luke Gettsy's system and learning how to take on more of a leadership role with his teammates.

Veteran running back Alexander Mattison has been a source of help. He'll be the primary backup behind White as the Raiders shift to more of a running back-by-committee approach. He was the Minnesota Vikings' lead back last season, but he spent most of his first four seasons behind Dalvin Cook, so it's a role he's familiar with.

"He's a guy that's been in a position similar to where I was over in Minnesota with Dalvin," Mattison said of White. "For him to have to step up and be in a different type of mindset, that's something that I've seen for him. As a group, we're able to come together and ... teach each other and lend a helping hand to one another."

Mattison is a solid runner, receiver and pass blocker, but his biggest asset thus far has been his familiarity with the offensive system. Mattison has never played for Gettsy, but he has spent his entire career under

toward an area of the field rather than hitting holes between specific offensive linemen.

"It's definitely helped to have familiarity with the system," Mattison said. "That wide zone is pretty hard to stop as long as the O-line gets running and the running backs are on our tracks and stay true to our aiming points. It's one of those things that can terrorize a defense."

O'Connell and Minshew rotating in with first team

The Raiders have continued to rotate quarterbacks Aidan O'Connell and Gardner Minshew frequently with the starting lineup. The coaching staff is still in the early stages of determining who the starter will be entering 2024, and that cycling will likely continue well into training camp.

"It's competitive," quarterbacks coach Rich Scangarello said. "They both have incredibly good personalities and they balance each other well. They're different in how they approach it and they're different in how they play, but their mindsets are similar. They're bringing out the best in each other. We're throwing a lot at 'em, and they've handled it well."

Scangarello said he has been impressed with the movie, grit and competitive nature Minshew has displayed, calling him a "baller."

The ideal situation for the Raiders, though, would be for O'Connell to emerge as the starter. Why? He's younger and has more long-term upside. Scangarello described O'Connell as "exceptionally accurate" and believes he can fit the mold of a "Kirk Cousins type" of quarterback in Gettsy's offense.

"The individual is everything you'd hoped he'd be," Scangarello said of O'Connell. "He's just got a lot of internal drive, discipline, how he sees the game the right way. He wants to be great. He'll work at it, he's selfless and he has a great deal of respect among his teammates, the coaching staff and everyone in the building."

It'd be great if the Raiders knew who their starting quarterback was, of course, but they're in no rush. They view the quarterback rotation as a positive.

"There's enough reps to go around," Scangarello said. "Obviously, you'd always like to have one guy established, but I don't think it will linger. I think someone will emerge. And it's exciting. It's a good problem to have."

Need A Home Services Pro?

Roofing • Siding • Bathrooms
Windows • Kitchens • Flooring
And much, much more

Get Helped, Not Hassled with HomeGuru

The new, better way to find the best home service professionals without giving up your personal information.

Flome
GURU

www.homeguru.com

Scan to get started



NEED TO PLACE A LEGAL NOTICE?

EMAIL:
legals@sltrib.com



COPY