
Solder ready where needed

By Peter Abraham and Michael Whitmer

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INDIANAPOLIS - There is little doubt that tackle Sebastian Vollmer and tight end Rob Gronkowski will play in the Super Bowl tomorrow. The question is to what degree their injuries will limit them.

That has made for a busy week of preparation for rookie tackle Nate Solder. Counting the postseason, Solder has started 13 games in place of Vollmer, who is dealing with an injured right foot.

Solder also is essentially the third-string tight end, helping to beef up the line in certain formations. If Gronkowski's playing time is cut, Solder could be used as an extra blocker more often.

"I'm prepared for wherever they need me," Solder said. "It's the same week it always is from that standpoint."

Gronkowski's health has been a topic of conversation and speculation all week. But Solder hasn't paid much attention.

"I can't let that affect the way that I prepare. It comes down to me being ready to play the game," he said.

Solder was recruited to Colorado as a tight end before moving to the line. Given Bill Belichick's belief in versatility, it's not unreasonable to think he could one day catch a pass in a game.

"I'll be prepared if that happens. They've done it before with other players, that's for sure. I'll be ready if they ask me to do it," Solder said.

Offensive line coach Dante Scarnecchia said Solder met expectations this season.

"To me, he had a good season. He has been valuable," Scarnecchia said. "We were lucky to have him and he did what we asked him. It was a good year for him."

For Solder, it was like being on a carousel that kept speeding up. He went from a Colorado team that was 5-7 in 2010 to the Super Bowl.

"From college, where we weren't all that successful, to where I am now, it's pretty wild. It has been a crazy turnaround," he said. "There really hasn't been much time to step back and think about it. You have to look ahead and get that next win. Now we have one left to get."

Solder gave tickets for the game to his parents, along with his high school coach, Bob Marken, who retired last year after 19 years at Buena Vista in Colorado.

"We've kept in touch. He's a great guy and a friend. There isn't anybody more that I want at the game than him," Solder said. "It's really cool that I can have him here."

Gronkowski no worse

Gronkowski's availability has been one of the key story lines, but he ditched the protective boot he had been wearing on Tuesday, practiced for the first time Thursday, and, according to Belichick, appeared to be in good shape a day after the workout.

"I think he was OK this morning. I don't think we had any setbacks," Belichick said yesterday. "We'll see how it goes out there today. He's coming along, we'll just have to see where he gets to, but it's certainly moving in the right direction."

The Patriots treated yesterday's practice like a Saturday walkthrough, with everyone participating in the light, one-hour workout and Belichick telling the pool reporter afterward, "I think we're ready to go."

According to the team's injury report, Gronkowski and 10 others were limited in their participation yesterday and are listed as questionable. The group includes offensive linemen Marcus Cannon (ankle), Logan Mankins (knee), and Vollmer (foot/back/flu); linebackers Dane Fletcher (thumb), Rob Ninkovich (hip), Tracy White (abdomen), and Brandon Spikes (knee); receiver Wes Welker (knee); defensive lineman Kyle Love (ankle); and safety Patrick Chung (knee).

Enjoying himself

While not exactly answering the question, Belichick gave no indication that he'd retire if the Patriots win tomorrow. He'll turn 60 in April, and has been a coach in the NFL for 37 seasons.

"I want to really try to do a good job in the job that I have," Belichick said. "I enjoy all aspects of the job. I enjoy the team-building, the drafting, the free agents, team acquisitions, those kind of things. I enjoy the competition on a weekly basis. Not just on Sundays, but the preparation leading into the game. I enjoy all of it. It beats working."

Belichick, according to a league source, has multiple years remaining on his contract, and has worked for owner Robert Kraft since 2000. If Belichick's comments yesterday are to be believed, he'd like that to continue.

"I feel like we have a good working relationship, a good personal relationship, and he's been very supportive of things that I've asked him to do," Belichick said. "We try to have a competitive football team, a competitive organization in every area, and I'm hopefully looking forward to doing that in the future, continuing that."

Election day

Former Patriots coach Bill Parcells is one of 17 finalists for induction to the Pro Football Hall of Fame, with the voting taking place today, followed by the announcement. Belichick, who spent a number of years on Parcells's staffs in New York (Giants and Jets) and Foxborough - going to three Super Bowls together, winning two - said his former boss is Canton-worthy.

"Absolutely. Bill has done a tremendous job in his time in the National Football League," Belichick said. "Bill has had a great influence on my career and on me personally. I can't imagine he'd be left out of that group."

Curtis Martin, who played with the Patriots for three seasons (1995-97) and ranks fourth on the league's career rushing list, is also a finalist.

Breaking the pattern

Because of Madonna's musical performance, there will be a much longer halftime break at the Super Bowl. A typical halftime at an NFL game lasts 12 minutes; tomorrow's is expected to push 30. Leaving no stone unturned, Belichick attempted to simulate that at practice, and expanded on the unusual decision yesterday.

"It gets into a whole restarting mentality, it's not like taking a break and coming out for the second half. It's like starting a game all over again. It's like playing a game, stopping, then playing a second game. It's almost like a doubleheader in baseball," Belichick said. "That makes it a little bit different, so we had the players go through that process of restarting."

"I just felt it was beneficial for our team this year to actually go through that. Go out there and warm up, practice, take breaks, shut it down for a half-hour, go into the locker room, simulate what a halftime would be in terms of corrections and adjustments, and restarting our bodies both mentally and physically. Just try to go through that process on a timeframe that was more like it's going to be this week."

Staying put

Belichick said the team will remain at its downtown hotel and won't go to a remote site the night before the game, although players did have a curfew last night . . . The Patriots will take their official team photo today. A bench had been set up on the field during Media Day Tuesday, but the Patriots were without Light and Vollmer, both of whom were ill . . . Yesterday's interview session ended with a question about how tired Belichick feels as game day nears and if he's been able to get any sleep. "I've slept like a baby," he said.

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