

2009



2011



2014



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The MVP of the waiting game

McCoy's path took him from Browns castoff to scout team legend to the Redskins' most important player

BY LES CARPENTER

Redskins at Cowboys

Today, 4:30 p.m., Fox

Inside: Thomas Boswell reminds us that Colt McCoy can play. **D12**

Come most autumn weekday afternoons, a battle breaks out on the fields behind the Washington Redskins' practice facility. This is when Colt McCoy leads his group of reserves and practice squad players into a daily fight with the team's starting defense. ¶ "He'll come in the huddle and say, 'Let's get this s--- going!'" practice squad wide receiver Simmie Cobbs Jr. says. ¶ Then comes a flurry of passes heaved over and past the Redskins' top defensive players. Often the throws imitate Washington's coming opponent, plays that aren't even in the Redskins' offense. Many times, the scout team will win, leading to whoops and a fair amount of trash talk from the roster's otherwise forgotten names. ¶ "We treat it like a game," says another practice squad wide receiver, Darvin Kidsy. ¶ For years, this was where McCoy, who will start Thursday's Redskins game at Dallas, found his football thrills: fighting through practice scrimmages that are watched by a handful of coaches and executives and preserved on proprietary films that are shown only inside the team's headquarters.

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McCoy's opportunity to start four years in making

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And fight he does. The stories of McCoy's practice field blowups are legendary. Mistakes draw shouts. Passes thrown with wobbles get shouts. He slaps his hands. He kicks the ground. He screams to the sky.

"I see it all the time," running back Chris Thompson says. "He can underthrow or overthrow somebody, and he gets so mad at himself and beats himself up, and he throws his helmet sometimes."

Thompson stops and laughs. "You know he wants it so much that even him doing practice squad reps, it makes him mad when he doesn't complete a pass. You love that about him."

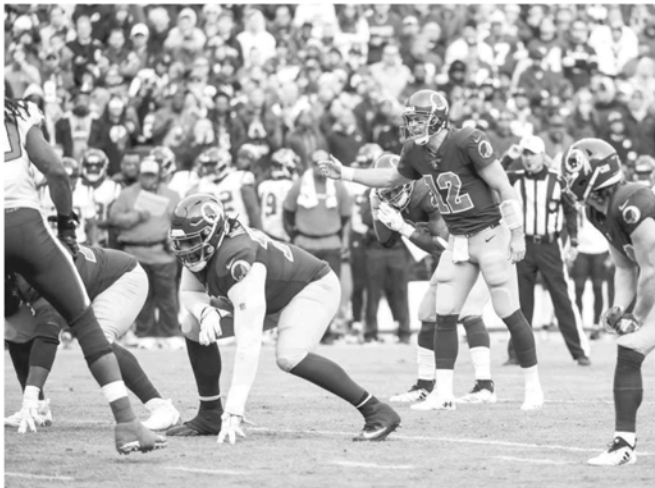
It seems everyone on the Redskins loves Colt McCoy, whether it's the players in practice or Coach Jay Gruden, who insists on keeping him on the roster. And so do the fans, who remember his glorious gun-slinging days at the University of Texas and long to see him running Washington's offense. No player is more popular on a team than the backup quarterback, and McCoy, at 32, has made close to \$12 million winning scout team scrimmages on practice fields.

Thursday's start will be his first in more than three years and just his fifth since 2011. He has thrown only 854 passes in his 8½ seasons, but as the wake of starter Alex Smith's serious leg injury, he becomes the Redskins' most important player. He is the man who will have to lead an improbable first-place team to an NFC East championship over the year's final six weeks, starting with a critical Thanksgiving clash with the Cowboys, who can tie Washington atop the division standings with a home victory.

Those backfield battles against Washington's starters? The fights are real now, with tens of thousands of people in the stands and millions more watching at home.

"I'm not going to go out there and not try to get better. That's not how I'm wired; that's not how I was raised," McCoy says of those lost years spent starting in invisible scrimmages. "I want to compete and love the game, and sometimes scout team is my opportunity to do that. Again, this means a lot. I care about people in this building, genuinely, whether that be my friends and teammates and guys I'm around every day and my coaches."

He figures he has owned them all his best in practice, even as the years piled up and he went from his late 20s to his early 30s and the starter, Kirk Cousins, never got hurt and, when Cousins left, the Redskins traded for Smith. He must have wondered whether this opportunity would ever come. Maybe at times it seemed



JONATHAN NEWTON/THE WASHINGTON POST

"I'm not going to go out there and not try to get better," Redskins quarterback Colt McCoy said of his years as a star of the scout team's offense. "That's not how I'm wired; that's not how I was raised."

unfair — just as it is unfair that he gets just three days to prepare for what might be his big chance to win something big in the NFL.

Then again, the NFL has never been fair to Colt McCoy.

Familiar with unfairness

McCoy joined the league in the middle of a front-office fight, and it's never good to be the pawn between two powerful men who can't agree.

