

T.O. keeps word, play exceeds expectations

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JACKSONVILLE – For 2 weeks the question has come in different ways, to different people, but not a day went by when it wasn't asked. It was The Question of Super Bowl XXXIX, handled with the serious-mindedness and intrigue usually reserved for Pentagon secrets.

And in less than 15 seconds, it was all over. The question was answered.

With 14:56 to play in the first quarter, Terrell Owens stepped on the field for the Eagles' first snap.

Check. He would play.

The first play of scrimmage was an incomplete pass from Donovan McNabb to Owens.

On the next play, 8 seconds later, Owens caught a pass for 7 yards.

Checkmate. He was fine.

Since the Eagles won the NFC Championship 2 weeks ago, Terrell Owens said he would play, said he could play, said he could contribute.

People argued he was, in no particular order, nuts, rude, selfish and stupid.

A well-respected doctor said it was against his better judgment to allow Owens to play.

Turns out, Owens was right.

Terrell Owens not only played Super Bowl XXXIX, he played more like the receiver who rejuvenated the Eagles' offense than a guy gimping around on one good leg.

And afterward, Owens enjoyed his I-told-you-so moment.

"Nobody in this room thought I could play this game, but nobody knew but me," Owens said. "I tried to tell people from Day 1 that I would play, but nobody wanted to listen."

Owens' joy in thumbing his nose at his detractors, though, was decidedly tempered by the scoreboard. He did not sleep in a hyperbaric chamber, nor fly in his masseuse and chiropractor to simply play in this game.

He did all of that expecting to be hoisting a trophy, and so afterward he said it wasn't an ache in his ankle that worried him.

"I don't feel any pain at all," he said. "I just feel bad that we lost the game."

After Rodney Harrison picked off McNabb in the waning seconds of the game, solidifying the Patriots' win, Owens made a beeline to coach Andy Reid. He talked quickly and quietly to the coach and the coach patted him on the shoulder pads as he walked away.

"I told him, 'We'll be back,' " Owens said. "I have no doubt we'll be back on this stage." If it wasn't quite the God-delivered miracle Owens promised, watching him play as well as he did sure was amazing. He played most of the game without tape on his ankle and only grudgingly took a painkiller shot before the game.

And with two screws in his ankle and a leg operated on 7 weeks ago, he led the Eagles with nine catches for 122 yards.

"T.O. played great," McNabb said.

The decision to start Owens apparently became official on Saturday night. When Reid and his assistants sat down to script out the first 15 plays as they always do, Owens was in the lineup.

But even Reid didn't expect Owens to be as productive as he was.

"I thought he did a heck of a job," Reid said. "He played a few more snaps than I thought he would and I thought he had great effort."

Owens' flash was a little duller and it seemed his ability to run a deep route was compromised by the injury, but he certainly was the best threat the Eagles had, particularly after Todd Pinkston was saddled with cramps in the second half.

In the first quarter, Owens got a great pick from Freddie Mitchell and leaped in the air for a great catch over the middle, blazing down the sideline for a 30-yard gain.

"T.O. wasn't no decoy," center Hank Fraley said.

Indeed, Owens leaves Jacksonville having had if not the last laugh, certainly a good chuckle at his detractors' expense. The critics and the doubters have no choice but to swallow some crow, and even if he doesn't have a ring, Owens at least has that.

"You know, if it was Brett Favre in this situation, they'd say he was a warrior," Owens said. "Me, I'm selfish. If I'm selfish it's because I want to help my team win."