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Opportunity knocks for Wheatley

BY MARK FARINELLA / SUN CHRONICLE STAFF

FOXBORO - Since he was drafted by the Patriots two years ago, Terrence Wheatley has waged an uphill battle to stay on their roster.

Tonight's nationally televised preseason game at the Georgia Dome against the Atlanta Falcons (8 p.m.; Ch. 25, 64) will be another opportunity for the former Colorado cornerback to prove that what he's shown in this year's training camp has not been a mirage, and that he deserves to keep his roster spot and perhaps expand his responsibilities.

"I just have to go out and make plays, and ultimately, have fun," said Wheatley, who has tried to erase the stigma of two injury-plagued and unproductive seasons with heady play and high emotion on the practice field.

A week ago, that also translated into positive accomplishments in joint practices with the defending Super Bowl-champion New Orleans Saints, then again in the preseason game at Gillette Stadium.

Wheatley made the only interception surrendered by Drew Brees in the three joint practices. Then, in the fourth quarter of the preseason opener, Wheatley made the right read on a quarterback bootleg by Chase Daniel on third-and-goal situation from the 1-yard line, dropping the backup for a 4-yard loss. In his Monday press conference, Patriots' coach Bill Belichick said that was a play that Wheatley missed when presented a similar opportunity last season.

Before he departed for this week's extended stay in Atlanta, Wheatley said he couldn't remember the specific play to which Belichick was referring.

"There are a bunch of plays that I probably missed last year," the cornerback said, smiling. "That play in particular, I saw the play and didn't second-guess it. I just went for it, went all out and made the play, and that's what I'm here to do."

When Wheatley makes plays as they are drawn up in the playbook, it adds value to the Patriots' corps of defensive backs in general. The position has become an area of supposed strength and great depth over a three-year period of rebuilding, although some of the younger players still need to establish their ability



Patsæ™ CB Terrence Wheatley. (Keith Nordstrom photo)

against the rest of the league.

No doubt, beyond veteran Leigh Bodden, the Patriots have a lot of young talent in the cornerback corps. Wheatley and Jonathan Wilhite were members of the same draft, followed by Darius Butler in 2009 and Devin McCourty this year - and those are just the ones with the best chances to make the team.

So, in the battle to stay one of at least five corners likely to stick (out of nine or 10 defensive backs in total), Wheatley knows that when the ball comes his way over at least the next two weeks (against the Falcons tonight and the Rams next Thursday at Gillette), he has to make plays.

"I hope so," he said. "I hope I keep doing stuff like that. I definitely have the confidence to go out there and make plays like that. Once you make a read or make a decision, the one thing I have to tell myself is that if 'you're wrong, you're wrong,' and deal with it later.

"Hopefully I'll get more chances like that and hopefully there will be more plays like that," he said.

Tonight's game comes on the heels of two limited-contact practices with the Falcons in extreme heat and humidity at their Flowery Branch, Ga., training headquarters. It was a step down in intensity from the previous week's joint practices with the Saints, but nose tackle Vince Wilfork said Tuesday that any such work was a positive thing for the Patriots.

"I'm happy with it," he said. "It's like we have three, four games in one week because of the practices and everything. I'm all about competing. I'm all about getting better. I feel my teammates are the same way. We all want to take this field. We want to go the mile to win and get better and compete."

Offensive guard Stephen Neal also gave a thumbs-up to the joint workouts because it allowed the Patriots to practice against different looks than what they see from their own teammates. Neal and his mates on the offensive line were glad to see different formations from the two NFC teams.

"We've been facing the same 3-4 (scheme) the entire time," he said, "and now we have a different team and a different style of defense last week, and now this week. I think it is really good to get how they actually play. We get to practice against that before we see them in the game, so I think that's really going to help us out."

Add quarterback Tom Brady to those who appreciated the variation from a normal training camp because of the early exposure to another system.

"There's a lot of things that these guys do that the Saints don't do that our defense hasn't done," Brady said. "This is a very athletic defense - athletic linebackers, quick defensive linemen. They present a whole different set of challenges.

"We played them last year, so there's some familiarity with them," he added. "They're good. They've got a good group of core players. Hopefully, we'll be able to protect on Thursday night. They have some guys who can get on the ball."

Depth, however, has been a concern entering the game with the Falcons. The Patriots were down to roughly 65 practice-worthy players this week, leaving several behind in Foxboro to recover from various nicks and bruises. Especially along the defensive line and in the linebacking corps, veterans may have to pull longer stints than usual for the preseason to get through tonight's game.

Upon the Patriots' return to Foxboro, they will transition into regular-season mode for practices, closing them to the public and media members and including more game-planning for upcoming opponents. But even Belichick endorsed the joint-practice concept, which makes it likely to become a staple of future training camps.

"It's something we haven't done in a while," he said, "and it is interesting to see what another team does, just even simple things."

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