

PACKERS

Why is this 'ready to rock' Packers receiver so confident and optimistic?

JASON WILDE For the State Journal

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Packers wide receiver Christian Watson is optimistic he can stay healthy for the upcoming season after playing in 23 of a possible 34 games during his first two seasons in the league.

Jeffrey Phelps, Associated Press

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GREEN BAY — Christian Watson spent last year’s regular-season opener standing in the visitors’ bench area at Soldier Field, wearing gold team-issued shorts, a long-sleeved moisture-wicking green Nike t-shirt, dark Viper sunglasses ... and the facial expression of a kid watching from the living room window while all of his buddies were having fun playing football in the cul-de-sac.

It’s not like the Green Bay Packers wide receiver wasn’t happy for his team’s 38-20 victory over the archrival Chicago Bears that day. But other than some sideline rah-rah stuff, and modeling the latest in sideline casual wear, Watson hadn’t contributed anything to the triumph.

That should not be the case Friday night in São Paulo, Brazil, where the Packers will kick off their 2024 season against the Philadelphia Eagles at Corinthians Arena — and Watson will start at wideout after a completely healthy training camp.

“That’s been my goal all offseason. That’s been my goal all along,” Watson said of being ready for the opener. “It hasn’t worked out for me like that in the past, but ... this is how it’s supposed to be. I want to play 100% of the games. I want to play 100% of the practices.

“I’m right where I want to be.”

Watson's hamstring issues during his first two NFL seasons are well documented. The 2022 second-round draft pick has played in 23 of a possible 34 games the last two seasons, missing three games and parts of two others as a rookie and eight games last year.

But as everyone from Watson to quarterback Jordan Love to coach Matt LaFleur knows, the Packers' offense is an entirely different operation when the 6-foot-4, 208-pound Watson is on the field.

Watson had one of the most impressive stretches of any rookie wide receiver in NFL history in 2022, when he caught 15 passes for 313 yards and seven touchdowns on 27 targets during a four-game late-season span. That burst accounted for much of his production that season (41 receptions for 611 yards and those seven TDs), and one of those big games came against the Eagles in Philadelphia (four catches for 110 yards, including a 63-yard touchdown) in a 40-33 loss.

Last season, Watson not only missed eight games because of the right hamstring — the same one that had been an issue a year earlier — but he still wasn't 100% healthy when he came back for the playoffs and was essentially a decoy, catching just two passes for 20 yards on three targets while playing just 60 offensive snaps across two postseason games.

That led him after the season to Madison to see the experts at Badger Athletic Performance at the University of Wisconsin, where Dr. Bryan Heiderscheit and his team **discovered “asymmetry” between his two hamstrings.**

Armed with a renewed commitment to doing the “little things” required to stay healthy — both in terms of exercises, stretches and weight training but also diet and rest — Watson didn't miss a single training-camp practice and is raring to go on Friday.

“I think we all have seen how explosive and dynamic he is as a playmaker, whether we're handing off a jet sweep like we did a couple years ago in Chicago or in the passing game, making great catches,” LaFleur said before the team departed for São

Paulo on Wednesday. “He is an important part of what we do. He’s a big, physical, fast guy — and not many of those guys exist. So we certainly are a better offense when he’s at full strength.”

Offensive passing-game coordinator Jason Vrable, Watson’s wide receivers coach his first two seasons, said Watson regularly hit 21-plus miles per hour when sprinting during camp, including at times for five straight snaps — an indication that Watson wasn’t holding back when running.

“I (am) really pleased with where he’s at,” Vrable said. “The most important thing is him feeling confident with himself. And I think he’s there right now.”

He definitely is. While proud of what he called his “day-to-day” commitment to “being conscious and being aware of where I’m at with my body,” Watson has high expectations — for himself and the offense as a whole — and isn’t shying away from any of them.

“What people see and what people hear (on the outside) is only a fraction of what us guys in the building see and participate in every single day. I think that the excitement in here is even higher,” Watson said. “We have expectations for us that are higher than a lot of the world probably is. We see it every day. But we know there’s a lot of things we have to do and maintain to accomplish those things. It’s not just a given because we have the guys to do it.

“Confidence is a big part of playing in this league. Not to say that I wasn’t confident going into my rookie year, but there’s a lot to think about, a lot of weight on you. When you’re able to play a lot more free, you just have a lot more confidence. And I think that’s where I’m at.

“I know what I’m capable of. I know what to expect. I definitely think I’m a different player. (And) I’m ready to rock.”