**Clifton Geathers a towering presence for Eagles**

By Les Bowen, Philadelphia Daily News

Thursday, June 6, 2013

This year’s Eagles defensive line rotation is going to look very different from what fans are used to seeing.

The Andy Reid-era Eagles prized speed over size up front, whether the defensive coordinator was Jim Johnson, Sean McDermott or Juan Castillo. The phrase "high motor" came up a lot, usually with players who might otherwise be described as "low measuring tape."

Which brings us, indirectly, to Clifton Geathers, a 6-8, 340-pound defensive end and nose tackle who has gotten some first-team reps at both spots this week, in the Birds’ mandatory minicamp that ends today. This is the last gathering of Chip Kelly’s team before training camp, to which veterans report July 25th.

We don’t know exactly what the d-line rotation is going to look like under Kelly’s coordinator, Billy Davis. We know it’s going to be big; that was one of Kelly’s first quotes that stuck this spring, the bit from March about how "we want taller, longer people because bigger people beat up little people."

We assume Fletcher Cox, the 12th overall selection in the 2012 draft, will be a fixture at DE, because he’s big (6-4, 300) and talented. We figure Davis brought in Isaac Sopoaga (6-2, 330) from the 49ers to start at nose tackle, but Sopoaga will be 32 by the time the season starts, and it’s unclear if he’s going to be on the field for 25 snaps or 70. Trent Cole and Brandon Graham are 3-4 linebackers now, they don’t really figure in the DL mix.

So, opportunity knocks for a player such as Geathers, and for Reid-era project Cedric Thornton, who has moved from 4-3 DT to 3-4 DE and now packs 310 pounds on his still-lean 6-4 frame. For both players, opportunity is knocking a lot harder than it might have if the Eagles had stuck with the 4-3, and not jettisoned mainstays like Cullen Jenkins and Mike Patterson.

"Clif has done some really good things since we’ve had him here," Kelly said yesterday. "Long levers. Can really separate, and really uses his hands extremely well. We’re excited about him. You didn't know exactly what you had until you got him here. Big, big body, and that's what we want on our defensive front is big guys. He really fits that mold right now, and I think he can fill a couple spots for us."

Until Geathers showed up, Cox was not used to being dwarfed by the man standing next to him in the huddle.

"They don’t make too many 6-8, 340-pound guys. Most of those are on the offensive line," Cox said yesterday.

Maybe that's why Geathers is on his sixth team since being drafted in the sixth round by the Browns, out of South Carolina, in 2010.

"Size can be a hindrance. Getting up a little high, somebody gets under your pads, you get threwed out much quicker than a shorter guy," Geathers said. "You get down low enough, down to their level, you can throw them out, very quick, but it's all about leverage, when it comes to size."
Geathers got to play in a career-high eight games for the Colts last season, and was surprised, he said, to wake up one March morning and find he'd been traded to the Eagles. The Birds found a landing place for fullback Stanley Havili, with ex-Eagles personnel chief Ryan Grigson in Indianapolis. In return, Grigson gave them a lineman who might fit what Kelly and Davis want to do better than he fit the Colts.

"I didn't know if he liked long players or not," Geathers said, when asked if he'd known anything about Kelly. "I'm just playing, wherever I end up. He might play a short guy, I don't know."

Geathers was featured in Sports Illustrated last week, in a story that detailed the amazing Geathers family football lineage, and compared it to that of the Matthews family, represented on the Eagles by linebacker Casey Matthews. (No, they haven't discussed growing up in football families. Matthews had no idea who Geathers was when a reporter asked him yesterday.)

Matthews is the son, grandson, brother and nephew of NFL players. The Geathers clan of South Carolina has an equally impressive scrapbook. If Clif makes the Eagles and rookie free-agent nose tackle Kwame Geathers makes the Chargers, joining Robert Jr., a defensive end for the Bengals, the Geatherses will have three siblings playing in the league at once, all the sons of NFL alum Robert Geathers Sr., a defensive lineman drafted in the third-round by the Bills in 1981. According to SI, no family has ever hit that combination. And that's not taking into account Robert Sr.'s brother "Jumpy," a 13-year NFL defensive lineman who has two Super Bowl rings.

Clif Geathers told SI his name was both a blessing and a burden:

"Maybe [coaches] want to see the same moves" they've seen Robert Jr. make, "but I'm 4 inches taller and 40 or 50 pounds heavier. So I don't use those moves. Or they might look at my uncle and say, 'Well, you've got the same frame . . . ' But I'm a different player."

Clif said yesterday he was never pushed to play, but "football exposure was always around."

The family's football history "is a big story," Geathers said. "It's a story we've always wanted heard," with more left to be written, he hopes.

Some of Geathers' first-team reps this week have come because Sopoaga isn't here after suffering a death in his family, and some might have come because Thornton is sitting out with a quad strain Thornton said he suffered last week.

A year ago, former Eagles defensive-line coach Jim Washburn said Thornton, an undrafted rookie in 2011 who'd played for the Division II Southern Arkansas Muleriders, was just scratching the surface of his potential. Thornton seems to be making a smooth transition to the new setup and d-line coach Jerry Azzinaro.

"In the trenches, it's just being a man," Thornton said yesterday. "Get your hands up as fast as you can and you'll be able to direct 'em any way you want to go."

Thornton has played three-man fronts before, never in a two-gap technique, he said, but "I think it's simple, easier than [what the Eagles did] last year." Thornton said he'll still play one-gap at times.

Thornton had an interesting take on the frustrations of spring work under the new coaches.
"I think they're putting us in the worst scenario right now, so come training camp, we've been in the worst, and they're going to put us in a situation where they think we'll be more successful in the games," he said. "They know what we can do. They're just trying to exploit what we can't do."

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