

Solder still learning on both sides of the line

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FOXBORO -- "He's played left tackle and I think that will be his position in the National Football League."

The quote is Bill Belichick's, spit at the conclusion of Day 1 of the 2011 NFL Draft. New England's head coach was describing Nate Solder, his first pick and 17th overall.

Just four months later, the "LT" started against the Giants at "RT."

Solder had little more warning than the rest of us.

"That was just kind of a decision coaches made," he said. "They told me yesterday."

The lineman shrugged his enormous shoulders good-naturedly. He's seen many, many snaps this preseason, but entering an NFL game on the opposite side was brand new.

The move didn't seem too jarring.

"It was fine," he said. "It's completely the opposite so you're kind of in Bizarro World for a little bit, but it was fine."

And he held up well in Bizarro World, which is where the first stringers lived during preseason's fourth game. With around six minutes left in the second quarter the second unit came in and Solder moved back over to the left. He appeared safe at home until after the half.

Then the line started springing leaks.

On third-and-9, Solder blocked down instead of out and gave New York safety Tyler Sash a clear path to Brian Hoyer. Sash crushed Hoyer, who got bagged for an eight-yard loss. Zoltan Mesko trotted out for the punt.

The next Patriots drive started with runs by Shane Vereen. Hoyer handed off to Vereen once: 14 yards. He tried for twice: Minus three. On the third attempt, Vereen looked left, but Solder missed his man and the back was pulled down before he could gain an inch.

Not much of New England's offense looked good in the second half and Solder knows he's not innocent. He was pleasantly perplexed when asked to describe his vision on 'that ugly Hoyer sack/fumble.'

"Weren't there a couple of them? I'm not sure exactly what happened. Shoot, I don't even know. I don't remember that clearly -- sorry," he laughed.

"But I'll see it on film. Oh yeah, I will."

His laughter doesn't signal a lack of commitment. Solder has played a lot this preseason and he's played well enough to be positive -- even with roster cuts looming. The final trimming happens Saturday and he knows Fake Game Four will factor in.

Was shifting Solder on the line a move to create space? Was it about depth, considering Sebastian Vollmer a) couldn't set an edge to save Brady's life in Detroit and b) was nowhere to be seen Thursday night? Or might it just be Belichick playing with his pawns during preseason? The coach has done this before, a la recently released tackle Nick Kaczur, who won a starting job after moving from right to left.

Solder has questions of his own.

"I learned a lot, but I've got a long way to go," he said. "I'm sure glad I got all the reps in that I got because I need to learn so much. It's a whole growing process, a whole maturing process. This is big league ball; this isn't college ball anymore and there are so many things to learn. Every day I say, 'Wow, I didn't know that. Wow, that'd be good to know.'"

It's Belichick's job to find answers. Nobody better knows how much development young players need and how much changing or shifting that takes. Especially at the draft.

"It's still obviously a different level of play and his techniques and there are a lot of things that he'll have to improve on," the coach said in April. "But he's a smart guy, hard-working kid, he's already graduated, he's a good worker."

It looks to be paying off. Solder has relished every snap. He's listened to his teammates and absorbed their lessons. He's worked with sage offensive line coach Dante Scarnecchia for "countless hours."

The next, he hopes, will come on the 53-man roster. On either side of the line.

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