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The NFL Draft—What Players will make a Difference?

By Paul Mroczka

April 29–30, 2006 live from New York City's Radio City Music Hall, it's one of the biggest events of the year! Is it the Rockettes? No. Maybe it's that dreamed of Beatles reunion? No. Then it must be the latest country music awards show! Not at all.

It's the one draft that won't give you a chill. If anything, this draft sparks the beginning of the 2006–07 NFL season, and yet, there's not one play run, one signal called, or one zebra in sight. It is the only non-sporting sports event of its kind—the NFL Draft.

It's a time when fans that can never get enough football are glued to their televisions and computers, when college football players from around the country say an extra prayer or two, and when professional football coaches and general managers make decisions that can make or break their upcoming season.

Everyone is looking for that "impact" player—a guy who can make a big difference on a team in their initial season. Of the 32 NFL clubs, 14 had losing records and ten were 5–11 or worse last season. These are the teams that need to desperately improve and due to their poor records, they get to pick first. That means organizations like Pittsburgh, Seattle, and Denver—those who had winning seasons and went deep into the playoffs—will be at the end of the line this year.

For a college player to be a top-ten pick, they need to have a few things going for them. First, they must be one of the best at their position. They also need to be a good fit with the team that's picking. Finally, there's that "impact" factor, which can trump whether the player is a good fit with a particular team. Running back Reggie Bush (USC), quarterback Matt Leinart (USC), and defensive end Mario Williams (North Carolina State) are all top players but only one can go first. On April 29th, it looks like Reggie Bush will be the player chosen number one in the draft.

The Houston Texans have the first pick and it's projected that they are going to choose a high profile money player. They can actually use a defensive force like Mario Williams, but chances are they will go with Bush. Why? Running backs like Bush are rare. Along with winning the 2005 Heisman Trophy, Bush shattered school records and was an All-American. He's a hard worker with great acceleration

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and the ability to elude defenders by quickly changing direction.

However, running backs probably get punished the most in an NFL season, which means they have a very limited shelf life. Great running backs tend to show signs of wear and tear by their tenth year, which often manifests itself in reduced output and reoccurring injuries. The one concern about Bush is his durability. He has had shoulder surgery, and he's small by NFL standards. By the way, although it's almost certain that Bush will go first, it is not a given that Houston will pick first.

The Texans may trade down with another team, like the New York Jets, giving them the first pick. The Jets certainly need offense. However, if New York does trade for the top spot, they may actually not choose Bush. The Jets' quarterback situation is tenuous and that makes USC's Matt Leinart an attractive pick.

Leinart stands 6' 5" and is a smart player with excellent decision-making abilities. These are great

attributes for a NFL QB. In the pocket, he is accurate, consistent, and possesses fine field vision. The one knock is his mobility, which is not an uncommon problem for quarterbacks.

If the Texans trade with another team and move down that will also complicate the draft, especially for New Orleans. The Saints really need a quarterback and would definitely take Leinart—a player that most experts believe could start in his first pro season. The choices for the Saints would then become quarterback Vince Young (Texas) or a defensive player such as Williams, defense tackle Haloti Ngata (Oregon), safety Michael Huff (Texas) or safety Jimmy Williams (Virginia Tech).

Vince Young led his Texas Longhorns to the National Championship against USC this year. He's an amazing athlete with great arm strength, fine mobility, and great running ability. However he needs to mature more as a passer and would probably suffer as a first-year starter. Presently, there's concern about his accuracy, which can be improved over time. Perhaps the biggest downside on Young is one of his upsides—his running ability. In the NFL, unlike the college ranks, quarterbacks who run, like Atlanta's Michael Vic, can become injury ridden and mistake prone.

Mario Williams, who is projected to go third to the Tennessee Titans, is big, athletic, and quick. At 6' 7" and 290 pounds he's got NFL size, power, and speed. The Titans are in need of a speedy defensive player. Williams can be effective immediately.

Green Bay really needs to upgrade its defensive and offensive line, which means it's well positioned in the draft. It will have numerous choices, including offensive standouts D'Brickshaw Ferguson (Virginia) and A.J. Hawk (Ohio State) and, on defense, safeties Michael Huff (Texas) and Jimmy Williams (Virginia Tech) and defensive tackle Ngata.

Ferguson has been a constant standout at Virginia and should be the first offensive tackle taken in the draft. He's big, quick, and hard working and would be an immediate force for the Jets, Packers or 49ers. A.J. Hawk should be a solid professional offensive linebacker; although his college career was spent on "D," many believe he lacks the size to play that side of the ball in the pros. Hawk is explosive, tough, and hard working with excellent football instincts.

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Safety Michael Huff could be a perfect match at corner back for the San Francisco 49'ers. He possesses fine instincts, coverage awareness, and closing speed. He reads quarterbacks well, which may be the tradeoff teams take in lieu of his small size. San Francisco needs someone like Huff, who can start immediately and will learn quickly.

