

DEVONTA FREEMAN'S BIG YEAR

After a career-making season, the Falcons' star running back landed a monster contract. Can he lead his team to a Super Bowl victory in 2018?

Text by KEITH GORDON

Devonta Freeman is at a crossroads. In a league where careers average less than four years and contracts are seldom guaranteed, the main goal for most NFL players is simply to sign their first nonrookie contract. Most young players entering the league are presented with deals that are capped at a fraction of what elite veterans can earn.

Freeman was no exception: He earned around \$1.5 million over his first three seasons—far less than what the Atlanta Falcon was worth as one of the league's premier running backs. The 25-year-old racked up 3,648 yards from scrimmage and 29 touchdowns in those three seasons, earning him two Pro Bowl selections. Last season Freeman led his team to Super Bowl LI, before a historic collapse handed the game to Tom Brady's New England Patriots.

The Falcons, desperate to hang on to the burgeoning superstar in their backfield, presented him with a five-year, \$41.25 million extension that will make the former Florida State Seminole the second-highest-paid running back in the NFL, behind Pittsburgh's Le'Veon Bell. The deal includes \$22 million in guaranteed salary, with a \$15 million signing bonus. The fourth-year back has truly made it into the NFL's top echelon.

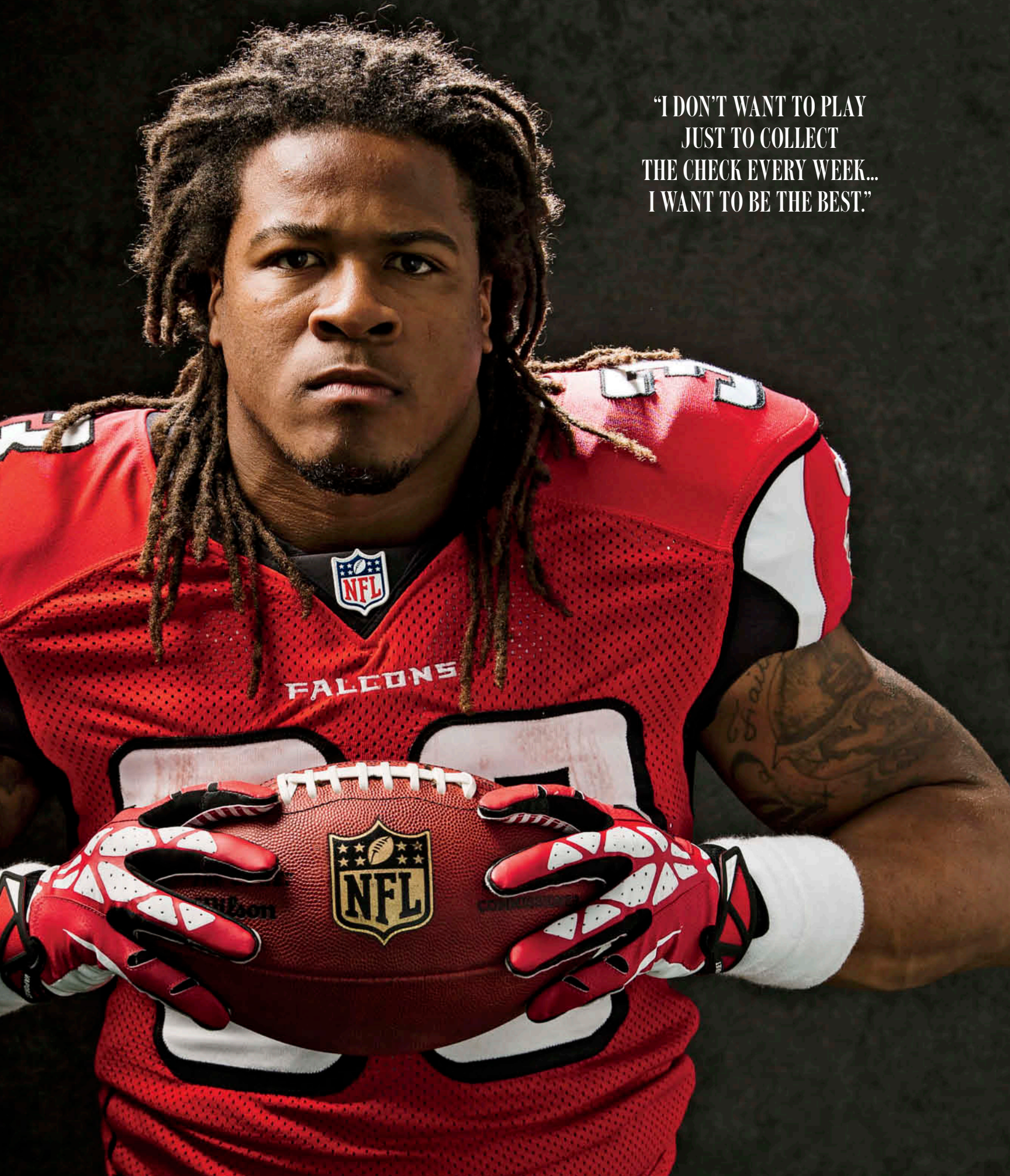
It would be understandable if the 5'8", 206-pound Freeman felt comfortable resting on his laurels. After all, players commonly experience a drop in production after signing a big contract, the thought being that they're less inclined to put their bodies in jeopardy on the field when they have financial security away from it. This is the challenge Freeman faces now. But based on what he told the *Sports Illustrated* site the MMQB back in 2015, motivation won't be a problem: "I don't want to be average. I don't want to play just to collect the check every week—actually, I don't even know how often we get paid because I don't pay attention to it. The point is, I love football and I want to be the best at football."

Freeman is now a rich man, but he comes from one of the poorest and most troubled areas in America: the Liberty City neighborhood in Miami. With six younger siblings, he started working at age 12 to help support his family, putting in shifts at one of the few thriving businesses in his impoverished neighborhood, the Richardson Funeral Home. Freeman has used his upbringing as both inspiration and a means of maintaining perspective.

When asked whether his contract negotiations were a distraction from his on-field duties,



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Freeman told NFL Network, “Where I come from, where I grew up at, I could be playing in the middle of the field...and a shootout might start. You know, that’s a distraction. Dodging a bullet or something like that, that’s a distraction...going to sleep every night thinking you might hear gunshots: That was the stuff that was distracting to me. This is football; ain’t no distraction.”

This season Freeman and the rest of the Falcons are focused on redeeming themselves after last year’s epic Super Bowl defeat. No team has lost the championship game and returned the next year since 1994, and countless teams have missed the playoffs entirely the following season due to what’s considered the “Super Bowl hangover.”

“It’s just one of those scars that you



remember forever, and you’ve just got to move on.” Freeman recently told SBNation. “You can’t be salty and negative about it for the rest of your life. You’ve just got to ask, How can I get better and get back there and take advantage of it? That’s all.”

Last season Freeman recorded more than 1,500 yards from scrimmage and 13 touchdowns. He’s as much of a threat catching the ball out of the backfield as he is running it between the tackles, a multifaceted talent for which defenses must constantly account. But he still feels there’s room to improve.

“Last year I left some runs out there,” he recently told the team’s website. “I feel like I haven’t even hit my prime yet. I’m a young running back in the league. I can get so much better.”

Freeman is one of the league’s top receivers out of the backfield, making him a nightmare for opposing linebackers to cover

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