

FOCUS ON: ALOUETTES Weak-side linebacker's return to the lineup is bad news for opposing offence

Ferri backs up his bravado

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THE GAZETTE

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In their last two games, the Alouettes' defence has allowed only 20 points and two touchdowns. Coincidentally, or not, that has coincided with the return of weak-side linebacker Diamond Ferri.

"He's part of the reason the defence is playing better," admitted Tim Burke, the team's defensive co-ordinator. "You see on the field how much he has done."

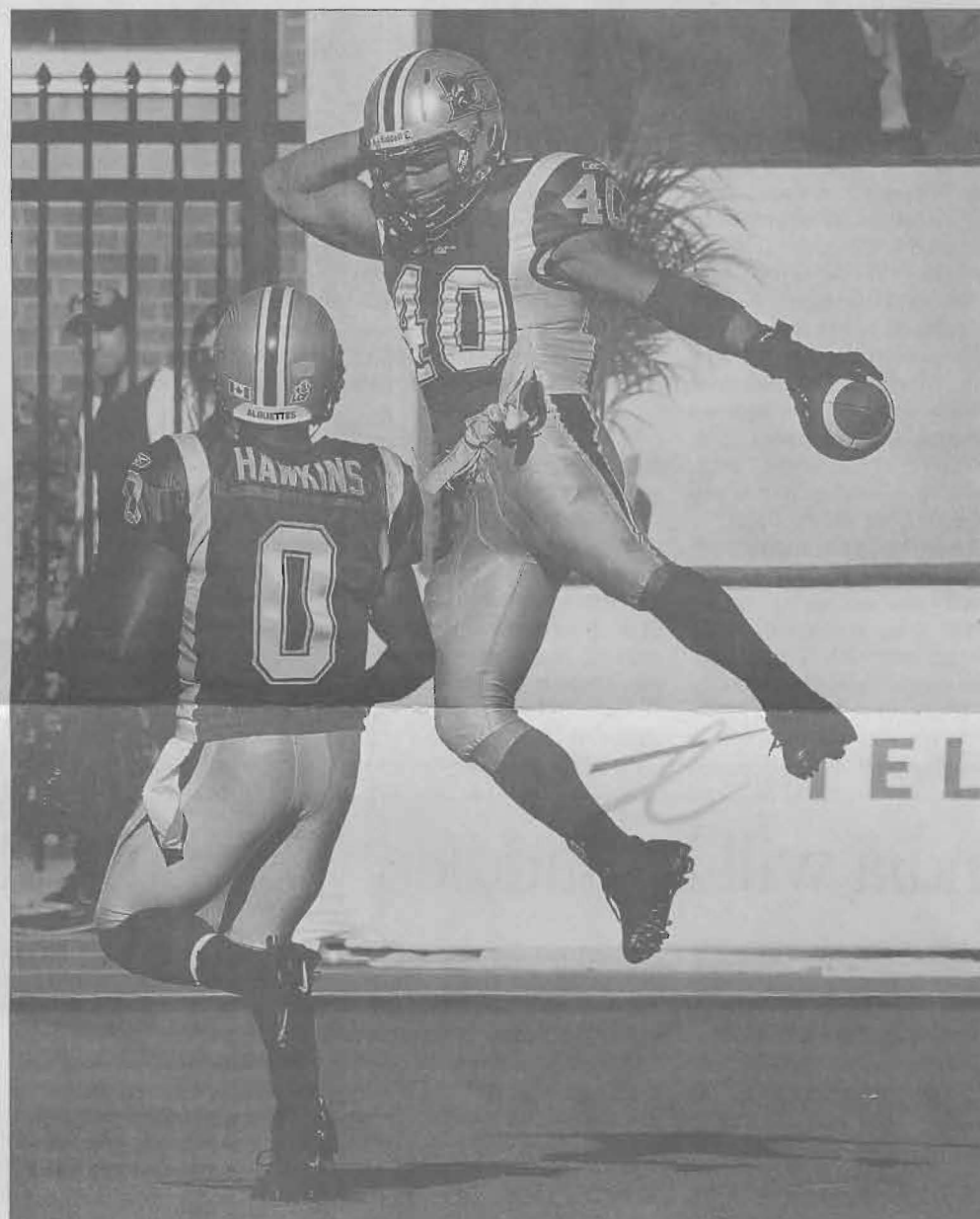
On Sept. 11 at Hamilton, in a potential first-place showdown with the Ticats, Ferri forced a fumble when he hit quarterback Kevin Glenn. Glenn returned for one series before being replaced by Quinton Porter. Ferri also recorded a quarterback sack in the game.

