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Hawkins grabs leadership role on team loaded with Super Bowl vets

By John Ingoldsby

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FOXBOROUGH, Mass.— The New England Patriots locker room is loaded with legendary leaders – Super Bowl ring-leaders that is. From Brady to Bruschi to Brown, the three-time champions are not lacking in the leadership department. But jewelry is not required to join this exclusive club. Hard work is. Artrell Hawkins grew up in Johnstown. He understands hard work. And Hawkins' western Pennsylvania work ethic has made him a team leader, no small accomplishment after just one year with what has become the NFL's model franchise. No less an authority than Patriots coach Bill Belichick, whose father, Steve, was born in Monessen, recognizes these attributes. "There is no player that puts in any more time than Artrell does in terms of preparation and studying film," said the often tight-lipped coach at his press conference on Thursday, while being downright effusive in his praise of Hawkins' blue-collar approach and leadership. "He is here early in the morning, and sometimes stays later than the coaches do. He puts in a lot of time and he is on top of it. Artrell has done a great job all year. He works hard, is very professional and communicates well. I am glad we have him." With an NFL playoff record second only to Vince Lombardi, Belichick is counting on Hawkins and fellow safety James Sanders today as his charges face the AFC's top-seeded San Diego Chargers in a divisional playoff game. "I think that Artrell and James have worked well together," said Belichick, who is facing yet another game without injured emotional leader Rodney Harrison. "They played together a lot this year, probably more than any other two safeties, just because of all of the circumstances that we've had back there. "Both of them are very diligent in, not only their personal preparation, but also in coordinating and communicating through the secondary and making sure that everybody is on the same page and we have the calls and the adjustments right," Belichick said. "That will be important in a game like this, just because San Diego gives a lot of formation variations and change their personnel groups around. They have some very unique and special players that are hard to match up against, that you have to know where they are, because even if it is the same call, when they start moving around, that changes how you want to play it." Hawkins recognizes that, and the 5-foot-10, 195-pounder is ready for his leadership role today in arguably the most important game of his career. "I know there are guys in the secondary who look at me for leadership," Hawkins said Friday. "The way I think about it is, everyone has a job to do, and whether you are a first-year player or a 10-year player, you have to know your assignment and go out and execute it. I relay that message and just try to be that calming force back there, let everyone know it is going to be all right. It is still football, and even though the playoffs are a higher level, the principles still apply." Hawkins said Harrison's injury has not affected him on the field. "With Rodney out, my role does not really change. I have been playing free (safety) all year, so I have been pretty consistent in what I have been doing. The adjustment has been with James since Rodney is gone. "In terms of my responsibility with making checks and helping get the defense set, I have been doing that all year. I have been one of the vocal guys all year, along with Mike Vrabel, and James when he comes in does a really bang-up job. It is all of us, a collective thing, but I have been making checks pretty much all year," Hawkins added. No one appreciates this more than veteran backup cornerback Ray Mickens, who joined the Patriots late this season, just as Hawkins did in November 2005. "Artrell is a good person off the field, most importantly," Mickens said. "He is a leader in the locker room, and a good guy to be around. He brings a lot of toughness to the secondary for his size playing safety, and definitely plays bigger than what he is listed. That's a positive for him. He has definitely taken over when Rodney got hurt as far as leadership. He has all the qualities and characteristics of a leader. He's our guy that talks and gets

everybody lined up in the secondary. It's comforting knowing that you have somebody back there that knows where everybody is supposed to be at and makes the right choice. So, we are all on the same page and he is our guy that is like our glue back there keeping everybody together." Mickens is not the only grizzled veteran who likes Hawkins' game. Quarterback Vinny Testaverde, 43, said: "I remember him well from his Cincinnati (Bengals) days. He is a good player, a confident guy, who made the most of his opportunities. Since I came here, I feel good seeing him on the field because he is a veteran player and understands what it takes to win. Most importantly, we can count on him." Such a testimonial from Testaverde, who has spent 20 seasons in the NFL, speaks volumes. Belichick's endorsement of Hawkins as a leader is even louder. After all, the very coach who embodies leadership hand-picked Hawkins to be the last Patriot standing between the likes of LaDainian Tomlinson and Antonio Gates and the end zone. How fitting that Belichick, a genuine sideline-walking gridiron historian, crosses paths with his western Pennsylvania heritage in trusting Hawkins with this key leadership role. He must know he can count on a hard-working Johnstown guy.

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