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Patriots-Jaguars: Points of interest

 By Mike Reiss
 ESPNBoston.com

In recent years, it has been commonplace to put together a "things to watch" list leading into preseason and regular-season games. It has almost become cliché.

Here's an attempt to add a wrinkle to that exercise. Instead of "things to watch," here are the main areas that pique my interest in the New England Patriots' preseason opener against the [Jacksonville Jaguars](#) (Ch. 4, 7:30 p.m.):

Filling the [Albert Haynesworth](#) void. Veteran defensive lineman Haynesworth is not expected to play. Neither is defensive lineman [Mike Wright](#). This creates an opportunity to evaluate a few of the team's younger linemen as defensive tackles in the four-man line the team has been working on during camp. In particular, 2010 seventh-round draft choice [Kade Weston](#) comes to mind. He has caught the eye in camp and should play a lot.

[Tom Brady](#)-to-[Chad Ochocinco](#) connection. Ochocinco was late to the team's walkthrough practice Wednesday, leading some to wonder if he'll suit up in the game. Top players aren't expected to play long, but if they do, watching the first Brady-to-Ochocinco connection -- coupled with the reception from the crowd -- figures to be fun.

Can't miss [Nate Solder](#). The first-round draft pick should get a ton of action at left tackle. At 6-foot-8, you can't miss him. Solder shows signs of being the left tackle of the future, but the team appears to be counting on veteran [Matt Light](#) to bridge the gap until he's ready. With Light still on the active/physically unable to perform list, Solder is getting a lot of reps in practice, and as one would expect with a rookie, it's been up and down.

[Brian Hoyer](#) vs. [Ryan Mallett](#). Preseason action is crucial for backup quarterbacks because if things go according to a team's plans, it will mark their only snaps of the season. Hoyer, now in his third year, has looked good in camp. So has Mallett. But doing it on the game field represents the next step and Hoyer should get a lot of work. This is his best chance to showcase his skills, similar to how [Matt Schaub](#) improved his stock with the Falcons (2004-2006) before being traded to the Texans in 2007.



Tom Brady will get his first taste of game action with new receiver Chad Ochocinco.

Is that [Ted Johnson](#) at linebacker? Second-year player [Dane Fletcher](#) should see a lot of action and this will be a chance to see how far he's come. Wearing No. 52, one might mistake him for former Patriots thumper Ted Johnson. Fletcher should make the club on special teams, but let's see how he does calling the signals on defense and leading the huddle. With [Jerod Mayo](#)'s snaps expected to be limited and [Brandon Spikes](#) sidelined with injury, this is Fletcher's time to shine.

[Lee Smith](#) should be tired after this one. Bill Belichick loves the tight end position. He's selected 11 tight ends in his 12 drafts with the Patriots, and the latest -- 2011 fifth-round pick Lee Smith -- has had a nice camp. He is a strong blocker with powerful hands. Much like [Rob Gronkowski](#) in 2010, Smith should play from start to finish in the preseason. He comes from Marshall, the alma mater of [Troy Brown](#), and wears Brown's old No. 80. The Patriots hit it big with their two tight ends in 2010 (Gronkowski and [Aaron Hernandez](#)) and it looks like they have another good one in Smith.

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Scotty McKnight: Reunited with an old friend



KRISTIAN DYER
NEW YORK

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The first time Jets quarterback Mark Sanchez hooked up with the Jets' seventh-round pick Scotty McKnight on the football field was when the two were in elementary school.

McKnight was then eight years old and, like Sanchez, was a ball boy for Santa Margarita High School when Carson Palmer was the then-quarterback. During halftime of those games, the ball boys would meet in the endzone for brief games of touch football.

Sanchez and McKnight would often be paired together in those impromptu games and the beginning of their chemistry on and off the field was instant. The two boys became close and through a meshing of personalities they were inseparable during their formative years.



AL PEREIRA/GETTY IMAGES

Scotty McKnight has been reunited with his old buddy Mark Sanchez this training camp.

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"We loved going out there and playing together — those early days — it was just fun," McKnight told Metro. "I think we sort of clicked back then. He was a little older than me, but we had a lot in common even back then."

Now they share a common locker room and McKnight, a former college walk-on, is hoping to share a team with his friend.

