



Designated HITTER

By Rosie Leutzinger

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On the football field, Curtis Williams just likes to hit.

There is not much about which you can ask Williams that will get him to open up. That is, until you mention laying a hit on an opposing player from the safety position. Then his eyes light up.

"It's just a good feeling," the 5-foot-10, 200-pound senior says. "You can get all your frustrations out on that guy. Hitting a guy real hard like that, that's what the game is all about."

If this is what football is all about — stopping an opposing player dead in his tracks and sending his body crashing down towards the turf with a vicious thud — then Curtis Williams has mastered the game.

Williams, a native of Fresno, Calif., has earned his reputation as the one of the nation's most devastating hitters. Last year he was awarded the team's Chuck Niemi Big Hit Award, given to the player that consistently lays the biggest hits, and he was also named honorable mention All Pac-10. Not bad for a guy that was expected to come in and keep up a strong Husky tradition in a different backfield: the offensive backfield.

Recruited as a tailback out of Bullard High School, Williams arrived on campus in 1996 in anticipation of competing for the starting tailback position with NFL players-to-be Corey Dillon and Rashaan Shehee. At the time, Williams

was one of the most highly-touted running backs on the West Coast, having



Curtis Williams

featured back.

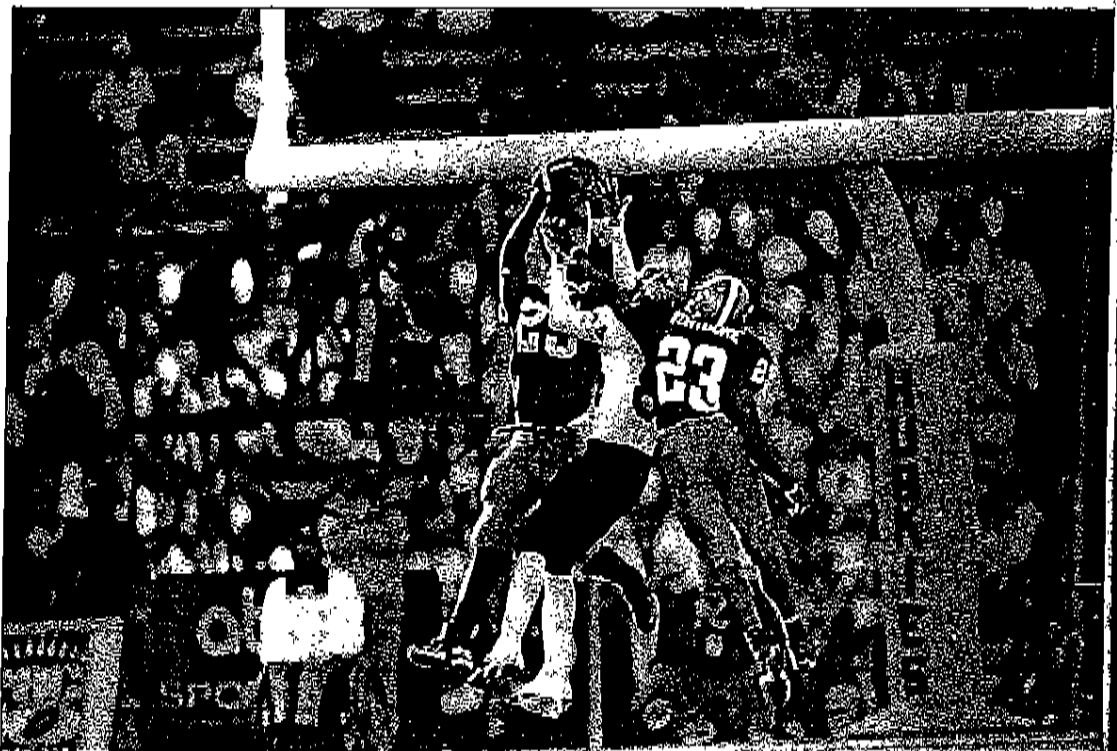
Though he made an impact on spe-

rushed for more than 1,400 yards and 31 touchdowns as a senior. Shehee was hurt early in the season, however, and when Dillon emerged as a legitimate star, it was obvious that Williams was not going to be the

versatile players on the team, even as a freshman, Williams asked if he could experiment at safety.

He spent the rest of that season and the next two, including a redshirt year in 1997, fluctuating back and forth between offense and defense. While he was praised for his maturity and ability to deal with the situation, Williams saw no results in the increase of his playing time, appearing in just five games over three years. He was tried at free safety, rover, cornerback, and running back. Frustrated, he began to wonder where he would fit in for the remainder of his career.

The clouds hanging above Williams'



Joante Komura photo

Williams, with help from teammate Anthony Vontoure (23), go high for an interception against Arizona State during 1999 Pac-10 action.

cial teams, Williams wanted more playing time and he did not care where that time came. Regarded as one of the most

head broke with the hiring of Rick Neuheisel in 1999, who brought along

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HUSKY PROFILE: CURTIS WILLIAMS

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with him safeties coach Bobby Hauck. Immediately, Neuheisel and Hauck — who had seen him play in high school — knew they had a keeper in Williams. A tremendous all-around athlete, they had to find a place for him somewhere on the field.

Shehee and Dillon long-gone, Williams remained buried on the depth chart at running back behind Maurice Shaw, Braxton Cleman, Willie Hurst, and Paul Arnold, and it was inevitable that he would be moved to safety. While many players find difficulty in switching positions — especially after being as successful at a position as Williams was at tailback — Williams loves the game so much he would do anything and play anywhere to get on the field.

"When the new coaches came in they didn't know much about me," Williams recalls. "I just told them that I wanted to play. I didn't care where I played as long as I played somewhere. Coach Hauck really did a lot to help me out and helped me feel more comfortable back there."

