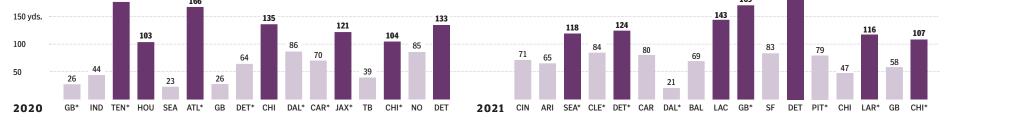
Playing at the highest level

Graphic by ANDREW KRAMMER, STEVE ZIMMERMAN, C.I. SINNER and JOSH PENROD Photos by CARLOS GONZALEZ, ELIZABETH FLORES and ANTHONY SOUFFLÉ • Star Tribune staff

THE DIG THE POST THE OUT THE HITCH THE SLANT THE GO Intermediate route • 10-19 yards Short route • 1-9 yards eep route • 20+ yards Deep + intermediate rout Intermediate route • 10-19 yards Short route • 1-9 yards 3 388 98 34.0 70% 90.9% Yards per catch Total yards Touchdowns Conversion rate Catch rate Yards after catch Working the middle: Jefferson is Big-play threat: Jefferson has proved Need an out: When the Vikings need a Automatic underneath: Quick footwork Finding a niche: In his second season, Posting up in the end zone: Jefferson Jefferson flourished with the dig - his has reached the end zone on short, interconversion on third or fourth down, they and opponents fearing him deep set up looking to improve his yards after most dangerous on the go route, a simple sprint upfield after releasing from the most productive route - gaining more mediate and deep routes. He has also frequently go to Jefferson, who has been the hitch as one of Jefferson's most conthe catch, which primarily come via defender at the line of scrimmage. yards (starting with a 34-yarder in scored on nine different routes, led with most productive on out routes by moving sistent routes. Since not catching the first in-breaking routes like the quick slant. and third thrown his way, he has caught He has more yards after the catch He often adds double moves to get by Week 1) and with greater frequency three scores running the post, including a the chains on seven of 10 targets. Jefferson defenders and catch the long ball. (nearly doubled catches from '21 to '22) 50-yarder against Baltimore last season. generates a first down or TD on 59.6% of the next 19, starting with a 33-yard on only screen and dig routes than his 94 targets on third and fourth down. pickup in his third career game. on slants in his two seasons. **Targets** 20 • **Receptions** 10 Targets 32 • Receptions 20 Targets 23 • Receptions 13 Targets 29 • Receptions 20 Long 49 • Touchdowns 2 (49, 45 yards) Long 38 • Touchdowns 0 Long 54 • Touchdowns 3 (50, 14, 12) Targets 15 • Receptions 11 Targets 22 • Receptions 20 Long 23 • Touchdowns 0 Long 33 • Touchdowns 0 Long 19 • Touchdowns 1 (11) THE PATH TO 3,016 YARDS HE CAN CATCH IT ANYWHERE In 33 games, the Vikings are 9-5 when Jefferson has 100-plus receiving yards, and 6-13 when he has fewer than 100. Justin Jefferson's 196 career receptions show he can make a grab at any place on the field, running nearly any route. * Home games DEPTH TARGE



Entering Year 3, Jefferson is already an elite route runner

 ◄ JEFFERSON from C1 keen eyes paired with precise footwork, and sticky hands

that cap abnormally long arms. Jefferson dominates on nearly any route from any alignment in the offense. More than two-thirds of his record-setting yards have come as an outside receiver, evaporating pre-draft concerns that he was used only in the slot at Louisiana State. He escaped that pigeonhole, which contributed to his being the fifth receiver drafted in 2020 at 22nd overall, and has flown to the top of the NFL, with All-Pro corner-

backs following him. Being shadowed by Ramsey told Jefferson he was one of the best. Now he wants to be 1,500

