

# Broncos practice squad player spends Sundays with hospitalized kids

By Lindsay Jones

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A thousand miles and two time zones from where his teammates had just kicked off against the Indianapolis Colts last Sunday, Taurean Nixon, a cornerback on the Denver Broncos practice squad, was crouched next to a hospital bed, putting pink and white leggings and a cardigan sweater on a doll named Caroline.

The game in Indianapolis played out on a small television across the room. But Nixon's focus was on Caroline Pakiz, the precocious, bespectacled and sometimes bossy 4-year-old who has named all but one of her dolls after herself. She has been at Rocky Mountain Hospital for Children since late October, just one of her many extended stays as she battles chronic intestinal pseudo-obstruction, a rare congenital disease that has prevented her from eating food since January.

Minutes earlier, she greeted Nixon not by saying "hello" but with a wary "who are you?" But after Nixon started filling her bed with gifts — a Broncos superhero cape, eye-black stickers, fuzzy blue and orange socks and a signed mini-helmet, which was soon placed on Caroline the doll's head — their friendship was solidified. Soon they were laughing as she pretended to be a kitten.

It was about as far from a typical NFL Sunday as one can get. And yet those were the best hours of Nixon's week.

A rookie seventh rounder out of Tulane, Nixon lives the typical practice squad life. He serves multiple roles on the scout team, covering wideouts Demaryius Thomas and Emmanuel Sanders on one series, then switching to offense and running receiver routes against corners Aqib Talib and Chris Harris. It's the same grueling schedule — practices, weightlifting and condition sessions and long hours of meetings — as your teammates but for a fraction of the paycheck and none of the glory on game days.

When Nixon realized in early September that he wouldn't travel to road games, he figured he needed to find a way to make himself feel useful on Sundays. His solution was simple: Go to the hospital and make a kid's day.

Plenty of NFL players visit hospitals as part of their team-sponsored charity work, and Nixon is often part of a crew of Broncos who do it on Tuesdays, typically the team's off day. But Nixon's Sunday visits — this was his third such trip — are different, because these are personal.

Nixon and his family understand what it feels like to constantly be in the hospital. Three years ago, his little brother T.J. was born with hydrocephalus, or fluid on his brain. T.J. had four surgeries in the first five months of his life and each time, the family steeled themselves for the chance he wouldn't survive.

"I was always thinking about my little brother, because I never knew when would be his last day — if he had a last day — you know what I mean?" said Nixon, who was in his sophomore year at the University of Memphis at the time. "I tried to use it at first as motivational thing, like, 'I'm going to do this for my little brother.' But it became too hard."

Nixon would drive six hours from Memphis to his hometown of Baton Rouge each weekend just to spend about 24 hours at the hospital. Before long, he transferred to Tulane.

It's still hard to be so far away his family, who have since relocated to Memphis. T.J. is crawling and trying to talk. His brain is still growing and, though he's still developmentally behind other children his age, the family calls him their "super fighter."

Nixon admits these Sunday visits can get emotional because he remembers how lonely the hospital can be. During the Broncos' previous road game, against the Cleveland Browns on Oct. 18, the teen whom Nixon visited told him he hadn't been this happy in months. A week before that, Nixon revisited a kid he had earlier seen on a group visit, when the child was in a coma. That child's family filled the room in the intensive care unit, and their cheers could be heard down hall.

"I'm actually more happy about it I'm pretty sure than most of the families are, because I'm able to spend my time with a kid that may look up to me. And after I leave, they'll understand, 'Dang, he's just like us.' " Nixon said.

"I want them to know that I'm the same as they are, and that my family went through the same that they're going through."

Unlike his two previous Sunday visits, watching the Broncos lose to the Colts proved to be excruciating. Nixon sat in a chair near the television and talked through the game with Caroline's father, Andy, as much as it pained him to see his teammates falter in the game's crucial moments. It's another aspect of practice squad life for Nixon and so many players like him — even though he's not in uniform, he celebrates the wins and mourns the losses as if he were.

"This is my first loss," Nixon said, shaking his head.

But then he stood and walked to Caroline's bed. She smiled and meowed. Nixon laughed and gave her a hug goodbye.

He'd won after all.

# Total breakdown: Broncos select CB Taurean Nixon in seventh round

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN.com

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A few quick thoughts on the Denver Broncos' seventh-round draft pick.

The pick: Taurean Nixon, cornerback, Tulane

My take: Nixon is a player who did not carry a draftable grade for some teams during much of the evaluation period, but he certainly had some scouts looking back at his work this past season when he uncorked a 4.37 40-yard dash at his on-campus pro day in late March. That's elite speed and the kind that gets a player noticed, even as the draft is just weeks away. At 5-foot-10  $\frac{3}{4}$  and 186 pounds, he is not an undersized player. He played the first two years of his career at Memphis before transferring to Tulane in 2012. This past season he started eight games for Tulane as the nickel corner, so he will certainly get a look there for the Broncos as well.

Speed numbers: Nixon was a nationally ranked sprinter as a prep athlete in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and was ranked in the top 10 nationally in the 100 meters as a high school senior. He also won the Louisiana state titles in the 100 meters and was second in the 200 meters. Like his teammate Lorenzo Doss, whom the Broncos selected in the fifth round, Nixon ran for the Tulane track team. Nixon ran the 100 meters and was part of the school's 4x100-meter relay in 2014.

# How He Fits: Seventh-round CB Taurean Nixon

Andrew Mason  
DenverBroncos.com  
May 2, 2015

**It's all about speed for Taurean Nixon.**

Speed that allowed him to sprint through his Pro Day 40-yard dash at between 4.25 and 4.37 seconds, depending on which stopwatch you consulted. Speed that allows him to close on an opposing receiver if he gets beat off the snap -- or to chase down a running back or receiver from across the field.

And speed that allows him to get downfield on kickoff and punt coverage -- and could earn him a look on kickoff returns.

If Nixon earns a spot on the 53-man roster, it could be on special teams, given the Broncos' revived emphasis on that area. The former Louisiana high-school state champion in the 60-yard dash knows that's his best chance to make a first impression.

"Yes, and I'm really good at the gunner spot," Nixon said. "I played there a lot when I first got to Tulane and I've got a love for it, so I think that, gunner, anywhere where my feet can be used when I first get there, I think that'll be my spot."

Nixon worked as a nickelback last year in Tulane's defense, with Green Wave -- and now Broncos -- teammate Lorenzo Doss playing more extensively as one of the two starting cornerbacks. Doss has preternatural instincts to read passes as they soar in his direction, and Nixon has straight-line speed that could be the best of any cornerback in the draft.

"We're different," Nixon said. "I would say Doss is more one of those guys that can really—he knows more situations, he's a situation corner and I'm more of a corner that you can just put me on a man and just say, 'Lock him up; wherever he goes, you go.'"

The Broncos could have picked someone else with their final selection, and rolled the dice that they could have signed Nixon as an undrafted free agent. But they didn't want to take that chance, because Nixon's speed would have been coveted.