

LONE STAR LEGEND

How the Dallas Cowboys' Ezekiel Elliott dominates the NFL

Text by KEITH GORDON



Ever since he was a teenager, all eyes have been on Ezekiel Elliott. After all, that's the inevitable result when you're a superstar running back who played first for Ohio State and now for one of the most high-profile football teams in the country, the Dallas Cowboys. It's also part of the territory when you dominate the NFL as Elliott has since his arrival in 2016, beginning with his monster rookie season where he averaged over 100 rushing yards a game and led the Cowboys to the playoffs.

He's followed that up by establishing himself as an elite all-purpose back for the league's most popular team, and in doing so, embraced the high expectations placed upon him when he was fourth overall in the 2016 draft, an atypical early selection for a running back. In a mere three years in the league, Zeke, as he's known by many football fans, has already led the league in rushing twice, proving himself as a dominant force right out of the gate.

Unlike many high draft picks, selected by struggling teams looking to rebuild their rosters, Elliott found himself in the perfect setting. Not only did the Cowboys find a star quarterback to play alongside him, un-

covering elite passer Dak Prescott in the fourth round of the draft, but they already had in place one of the best offensive lines in football, one of the most important factors in any running back's success. As a result, both Elliott and Prescott made the Pro Bowl as rookies, the first quarterback-running back teammates in modern NFL history to achieve such acclaim as first-year players.

"The offensive and defensive lines, that's where the game starts," the 24 year old Missouri native tells *Maxim*. "That's the heart of the team, that's what drives a team. Dak and I were very fortunate to be drafted to the Cowboys where we have the best offensive line in football. They make our jobs a lot easier. Those are guys we're close to, we love to spend a lot of time with, take trips with, and show them that we're very appreciative of what they do. They don't get the spotlight, they don't get a lot of glitz and glamour, or a lot of praise. They work hard, they're blue-collar."

Unlike the blue-collar linemen, star running backs are always in the media's focus, but Elliott has worked hard to avoid getting caught up in the noise thus far in his career.

"Being a top guy, you've just got to be able to silence that. A lot of it is just to get stories, just to get clicks. But what matters to me is what's going on with our team, what's going on in our locker room, and just winning ball games." And winning in Dallas means extra attention and exaltation, playing for the self-proclaimed "America's Team." "It's great being a Dallas Cowboy. The fanbase we have is the biggest in football, probably the biggest in sports. It's a dream come true."

