

Peterson, Willis and Thomas representing for rookies at Pro Bowl

By BARRY WILNER,

AP Football Writer

HONOLULU (AP) Hey rook, welcome to the Pro Bowl. Now get me a chaise lounge.

Or some shrimp. Or a mai tai.

It's quite an achievement for an NFL rookie to get to the league's all-star game. After the veterans commend them for such strong debuts, though, the orders begin.

"Yeah, they let me know I'm a rookie every day," said San Francisco linebacker Patrick Willis, merely the NFL Defensive Rookie of the Year. "They remind me I need to take every rep, no matter what. It's all fun and games. That's what you have to do when you go through it as a rookie."

Even if you're a 6-foot-6, 313-pound tackle like Joe Thomas of the Browns. Thomas solidified Cleveland's offensive line, helping the team go 10-6 after years of losing. He even drew votes for Offensive Rookie of the Year, which the NFC's Adrian Peterson of the Vikings won 46 1/2 to 3 1/2 over Thomas.

"I didn't even know offensive linemen were on the ballot," Thomas joked. "I was excited about that. You never think you have a shot at anything like that."

Or at making the Pro Bowl.

"It's an honor and I'm really proud to be able to play with the greatest players in the NFL," Thomas said.

Having such a solid resume and such strong respect for veterans doesn't earn Thomas any slack, though. One AFC teammate said Thomas has to "earn his stripes no matter what we ask," and Thomas admitted he expected to be put-upon by his elders.

"It's great to have three of us here," he said, noting that he, Willis and Peterson can share the rookie abuse. Uh, duties.

Peterson, who set the NFL single-game record with 296 yards rushing against San Diego and wound up with 1,341 yards and 12 touchdowns despite missing 2 1/2 games with a right knee injury, enjoys having two fellow freshmen on hand.

"It means a lot to get to the Pro Bowl, especially as a rookie," he said. "It tells you about the talent we have and how hard the guys worked. We have a mind-set of being young players coming in to have an impact.

"This season was a dream come true and something I definitely felt I could accomplish. And definitely it comes with a prize - a trip to Hawaii."

And with a price. So Peterson and his rookie counterparts have been fetching drinks, carrying bags and servicing the vets. It's a thankless job, but it comes with the territory.

As does playing special teams in the game, which makes sense for Willis, a tackling machine.

"He's one of the best young players in the game," Bengals receiver Chad Johnson said Thursday. "It's rare for someone to come in and have an impact like that, so young. The last one I saw wears No. 52 in Baltimore (Ray Lewis)."

Thomas faced Willis at times in the season finale, Cleveland's 20-7 win over San Francisco. Willis' 49ers held Peterson to his lowest total, a mere 3 yards in 14 rushes, in a 27-7 Minnesota victory three weeks earlier.

Now, the three rookies are bonded in servitude - at least for this week.

"Hey, we're living a dream," Peterson said. "This is something you love and you prepared all your life for it. You get the experience of being around the greatest players in the world."

Sure you do, rook. Now go get that vet some tanning lotion.