And last Sunday, at home against Edmonton, the 5-foot-10, 223-pound Ferri was even better. He had a sack, an interception and returned a kickoff 85 yards for a major in the first quarter. It was an unusual trifecta for the versatile Ferri, but not the first kickoff return of his Canadian Football League career.

Ferri, who signed with the Al as a free agent in May 2007, returned a kickoff 12 yards in 2008 and another for 21 yards last season. He also has a 19-yard kickoff return in the playoffs. Through stints in the NFL and NFL Europe, Ferri returned kicks. And when he played collegiately, at Syracuse, he was named the Big East offensive and defensive player of the week for the same week, Nov. 29, 2004.

"I bumped a guy, broke a tackle and that was it," he said of last weekend's exploit. "You see what happens when the ball's in my hands; I make plays. It felt natural and good to be a spark and ignite them with my attitude, flash and swagger."

Modesty has never been one of Ferri's attributes, but he has the credentials to back up the braggadocio and comes to play on a weekly



PIERRE OBENDRAUF THE GAZETTE

Diamond Ferri celebrates his 85-yard TD run with teammate Andrew Hawkins on Sunday.

basis; his infectious attitude probably has a ripple effect through the dressing room and roster.

"I can catch the ball. I have speed and moves," said Ferri, 29. "I'm cocky. I tell everyone I'm the best running back and returner in the league."

"I'm the off-returner," he added, turning serious. "I'm there to block (on special teams). I'm not supposed to give the team seven points. But the guys see I care for

them and the team. Is it a coincidence? You've got a playmaker in the scheme, an extra playmaker. I hope something happens."

In many ways, this season has been both rewarding and trying for the Massachusetts native. Coming off a Grey Cup championship and becoming a father for the first time, Ferri missed the start of training camp because of an illness that has plagued him throughout his career.

While reluctant to discuss the issue, Ferri, according to published reports, has an inflamed pancreas. He was admitted to hospital in Septem-

TARGETING THE BLUE BOMBERS

The Alouettes resume practice today before heading out to Winnipeg for Friday's matchup. Get the latest at alsinsideout.com

ber 2007, after missing a game against British Columbia, with a stomach ailment. Ferri thought it was food poisoning when, in fact, he suffers from gastrointestinal reflux disease. It occurs when contents of the stomach splash back into the esophagus.

"It's like bad heartburn," said Ferri, who takes medication daily and must control his diet. When he deviates – as he did following the team's championship-ring ceremony or about a month ago – he becomes sick. That, in turn, has led to him sharing playing time with Ramon Guzman. Ferri always had been an every-down player.

"No alcohol. It irritates the pancreas," he said. "I do let myself go from time to time with fast food – chips and candy – but that's not good for the body and I can't digest it. I also know I can't eat late at night."

"I understand my role and accept it, whether it's on defence or special teams. I've got a job and I get paid."

Ferri's illness has hamstrung Burke and the defensive coaches, occasionally, since there's no way of knowing when it might occur.

"All you can do is prepare like he's going to be there," Burke explained. "Diamond brings a lot of high energy to the game and plays very fast. He utilizes his speed and has great instincts. He can turn an average play into a big play, and he's got the speed to carry it out. He's all over the place and is versatile. His best attribute is as a blitzer."

"We try to utilize our talent as best we can," Burke added. "Every player has strengths and weaknesses. We try to put certain guys in certain positions to make plays. Diamond fits that category."

After film and meetings yesterday, the AIs practice today for the first and only time this week before Friday's game at Winnipeg.

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