It was in high school that the two really began to develop the close bond that continues to today. Though they went to different high schools, McKnight remembers running routes and playing 7-on-7 with Sanchez in the summer. There were trips to the mall together, stops for pizza and of course,

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road trips.

Sanchez went on to USC and had a storied career that led him to become the No. 5 selection in the 2009 NFL Draft. McKnight walked on at Colorado and went on to find his own success. He is near the top of a number of receiving records in Boulder. As teenagers, and even in college, they'd talk about playing together someday, just like they did during halftime of Santa Margarita games when they were in fourth grade. Neither thought it would come to reality.

"We talked about it for sure, but never thought it'd really, actually happen," McKnight said. "It was something nice to think about — that someday he'd be throwing passes to me in the NFL. Did I think it'd actually happen? No, not really. I can't believe it now."

Sanchez recalls a conversation with Jets general manager Mike Tannenbaum and head coach Rex Ryan about his childhood friend, telling them both to keep an eye on McKnight prior to his senior season in 2010. There was never a point where McKnight asked for a good word from Sanchez, but the quarterback's scouting report helped spark an interest in the wide receiver.

It was an interest that culminated in McKnight being a third-day selection.

"I told Rex and Mike to keep an eye on Scotty at Colorado and that he was about to break some records his senior year, which he did. Other than that, the Jets asked me questions about Scotty and I answered them honestly, like I would for any player," Sanchez told Metro. "I was able to provide more detailed info in Scotty's case because we have been friends so long, but I expressed to them some of the things that I knew about him — high football I.Q., ferocious competitor, coach's son, hard worker, great route runner and tough."

Sanchez helped organize involuntary workouts in June — during the lockout — and McKnight stayed in New Jersey to train at TEST Sports Club in Martinsville. Their four-day-a-week schedule involved a heavy lifting session in the morning and then passing drills with other teammates in the afternoon.

The two were finding chances to laugh and smile, even during the grind of the workout schedule. McKnight has moved his belongings into Sanchez's apartment about 10 minutes west of the team's practice facility and they have discussed being roommates.

"We're just both laid back; nothing bothers us really. It's chill between us," McKnight said. "I don't really get too bothered or too 'up' about anything until game day. It works between the two of us like that."

And as preseason camp unfolds and McKnight gets a chance to run his routes — this time catching balls not from Sanchez, but from Mark Brunell, Drew Willy and Greg McElroy — he's hoping to justify to Ryan and the coaching staff his best friend's scouting report. The reports have been good on McKnight so far with his work ethic and hands being praised by teammates and coaches.

"He has quick feet to get in and out of routes. He has 4.4 speed. He's a grinder and a very smart player — willing to prepare like crazy and get into the playbook," Sanchez said. "He has a very high football IQ which is important for a first-year player to succeed. At the end of the day, he'll do whatever it takes to get on the field and once he does, he'll give it everything he's got."

In McKnight, Sanchez is potentially getting a receiver with good hands and a potential target for the next decade. The two are excited to be teammates on the field and there is potential for the dynamic duo off the field as well.

"I've been his wingman plenty of times and he's been mine too, many, many times," McKnight said. "And I will be again I'm sure."

Follow Kristian Dyer on Twitter @KristianRDyer for live updates from Jets camp, including breaking news and photos of the team in action.

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Tuesday, August 9, 2011

Andre Gurode could return Saturday

By Todd Archer

SAN ANTONIO -- When the Cowboys have their first full practice back in Arlington, the hope is that center [Andre Gurode](#) will be able to work for the first time in training camp.

Gurode is on the non-football injury list after undergoing knee surgery in June and will have to pass a physical before he is cleared to work. Second-year center [Phil Costa](#) has been working with the No. 1 offense since camp began with rookies [Bill Nagy](#) and [Kevin Kowalski](#) splitting the backup work.

Over the last few days, Gurode has stepped up his rehab. On Tuesday, he and [Jay Ratliff](#), who is battling a sore hip, had a spirited rehab/conditioning session under the eye of strength and conditioning coach Mike Woicik. Gurode and Ratliff ran a series of 50-yard and short-area sprints and concluded the workout with some pass rush work.

If Gurode is able to return, he could see action in the Aug. 21 preseason game vs. San Diego.
