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Talent alone gets you nowhere in the NFL—it's a lesson that took Roddy White years to learn. Now the Falcons' wideout is a major weapon on a team that looks primed for a Super Bowl run

To understand how the Atlanta Falcons' Roddy White went from an NFL nobody to the league's most prolific receiver—the league leader in catches (106) and receiving yards (1,284), and the offensive focal point for a 12--2 Falcons team that's on track to win home field advantage throughout the NFC playoffs—it's best to begin with a different sport, in a different state, and with a key moment that occurred nearly a decade ago. That moment, in February 2001, taught White a lesson it would take him years to unlearn, until he was set to be thrown onto the mountainous scrap heap of first-round receiver busts.

The sport was wrestling; the state was South Carolina, where White grew up and attended James Island High; and the moment came during the Class AAAA championship match, when White, then a senior, used his newfound athletic gifts to pin his opponent, a fearsome boy who naturally outweighed White by some 20 pounds, with a move few schoolboy wrestlers could have pulled off.

White called the move the Shanaz. It's pronounced like Lamaze, and White's opponent, his much larger opponent, was left breathing like a mother in labor after White used it to win his second consecutive state title. It's not pronounced like amaze, although that's what White did to the thousands in attendance at the Carolina Coliseum in Columbia that February day.

As White jumped celebratory circles around his bewildered opponent, no one was more astonished at what he'd just done, at what his body was now capable of doing, than White himself. For much of his adolescence his friends called him Sonic, because he was small and fast like the Sega hedgehog. As a high school freshman White had wrestled at 112 pounds—"a tiny little thing," recalls Albert Spalviero, now in his 12th year as the coach at James Island—but he dreamed of the day when he'd be as big as his uncle, Len Champaign, and his cousins, Carlos and Rell Champaign, state wrestling champions all.

Gradually, White grew: He wrestled at 130 as a sophomore and at 152 as a junior in 1999--2000. That season he won his first state title.

Then, in the summer before his senior year, Roddy White's body simply exploded, as if he'd been nibbled by a radioactive arachnid. Suddenly he was 6 feet, 175, and his body could do whatever he wanted it to do. White could run the 40, he says, in 4.3 seconds. The boy who two years earlier was too small for varsity football was now too much for South Carolinian defensive backs to handle: He set school single-season records with 62 catches, 1,342 yards and 17 touchdowns. But his participation in the football All-Star circuit that year meant he missed much of the 2000--01 wrestling season. By the time White joined the team about four weeks before states, Spalviero already had another wrestler at 171 pounds, and White had no inclination to endure the baby oil rubdowns and sweat workouts to make weight. Anyway, he knew he'd need that bulk for football, which by then he realized was his future.

So that day in 2001 White found himself on the mat with the best 189-pounder in the state, a beast of a boy who had been training all season long and who had cut at least 10 pounds of water and fat to slip in under the weight class's limit. The boy took his starting position, on all fours, with White crouched to his right. The opponent began to rise to his feet, and White let him do so. Then, about halfway up, White whipped his opponent into a cradle position like an overgrown infant and rolled him over until his shoulders were digging into the foam. This was the Shanaz. "He pretty much cut through everybody," recalls Spalviero. "He could just do things, you know?"

White had discovered that he could do things no one else in South Carolina could—not the Champaigns, not anybody—and he came to believe he'd be able to do those things no matter what he ate, what he drank, how much he slept, how little he did to prepare. "He was a great kid, but he was difficult for a coach," says Spalviero. "You would want to get a little bit more out of him. They say some guys are gamers when the lights come on Friday nights, and he was like that. When the lights were on, he was born to do it. I think he's learned now that there's a lot more to it."

Back then, and in the four years after White wrestled his last match, he had little reason to think that. At Alabama-Birmingham, where he played college football after low SATs threw schools like South Carolina and Clemson off his trail, he ranked second all time in catches (163), receiving yards (3,112) and touchdowns (26), and as a senior in 2004 he led the nation with 1,452 receiving yards. The following April the Falcons, looking for an impact receiver to pair with Pro Bowl quarterback Michael Vick, made White the 27th overall pick in the draft and handed him a five-year, \$7.35 million contract.

