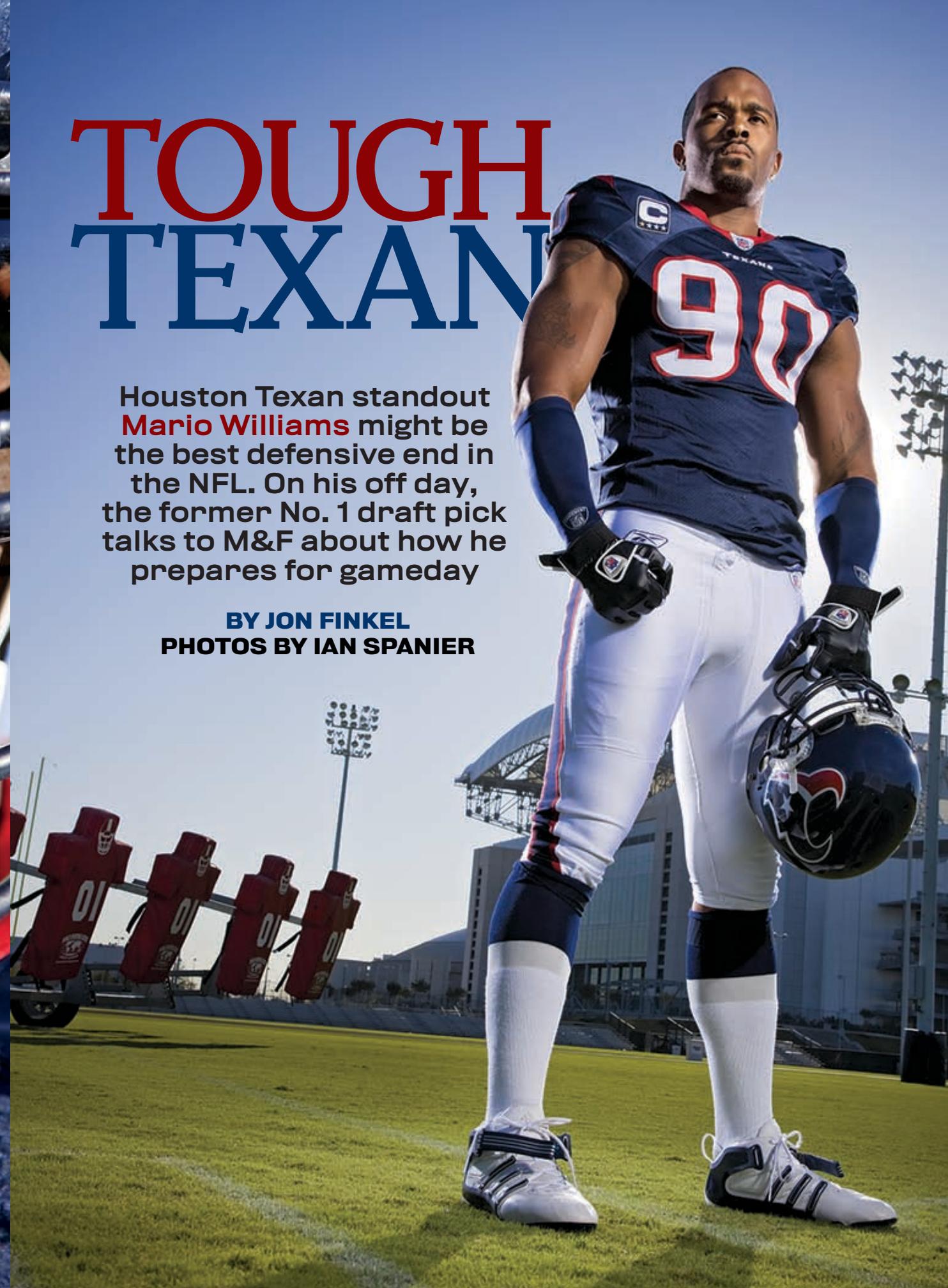




TOUGH TEXAN

Houston Texan standout **Mario Williams** might be the best defensive end in the NFL. On his off day, the former No. 1 draft pick talks to M&F about how he prepares for gameday

BY JON FINKEL
PHOTOS BY IAN SPANIER





PREGAME

It looks like Mario Williams has baby seals connecting his shoulders to his elbows. That's the first thing you notice when you're standing on the sideline at Reliant Stadium before the Texans game against the Bengals. Maybe it's because his shoulder pads are too small or his No. 90 jersey is too tight, but as Williams goes about his pregame routine, the muscles in his arms look huge, like they belong to a larger man — which, considering that Williams is 6'7" and weighs 290 pounds, seems almost impossible. It's as if he tore off the waterboy's legs and jammed them into his rotator cuffs.

