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AFC NEWS 'N' NOTES

FOR USE AS DESIRED
AFC-N-2 5/18/06

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NFL WELCOME MAT CAN BE TOUGH FOOTING FOR ROOKIES

You excelled throughout your high school and college days and landed that dream job right out of school. That is the case for many NFL rookies, though their first days on the job hold more challenges than simply learning how to find the company cafeteria.

"I knew that I had to prove myself, and not just talk a good game," says Denver Broncos All-Star linebacker **AL WILSON** of his first minicamp with the team as a first-round pick out of Tennessee in 1999. Wilson was a team captain for the Volunteers, helping them to a 13-0 record in 1998 and the national championship. The Broncos had just won a Super Bowl when he walked onto the field with veterans for the first time. "I wasn't coming in here showboating or anything," says Wilson. "I was just humble and willing to listen, and I think that's what you have to do."

Recalling his first NFL minicamp in 1998, Pittsburgh Steelers All-Star wide receiver and Super Bowl XL MVP **HINES WARD** says, "It was a lot to take in, but I made sure to learn my playbook quickly."

"The biggest challenge was probably adjusting to the speed of the game," adds Wilson, "and even the speed of the practices because the coaches expect you to carry out all of your assignments perfectly right away. I had to really pick up on the schemes and play mistake-free right away, going full speed."

As rookies aim to grow into their NFL shoes, coaches must guide, teach, and evaluate them, while making them realize that their contributions on the field are critical.

"They need a tough mental set and some encouragement," says former Cardinals (1973-77) and Chargers (1979-86) head coach **DON CORYELL**, who guided five teams to division titles. Coryell, 81, is now enjoying retirement near Vancouver, British Columbia. "It could be as simple as a pat on the back by a coach. If a rookie just goes out there and busts his tail on every play, that's recognized by everyone and a lot of guys make teams because of that. Try to keep him fired-up and excited. A rookie needs confidence that he can make it in the NFL."

JIM MORA, SR. was head coach of the Saints (1986-96) and Colts (1998-2001), leading his teams to the playoffs six times, and is now an NFL Network analyst. "I'd always meet with the rookies and talk to them about what they should expect," he says. "I would tell them that they were here because they're good players."

"Another thing I would tell them is not to worry about what the coaches are thinking – just go out there, practice hard, and do the best you can."

"I think the biggest thing here for a coach is to show patience," adds **TED MARCHIBRODA**, who during his 31 years as an NFL coach led the Colts to three consecutive division titles (1975-77) and in 1995 came within one game of the Super Bowl. Marchibroda now serves as a color analyst on Colts radio broadcasts. "Don't make a decision too soon on a rookie – that will take place in games during the preseason."

Ward and Wilson, two accomplished NFL standouts who have been selected to play in four Pro Bowls apiece, are thankful for veterans who offered them insight early in their careers.

"I leaned on **JEROME BETTIS** a lot when I got here," says Ward. "He was like a big brother to me by helping me learn how to handle everything. He led by example and was a class act. He took me in and I learned a lot from him."

Wilson credits former fellow linebackers **JOHN MOBLEY** and **GLENN CADREZ**. "Sure, they treated me like a rookie in many ways, but they were a big help in that I could go to them and ask them questions," he says.

Former head coaches Coryell, Marchibroda, and Mora all recognize the value of having veterans mentor young players. Each coach agrees that such relationships must evolve on their own.

"It has to happen naturally," says Coryell. "In every position group, there were veterans who did what was best for the team and helped the younger guys. Class guys like **JACKIE SMITH**, **DAN DIERDORF** – they're two examples of veterans who worked very well with younger players."