

# Prime Numbers: How Aqib Talib found himself in Deion Sanders' territory



***I. "Guys like Aqib come from small beginnings, and you don't sit up there and say, 'Man, one day I'm going to go to the Hall of Fame.' You say, 'You know what, man? I'm going to be great, I'm going to make a lot of money to rescue my family from the situation they're in, and I'm going to try to change the culture and change the community.'" – Deion Sanders***

[Aqib Talib](#) can no longer remember what he ordered when he first met Deion Sanders in 2008 over lunch, but he can picture many of the morning's details.

He had finished a workout with Olympic gold medalist Michael Johnson, who was helping fine-tune Talib's sprinting form. The Kansas Jayhawk needed to shave valuable milliseconds off his 40-yard dash before his upcoming Pro Day.

Then it was off to the Grand Lux Café at Galleria Dallas, an upscale mall on

the north side of the city not far from where Talib went to high school.

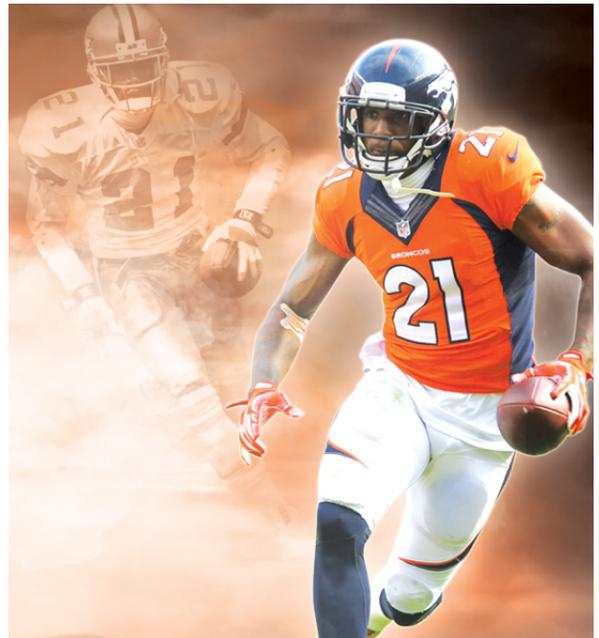
He was nervous, and this 22-year-old didn't rattle easily. At the time, he was about two months removed from winning Orange Bowl MVP and two months away from being a first-round pick in the NFL Draft. He was young, confident, audacious and talented. Little intimidated him.

But lunch with Deion — *Prime Time!* — was a different story.

Sanders was Talib's idol. Now, he was about to come face to face with him, and Talib struggled to accept the reality of the moment.

Perhaps it would've been even harder to imagine that, in just shy of 10 years, he would match one of Sanders' marks and have the chance to surpass it.

That would come later, though. Back to the Grand Lux.



Talib joined Sanders at a table, along with one of Sanders' former teammates. A big Cowboys fan, Talib recognized Kevin Smith, the other half of Dallas' cornerback duo from 1995 until 1999.

The conversation had little to do with football. This was more about Sanders reaching out to a young man to offer guidance and to simply get to know him. In Talib's words, "We just had regular-people conversation."

After finishing lunch, the group went their separate ways. A star-struck Talib left feeling he had just had his first welcome-to-the-NFL.

He wasn't even drafted yet, but he was on his way.

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## ***II. "When you get an interception, you don't hear nothing." - Aqib Talib***

Eight years later, he was on his way to the house.

Colts quarterback Andrew Luck had just tried to force a pass by Talib on third-and-15, and he was about to pay dearly in this Week 2 matchup of the 2016 season.

Now it was all about numbers. The way Talib sees it, if he catches a pick with momentum, there's usually just one or two people he needs to outrun. Plus, offensive players don't practice tackling.

On this, his 31st career interception, there were more than just one or two people in his way.

One by one, Talib rid his path of would-be tacklers. He knocked down Colts receiver Phillip Dorsett when he outfought him to catch the ball. One down. He deftly juke tight end Jack Doyle into the dirt. Two. [Von Miller](#) helped with a block on right tackle Joe Reitz. Three. Talib then veered out of the way of Luck's diving attempt. Four.

Now there was no one between Talib and the end zone. He outkicked a sprinting wide receiver and lineman in the final few yards and that was that.

There was no Deion high-step to the end zone, but the moment — including the preparation hours and days in advance, the anticipation reading the play and the vision to run it back — was distinctly Sanders-esque.

As he crossed the goal line, Talib sealed his ninth career pick-six and his first Prime number.

Nine, of course, is not mathematically a prime number, as it's divisible by three. But it is a Prime number — that is how many interceptions Deion Sanders returned for touchdowns in his career.

And it is also a number Talib treats with considerable respect, particularly because arguably no statistic better represents Sanders' explosiveness and pure talent than that one.

"That's, like, my idol growing up watching football," Talib says. "I'd seen how great he was playing football and to make the statement that I've got the same amount of interceptions for touchdowns as him, that's huge for me.

"That's a stepping stone to where I'm trying to be in my career."

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***III. "I got the flag, but I was feeling it! I felt like Deion! I felt like Deion right there!" – Aqib Talib***

## Aqib Talib Orange Bowl Interview



Deion Sanders discovered Aqib Talib the same way many people did, by tuning in for the 2008 Orange Bowl between Talib's Kansas Jayhawks and Virginia Tech.

