



This is Ted Johnson's Brain

A former star at the University of Colorado and celebrated NFL linebacker gave himself to football—only to find at the end of his career that he'd lost his mind. Now, at age 36, he's trying to put the pieces of his broken life back together.

By Robert Sanchez | Photograph by Joe Hancock

Ted Johnson is flat on the turf of Boulder's Folsom Field.

From a bleacher seat on the 35-yard line, Ted Johnson Sr. had seen his son run headlong into a University of Miami running back on that warm, fall afternoon in 1993 and disappear into a tangle of pads and helmets as Johnson's University of Colorado teammates piled on. Now, Ted Senior strains his eyes and waits for his namesake to pop back up. Where are you, Junior? Ted Senior repeats quietly to himself. C'mon, Junior. C'mon.

The players peel themselves off the heap slowly, pulling their bodies, one by one, off the green turf, until they are all standing—every one of them, except number 46.

Johnson's CU teammates have formed a protective barrier by the time a trainer arrives at the linebacker's side. The man kneels down and looks closely at Johnson's face: his boyish, upturned nose and strong, fierce features. Johnson is unconscious, but he's hardly still, and the man almost instantly realizes that he's choking on something. The trainer opens Johnson's mouth and pulls his tongue from his throat.

In all the football games Johnson had played—from high school up to this point as a junior at CU—never once did he need to be carried off the field. It was a simple, almost trivial, fact, but one from which Johnson derived a great deal of pride. While others fell and rolled on the field in pain, Johnson always got up, went back to the huddle, and prepared for his next hit. Not this time, not today.

As he cranes his neck to get a better view of the field, Ted Senior sees, finally, that his son is sitting up, then standing, then is helped off the field. He looks sick, glassy-eyed, empty. Players clear a path to the bench where Johnson sits, face in his hands.

All at once, the stadium sounds began to crystallize in the young man's head: the roaring crowd, the barking coaches, and a voice calling to him from the railing above the Buffaloes

bench.

"Junior! Junior!" his father yells. "Are you OK?"

Johnson turns his head and tries to focus his eyes. His face is long and worn.

"Yeah, Dad," he says. "I'm OK."

"Bro, where's my car?"

Johnson asked me last fall after lunch at a central Boston sandwich shop. "I thought I parked it right here."

I shrugged. Johnson pushed the horn button on his keychain and listened for his Range Rover. Nothing.

"It's gotta be somewhere, bro, we parked right here," he said in his surfer-dude drawl. Johnson slumped his enormous shoulders and again pushed the button. "Bro, I feel like I'm going crazy. But you don't remember where we parked, either, so maybe that means I'm not losing it. Right?"

We walked the street, searching for the SUV. Johnson's forehead furrowed. He pushed the button again and again with no response—until, finally, the Range Rover's horn sounded. A look of relief washed across Johnson's face. "See," he said with a smile, pointing to his skull, "not losing it."

It was one of my first meetings with Johnson, who was less than two months out of Spaulding Rehabilitation Hospital in Boston. In August of last year, the 36-year-old former CU All-American and star NFL linebacker had checked himself into the center at the urging of his doctor, Heechin Chae, an expert on pain and rehabilitation medicine. Since retiring from the NFL three years earlier, Johnson's life—or perhaps, more precisely, his mind—had gone completely to hell.

His list of troubles was ever-growing, and he ticked them off with the sort of matter of factness that one might use to recount a grocery list. He was divorced. Johnson had been addicted to amphetamines. And he suffered from debilitating headaches, depression, and fatigue, the result, he says, of dozens of concussions during a 10-year career as the middle linebacker for the New England Patriots.

For much of his retirement up to this point, he had spent his time inside Room 801 of the Ritz-Carlton residences and in a rented two-story townhouse in Boston, where he locked the door, closed the blinds, and rarely left his bed unless he needed to eat, use the bathroom, or collect one of the four prescriptions he'd become dependent upon. His once robust list of friends had dwindled—folks simply stopped calling because Johnson stopped answering. It was a painful fall from grace for a man who once seemed in the center of it all, with a wife and kids and a job that every American boy who'd ever strapped on a helmet longed to have.

Since leaving Spaulding, which was behind the townhouse where he'd sequestered himself for the previous year, Johnson had stopped using Concerta and Provigil (both stimulants), started an exercise regimen, and had been assigned to a psychologist who'd given Johnson a road map that would, hopefully, guide him back to some semblance of normality.

