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Under the lights: A day in the life of Emmanuel Sanders

Posted Jan 6, 2016



Ben Swanson
Managing Editor, DenverBroncos.com

Emmanuel Sanders' longest day of the week just shows how he's become a dynamic player for the Broncos. [Note: This story appeared as the cover story in the Week 16 edition of the Broncos' Gameday magazine. Statistics have been updated.]



Run out of the tunnel with Emmanuel Sanders

It's my lucky day, [Emmanuel Sanders](#) tells me. It's Wednesday, the busiest day of his week, and I've caught him in a cheery mood. You might guess it's hard to find him in anything but a positive disposition, but days like this can wear on him and turn him a bit introverted.

In the roughest parts of the season, when he's battling through injuries, Sanders' Wednesdays begin at 5:30 a.m., and really kick off an hour later when treatment at the UCHHealth Training Center starts.

Sanders, with his small frame and penchant for acrobatic catches that leave him vulnerable in midair, still feels the lingering soreness from Sunday's games on Wednesday morning, and the next 90 minutes in the training room are vital to ensure he's fully healthy by Thursday, which is usually the case as he's missed just one game since joining the Broncos.

This is not a lax hour and a half, though.

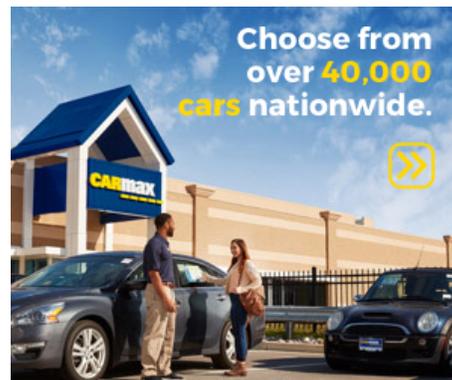
"It goes anywhere from cold tub to hot tub. It's really like a strength and conditioning program," Sanders says. "You do a lot of weights, a lot of stability work, just trying to strengthen all the muscles around the injury that you have. So it's an hour-and-a-half workout, really."

Following treatment and a quick breakfast, Sanders and his teammates start their preparation for the upcoming game by installing the new game plan on the field and in the meeting rooms, which can sometimes last up to four hours.

"The reason why we meet for three or four hours on



Mic'd Up: Emmanuel Sanders



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Wednesday is because it's a new game plan," Sanders says. "So you go in and talk about the run plays we're going to be running for that moment, then you talk about the pass plays we're going to go through, and we're breaking it down, play by play."

Prepared with a notebook, pens, pencils and highlighters, Sanders takes meticulous notes, just like he's back in a college classroom at Southern Methodist University, his alma mater. It's not a part of the game that many people are privy to, but it's the essential complement to the physical feats that draw gasps and elated cheers in the stadium.

"People don't understand that it's a lot that goes into being a National Football League player," Sanders surmises. "You've got to be smart, and you've got to be athletic, because it's a big playbook, and we go over it all every single Wednesday."

Then there's the on-field work, which is also lengthy because of the nature of implementing a new game plan and putting what they learned in the meeting room to practice.

Individually, one emphasis for the wide receivers is footwork. Wide Receivers Coach Tyke Tolbert often tells his group that technique will get them open more often than speed, and Sanders' tape attests to it.

You can just look to the last time he played Cincinnati in Week 16 of 2014 for examples of how Sanders finds space where others may find none. In the third quarter, Sanders created a big play with his acceleration and speed. When quarterback Peyton Manning released the ball, cornerback Terence Newman matched Sanders step for step, but Sanders opened up and gained a couple feet on Newman, forcing him to hold Sanders' left arm. But Sanders only needed one arm, making a stunning catch in stride as he was taken to the ground. Three plays later, Manning targeted him on a screen and Sanders scored a touchdown

Later in the quarter, Sanders found the end zone for the second time, again in a short-yardage situation. Lined up outside to the right, he jukeed cornerback Dre Kirkpatrick into jumping for an out route at the goal line and instead cut inside behind safety Reggie Nelson for the score.

