



SUIT, VERSACE;
SWEATER, MISSONI

Lightning **Quick**



SAN DIEGO CHARGERS
ROOKIE CORNERBACK
JASON VERRETT
CAN HANDLE
ANYTHING
THROWN HIS WAY.
BY JOHN MIHALY

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COAT, ROBERTO CAVALLI;
TOP, PUBLIC SCHOOL

Down by three with two minutes left to play, the Oakland Raiders took the chance they had been waiting for. Trailing 31-28, the Raiders were driving for the winning score. With the ball on

the Chargers' 45-yard-line, Raiders quarterback Derek Carr dropped back to pass and heaved it high and deep to his 6-foot-3 target, Brice Butler. The only thing standing in the way of Butler and the end zone was 5-foot-9 rookie cornerback Jason Verrett.

As the ball reached Butler's outstretched hands, Verrett rose skyward with Butler and wrestled the ball from his hands to preserve the Chargers' victory. "Teams are always going to want to take their shot," Verrett says, "especially with me being young and out there on that island. That just comes with the game."

The Chargers are glad they took their shot this year on Verrett and drafted him in the first round, 25th overall. In a league where the prototypical size of a star wide receiver is in the 6-foot-4 range, teams are looking for a physical presence to battle the Megatrons of the NFL. And while no scouts ever questioned Verrett's ability to cover the fastest receivers, there was enough doubt in his size to fear that he couldn't rise up to counter the jump balls that you regularly see in end zones across the NFL.

VERRETT SAYS THAT he can't remember who failed to pull the trigger on him in the draft. He doesn't even care. "I'm actually happy that I was picked when I was," he says. "My goal was to be drafted in the first round, whether I was pick tenth 25th, or whatever number."

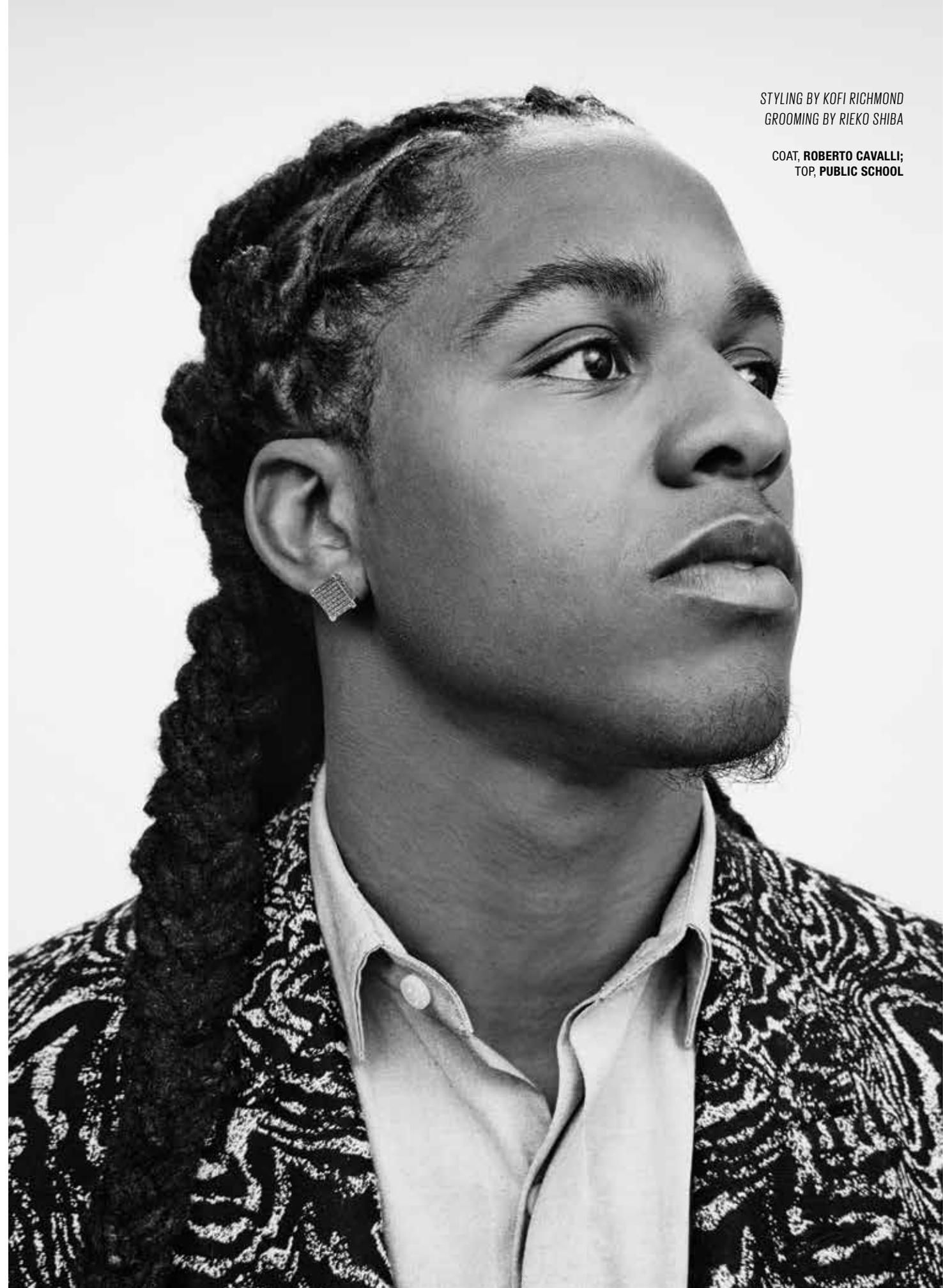
Growing up in Fairfield, California (located between San Francisco and Sacramento), Verrett attending Santa Rosa Junior College, where pro football seemed a world away. He grew up a diehard Raiders fan attending games even when his favorite team wasn't winning many of them. It was there he was able to closely watch his favorite player, Heisman Trophy-winning, Super Bowl Champion, All-Pro safety Charles Woodson.

After transferring to Texas Christian University, Verrett's

play began to earn him a national spotlight. Being drafted by the Chargers kept him in his home state. And he'd be playing the Raiders twice a season. It was fate that would have him secure his first interception, a game-saving play, in front of his more than 60 friends and family members at the game in Oakland. "After I made that play," Verrett says, "I honestly couldn't believe that it was not only going to seal the game, but that it was how I was going to get my first NFL interception. It will be one of the most memorable moments of my life." And as for putting the dagger into the silver and black team that permeated his youth? "I definitely enjoyed being a Raiders fan as a kid growing up but I think it was more fun preparing to beat them and to play in their stadium."

At the midway point of this NFL season, the Chargers are leading their division and have reenergized their fan base. Winning certainly helps to create a positive learning environment for a rookie, but it hasn't changed the mindset that Verrett brought with him into training camp. "My goal was to make a lot of plays. That's definitely one of my traits as an athlete," he says. "It's definitely something the team has lacked over the past couple of years. The addition of Brandon Flowers was a boost to secondary to go along with Eric Weddles, the leader of the defense. All along we've been mainly focused so far this season on keeping the wins going. We're hoping to get into the playoffs and then after that, the Super Bowl."

It's that mentality that allows Verrett to not allow the word "rookie" affect the way he plays his game. "I don't necessarily feel like a rookie. Of course I'm going to make mistakes. My main goal is just going out there and doing the things I know how to do well. I can't go out there and play like or rookie or think like one in this game because I have to play to the level of the veterans. I think my rookie days probably ended in camp. I pretty much have to be molded like a veteran from here on out." ■



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