Nowadays just call him Eager Olshansky

by Kevin Acee

In a span of a dozen plays in the third quarter against Baltimore two weeks ago, Igor Olshansky showed a new depth in his game.

On the first play, he hurdled a fallen lineman and, moving swiftly to his left, took down Willis McGahee from behind. Three plays later, he simply tossed his man aside, stepped to his left and tackled Musa Smith just beyond the line of scrimmage. On the next series, Olshansky got upfield and stripped the ball as he sacked quarterback Kyle Boller.

It was, as much as anything, a display of health.

"It feels good to be healthy this year, as opposed to last year," Olshansky said, essentially summing up why he is playing so well.

The breakout season predicted for 2006 has come a year later than expected for the Chargers' big and brash defensive end. And it's making a difference lately.

In explaining the improved play of the defense recently, linebacker Shaun Phillips said this week, "What's helping a lot is the guys inside have stepped up and decided they want to be playmakers."

A year after A.J. Smith and others predicted Olshansky would emerge as a star, Olshansky is in the midst of his best season since being drafted in 2004. Indeed, a week after defensive line coach Wayne Nunnely said Olshansky had his best game of the season against Baltimore, Nunnely had to amend. Against Kansas City, Nunnely said, Olshansky was even better.

For the season, he of the "Superhuman Strength" is not only playing the run as well as ever but actually getting after quarterbacks too.

He has had a hand in bringing down the quarterback four times this season for a total of 2 1/2 sacks, already one more than he had last season. He also has 7 1/2 QB knockdowns, 3 1/2 more than all last season, and 3 1/2 QB hurries, one less than 2006.

"I'm putting everything together," he said. "I'm getting off the ball better. My pass rush is better. My reads are better."

Olshansky has worked on his get-off at the snap and at recognizing cadence. He has spent a lot of time strengthening his legs. He is also playing more since Luis Castillo went down with an ankle injury.

But, mostly, Olshansky's improvement is about being healthy.

Three games into the 2006 season, Olshansky tore the MCL in his left knee. He played three weeks later against Baltimore but tore the meniscus in the same knee two weeks later at San Francisco. Surgery followed. He missed just two games but did not feel right for another month, and his mobility was severely limited.

"There is a difference," he said. "It all has to do with being healthy. I was doing great things at the end of training camp last year, but the knee stumped me. I had to go back to what I know, which is striking. When I get hurt I rely back on my strength, which is the power game.

"This year I'm able to use more finesse, keep guys off balance and use my hands more. I'm not saying I didn't get after it last year, but last year I was more vertical because I had to be, especially (since) I really didn't feel comfortable until the last couple weeks."

Olshansky will never be as quick or flexible as Castillo. Of course, Castillo will never be able to bench press small buildings like Olshansky. And in the Chargers' defense, sacks by an end are bonuses. But once seen as one-dimensional, a healthy Olshansky has added to his game.

"I always thought of myself as a person that could do both - get to the quarterback and stop the run," he said. "I have a combination of strength and speed that not a lot of people have. A lot of people have great speed, and a lot of people have great strength. Not a lot of people have both."

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