


**30**

**7**

## READ & REACT

BY MICHAEL PARENTE

### Wide-open debate

With Danny Amendola, Julian Edelman and Brandon LaFell penciled in as the Patriots top three receivers, there's still competition for the fourth spot in the lineup, which could be a key position this year given the team's lack of depth at tight end.

Second-year pro Kenbrell Thompkins, an undrafted free agent a year ago who is now a potential breakthrough player offensively for 2014, got a lengthy look Friday with Tom Brady under center. He was targeted three times while catching two passes for 35 yards in the opening half. The statistics weren't what stood out the most, but rather Brady's unwavering confidence in Thompkins despite an ill-timed drop midway through the second quarter.

After making a great grab on a 21-yard pass from Brady, Thompkins dropped an easy one over the middle on the next snap. Brady went right back to him on the next play and Thompkins rewarded his quarterback's confidence with a nice catch in traffic before turning up the field for a 14-yard gain.

With last year's second-round draft pick Aaron Dobson still sidelined due to a foot injury and Josh Boyce not playing until the third quarter, Thompkins took advantage of his opportunity Friday to climb the depth chart and stave off a hard push from rookies Brian Tyms and Derrick Johnson, both of whom have played well at various points during the preseason. The two combined for three catches in the second half Friday and figure to be Thompkins' main competition from here on out,



### COACH'S CORNER

*"I thought we took another step in our preparation here tonight. There were certainly some positive things out there.*

*Still a lot of things we have to work on. We'll see if we can string together another good week on the practice field [and] in meetings and take advantage of our next preseason opportunity and do as much as we can to be ready for the regular season. I thought the guys played with good effort tonight, and we had a good week that led up to that, so those things were all positives. But we have a long way to go. Still a lot of stuff we have to work on. We left a lot of plays out there on the field."*

unless seventh-round draft pick Jeremy Gallon, who finally suited up Friday, can make a serious push in the preseason finale against the Giants.

### Shane on you

Friday was also a big night for running back Shane Vereen, who rushed six times for 18 yards and also caught five passes — second only to Edelman — for 57 yards

and two touchdowns. Starter Stevan Ridley, who fumbled against the Eagles, got the bulk of the carries in the second half as the primary back, while Vereen and rookie James White lined up next to one another in the backfield several times in the opening half, perhaps foreshadowing what we might see this season with New England's two-back set.

"It's something the defense has to prepare for, something we can use to our advantage," said Vereen, who finished third on the team last year in receptions behind Edelman and Amendola. "I just go out there and work on a lot of things in practice, and whatever they ask me to do, I'll do."

White was also on the field when Vereen scored on a 40-yard catch-and-run play from Brady in the second quarter. All told, Vereen was on the field for 26 of 33 snaps in the first half.

### Center of attention

The competition at center heated up again Friday against Carolina as Ryan Wendell, the incumbent starter for the past two years, got the nod on the opening series while Dan Connolly, his lone competition for the starting role, entered the game on New England's second possession. Jordan Devey, the former practice squad lineman, started again at right guard as he's done throughout the preseason.

Later in the opening half, Wendell reentered at center with Connolly replacing Devey and moving back to right guard, where he has started for the last two seasons since he and Wendell initially swapped roles in 2011. They continued subbing for one another throughout the game with Wendell reentering at center once rookie Jimmy Garoppolo entered the game at quarterback in the third quarter.

While the third preseason game is generally considered an opportunity for teams to get an extensive look at their projected starters, it's still unclear who will start at center or right guard in Week 1 given the constant substitutions in each game. Devey has played well enough through the first three games to at least give first-year

### RANDOM THOUGHTS

MICHAEL PARENTE

If the use of surface tablets on the sideline wasn't enough to usher in the boom of mobile technology among NFL coaches, the Patriots also have a nifty way of holding their clipboards, using what resembles a sleeve similar to what you'd see on the underside of a handheld Wham-O Velcro Catch Ball pad. The hard slips comfortably inside, eliminating the need to grip a hard plastic clipboard all night. It sure beats getting hand cramps at the most inopportune time.

Fewer flags being thrown means a more enjoyable game and Friday's exhibition between the Patriots and Panthers was a step in the right direction, or at least a step above what we saw against the Eagles when the two teams combined for 21 penalties. Only 15 were called Friday, but four were for offensive pass interference. What gives? It seems as though receivers are now being penalized for simply blocking. It's just another wrinkle in the system the officials need to iron out before Week 1.

During the local broadcast Friday, the in-game trivia segment asked how many teams have a winning record against the Patriots since Bill Belichick began coaching them in 2000. The answer is zero. Nada. Zich. Not even the Broncos, who seem to have their number, have a winning record against the Patriots. The only team that doesn't have a losing record during that same stretch is Carolina, which is 2-2. It's a mind-boggling statistic if, by some chance, you happen to forget just how good this franchise has been for the past 14 years.

### ROGER BROWN

The Patriots use of two-back sets to create mismatches in the passing game has been effective in the preseason. Shane Vereen's 40-yard touchdown pass from Tom Brady in the second quarter came on a play when Vereen and James White both lined up in the backfield.

There's no need for the Patriots to carry three quarterbacks on their 53-man roster, especially when they need depth at so many other positions. Rookie Jimmy Garoppolo has shown enough in preseason to be the team's backup QB.

It was good to see the coaching staff take a cautionary approach with linebacker Jerod Mayo, who dressed but didn't play against the Panthers. Mayo, who practiced this week, has yet to play in the preseason.

offensive line coach Dave DeGuglielmo something to consider when the opening day depth chart is finalized.

In any event, Wendell earning the start against Carolina is a good sign for the 28-year-old vet, who spent the first three years of his NFL career on and off the Patriots active roster until earning the starting role over longtime incumbent Dan Koppen in 2012. He and Brady have developed a solid rapport in recent years and that alone might be enough for him to keep his job in 2014. Devey might not beat out Connolly for the starting right guard job when all is said and done, but his experience in the preseason working with the starting unit



**END RESULT** — Running back Shane Vereen scores on a 40-yard touchdown pass from Tom Brady in the second quarter Friday to give New England a 10-0 lead.

Photo by Keith Nordstrom