

# Bills bolstering defense with upgrades

by MATT KRUEGER  
Reporter

Head coach Dick Jauron and Chief Operating Officer Russ Brandon didn't have to look very far to find the Buffalo Bills' greatest weakness in the 2007 season.

The Bills finished 31st in the league on defense, giving up an average of 362.9 yards per game. They were 25th against the rush (124.6) and 29th against the pass (238.4 yards per game). Much of that had to do with the myriad of injuries the Bills sustained, but the higher-ups aren't wasting any time in restructuring the defense for the 2008 season.

After cutting linebacker Coy Wire and defensive tackle Larry Tripplett last week, the Bills signed free agent linebacker Kawicka Mitchell, free agent defensive tackle Spencer Johnson and

completed a trade with Jacksonville for defensive tackle Marcus Stroud.

"We definitely had areas that we prioritized, and we've addressed a couple of those areas," Jauron said during Friday's press conference. "We had to see what got to free agency and who got to free agency. And it could have gone in a number of different ways. You set a game plan going in and Russ pointed out a lot of people were involved in putting the game plan together. It changed all of the time and you don't know if you're going to get the guy. You don't know if you're going to get who you're chasing at that moment. You've got to transition quickly to the next guy so it turned out it was three defensive players and it's again definitely areas that we needed to address."

Mitchell, a second-round draft pick by Kansas City in 2003, spent

four seasons with the Chiefs, before joining the New York Giants for their championship 2007 season.

He recorded 87 tackles, three and a half sacks and an interception in 2007. He also scored two touchdowns on turnovers. He has 450 tackles, eight sacks and four interceptions in his five-year career.

Mitchell will move to outside linebacker this year and line up next to Angelo Crowell and Paul Posluszny.

"I think it's a great opportunity," Mitchell said. "Obviously we're a young team but I think we have a great opportunity to win a lot of games. They've had some success in the past couple of years and they were a tough team every time we played them, especially up here in Buffalo. And, actually, that's the only time I played them. But it's a great opportunity for my

family and hopefully I can come and contribute to winning games. That's what I want to do is just win."

Stroud, a first-round draft pick by Jacksonville in 2001, was named to three consecutive Pro Bowls from 2003 to 2005. He started nine games for the Jaguars in 2007, but missed four due to a violation of the league's substance abuse policy and was put on the injured reserve list in December.

At 6-foot-6, 310 pounds, Stroud is the kind of big run-stopper the Bills desperately want on the line.

"Hopefully, I'm the guy that could play my technique and help everybody else play the technique and we're all in the same place and we'll all be there together," Stroud said.

Johnson signed as an undrafted free agent with Minnesota in 2004

and appeared in 49 games for the Vikings. In 2007, he had his most productive year, playing in all 16 games with three sacks, two fumble recoveries and a forced fumble.

"We're excited about the whole thing," Jauron said. "We really feel like we've helped our football team. Free agency is not over, but it's gone quickly. It's gone well for us. It's gone very well. Adding Kawika and Marcus and Spencer really does. It fills some stops that were critical for us to fill. Now we'll keep going forward in this thing and see what happens. Then we have the draft looming in our future and we're excited."

The Bills could be adding to the offensive side of the ball soon, as wide receiver Bryant Johnson and tight end Ben Troupe visited Buffalo this week.

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# Sabres hope Bernier can boost attack

by MATT KRUEGER  
Reporter

The loss of defenseman Brian Campbell still reverberates in Western New York, as fans continue to weight in with their thoughts on the trade that sent him to San Jose for winger Stever Bernier.

Many fans express disgust and a feeling of betrayal in Campbell, since he refused Buffalo's offers for a three-year contract. Campbell wanted six or seven years. Still other fans miss the fiery redhead, who has become one of the top defenseman in the league.

But the team has moved on, and Bernier has quickly appealed himself to the Western New York fans. A day after his first game, an 8-4 win over Nashville last Wednesday, in which he scored two goals, Bernier could see his jersey on sale at stores around the area.

"I didn't think about it," Bernier said about making an impression in his first game. "The only thing I wanted to do was play good and do everything right. I didn't want to have any turnovers, and (Wednesday) that was the case."

Through his first week with the team, Bernier has spent most of his time on a line with Derek Roy and Thomas Vanek. That's a huge

role for a player that hasn't played a full season in the NHL since getting drafted 16th overall in the 2003 NHL Entry Draft.

Roy and Vanek, along with Maxim Afinogenov, comprised Buffalo's most productive line last year. The two also signed big-money contracts in the offseason and have been thrust into leadership roles in the locker room. Roy (25 goals, 33 assists) and Vanek (27 goals, 25 assists) have also found a lot of success with Drew Stafford on their line.