"That," White says, "is where the bump came into the road. Being young and not knowing any better, I thought I was the only kid out there that was big and fast and strong and could do it all. But all of a sudden there are other guys out there that are just like you. I was like, I'm finally here and I'm ready to strut my stuff. Go out there and show the world. But it took a whole lot of learning for me to discover how to do that."

It took two lost seasons, during which White caught just 59 passes for 952 yards and started fewer than half the Falcons' games, before he found the road to discovery. Among those whom White credits with showing him the way are Paul Petrino, his position coach in 2007; Terry Robiskie, his receivers coach since '08; Brian Finneran, the 12-year Falcons veteran wideout; and even Vick, who was imprisoned just before White's breakout year and is now a Philadelphia Eagle, but whom White still considers a close friend and mentor.

Yet for White, one teacher stands out from the rest.

The evening of Sept. 25, 2006, was an emotional one in New Orleans. On that Monday night the Saints played their first home game in the Superdome since Hurricane Katrina hit the city a year earlier. It was an emotional night for Joe Horn too. New Orleans had made him. A wide receiver, Horn played two seasons at Mississippi's Itawamba Community College, washed dishes and worked in a furniture store for a year, hooked on with the Memphis Mad Dogs of the CFL, then spent four years as a reserve with the Chiefs before joining the Saints as a 28-year-old free agent in 2000. With New Orleans, Horn had four 1,200-yard seasons, made four Pro Bowls and millions of dollars, and became a hero. After Katrina, he was heavily involved in the community as it embarked on its long rebuilding process, but the fact was that by that triumphant night in 2006, Horn was 34 and thinking about his future. And he had the strange inkling that pretty soon it would take him over to the opposing sideline, where stood an underachieving wideout who'd had all the early-career advantages Horn had not.

"I went over to Roddy White," recalls Horn, "and the first thing I said to him was, 'This is going to be my last year here. I'm quite sure they're going to get rid of my ass. But I'm coming straight to Atlanta, and we're going to fix your problems.'"

Two months later, when the Saints played the Falcons for the second time that season, Horn felt even more certain about his destiny as he watched a wide-open White drop a perfectly thrown fourth-quarter bomb from Vick. "He had the hands, he had the size, he had the strength and the speed," Horn says. "It was the attitude. I knew I had to bring the dog out of Roddy White."

As Horn expected, the Saints released him after the season, and he signed with the Falcons in March 2007. There was no doubt as to which of Horn's new teammates he would phone first. "He was like, 'Hey, my man, you gotta come down here,'" says White. " 'We've got to get together, we've got to start talking, we've got to find ways to get better.' I'm like, 'This is March!'"

Soon, Roddy White was a Joe Horn disciple. "He was the player I wanted to be all along, and he was telling me how to do it," White says. "Once he started talking, all I wanted to do was listen to him."

Lesson One: Physical talent is not enough, not nearly, in the NFL. The only way to avoid those mortifying drops, Horn told White, was to catch more balls than anyone else. Soon Horn and White were snatching 100 balls each from a JUGS machine before every practice—and 100 more after every practice. On road trips Horn would knock on White's hotel room door at 7 a.m., to be sure they'd be the first in the locker room. "I'm preparing you," Horn told White. "When the rest of the guys are walking in with their suits and ties, you're already ready."

The mornings when White would fall asleep during special teams meetings after long nights spent deploying his considerable financial resources at clubs across Atlanta? Over, along with the long nights. "I told him, 'Baby boy, when you're done with the NFL those same strip clubs will be there, and those same bottles of Dom Pérignon and Cristal will be in them,'" says Horn. "'Where's your legacy going to lie, Roddy White? Staying out until four o'clock in the morning ain't going to do anything for you.' It started to sink in."

"Buckhead, the West Side, the East Side, everywhere," White says, listing the neighborhoods he tried to drain of vodka and cranberry juice, pre-Horn. "If not every day, then every other day. Drinking. It's tough to do that and then come in and prepare to play football."

"It was frustrating as hell when he first got here," says Finneran, who was undrafted out of Villanova in 1998 and did his time in NFL Europe and as a practice squadder. "Fine—first-round picks don't usually play special teams. But sleeping in those meetings, not paying attention? It was frustrating to see a guy like that with so much ability just waste it."

