

The Jets are winning? Could it be?

Tied for second in the AFC East, the New York Jets are off to their best start in 11 seasons

By Barry Wilner
The Associated Press

HEMPSTEAD, N.Y. — Don't say it. Don't even think it.

Well, maybe for a few seconds, but don't let anyone catch you.

Yes, the New York Jets have their best start (4-2) in 11 seasons and have won three straight for the first time since 1993.

Yes, they are tied for second place in the AFC East. And yes, under Bill Parcells, they've won as many times in six games as they did in 32 with Rich Kotite as coach.

But no, they don't want to talk about playoff contention just yet. Or if they are willing to do so, it's only in the quietest way.

"We have the chance to show we have an organization that can get it done," said safety Victor Green, who led the NFL in tackles last year, mainly because running backs and receivers were getting free so often downfield. "It's not like a payback or a vendetta for what might have happened to us

in the past, it's maybe just we can open some eyes.

"It's exciting right now. This is my fifth season and we had a little success early in '93 (7-4 before finishing 8-8) under Bruce Coslet. But winning three straight now feels real good, and if we can win the next three, we'd be sitting pretty good."

Parcells likes to break the season into quarters. New York was 2-2 in the first quarter and is 2-0 in the current one. Next up are division rivals Miami and New England, both at home.

"My objective here is to try to improve the team," said Parcells, who clearly has done that. "It seems like now there's a little different attitude starting to create itself, and I understand why.

"But the seventh game of the year is not pivotal. We've got to try to put some more wins together and get into the second half of the season on the plus side, then try to play the second half and do it again.

"I am not under any illusions we are past this or that. If we were to win five or six more games in a row, then I would say, 'OK, we are in position to try to do something.' But we are not there yet."

Where they are, however, is far-

ther along the rebuilding process than anyone might have imagined after their two losses, to the Bills and Patriots — both close games in which they beat themselves with critical errors. Those mistakes were generally eliminated during the winning string, although the Jets played only one strong, 60-minute game in the streak, a 31-14 victory at Cincinnati.

But when the Jets rallied to take a lead from Oakland, they held it. And when they grabbed early leads over the Bengals and Colts, they held them. When big plays and turning points were at hand, it was the Jets who produced.

That — should we whisper this? — is the sign of a playoff contender.

"There's still a long way to go," Green said. "We're showing some improvement in our ability to take over a game, but we're not there yet. When we put teams down and keep them down for a long time, then we will be better at it as the season goes on.

"We're more focused now. We know the personnel we have and that we've got the personnel to get it done. If we keep playing like this, I think we'll be in the tournament."

Hicks: Ducks must control Hicks' speed, gang-tackle him early, Bellotti says

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team's fourth-leading rusher with 161 yards and three touchdowns on 40 carries.

Hicks entered the 1995 campaign with full confidence that both his career and his knee were back on track after undergoing an arthroscopic procedure early in fall camp.

He made his debut that year in UCLA's Pacific-10 Conference opener at home against Oregon and unleashed a 52-yard scoring jaunt on his first play from scrimmage, a run that remains the longest of his career.

However, after carrying just 15 more times for 48 yards in the following two games, the lingering pain in his knee proved to be too much.

Hicks sat out the remainder of the year and was granted a medical redshirt by the NCAA.

A season on the sidelines gave the tailback another opportunity to grow.

"I'm pretty confident in my abilities," he says. "I just had to get more experience. Now I feel much more comfortable. I know how to study the other team's game plan, and I'm more of a student of the game than I was then."

Not only was Hicks a smarter football player, but his running style changed drastically.

"When he first came out he was

real quick, but he wasn't real big," Oregon defensive tackle Desmond Byrd says. It seemed like during the injury he decided to concentrate on weight lifting, and he's put on another 30 pounds of muscle.

"Now when he puts a body on people, it makes them think twice about tackling him."

With his new size and smarts, Hicks enjoyed a breakout season last year, highlighted by a career day in Autzen Stadium during UCLA's 41-22 win over the Ducks.

After gaining just 20 yards in the first half, Hicks broke out for 153 yards and two touchdowns in the third quarter.

"It just so happens that I had a great second half that week," Hicks says. "They'd pretty much shut me down in the first half, but it was just a matter of time before our offensive line started to open up some holes and we really got rolling."

In 1996, Hicks finished fourth in the Pac-10 in rushing with 1,034 yards, an average of 94.8 per game. He was voted the team's most valuable player, as well as being selected second-team all-league by the coaches.

As the Pac-10's top returning rusher, Hicks has blossomed into a superstar this year. He leads the nation in scoring with 18 points per game and has scored 13 rushing touchdowns.

Skip Hicks File



WHO:
UCLA
tailback
Skip Hicks
HOME-TOWN:
Wichita
Falls, Texas

STATS:
Leads the nation in scoring with 18 points per game ... has run for 515 yards ... 13 touchdowns in 107 carries ... fourth in Pac-10 with 1,034 yards last season ... scored 21 TDs ... 17 rushing, three receiving.

He has also earned the respect of Pac-10 players and coaches.

"He has a combination of power and speed that we haven't seen this year," Oregon head coach Mike Bellotti says. "You can't allow him to get started because he has such great break-away speed. You have to gang-tackle him early."

Byrd is much more succinct: "He's an NFL tailback playing college football."

If nothing else, Hicks is a college tailback who has displayed a professional's ability to recover from injury.



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