



Nate Solder could be in receiving line

By Steve Buckley | Thursday, December 22, 2011 | <http://www.bostonherald.com> | Columnists

FOXBORO — It should come as no surprise that Patriots [team stats] coach Bill Belichick uses rookie tackle Nate Solder as an occasional third tight end: He knows the kid was a pretty good tight end during his days at Buena Vista High in Colorado, and was recruited as such at the University of Colorado.

Right?

Well, no. Belichick has famously used all kinds of players at all kinds of positions over the years — think Mike Vrabel at tight end and Troy Brown [stats] at cornerback — but it turns out he'd rather discover his players' versatility on his own than sit at home watching tapes of these guys' high school games.

Does he have an understanding of how his players were deployed in high school and college? Absolutely. But as Belichick said yesterday, "I'm not going to make a decision here based on what a guy did when he was 18 years old. I'm going to make a decision based on what I see the player do."

Clarifying his point, he added, "I can't say, 'OK, what did this guy do in high school? All right, that's what I'm going to do with him.' It's hard for me to look at it that way. I respect it, I do. But I have to look at what I see, what I see in the athlete, what his physical skills are, what his mental (makeup) is, the way he plays the game, his style of play, his ability to process information."

What we do know is that the 6-foot-8, 319-pound Solder, who was converted from tight end to offensive tackle as a college sophomore, has been as an eligible receiver in nine games this season.

Does Solder dream of catching a touchdown pass?

"I'm just excited to play, to be honest with you," the first-round pick said. "Any kind of opportunities I get, I'm grateful. If I can help the team with blocking, which is what I think I'm here to do, or if the chance comes that I catch a pass, so be it."

For the record, Solder has not caught a touchdown pass since his senior year at Buena Vista. It was the 2005 season, and the college-bound Solder had 31 receptions for 513 yards and eight touchdowns. Yet he doesn't remember his last touchdown, saying, "That was a long time ago. I couldn't even tell you."

So we checked with one person who *could* tell us about that last touchdown: Nate Solder's quarterback at Buena Vista.

"You know, when he says he doesn't remember, that's only because he's the most humble guy in the world," said Caleb Graff, who went on to play football at Division 3 Bethel University in St. Paul, Minn., and now teaches



history at Geneseo (Ill.) High School. "But I 100 percent remember. It was near the end of the 2005 state championship game against Holy Family. There were about two minutes left in the game, and we were losing, 35-14. It was a sweep pass. I faked the handoff to the fullback, and Nate went straight down the field. I hit him at the 5(-yard line) and he went in for the touchdown.

"I remember Nate handing the ball to the referee. And then we high-fived. We both knew that was the last time we'd be celebrating a touchdown together."

Graff's recollection is 100 percent correct. The Denver Post scoring summary shows Graff connecting with Solder for a touchdown, after which the rush failed. Holy Family came away with a 35-20 victory in the Class 2A championship game.

When Belichick spoke with the media yesterday and was asked if Solder has good hands, the coach answered cryptically: "Maybe we'll find out someday."

But Caleb Graff feels no need to be coy.

"I don't want to usurp any of Mr. Belichick's authority, but yes, of course he has good hands," he said. "He's very athletic. He's *crazy* athletic.

"He'll catch anything **Tom Brady** [stats] throws high," said Graff, speaking as an old buddy.

But then, speaking as an old quarterback, he added this: "He can't always do the low balls. But he'll catch the high ones."

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Wednesday, December 21, 2011

Solder, Pats' O-line ready for challenge

By Steven Krasner
Special to ESPNBoston.com

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. -- Fortunately for Patriots offensive tackle [Nate Solder](#), he can leave work at the office.

Otherwise, the rookie might be suffering from sleep deprivation, battling his way through weekly nightmares as game day approached with the likes of superlative pass-rushers [Tamba Hali](#), [Dwight Freeney](#), [Robert Mathis](#), [Brian Orakpo](#), [Ryan Kerrigan](#) and [Elvis Dumervil](#) taking ferocious aim at New England quarterback [Tom Brady](#).

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This week it's going to be Miami Dolphins linebacker [Cameron Wake](#), who will be a major focus of New England's pass protection for Saturday's 1 p.m. ET game at Gillette Stadium. Wake has been credited with 7½ sacks this season, giving him 27 in his three years in the league.

"I try not to have any dreams about it," said Solder with a slight smile Wednesday. "I try to get all my work done here [in preparation for the game] with practice and watching film."

At least this week, Solder has some personal experience to draw upon when it comes to Wake.

The Patriots played Miami in the season opener, which also marked Solder's NFL debut. The Pats had made him their top pick (17th overall) in the 2011 draft after a standout career at Colorado. Wake registered one sack in that game, a 38-24 New England victory in Miami, but it did not come at Solder's expense.

And while Wake isn't the Dolphins' only solid pass rusher, he is their most dangerous. So Solder and his offensive linemates will be well aware of where Wake is lining up.

"I certainly knew of him [before the first game]," said Solder, a 6-foot-8, 319-pounder. "I knew he was an amazing player. He's really quick, has great moves and is a really good athlete."

Solder, though, is now better able to know what to expect from pass rushers, thanks to, he says, tutelage from line coach Dante Scarnecchia, his teammates and his own personal experiences.

"One of the things I've been learning is that you have to be ready for [a great pass rusher or two] every week," Solder said. "That's so different from college. Here everyone has elite pass rushers. But we do a lot of studying."

Solder, who also has been asked to play as an extra tight end on occasion, has impressed 12-year veteran

guard [Brian Waters](#).

"He's a very good player, but one of the things I like about him is that he still has things to learn, and he knows he has things to learn," Waters said.

Waters, meanwhile, has seen a lot in his time in the league. While the Pats have been playing against some exceptional pass rushers lately, he answered simply when asked if anyone has shown him anything new.

"Not really," said Waters, who signed with the Pats just before the regular season and quickly became a fixture on New England's line.

"They come with basically what you'd expect, but that's not to say they aren't great players. When teams are looking for [defensive] players [in the draft] they're looking for speed rushers, guys who can get to the quarterback. They want the best players to get to the quarterback," he said.

Wake, agrees Waters, is one of those special players.

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"Wake is an explosive football player," said Waters, a 6-3, 320-pounder. "He's quick off the ball, comes after you trying to get to the quarterback, puts a lot of pressure and hits on the quarterback. He's dangerous. I feel sorry for the tackles because it seems like every week we're playing the best players in the league."

The tackles, notably Solder, [Matt Light](#) and [Marcus Cannon](#), are entrusted with forcing the outside rushers to move wide past Brady without getting a hand on him. That doesn't always work according to plan, notably Dumervil's bone-crushing sack of Brady last week in Denver.

The Pats, though, have given up only 24 sacks this season, keeping Brady relatively unscathed through the first 14 games of the season.

"That's certainly our responsibility," Solder said.

And it will be again Saturday, no matter what havoc Wake and his pass-rushing teammates try to cause.

Steven Krasner is a frequent contributor to ESPNBoston.com.