Slowly, as the stadium seats fill, the buzz in the air grows louder and the contact on the field gets harder: swim moves, bull rushes, spin moves — they all take place in one-second bursts. Each time Williams lines up opposite a teammate, the intensity heightens. In between hits, he looks across the field at the visiting Bengals, up at the stands, then at the sky. When his eyes return to the turf, his head starts to bob ever so slightly, and you can see the competitive fire building. Williams lit this flame a few hours ago and it's starting to blaze.

"I try to stay as relaxed as possible heading into a game," Williams says. "I like to listen to slow stuff like R&B to keep me calm. Then before we go out onto the field, I'll put in some hip-hop to get a little blood flowing. But once we're out there, the energy just takes over."



Williams shows us how he stares down a lineman...

30 MINUTES TO KICKOFF

Today's mission is to sack the Bengals' quarterback, Ryan Fitzpatrick. To do that, Williams must negotiate more than 1,800 pounds of huge humans, bookended by offensive tackles Levi Jones (6'5", 307 pounds) and Stacy Andrews (6'7", 342 pounds). Their job is to keep guys like Williams from reaching their quarterback; his job is to make them look bad.

With less than a half-hour until game time, security officials begin clearing the media off the field, and Cincinnati and Houston head to their respective end zones. While the Texans' offense runs through a few plays, the defensive line — of which Williams is a captain — gathers in a huddle in the end zone. Williams unleashes a scream that ignites his fellow linemen as they line up behind the goalpost. They pound the padding at the bottom of the upright, one by one, then head into the locker room.



...and laughs at the thought of someone being able to stop him



Williams crushes an official NFL football as easily as he crushes quarterbacks



PREGAME PHOTO: SPORTS ILLUSTRATED/GETTY IMAGES
ALL OTHER GAME PHOTOS: GETTY IMAGES

15 MINUTES TO KICKOFF

"The first thing I want to do is get off the ball and react," Williams says, describing his mind-set right before the ball is snapped. "I watch videos of every guy we'll go up against. I look at their tendencies, how they block against the run and the pass, and I kind of anticipate what they're going to do."

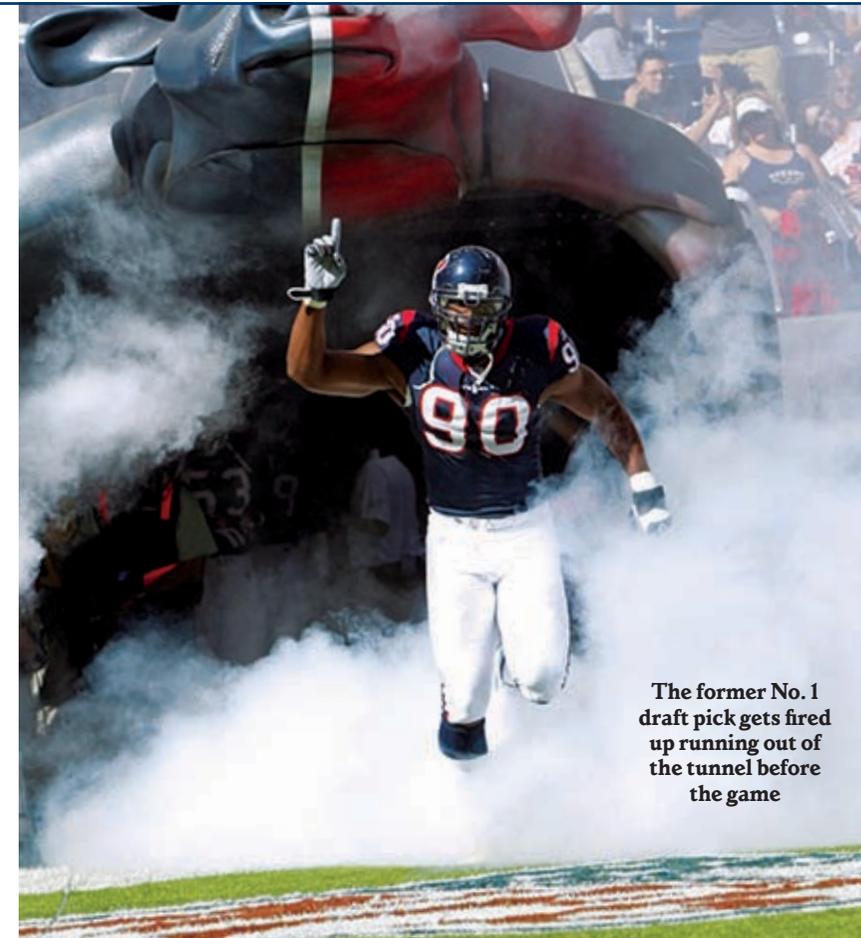
What he calls anticipation, others might call a preternatural ability to read an opposing team's defense, otherwise known as football IQ. Some have it, some don't. Williams has it in spades. Exhibit A: He had more than 100 tackles as a junior on his high school football team. Exhibit B: He holds the North Carolina State University career record with 55.5 stops for losses. Exhibit C: He set a Texans franchise record of 14 sacks in his second season in the NFL.

