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Nate Solder could shoulder load

By Karen Guregian / NFL Notes | Sunday, August 28, 2011 | <http://www.bostonherald.com> | [NFL Coverage](#)

Nate Solder is going to be the **Patriots** [team stats]' starting left tackle and **Tom Brady** [stats]'s chief blindside protector for many years to come.

Of course, that won't happen until the rookie first-round pick is ready to assume the job, and **Matt Light** [stats] passes the baton.

That said, Patriots coach **Bill Belichick** has done a little experimenting, as Solder has gotten work at right guard. When asked about it specifically after a recent practice, Belichick explained that he was just taking a look at players at different positions because he can take just seven linemen into a regular-season game, so some will have to double up. Well, that certainly makes a lot of sense.

But let's look a little closer at that experiment. Is Solder even a realistic possibility at right guard, potentially as a fill-in if **Dan Connolly** got hurt? Just picture a 6-foot-8, 317-pound stallion playing an interior position on the line. We asked former Pro Bowl guard **Randy Cross**, a fixture in the Patriots broadcast booth during the preseason, if Solder could be effective at the position were he asked to do it in a pinch.

"I know coming out of the huddle, it would give people pause with that strong-right formation, seeing (**Rob Gronkowski**, (**Sebastian Vollmer** and Solder coming at you," Cross said with a laugh. "Now that's a decent-sized wall. But I think the kid's got the ability. If you have **Dante (Scarnecchia)** coach him up, he could get by.

"I mean, it's going to be even more of a challenge than the tackle spot given his stature and altitude when it comes to working inside against nose tackles and inside linebackers. But the kid seems to be, from a work standpoint, not afraid of taking on new challenges. If he had to do something like that, I'm sure he could."

Cross, a three-time Pro Bowler who protected **Joe Montana** for many years with the San Francisco 49ers both as a guard and center, has kept a close eye on Solder this summer from his perch in the booth.

"I was impressed with how he played, especially against Tampa," Cross said. "Tampa's got some really good pass rushers, but he held his own. There were some moments I'm sure he'd like back, and some areas he can probably work and get better at, improve his power, but he looks like he's on his way."

Ross Tucker, a former Patriots lineman who writes for ESPN and is a host for SiriusXM NFL Radio, hasn't watched Solder yet. But the thought of him at guard leads to several issues Solder would have to overcome, so Tucker sounded bit skeptical.

"I just think that would be tough. It's a different stance. A different body posture. A different hand placement. That's a lot to ask," Tucker said. "It's two different things. Not only are you asking him to play inside, which he hasn't done, now you're also asking him to switch sides. So I think that would be a pretty difficult aspect to it. I think that part of offensive line play is a lot more difficult than people realize, playing different sides. You can do it, but it definitely takes some getting used to."

The height issue doesn't appear to be a deal breaker as Solder — a former tight end — moves his feet incredibly well, and does get low. Still, you don't see many guys of his stature on the inside.

"I've seen it done. **Jonathan Ogden**, who was just a phenom, played guard for a year," Tucker said. "But I can't think of too many. It's really difficult because a lot of the guys you're going against are 5-11, 6-0 ... a lot of them are like **Vince (Wilfork)**, so it's impossible for a guy that tall to get leverage on those guys and get underneath them. But could he possibly do it? Yeah, maybe. It's just not something that's likely to happen overnight. It's like asking a golfer to change their swing. It's just different. You can probably do it, but if you haven't taken many reps at that position, it would be pretty difficult."

The blitz reads also are different. So that would take time to learn. It's not impossible, it would just take time and reps to pick up.

Tucker posed the ultimate question. If a guard gets hurt, be it **Logan Mankins** [stats] or Connolly, who do you want as the replacement? A sub with experience at the position, such as **Rich Ohrnberger**, or Solder? Just something to ponder, and a question Belichick is probably trying to answer himself.



Photo by Matt Stone (file)

A real kick in the pants

It's hard to find anyone who's a fan of the new kickoff rules, especially among special teams players. Moving the ball up five yards has almost guaranteed a touchback every time.

"It's tough because it sets the tempo of the game, it sets the mentality of the game, it sets a lot of different things," said Pats linebacker and special teams ace **Niko Koutouvides**. "Now the percentages of it being a touchback are pretty high. It's going to be interesting to see how the league and the fans react."

Fans don't seem to like having the possibility of a run-back taken away. The league, however, isn't going to change the rule. Safety concerns.

"I understand the safety part of it," Koutouvides said. "Some people are going to dislike it. Absolutely. Some people are going to like it. Maybe. I don't know. So we're going to have to get a feel for it as it goes on."

Did Koutouvides think kick returners would try to catch people napping on the coverage teams?

"Oh, absolutely," he said. "That's going to happen, especially a confident one. If he catches it five or six yards deep, and he thinks he can get it past the 20-yard line, he's going. Anything past the 20 is going to help. So, you definitely can't mope down there. You can't assume, or relax. You still have to play it every time like he's taking it out. You just always have to be prepared."

Ex-Pat Evans hangs it up

Former Patriots and Saints fullback **Heath Evans** [stats] officially retired from the NFL. He moved his family to the West Coast and now has a job with the NFL Network.

BenJarvus Green-Ellis had the locker next to Evans when the two were teammates in Foxboro. Green-Ellis recalled being a rookie and Evans providing guidance.

"He taught me a lot about how to approach the game, how to approach practice, things like that, mostly just being a good guy on and off the field, he was a guy of integrity," Green-Ellis said. "Heath was a good guy for me to learn from. This is my fourth year now. Like I always say, everyone from Heath, to **Lamont (Jordan)**, to **Sammy (Morris)**, **Kevin (Faulk)**, to **Fred (Taylor)**, to **Laurence (Maroney)**, you learn something from everybody.

"I hope it all works out for Heath. He's a good guy."

Mankins said Evans will be a good fit for TV work.

"Heath likes to talk. He always has an opinion on everything," Mankins said with a laugh. "But good for him. He was a good player and a great teammate. Everyone really respected Heath. He did a lot of good things for us. We always appreciated Heath."

The vaunted by Vontae

There's quiet confidence. And then, there's **Vontae Davis**. The **Miami Dolphins** [team stats] defensive back bragged last week that he and teammate **Sean Smith** are the best pair of cornerbacks in the league.

"I'm going to go out on a limb and say we're the best tandem in the league," Davis said Thursday.

Maybe he hasn't heard of **Darrelle Revis** and **Antonio Cromartie** in New York. Or **Nnamdi Asomugha**, **Asante Samuel** [stats] and **Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie** in Philadelphia.

Actually, he has.

"You name them all and I'm putting it out there," Davis said.

Naturally, Dolphins coach **Tony Sparano** backed his player.

"I like to hear it," Sparano said. "I think they need to play with swagger. They need to play with confidence and those two guys have confidence. Time will tell at the end of this thing whether or not they are ... but I'd take them."

We'll see how Brady fares against "the best" corner duo in Week 1. ...

Jets quarterback **Mark Sanchez** is enjoying having newly acquired veteran receiver **Derrick Mason** at his disposal, especially in the red zone. The two have clicked already during the preseason.

"He's quick, he's shifty, he knows how to screen a defender away, and keep his body in between the ball and the defender, and that's what you need," Sanchez said of the former Ravens wideout last week. "He's one of those guys who knows how to make a big catch. He's got great hands, a solid receiver, so he can be a great help for us."

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