

Return Man

Welker will be back, and perhaps sooner rather than later

by Ian R. Rapoport

The image that will stay in the minds of Patriots fans forever is a jarring one.

Wes Welker, the soul of the team and the NFL's leading receiver, limping off the lumpy turf at Reliant Stadium in Houston, sitting on the bench by himself, putting a Gatorade-sponsored towel over his eyes, and crying. And crying. And crying, even as he was being carted into the locker room.

After catching a 12-yard pass from quarterback Tom Brady in the meaningless 2009 regular season finale, Welker tried to cut back with Texans safety Bernard Pollard bearing down on him. Two seconds later, he had crumpled to the turf, grabbing his leg.

Welker's mother, Shelley, contacted by a reporter during the game, asked fans to, "Just say your prayers for him," a small reminder of the gravity of the situation. The pain was obvious, and so was the reality.

Tests confirmed that Welker had torn both the MCL and ACL in his left knee, knocking him out of the playoffs and off-season conditioning, and leaving his status for 2010 in doubt. To make matters more complicated, Welker also discovered that he'd torn his rotator cuff sometime during the 2009 season, an injury that required more reconstructive surgery.

With Tom Brady two years

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removed from his own surgery, with Randy Moss believing that he's in his final year with the franchise, with neither of the last two seasons including a playoff win, there is no doubt coach Bill Belichick needs Welker to return like his old self as soon as possible.

Amazingly, that may be exactly what happens.

To the surprise of virtually everyone, Welker returned to the field during organized team activities June 2, a little more than four months after having surgery.

While there were some subtle indications that he was still getting his legs under him—he would put the breaks on noticeably gingerly after running a route—it should not detract from the fact that *Wes Welker was running pass routes four months after major knee surgery*. And for the most part, he looked like the same ol' Wes, which stands as perhaps the most encouraging sign of the offseason for the Patriots.

Of course, just seeing Welker on the field was meaningful in its own way. Tedy Bruschi, a teammate of Welker's in 2007–08 who now works for ESPN, said, "[I'm surprised he's out there on the field... not so much that he's out there on the field, but that he's out there in front of the media, in front of all the eyes that can watch him. Because he could've easily been in the field house right next to the practice field hidden from the cameras where people couldn't watch. But this is his confidence, saying, 'Go ahead. This is where I am. Watch me running these routes, watch me doing these drills, I feel great.' This was like a statement from Wes saying, 'I'm back!'"

Whether he will be back for the season opener against the Bengals September 12 remains uncertain, but early projections that Welker would begin the season on the physically-unable-to-perform list now look decidedly premature.

His true status will come into clearer focus in late July when training camp begins. "He'll work hard as he always does to bounce back," Belichick said.

There's no doubt about that. But his return to form is imperative, and Belichick knows it better than anyone. How important is Welker? For three years, he has been the team's steadiest player, a gritty leader and consistently consistent performer. All he's accumulated is 346 catches for 3,688 yards and 15 touchdowns since the start of the 2007 season, the most of any receiver in the NFL in that span.

The 5'9", 185-pound former Texas Tech star has turned himself from an overlooked, underappreciated undrafted free agent into one of the most indispensable players in the league. Welker's 123 catches account for 32% of his team's total in 2009, while his 1,348 yards represent 30% of the Pats' receiving yardage.

"You can't replace him," Brady said.

Maybe not, but will Welker in 2010 be able to replicate Welker in 2009? The progress so far—and amazing is not too strong an adjective to describe how far he has come in



Welker caught a team-record 123 passes last season, the second-most in NFL history, despite missing nearly three full games due to injury.

such a short time—is extremely encouraging. But until he's on the field, and making those trademark quick cuts in the slot, we won't know if he's the same Welker or if he ever will be again.

From Belichick to receiver Julian Edelman to former teammates who had dealt with similar injuries, all have been asked the same question: When will Welker come back, and will he be the same when he does?

Typically, Belichick's answers are vague. Queried about gauging Welker's progress, Belichick answered, "Wherever it is. I don't know how long it's been. He works hard. We know that."

Edelman, the second-year receiver often called Mini-Wes, is hit with the topic whenever fans recognize him on the street.

"If someone does know, they'll ask, 'How's Wes?' and all that," said Edelman earlier in the offseason. "I'll usually say, 'Doing well.'"

As for Welker, he made his first significant comments days after the knee injury in a letter to fans posted on his website. That's when he stated that his simple goal is to return to the player he once was.

"I am ready to face that challenge," Welker said. "This