

PSU's Zwinak still battling fumble-itis

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By Timothy Schoen

It was a dark and cold late-March morning when Zach Zwinak and the rest of his Penn State teammates took to the practice field for the first of 15 spring practices.

The junior was coming off a season when he saw time in only two games and carried the ball just three times. Zwinak was a solid contributor to the team's practice squad, but he was a name very few Nittany Lions fans knew. That early March morning gave him an opportunity to impress a new coaching staff and start anew.

Zwinak has climbed the depth chart with a hard work ethic and as other Penn State running backs that were previously above him either transferred or sustained injuries.

"As time goes on things change," the soft-spoken Zwinak said after Saturday's game.

Things have changed drastically for Zwinak, who is now the team's featured running back. He carried 29 times for 139 yards in the win over Indiana. Zwinak also scored two touchdowns - one rushing and one receiving.

But Zwinak also fumbled twice Saturday, which brings his season total to five. The second fumble came at a key juncture in the game with the Lions leading 28-19 in the third quarter.

"That was a bad fumble that he had today, and he knows that," Penn State coach Bill O'Brien said. "I am going to be hard on him because I think he is a heck of a player."

The coach was visibly upset with his running back after that play. It gave the Hoosiers the ball back at the Penn State 47-yard-line.

"He just wasn't happy, let's just say that," Zwinak said after the game when describing what O'Brien said to him when he came off the field.

Unlike many running backs, Zwinak does not wear gloves that provide added grip to a ballcarrier. He opts to carry the ball barehanded.

Zwinak said he has struggled throughout his career to hold onto the ball, and many people have recommended wearing gloves. But he said gloves do not feel comfortable on his hands.

With his rapid rise from practice team to starting running back, he said he is still adjusting to the new level of competition he's playing against.

"I have to grow as a player," Zwinak said. "I have a lot of learning to do, and I have to make sure I remember all of the little things each play."

Michael Zordich replaced Zwinak at running back to begin the series following his second-half fumble. Zwinak eventually finished off that drive with a 1-yard touchdown run.

Zwinak said the second fumble made him want to run harder to help try and redeem himself. He credited O'Brien and running backs coach Charles London for keeping the faith in him and allowing him to go back into the game.

Zwinak admitted he thought his afternoon was over after the fumble.

"Every time I mess up a play, I think I am done," he said.

Even his 16-yard touchdown reception didn't come without him losing control of the ball. Zwinak caught the Matt McGloin pass, but immediately after he crossed the goal line the ball slipped out of his hands. The play was ruled a touchdown on the field, and instant replay confirmed the ruling.

When asked if he thought he had possession of the ball long enough for the play to be ruled a touchdown, Zwinak laughed and said, "Someone was looking out for me, that's all I am going to say."

O'Brien said ball control is something his running back must improve on. The running backs do a number of ball security drills each week in practice, but the coach said it comes down to each player to improve.

Zwinak said at the beginning of the year, he did not know what kind of role he would play on this team. He vowed to work hard and try to contribute in any way possible, and he also admitted he has surpassed all of his expectations.

Zwinak has run for 821 yards this season. In Saturday's loss to USC, former PSU running back Silas Redd carried the ball just three times for 8 yards. Redd has run for 740 yards this year.

"Where we are now, you would have never expected that we would have won the games we won and lost the games we did," Zwinak said. "The players who left, the players who stayed, you could have never foreseen any of this."