This was in 2010, not long after Mike Holmgren had been hired as president of the Cleveland Browns, inheriting a coach in Eric Mangini who shared few of Holmgren's philosophies on how to run an offense. One of their biggest disagreements came over the team's third-round pick in that spring's draft. Holmgren loved the promise of McCoy, who had been a star quarterback for the Longhorns. Mangini did not want McCoy. Holmgren had the power, however, and so the Browns drafted him.

But that didn't mean Mangini had to like the situation, and soon it became apparent just how much he didn't want McCoy around. A Browns employee at the time with direct knowledge of how Mangini's staff handled McCoy said in an interview a year later that the Browns coaches barely spoke to McCoy in the months after the draft. While the other quarterbacks were given the week's game plan on Mondays, his came Wednesday. He found out he was starting the team's final preseason game just

five minutes before kickoff.

A year later, McCoy reluctantly confirmed these details when they were presented to him in an interview.

"I don't want to throw them under the bus," he said that day in 2011. "The [2010 season] had a lot of challenges. I spent a lot of time trying to think about, why did this happen or that happen?"

Then, to make things even more unfair, the Browns hired a new coach, Pat Shurmur (now the coach of the Giants), who ran a West Coast offense perfect for McCoy — only to have the NFL lockout come that winter, denying Shurmur the chance to teach McCoy his offense. When the lockout lifted, McCoy had less than a month to learn Shurmur's system before the opening game.

That would be the one season McCoy really got to play, starting 13 games, going 4-9 on a bad Cleveland team, throwing for 2,733 yards, 14 touchdowns and 11 interceptions before Pittsburgh's James Harrison crashed into him with a vicious helmet-to-helmet hit that left him with a concussion and ended his season. Harrison was suspended for a game. McCoy lost his job. The next year Cleveland drafted Brandon Weeden, and McCoy didn't start another game until 2014, when he came into a situation eerily similar to this one, a game in Dallas. He won that one, lost three more and then hurt his neck and was done for that year.

What is fair?

McCoy has never seemed to

like talking much about Cleveland, wary of dredging up bad memories. When pushed on the subject, recently, he says: "Those were hard years. ... It wasn't for a lack of effort or a lack of try. It was just hard. I was young. I think I've learned a lot from that, maybe matured a little bit. It definitely makes you appreciate the opportunity that I have kind of been presented right now."

This is part of why the Redskins and Gruden love McCoy so much. He has been through a lot. He has gone from Texas, where he was the team MVP all four of his years, to being the Browns' Next Great Thing to being tossed on the scrapheap to winning lost afternoons on the Redskins practice fields. He has a past, and that is a valuable currency in a game in which success is often measured more by how you deal with the bad moments than on those days when you shine.

"I think any experience is good experience," Gruden says. "You know, he didn't fare too well at Cleveland, obviously. He got hit a couple times pretty hard, had some issues out there, and then he got hurt here. I just think he's a guy that's been in the hopper just waiting to come out."

Finally, another chance

Scout team isn't only about trying to prepare the starting defense. It's about trying to get the players on the bottom of the roster to get better. And so McCoy patiently explains the things he has learned in nearly a decade in

the NFL to players who might never see a game as Redskins, asking whether they are sure they get every nuance of the offense, whether they know why he threw the ball in a particular place.

For Kiddy, who grew up in Houston watching McCoy tear apart the Big 12 at Texas, the lessons have been about running routes, something many new receivers struggle to grasp in the NFL, where everything is faster and precision is demanded.

"I've made a huge improvement in my route-running," Kiddy says.

Much of that is because of McCoy's impromptu tutorials. After every play, Kiddy runs to McCoy asking for feedback. One day Kiddy asked McCoy whether he wanted to be a coach, because he seemed so good at breaking down details of each player's game. McCoy laughed, he said.

"Honestly, right now I don't have any patience," he says McCoy told him.

It was a funny thing for McCoy to say. He might be the most patient quarterback in the NFL, a man so calm he could scream about underthrown passes and throw his helmet in practices year after year, all while never getting a sniff of an actual game.

Standing outside the Redskins' locker room just days before his career starts again in Dallas, McCoy does not smile or joke. He stares straight ahead, talking about a forgettable past and how it can help mold another man's future. He talks about Maurice Harris, whom he helped the past two years the way he has helped Kiddy and Cobbs and who has become one of the team's top receivers. He talks, too, about Trey Quinn, the last player taken in this year's draft, a wide receiver he helped teach the routes and coverages and who started his first game last weekend.

It's players such as these, McCoy says, who make football matter, who inspire him to win those afternoons on the fields behind the facility.

"I don't let a coaching moment or a teaching moment slip with those guys," McCoy says. "I think sometimes, early, when they get to know me, [they think], 'He's too competitive,' or 'Something's wrong with him,' or 'Stop yelling at me.' But at the end of the day they ultimately realize, 'That's Colt; he's just trying to help me and bring the best out of me and really understand what we're doing.'"

And now, finally, almost a decade since his NFL career began, Colt McCoy gets another chance to do something big. This time it won't be in the view of nothing but trees and the back of a building in an Ashburn industrial park.

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