

Despite strong South Florida ties, outside linebacker Jason Taylor a Jet now

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Jenny Vrentas/The Star-Ledger



William Perlman/The Star-Ledger Jason Taylor, above, is described by Jets coach Rex Ryan as 'a closer.'

The deal was already done by this point. But when Jason Taylor stopped by Morristown's Pazzo Pazzo restaurant one night this past spring, he had in hand the surest way to win over his new coaches.

The Jets defensive staff was upstairs in what they call the "Jets skybox," enjoying the pizza they rave about. They're fond of unwinding with a cigar now and again, too, which Taylor knew.

Coincidentally, the veteran defender had recently opened an upscale cigar shop in South Florida.

"He brought some up from Florida," outside linebackers coach Jeff Weeks said. "I think they're a little better than New Jersey cigars."

Taylor, 36, is a bit like those cigars: a longtime South Florida trademark, exported to northern New Jersey. Tonight at 8:20 — when the Jets (1-1) play the Dolphins (2-0) in a critical division game — the outside linebacker will juxtapose the place he still calls home with the new allegiance that once seemed so unlikely.

"There's always a good bit of Jets fans there," he said, when asked if he thought he'd hear any cheers at all at Sun Life Stadium, "so hopefully I'm getting them to start clapping for me a little bit now."

And even though Taylor hyperextended his left elbow in last week's game, neither he nor coach Rex Ryan expressed doubt about whether he'll take the field. Taylor is expected to tap into his high pain tolerance, fasten the space-age-esque brace to his arm and line up.

Defensive coordinator Mike Pettine did acknowledge they'll have to rely on the rotation so they don't overwork Taylor. The 14-year pro's workload has been heavier than expected since he signed with the Jets in April, with Calvin Pace sidelined after breaking a bone in his foot. Taylor played more than 50 snaps in the opener against Baltimore, and more than 30 in last week's victory against New England.

He has been used in myriad ways, typical of Ryan's multiple-look defense. He has mastered both outside linebacker positions, called the "rush" and the "SAM," and is used 7-on-7 drills to work on the coverage complement to his Hall of Fame-caliber pass rush.

Sometimes Taylor stands up, and sometimes he puts his hand in the dirt in two-, three- or four-man fronts. (The Jets have been using Taylor and Shaun Ellis as their lone two down linemen in some third-and-long situations.) In Week 1, he stood up on about 65 percent of his snaps, while he was down three plays out of every four last week.

No play, though, represented more why Taylor was brought to the Jets than his fourth-quarter strip sack of Patriots quarterback Tom Brady — which helped earn the team a victory, and Taylor a standing ovation.

"He's a closer," Ryan said. "Great pass-rushers win games for you in the fourth quarter."

That objective was a priority for the 2010 Jets, who were in the middle of the league in sacks last year and surrendered fourth-quarter leads three times.

The Jets were restricted in free agency, as one of the final eight teams in last year's playoffs, but were free to hit the market as soon as kicker Jay Feely signed with Arizona. Ryan and general manager Mike Tannenbaum promptly called Taylor's agent, Gary Wichard.

Taylor balked when Wichard, who has known the Ryan family for decades, initially dialed him — the same response he had when Wichard first proposed “Dancing with the Stars.”

“He used the same expletive on me, and hung up on me,” Wichard recalled. “I said, ‘I got him now.’ ”

Wichard relayed what fellow client Terrell Suggs told him while playing for Ryan in Baltimore: Every outside pass-rusher in the NFL should play one year under Ryan.

The Jets, for their part, courted Taylor: A helicopter ride over Manhattan, a stay at the posh Mandarin Oriental hotel, and a visit to New Meadowlands Stadium — where Taylor’s highlights played on HD video screens.

Then, of course, was the reality that the Dolphins weren’t calling. Taylor envisioned retiring with the organization, but his tenure there had its rough spots. He was traded to the Redskins as training camp opened in 2008. He returned to Miami for 2009, but the Dolphins wanted to wait until after April’s draft this past spring before deciding on another year.

Asked if he would still be with the Dolphins had head honcho Bill Parcells stepped aside earlier in the year, rather than earlier this month, Taylor acknowledged that might be the case.

“If you held my hand over a fire to give you an answer,” Taylor told Florida reporters this week, “I’d say yes.”

His ties to South Florida are undeniable. The family home is there. His kids had been in school there. The Jason Taylor Foundation — committed to health care, education and quality of life for children in need in South Florida — is based in Weston, Fla.

In fact, tonight Taylor is helping Dolphins running back Ronnie Brown launch his own charity, by jointly inviting 80 local kids to the game. The foundation’s executive director, Seth Levit, worked in public relations for the Dolphins for several years, so he knows as well as anyone that a green-and-white Taylor will be “different for a lot of people.”

It was different for the Jets, too. And Weeks, Taylor’s position coach, frankly admitted that — before Taylor arrived — he wasn’t quite sure if a 14-year veteran would want to assimilate, or if he might just be there to collect a paycheck.

The cigars were a good omen. Then, Taylor fought through the elbow injury that sent him to the locker room and came up with perhaps the defensive play of the game.

“Hey,” Ryan said to Weeks over lunch Tuesday. “Jason’s one of us, isn’t he?”

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