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SAN DIEGO — Six years ago, a gunman walked into an apartment courtyard in Long Beach, Calif., and opened fire through an open door, spraying a round of bullets into a living room. About 20 children were inside celebrating at a Halloween party with their families.

When Mark Seay heard the shots, he threw himself on top of his 3-year-old niece, Tashawnda. A bullet penetrated his buttocks and traveled to his abdomen, through his liver, kidney and lung, before settling near his heart. During surgery, the doctors removed one kidney but were unable to remove the bullet.

Seay was the only person injured in the incident, which was listed as a random shooting by the Long Beach police. Seay recovered and against doctors' recommendations continued his college football career at Long Beach State and is now a starting wide receiver for the surprising San Diego Chargers (4-0).

"I never feel safe anymore," said Seay, 27, who doesn't like to talk about the shooting. "I look and watch around me and pray that God will watch over me."

At a slight 6 feet, 180 pounds, Seay (pronounced SAY) continues to be an improbable yet integral part of a fleet receiving corps that lost its star, Anthony Miller, to free agency during the off season.

"We don't have a bunch of stars," said Seay, who was acquired as a free agent from the San Francisco 49ers in 1993. "So you don't have to worry about getting the ball. Our offense is wide-open. You never know who that guy is going to be. It could be Sean Jefferson having 100 yards one week or Tony Martin the next week. And then me."

Seay's humility goes a long way in an organization that had 23 players eligible to become free agents last February and seemed destined never to regain the level in 1992, when they went 11-5. Losing Miller to the

Broncos and trading Marion Butts, their leading rusher, had observers deriding the team before the season even began. Seay was the beginning of the puzzle that no one but Coach Bobby Ross and General Manager Bobby Beathard understood.

"Mark is going to give everything he has," said Beathard. "He uses it all. He works a little harder to become better each day. And he'll get better by experience the more he plays. He dropped a ball in each of the first two games, but then came back and makes the big play."

Seay, who played in just one game in 1993, won over Ross during the

Six years after losing a kidney, Seay becomes an integral Charger.

exhibition season, making 7 catches for a 10.9-yard average and 2 touchdowns.

"I'm deceptive with my speed," Seay said. "I can run a 4.6, but you'll never know where I'm going until the ball is in the air."

Without million-dollar names to throw to, quarterback Stan Humphries, the National Football League's highest-rated passer, doesn't look for a name but for anyone who can get open. So far, Seay has 14 receptions — tied for the team lead with **Ronnie Harmon** — for 207 yards, a 14.8-yard average and 3 touchdowns. It is a notable accomplishment for someone who had never caught a regular-season pass as a Charger.

"I didn't know how our receivers would play," said Ross. "You don't know what a young man would do in a game. The burden of being a starter and then a full-time player is an entirely different responsibility. But it didn't surprise me that they could

do it."

Seay has been blessed with playing for another coach who believed in his ability. George Allen, the former coach of the Washington Redskins who died in 1991, worked his legendary football passion one last time as the head coach of Long Beach State in 1990-91.

When Long Beach school officials told Seay he could not play football because he lost a kidney, Seay filed a civil suit. He was waiting for a jury trial when Allen interceded. Allen, also the athletic director, was able to persuade the school's administration to reinstate Seay after he recovered from the shooting.

"He cut through the red tape and got me back," Seay said. "He said, 'If that's what you want to do, you should have the right to live your life like you always have. Heck, I've played guys with one eye.' He told me, 'If there's one thing I hate, it's people making decisions for athletes.'"

When Beathard gave Seay another chance to continue to play in the N.F.L., Seay never hesitated, even though he had to sign a waiver that took all responsibility away from the Chargers if an injury happened on the playing field.

Seay wears a protective pad over his kidney, designed by the Chargers' training staff.

"We're all prepared," said Dr. Paul Black, the team's physician. "So is Mark. But every time he goes over the middle to catch a pass or jumps in the air and gets hit from behind, I'm a little concerned."

Only four games into the season, it is Seay who has already won the bigger battle. His singular concern is to see how fast he can run and how well he can catch a pass. And someday, he hopes that people will look at him as Seay, the rising N.F.L. rising star, rather than the Seay, the shooting survivor.

"Maybe somebody will be a star," said Beathard of the group he has assembled. "Someday."