This stat is the most important, because having the talent to flatten the other team's quarterback on a regular basis is a valuable commodity in pro football. So valuable, in fact, that the Texans drafted Williams No. 1 overall in 2006.

"It's funny because I used to want to be a running back," Williams says. "All big guys want to carry the ball. I used to watch Barry Sanders and Emmitt Smith, and want to be them."

With the goalpost still swaying from Williams' hit, the Bengals are lucky they only have to block him every down rather than tackle him each play if he carried the ball.

"I liked the defensive guys, too," he says, letting it be known that he's not at all disappointed with the position he plays. "I watched Bruce Smith and Reggie White play all the time." Smith had 200 career sacks, and White had 198. Williams, in his third season, has 24.5 heading into this game. If all goes well today, he'll clear 25.

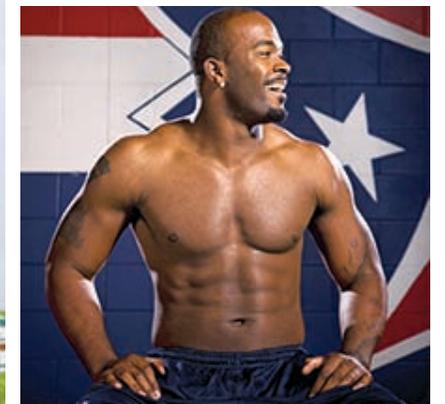


The former No. 1 draft pick gets fired up running out of the tunnel before the game

KICKOFF

Coming out of the tunnel during the team's introductions, he's at it again, getting himself and his teammates fired up with an array of head butts and head slaps that would send a normal person to the hospital — though there probably isn't much a doctor can do if you've been decapitated.

He stays calm long enough to head midfield for the coin toss. Cincinnati wins the toss and elects to get the ball first, which means the chess match between Williams and the Bengals' front five is about to begin.



MARIO WILLIAMS

SNAPSHOT

Birthdate: Jan. 31, 1985
Height: 6'7"
Weight: 291 pounds
College: North Carolina State (Raleigh)
Hometown: Richlands, North Carolina
Years in the NFL: 3
Drafted: No. 1 overall
Resides: Houston

FIRST QUARTER

“Growing up, I always looked at the next level,” he says. “When I was in high school, I thought about playing in college. When I was in college, I thought about playing in the NFL. My junior year in college, I thought, *Why not? The possibilities are endless.*”

Why not, indeed. When you weigh almost 300 pounds and have a 41-inch vertical leap, the question *why not* doesn't have many answers. Neither does the question the Bengals ask: How do you stop Mario Williams? It seems, for the moment, that their strategy is to fire as many players at him as they can.

“They try to throw so much at me,” he says. “But I'll see a certain formation, and I'll know what's about to happen. I'll know if I'm going to get chipped or if I'm going to have 2-3 guys coming at me. You just have to prepare for it.”

The first series is a three-and-out for the Bengals, but when Texans return man Jacoby Jones takes the punt to the house for a touchdown, Williams finds himself right back on the field.

