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Donald Strickland relishes his second chance

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 11, 2011

BY J.P. PELZMAN

STAFF WRITER

THE RECORD

A torn groin muscle had removed Donald Strickland from the biggest game of his NFL career, and he sat in the visitors' locker room at Lucas Oil Stadium, so distraught he cried.

"I was actually bawling in the locker room," the Jets' nickel cornerback recalled last week, "because I knew how bad I wanted this."

And while Strickland was bawling, Peyton Manning was just plain ballin'. On the play after Strickland was injured, Manning picked on replacement Lito Sheppard for a 36-yard pass to Pierre Garcon, part of a 377-yard, three-touchdown afternoon for Manning in a come-from-behind AFC title-game win over the Jets in January 2010.

That day has stuck with Strickland, even through a one-year stint with San Diego last season after being released by the Jets. And it's a big reason he re-signed with the Jets this year. He and his teammates hope tonight's regular-season opener against visiting Dallas is the start of that long-awaited Super season for the Jets, who have lost in the AFC Championship game in each of the last two years.

"If I was in the mix, I think it would have been a different outcome," Strickland said.

He was not the only one who felt that way that day.

"That was rough," coach Rex Ryan said after the game. "The Colts saw Strickland go down and they went to three [wide receivers] on us immediately."

Strickland tore his groin when he landed awkwardly while tackling Garcon on a 27-yard gain late in the first quarter. He "felt a pop," he said, and knew immediately he was done.



STAFF FILE PHOTO

Nickel cornerback Donald Strickland re-signed with the Jets for another shot at reaching the NFL apex.

"It was painful," he said.

Physically and emotionally, because not only was a Super Bowl berth on the line, but the game had additional significance to Strickland, a third-round pick of the Colts in 2003, who was waived by them two years later.

"It was also a redemption game for me," Strickland said. "I was playing at a very high level [and] it just came to a screeching halt. ... That ate at me for a long time and that's one of the reasons I wanted to come back and rewrite the story."

He isn't the only one looking to turn the page and find a different ending after the January heartbreak the Jets have endured, losing to Indy and then Pittsburgh last season.

"It's definitely something that's talked about," linebacker Calvin Pace said, referring to conversations with teammates. "At some point in time we talk about our ultimate goal. And everybody knows it's time. It's time to get to that game and take it that step further, and that's to get to Indianapolis," site of the 2012 Super Bowl.

Pace probably is the most anxious of any Jet for tonight's game, considering he's missed the first four games in each of the last two seasons. In 2009, he served a four-game NFL-imposed suspension for testing positive for performance-enhancing substances, and last season he was sidelined until Week 5 with a fractured foot.

"I'm ready to go, man," he said with a grin.

"Last year was unfortunate," Pace said. "The year before was dumb. It's finally how it's supposed to be."

Pace, Strickland and the Jets hope they finally can say the same thing at the end of the season.

BRIEF: The stadium lights will be turned off for the duration of halftime tonight as part of a tribute to 9/11 victims. Fans are asked to remain in their seats for the tribute. Players and coaches will wear hats commemorating the police and fire departments.

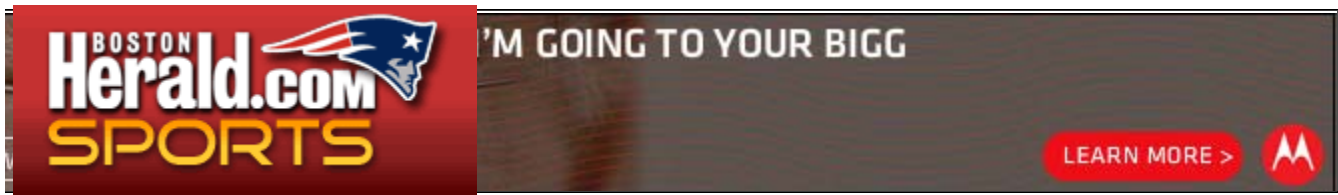
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'Wake-up' call for Nate Solder Tough start for rook if Vollmer can't go

By Ian R. Rapoport / Patriots Notebook | Sunday, September 11, 2011 | <http://www.bostonherald.com> | N.E. Patriots

FOXBORO — The **Patriots** [\[team stats\]](#) officially have questions at right tackle.

Sebastian Vollmer missed yesterday's practice with a back injury, meaning he didn't participate in any workout this week. Afterward, he was listed as questionable on the final injury report of the week.

If Vollmer can't play tomorrow night against the Dolphins on "Monday Night Football," it appears rookie **Nate Solder** will make his debut. In addition, defensive tackle **Albert Haynesworth** missed the helmets-only practice with an illness, and is listed as questionable for a situation not believed to be serious.

As for the first-rounder Solder, he said Friday, "I'm absolutely ready to go, whatever situation I'm put in." Still, the situation could leave the Patriots dangerously thin at tackle.

On Friday, coach **Bill Belichick** was mum about Vollmer's status.

"Whatever he is able to do," Belichick said, "we'll list him based on what he is able to do this week on the injury report."

Vollmer, the returning starter, hasn't been spotted since he skipped the fourth preseason game. Solder held his own against the Giants at right tackle, but Miami's defensive line will no doubt be a far greater challenge. That's especially true for the right tackle, who most often matches up with Dolphins terror **Cameron Wake**, the third-leading sack producer in the league last year.

If the Patriots don't sign or promote a tackle today, it will leave them with just two active tackles on their roster. Belichick intimated it wasn't a big deal, noting how the team usually has just seven linemen active anyway.

The only difference is if a tackle has an injury, another player must play out of position. Likely, it will be guard **Logan Mankins** [\[stats\]](#) who can slide outside.

Mallett learning

Against the Giants in the preseason finale, third-string quarterback **Ryan Mallett** suffered through a brutal series. The rookie from Arkansas took over with 2:21 remaining from his own 20-yard line, needing a field goal to win it.

Instead, three sacks in Mallett's final five plays stopped him before he even started. Mallett said this week that he learned a valuable lesson.

"Get rid of the ball," he said, shaking his head in amazement. "I was holding onto it, trying to make a play, which is something you can't do when you're in that situation of the game. It's just something that I got to learn from. I won't let it happen again if I've learned from my past mistakes."

When the Giants came after him, Mallett should have cut his losses and thrown it away or settled for a short gain.

"It's just part of being young and trying to make something happen instead of taking the smart play," Mallett said. "Down one, need a field goal, so I wanted to make something happen, and I wound up hurting myself more than helping myself because I didn't get rid of the ball."

On the topic of the third quarterback, Belichick said the focus now shifts from doing to watching.

"Whether you're in there or not, you still gain that experience if you're paying attention and listening to what's going on," Belichick said, "no matter which place you are on the depth chart."

Weather or not

The Patriots can expect temperatures in the low-80s at gametime tomorrow.



All of which means they better prepare themselves accordingly, hydrating as much as possible.

Players aren't worried about it, though, because they dealt with it so well during the preseason tilt vs. Tampa Bay.

"Miami will be playing in the heat, also," said nose tackle **Vince Wilfork** [stats], a University of Miami product. "Being from the South, you never get used to playing in the heat. But we try not to focus on the weather. If you allow the weather to be a factor, that's where you make a mistake."

Fletcher on move

Brandon Spikes is still working himself back into shape from an ankle injury, and it's looking like he'll be eased back into the linebacker rotation.

Don't be surprised if **Dane Fletcher** gets the start tomorrow night at middle linebacker, but even he's banged up. Fletcher had a thumb injury that's limited him. Asked if he can wrap up ballcarriers with the cast on his hand, Fletcher simply said, "We'll see."

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