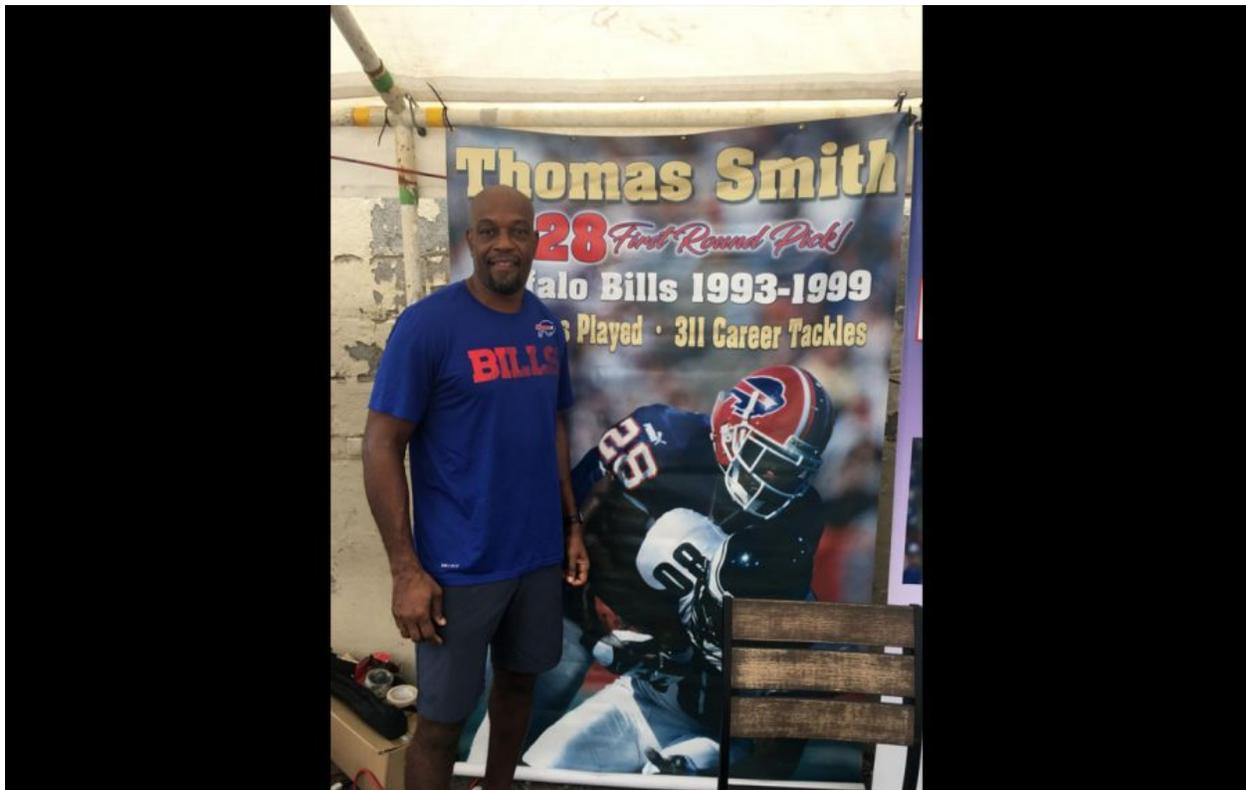


# Ex-Buffalo cornerback Thomas Smith: 'With Bills fans, the cheering never stops'



By [Erik Brady](#)

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HERNDON, Va. — Thomas Smith hears echoes of the crowds that cheered him at Rich Stadium whenever he goes to Jimmy’s Old Town Tavern, a Buffalo Bills bar that puts the Western New York into Northern Virginia.

“As an athlete you can never have enough of that adulation — that feeling that comes with people adoring you,” Smith says. “When you stop playing, you miss that cheering. But with Buffalo fans, the cheering never stops.”

Smith, the cornerback who was the Bills’ top draft choice in 1993, basked in some of that adulation of old last Sunday at Jimmy’s, where he signed autographs and took photos with fans who came to sample wings and weck and watch the Bills play the Tennessee Titans.

