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An Interview With:

HINES WARD

Q. As an offensive player, how much fun is it to sit back and watch Troy Palomalu do his thing out there?

HINES WARD: It's always exciting. You get to see his hair running around and we call him the Tasmanian Devil because he's always out there creating havoc on the field. He's a great student of the game and always asking offensive players about routes and what are we trying to do, trying to figure out how to get open against them and stuff. He's a great student of the game and he's going to continue to grow and grow as a player.

Q. I was reading some stuff about your background, I was wondering if your mother, where she lives, if she still comes to the games and if you have any contact with your father?

HINES WARD: No, I don't have any contact with him. But my mother, she comes every now and then to game. But for some reason, she misses all the plays and she needs the replays on television to catch the plays. So she likes to watch it at home.

Q. You and Rod Smith seem to have a lot in common, do you watch him, do you respect him, what he does?

HINES WARD: Yeah, Rod is one of the most underrated guys in the league. You look at him, and a lot of people really don't talk about him. People say he's not fast or he's not this and this, but every year he's been one of the most consistent wide receivers in the league and I can kind of see comparisons compared to him. He's great at what the Denver Broncos are doing. He's out there and he brings his lunch pail to work each and every Sunday and that's what you like and respect about the guy. He's on of my favorite receivers in the league to watch.

Q. Do you try to do that in your game, what you're talking about?

HINES WARD: Yeah, but I don't really try to emulate anybody. I just try to go out there and I just do the little things that probably sometimes get overlooked.

But, you know, I can see how they would compare Rod and myself together, because here we are, we're still going out there and every time they need somebody to make a play, they can depend on us to go out there and make plays for our team.

Q. How would you describe your job this year with the maturation of Ben Roethlisberger as a player?

HINES WARD: I think a lot of players have contributed. You just sit there and watch Ben, he played night and day from last year's playoff time to this year's playoff time. He's just going out there and having fun playing the game of football.

Last year he had a lot of success early, and all of the success kind of got overwhelming sometimes. So you can understand for most rookies coming into the league finishing off 15-1 heading into a Championship Game his first year, things can get overwhelming and hit you by storm.

But he's been more calm and collected this year and that has a lot to do with crediting our veteran guys going out and working with him and him starting in the game and trusting in his teammates to go out there and make plays for him.

Q. What do you remember about when you had a radio show in Pittsburgh with Josh Miller?

HINES WARD: Josh, he's an all-time classic. He was well-liked in the locker room. Josh and I will always remain friends. We became close friends, especially on the radio show. Josh is one of the all-time favorites here and in the locker room.

Q. About the Bronco defense, compare what you're seeing on film now compared

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to what you remember playing against them before a couple years ago?

HINES WARD: We have a totally different makeup of the team when we played them last time we were there. One thing you know about them, they always have good team speed. The guys are out there. **AI** (Wilson) is running around like he's been doing ever since he was in Tennessee, so he's still the same player. I was fortunate enough, **Champ** (Bailey) and I played against each other and just watching **Champ** (Bailey) go out, he's one of the better corners in the league. Overall, they have got great team speed and it's going to be a challenge for us this week.

Q. Is it more in your face now than you remember, more high-pressure, do they bring the pressure more?

HINES WARD: Oh, yeah they are going to go out and blitz and try to confuse us. That's something we have to counter. A lot of teams are blitzing and trying to blow up our runs. We're going to have some chances in the passing game try to make some plays. We still have to run the ball because that's who we are; that's our identity. We just have to go out there and execute our game plan, and it's kind of hard because in this case, we have not played Denver this year.

So the first half is going to be kind of a feel for trying to feel each other out. And whatever team goes out there and doesn't turn the ball over and executes their game plan ought to win the ballgame.

Q. You guys went into Indianapolis, talk about the challenges of going to play on Invesco Field in Denver?

HINES WARD: Playing in altitude, all that, playing there, I'm pretty sure that the city of Denver is going to be rallying behind their team. It's one game away from the Super Bowl. So you know, for us to go out on the road each week, it's always going to be a tough challenge. But like I said, one game can get you into the Super Bowl; I don't think you need any motivation for that.

