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Shane Conlan Is Having Best Season Of His Five-Year Career

ORCHARD PARK - In the early stages of last season, Shane Conlan wondered if public sentiment had turned against him.

His much-publicized training camp holdout had finally been resolved in time for him to play in the Buffalo Bills' season-opener, but the fans - rather than embrace him - were quick to point out that he wasn't involved in as many plays nor was he making the big, eye-popping hits.

The criticism hurt.

"At first it bothered me maybe a little bit because I've never been put in that position before," the Frewsburg native said earlier this week. "I got in an argument with a guy in the parking lot (while I was) with my family. That bothered me. Then a quarter or half-way through the season I said the hell with it. I talked to Walt (Corey, the Bills' defensive coordinator) and he said, "This is ridiculous. I know what type of ball you're playing and that's all that matters." I watched myself on films and I was playing well, but I was just not getting the plays. Sometimes you get them, sometimes you don't."

So far in 1991, Conlan is getting tackles in abundance in what has turned out to be the best season of his five-year career. At the half-way point, the three-time Pro Bowl selection leads the Bills with 68 tackles, including 47 solo stops. He also has two quarterback pressures, one pass defensed and one fumble recovery. If there was a category for bone-jarring hits, he'd lead the team in that, too.

"This year I'm doing a lot of things better than I did last year," Conlan said. "I'm not getting any younger, obviously, and my skills aren't getting any better. It's just my knowledge of the game is getting a lot better."

Coach Marv Levy agrees.

"He's making a lot of tackles, he's playing in a lot of downs, in a lot of situations," Levy said. "He's experienced, he's healthier than he's been in a while and he's getting opportunities."

A good share of those opportunities are the result of Buffalo's inability to consistently stop opposing running attacks. That being the case, opponents

have fewer third-and-long attempts, situations which normally would force Conlan to the sideline in favor of a defensive back.

"I think a lot of it has to do with us not stopping the run because we're out there a lot," Conlan said. "We're not going two plays and then we're putting dime (coverages) in and shutting them down. They're able to run and when it's third and short I'm still in there. I think it just goes with the playing time more than anything. I'm in there a lot more this year than probably last year or the year before."

Conlan's best game so far this season was in the Bills' 33-6 loss to Kansas City in a nationally-televised encounter at Arrowhead Stadium. All he did in that lopsided affair was make 16 tackles, mostly on the Chiefs' Christian Okoye.

"The Kansas City game we got our butts kicked, but I had a lot of plays," Conlan said. "It was fun to certain extent out there just hammering, hammering hammering until you realize what's going on and you look up at the scoreboard."

Levy, who doesn't ordinarily pay close attention to individual players during the course of a game, admired Conlan's performance against the Chiefs.

"You could see him standing out on a night when our team really didn't play a real good game," Levy said. "...I was favorably impressed. He played a helluva game."

As a unit, the linebackers have been the standout group of the Bills' defense as Conlan, Carlton Bailey, Darryl Talley and Cornelius Bennett are the top four tacklers. Without them, Buffalo's banged-up defense would resemble Swiss cheese.

"I just think there might be more responsibility on us to play well because we've all played together for five years now," Conlan said. "We're all experienced and we know what it takes. We've been run on down the field before. We know what it's like. It's not like 'Oh my God, this is happening...' It's happened in the past. We know how to handle it. We just have to instill in everybody that we just have to play our best. We've got to have everybody going to the football and be mentally into the game."

The Bills have had defensive end Bruce Smith and Jeff Wright healthy for only two games between them this season. Wright is expected to play Sunday against New England. Smith, who is scheduled to come off the disabled list after the Patriots' game, isn't expected to play until sometime after the Green Bay Packers game Nov. 10. Until everyone is healthy, the Bills will have to make due with the personnel they have.

"We're just playing our best," Conlan maintained. "We're trying to win, we're trying to stop the run. It just hasn't been too successful. Plus, we're bumped up. One time we had five linebackers on the field. We don't have a lot of beef out there. We've got a nose tackle (Mike Lodish) who weighs 270 pounds. We just don't have the size. I thought we've played well, we just have had some certain breakdowns and that will happen. We'll get the guys back that we need and then we'll take it from there."

Despite the Bills inability to stop the run, Conlan believes they are still respected around the NFL.

"I know people we play respect us," he said. "It's not like they're saying, 'We ran 200 yards on them, they're awful.' I don't think that's the case. I think it's media people, maybe some fans that are saying (we're) not playing well defensively. Our offense doesn't have the ball a whole lot. They're able to score so quickly at times and we're right back out there. We just have to do our best and we pretty much have done it."

Conlan certainly has.

And he's put an end to any further parking lot criticism as well.