“Man, I love Buffalo fans,” Smith says. “They didn’t have the Buffalo Mafia yet when I was playing, but those fans were already obsessed with the Bills. And when I moved to Baltimore, I found out there are Bills bars everywhere.”

Smith, 48, is an area manager for Amazon in Baltimore, overseeing a team of 60 or so associates at a fulfillment center where they pack and ship products. He figures it’s a bit like being a football coach.

“I played for Marv Levy, and he was a great coach,” Smith says. “He was not a micromanager. He let his players play and that’s what I do — I let my people do their thing.”

Smith keeps a framed photo on the wall in his home office of a game-sealing interception that he made in 1996 against the Dallas Cowboys at what is now known as New Era Field. The Bills led Dallas, 10-7, and the Cowboys had the ball with just less than two minutes remaining.

Smith lined up against Deion Sanders because the Cowboys' shutdown corner was playing some wide receiver that day. Smith was excited to match wits with Sanders and Cowboys quarterback Troy Aikman, both future Hall of Famers.

"I wanted to show Deion I had defensive skills, too," Smith says, smiling at the memory. "He ran a post pattern and I was with him step for step. I saw the ball and just went up for it."

And came down with it. The cheering from 78,098 fans still rings in his ears. That was one of his six career interceptions. He says he dropped what could have been several more.

"I wish my hands were a little better," he says. "Would have made at least a couple Pro Bowls."

Beating the Cowboys was a big deal for him. They were among the teams he watched every Sunday with his father while growing up on the family farm in rural Gates, N.C., near the Virginia line.

"I visualized myself playing in the NFL while I was watching," he says. "I knew I could do it. I was the fastest guy in school. But no one recruited me."

He earned an academic scholarship to the University of North Carolina and walked on to the football team, where he was determined to earn an athletics scholarship because his academic grant was only guaranteed for one year.

"My father was a welder, my mother was a bus driver, and we farmed," Smith says. "We lived well for a country family, but we didn't have the money for college."

UNC football coach Mack Brown — who is back coaching the Tar Heels again — quickly recognized Smith’s talents and soon proffered that scholarship. By the time Smith graduated with a degree in business administration and management, he was a first-round talent who ran a 4.40 in the 40.

“My best was a 4.38,” Smith says. “I could run a 4.40 in dress shoes.”

He had a vertical jump of 41½ inches, which came in handy when he outleaped Sanders for that interception.

“I started dunking in the ninth grade,” Smith says. “I was a big Michael Jordan fan growing up. I met Michael as a kid a few times when he was at North Carolina because Sam Perkins is my cousin. His grandmother and my grandmother are twin sisters.”

Smith played for the Bills as a rookie in Super Bowl XXVIII and stayed in Buffalo through 1999. He played the 2000 season for the Chicago Bears and finished his career with a single season for the Colts in Indianapolis, where Perkins was playing for the Pacers.

Smith used some of the money he made in the NFL to try his hand at entrepreneurship. He says he has worked in real estate investment, transportation and property management, among other things. He reports he’s currently working on his MBA through Indiana University.

“I’ve had more failures than I’ve had successes, but I’m not complaining,” he says. “I’m doing well. I’m healthy. And I’m making money.”

Still, he has dreams of hitting it big someday. He keeps a graphic on his phone of entrepreneurs who struck gold after 40 — from Sam Walton, who founded Walmart at 44, to Harland Davis, better known as Colonel Sanders, who founded KFC at 62.

“Look at Jeff Bezos — he started Amazon with \$1 million in 1994,” Smith says. “Just think if I ran across him then. I had \$1 million in 1994, when I was playing for the Bills. He was looking for investors. Man, I could have started the company with Jeff.”

Now he works for Amazon, where one of his associates at the fulfillment center is a big Bills fan.

“Oh, yeah, one guy at work, Ray, goes to Bills games all the time,” Smith says. “He was so excited when he met me. ‘Thomas Smith! Oh my God!’ So we’ve got a Bills Mafia guy in the fulfillment center. That’s how it is. Bills fans, man, they’re everywhere.”

**Story topics:** [Bills alumni/ Tommy Smith](#)

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