Joe Horn's coda in Atlanta lasted just one season—he retired after catching 27 passes for 243 yards in '07. But his legacy has endured in the form of White's transformation. In their one season together Horn's protégé finished eighth in the NFL with 1,202 receiving yards even though he was catching balls mainly from journeymen like Joey Harrington and Chris Redman rather than Vick—and his ascension continued when Atlanta drafted Matt Ryan third overall in 2008. Says Horn, "I told him, 'Listen, you ain't preparing to become one of the leading receivers in the NFC, a fringe Pro Bowler.' I said, 'Rod, you're preparing to be the best receiver in the world. You've got it right in your hand.'"

This fall, though he doesn't have a reality show or a breakfast cereal (Roddy-O's?), White has looked a lot like the best receiver in the world. His 6-foot frame now packed with 212 pounds of muscle, White has ranked firmly among the NFL's elite wideouts for the past three years—averaging 85 catches and 1,246 yards (with two Pro Bowl selections)—but in 2010 he will far surpass those numbers. (He's on pace for 121 and 1,467.) "People know that when you play Atlanta," says Falcons coach Mike Smith, "you've got to concern yourself with Roddy White."

"Total package," adds Finneran proudly. "He's one of the few top receivers in the league who are triple threats: make tight catches in traffic because they're big and physical, run by you because they're fast, and block for the running back too." To that last point: Although White has yet to pull out the Shanaz on the football field ("If I use it, it's going to be a penalty," he says, laughing), Smith says that White's wrestling background, particularly his knowledge of how to use leverage, has made him "one of the better blocking wideouts I've ever seen." Watching tape of what was probably White's finest game to date—11 catches for 201 yards and two touchdowns against Cincinnati in Week 7—the Falcons' video team determined that he had 11 key blocks on Atlanta's 30 rushing attempts. "Eleven blocks," Smith says. "That's just unheard of."

Says White, "I know I'm doing a good job on defensive backs because their coaches yell and cry to the referee all day about me holding and stuff like that."

White's significance to the Falcons' offense has manifested itself in other ways as well. Dropped balls, for one, are essentially a thing of the past—this season he didn't allow an on-target throw to escape his grasp until Week 10, by which point he already had 65 catches. And he has become deadly in third-down situations, leading the NFL in both receptions (33) and catches for first downs (27) in that category. "He instills confidence in me to know if I put the ball around him—somewhere around him—he's going to make a play," says Ryan, who has thrown to White 166 times, or on 32.5% of his attempts. Tight end Tony Gonzalez is a distant second on the team, targeted on 19.2% of Ryan's throws.

But though White is now a disciplined technician, he retains some of his youthful mirth. On a recent Wednesday his easy, high-pitched laugh rang out through the Falcons' locker room as he showed off his dreadlocks, which he'd fashioned into pigtails. "He's a fun-loving guy, likes to joke around," says Ryan, "but when it's time to work, he knows how to work." White still goes out at night in Atlanta, but rarely, and rarer still because Robiskie has acquainted himself with the managers and bouncers of most of the town's nightspots. "I've got eyes all over the city," Robiskie says. "If he's in there, I know I'll get a call."

Most nights White is content to dote on or talk on the phone with his children—Roddy Jr., 4, and Milan, 1, who live with their mothers in Alabama and Atlanta, respectively—and watch game film or TV shows on his iPad. That was his postgame plan after a vintage performance in Week 11, a 34--17 win in St. Louis: nine receptions for 83 yards, including a 26-yard grab on a key third-and-14; a crucial block on a game-clinching 39-yard run by Michael Turner; and a reception out of the backfield on the ensuing two-point conversion.

"I'll probably just go home and chill," he said as he sat in front of his locker, draped in white towels, with enormous ice packs on his right knee and left elbow. (White still has a wrestler's mentality: He's never missed a game in his six seasons, even after spraining his MCL in Week 8 last year. "It was a grade 3 sprain," he notes. "There's only four grades.") "I'm watching 24. Season two. They just killed Jack Bauer! Well, they almost killed Jack Bauer. They brought him back to life."

A parallel to White's career? He nodded, then pulled out his Blackberry and revealed a text he'd received from an old mentor, one who still sends him words of inspiration before every game. The message from Joe Horn read, "Go out there and bust your ass." White giggled, then said, "That's what he always texts me."