The idea of having to reattach training wheels to his life was embarrassing for Johnson. At CU, he'd grown from a shy, self-conscious California high schooler into one of the most important cogs in a defense that helped the Buffs to 34 wins and four bowl-game appearances. During his four years as a starter, from 1991 to 1994, Johnson developed into a concrete block of a kid: 6-foot-4 and 240 pounds of pure linebacker who had the unique talent of dispatching offensive linemen 70 pounds heavier and then brutally nailing running backs. The New England Patriots took him in the second round of the 1995 NFL draft. At 22, Johnson became a millionaire overnight.

During a decade with New England, Johnson helped the Patriots to four Super Bowls, three of which they won, and was a defensive captain for three seasons. Over a career that spanned 125 regular-season games, he built a reputation as one of the league's most ferocious run-stoppers. Johnson shattered helmets and bones; he hit running backs so hard that, even surrounded by thousands of raucous fans, the players could hear the runners whimper upon contact. "He looked like a warrior coming off the field," former Patriots linebacker Larry Izzo once remembered of his teammate, "blood splattered on his pants."

But with each hit, Johnson may have been killing himself. "Sometimes I wish Junior would have just blown his knees out and couldn't walk," Ted Johnson Sr. told me earlier this year. "But his brain? Oh boy."

Since 2002, at least five NFL players have committed suicide or died following years of rapidly deteriorating mental health. Dozens, perhaps hundreds, of others have suffered quietly, victims of a particularly sinister trauma called post-concussion syndrome (PCS). In its most serious form, PCS can lead to Alzheimer's disease, dementia, and early death. When a

player absorbs a blow to the head, the sloshing of the brain and subsequent banging against the interior skull can tear blood vessels, twist the brain stem, and compress tissue. With each successive concussion, the chance for a more devastating concussion—and the long-term effects that come with it—multiplies massively.

Although the exact number of professional football players who suffer concussions during a given season is up for debate—the NFL only recently created rules on how to address the injury—researchers at the University of North Carolina reported in 2006 that retired players faced a 37 percent higher risk of Alzheimer's disease than other males of the same age. Retired players with three or more concussions also had a five times greater chance of being diagnosed with mild cognitive impairment and a threefold greater prevalence of significant memory problems, compared to players without a concussion history.

The most noteworthy case of PCS is that of Mike Webster, who died of a heart attack in 2002. A Hall of Fame center with four Super Bowl-champion Pittsburgh Steelers teams, Webster, nicknamed "Iron Mike," played nearly two decades in the NFL, after which he literally lost his mind.

After his retirement in 1990, Webster wasted millions of dollars on ill-advised investments, got divorced, and lived out of his black Chevrolet truck with a garbage bag taped over a broken window. His diet consisted mostly of potato chips and dry cereal, and those who saw him in his final years said he suffered severe headaches, showed signs of dementia, and had the glassy-eyed look of a boxer who had taken too many shots to the head; he used a stun-gun to shock himself into unconsciousness. By his 50th birthday, he was dead.

Bennet Omalu, then a neuropathologist at the Allegheny County (Pennsylvania) medical examiner's office, examined Webster's brain after he died. Omalu was shocked at the microscopic red flecks—a telltale sign of irreversible damage. Webster's brain was shredded from repeated blows to his head over the years.

Webster wasn't the only NFL vet who had serious health issues after retirement. In 2005, former Pittsburgh Steelers offensive lineman Terry Long killed himself after a 15-year retirement marked by bouts of significant depression. In 2006, Omalu studied the brain of Andre Waters, a 44-year-old former hard-hitting Philadelphia Eagles safety who shot himself 11 years after his retirement. Waters suffered at least 15 concussions during his 12-year career. After viewing Waters' brain, Omalu said the former football player would have been "incapacitated" had he lived 15 more years because of the damage to his brain. In 2007, Omalu examined the brain of Justin Strzelczyk, a 36-year-old former Pittsburgh Steelers offensive lineman who died three years earlier during a high-speed police chase. Omalu saw

four red splotches in the brain. And last year, Boston University doctors discovered signs of "chronic traumatic encephalopathy"—loosely known as "punch-drunk syndrome"—in former Houston Oilers and Miami Dolphins linebacker John Grimsley, 45, who accidentally shot himself and died earlier in the year. (Johnson has said that he will donate his brain to Boston University for research upon his death.)

