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Wheatley tries to be a sharper corner

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If you're Terrence Wheatley, the hardest part is that you're retracing your footsteps.

Two games into his second preseason as a Patriot, he's not at all the cornerback he wants to be, and any progress he makes can feel like ground he already covered.

He was a rookie a year ago. A second-round pick who defined his approach in two words: "speed kills." With that alone, it seemed like he instantly addressed one of the Patriots' top priorities. He had 4.37 speed in the 40-yard dash plus a 36 1/2-inch vertical leap, and over the course of his career at Colorado, he had developed an addiction to picking off passes.

With the Patriots losing two of their top three corners to free agency, he was immediately thrown into the thick of a heated battle at the position, and from the start he showed a corner's confidence. Wearing the jersey number of departed Pro Bowler Asante Samuel instantly raised eyebrows, and his response was simple: "The player makes the number."

Making the player turned out to be a process. If there was a question about Wheatley, it was his wrist. He practically played one-handed for Colorado - a sign of toughness to his college coaches, a red flag for skeptics, but a nonfactor to Wheatley.

He ultimately made his first NFL start under ready-or-not circumstances in Week 9 against Indianapolis. Thanks to a wrist injury in the second quarter, that start would also be the end of his season. It was like knocking over a house of cards.

"This is a game of momentum and confidence," Wheatley said. "So when you start to build some confidence and start playing well and you do have a setback, it's like pressing the reset button. You've got to start over again. That's the process, and hopefully it doesn't take forever."

He seems like he's starting from scratch this preseason, only with bread crumbs to remind him of the plays he wants to make and the mistakes he doesn't want to make. But that doesn't necessarily make it easier.

After the Patriots' 7-6 exhibition loss to Cincinnati last Thursday, he acknowledged that he has acres of improvement to make. He was beaten for the only touchdown of the night, and he was a bit player in Chad Ochocinco's carnival, missing a tackle on an out route that turned into a big play.

He gave himself a grade between a D and an F for the performance.

"I think it's a work in progress," Wheatley said. "After getting hurt last year and missing half the season, you're kind of still a rookie, yet not a rookie. So you're still out there learning."

"But I'm just taking it day by day. I need to go out there and just feel comfortable, and that takes time."

Dealing with a bum wrist is something he's almost become accustomed to.

"It doesn't affect me at all," he said. "It was a long process rehabbing and stuff like that. I missed a lot of time. But when I'm out there playing, I really don't notice. I use both hands the same."

Being in a battle for time at corner is familiar, too. A year ago, he and Jonathan Wilhite were newcomers fighting for time behind Deltha O'Neal and Ellis Hobbs. Now, Wheatley sits behind import Shawn Springs on the depth chart.

"We can all play back there," Wheatley said. "We've got playmakers back there. We've just got to put ourselves in a position to use our athletic ability."

The ostensible approach is that the competition will make everyone involved better, but for a player who runs on speed, things may come slowly.

"You've kind of got to have that mentality to get better," Wheatley said. "You don't want to assume you've just arrived. Nobody's arrived. You want to go out there and find a way to get better every day.

"You've got to be able to go out there every day, and if you have a good day, erase it because it's another day, and if it's a bad day, it's the same thing. That's the mentality you have to have."

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