Q. Antwaan Randle El has called Coach Cowher a little bit of a nut in a good way. What's it like playing for him and do you think it gnaws on him that he has not won the ultimate prize?

HINES WARD: As players and coaches, we all want to reach that goal. He has the longest tenure here of any coach. That's a credit to him as far as going out and drafting the players that he wants in his system and going out and treating his players like -- he's a true players coach. As a player, you like playing for a coach like that who goes out and he understands that you're going to get beat up during the week, so he takes it easy on us as far as practice-wise. But he knows he gets the most out of us come Sunday. So, I mean, I'm happy to be playing for him.

Q. You're going to one of the toughest sites to win in the league. How much do you think the home-field advantage is an advantage for the Broncos?

HINES WARD: It is an advantage. They are undefeated at home. It's always a tough challenge to go in knowing that nobody has lost. We were in the same predicament last year. We were undefeated at home and New England came in and we turned the ball over and unfortunately we lost the ballgame.

We don't really get caught up into it, we know it's going to be a tough place to play. If we just go out there and you look at the playoffs this year, whatever teams that don't turn the ball over and create opportunities win the ballgame, and that's what we're trying to do.

Q. Did you go to Georgia because it was fairly close to home or did you have lot of other offers?

HINES WARD: Oh, yeah I had plenty of offers. But when I went, we didn't have a lot of talent in Georgia, so a lot of guys committed and just tried to stay there. You look at the guys around the league, I'm kind of the old head, but **Richard Seymour**, **Marcus Stroud**, **Champ Bailey**, **Ben Watson**, all of those guys just wanted to come to Georgia, so we started putting some great guys in the league.

Q. Because of the way you play the game and because of what happened last year, losing the advantage to play in your home field, do you think that advantage was really important for you?

HINES WARD: I use it, I guess. The way I play the game as far as just going out and trying

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to be consistent each week, play physical, that's just who I am.

So I don't really know if I have an advantage for me on Sunday. I mean, I think everybody brings a different thing to the table.

Q. I'm wondering if you can talk a little bit about *Jerome Bettis*, and not only *Jerome Bettis* and what he means to that franchise, you all want to go to the Super Bowl, but the feeling of getting to the Super Bowl in his hometown in maybe his last year?

HINES WARD: It's a book waiting to be written. Here is a guy who had a hell of a career, you really don't realize you're playing with a Hall of Fame running back until it comes to an end. All that he's done for this organization, the city of Pittsburgh, he epitomizes what the Pittsburgh Steelers are all about. He's a class act on and off the field. I don't think he realizes how much of a role model he is, as far as how he handles situations and how he approaches each and practice each and every day. If this will be his last year, what better way than to finish his career off where it all started in Detroit.

We're in that position to put him back in the Super Bowl. A lot of guys just want to go out and not only play for ourselves but for a guy like *Jerome Bettis*.

Q. You looked good last year when you went 15-1, do you think maybe you're better battle-tested because of what you've had to go through?

HINES WARD: No question. We didn't want to go through it this year the way we went through it by choice. That was how it went and last year we were the No. 1 seed, we got home-field advantage. This year there was a playoff atmosphere from Chicago on for the last four games because we needed to win all four games to have a chance of making it to the tournament.

So we've been on that playoff mentality mode since probably the last four weeks during the regular season. We were playing with desperation. We know if we lose a ballgame we're going home and that's how it's been for the last six or seven weeks now.

Q. The hold out -- did you ever think about why it had to happen and where it turned out so well for both sides?

HINES WARD: I didn't want to make it a media circus. I know *Terrell Owens* and all the situations like that, but it is a part of the business. You only get a small window of opportunity to maximize as much money as you can, so me playing for Pittsburgh, a predominately run-oriented team, I just felt my value at that time, what I brought to the table four straight years, I wanted to be compensated for it amongst my peers in the league.

I really didn't mean it to be a distraction, but everything worked itself out. I came back to camp, signed my contract and here we are playing in the Championship Game. So everything worked its way out for the better.

