



Hypolite long shot worth rooting for

By Scott Fowler McClatchy Newspapers
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SPARTANBURG, S.C. -- Way down on the Carolina Panthers' depth chart, past the starters and the second-teamers, there's a large section that might as well be labeled "Could Be Fired At Any Moment."

George Hypolite -- an undrafted rookie defensive tackle -- sits smack in the middle of that section.

"I'm at the bottom of the totem pole," Hypolite says.

I wish Hypolite would climb a couple of notches on that totem pole. He's someone to root for -- a football player with undergraduate degrees in both ethnic and women's studies and a bent toward volunteerism.

The first time I heard Hypolite talk he used the word "sociopolitical" correctly -- not once, but twice. And it wasn't in a show-offy way, it was just while he answered questions about his double major.

I wondered what other seven-syllable words I'd ever heard uttered by an athlete. All I could come up with is "ineligibility" and "unreliability," neither of which has ever been a problem for Hypolite.

The guy had a 3.58 GPA at Colorado and made a slew of all-academic teams. But in the NFL, your 40 time matters a lot more than your GPA.

Hypolite wasn't invited to the NFL scouting combine. He wasn't drafted in April, either.

Jacksonville signed Hypolite an hour after the draft and kept him for three months before giving everyone two weeks off.

Then another defensive tackle came available the Jaguars wanted more. Hypolite was about to go on vacation -- the Jaguars told him to make it a loooooong one.

"I was suddenly informed that my services were no longer needed," Hypolite says. "And of course I'm on the cusp here, too."

Yet you seem calm, I say.

"Maybe on the outside," he says. "On the inside, my heart is racing like a 3-year-old child who just had their rattle stolen from them and doesn't know if he's ever going to get it back."

At 299 pounds, Hypolite is smaller than many defensive tackles in the NFL. A good pass rusher at Colorado, he was second-team All-Big 12. He also gained acclaim for volunteering more than 300 hours for two straight summers, mostly preparing food for homebound AIDS patients and working at a shelter for battered women.

Eight days after the Jaguars cut him, the Panthers called following Maake Kemoeatu's season-ending injury. They didn't want Hypolite to start -- they just wanted some depth.

Signing a third-team defensive tackle isn't the sort of decision coach John Fox debates for days.

"I don't know that I had a lot to do with that one," Fox said. "Our scouts keep a ready list at every position, and (Hypolite) was next on the hit parade."

How long will this parade last? Hypolite wonders.

"I don't know if this is going to be my shot," Hypolite says. "I don't know if this is going to be the last time I put on an NFL uniform."

Let's hope it isn't. Besides being a decent player, Hypolite is smart, funny and understands there's a world outside football. Surely there's room for him somewhere in the NFL.

I tell him as our interview concludes that I plan to publish a column on him within a few days.

"Sounds good," Hypolite says. "Hopefully I'm still around."



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