In 2007—a few months after the New York Times and Boston Globe printed stories about Ted Johnson's head injuries, in particular two concussions he suffered within days of each other in 2002 from which Johnson said he had never fully recovered—I attended the National Concussion Summit in Marina del Rey, California. The event was among the first to address concussions in sports, particularly in the NFL, where the league was mounting a full-throated refutation of Omalu's findings. Omalu and other doctors who supported his research, the NFL argued, had cherry-picked a handful of players, massaged statistics, and passed off the worst-case scenario as typical of the average football player. Omalu defended his work, saying the league had failed to protect its most valuable assets in favor of television contracts and ticket sales. NFL officials were invited to the conference, but none attended. The league now is conducting its own study, which NFL officials say will "determine if there are any long-term effects of concussion in NFL athletes." The findings, the league has said, likely will be published next year.

Omalu spoke at the Concussion Summit. He had Webster's postmortem photo stored on his laptop, and he projected it onto a large screen at the front of the room. The Hall of Famer's thinning hair was tousled; his head and neck rested on a Styrofoam brace. There was a slight upturn in the corners of Webster's lips, as if he were smiling. Omalu left the photo on the screen for several moments. Dozens of us stared at it. The room was silent, perhaps because we could not believe what we were seeing—or maybe because of what Webster seemed to be telling us. After spending his last decade trapped in a tortured mind, Iron Mike looked relieved to be gone.

Ted Johnson was on the ground—again. On a muggy Saturday night in August 2002, the New England Patriots were playing the New York Giants at the Meadowlands in a meaningless preseason game. One of the Giants' running backs, Sean Bennett, caught a ball in the flat, and Johnson did what he'd done a thousand times before: He charged, then lunged. His helmet hit Bennett's thigh, taking him down. Everything went foggy after that. Almost immediately, trainers diagnosed Johnson with a concussion.

But four days later, Johnson returned to the Patriots' training camp. He had something to

prove that summer: A few months earlier, the Patriots, his second family, had offered him to the Houston Texans. After the Texans passed, Johnson threatened to hold out. Instead, he decided to take a pay cut to stay with New England—then learned, when he arrived at summer camp, that he had lost his starting slot. All of which explained the brutal hit on Bennett in the exhibition game: Johnson wanted to show the team that he still had it, that he was still ready to sacrifice for the team.

The team, however, appeared ready to sacrifice Johnson. A few days after Johnson had his brain scrambled, coach Bill Belichick had the linebacker in full-contact practice drills. On his first play back, Johnson hit a fullback. His head snapped back, and a sensation cascaded from the top of his skull to the bottom of his toes. Its warmth was comforting and sickening, like a blanket of fire. Johnson's mind slowed; he felt woozy. It was his second concussion in less than a week. Despite lingering grogginess that season, Johnson slowly worked his way back and finished second on the team in tackles.

But Johnson continued to be lethargic, dizzy, and confused, and by the time the 2004 season began, he had started taking Adderall, which is usually prescribed for children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and patients with narcolepsy. Adderall countered the lingering effects of the concussions; it quieted Johnson's mind and allowed him to focus on subtle offensive shifts, to direct the human traffic flashing before his eyes. Johnson ripped off one of his most productive seasons, starting 15 games and finishing third on the team in tackles. The Patriots won their third Super Bowl, beating the Philadelphia Eagles 24-21.

A few months later, in the spring of 2005, Johnson was driving to a movie. In the quiet of the vehicle, Johnson thought about the upcoming training camp. He remembered the warm sensation that accompanied the concussions, and how that first tackle in practice surely would bring the feeling. The idea of another hit sickened him. Johnson turned to his wife, Jackie, whom he'd met a few years earlier at a party, and said, simply: "I'm done."

Ted Johnson Jr. was born in 1972, the only son of Ted Senior and Patrice Johnson, a striking brunette who'd grown up poor in Iowa and was on her fourth marriage. As a boy in Houston, Ted Junior used to watch Oilers games at the old Astrodome, while his father, Ted Senior, extolled the virtues of Earl Campbell, the Oilers' star running back. Father and son marveled at Campbell's power and skill, the way he'd run up on a guy and mow him down, like he was a linebacker playing offense. Ted Senior liked to watch the runs. Ted Junior liked to watch Campbell limp back to the huddle and smash someone in the face on the next play.

