

Opportunity knocking

San Dimas High product Hackett comes of age

By Chris Gutierrez, Staff Writer
Inside SOCAL

San Dimas High School graduate D.J. Hackett had what many considered a breakout season for the Seattle Seahawks in 2006.

A 2004 fifth-round draft choice out of the University of Colorado, Hackett played in 14 games, making five starts, and ranked third among a talented group of Seahawks receivers in receptions (45) and yards (610). He tied for second with four TD receptions.

Hackett's efforts helped Seattle win a third consecutive NFC West championship and served notice to his peers that he had arrived as an NFL wide receiver.

Hackett, who grew up in Ontario, says the reason he emerged the way he did is quite simple.

"Last year, I feel like I got more opportunities than I had previously," Hackett said from the Seahawks training camp in Kirkland, Wash. "I've always had confidence in myself."

Hackett filled in admirably when other Seahawks receivers were forced out of action, especially after Bobby Engram missed nine games because of a thyroid condition.

Having seized the opportunity a year ago, Hackett finds himself with an even bigger opportunity as this season begins.

During the off-season, the Seahawks traded away Darrell Jackson, who had 441 receptions and 47 touchdowns in seven seasons with the club.

That moves Deion Branch over to the flanker position, leaving an opening at split end.

When training camp began, Hackett was listed as No. 1 on the depth chart at the position, ahead of Nate Burleson.

"Each year I come in and try to get better, get good relations with the quarterback, whether I'm the first guy or the fourth guy," Hackett said. "I'm in a different position this time, of course, because I've come in with a chance to be a starter, not the third or fourth guy. I have an opportunity to showcase my talents."

Hackett, 26, added that although he is the favorite to land a starting position, he's not taking anything for granted.

Nonetheless, he has received high praise from many observers on the progress he has made in his brief career.

"I think he took great strides last year as a role player and did some really fine things," Seahawks coach Mike Holmgren said in talking about this being a big chance for Hackett. "He has to stay healthy. When he is healthy, he can play pretty well."

Hackett played in the Seahawks' 21-20 wild-card playoff win over Dallas last season, but injured his ankle in the game and was inactive for the following week's loss against the Chicago Bears.

Among his 2006 single-game highlights were his first career 100-yard receiving effort (104 at Arizona on Dec.10) and a career-best eight receptions (Dec.14 vs. San Francisco).

It may be just a hint of things to come as he becomes a bigger factor in the Seahawks' game plan.

According to scouts offering their opinions in The Sporting News' NFL preview magazine, Hackett is "big and athletic. Has rare leaping ability. Runs with great balance and awareness. He can use his size, strength and speed to create mismatches downfield."

Being part of the high-powered Seahawks offense, led by quarterback Matt Hasselbeck, is something for which the 6-foot-2, 208-pound Hackett is grateful.

"It's great. The West Coast offense is proven. There's a lot to learn, but it's a wonderful thing," said Hackett, whose father, Eddie, was a third-round draft choice of the Minnesota Vikings out of Alcorn A&M in 1971. "(Hasselbeck) is an established quarterback."

"Hackett is a bigger guy and very physical. That is the biggest thing," Hasselbeck said, explaining what Hackett brings to the other side in the Seahawks' offensive scheme. "You saw many plays last year when it was man coverage and he was just throwing a guy off because he is bigger and stronger. He catches the ball well."

At San Dimas High, where he graduated in 1999, Hackett played wide receiver and defensive back on the football team, but also excelled in basketball and track, earning varsity letters three times in all three sports.

During his senior football season of 1998, in which he was a team captain for coach Ted Clark's Saints, Hackett earned All-CIF accolades after catching 48 passes for 772 yards and nine touchdowns. He also had four interceptions on defense.

From there he went on to play at Cal State Northridge.

After redshirting in 1999, Hackett made his mark as a freshman in 2000, catching 47 passes for 728 yards and seven touchdowns.

Hackett followed that with a sophomore season that included 53 receptions for 778 yards and 10 TDs.

CSUN discontinued its football program after the 2001 campaign, so Hackett took his talents to coach Gary Barnett's Colorado Buffaloes, who made an Alamo Bowl appearance in 2002. Hackett grabbed two TD passes in the game against Wisconsin.

Hackett's final collegiate season was highly productive.

He set a still-standing single-season school record with 78 receptions, accounting for 1,013 yards and seven touchdowns. He was an All-Big 12 Conference first-team selection, the team's Most Valuable Player and was also selected to play in the Hula Bowl.

There was no doubt his next stop would be the NFL.

"Once I got out of high school, I felt I could play at any level," said Hackett, who was born DeAndre James but has been called D.J. for as long as he can remember. "For me, the biggest difference from college to pros is reaction time. I think the biggest improvement I've made receiving-wise is in making the in-and-out breaks."

He was inactive the first seven games of his rookie season (2004) with the Seahawks before being placed on injured reserve for the rest of the campaign with a hip injury.

Hackett saw his first taste of regular-season NFL action in 2005, playing in 13 games and starting three. He caught 28 passes for 400 yards and a pair of touchdowns.

Seattle's season ended with a trip to Super Bowl XL in Detroit against the Pittsburgh Steelers.

Hackett played in the game but didn't have a reception in the Seahawks' 21-10 setback.

"It was a great experience. It would have been nice to win," Hackett said about the Super Bowl. "It felt good to have a chance to contribute to the team (during a Super Bowl season)."

Hackett now lives in Seattle with his wife, Alexandra, who gave birth to the couple's first child, Andre James, on July 31, just a few days into training camp.

Family is very important to Hackett. He says that the support of his mother, Gloria, and father has helped the most in getting to where he is today. He also draws strength from his faith.

As he looks forward to another season and the chance to build on his flourishing career, Hackett feels blessed to be a part of the NFL.

"It's a wonderful experience," he said.

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