Hauck explains that while the coaches have definitely helped, it is Williams' positive attitude that has made the switch so successful.

"Curtis loves everything about the game of football, which is probably why he's good player, and a really good guy to be around," he says. "He enjoys working hard, he enjoys the physical aspect of the game and likes being around the guys he plays with."

It also helps that Williams is a gifted athlete, for any position.

"A lot of the same athletic skills that you use at tailback you also use at safety," Hauck explains. "The other thing is, he is really intelligent so he has been able to pick things up real fast, make all the checks and all the adjustments. He's done a really good job of that."

In the 1999 spring game, Williams impressed the new Husky coaches enough that they decided he had finally found a home on defense. He showed

his big-hitting ability, and while his cover skills still needed work, his athleticism and physical play eventually earned him the starting nod at free safety, creating a formidable tandem alongside first-team Freshman All-American strong safety Hakim Akbar.

Williams took his lumps, but his baptism by fire paid off, as he ended the season second on the team with 69 total tackles, including a team-high 48 solo tackles. He has remained a key member of the special teams, including the highly-regarded punt coverage team made up of only the best and brightest athletes on

per return, the second-best average in the conference.

Williams has finally reached a level where he feels comfortable at safety. A major contributor on the field, Williams has become a leader for the two freshman safeties that wait in his wings.

"Since he's such a smart guy and confident in his ability at that position he's been great with the young guys in helping them learn," Hauck said. "We're going to miss him when he's gone in that regard because he's so smart back there and really sets a good example."

For now though, Hauck and the

Huskies will get to enjoy watching Williams punish opposing players. He was one of the keys in the Huskies' defeat of Miami, shutting down the Hurricane receiving corps regarded by many as the best in the country. He and his fellow defensive backs held early-season Heisman Trophy candidate Santana Moss to just one catch for seven yards, and stuffed the dazzling freshman on punt returns, including forcing a fumble that led to the Huskies' first score. For now, the negative talk surrounding the Husky secondary the past couple of seasons has been silenced.

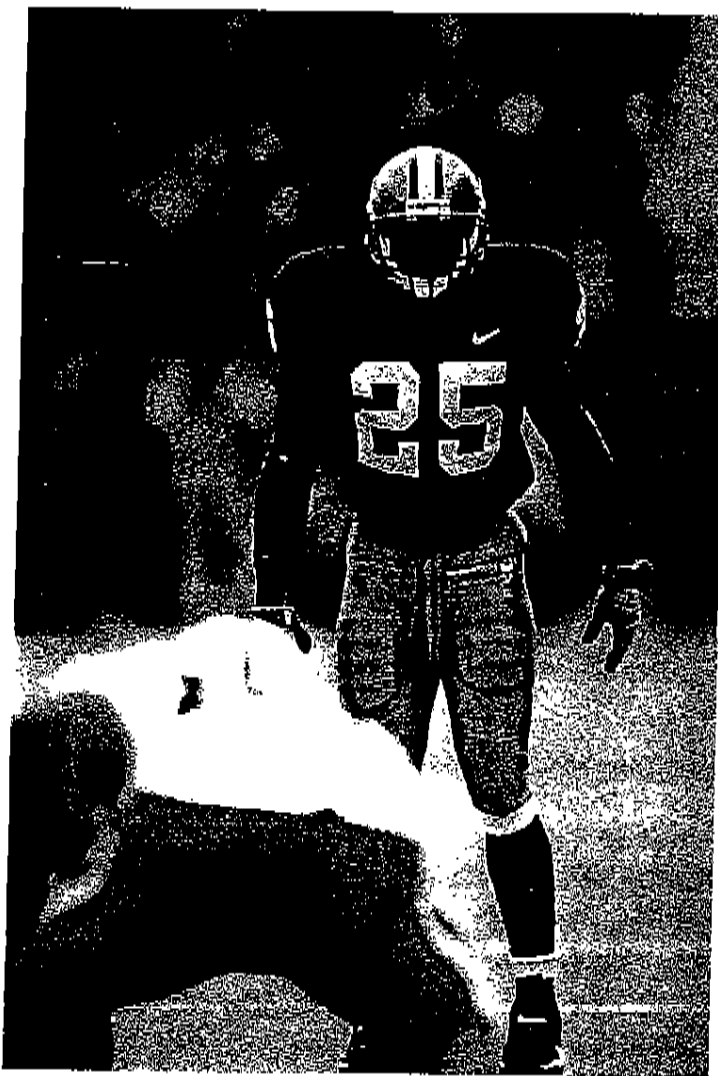
"We don't pay attention to that talk anyway," says Williams. "We just go out and work hard and let our play do the talking and I think we'll be able to prove a lot of people wrong by doing that."

This is the essence of Williams: little talk, a lot of action — and a lot of hitting.

"It's definitely an attitude," Hauck says. "Some of the biggest, fastest guys don't want to stick their nose in there and put a hit on somebody. At that position, you get a chance to make some big hits and he doesn't miss too many of those opportunities. He seems to really enjoy that part of it, which makes him one of my favorite guys to be

around because that is a big deal to me."

It is also a big deal to the Huskies and their chances of winning a Pac-10 title. Should Williams continue to lay the hits on the opponents, the Huskies will be a big hit come January.



Joanie Komura photo

Williams, who was switched from running back to safety, enjoys his reputation as a big hitter. He won the Chuck Niemi Big Hit Award last year, an award based on who consistently gives the best hits.

the team. In 1999, the squad lined up against the Pac-10's leading returner, Dennis Northcutt of Arizona, as well as two of the nation's best in Kansas State's David Allen and Colorado's Ben Kelly, and proceeded to allow just 7.7 yards