Johnson's half sister, Elyse, was 13 years older and moved out when she went to college (she eventually became an Oilers cheerleader). In 1979, Patrice and Ted Senior divorced. Mom

kept the house and took six-year-old Junior.

Patrice and Ted moved around for the next few years, first to Iowa, then to Carlsbad, California, and finally settled in Vista, California, where they lived in a tract-style house not far from the beach.

For much of her life, Johnson's mom did not have a regular job, though she flipped houses for a time while living in Southern California. Slim, six feet tall, and beautiful, she instead relied on the men who bought her clothes and jewelry. The men visited often and sometimes stayed the night. When they didn't, sometimes she disappeared to faraway places, one time Las Vegas, the next some exotic island. Ted was shuttled to friends' homes, to couches and bedroom floors, where he lay awake at night, worried about whether his mother was going to pick him up the next morning. "Ted had a beautiful home, he had food, he had everything," Patrice told me. "Do I wish things would have been different? Yes, some things."

If a rift had developed in Johnson's relationship with his mother, he also reaped the benefits of being related to her. He'd inherited the size of his maternal grandfather—a 6-foot-4, 350-pound bear of a man—and his mother's All-American looks. One night in 1984, one of Patrice Johnson's friends, a football coach, was at the house and called Ted to his side. He put his hands around the kid's wrists. Had the boy ever considered playing football?

Johnson joined the Carlsbad High School team that fall as a tight end. At a time when most boys were getting their first razors, Johnson was 6-foot-1 and 200 pounds. He dreamed of leaving his mother's house and over the years made local weight rooms his second home. "The process of building his body was an escape," his sister Elyse says now. "He could focus on something else. He worked hard to make his way out."

Former Colorado head coach Bill McCartney, whose recruiters first saw Johnson in 1990, saw him as the total package. "Looking at him, you could see that he was going to grow into his size," McCartney says. "I mean, in regular clothes he looked like a football player." Four schools—including CU—sent recruiters to the Johnson home. Colorado offered Johnson a scholarship, and he accepted immediately. Less than a month later, CU won its first football national championship. Now emboldened and with a destination, he graduated high school, moved out of his mother's house, and headed to Boulder.

"I was pretty overwhelmed," Johnson says of his arrival at college. Even when he blew up a runner, smashed a tight end coming through the middle, Johnson lamented that he had been too slow, that his technique was off, that anyone could have made the same play. "Nothing was ever good enough. Ted was emotionally damaged from the relationship he had with his

mother," says Johnson's former linebacker coach, Brian Cabral. "In my coaching career, he's probably the most insecure player I've ever met."

Johnson, however, would find his calling in fall practices with "stun and separate," a technique that Cabral had mastered while winning a Super Bowl with Chicago in the mid-1980s. Under Cabral's tutelage, Johnson learned to drop larger offensive players with a single hit: forehead to the chinstrap, grab the breastplate of the shoulder pads and shove, a viciously lethal movement that cleared the way into the backfield.

The technique opened Johnson's world. "He was a beast," Cabral said one afternoon this past winter in an office overlooking the Folsom Field turf. On Cabral's wall were photos of his former linebackers, guys who'd won national awards, who went onto glory on fields in Detroit and Oakland and Foxboro, Massachusetts. He leaned back in his chair. "It was like he was created to do that one thing," he told me. "You know—" Cabral suddenly stopped, and the room went silent. For nearly a minute, Cabral had a pained look on his face. "You know," he said in a small voice, his right index finger pressed to his lips, "sometimes I wonder if [stun and separate] isn't to blame for this mess. I wonder sometimes if I didn't help do this to him."

After he retired from the NFL, Johnson still felt dizzy and fatigued. His short-term memory was shot. He continued to take Adderall. If, during his pro days, he had been using the drug to get up for the next play, he now was abusing it to get up in the morning. Johnson visited five different doctors, making sure the symptoms he described to them closely matched those of ADHD. Each prescribed Adderall as a remedy. "I became a pretty effective liar," Johnson recalls. "I just had to remember what story I told to what doctor; who was giving me 50 milligrams, who was giving me 75. As long as I kept the stories straight...." At one point, his now ex-wife, Jackie, remembers, Johnson consumed a month's worth of pills in two days.

He got a job as a football analyst at a local television station shortly after his retirement, but he had to quit because the lights were too bright and gave him headaches and made him feel dizzy. Worried that his addiction had gotten out of control, in 2005 Johnson checked himself into the first of three rehabilitation centers, where he planned to kick the pills and get answers to the headaches and lethargy that were plaguing him. Treatments, including 12-step addiction programs, and diagnostics, such as an inconclusive brain scan, failed, leaving Johnson feeling depressed and agitated.