"It's great," Bernier said of playing on a line with the team's top two goal scorers. "They see the ice so well. They skate so well. The only thing I have to do is make sure I get the puck to them and drive to the net. It's easier for me when I play with two guys like that."

Although Bernier has played in three games, through Monday, with the Sabres, his only points have come from his incredible

debut. He didn't have a goal or an assist in either of Buffalo's last two games, losses to Montreal, 6-2, and Detroit, 4-2.

Bernier also got on his new teammates good side with his run at Nashville's Jordin Tootoo last Wednesday. After Tootoo traded slashes with Roy in the closing minutes of the third period, Bernier was the first man into a scrum, knocking Tootoo backward into the wall with a hard check.

"He's my center, I've got to defend him," Bernier said of sticking up for Roy. "But I would do that for anyone in the room. Everybody is as important. I would do the same thing for them, and I know they would do the same thing for me. It's normal to do it."

Buffalo will need to improve on offense and shore up the defense to earn a playoff spot in the Eastern Conference. Heading into Tuesday's game against

Philadelphia, Buffalo sat ninth, three points behind the Flyers.

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**CAREER VAULT** — Lacey Woite of Snyder scored a career-high 9.70 on vault to become the Level 6 vault champion at the Patriot's Cup meet hosted by Stumpf's Gymnastics Center. Woite is a Level 6 gymnast at Stumpf's and a student at Smallwood Drive Elementary.



**SS. Peter and Paul's boys fifth-grade basketball team** came back to defeat St. Benedict's, 14-8, to win the championship of the 2008 Park School Winter Classic. Members of the team, pictured from left, are: first row - Jason Brick, Tim Noonan, Peter Weimer, Robert Quebral, Salvatore LaTorre; second row - Luke Eberhard, Ryan Nigro, coach Paul Quebral, Christian Graziano and Nick Powell.

## SS. Peter and Paul boys win tourney

The SS. Peter and Paul's boys fifth-grade basketball team overcame a halftime deficit to St. Benedict before prevailing, 14-8, to win the championship of the 2008 Park School Winter Classic.

Tournament MVP Salvatore LaTorre scored seven points to lead the Knights. Tim Noonan added four points while Christian Graziano and Jason Brick rounded out the scoring for SSPP.

St. Benedict took the early lead thanks to the sharp shooting of Sean Andrews and Will Boerema, both of whom were named to the all-tournament team.

The SSPP rally was made possible by an aggressive defense spearheaded by Peter Weimer, Nick Powell and Robert Quebral, who helped hold St. Benedict's scoreless in the second half.

In the semifinal round, SSPP defeated St. Christopher, 26-10, although the contest was much closer than the final score might indicate.

Relentless point guard Peter Weimer led all scorers with eight points, including six in the fourth quarter, to put the game away.

Inside force Luke Eberhard, also named to the all-tournament team, and power forward Ryan Nigro each added six points, while the remaining baskets were scored by Nick Powell and Jason Brick.

## St. Greg's eighth-graders place third in playoffs

The St. Gregory the Great eighth-grade varsity girls basketball team beat St. Amelia's, 32-28,

to take third place in the Ken-Ton gold division playoffs.

St. Greg's led the entire game

but had to fight off a fierce 16-point fourth-quarter comeback by St. Amelia's. Lisa Harb's two foul shots with seconds left finally sealed the victory.

The Cougars' Kaitlyn Curtin, Claire Mangano and Julietta Gervase led the scoring with six points each. Scoring four points each were Nicole Favre and Lisa Harb.

Rounding out the scoring with two points each were MaryKate O'Connor, Whitney Krantz and Colleen Logan.



**The St. Gregory the Great eighth grade varsity girls basketball team** took third place in the Ken-Ton Gold Division playoffs, beating St. Amelia's, 32-28. Members of the team, pictured from left, are: first row - Nicole Favre and Lisa Harb; second row (starting with No. 4 to No. 21) Claire Mangano, Mary Kate O'Connor, Ali Gilbert, Whitney Krantz, Julietta Gervase; third row (last four girls standing on left side) - Catherine Suchan, Alisa Vacanti, Maria Patnella, Colleen Logan; top row - coaches Dr. Richard Gilbert and Jillian Gervase; missing from photo - Kaitlyn Curtin.

### Sports brief

**Registration for Mathewson McCarthy youth baseball** can be done online at [www.mm-brb.org](http://www.mm-brb.org).

The site lists street boundaries for potential players. Mathewson McCarthy's home facility is located behind Erie Community College's North Campus, 6205 Main St., Williamsville. The league offers house league baseball and tournament teams.