



## AFC NEWS 'N' NOTES

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### ONE EYE ON THE BALL, ANOTHER EYE ON THE CHAINS

Being cognizant of the first-down marker and surpassing that point on a catch is a nuance of the sport that wins games.

"It is something that you can practice," says Denver Broncos wide receiver **ROD SMITH** about gaining the knack of surpassing the first-down marker. "You practice situations that will occur in games. My thing is that I play the game 10.5 yards at a time. If you keep moving the sticks, you move into position to score points and keep your defense off the field."

A look at players with the most third-down receptions that result in first downs in the past 10 seasons and for 2006:

PLAYER (SINCE 1997)	3RD DWN REC. FOR 1ST DWN	PLAYER (2006)	3RD DWN REC. FOR 1ST DWN
Marvin Harrison, Ind.	185	Marques Colston, N.O.	20
Jimmy Smith, Jac.	168	Terrell Owens, Dallas	16
Rod Smith, Denver	161	Hines Ward, Pittsburgh	16
Keyshawn Johnson, Car.	158	Laveranues Coles, NYJ	15
Randy Moss, Oakland	155	Javon Walker, Denver	15
		Reggie Wayne, Ind.	15

"You just have to be disciplined in your route," says Pittsburgh's four-time All-Star receiver **HINES WARD**. "Usually on third-down, they know you're the go-to guy, so you might see bracket coverage.

"It's just about being on the same page as the quarterback, and the quarterback trusting you to get the proper depth and that you'll make a play for him to keep the chains moving. It's just a feel thing. You have to play a game within the game. You have to know the down and distance, know how many yards you have to get."

New Orleans rookie – and draft pick No. 252 overall of 255 – **MARQUES COLSTON** from Hofstra, leads the NFL with 20 third-down catches for first downs through Week 10.

"Most routes are based on route depth, and most conversions are caught underneath the coverage and turned up and advanced for the first down," says Saints head coach **SEAN PAYTON**. "The important factors are understanding the coverages and having the toughness to make the extra yards that you need to get the first downs.

"Marques has worked very hard and has strived to pick up the nuances of the offensive system. He has been a quick study and is a player who enjoys learning and wants more and more knowledge. He is a 'coachable' player."

A common thread among receivers atop these charts is the credit they give to their coaches for stressing first-down awareness.

"Every coach I've had since I've been playing receiver has stressed the importance of the depth of your route," says Smith. "If it's third-and-six and you run a five-yard route, what's the point? It's really a factor in who wins and loses in this league if you look at third-down conversions. It's indicative of who is going to win the game because if you keep the sticks moving, you're going to get into field-goal range and score more points."

Says Ward, "Coach **(BILL) COWHER** always preaches that big plays are made when you're converting third down. In his opinion, converting third downs are big plays. If I continue doing that, then I'm helping the team. Just make a conscious effort on third down to make sure that you convert."

"Our coaches," says receiver **LAVERANUES COLES** of the Jets, "put everyone, not only me, in a position to succeed. They dial up a play that gives us a chance to move the chains. All we have to do is execute."

Guiding the Indianapolis Colts' offense since 1998, offensive coordinator **TOM MOORE** notes, "Whatever we do in practice, whether it's a drill, seven-on-seven, or 'team,' we have down markers in place so that our receivers are always cognizant of where they have to go and where they have to be for the first down. We script our plays accordingly with this in mind."