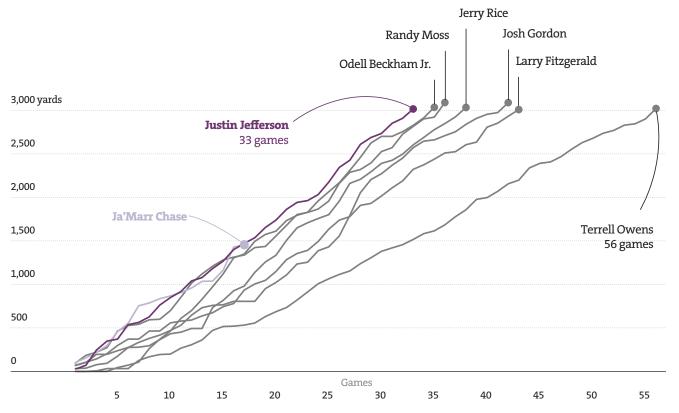
the best. "You can tell his mental part of his game is growing, confidence is growing," Vikings cornerback Patrick Peterson said. "He got everything work- 500 ing in his favor right now. You can just tell he's extremely focused on being the best receiver in the game."

Football intelligence

Peterson still remembers a younger Jefferson's impressive grabs at the West Campus Apartments parking lot to Tiger Stadium. Jefferson wasn't yet a teenager when he was playing backyard ball with his older brother Jordan Jefferson, an LSU quarterback, a quarterback's perspective teammate

THE FASTEST TO 3.000 YARDS

Justin Jefferson reached 3,000 receiving yards faster than any receiver in NFL history, reaching the milestone two games sooner than fellow former LSU receiver Odell Beckham Jr. Another former LSU receiver, Ja'Marr Chase, had a standout rookie season in 2021 and could beat Jefferson's record with a strong second season. Jefferson's pace compared to the next fastest receivers to that mark — and players with the most career receiving yards — shows his dominance.



discs that taught both Jeffer- and Jefferson, who is nine You don't always see that this in Baton Rouge, La., next son brothers about defensive coverages

Source: Star Tribune research

"It was a lot of tapes," Justin said Playbook schooling from to maximize every route.

years younger, frequently early in a guy's career." discuss strengths and weaknesses of individual defenders and coverages, allowing each

and Peterson, Jordan's college set Jefferson on a rocketing leverage pretty well," safety route," or before he declares trajectory, further boosted by Harrison Smith said. "Where his direction downfield. As he Justin was often nearby sitting next to receiver Adam to fit into windows and things runs straight ahead, Jefferson when Jordan reviewed Tigers Thielen in the Vikings' film like that, how to work [defend- disguises intentions with minigame footage, pulling out room. Coaches say Thielen ers] at the top of routes. mal extra motion in his arms

Processing opponents

before the snap helps lefferson be one of the NFL's top deep threats. Defenders point "[Jefferson] understands to his work "at the top of the

and feet before breaking left, right or back toward the quarterback. He can also fake out a defender with a false step and head fake called a rocker step.

JIM FOSTER • Star Tribune

"That also plays into his high level of football intelligence," said Matt Bowen, ESPN analyst and former NFL safety. "Knowing when he's going to plant that outside step, know- It's things he can do that other ing when he's going to set up a people can't."

defensive back to go where he wants to go and understanding what the coverage is tell-

ing vou." Four deep routes of 20 yards or more — post, corner, post-corner and go routes account for nearly one-third of Jefferson's yardage and eight of his 17 touchdowns. He tied Seattle's Tyler Lockett last season with the most targets at least 20 yards downfield, per Pro Football Focus.

In Baltimore last year, Jefferson's 50-yard touchdown on a post route started before the snap. He saw a Ravens defender turn around and signal a teammate on third-and-7. Without slowing, Jefferson faked a step outside to throw off the defender and cut back inside. The runway was set.

"I seen them talking," Jefferson said. "He was like, 'Watch the outside-breaking route.' So, I gave him a one-two step to the outside and seen the safety come down to K.J. [Osborn], and I'm like, 'Oh yeah, Kirk [Cousins] has to throw this.'

Natural body control

On a field at a training facility outside Miamilast summer, Vikings receiver Bisi Johnson knew he was witnessing the abnormal. Johnson watched Jefferson bend and weave

through routes like water. "Just the way his body moves is actually different," Johnson said. "The way he can cut, and the way he can get in and out of breaks, it's tremendous. It's different. I don't know how else to describe it.

