

Ron Cook: Chris Hogan's determination rewarded with Super Bowl season

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By Ron Cook / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

HOUSTON — The question had to be asked of New England Patriots wide receiver Chris Hogan, who tortured the Steelers with nine catches for 180 yards and two touchdowns in the AFC championship game.

“How in the world did you get so wide open?”

“We knew their game plan,” Hogan said. “They didn’t play a lot of man. That’s what we expected.”

Easy.

Don’t jump to conclusions.

This isn’t another Spygate.

“There are a lot of things that make it happen,” Hogan said. “Film study. Hard work. Running my routes the right way with the right depth. Knowing the soft spots. Creating separation ...

“I think it goes back to preparation throughout the entire week. The more you watch film, the more you see things that are going to be open during the game. If you’re getting those certain looks, you’ve already kind of visualized those plays in your head. You’ve already played it out. You already know what’s going to happen.”

Hogan might have snuck up on America in the AFC championship game, but the Steelers knew all about him. Mike Tomlin and Keith Butler knew he averaged 17.9 yards per catch this season, best in the AFC. Their defense just couldn’t stop him. We’ll see Sunday night if the Atlanta Falcons defense can stop him in Super Bowl LI.

“He’s been spectacular for us,” Tom Brady said of Hogan.

“He is more talented than what people are giving him credit for,” Patriots receiver Julian Edelman said.

“He’s so fast. Anytime you put the work in that he has, you’re going to see results.”

Every player at the Super Bowl has a unique story, Hogan's better than most. He played just one season of college football at Monmouth after playing three years of lacrosse at Penn State. He managed to get camp time with the San Francisco 49ers and Miami Dolphins and practice-squad work with the New York Giants before finally sticking with the Buffalo Bills in 2013. He did enough in his three seasons in Buffalo for the Patriots to sign him to a three-year, \$12 million contract before this season. He since has been compared to former Patriots great Wes Welker, which flatters him but prompted him to say, "I just want to be myself and make my own way."

Hogan said the low point of his long journey to the NFL was being released by the Dolphins' practice squad early in the 2012 season. HBO's "Hard Knocks" had made him something of a cult figure during that training camp. Teammate Reggie Bush nicknamed him "7-11" because he always was open. He couldn't believe the Dolphins closed the store.

"I had a great offseason and a great training camp with a lot of good feedback from the coaches — and I get cut," Hogan said. "For me, it was an eye-opening experience. As good as I played and as good as I thought I was, it wasn't enough. I drove back that day all the way to New Jersey. I was working out the next day, waiting for another opportunity. Really, from that moment on, I haven't stopped."



Patriots receiver Chris Hogan torched the Steelers for nine catches for 180 yards and two touchdowns in the AFC championship game. (Matt Freed/Post-Gazette)

Hogan spent much of the 2012 season watching football on his couch. He said he never considered giving up the game.

“I would never give up on anything. That’s my drive, my passion to succeed. That’s why I’m here.

“There were some doubters out there, I can imagine. But I had a lot of people supporting me, as well. The biggest believer in myself was me. That’s all I needed. I knew I could compete. It was just about being at the right place at the right time.”

It probably didn’t hurt that Patriots coach Bill Belichick has a lacrosse background. He was captain of his lacrosse team as a senior at Wesleyan University. Belichick and Hogan weren’t the first two athletes to combine football and lacrosse. The great Jim Brown did it at Syracuse in the mid-1950s.

“There’s tons of carry-over from lacrosse to football,” Hogan said. “You’re constantly going, trying to beat the guy in front of you. I think the biggest thing is the eye-hand coordination. Anybody who has played on the college level knows we can throw the ball around pretty hard and pretty fast. That’s helped me a lot.”

Hogan had scholarship offers for football from Connecticut and Rutgers but picked Penn State for lacrosse. “It was the sport I was recruited more heavily for. I visited Penn State and fell in love with the place.”

Hogan fell in love with something much important at Penn State. Ashley Boccio was an All-American defender on Penn State’s women’s lacrosse team. They started dating and became engaged. They are due to have twins in March, a boy and a girl.

“Lacrosse was pretty good to me,” Hogan said, grinning.

Boccio, a podiatry resident at Long Island Jewish Medical Center, didn’t make the trip to Houston because of her condition and will watch the Super Bowl at their home in Long Island. For Hogan this season, there has been a lot of long-distance commuting. He said he makes the three-hour drive each way from Foxborough once a week, “mostly to just have lunch with her at the hospital.”

One day, Hogan will be able to tell his kids he played with Brady and for Belichick, the greatest quarterback-coach combination in NFL history. One day, perhaps, he will be able to tell them he was a world champion.

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