

## After microscope glares on Thomas, it's Moss' turn to feel heat

After the dust settled on 'LateGate,' it just might have been better for New England Patriots wide receiver Randy Moss to have been sitting where Adalius Thomas was sitting last week against Carolina.

On the sideline in street clothes. Instead, a seemingly disinterested Moss was a non-factor once again against a subpar Panthers secondary, after which cornerback Chris Gamble openly claimed that he knew Moss "was going to shut it down," in referring to Moss' anemic single catch for 16 yards on the day, and which then resulted in a fumble.

Not exactly the sort of performance expected from one of the top receivers in the NFL, and having just collected 11 catches over the last four contests, it seems that most football watchers have placed a target on Moss' back in claiming that the wideout is headed back to his ineffective days of when he was in Oakland, which ended when the Raiders were willing to part with the star receiver for just a fourth-round draft pick.

Gamble wasn't alone at aiming at Moss' lethargic play, as teammate safety Chris Harris said, "You get physical with him, and I don't want to say he quits, but he kind of doesn't run the routes the way they're supposed to be run."

Ouch. Unfortunately, this has been a

reputation that had followed Moss from Minnesota to Oakland, but most everyone figured that he'd drink the Patriots' Kool Aid and march to the party line — and never stray — when he arrived at Foxboro.

In an effort to defend Moss, and hopefully not lose him for the remainder of the season, head coach Bill Belichick and quarterback Tom Brady were front and center at refuting the Panthers' claims.

Moss' struggles, though, haven't been a one game anomaly, as his last four games have shown a steady downhill track in production. Aside from being shut out this week — there is nowhere to go but up against the Bills this week, as Moss hasn't had a game up to his typical standards since Indianapolis, when he torched the young Colts secondary for nine catches for 179 yards in the 4th-and-2 game.

Which opens the door to wondering in watching video of how poorly Moss blocked for running back Kevin Faulk on that critical play. Could the beginnings to Moss' having fallen into severe pout mode be traced back to that play, in showing outward disappointment for not being the target of Brady's in what could have ended the Colts' winning streak a few weeks ago?

Since that loss in Indianapolis, Moss has downspiralized with an ineffective five catches for 34 yards against the New York Jets, with

some of his remaining desire possibly being quashed in having to face off against one of the league's up-and-coming cornerbacks in Darrelle Revis that week, only to be followed by a scant three catches in New Orleans, then two against Miami and then the single catch-and fumble against the Panthers.

### ON THE SUBJECT OF SPORTS



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Making matters worse is that Moss has been dogged by a reputation where quarterbacks are seen as forcing balls to Moss, in an effort to keep the enigmatic wideout content. Upon reviewing some of Brady's questionable throws this year, combined with a bothersome lack of fight by Moss in trying to break up some of those potential pickoffs, that has only deepened the frustration of Pats followers.

While one could defend Moss' numbers against Revis, the last three games have been against a suspect group of corners, whether it

be Mike McKenzie, who the Saints had signed off the street as an injury replacement because of how depleted its secondary was leading up to the Saints game, or either Vontae Davis or Sean Smith of Miami, both rookies, and then Gamble, an average-at-best player at his position.

So while Moss has been limited to 183 yards since the Colts game, one has to ask what has kept Moss from putting up numbers more on par with Welker's — 496 yards over that stretch, especially after seeing some of Moss' "body language" as Harris noted, making it easy to think the effort simply isn't there.

When considering the supposed double threat that Brady should have in Moss and Welker, it's no surprise during Moss' slump, even a three-time Super Bowl winner in Brady would see the offensive numbers on the scoreboard suffer, as the Pats have been limited to no more than 21 points the last three weeks.

At a frustrating 8-5, most of the credit for the team being able to move downfield this season offensively has been on the other side of the field, with Welker leading the league in receptions, even though he missed the two of the first three games of the season because of an injury, with 105 catches and 1,158 yards.

Moss, on the other hand, has been on the field for each of the team's 13 games, but has only been able to reel in 69 passes for 1,074 yards.

Even without Brady under center last year, and Matt Cassel forced to learn the ropes for virtually the whole season, Moss was able to equal that number of catches in 2008. With only three games left on the schedule, it's definitely eye opening to see that Moss is only at 69 catches, making it easy for the questions to have picked up steam about his play this season.

Lest we not forget that Moss, in his first year with Brady, was largely responsible for Brady's rewriting the record book in the 16-0 regular season that had Brady throw for 50 touchdowns in 2007, while Moss gathered his own record-breaking total of 23.

With the glaringly poor performance last week, though, on top of watching Brady talking at length with Moss on the sideline, seemingly trying to get through to him to step up his game, it's clear that there's a fine line that the team finds itself treading in keeping Moss productive for the rest of the season.

With some of the injury issues facing the Pats entering Sunday's game against the Bills, the need for an offense capable of scoring more points is crucial, as both defensive linemen Vince Wilfork and Ty Warren have missed practice sessions this week, and could either miss the game outright, or be ineffective because of health issues.

At least one possible slight

improvement on the defense will be the continuation of having cornerback Shawn Springs back on the field, after having missed four consecutive games, despite being listed as probable for each of them. While Belichick tried unsuccessfully to utilize the much younger Jonathan Wilhite at the position, even the head coach finally hit his breaking point, and reinserted Springs against Carolina. While Springs was unable to break up a 41-yard bomb by Matt Moore to Steve Smith last week on the Panthers' opening score, his inability to shut down Smith was largely limited to that play, while suffering through Wilhite's inabilities seemed to have stretched to a nightmarish handful each and every game.

This week, Springs will likely have to face off against another big weapon in Buffalo's Terrell Owens, who he limited to just two catches for 46 yards in Week 1 this season, one of Owens' lowest outputs on the year. Somehow, even with a Bills team that is headed nowhere this year at 5-8, with a backup quarterback at the helm and Dick Jauron failing to make it through the season as head coach, Owens still seems to be an active threat within the Bills' offense, much more so than could be argued with Moss lately.

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