

Rookie Roy Williams takes over for injured Woodson

IRVING, Texas (AP) — Dallas Cowboys rookie safety Roy Williams doesn't like the idea of being on the field without Darren Woodson.

"I lost my role model," Williams said Wednesday. "He's not going to be on the field and that hurts, but we have to keep moving on."

Woodson will miss the rest of the season for the Cowboys (3-7) because of a severe abdominal strain that will require surgery. The void will be felt not only by Williams, but the entire defense.

"It is a tremendous loss. He's kind of our bell cow on defense from an experience standpoint, certainly in the secondary," said coach Dave Campo. "That hurts us. No question about it. It will force us to play another young player or two."

Replacing Woodson, the 11-year veteran and Cowboys' career-leading tackler who has been part of three Super Bowl championships, isn't as easy as just putting another player on the field.

Second-year safety Tony Dixon will take over for Woodson in the starting lineup. But the Cowboys still have to account for Woodson in special packages such as "42" and nickel defenses where he was essentially another linebacker on the field.

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— Roy Williams
Dallas Cowboys safety

That could mean more playing time for rookie Pete Hunter or fourth-year cornerback Duane Goodrich. Keith Davis likely will be re-signed from the practice squad.

Dixon was a second-round pick by the Cowboys in 2001, then missed eight games because of injuries. His only NFL start came against Seattle last month when the Cowboys opened in their "42" defense, but he has played extensively in those different packages and on special teams this season.

Edwards, the third-year Cowboy and second-year starter, is suddenly the most experienced player in the secondary.

"A third-year guy being the elder, that's tough. But we can do it," Edwards said. "We're all going to come together as a unit on defense and make it happen."

While Woodson has been a leader for the entire defense, his relationship with Williams is special.

Woodson has been a mentor to the team's No. 1 pick in the April draft and the now team's third-leading tackler. Williams and the five-time Pro Bowl safety have had an unusual bond since the rookie arrived.

After 10 games playing side-by-side with Woodson, Williams will have to play without him for the first time Sunday against Jacksonville.

"I won't ever feel comfortable doing it without him, but I feel well-enough prepared that I can go out there without him," Williams said.

"I'll just keep going what I'm doing and I'm not going to put too much pressure on myself," he said. "I haven't been putting too much pressure on myself and have been playing consistent. I'm not going to change anything."

Williams will have to prove what he has learned, likely taking over making some of the defensive calls that Woodson handled.

"Roy's learned from the best, and he's ready," Edwards said.

NCAA regulations too often enforced at extreme levels

By Jim Litke
AP COLUMNIST

(AP) — You have to wonder what's in the food at the NCAA cafeteria to make the people so mean. (Play along for the moment: How mean?)

Mean enough to suspend one kid for renting a car and two others for taking part in a charity game to raise money for cancer research. Mean enough to suspend a fourth — for a dozen games no less — because he played against middle-aged men in a rec league on his own time.

The NCAA will discuss the details in each case, but not the thinking that went into the decisions.

Would you?

A spokeswoman said Tuesday the NCAA does not comment on infractions cases. (Then she put down the phone, and probably laughed out loud and resumed pulling the wings off flies.)

In the first case, Memphis junior Antonio Burks will have to sit three games because somebody behind the counter at Avis ignored company policy — drivers must be at least 25 and show a valid credit card — and let the 22-year-old Burks rent a Cadillac by paying cash.

It's hard to know what steamed committee members more: that Burks' modest celebrity won him a benefit not available to the average student; or because no one ever upgraded them to a luxury-class car without a coupon. Either way, Burks' appeal went nowhere.

(Seem fair? As the commercials for a competing rental-car company like to say, "Not exactly.")

Case No. 2 is a little more encouraging. North Carolina seniors Will Johnson and Jonathan Holmes were handed one-game suspensions for playing in a three-on-three campus charity tournament last spring. NCAA rules, designed to keep student-athletes from gaining any advantages, prohibit participating in outside competition during the school year and limits them to sanctioned summer events.

But somebody in the organization must have figured out how the suspensions to Johnson and Holmes made the NCAA look. The penalties were rescinded on appeal, and in time for both to make the season-opener against Penn State.

No such luck for Billy Edelin. The Syracuse freshman spent all of last year on a school-imposed suspension, and now he'll spend the early part of this one nailed to the bench.

Last week, the NCAA suspended Edelin for the

Orangemen's first 12 games — one for each game he played in a rec league against 40-somethings — and then turned down coach Jim Boehm's offer to stand in for Edelin.

"I'd rather take a 10-game suspension myself," Boehm said. "If that's what they want, I'd do that."

For Edelin, disappointment is nothing new. He arrived at Syracuse in fall 2001, as the most promising recruit in his class, but was suspended by the university that October. Two female students accused him of sexual misconduct, and although no charges were ever filed, Edelin spent the rest of the school year in virtual exile.

He was banned from even setting foot on the Syracuse campus. Among the team meetings Edelin never got to attend was the one where the coaches go over which outside competitions are approved by the NCAA.

People who know Edelin have been impressed by the way he's handled himself since returning to Syracuse. He hasn't ducked questions about the misconduct accusations, instead expressing regret and asking for another chance.

The university reinstated Edelin last June. The strange thing is if he'd taken off for Europe or South America and played pro ball over the summer, the maximum penalty would have been eight games.

But because he broke the occasional sweat playing 4-on-4 in a cramped elementary school gym with guys old enough to be his father, Edelin will have to sit out until a Jan. 18 game against Pittsburgh. The Big East season will be gearing up just as he returns, and Edelin will be thrown to the Panthers without having faced real competition in almost a season and a half.

"They always talk about these kids who jump to the NBA and say what they're missing, but then when you go to college they mess with people. I can't get out on the court," Edelin said.

Actually, he could have played in Tuesday night's exhibition against an Upstate AAU team that included a few former Syracuse players. It was his last chance to don the orange until the suspension is lifted for a Jan. 18 game against Pittsburgh. He decided to sit on the bench instead and watch.

A rule is a rule is a rule. But the NCAA has rescinded some suspensions because of the public-relations value or sloppy bookkeeping in the past and it certainly wouldn't hurt to add compassion to that list.

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