

Vikings' E.J. Henderson speaking up

Vikings middle linebacker E.J. Henderson, back from a season-ending injury, is more vocal this year.

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E.J. Henderson has an eye on leading the defense this year after an injury to his left foot kept him off the playing field for most of last season. Henderson was photographed at Vikings training camp in Mankato.

MANKATO, Minn. — There's no shortage of pep talks and head butts in an NFL huddle.

But veteran defenders Ben Leber and Antoine Winfield were startled by the source of the inspirational message before the first practice drill

of training camp Friday.

The usually reserved and understated E.J. Henderson called together the defense and challenged them to be great, even in the elementary pursuit drill they were about to do.

"He had a few good words for us," Leber said. "And anytime E.J. says anything, since he doesn't say a whole lot, we listen."

As the middle linebacker, known as the quarterback of the defense, Henderson always has received the calls from his coaches on the sideline and communicated them to his teammates on the field. But Winfield said Henderson is mixing in commentary and encouragement.

"He used to be more quiet, and he would make the calls and get out of there. He wasn't as vocal," Winfield said. "But now, he comes in and says, 'Stay focused. We need to dominate.' Stuff like that."

"In the huddles, he gets us pumped up. He's taken it to the next level."

Vikings defensive coordinator Leslie Frazier, himself a low-key person, was as surprised as anyone to see a more outspoken Henderson.

"For E.J. to be verbal about anything is unusual," Frazier said. "Usually, it's one or two words: 'Uh, huh. OK.' There's a level of maturity going on there."

In making a point about Henderson, Vikings coach Brad Childress recalled an old E.F. Hutton commercial in which two people in a crowded area are talking, and one of them says, "Well, my broker is E.F. Hutton." At that point, everyone around them stops and leans in to listen.

"He's not a guy that's running it all the time,"

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Childress said of Henderson's mouth.

For his part, Henderson said he wasn't doing anything intentional.

Henderson, who turned 29 on Monday, enters his seventh NFL season. A former Butkus Award winner as the nation's best collegiate linebacker, Henderson has earned the respect of his teammates for his toughness and relentlessness. Yet as he looks around the defensive huddle, Henderson said he is noticing more and more younger faces.

"Me and Kevin (Williams) have been with the Vikings the longest on the defense," Henderson said. "I have to give the second- and third-year players some advice.

"I do feel more comfortable out there as a leader, and I feel that's my role and I'm ready to carry it."

Henderson added there might be another reason for his leadership: his excitement to return to the football field after not playing the final 12 games of last season because of a season-ending foot injury.

"I think I missed it so much. I'm just so excited to get back out there," he said.

The Vikings' defense ranked sixth in the NFL, its highest ranking since the 1994 season. But, to a man, the Vikings believe they would have been a significantly better defense with Henderson manning the middle.

"We had a good defense last year," Leber said, "but he's the guy that's going to make us great. He was playing at a Pro Bowl level before he got injured, and he's going to pick up where we left off and catapult us from six to one."

Added defensive tackle Pat Williams, "We were six

last year without him.

"Imagine if we had E.J.?"

The Vikings were ill-equipped to replace Henderson, whom they signed to a five-year, \$25 million extension in December 2006. Undrafted rookie David Herron struggled in three starts, and the team resorted to plugging in special teamer Vinny Ciurciu, who managed one tackle in his only start of the season.

Ciurciu was released during the offseason.

The Vikings also signed Napoleon Harris, who did a solid job, and also worked Leber into the spot.

But Frazier said his unit was missing something from the position.

"The big plays," Frazier said. "Those are the plays where the fans stand up and go, 'Wooo.'"

"The splash plays he makes for our defense raises everyone's level of play."

Henderson hasn't earned a spot in the Pro Bowl, but he was voted the team's defensive most valuable player in 2007 and a team captain in 2008. Henderson admitted he might be a step slow right now, but he is confident he will be back to full speed soon.

His teammates wouldn't expect anything less.

"He's the leader. He's the man in the middle," Winfield said. "You got the big guys up front, taking the pressure off him. Then E.J. is running free, and he's the best in the business at doing that."

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