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Former McCort star could play major role for Patriots

By John Ingoldsby, For the Mirror
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FOXBOROUGH, Mass. — It's been a long, strange journey for Johnstown's Artrell Hawkins.

The Bishop McCort product has seen the highs and the lows of life in the NFL during his stops in Cincinnati, Carolina, Washington and now New England.

Sunday night, though, will be one of the high points when he lines up as a starting safety at Gillette Stadium for the Patriots against the undefeated Indianapolis Colts in a showdown on national television.

"It is probably the biggest regular-season game of my NFL career," Hawkins said Thursday morning before practice. "Especially when you factor in playoff possibilities, home field, the Colts being undefeated, and of course, the rivalry between the two teams."

Along with fellow safety Rodney Harrison and the rest of the defense, Hawkins must be on top of his game against a Peyton Manning-led offense on a brand new turf just installed at Gillette.

"I have played against Peyton before when I was with Cincinnati, and he is one of the best in the game who always has his team ready to play," said the nine-year veteran, who converted to safety from cornerback after signing with the Pats last November.

Hawkins, who starred at the University of Cincinnati after high school, spent six losing seasons with the Cincinnati Bengals, where he had the third longest interception return in NFL history at 103 yards. He then played one campaign with the Carolina Panthers and was waived by the Washington Redskins in August 2005.

Then he arrived in Foxborough's football nirvana and for the first time played on a NFL team with a winning record.

"It's been a blessing, and a great sense of satisfaction as I have learned to elevate my game here," Hawkins said.

The feeling is mutual with his teammates.

“Artrell has been a complete professional for us, who took advantage of the opportunity here and solidified our secondary,” Patriots linebacker Roosevelt Colvin said.

Long before coming to New England, it was Hawkins who graced the Flood City as a running back and cornerback. He said he remembers well his visits to Altoona to play against Bishop Guilfoyle.

“The thing I remember most about Altoona is the field,” he said. “The [Omni] Turf at Mansion Park was something we didn’t see much of in Western Pennsylvania, but it was beautiful and I liked playing on it.

“I remember that BG was a tough team, and I always wanted to beat them as our rival Catholic high school. Altoona, as a city, also had great athletes, such as Steve Taneyhill, Jamir Washington and Danny Fortson.”

Hawkins has arranged for former Crusher coach Frank Krevetski to attend Sunday’s game, as Hawkins also did last year for his first-ever NFL playoff game against the Jaguars. Ernie Williams, a Johnstown High track coach who, Hawkins said, “gave me my speed by teaching me how to run” will also be at the game.

It is precisely the type of class and character that has endeared him to his new Patriot teammates.

“Two words describe Artrell — professional and committed,” Harrison said. “I have a lot of respect for his hard work and intelligence, and am happy to see his success. He doesn’t get beat deep, and he can knock you out, too. He’s like a little brother to me.”

John Ingoldsby is an Altoona, Pennsylvania native and a former Altoona Mirror staff reporter.