

# Playing at the highest level

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Photos by CARLOS GONZALEZ, ELIZABETH FLORES and ANTHONY SOUFLÉ • Star Tribune staff



**THE GO**  
Deep route • 20+ yards

**34.0**  
Yards per catch

**Big-play threat:** Jefferson has proved most dangerous on the go route, a simple sprint upfield after releasing from the defender at the line of scrimmage. He often adds double moves to get by defenders and catch the long ball.

**Targets 20 • Receptions 10**  
**Long 49 • Touchdowns 2** (49, 45 yards)

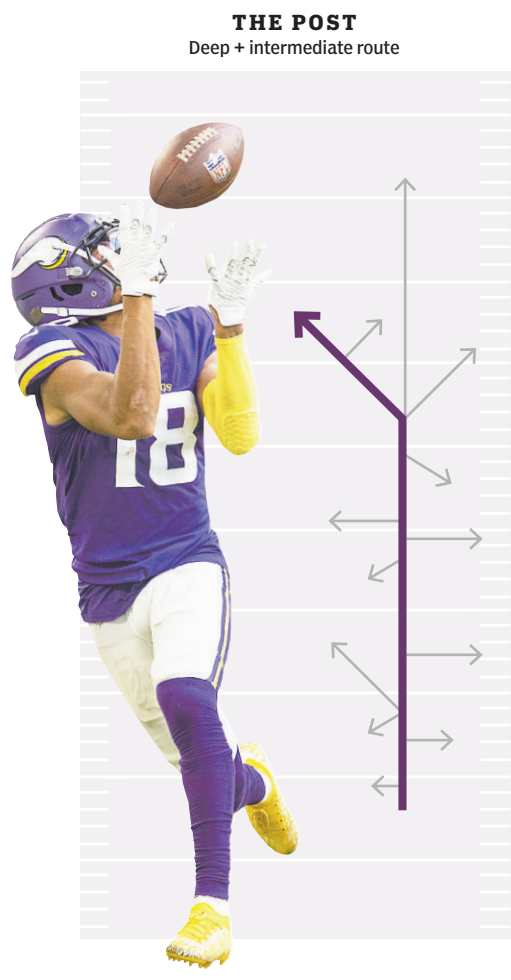


**THE DIG**  
Intermediate route • 10-19 yards

**388**  
Total yards

**Finding a niche:** In his second season, Jefferson flourished with the dig — his most productive route — gaining more yards (starting with a 34-yarder in Week 1) and with greater frequency (nearly doubled catches from '21 to '22).

**Targets 32 • Receptions 20**  
**Long 38 • Touchdowns 0**



**THE POST**  
Deep + intermediate route

**3**  
Touchdowns

**Posting up in the end zone:** Jefferson has reached the end zone on short, intermediate and deep routes. He has also scored on nine different routes, led with three scores running the post, including a 50-yarder against Baltimore last season.

**Targets 23 • Receptions 13**  
**Long 54 • Touchdowns 3** (50, 14, 12)

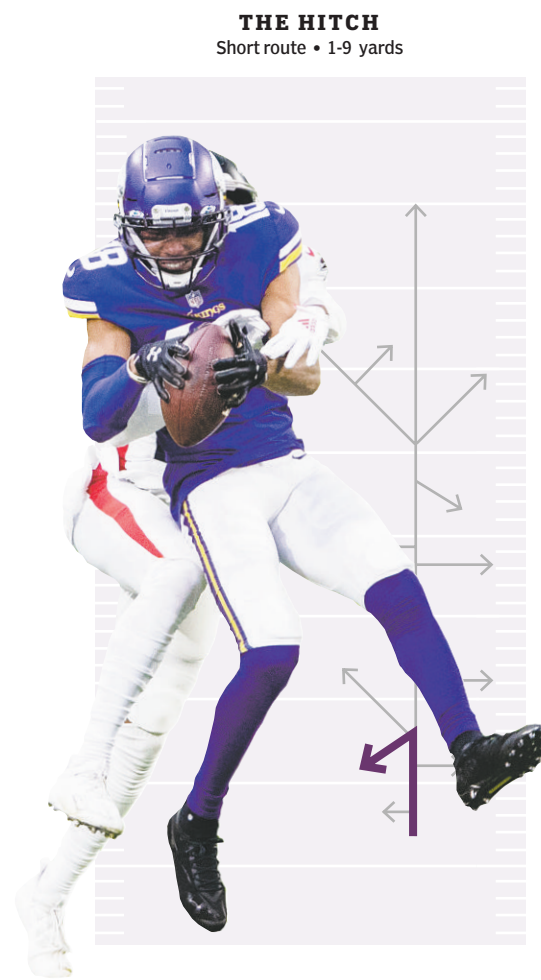


**THE OUT**  
Intermediate route • 10-19 yards

**70%**  
Conversion rate

**Need an out:** When the Vikings need a conversion on third or fourth down, they frequently go to Jefferson, who has been most productive on out routes by moving the chains on seven of 10 targets. Jefferson generates a first down or TD on 59.6% of his 94 targets on third and fourth down.