Q. Are there one or two things that's unique about the home-field advantage in Denver compared to other places?

HINES WARD: I don't know. It's kind of hard to say. Last year when we had home-field advantage it was kind of more of a distraction more than anything; more ticket requests, a lot of people want to come and watch. With us going on the road, we really don't have to worry about that too much. We just go out there and just concentrate on football.

It's been a while. I've been in the Championship Game for three years straight and this is the first time we're on the road. So I know it's less of a distraction as the previous two years I've been in the Championship Game.

Q. Talk about the fans of the *Pittsburgh Steelers*, how comforting will it be to see the towels waving?

HINES WARD: Wherever we've been it has all been a great Steeler-fan turnout. I guess because here in Pittsburgh the games are sold out for the next ten years, so it's kind of hard for people to get tickets. Any time we have a chance to go on the road we always have a nice turnout. I'm pretty sure that Broncos fans, they are going to be there to support their team as well. It's going to be a great match-up. As players, this is a game that you look forward to.

Q. Would you talk about *Antwaan Randle El* and the threat he presents, just the go-to guy and obviously can do some things?

HINES WARD: Yeah, he can. People always talk about with the loss of Plaxico (Burress)

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what kind of offense will we have in the passing game. We don't get as many opportunities as other guys, I think we're only passing 20, 19 times a game. If you look at it statistically, we don't put up big numbers. But you look at our yards per catch as far as average-wise and we're right up there in the best with the top 3 in the league. We all bring a different flavor to the table. **Antwaan Randle El**, he's a threat, every time he touches the ball, he can make something happen, something positive. It's just a matter of all of us, we may not be fast or look tall or have this attitude about us, but we're productive on the field when we get our opportunity.

Q. What was on your mind when the player fumbles late -- inaudible -- what was going through your mind when that happened?

HINES WARD: I just felt bad for Jerome. As a player, you always remember that last game that you played in, and for him to have a career that he has had for us, you hate to see a play like that in the ballgame. And fortunately for us, that wasn't the deciding factor of the ballgame. Luckily for us they missed a field goal and consequently we won the ballgame.

Q. Because of the playoff mode you've been playing with in Chicago, do you think that mentally and physically you are the toughest team right now? Will that be an advantage with Denver?

HINES WARD: I don't know, mentally I think at this point, the season has been long for both teams. We're both about the same mentally.

Physically, we're fine. I mean, at this point everybody is banged up, you've played, what, 20 games, 19, 20 games already including preseason. Like I said, what motivates us is we're one game away from the Super Bowl, and I think you'll find a way to get motivated and do what you've got to do extra to get through the week and prepare yourself.

Q. Were you surprised that Denver beat New England?

HINES WARD: They (Patriots) are a great team. There's no doubt about that. But when you turn the ball over like they did, it's going to decrease your chances of winning the ballgame. I think when Champ intercepted that ball and ran it

all the way back and scored, Denver had the game in control.

There's no question, we've got to go out there and execute our game plan and we can't afford to turn the ball over against a great team like Denver.

Q. Is there a style of play that you guys play or is it your mentality that has allowed you to have success on the road this season and in the playoffs?

HINES WARD: Our style of play, we're known as a physical team. A lot of people when we're playing, they know that so they try to match that intensity.

For us, we've just got to be mentally tough. Playing on the road is always a hard thing to do. We had to go to Cincinnati, go through Indianapolis. But those two teams we played in the regular season, like I said, we didn't have a chance to play Denver this year and they didn't have a chance to play us, so it's going to be a lot of film work to be done.

A lot of guys never even played in Denver before. It's always going to be a tough challenge but we will just try to get off to a fast start and not turn the ball over.

Q. You just beat the two best quarterbacks in the AFC, at least according to the rankings; where should Ben be ranked?

HINES WARD: He should be ranked right up there with those guys. I don't see why he can't be right up there. I mean, he's had a great playoff year up to this point. You look at his record, he's 2-0 in the playoffs right now. Statistically, you may look at his stats and they may not be eye-glaring, but what he does for our team is always put us in great situations. He gives us our best chance to win ballgames week-in and week-out. In my opinion, he should be right up there with those guys.

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