In the postgame interview with the game MVP, Talib told the Dolphin Stadium crowd and Fox Sports viewers that he felt like his idol as he high-stepped into the end zone at the end of a 60-yard interception return.

But it wasn't just the pick-six. It wasn't the high-stepping. The truth is he has always felt like Deion.

Prime Time had it all. He was flashy, both in his fashion and in his play. His jewelry and style didn't just draw eyeballs; it drew the first 13 paragraphs of his first Sports Illustrated cover story. On the field, he drew the top

assignments and had the instincts and physical tools to challenge every pass thrown his way. When he did wrangle an interception with room to run, he was often untouchable. And if his play didn't grab your attention, his celebrations would.

For a young Talib, it wasn't only what Prime Time did on the field that made him an idol — it was also who he was.

"It was kind of my personality," Talib says. "That might have been what drew me to him, because he was a talkative guy. He's loud, he's funny, he always wants to speak his mind. And that's kind of how I've been all my life. I don't necessarily say I got it from Deion, but I probably got it from my mother or somebody. But it's the same traits he has."

Talib dreamed of being Deion. For an elementary-school assignment, Talib wrote that he'd be an NFL player when he grew up. Now, as an NFL player, Talib wears No. 21, like Sanders did. Sanders has his own youth football team; Talib does, too.

To the best of his best ability, Talib has done everything to follow the path that Sanders walked two decades before.

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***IV. "People tend to think it comes easy for the extremely talented, successful guys like Aqib, but it doesn't." – Ed McCaffrey***

Perhaps the biggest misconception about Deion Sanders, according to his former teammate Ed McCaffrey, is that he didn't work hard to achieve the success he had in the NFL.

"People probably thought he's just this flashy, fast guy who likes to do

touchdown dances," McCaffrey says, "but man, he studied every receiver he ever went against, watched a lot of film, worked incredibly hard, kept in great shape [and] played two professional sports there for a while. ... Deion was a great teammate, he was a competitor and he worked extremely hard to be the best at his position in the NFL, and he was.

"I see that same type of determination and work ethic and skill set in Aqib."



That wasn't always the case, Talib admits.

Although he valued his time in Tampa and learned plenty from the likes of Jon Gruden, Ronde Barber and Derrick Brooks, Talib didn't extract his full potential until he was traded to New England.

"My first game [with the Patriots] was going to be against Andrew Luck and my head coach was now Bill Belichick, so me personally, I think that's when I became a real pro," Talib says. "Because knowing I'm going to be playing Andrew Luck, I'm going to be on this stage, it's Sunday night, Bill's my coach, [it's] my first game, I put way more time in at home studying for the game, and then when I got in the game, it was so much easier for me. So from that point on, that became my routine. I feel like that's when I definitely became a professional football player."

His new standards for preparation led to success. In the 59-24 rout, Talib returned an interception 59 yards for a touchdown. Since then, Talib has held himself and his preparation to the highest standards with clear results: four Pro Bowls, one first-team All-Pro selection and a Super Bowl victory.

"Aqib reached a pivotal point in his career where he had to understand the expectation that was asked of him to perform, on and off the field, as well as the expectation to just go to the next level," Sanders says. "He had the choice either to have a pretty decent NFL career, make a little money and go on with his life, or he could be great. And he chose to increase his study habits, he chose to increase his offseason workouts, his preparation — his whole knowledge of and understanding of the game — and it paid off for him."

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***V. "The goal is just understanding of the game, understanding your opponent and understanding the scheme in which you play. And when you have peace off the field, it's so much easier to perform on the field. And I think he's arriving at that***

## ***place." – Deion Sanders***

Yet, Aqib Talib is not Deion Sanders.

As a player, Talib is more physical and doesn't have the same speed. Few do. As a person, he is not the outgoing cultural figure that Sanders was. Prime Time hosted Saturday Night Live during his career and released a rap album on MC Hammer's label. The closest Talib has come to that is freestyle rapping at Denver's Super Bowl 50 media night.

However, Sanders has provided him with a mold that's close to who he is, even if they don't share the same physical attributes or the commercial success.

"What they have alike is their instincts," says John Elway, the legendary quarterback who dueled with Sanders on the field and the current Broncos President of Football Operations and General Manager who scouted Talib in his free agency. "They both have great instincts. They do a great job reading routes, reading splits and so, instinctually, they're very much alike. Deion was probably a little bit faster, but I think Aqib's more physical. But other than that, they're both great, great corners."

As Talib reaches this career benchmark where he can stand shoulder-to-shoulder with his hero, it's even more intriguing to think where he can go from here. He's still at the top of his game as part of the NFL's most dominant secondary, and there's time to move beyond Sanders and make his own records.

"I think when you're still in the middle of it, you still figure that you have a lot more to give," Elway says. "So it's nice to be able to break a record like that, especially the guys you looked up to, but I also think you look at it and say, 'I'm not stopping.'"

Talib is looking ahead. He sees the three players ahead of him on the pick-six charts — Rod Woodson, Charles Woodson and Darren Sharper — and knows each played somewhere between 14 and 18 seasons. Talib, in his ninth, understands there's an opportunity to create a legacy all his own.

"I want to have the most, of course," Talib says. "I want to end my career with the most interceptions for touchdowns, of course. But it was just that milestone. Being tied, it was like a rude awakening that it was possible.

"That's why we play the game. Of course, we've got idols and things like that, but I want my youth football program and my kids and grandkids to know Aqib Talib."