In February 2006, Johnson entered McLean Hospital, 10 miles west of Boston. For two weeks, Johnson shuffled from one darkened room to another and met a host of doctors and therapists each day, but, still, he didn't get any answers.

A few months after leaving McLean, Johnson and his wife argued about the prescriptions he was taking. According to police records, Johnson twisted Jackie's arm behind her back and pushed her into a bookcase. She fought back, punching and scratching him. She called the cops, who showed up at the couple's home. The two were arrested, but the charges were dropped when the pair declined to testify against each other.

Regardless of the legal outcome, the damage was done. The pair divorced late in 2006; Jackie took the kids—their oldest, Samantha, was two; their son, Charlie, was less than a year old—and Johnson moved into the Ritz-Carlton in downtown Boston. There, in the darkness of his room, he continued abusing Adderall and briefly used Ecstasy, which he purchased from strangers who immediately recognized him on the street. "I didn't hide who I was," Johnson recalls. "I just didn't care."

Johnson blamed his life's ugly turn on his head injuries, but his closest friends weren't totally buying the story. "There's fallout from his years of playing and the injury, but there became a cloudy area of how much of that was because of the misuse of drugs," his friend Barry Kolano says. "Ted knew and led us to believe it was all from the head injuries. I think he was being dishonest with himself and to us that he needed [the drugs] because of how badly he felt. It became a self-fulfilling prophecy."

Eventually, even Johnson grew tired of the game. He hired his friend Barbara Rizzo to help organize his life, and he planned to detox alone. "For a few months, I was ordering room service three times a day," Johnson recalls. "I wondered what those guys answering the phone thought about me. I was pathetic." Rizzo checked phone messages, returned calls to Johnson's friends and family, and kept in contact with lawyers who were finalizing his divorce. When Johnson didn't answer his door, she'd use a master key, rush to the bedroom, and make sure he was still breathing.

In April 2006, Johnson met Chris Nowinski, a then 27-year-old Harvard-educated former college football player and professional wrestler whose career had been cut short by concussions. Nowinski made fast friends with Johnson, in part because of their shared fear of what the future might bring. In the darkness of his room, Johnson confided to Nowinski his worries about dying young, about not knowing his kids' faces as he grew older, of living alone, drugged and depressed. Nowinski, who had found something of a mental clearing—a respite from the same worries that consumed him—consoled Johnson. Neurologists, Nowinski said, helped diagnose his own concussion problems. Nowinski now wanted the same relief for his friend, and he recommended several doctors.

One of them, Dr. Robert Cantu, the chief of neurosurgery and director of sports medicine at

Emerson Hospital in Concord, Massachusetts, ran film of Johnson's brain. After years of questions, Cantu's work seemed definitive—and frightening. Johnson, the doctor said, had suffered several concussions at the end of his career that grew so devastating in severity that Johnson now had post-concussion syndrome and showed signs of early brain damage that might be permanent. Johnson's symptoms, the doctor told him, were so relentless that by his 50s Johnson could have severe Alzheimer's.

The diagnosis was both liberating and terrifying. Johnson was referred to Dr. Heechin Chae, who eventually directed his patient to the Spaulding Rehabilitation Hospital. Johnson wasn't prepared for what he was about to see. Inside Spaulding, the walls, the floors, everything in the clinic was dull and white and made him uneasy. Some rooms smelled like urine and feces. Most of the patients wore gowns, but Johnson did not. Even if the doctors didn't consider him normal, he at least wanted to look the part. Patients mumbled to themselves in the hallway; one man wore a bicycle helmet. Johnson's roommate was a Marine who'd had an RPG explode next to his head while he was on a mission in Iraq. The man didn't talk and had forgotten how to walk.

Johnson was embarrassed. He was nothing like these guys. Their minds had been wrecked in battle, in car crashes, in things that were far beyond their control. He was just a football player who'd taken too many hits to the head.

Before he began his therapy, Johnson's first task was to run on a treadmill until he became exhausted. The former world-class athlete lasted two minutes.

