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Young Lions amp up competition at linebacker

TIM TWENTYMAN
The Detroit News

Allen Park -- The Lions have added veteran starting talent to their defensive line, receiving corps, offensive line and secondary this offseason. But when it comes to linebackers, the team seems content with having two second-year players starting alongside veteran Julian Peterson.

DeAndre Levy, who started 10 games as a rookie last season, has taken over the middle linebacker spot for Larry Foote (signed with Steelers), and Zack Follett, mainly a special team's player in 2009, is starting opposite Peterson in the other outside spot left vacant by the trade of Ernie Sims (Eagles).

"Those guys brought a lot more skill because they were veteran guys and they knew the game a little better than we do," Follett said of Foote and Sims.

"But I have to say the only difference I see so far is hunger. When you have guys that already know the job is theirs -- not saying that they didn't work hard, they did a great job -- but you have guys that are still trying to make it and there's a spot open. Everyone is working that much harder, doing a little bit more than they did last year. That's the biggest difference."

The open spot Follett is referring to is the right outside linebacker spot he currently occupies. Follett has been given the starting nod by coach Jim Schwartz and defensive coordinator Gunther Cunningham, but there's still plenty of competition and nothing seems etched in stone yet.

"(Follett) has progressed," Schwartz said.

"He's a seventh-round draft pick. Doesn't make the 53-man roster and goes on the practice squad. He comes back and he plays special teams and he gets a little bit of taste at the end of the season in a defensive package. He hasn't made a play yet, but it's a little bit of a continuation of what he did last year and he's done nothing to take that away from us right now."

It's a big year for another young linebacker, Jordon Dizon, whom coaches are hoping takes a giant leap forward heading into his third season.

"My role is undefined at this point," Dizon said. "We have a lot of competition. Good competition not only makes yourself better but the person in front of you and behind you better. It's good competition for the team, but as far as my role goes, I'm just here to compete and when I compete, I make everyone else better."

The Lions also have Caleb Campbell, Vinny Ciurciu, Landon Johnson and Ashlee Palmer.

The true test for a linebacker, though, comes when the pads come on and the hitting starts. Schwartz has a good idea what he has in Peterson and Levy, but Follett's true audition for his starting spot will come when he starts picking up blitz concepts, covering running backs and tight ends, and showing he can retain the entire playbook during live action.

"When you are evaluating linebackers, you need pads and you need tackling and you need them taking on blocks. Right now its seven-on-seven and they aren't really taking on a fullback or taking on an offensive lineman," Schwartz said. "You can see them move around and things like that, but that won't be the tale of the tape."

Schwartz says he likes what he see's in his young linebackers thus far, though.

"Levy is coming in last year this time and he's playing outside and inside. He's trying to learn everything, special teams, everything," he said. "It's overwhelming at times. Now he's settled into one position. He's been through it a year. He knows what to expect physically. He knows what to expect mentally. The system hasn't changed and you'll see a better player as a result of that."

"Our faith (in Follett) is more from the progression that he took and how he sort of moved along last year, not so much on what's happening right now. He's doing a nice job and obviously he knows our system."

Extra point

The Lions released tight end **John Madsen** on Friday.

... The Raiders signed former Lions guard **Daniel Loper** .

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Freak injury may end career of Broncos' McChesney

By Mike Klis
The Denver Post

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Matt McChesney played offensive guard and center the past two seasons for the Broncos.

Basketball took away one Broncos offensive lineman.

Golf wiped out another.

The only difference between these off-field injuries is Matt McChesney may be done with football for good.

McChesney, a former University of Colorado defensive lineman who had been playing guard and center for the Broncos, is expected to retire after a rolling golf cart left him with a severe ankle injury.

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"It was just a freak accident," said McChesney, a former Niwot High School star. "It stinks."

McChesney's setback happened roughly a week after Broncos offensive tackle Ryan Clady suffered a partially torn patellar tendon in his left knee while playing basketball April 23.

Although Clady is expected to miss most — if not all — of training camp and the preseason, the Broncos are hoping their all-pro blocker will return in time to be a starter in their regular-season opener Sept. 12 at Jacksonville.

If this keeps up, Broncos blockers might want to seek out a crossing guard before walking across the street.

The offseason injuries to Clady and McChesney, coupled with late 2009 surgeries for Russ Hochstein and Ryan Harris, mean the Broncos' first-team offensive line when they open their organized team activity (OTA) on Monday will likely be Tyler Polumbus at left tackle, Seth Olsen at left guard, J.D. Walton at center, Chris Kuper at right guard and Zane Beadles at right tackle.

Beadles and Walton are rookies who were drafted in the second and third rounds, respectively, and Olsen was a fourth-round pick in the 2009 draft who was inactive for 13 of 16 games last season.

No wonder the Broncos drafted a mobile, linebackerlike quarterback in Tim Tebow.

McChesney, who had a shot to make the Broncos' roster this year as a backup center and guard, had climbed out of the golf cart he was driving to approach his ball. Just as McChesney got out, the trailing cart was driving by and accidentally clipped



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his ankle. It was the same ankle McChesney had surgically repaired after a preseason injury last year.

The Broncos have told McChesney they would like him to try rehabilitating his injury and compete for a job in training camp. But having battled numerous injuries since he was named

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CU's defensive player of the year in 2004, McChesney appears ready to enter the next phase in his life.

"It's been a long road," said McChesney, who played in three NFL games as a defensive tackle and special-teams player for the New York Jets in 2005 and was on their practice squad in 2006 before he was converted to guard prior to the 2007 season.

Various injuries, however, prevented his development, and he wound up playing in just one game, in 2008 for the Miami Dolphins, as an offensive lineman.

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