Sanders and the rest of the receivers do drills to keep their footwork sharp, but his skills have been honed over years of work and he puts particular attention on it during his offseason work.

"Footwork is extremely pivotal," Sanders says. "That's one of the reasons why when I'm back in Houston in the offseason, I work with a guy by the name of 'The Footwork King,' and I do all these footwork drills to make sure my foot speed is there, to make sure everything is there, because like Tyke says, technique gets you open."



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Best of Sanders' spectacular catches

Once practice ends, then it's off to the locker room to meet the media before heading back to the meeting room to break down more of the game plan.

That's where most players' days end, but not Sanders'. He puts on his suit and heads over to the Pat Bowlen Fieldhouse, where he tapes "Broncos Huddle" with 9News' Rod Mackey.

This is year two of the show, but he had experience on radio and television shows in Pittsburgh before coming to the Broncos.

He's polished and knowledgeable, and media seems like a natural fit for Sanders' personality.

"I wouldn't say that," he says with a smile. "I'm the quiet guy sitting in the corner. Nah, I'm just kidding. It's just one of those things where I guess people say I'm good at it, but I still don't notice how good I am, I guess. Even football, people say I'm a good football player, but I just try to work at it. Even when I get home, I go and review my shows and see what words I use and my body demeanor, because if I'm going to do it, I'm going to give it my all and do it."



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That's right, football isn't the only tape he watches to improve himself. Sanders applies the same kind of dedication to whatever he puts his mind to, and when it comes to a potential post-playing career, he's eager to be the best he can be.

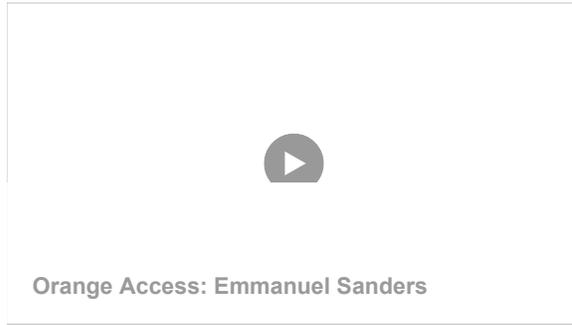
"When I was 15 years old, my uncle told me, 'What's the first thing to look for every time you enter a building?' And I was like, 'What the heck is he talking about?'" Sanders said. "He said, 'Well, obviously, you've got to know where the exit sign is.' And someday I'm not going to be able to play this game of football, this game that I love, and you've always got to have a backup plan, and you've always got to have something after retirement."

The workday is long, ending around 6 p.m. more often than not, and sometimes when the grind feels tougher than usual, an exhausted Sanders turns inward and conserves his energy.

"I'm tired, but I know hopefully that all of this will pay off someday," Sanders says.

All his hard work has paid off so far. On the field, it's translated into a career-best season in 2014 with 1,404 receiving yards and nine touchdowns, resulting in his first Pro Bowl selection. This season, Sanders finished with 76 catches for 1,135 yards and 6 touchdowns in 15 games.

"This city has embraced me so much and I can't even thank everyone enough, starting from [Executive Vice President of Football Operations and General Manager John] Elway to everyone," Sanders says. "Everyone has embraced me so much and I'm so appreciative for it because it's everything that I've wanted. You work your butt off, you want all your hard work to pay off, and it's just good to see that [Nike] commercial and see my name pop up on the television. It's cool, coming from where I come from, the small town of Bellville, Texas. I know it's all a blessing within itself and it comes from a lot of hard work, so I've just got to continue what I've been doing."



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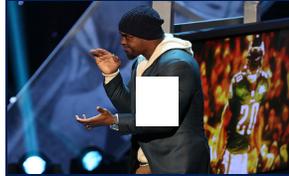
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