On a sunny fall morning, two months after he left Spaulding, Johnson and I walked to the Suffolk University campus in Boston where Johnson had an appointment with a career coach/assistant professor. Johnson had had his prescriptions taken away by his doctors and—at the urging of his therapist—had set out to find a job that would give him a reason to get up in the morning. The search was remarkably easy: Johnson had offers to do everything from working for insurance companies to playing golf with high rollers. The only thing that appealed to him was teaching; a friend who taught at Suffolk suggested to the dean that Johnson teach a course on sports crisis management.

As we walked, Johnson seemed nervous. He was dressed in slacks, a white dress shirt, a red tie, and a blue blazer, with the collar unintentionally flipped up in the back. Sweat poured down his face. "Bro, I'm dying here," he told me. We stopped, and he pulled out his wallet. There, from behind his driver's license, he removed a creased index card. He read it quietly. "Number one, go slow. Number two, get the gist. Number three, check your work. Number

four, make necessary changes."

Johnson's Spaulding therapist recommended that he keep the card with him at all times, lest he inadvertently sabotage his progress. Two months out of rehab, he'd embraced the changes in his life with the spirit he once used to study his playbook.

"I even have a mission statement," Johnson told me. "My therapist said I needed one. Wanna hear it?" Johnson took a deep breath: "To be a devoted warrior whose love for his family is unmatched and who strives for authenticity at all costs, with the hopes that in my final act I can look back to say I've had a life well-lived." With that, he patted my back. "For me, bro, that's *powerful*." The word lingered in the morning air.

Inside one of the brick buildings on the campus, the career coach met us as we got off the elevator and ushered us into a room where another assistant professor was seated at a desk. She was short with graying hair; Red Sox and Patriots pennants hung from the walls.

"You look familiah," the woman said in a thick Boston accent.

"This gentleman is Ted Johnson," the career coach said. "He played for the Patriots."

The woman jumped from her chair. "Oh my gawd! I knew it was you!" She charged, open-armed, toward Johnson. The embrace knocked him backward.

"My sistah was the biggest Pats fan in the world," she said.

"That's great," Johnson said, smiling.

"She was diagnosed with cancer the year before your first Super Bowl win; boy she woulda loved to see that. And you know what? That Super Bowl parade was on the first anniversary that she died. I just know she was smiling that day. Boy, she woulda loved to meet you."

The woman opened her arms again and embraced the linebacker.

"This isn't from me," the woman said. "This is from my sistah."

Johnson gathered the woman in his arms. He turned and wiped away a tear.

Back at his townhome later that afternoon, Johnson hung up his jacket and said he needed a nap. "All that work has my head spinning, bro."

The door opened to a small foyer, and beyond that to a family room and a kitchen with granite counters and a stainless-steel refrigerator. A tin Kokopelli swung a golf club from a windowsill; there was a glass coffee table with sports books, and the walls were lined with dozens of remnants from Johnson's playing career—photographs, footballs, and helmets, one of which was chipped and dented across the reinforced forehead, like a worm had chewed its way through the plastic.

Before he went to his room upstairs, he sat in his leather chair and turned on the television. He pushed some buttons on his remote, and in a few seconds there was Ted Johnson, number 52, taking down running backs and smashing quarterbacks in their ribs. A smile washed across his face. It was a tribute video the Patriots had played on the jumbo screen a few months after Johnson retired.

He settled in. "When I was lying around the house, I'd put this on so I could remember who I used to be. I know that guy is in here somewhere," Johnson said, pointing to his heart. He studied his old self on the screen, breaking through offensive lines and making tackle after tackle. Television Ted blasts a running back—a face full of Johnson's forehead under the chin. "That's what fucked me up," he told me. Johnson watched the hits, staring at the television. The smile evaporated.

In that moment, he was looking back but found himself again faced with his future, with the creeping uncertainty of a life and a mind that had veered terribly off-track. Regardless of his work, his improvements, and the friends who stuck with him, there is a fear—a gripping, stomach-twisting agony—that one day he will not recognize those people, and, maybe even more devastating, that he won't remember the man he now sees on his television screen.

Johnson paused the video. He sat forward, his shoulders square. He pushed play and watched the hit. Each time he unfroze the video, he'd say, "Boom."

Another running back entered the screen. Johnson paused again before the hit. "Boom." He started and stopped the video for several minutes, again and again and again. "Boom," he said.

Boom.

Boom.

Boom.

