

49ers turn to the old guy at quarterback

Oakland Tribune, Dec 30, 2007 by Dennis Georgatos

CLEVELAND -- On his first day on the job with the San Francisco 49ers three weeks ago, quarterback Chris Weinke showed up wearing a cap that read "Old Guys Rule."

The moniker referred to a brand of clothing, but Weinke, 35, also was trying to dispel, in a humorous way, the concerns about his age that have followed him throughout his NFL career.

He'll get a chance to do that on the field today when he makes his first start for the 49ers in the regular-season finale at Cleveland.

"I'm excited," said Weinke, who becomes the fourth quarterback to start a game this season for the 49ers. "It's an opportunity I'm going to try to take full advantage of."

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Weinke, who played six years of minor league baseball before returning to football with a Heisman Trophy-winning career at Florida State, broke into the NFL as a 28-year-old rookie with the Carolina Panthers in 2001.

The fourth-round pick went on to start 15 games as a rookie, becoming the oldest drafted quarterback to start a game in the process. He surpassed former 49ers quarterback Jim Druckenmiller, who was 24 when he started a game in 1997.

Released by Carolina last March, Weinke was out of football most of this season, but he said he wouldn't let himself give in to the notion that his career was over.

"I never lost faith," said Weinke. "Sometimes, you just have to wait, and with the situation out here with the injuries, an opportunity opened up for me. It's funny how things work. You just never know, especially in this profession."

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Weinke was signed by the 49ers on Dec. 12 to shore up depth after they lost their top two quarterbacks to injury. Trent Dilfer suffered what proved to be a season-ending concussion Dec. 9 against Minnesota, and Alex Smith underwent season-ending surgery to repair damage from a shoulder separation suffered Sept. 30.

Shaun Hill, who began the season as the 49ers' third quarterback, led the team to successive wins against Cincinnati and Tampa Bay, but he took a shot to the back at the end of a scramble against the Bucs last Sunday.

On Friday, coach Mike Nolan disclosed that Hill, who had been troubled all week by back spasms, also had

suffered three fractures to the transverse process in his lower back last Sunday. Nolan ruled Hill out for today's game against Cleveland and named Weinke the starter. Former UCLA quarterback Drew Olson of Piedmont was activated from the practice squad to serve as the backup.

"If you had asked me three weeks ago did I think would be starting a game this year, I would have probably answered no. But I'm excited about it and look forward to the challenge," Weinke said. "I'll go out there and try to manage the offense the best that I can."

Weinke has only been on the field for one snap since joining the 49ers-- he handed the ball off to Frank Gore last Sunday while a shaken Hill regrouped on the sideline after taking a hard hit.

Weinke hasn't thrown a pass in an NFL game since making three starts for the Panthers last December. His three practices this past week marked his first extensive work with the 49ers' first-team offense.

"We're going to battle with somebody that hasn't been here very long and doesn't know the offense very well," 49ers offensive coordinator Jim Hostler said. "How we look on Sunday is hard to predict."

Hill said he expects Weinke, who has appeared in 27 games in six NFL seasons, to be just fine.

"Chris has had a great week of practice," Hill said. "He'll be ready to go, and I think he'll play well."

Weinke said he has a good feel for the game plan and has developed a pretty good working relationship with the players who surround him.

"It helped me to be able to take all the reps with the offense this week so that I could be more comfortable," Weinke said. "The coaches did a nice job of putting a game plan together to take advantage of the players that we have and also make it a situation where I felt comfortable."

"But first and foremost, I'm going to go out and have fun. That's why I started playing this game when I was a kid. That's what we're going to do Sunday."

Spoken like a veteran who remains a kid at heart.

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