“At the beginning of the game, I'll try different moves on each guy and try to test where his weaknesses are,” he says.

Like a poker player, he bull rushes Levi Jones on a pass play to see how he'll react. On the next down, he sticks him like he's going to bull rush but then spins. Each time, he logs Jones' reaction, hoping to find his tell.

“Sometimes I know something is going to work,” he says, laughing. “I'll see the formation and how he's standing and I'll just know. Then I'll get excited and mess it up.”

That excitement is apparent when, on back-to-back plays, he stutter-steps right, swims left, blasts through the line and arrives at Fitzpatrick a split second after he releases the ball. Three defensive series. Three hurries. Blood is in the water.

SECOND QUARTER

“In college we lifted weights all the time,” Williams says. “It was like being a bodybuilder. In the pros, you get as strong as you can at a weight you can maintain throughout the season. We do it by working the core and doing more bodyweight exercises.”

Having a stronger core means you have better balance, and having balance is what allows a player to absorb a hit from a running back while maintaining his trajectory toward the quarterback.

“We work really hard on firing our muscles,” he says. “Our workouts are explosive. We do a lot of exercises in our lower-body routine.”

According to the workout regimen given to us by the Texans' strength and conditioning staff, “a lot” is an understatement. There are 22 exercises on the list, the most impressive of which is the XPLoad Leg Press, where Williams performs a whopping 580 pounds for 12 reps. But he has to if he wants to have a prayer of getting around someone like Jones on Sundays. With 13:00 to go in the second quarter, it almost happens.

It's second-and-10 and the Bengals have possession midfield. The moment the ball is snapped, Williams jab-steps right, violently changes direction and shoves Jones to muscle by. He roars toward the quarterback but is pushed just enough by Jones that he misses Fitzpatrick by mere inches. On the very next play, he lines up just off tackle and splits the linemen right as Fitzpatrick drops back. He jukes the running back and comes full bore at the quarterback, who at 6'2" looks like he's about to be swallowed by a tidal wave. At the last second he throws the ball away, robbing Williams of a sack. Still, the play forces Cincinnati to punt.

“Getting a sack is like getting a touchdown,” Williams says, getting animated just talking about it. “The crowd goes crazy. It's like you can breathe easy for a minute — it's a breath of fresh air.”

The Texans then go on a 15-play, 91-yard touchdown drive that eats up 9:22 on the clock, taking the game to near halftime and keeping Williams off the field. Sometimes a good offense can be frustrating.

“Getting a sack is like getting a touchdown — the crowd goes crazy”



HALFTIME

At halftime, the Texans' press team distributes game stats and their gameday magazine, which highlights star players. In the book, Jacksonville Jaguars quarterback David Garrard said this about Williams: "The more and more he plays, the better he gets. You really have to account for him. A guy with his abilities, his range, his speed, his power, he's a force to be reckoned with."

In addition to the practices, the training and the studying, Williams, for his part, gives a humble explanation as to why he's such a force. "I look at it as a God-given ability," he says. "I was born with fast-twitch muscle fiber, and I'm fast for my size."

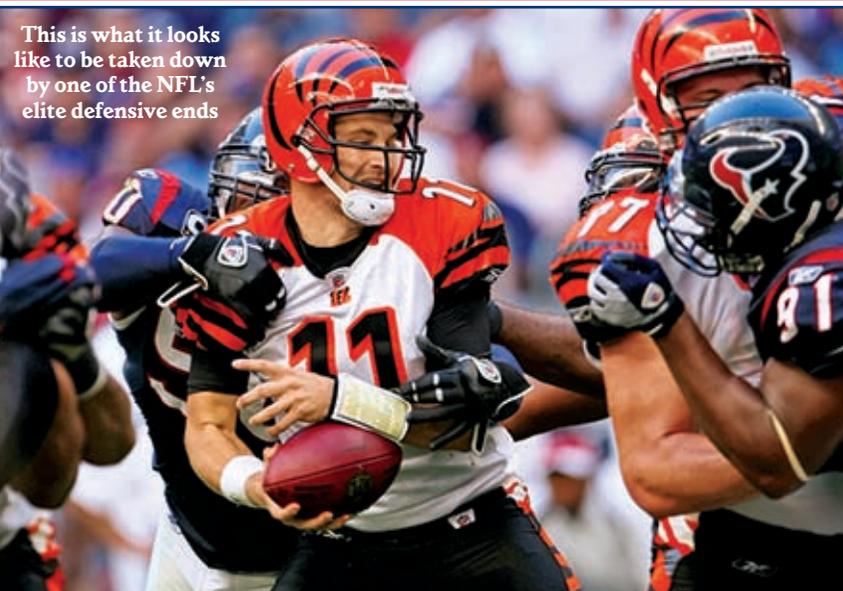
He's also hungry, both literally and figuratively. "I try to eat at least four hours before the game," he says. "There's always chicken, steak and pasta available to us, but I feel heavy if I eat that. I want to be fast and I want to be hungry — it makes me play harder." Which means while he's sitting in that locker room at halftime, he's starving to get back on the field.