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August 5, 2009

Lions practice notes: QBs try to score from 5-yard line

By *NICHOLAS J. COTSONIKA*
FREE PRESS SPORTS WRITER

Quick hits from Day 5 of Lions training camp:

- The Lions worked on punching the ball into the end zone through the air this morning. They placed the ball on the 5-yard line and gave each quarterback four reps to see how many touchdown passes he could throw. (No linemen.)

Matthew Stafford went 2-for-4, hitting tight end Will Heller and fullback Jerome Felton. He almost went 3-for-4, but wide receiver Calvin Johnson couldn't haul one in.

Daunte Culpepper went 0-for-4. Cornerback Eric King made a nice play, breaking up a pass to wide receiver Dennis Northcutt.

Drew Stanton went 2-for-4, if you give his receivers the benefit of the doubt that they were in bounds. Stanton found wide receiver Kenneth Harris on a fade. Then wide receiver Eric Fowler made a leaping catch in the back of the end zone -- perhaps out of the back of the end zone.

- There was a lot of chatter between the offense and defense during Stanton's portion of the drill. Linebacker Larry Foote, No. 55, and wide receiver Keary Colbert were especially vocal, arguing about whether the receivers got down in bounds.

"We'll take that, 55!" Colbert yelled.

Foote said the units have a little wager going, but, smiling, he declined to go into detail.

"A lot of meals," Foote said. "You don't want to lose to offensive linemen, because you know how they eat. That'd be a big check."

As for Colbert, Foote said: "He talks a little bit, but he can't keep up with me."

- Johnson actually looked human this morning. He dropped multiple passes and had one broken up on a particularly nice play by safety Marquand Manuel. Usually, he catches just about everything and is good for at least one highlight-reel play per practice.
 - Highlights: Linebacker Jordon Dizon drew some cheers for intercepting a Stafford pass during seven-on-seven drills. ... Colbert made an impressive catch against cornerback Will James during team drills, and Stafford threw a nice pass down the right sideline to running back Aveion Cason. ... Stafford also threw a rocket over the middle to Johnson in team drills.
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Patriots Notebook: Wheatley says he can see clearly now

By BRIAN MACPHERSON
Special to the Union Leader
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FOXBOROUGH, MASS. – Terrance Wheatley still finds his mind racing when he's out on the field. It's just racing to a different destination.

A year ago, the then-rookie cornerback spent most of his time on the field focusing on where he was supposed to be and where he was supposed to be going. So far this summer, though, he's been able to devote his concentration to the wide receivers across the way and not the X's and O's he's devoted so much time to memorizing.

"I was trying to think the game and try to think the playbook at the same time," the second-year cornerback said. "That's too hard to do. Knowing the playbook a little bit better now, I can actually go and focus on the actual techniques of the game, and that's where you make all your plays."

► [Click here to visit the blog of the Union Leader's Boston sports correspondent, Brian MacPherson, 'One If By Land.'](#)

Both Wheatley and fellow second-year corner Jonathan Wilhite have a chance to make a big impact in an overhauled New England secondary this season. With the trade of Ellis Hobbs to Philadelphia and the decision not to bring back veteran Deltha O'Neal, opportunities are plentiful.

Veterans Leigh Bodden and Shawn Springs landed the big free-agent contracts in the spring, but don't be surprised if Wheatley and Wilhite emerge with the jobs.

"Oh, man, have you seen them out here?" safety Brandon Meriweather said. "They look good. They look like real good. They look like they're coming into their own."

Wilhite made four starts a season ago, all in December, and Wheatley made just one start in early November before he landed on injured reserve. But that experience figures to prove invaluable as the second-year defensive backs work to impress Bill Belichick and the Patriots' coaching staff during the preseason.

(For the sake of comparison, Asante Samuel started only one game his rookie season and didn't emerge as a full-time starter until his third season. By his fourth season, he was one of the NFL's best playmaking corners.)

A cornerback's rookie season often is a whirlwind of meetings and playbook study, the complexities of the defense often getting in the way of a player's ability to employ his natural abilities and instincts. After a year to study the playbook and learn the schemes, though, those abilities and instincts start to take over.

"When you go out there, you can actually study actual people, receivers and quarterbacks,"

Wheatley said. (Wilhite was not present at the Patriots' morning practice session yesterday.) "Instead of sitting and looking at the playbook until 2 in the morning, you're actually sitting up and looking at film. When you go on the field, everything's a little bit easier."



