

7 THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT FREE AGENCY



BY KEN HAMLIN, COWBOYS FREE SAFETY (AS TOLD TO CHARLES CURTIS) PHOTOGRAPH BY JACK THOMPSON

1. DOCTORS HIT HARD. "When I went through free agency last year, teams gave me every test around—CAT scans, MRIs, X-rays. They double-check old procedures, because guys sometimes get surgery that isn't done right. You hate for them to doubt you, but they have to cover their backs."

2. IT'S ONE BIG MEET, GREET AND EAT. "Teams roll out the red carpet; I've been taken to the best restaurants. You talk about team philosophy, expectations, training camp. Then they ask about off-field stuff, like who your friends are and how much you go out. Teams know that if a guy has character, it will rub the other players the right way."

3. AGENTS COME ARMED. "My rep, Kennard McGuire, breaks down the position: what other guys make and how their stats compare with mine. Teams know Kennard is more than an adviser at contract time; he brings ammo, ready for war."

4. I DO MY HOMEWORK ... "I talk to players about coaches and practices. A guy on one team told me not to come. He said, 'It's bad chemistry, period.' When I visited Dallas, I felt good after getting feedback about Wade Phillips. I heard he's a players' coach, defensive-minded and laid-back. That sells."

5. ... AND GET READY FOR TESTS. "Being a quick learner helps. Teams set up drills to see how fast you pick up on things."

6. IT'S NOT ALL ABOUT THE BENJAMINS. "You want your family to be set, but you don't want to be rich and unhappy. We consider everything: whether the team can win, who you'll be playing with, how you'll fit in—even the other teams in the division."

7. FRANCHISING SNEAKS UP ON YOU. "I've never heard anyone say he wants to be franchised. You just have to hope it leads to a long-term deal."