**Targets 15 • Receptions 11**  
**Long 23 • Touchdowns 0**



**THE HITCH**  
Short route • 1-9 yards

**90.9%**  
Catch rate

**Automatic underneath:** Quick footwork and opponents fearing him deep set up the hitch as one of Jefferson's most consistent routes. Since not catching the first and third thrown his way, he has caught the next 19, starting with a 33-yard pickup in his third career game.

**Targets 22 • Receptions 20**  
**Long 33 • Touchdowns 0**



**THE SLANT**  
Short route • 1-9 yards

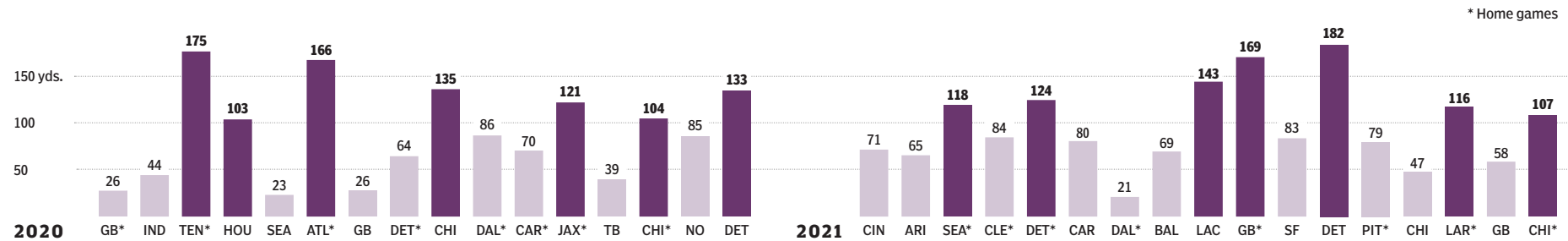
**98**  
Yards after catch

**Working the middle:** Jefferson is looking to improve his yards after the catch, which primarily come via in-breaking routes like the quick slant. He has more yards after the catch on only screen and dig routes than on slants in his two seasons.

**Targets 29 • Receptions 20**  
**Long 19 • Touchdowns 1** (11)

## THE PATH TO 3,016 YARDS

In 33 games, the Vikings are 9-5 when Jefferson has 100-plus receiving yards, and 6-13 when he has fewer than 100.



\* Home games

## HE CAN CATCH IT ANYWHERE

Justin Jefferson's 196 career receptions show he can make a grab at any place on the field, running nearly any route.

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	Post	Slice
41 to 50 yards																	1		1	2
31 to 40																			2	
21 to 30																1				
11 to 20																				
1 to 10	1	2	2	20	2	1	1	19		11	9	5	17	8	11	9	4	2	1	10
Behind LOS				6				18		6		2	3			1				

# 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 cornerbacks following him.

Being shadowed by Ramsey told Jefferson he was one of the best. Now he wants to be the best.

“You can tell his mental part of his game is growing, confidence is growing,” Vikings cornerback Patrick Peterson said. “He got everything working in his favor right now. You can just tell he’s extremely focused on being the best receiver in the game.”