Impeccable body control and four-deep varieties? That Jefferson, who can twist midair to pluck away passes with 33-inch arms rivaled by few

other 6-1 receivers Cousins a reliable landing spot for lobbed passes on fade and go routes. Jefferson has come down with 16 catches for 495 yards and three scores on those routes, including a 27-yard grab against the Chargers last season.

The pre-snap read wasn't matching his false steps in Adams. good for Jefferson on that routes. "He has different releases Iefferson's eyes are key on he can do," said Vikings corplay. He was supposed to run a stop-and-go route down the the underneath whip route, nerback Chandon Sullivan, sideline, but Chargers corwhich begins as a slant with an who faced Jefferson as a Packer ner Tevaughn Campbell was abrupt cut toward the sideline. the past two seasons. "He has a deep package now." leaning toward the sideline. On whip routes, he's caught Iefferson said he improvised, nine of 12 targets for 66 yards route downfield, has been most of the time the great ones stuttering only briefly before and two touchdowns, includaccelerating to beat him down-Jefferson's most productive ing a 3-yard score against the field. Campbell was still in Seahawks last vear. "You have to take a couple Jefferson's hip pocket, forcing via 31 targets. Defenders note

him to make a twisting, contested grab. "The football is kind of on the back shoulder," Bowen said. "His ability to track the ball, the body control but also the competitiveness to go up and take the ball away from then you snap out of it. It the defensive back. When you works every time." see that with a young player, that really jumps out."

Manipulative vision Vikings receivers coach Keenan McCardell said players typically need four or five NFL seasons before knowing how to manipulate defenders with their eyes. Sight starts at

the line of scrimmage. Is the defense in man-to-man or zone coverage? What type of zone between two-, three-

Vikings receiver Justin Jefferson has quickly made his mark in the NFL with immense talent and detailed route running beyond his years. His path to 3,016 receiving yards over 33 games in two seasons required a deep route tree and skill set to shed defenders at all levels. "Not a lot of guys in this league can be a deep threat and an underneath guy that can shake and move," teammate Adam Thielen said, "to play outside, to play inside, and really do it at the highest level at all of those different criteria. That's what is impressive."

DEPTH OF TARGET	SHORT ROUTE RECEPTIONS										INTERMEDIATE						DEEP				
	Angle	Drag	Flat	Hitch	Return	Screen	Slant	Smoke	Speed out	Whip	Comeback	Dig	Hook	Out	Over	Post corner	Corner	Fade	Go	Post	Slice
41 to 50 yards																	1		1	2	
31 to 40																	1		2		1
21 to 30																1	2	4	6	1	3
11 to 20							1				5	17	8	11	9		4	2	1	10	
L to 10	1	2	2	20	2	1	19		11	9	2	3			1						
Behind LOS			6			18		6													

Skyward contortions give

seven 100-yard games last year. glass in case of emergency.

defenders after the snap. "You got to see the coveron.'

age and see the leverage first," said McCardell, a former Pro Bowl receiver. "After that, vou can move guys with your head, your eyes, look away."

By the time McCardell coached Jefferson for the receiver was already seeing the whole field and shaking

more steps and show your eyes to the quarterback," Jefferson said. "That sells that slant, especially in the red zone because people think you're going to throw it quick. Once the eves and head turn.

'Clean' footwork

Jefferson has a pair of cleats in a glass case at home.

They were enshrined after three 100-yard games last season, including 118 yards against the Seahawks and 169 yards against the Packers. Jefferson forgot the third opponent. That's understandable: He had

But he knows he will break

Quick and precise footwork makes Jefferson a terror standard. on short (1-9 yards) and intermediate routes (10-19 yards). Defenders struggle jamming him in press coverage at the line. He shakes them with adopted from other stars like thing I'm working toward." defenders with head fakes Raiders receiver Davante

> The dig, or an in-breaking with 388 yards on 20 catches his footwork on those inside cuts, which Vikings coaches his targets compared to 6.2% as a rookie.

