

# Tailback Graham the ideal fit for Panther attack

by Pat Bostick

With Dion Lewis choosing to take his talents to the NFL, much of Pitt's running back duties currently fall on the shoulders of Ray Graham. The man who wears No. 1 on his jersey is now the No. 1 running back on the Panthers' spring camp depth chart.

Graham proved he can carry that load during his first-ever start last year, rushing for 277 yards on 29 carries and scoring three touchdowns against Florida International. But along with the added responsibility of being the starter, Graham is currently adjusting to a new offensive system, various techniques and a different environment.

So far this spring, though, the Elizabeth, N.J., native has impressed Pitt Head Coach Todd Graham.

"You look out there and think, 'he's a game-breaker,'" he said after practice on Tuesday.

Watch Ray Graham play and it's obvious that the junior tailback has as much ability as any back in the country. Every bit of 5-foot-9 and pushing 200 pounds, he has more than adequate size and is strong enough to stand up a blitzing linebacker in pass protection. Graham also has what some refer to as another "gear," seemingly exceeding his top-end speed when he breaks into the secondary. He has the ability to change directions instantaneously much like LeSean McCoy did at Pitt, producing highlight real runs while taking out opponent's ankles. His most valuable trait, however, can't be quantified. Graham has great field vision, an uncanny ability to locate running lanes and he can feel defenders closing in around him. This is what allows Graham to make such quick and decisive cuts: he can process this information at lightning-fast speed, allowing him to react and play instinctively.

These skills will benefit Graham as he continues to transition into Pitt's new offense — an offense which has been known to favor the zone-read running game. After Saturday's scrim-



Tailback Ray Graham had standout games as a freshman and sophomore and is primed for an even bigger season in 2011.

mage, Coach Todd Graham was enthusiastic as he proclaimed, "The best thing we did on offense was run the inside-zone."

Ray Graham should be equally as excited. Rather than directing the runner to a specific hole in the line of scrimmage, zone runs create lateral movement at the line of scrimmage and can hit almost anywhere. This is perfect for a back with great vision like Graham. Though he has seen success running both the inside and outside zone in the past, he will now have to get used to running these plays more exclusively from the shotgun. This will require him to perfect the new handoff exchange which the Panthers are adjusting to this spring. On zone plays, this exchange will involve the quarterback placing the ball in the running back's stomach with two hands, and either letting the running back take it or pulling it back and running himself. The quarterback will make this decision based off a given defender's movement, and it will likely happen quickly — sometimes when the quarterback's arms are fully extended. This exchange takes time to master,

and involves a great deal of trust between both quarterback and running back.

Once mastered, this exchange technique will allow the quarterback to run the football when the situation dictates. This should prove to be beneficial for Graham. It will keep the defense guessing and create misdirection, putting the defenders in tough situations. Another factor which promises to benefit Graham is the Pitt's transition to more "spread-out" offensive formations. By forcing the defense to expand, it will create bigger running lanes, especially when Pitt starts creasing zone runs. Combine these formations, techniques and schemes with Coach Graham's intentions to be explosive in the passing game, and you've now forced the defense to play the run while being mindful of the multiple pass threats on the field.

Speaking of pass threats, Ray Graham is a pretty dangerous receiver himself.

"His ability to catch the football is what is going to be very special with us," Coach Todd Graham said enthusiastically after Tuesday's practice.

This Pitt running back has unbelievably soft hands, and his ability to make sudden cuts in the running game will also serve him well in the Panther's passing attack, as he is quick enough to create initial separation from defenders and has the speed to simply blow by the linebackers who will most likely be covering him.

All in all, Graham is the total package. He has all the tools to be successful in new co-offensive coordinator Calvin Magee's ground attack, the same attack that propelled former West Virginia running back Steve Slaton into the NFL. Graham will also be a versatile part of Coach Mike Norvell's passing attack. At Tulsa, Norvell's passing attack featured another versatile player, Damaris Johnson, who led the country in all-purpose yards for two consecutive seasons. Graham can prove to be that type of versatile player—a guy who can drive Pitt's offense both on the ground and through the air.

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*Pat Bostick played quarterback for Pitt from 2007-10. Each week, he breaks down Pitt football and the changes that are being made in each area.*