

## PRO FOOTBALL

## An Outsider Struggles to Make It Into the N.F.L.

By CHARLIE NOBLES

DAVIE, Fla., July 27 — Mike Sheldon is one of hundreds of players painfully familiar with life on the National Football League fringe, and he has overcome more formidable odds than most just to be in position to make it as an N.F.L. player. But as Sheldon goes through two-a-day practices in routinely oppressive heat at the Miami Dolphins' training camp, time is running short on his dream.

An all-America offensive lineman at Division II Grand Valley State in Allendale, Mich., Sheldon was not taken in the 1995 draft. He has spent the last two N.F.L. seasons on developmental teams, practicing but never playing. Now, league rules prevent him from spending a second season on the Dolphins' developmental team.

"This is it for him," said Larry Beightol, the Dolphins' offensive line coach. "He must make our active roster to stay with our ball club."

There are 81 players in camp; 53 will be on the active roster Aug. 24, with five others making the developmental team. Sheldon is fighting the odds to make the leap from fringe to fixture.

"In my situation, you always feel a little bit on the outside looking in," Sheldon said today, sitting in the training camp dining room. "But you can't let that affect you. It's a long fight, but you see a lot of pros who have made it the long way."

He need not look far for examples — the former Dolphin offensive linemen Jim Langer, from South Dakota State, and Larry Little, from Bethune-Cookman, were free agents who not only made the team, but also the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

There are signs that Sheldon may beat the odds, too. He is listed as a second-team tackle. Dolphins Coach Jimmy Johnson pulled him aside after a recent scrimmage and said, "Good job, kid."

Beightol said: "I'm shocked and surprised. I knew he was a bright guy and he had a terrific

work ethic, but he's really improved from what I saw of him last year. You know, at that time I really didn't think he'd have much of a chance of making it in the N.F.L."

Part of his drive comes from a common desire among athletes: to help his parents. But Sheldon has a special incentive. Both his mother, Emy, and his father, Tom, have multiple sclerosis. Emy has had the crippling disease for 22 years; Tom has had it for 6, but his condition is worse and he lives in a nursing home.

"It's always been a dream of mine to help them have no financial worries," Sheldon said.

A season with the Rhein Fire of the World League, from March to June of this year, seems to have raised Sheldon's stock dramatically. Rhein reached the championship game, and Sheldon was a league all-star. "Playing in game situations helped me a lot," he said. "I'm a lot more confident right now. The game's a whole lot faster up here, but I've learned to adjust to it."

There was a price: Sheldon has been playing football almost nonstop since last July.

"Getting beat on the head for almost a full year is pretty tough," Beightol said. "But he's been more than a pleasant surprise, to say the least."

Sheldon's journey to the pros had a limping start. Tiny Grand Valley State was the only school to offer a scholarship to the 6-foot-1-inch, 225-pounder from Villa Park, Ill. But he grew four inches and 80 pounds by his senior year. His agent, Dr. Da-I Ping — a holistic practitioner near Detroit who also represents athletes, including Raiders cornerback Lionel Washington — told Sheldon that he probably would not be drafted that spring. Still, Ping promised to get him a chance at the pros, and he delivered a week later.

"I told A. J. Smith, 'Listen, you'll never believe it,'" Ping said, referring to the Buffalo Bills'

director of pro personnel. "Both of Mike's parents have M.S. and they're wheelchair-ridden. This is such a great kid, the way he treats them, his work ethic. I promised myself I would get him into camp." A. J. said, "We can't give him anything," I said, "I'm not asking for anything. We want for this kid to have an opportunity." He said O.K."

Ping, who is selective about his clients, said Sheldon won him over right away.

"What impressed me about him is the way he treats his mother," Ping said. "When I met the family, he was wheeling her around in a wheelchair. Nothing was too good for her, and he had patience. When I saw that, I said to myself, 'I've got to get him on a team.'"

Sheldon spent the 1995 season on the Bills' developmental team. Near the end of training camp in 1996, the Bills released him. "That's probably my lowest point," said Sheldon, a tackle who can play guard and center. "I flew home and began to wonder if I'd ever get another chance. But four or five days later, my agent called me up and said, 'You're going to Miami.'"

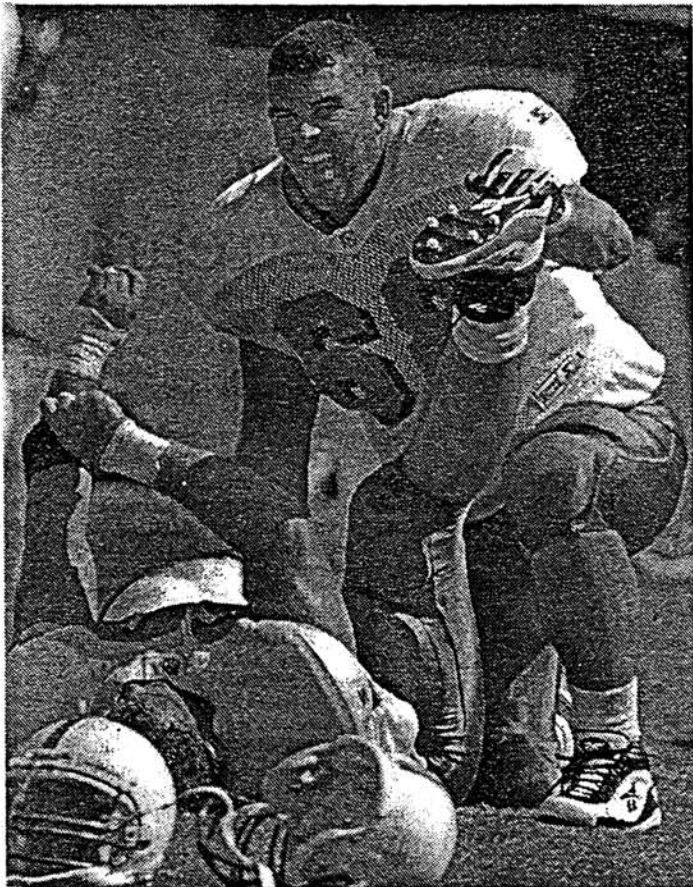
Ping had made a similar plea to the Dolphins. For Sheldon, it was pleasing but sobering. He was back in the N.F.L.'s shadows, toiling on a developmental squad. He could wear a Dolphins uniform, but only in practice, as so much fodder to prepare the real team.

Beightol said teams often do not know what they have until they see a player in stressful conditions.

"Because you can never look in their chest to see the size of their heart," he said. "If you could, you would probably get a lot of these guys."

For his part, Ping seems to get goose bumps every time he discusses Sheldon.

"He's got a heart as big as he is," the agent said. "He's had a lot to overcome, and that's why he's going to be a great story in the future."



Gary I. Rothstein for The New York Times

Mike Sheldon (68) working with John Bock at Dolphins camp.