"He makes those breaks and cuts so clean," Peterson said. "To where the smallest false step of the DB not being in position, he gains the advantage.'

Working hands

Before yellow gloves encircle Jefferson's eyes during his famous "Griddy" celebration, they're usually making a highlight-reel grab.

But Jefferson's hands are one area where he is looking to improve. He had 13 drops in two seasons, including nine parisons between Jefferson mismatches on opposing cgonzalez@startribune.com

going to slip them bad boys receivers targeted at least 90 times, per Pro Football Focus. That's below his elite

He's aiming for perfection, not just improvement.

"Working on my hands, always," Jefferson said. "Trying to go the whole season without first time last season, the a variety of starting moves drops. That's definitely atough known as releases, some he's thing to do, but that's some-

The last receiver to see 90-plus targets without a drop was Larry Fitzgerald Jr. in 2019.

"I heard it," McCardell said of Jefferson's no-drop goal, "but I don't need to talk about it, because it's in his mind-set. It's what he is. The great ones know what they want and go do it."

What's the hardest pass to catch? McCardell said the ers had as few passing plays hard-thrown slant, on which Jefferson has only one drop leaned into last year as the dig to 20 catches on 29 targets for route accounted for 12.6% of 233 yards and a score. Sometimes a perfect pass can be the toughest, according to Jefferson, who pointed to the overthe-shoulder deep ball.

"Because it most likely passes your eyes," he said. "Once it passes your eyes, it's kind of difficult to catch, especially when it's coming over your head to the backside of the shoulder."

What's next?

Head coach Kevin O'Connell's arrival from the Rams, where he was the offensive coordinator for two years, led to immediate com-

"Whenever I need that 100- last season for a 7.7% drop and Cooper Kupp, who last linebackers or safeties. They is a born talent, according to tells a receiver how to set up yard game," Jefferson said, "I'm rate that ranked 24th among year led the league in catches also create chances for yards (145), receiving yards (1,947) and touchdowns (16) in the Rams' Super Bowl-winning season.

But Jefferson won't be simply plugged into a Kupp role, said Vikings offensive coordinator Wes Phillips, who was the Rams' passing game coordinator

"Cooper was playing more a slot position," Phillips said. "Just by nature of his position, he'll be doing a little bit different things than Cooper."

Jefferson's role will evolve with the Vikings offense, which he said will be "less predictable" under O'Connell by throwing out of varied and morphing formations.

Pre-snap motion was a common sight at training camp. Only the Jaguars and Steelwith pre-snap motion as the I enjoy.' Vikings in 2021, according to ESPN Stats & Info.

"The presentation will be different," said Bowen, the ESPN analyst. "There will be more misdirection in the backfield. That's all a positive for a receiver. Because you can look at that coaching tree, whether [Kyle] Shanahan, [Matt] LaFleur in Green Bay and what you'll see this year with O'Connell, and obviously Sean McVay in L.A. as well, how they create space or how they occupy defenders to create that space for a receiver."

will run more in-breaking routes, like the dig route, from play designs aimed to create

after the catch, where Kupp led all receivers last season.

The Vikings' new playbook is also expected to offer more flexibility. Phillips said multiple plays can be called in the huddle at once and decided upon seeing the defense. Jefferson will have leeway built into routes, some of which he can alter based on what he sees in the coverage.

As defenses double Jefferson more, the Vikings are planning counterpunches by giving him the chance to find man-to-man opportunities.

"Even if they're double covering me with the safety and corner, or corner and linebacker, the outside [might be] one-on-one, you know?" Jefferson said. "I'm even in the backfield now. So, it's just so many things new to this offense that

He will continue to chase contemporaries and legends, needing 1,148 yards to surpass Randy Moss for most receiving yardage in the first three NFL seasons, and 1.633 vards to break Moss' single-season Vikings record, a mark Jefferson came 17 yards short of last season.

"I'm not labeled as the best receiver at this point, so that's my motivation," Jefferson said. "Just becoming the best receiver and being the best teammate for my team. Just doing stuff to provide for my Bowen predicted Jefferson team and just trying to get to that main goal."

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