

Williams' death shows pros vulnerable

DENVER (AP) - Broncos cornerback Darrent Williams was killed in a drive-by shooting early Monday after an argument at a nightclub, his limousine sprayed with bullets in downtown Denver.

Team spokesman Jim Saccomano said police called him about 3 a.m. from the scene and told him three people had been shot, and the 24-year-old Williams had been killed. His death came hours after the Denver Broncos were eliminated from the playoff race.

A little after 2 a.m., a white Hummer limousine was fired on from a vehicle that pulled up along its side, police spokesman Sonny Jackson said. As many as a dozen bullet holes were visible on the driver's side of the vehicle. One window was blown out and four others had bullet holes.

Three people in the limo were hit and taken to St. Anthony Central Hospital, where one man was pronounced dead, Jackson said. The other man and woman who were shot were not identified.

The Rocky Mountain News reported that wide receiver Javon Walker was one of the passengers but wasn't wounded. It was unclear how many people were in the limo.

Jackson said there was a dispute at a nightclub several blocks from the shooting where Williams and his group had attended a New Year's Eve party. He said the argument didn't specifically involve Williams, according to witnesses.

"Why this happened, we're not sure," Jackson said.

"There was some confrontation between a group of people in the vehicle and a group at the nightclub."

Police were searching for a white Suburban or Tahoe they suspect was involved. Jackson wouldn't identify any of the other passengers nor would he confirm whether any other Broncos players were in the vehicle at the time of the shooting, saying they were all witnesses.

The club identified by police advertised a New Year's Eve event celebrating the birthday of Denver Nuggets star Kenyon Martin. Nuggets officials didn't immediately respond to questions about whether any of their players were involved.

Saccomano said he spoke with coach Mike Shanahan and others in the organization. Hours earlier, the Broncos lost to San Francisco 26-23 in overtime.

"Complete shock. We're speechless. It takes words away," Saccomano said.

"It is a terrible tragedy," NFL spokesman Greg Aiello added. "We don't know all the details yet, but we are reaching out to the Broncos to offer our support."

The previous active NFL player to die was Thomas Herrion of San Francisco. He had a heart attack following an exhibition game in Denver on Aug. 20, 2005.

Champ Bailey was among the Broncos players and staff members who gathered at Denver Health Medical Center, where Williams' body

was taken.

"He had a big heart and a lot of courage," said Cedric Smith, assistant strength and conditioning coach.

"It's a tragedy, a complete tragedy. It's sickening."

Minnesota Vikings defensive tackle Kevin Williams played two seasons with Darrent Williams at Oklahoma State.

"It makes you want to stay home and not go out to places when you see things like that," Kevin Williams said. "You hate to see it. He was a hardworking kind of guy. He was a great guy."

Oklahoma State coach Mike Gundy called the death

a "tragic loss for the Broncos family, Oklahoma State University and anyone who knew Darrent Williams. It's a loss that goes far beyond the football field."

Williams teamed with Bailey to give Denver one of the NFL's top cornerback tandems. Williams finished the season with 88 tackles, 78 of them solo, and four interceptions.

"Anytime you lose a guy who was close to everyone, it hurts," punter Paul Ernster said. "From the get-go, he was like one of your good friends."

On Sunday against the 49ers, Williams had three

tackles and returned two punts for 50 yards before leaving the game with a shoulder injury late in the second half. After the game he said he planned to wait a few weeks before deciding if he needed an operation.

Williams, a second-round draft pick in 2005, made an immediate impact on the Broncos. He started nine times in his rookie season following a stellar college career.

Anthony Criss, Williams' high school football coach in Fort Worth, Texas, spoke with the cornerback often, and as recently as two weeks ago.

"When he was younger, he always gravitated to the wrong crowd," Criss said. "I remember he went to church and the minister was talking to him about needing to pray and stop hanging around with the wrong people, and he started straightening up and doing the right thing."

Williams matured at Oklahoma State, Criss said.

"I visited him his junior year, and he was grown," Criss said. "Everything was, 'Yes, sir. No, sir.'"

In December, Williams spoke of returning to his hometown this offseason to talk to youngsters about staying out of gangs.

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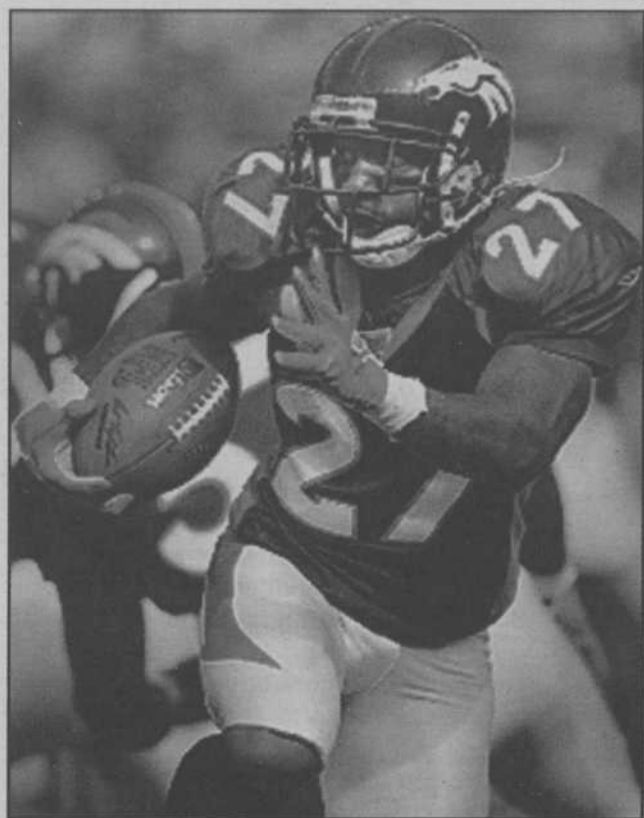
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Denver Broncos' cornerback Darrent Williams, seen here in a game, was shot to death after leaving a Denver club.

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