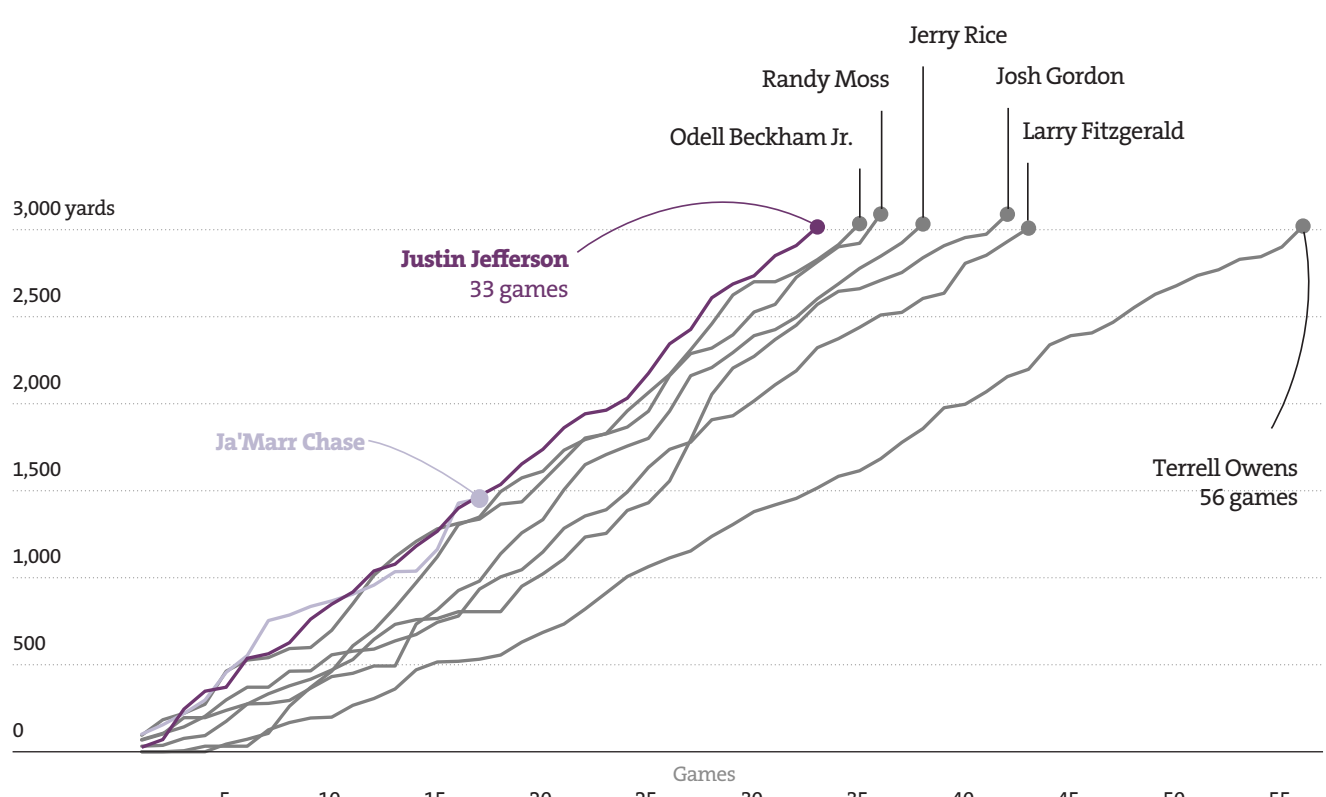
## Football intelligence

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

Justin was often nearby when Jordan reviewed Tigers game footage, pulling out

## 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.



Source: Star Tribune research

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discs that taught both Jefferson brothers about defensive coverages.

“It was a lot of tapes,” Justin said.

Playbook schooling from a quarterback's perspective set Jefferson on a rocketing trajectory, further boosted by sitting next to receiver Adam Thielen in the Vikings' film room. Coaches say Thielen

and Jefferson, who is nine years younger, frequently discuss strengths and weaknesses of individual defenders and coverages, allowing each to maximize every route.

“[Jefferson] understands leverage pretty well,” safety Harrison Smith said. “Where he runs straight ahead, Jefferson disguises intentions with minimal extra motion in his arms

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.

“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, knowing when he's going to set up a

defensive back to go where he wants to go and understanding what the coverage is telling you.”

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.’”

Impeccable body control is a born talent, according to Jefferson, who can twist mid-air to pluck away passes with 33-inch arms rivaled by few other 6-1 receivers.

Skyward contortions give 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 good for Jefferson on that play. He was supposed to run a stop-and-go route down the sideline, but Chargers corner Tevaughn Campbell was leaning toward the sideline. Jefferson said he improvised, stuttering only briefly before accelerating to beat him downfield. Campbell was still in Jefferson's hip pocket, forcing 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 the defensive back. When you see that with a young player, that really jumps out.”

“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.”

“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.”

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

and Cooper Kupp, who last year led the league in catches (145), receiving yards (1,947) and touchdowns (16) in the Rams' Super Bowl-winning 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 I enjoy.”

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 yards 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 team and just trying to get to that main goal.”

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