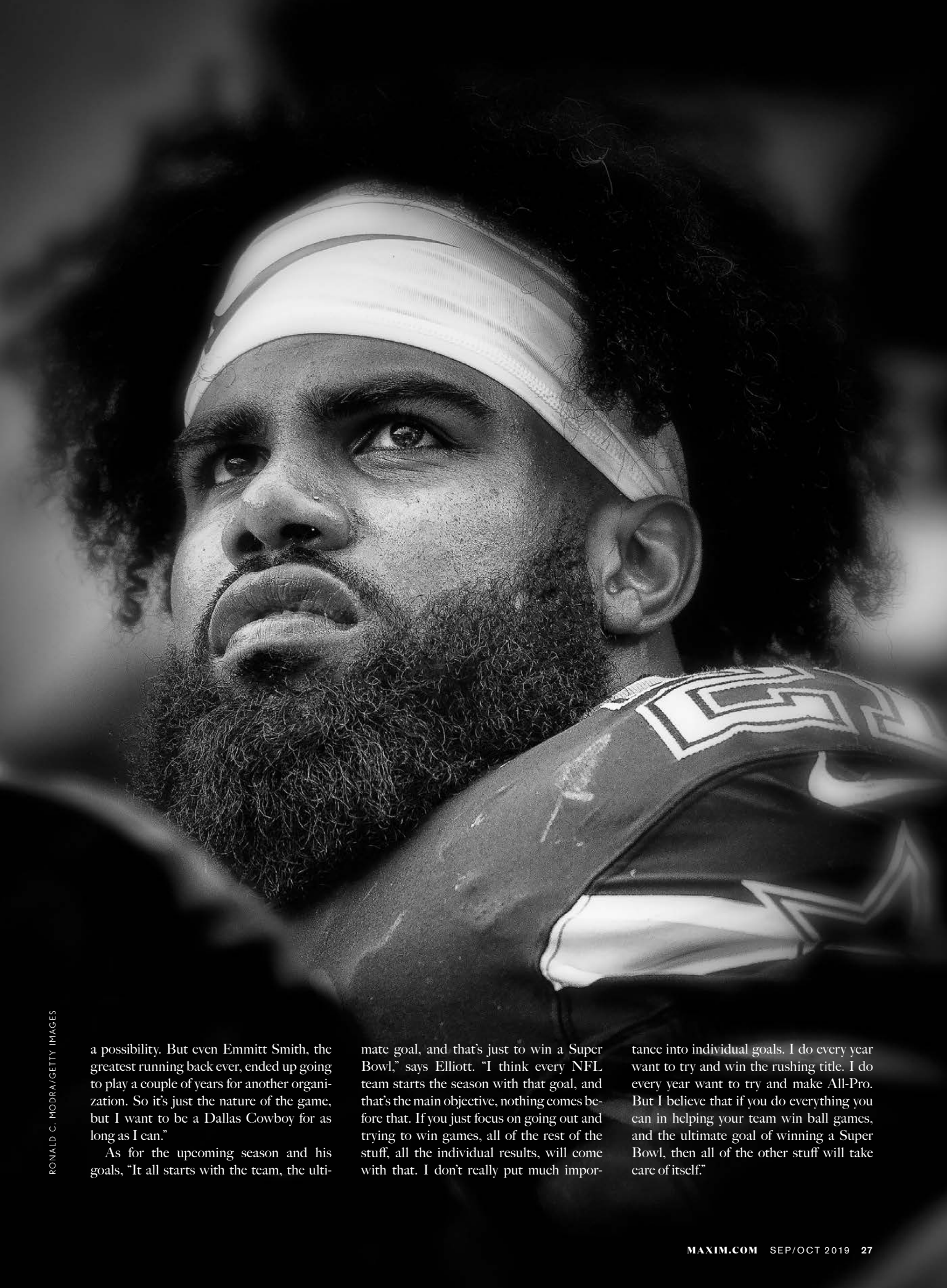
But even the most diehard fans can't imagine the physical sacrifices Elliott must make. The nature of the running back position, crashing into an opposing defense 25 or 30 times a game, takes a toll on even the most special athletes, which is why the routine and recovery of game weeks is so vital for Elliott and his teammates. It also takes a special mindset to play the position at a high level. "As a running back, especially a physical running back like I try to be, I like to bring the contact to them before they bring it to me," Elliott proudly claims. "You can't hate contact and be a running back, you've got to be physical."

The result of this physical battle, and attrition, means each game week during the season is simply an attempt to get one's body as close to healthy as possible, although "you're only going to be 100% at the beginning of training camp because once training camp starts, you're going to get nicked up," he notes.

As Elliott continues to establish himself as one of the NFL's transcendent stars, the business side of the league is inevitably coming into prominence, as running backs have trended downwards in value and financial commitments in the modern NFL; teams realize the wear-and-tear on backs adds up quickly, and there's been a narrative in the league that decent ones can be had at a discount.

But Elliott believes this is finally swinging back in favor of elite backs such as himself. "Until the very recent deal with Todd Gurley [four years, \$60 million], I think there was an undervalue of the running back," claims Elliott. "But with guys like Gurley getting drafted so high, then me, and now guys like Saquon [Barkley] getting drafted in the first round, I think we've done a great job of bringing back the value of the position, showing the importance of the running back."

But the back has made it clear that while he understands the league is a business, he'd love to spend his entire career wearing the Cowboys' star on his helmet. "I love playing for the Dallas Cowboys, I love the organization, my teammates. I do want to be a Cowboy for the rest of my life and hopefully that's



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a possibility. But even Emmitt Smith, the greatest running back ever, ended up going to play a couple of years for another organization. So it's just the nature of the game, but I want to be a Dallas Cowboy for as long as I can."

As for the upcoming season and his goals, "It all starts with the team, the ulti-

mate goal, and that's just to win a Super Bowl," says Elliott. "I think every NFL team starts the season with that goal, and that's the main objective, nothing comes before that. If you just focus on going out and trying to win games, all of the rest of the stuff, all the individual results, will come with that. I don't really put much impor-

tance into individual goals. I do every year want to try and win the rushing title. I do every year want to try and make All-Pro. But I believe that if you do everything you can in helping your team win ball games, and the ultimate goal of winning a Super Bowl, then all of the other stuff will take care of itself."