THIRD QUARTER

"He's a tremendous player and a great athlete," Jones says about battling Williams. "He has long arms that you have to deal with. When the ball's snapped, he wants some and I want some."

In the first series, Jones digs deep and twice stalls Williams just enough to keep him from recording the sack. The second series of downs is another stalemate. So is the third. Then, it happens.

This is what it looks like to be taken down by one of the NFL's elite defensive ends



1:55 LEFT IN THE THIRD

Cincinnati's in the red zone, and the Texans have held them without a touchdown all game. The ball is snapped and big No. 90 fires off the line. He bull rushes Jones to the left, then, just as Jones readjusts for leverage, Williams shoves him with his left arm, swims over him with his right and tomahawks Fitzgerald from behind, chopping the ball out of his hand and creating a pile of bodies squirming for the pignskin. When it's clear the Texans have the ball, Williams pumps both fists in the air. After almost three quarters of football, he did it. He beat Jones. He beat the Bengals' line. He got to the quarterback and got his sack, with a forced fumble to boot. The crowd is going wild.

As he celebrates on the field, the JumboTron plays "Super Mario Williams,"

WILLIAMS' IN-SEASON WEIGHTLIFTING ROUTINE

The Texans divide their workouts into an upper- and lower-body circuit, arms and abs. Mario Williams' trainer Ray Wright says he usually keeps him to one set per exercise so each rep is done perfectly.

Monday: Upper and lower body

Tuesday: Abs

Wednesday: Biceps, triceps

Thursday: Upper-body dumbbell routine

Friday: Off day or arms

Saturday: Off

Sunday: Gameday



Williams uses an array of leg exercises to be as explosive as he can on the field



UPPER-BODY SAMPLE ROUTINE

EXERCISE	REPS/WEIGHT (lbs.)
4-Way Nautilus Neck Machine	12 (each direction)
Hammer Strength Shrug	12 seated, 12 standing
Barbell 3x6 Routine ¹	6/365
	6/360
	6/355
Avenger Pullover Machine	12/290
Nautilus Lat Pulldown	12/210
Barbell Incline Press ¹	6/315
	6/310
	6/305
Hammer Strength Rear-Delt Machine	12/60
Avenger Seated Row	12/250
Hammer Strength Rotator-Cuff Machine	12/50
Avenger Lateral Raise	12/120
Avenger Seated Press	10/225
	10/220

¹ Rest one minute between each set.

LOWER-BODY SAMPLE ROUTINE

EXERCISE	REPS/WEIGHT (lbs.)
Pendulum Squat	12/270
Avenger Leg Press	10/360
Nautilus Power + Leg Press	12/270
Hammer Strength Leg Curl	12/60
Hammer Strength Leg Extension	12/60
Hip Extension	12/350
Hip Abduction	12/180
Hip Adduction	12/180
Standing Calf Raise	12/340
Seated Calf Raise	12/180

a video in which Williams is made to look like the Nintendo Mario. He runs along the screen, eats a mushroom, triples in size and then, instead of taking down turtles, he tackles Bengals.

“Last year, they had only the music,” Williams says. “Now they have the whole video. I usually don’t get to see it because I’m celebrating, but a friend just showed it to me. It’s fun.”

On the field, he celebrates his way to the sidelines with sack No. 25.5 — only 172.5 to go until he catches Reggie White. **M&F**



Even alone on the practice field, Williams still creates a presence

“In college we lifted weights all the time,” Williams says. “It was like being a bodybuilder. In the pros, you get as strong as you can at a weight you can maintain throughout the season”