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PATRIOTS AT EAGLES

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By **Monique Walker** | GLOBE STAFF NOVEMBER 25, 2011

FOXBOROUGH - During training camp, it's fairly easy to pick out the Patriots offensive linemen.

They are usually huddled in the distance, going through their routines. Somewhere, hidden by their massive frames, offensive line coach Dante Scarnecchia barks orders.

After practices, where there is one lineman, another isn't far behind. Members of the offensive line spend time together to get an idea of what it is like to work together. They pick up on tendencies, learn how to communicate, and establish camaraderie.

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That extra time is coming in handy. Injuries have forced players to become moving pieces on a line that protects the team's most valuable asset in quarterback Tom Brady.



BILL GREENE/GLOBE STAFF

Tackle Nate Solder, the Patriots' first-round draft pick this year, didn't expect to get as much playing time as he has.

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■ **Notebook: Concern is real
McCoy**

“Yeah, it’s important, camaraderie on the offensive line,” Brady said. “Those guys, the communication between that group is very important.

“We’ve had that for a number of years. The guys that have been in there have played with each other, and fortunately a lot of our backups have been in there, too. Like Ryan Wendell stepping in, Nate Solder has done a good job as a young player, Marcus [Cannon] had his first little bit of experience out there.

“All those reps are very important. They’re coached very well, and there are very high expectations for those guys and they always live up to the challenge.”

This season, the Patriots have had to put that camaraderie to the test. In the season opener, center Dan Koppen suffered a season-ending ankle injury. Dan Connolly filled in at center and free agent signee Brian Waters took over at right guard. Meanwhile, the rookie Solder was in at right tackle for an injured Sebastian Vollmer.

Waters has proven himself a constant on the right side. Logan Mankins and Matt Light have secured the left side. Connolly has handled a majority of the center duties, and Vollmer has returned to his responsibilities at right tackle.

But last Monday night against the Chiefs, Light went down with an ankle injury in the final minutes of a 34-3 win against the Chiefs. And Connolly and Wendell shared snaps at center.

Once a member of the Patriots, an offensive lineman knows he will have to learn the responsibilities of several positions, and when a player is out, there isn’t room for a learning curve.

“That’s kind of part of the job - people get hurt and other people step in,” Vollmer said. “It’s kind of our goal, obviously, to keep the same five out there if we can, but if we can’t, other people have to step in.

“Myself, I’ve been in that situation and it’s hard to do sometimes. You have to make do, and that’s what practice is for and that’s what training camp is for. You get to try all sorts of combinations.

“It’s getting late in the year, where you have a lot of faith in guys to go in without a lot of practice.”

Solder knows the feeling all too well. Solder, who was drafted by the Patriots in the first round, wasn’t expected to get much playing time early on. But with Vollmer battling a back injury, he stepped in. He started six of his first seven games at right tackle and has played in every game this season, also seeing time as a third tight end.

While a teammate’s injury isn’t how a player wants to get on the field, at this point in the season, the experience has helped Solder add more to his plate.

“Even though no one wants it to happen, it turned out to be somewhat of a blessing to get out there on the field and get some experience,” he said, “and I think it’s absolutely helping me right now to have some of that experience under my belt going into new challenges when the season is getting amped up and things are getting more important.”

When the Patriots take on the Philadelphia Eagles Sunday, they may have to make additional adjustments if Light is unable to play. He was limited in practice Wednesday but was not in a walking boot, which may be a positive sign.

Having time to prepare is better than being thrown into the mix during a game. Solder forces himself to stay active on the sideline so he can be ready if called.

“You’ve got to keep up with the game the whole time and stay focused on the sidelines, stay into the game, see what’s going on, and hear what adjustments are being made on the sidelines,” Solder said.

Wendell, who is in his third NFL season, said the linemen realize they have to be able to come in at a moment’s notice and provide a seamless transition.

“It’s just time and practice,” Wendell said. “It’s happened a lot over the last couple of years of being here, so I think you just get used to being thrown in there.”

On Monday night, Wendell came in for Connolly for a few snaps at center. Switching up a center in the middle of a game may seem dangerous, but Brady is comfortable with both players.

“I’m familiar with both those guys because I’ve had a chance to play with them for a while,” Brady said. “They’re both very good at it. The center/quarterback exchange is obviously most important. Because I’ve taken so many snaps from both of those guys over the years, it’s not much of a problem.”

Wendell focuses on providing consistency for Brady when he’s in.

“Tom’s the consistent factor, and it’s our job to model the way we do things around the way he wants,” Wendell said.

The linemen may never know when it’s going to happen, but as long as everyone can make the necessary adjustments, running back BenJarvus Green-Ellis said, the results should always be the same.

“We’ve just got to all work together,” said Green-Ellis. “Whoever is in and whoever is out, it doesn’t matter because we all have to be able to operate on one page.”

Michael Vega of the Globe staff contributed to this report. Monique Walker can be reached at mwalker@globe.com. Follow her on Twitter [@monwalker](https://twitter.com/monwalker).