



Another chance to Solder on Replacing Pro Bowler Light just the latest challenge for Pats hulking tackle

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The short, pudgy kid should have known he never stood a chance.

He was, essentially, thrown into a freshman high school basketball game as a defensive decoy, an agitator entrusted with the responsibility of getting under the big guy's skin. He'd push him, slap him, elbow him, say some nasty things about his otherwise very nice mother.

Anything to derail the indefensible. This was the short kid's chance to play. Now, his team needed him to be its MVP.

Minor problem: His assignment was a 6-foot-6 teenager from Buena Vista (Colo.) High, already very well-known to his opponents in the area. At that height, he had a foot on even his taller peers. To a high school freshman, he might as well have been gazing helplessly at the Rocky Mountains.

The giant on the court was Nate Solder, a humble, somewhat awkward kid who had endeared himself to the community. He was polite and respectful. Fathers might have wanted him to date their daughters, even if they didn't want their daughters dating.

So the short, pudgy kid's strategy made sense to a degree. That was until the fourth quarter, when one final nudge caused Solder to blow a gasket, chase his vertically challenged opponent down the court, wind up and begin to unleash a fistful of fury.

But just as quickly as it escalated, Solder recoiled and continued playing. No punches were thrown, but the message was received, as Solder's respectful side won out at the last moment.

"He's got a long fuse, but he's got this competitive thing that will just blow up," said Bob Marken, Solder's freshman basketball coach. "In all of his humbleness and niceness, he's such a competitor, and he will just step up and play. When it's time to compete, he will step up to the challenge unbelievably. It played out in that scene. It still makes me chuckle."

Marken was also Solder's high school football coach, so he's seen Solder's growth and development from the very early stages, and there's been plenty of that. While Solder has always stuck out — and that's what happens when high school students have to duck to get into their classrooms — his frame needed work.

Proportionally, Solder has always been too skinny. Even as recently as this spring, the **Patriots [team stats]** left tackle, who is currently listed at 6-8, admitted he'd like to add another 20 pounds. Marken attributed part of that to Solder's diet, which by all accounts is insanely healthy, to the point where he cut out sugar in middle school. But the adverse effect is it has made it harder to gain weight.

As a result, Solder played tight end throughout high school. On the other side of the ball, he was a defensive end as a freshman and sophomore before switching to middle linebacker for his last two years. The results were impressive as a senior, when he recorded 31 receptions, 513 yards, eight touchdowns, 118 tackles, two sacks and a fumble recovery for a team that advanced to the state championship.



Photo by GLEN MARTIN

Hometown hero a big hit

Solder was a star in Buena Vista, a small mountain town with about 2,500 residents located two-and-a-half hours southwest of Denver. They recognized him because he was a big-time athlete who blocked out the sun, but they related to him because he was one of them.

While trying to seek out those who knew him best, they gushed about "Nate" and his rise to the NFL. They're all on a first-name basis as they follow him close behind, taking the ride with him.

There are the stories of when Solder worked as a teacher's aide in high school, taking part of his day to work in the elementary school. And Marken loves the one about the national video crew that visited Buena Vista to profile Solder before the 2011 draft.

The crew wanted his favorite memories of his high school career, and he rattled off his teammates' accomplishments in their state semifinal victory during his senior year — a flea-flicker for a touchdown and an interception in the end zone — but he left out the part about his own 15 tackles.

To this day, when Solder returns to Buena Vista, he sticks by his roots and embraces the small-town feel, as humble as always, and he's still quick to help out with students.

"Those little kids would look up to him, idolize him," Marken said. "And really, there was nobody better in our community that we would want them to look up to. Even if he's in town today, he'll go back to those classrooms, always."

Making the transition

Solder, clearly, shined as a high school athlete, but he had a couple of difficult decisions to mull when choosing a college. After his junior year, he leaned heavily toward basketball, which he could have played at Dartmouth, but Marken recognized a lot more long-term potential on the gridiron.

The recruiting war got strange, too. It seemed that Solder's suitors forecasted his career at left tackle, but he still liked the idea of giving it a shot at tight end. Marken said schools would promise him his position of choice just to get him to commit, and there was some danger in the process.

