Breida Making Noise in the NFL

Georgia Southern University

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They say it happens to every NFL rookie. That moment when it hits you that you're a professional athlete. Be it meeting a player you idolized as a kid who is now your teammate, a prank or the dreaded rookie talent show. For Matt Breida, his moment is vividly etched in his mind and is something he'll never forget.

"Mine was when I found out I had made the 53-man roster after training camp," Breida said via phone interview last week after practice. "In training camp, you feel like you're in the NFL, but you're not there yet. Once they made the final cuts and I was on the roster, it hit me that I was in the NFL."

Breida, a rookie running back for the San Francisco 49ers and one of the all-time favorite Georgia Southern players, took the toughest route possible to the league. He didn't get an invite to the NFL Combine. He then blew up after a monster Pro Day in February, but he still wasn't drafted. He had a few teams he could choose from, but signed as an undrafted free agent with the 49ers and new head coach Kyle Shanahan. From there, he was relentless in learning the playbook, studying film and working hard on the practice field. It all worked out as he not only made the team as the squad cut two former draft picks to keep him, he is the top backup to Carlos Hyde and is
gaining more playing time each week.

The rookie says the biggest difference between college and the pros is the amount of preparation it takes each week to be ready to play on Sundays, as well as the game speed being a lot faster.

"Every day you have to come to work and be consistent," he said. "There are no days off. It's a business at this level and you have to stay on top of everything you do and be a consummate pro."

A few weeks ago, he caught a shovel pass and took it to the house for his first NFL touchdown. And then he struck his usual pose, arms crossed and a stare as to say "I got ya." It's one that Eagle Nation saw 40 times over his four-year career, even though many of his professional counterparts are putting unique celebrations on display each week.

"I'm going to stick with the pose," he said. "It's something I've been doing since college and it kind of grew on me so I'll probably stick with that and keep it simple."

The beauty of the touchdown was it came in his parents' hometown of Philadelphia. Mike and Terri Breida couldn't make it to the game - they were out in San Francisco for his pro debut - but they were watching and celebrating the score from a friend's restaurant in the Tampa area. Breida also had about 30 family members, including two aunts and their families, who still live in the area at the game.

"I was just ecstatic to get my first touchdown in the NFL and I was happy to be able to do it in front of my family in Philadelphia," Breida said. "They got to see me score my first touchdown and I got to do it for my cousin and my grandfather who passed away recently. I know they were looking down on me and smiling."

Breida said he kept that ball and will probably put it in a case and hang on to it to always be able to remember that score.

Nicknamed #HeGone for his breakaway speed and penchant for busting long touchdown runs, Breida is slowly gaining the trust of his teammates and coaches and is looking for big things in the second half of the season. Through 10 games, Breida has 219 rushing yards and a score, which came on a 33-yard run last week in the win over the New York Giants, as well as 17 catches for 124 yards and a touchdown as the 49ers have the bye week this week. Breida hasn't decided what he'll do for the bye week as he might make an appearance in Statesboro for Saturday's game against South Alabama or he may head back to his home in Brooksville, Florida.

Adjusting to life in San Francisco has taken some getting used to as he's lived on the east coast his entire life.

"It's not so stinking hot and humid all the time," he quipped. "I will say it's so much more expensive to live out here, but everything else is going well. I kind of miss the gnats, and I definitely miss my family and friends in Florida and Georgia, but I really do like it a lot out here."

Breida is one of two former Georgia Southern football players now playing the running back position in the NFL as Jerick McKinnon is always toting the rock for the Minnesota Vikings. On the day Breida scored his first touchdown, McKinnon score a touchdown as well as the Vikings downed the Browns in England. Having a mentor in the league who he knows and can talk to has been big for Breida, who played with McKinnon at GS.

"Me and Jerick, we stay in contact whenever we can," he said. "We played them in preseason and we got to talk before the game and swapped jerseys after. He was very positive and encouraging and told me to take advantage of every opportunity I get, to stay humble and to always remember where you came from. And those are the same words he told me on the first day I got to Georgia Southern. I'm trying to follow in his footsteps and hopefully we're both in the NFL for a very long time."

And the rest of Eagle Nation is hoping for the same.