Wheatley began the season as a reserve but earned his first start at cornerback on Nov. 2 against Indianapolis "" drawing perennial Pro Bowl wide receiver Marvin Harrison as his assignment. He broke up his first career pass on the Colts' first possession. He then broke his wrist when he deflected a pass and fell to the turf early in the second quarter.

New England Patriots wide receiver Joey Galloway, left, looks for a way past teammate corner back

Terrence Wheatley, right, during training camp yesterday.

He was placed on injured reserve two weeks later and missed the rest of the season.

But he didn't spend November and December at home with his feet up. In a sense, his wrist injury just accelerated the start to his first full offseason and his transition from rookie to second-year player.

"You still go to meetings," he said. "You still go to meetings, and you still try to learn the scheme. That, being a rookie, is the hardest thing "" not so much the actual game, but learning the playbook so you can go out there and not have to think as you're playing. That just slows you down."

Wheatley's injury, along with the ongoing ineffectiveness of O'Neal, opened a starting spot for Wilhite in the final month of the season. The former Auburn star started each of the Patriots' final four games and even picked off his first career pass against the Oakland Raiders on Dec. 14.

Wilhite appeared to open this year's preseason ahead of Wheatley on the depth chart "" he played left corner with the first unit when Springs missed the first practice of training camp "" but has missed several practices since. His experience from last season, though, figures to be more of a factor than a couple of August two-a-day sessions.

"Both of those players have made significant progress, and hopefully they'll be able to carry that onto the field and into training camp and build on it and have strong seasons," Patriots coach Bill Belichick said. "Their offseason has been good. They are way ahead of where they were last year, there's no question about that."

Brian MacPherson covers the Patriots for the New Hampshire Union Leader and Sunday News.

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Since being traded to the Nuggets last season, Chauncey Billups has not only given the team success in the regular season and playoffs, but has given Denver a real hope for a championship run ...

Becoming the Hometown Hero: Chauncey Billups' New Challenge



by [Blaise Beast](#) (Contributor) Written on **August 05, 2009**



(Photo by Jed Jacobsohn/Getty Images)

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Since being traded to the Nuggets last season, Chauncey Billups has not only given the team success in the regular season and playoffs, but has given Denver a real hope for a championship run .

Every state, town, and city has its own little sport God to gaze upon. The hero.

Indianapolis is run by Manning, such as Philadelphia was by Iverson. Fans will agree with whatever comes out of his mouth. Even a college athlete could be considered the "hometown winner."

The towns or states wouldn't admit it, but they really need such a sports hero that will always provide hope.

But let's re-phrase that whole paragraph. How can these superstars go by the fundamental phrase of a "hometown hero?"

With the exception of LeBron James, how many sports stars, how many "hometown heroes," are actually from that town?

Most pro athletes had a different hometown, one where they grew up in. Shaq didn't have a house for a while in L.A, yet wouldn't that be considered his hometown area?

Did Tom Brady grow up in New England? Did Kobe Bryant grow up in L.A? Did Albert Pujols grow up in St. Louis?

No, no, and, uh, no.

And I'm not saying that Billups' voyage, at first, was really any different. Back in Detroit, Rip Hamilton, Billups, and Ben Wallace were basically all immediately connected with Detroit and Michigan. Yet none of them even grew up near that area.

And during that time, Denver would treat fellow heroes Carmelo Anthony and Brandon Marshall like hometown studs.

But, at this very moment, Billups' story makes the whole meaning make sense.

As a kid and teen, Billups grew up in some of the poorer parts of Denver. Yet, these heroes weren't the millionaire, All-Star NBA players that so many look up to now a days. These were the real hometown die-hards that you'll find throwing down a dunk in a broken down alley while playing street ball.

Billups would walk down that road and admire these fellow neighbors, or just basketball players. Billups made this point very clear when he mentioned that "guys from my neighborhood were the ones that I looked up to. I wouldn't watch NBA, but I idolized these guys that I could see and I could meet."

Now, Billups is one of the brightest stars for his Denver, and he is hoping to push the Nuggets to a spot as a serious contender.

This all started after the Pistons and the Nuggets believed they needed a charge-up after a somewhat slow start at the beginning of the season.

Allen Iverson, who will almost always be submitted and known as a better player than Billups, was the refugee in this trade while moving to the Pistons. As hard as it is to find out a team, your team, is willing and even trying to give you away, especially when you had been the leader of the Championship squad, Billups was fine. He even admitted he was content later on and said he was going to re-live his experiences, and possibly end his career, in Denver.

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