University of Maryland tight end Vernon Davis has strength, quickness off the line, and great hands and concentration—all of which should serve him well in the pros. He's small for a NFL tight end and may be more adept at wide receiver. Any team would be better with the addition of Davis but the Arizona Cardinals could really use a player like this on offense.

College standout Jimmy Williams looks destined to be a solid NFL safety. He's aggressive, tough, and fast but must improve in terms of coverage awareness. Oakland, Buffalo, and San Francisco can all benefit from his skills and drive.

Haloti Ngata is a great defensive force with size, speed, and strength. He has the potential to be a premiere defensive lineman, constantly controlling the line of scrimmage. He's also shown a lot of potential towards improving his technique, which gives him a big upside. He may go to Detroit, but the Houston Texans team can really use this player, while the Lions are looking for a quarterback. If these

two teams trade draft slots or draft picks, it could benefit both.

The top ten prospects—Reggie Bush (RB), Matt Leinart (QB), Mario Williams (DE), D'Brickashaw Ferguson (OT), A.J. Hawk (OLB), Michael Huff (S), Vernon Davis (TE), Jimmy Williams (S), Haloti Ngata (DT) and Vince Young (QB)—will be in the forefront of this year's draft. Chances are three or four of these players will go on to have long NFL careers. Right now, these ten men show all the promise in the world. Soon, they'll be asked to work harder, think more, and develop greater skill levels than they ever have before.

Those who survive and flourish will be the ones who can adapt the best and work the hardest, relying on more than just the talent that got them there. After all, New England's Tom Brady was sixth in the NFL draft. No, not the sixth pick—he went in the sixth round as the 199th draft pick. How do you spell "adaptability" and "hard work?"

This article was written by Paul Mroczka for

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Fantasy Football, a Quick Introduction

By Mark Larsen

Whether you already know every professional football team and player like the back of your hand, or you just want to learn enough to look less blank when conversing with friends, family or coworkers, fantasy football can enhance your NFL viewing experience.

As a lottery commercial says, "you have to be in it to win it". In order to join the fun, you have to pick a "host", select your preferred NFL players, and join or start a league.

You have a ton of options when considering where to host a fantasy football team. Some of the most commonly played "hosts" include CBS Sportsline.com, SportingNews.com, YahooSports Fantasy Football and CDM Fantasy Sports.

Depending on the host and league, you'll play one of several formats. One requires an upfront payment to enter your league, but doesn't charge you for players you pick up during the season from a free agent or "waiver" pool. Generally, the higher you pay as your upfront fee, the larger your prize if you win your league for the season.

The second format is free to join, but will cost you for most or all players you claim off waivers or as free agents after the initial draft period ends. Generally, trades with other players are free of charge. Be careful, though! Those trades can be costly in another way if you give away too much to get that must-have player.

The most common formats allow you a team made up of one or more quarterbacks, one or more running backs, one or more wide receivers, one or more tight ends and one or more defense/special teams (DST) units. Depending on the league, you may play all of your players at once or pick some players as "starters" and assign others as "reserves". Only your active players (starters) earn you points for that week. You get points for their league-defined accomplishments each week. What and how much your team will score will vary from league to league.

Now you need players on your team, so it is time for you to "draft" some. Using your basic understanding of football, and drawing on your NFL savvy, or some free or paid information sources to review, you'll rank real NFL players before your league draft. You may also be able to use the players as "pre-ranked" by your host.

You'll also need to decide whether you want the excitement and time commitment of a live draft, or the relative ease and less time offered by an automated draft. If you are a beginner, the automated draft is highly recommended.

During the season, there are "BYE" weeks, during which an NFL team and its players get the week off to recharge. Real players also can be injured, so you lose their productivity. On the other hand, you

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and your team don't get any time off, so you'll probably have to make trades and waiver wire moves to ensure that you have a full, strong team playing every week.

Those are the basics. Now, it is up to you to apply your special knowledge, instinct or hunches, and "Win one for the Gipper". Before your draft, you might want to challenge friends, family members or

co-workers who have similar skills to yours to join your league. Some healthy competition can make your fantasy football experience even more enjoyable.

This article is brought to you by Mark Larsen, founder of Satellite–Savvy.com. Check out the best place for

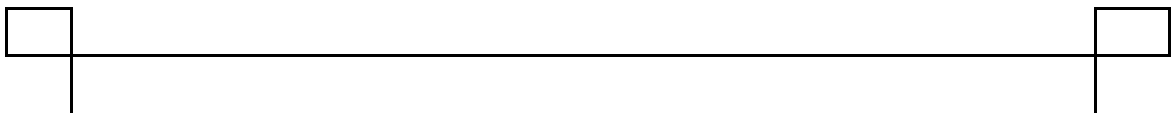
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