Solder committed to the University of Colorado, but head coach Gary Barnett was fired in 2005, and his replacement, Dan Hawkins, immediately made sure to retain one of his top recruits, which turned into a successful venture.

Hawkins said Solder was 6-8 and 225 pounds as a freshman, which led to a redshirt year. Then, as a redshirt freshman, Solder's athleticism truly stuck out. During practices, quarterback Cody Hawkins would repeatedly throw 8-yard, choice-routes about 8 feet in the air for Solder, and the offense figured it could be as easy as that. Solder also played on the kickoff coverage team, and he was routinely one of the fastest players down the field.

But as Hawkins knew, Solder's future was at left tackle, where he played as a redshirt sophomore. While the positional change was right for the team, it was truly in Solder's best interest, too.

"It was pretty obvious," Hawkins said. "We went to him and said, 'Do you want to be a first-round pick as a tackle, or do you want to be a free agent as a tight end?' And he was great. He was like, 'I'll do whatever it takes to help the team.' You don't see a lot of tight ends who want to do that. He's very tough, great morals, I can't say enough about the guy. He's a kid you want to work in your firm, to live next door to you."

"If he wasn't 6-9, 300 pounds, you'd never guess that he was a football player. He's such a well-rounded guy. He could have a conversation with you about the Amazon jungle, politics and everything else. He's just an unbelievable athlete."

Solder's first full season at left tackle went so well that Hawkins had a meeting with Solder and his parents to discuss the future. The warning: He would soon be hearing from agents and others in NFL circles who could promise him the world if he left school early, as some viewed him as an emerging prospect in the college ranks. Solder was wide-eyed about the whole thing.

"I said, 'Look, I know this is going to be amazing to you, but you're going to be one of the best tackles in college football. People are going to come after you,'" Hawkins said. "He was so awesome about the whole thing. He was a little taken aback, like, 'What?'"

Solder continued to showcase his elite athleticism — he'd run with the running backs and receivers during practice, not the offensive linemen — with his tremendous footwork, fluid hips and surprisingly adept flexibility to bend to block shorter rushers. He was durable, too, missing two total offensive snaps as a three-year starter.

In a coach's eyes, Solder was the perfect left tackle, as the staff could just leave him there and forget about him. Hawkins laughed at the memory of a television interview when he was asked how Colorado would handle Texas A & M's decorated pass rusher, Von Miller, to which Hawkins replied, "Have you seen Nate Solder?"

Moving up the ladder

The praise wasn't coachspeak. Solder was the second tackle selected in the 2011 NFL draft, 17th overall by the Patriots, who didn't have an immediate need at the position but made the pick in preparation for Pro Bowler **Matt Light** [stats]'s eventual retirement.

That was OK, though, because it fit nicely with Solder's upside. As Hawkins noted, Solder had only three years of experience, and he went through a handful of offensive line coaches. There was so much room for him to develop, which the Patriots expect to happen during his transition to full-time left tackle this fall after splitting time between left and right tackle last season.

"We were very impressed with Nate," **Logan Mankins** [stats] said of Solder's rookie season. "I think he's only going to get better this year. He better get better because that's what we want him to do and expect of him."

Now, it's time for Solder's turn in the spotlight. Naturally, offensive linemen want to keep a low profile, but when the job description involves keeping **Tom Brady** [stats] clean, anonymity isn't much of an option.

Can the quiet, polite kid from Buena Vista handle that? His previous coaches believe he'll get it done with his head down — as he's always done — whether it was on the field, or volunteering at a Guatemalan orphanage or helping rebuild an Italian town after an earthquake.

Solder hasn't asked for the spotlight because he doesn't want it, but that hasn't prevented him from using his high profile to make a difference in various walks of life. That's probably what the Patriots recognized while they were shopping for their left tackle of the future.

"I don't think you could find a better guy, mentality-wise, than that," Hawkins said of Solder. "He would just be happy knowing that he did his job and Tom never got hit, never got pressured. He wouldn't care if Tom Brady ever knew who he was. He's that kind of guy."

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