



Junior achievement: Best class ever in NFL draft?

Updated 4/23/2008 3:29 AM

By Larry Weisman, USA TODAY

Youth, said George Bernard Shaw, is wasted on the young.

He obviously never ran a draft board for an NFL team, where tender years count for so much.

Underclassmen have been a considerable part of the draft since they first became eligible in 1989. No fewer than 10 have been first-round picks every year since 2000, peaking at 15 in 2004.

Now comes their chance to show their elders even less respect. With at least 20 juniors looking like possible No. 1s, juniors may comprise more than half of the first round for the first time.

"It could be," says Scot McCloughan, general manager of the San Francisco 49ers. "When the underclassmen come out, they are usually good players. There are positives — you're getting a younger guy a year early. But there are as many negatives, in terms of physical and mental maturity."

Young, talented and theoretically ready, the juniors add flash (running back Darren McFadden) and flesh (290-pound defensive end Calais Campbell) and deepen the talent pool for the NFL.

"Overall the juniors that did enter the draft really strengthened it, especially at some positions," says Kevin Colbert, director of football operations for the Pittsburgh Steelers.

Need a running back? McFadden, the Arkansas speedster, won't last long. But those many juniors (Rashard Mendenhall, Jonathan Stewart, Felix Jones, Jamaal Charles) means "you can get a running back in the first three rounds of good quality," Colbert says.

Indianapolis Colts president Bill Polian says he wouldn't be surprised if six backs went in the first round alone.

"It's just amazing to see that there are so many great junior running backs. This is a great class, when you put it that way," says Stewart, of Oregon.

In the NFL's brutal seven-month calendar (from training camp to the Super Bowl), fresh legs count. Especially for the running backs, whose NFL downside generally begins as they approach 30 years of age. The junior backs might come to the NFL short of playing time, but their bodies endured less punishment in a shorter college career.

"There are positives and negatives to it," concedes Mendenhall, a one-year starter at Illinois. "One of



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them is you haven't taken a lot of the beatings as some of the senior guys. But at the same time, you don't have as much experience. It's a double-edged sword."

Some have already taken beatings, physically and possibly in their draft standing. Stewart, in his lone season as the Ducks' featured back, set school records and led the Pac-10 in rushing (1,722 yards) and all-purpose yards (2,481). That, however, came with a price when he underwent surgery in mid-March to correct a lingering turf toe injury.

He missed his scheduled workout for pro scouts but his turf toe was no secret at the scouting combine in Indianapolis in February, where he ran the 40-yard dash in 4.46 seconds. Still a top 20 pick? Likely, given his performance last year when the injury did not cause him to miss any playing time.

Given that brush with mortality, why not use the springboard to the NFL as quickly as possible?

"You don't get the chance to play in the NFL every day," Mendenhall says. "When that chance comes, there is risk and reward."

Making the decision

This is no small step up the ladder. Leaving college football, where NCAA rules limit teams to 20 hours of work per week, for the endless grind of the NFL constitutes a complete lifestyle change.

"I think that this jump these kids are fixing to make from college to the pros is the ultimate jump," says Houston Texans coach Gary Kubiak.

They declare their intentions in mid-January and there is no turning back, which bothers Ralph Friedgen, head coach at Maryland and a former NFL assistant. Friedgen has seen a number of his better players (linebacker Shawne Merriman, defensive tackle Randy Starks, linebacker E.J. Henderson, tight end Vernon Davis) leave early, as will Henderson's brother, Erin, also a linebacker this year.

"Of all the things I hear about helping the student-athlete, I don't think this is one," Friedgen says. "It's a very tough situation for these kids, with a lot of money riding on it. If you're going to be a first-round pick, you ought to go. If you fall into the third or fourth round, that's millions of dollars. You made a decision in January and you don't get a result until the end of April."

Sometimes the player suffers. Sometimes it is the team.



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McCloughan remembers when he worked in scouting for the Seattle Seahawks and they used their 2001 No. 1 pick on a junior receiver, Koren Robinson, now with the Green Bay Packers. Robinson's career has been marred by incidents with alcohol, arrests and two suspensions by the NFL (and one by the Seahawks). Seven years in the NFL, three teams, one 1,000-yard receiving season.

"He was a third-year junior, 21 years old. We didn't put the support structure around him," McCloughan says. "We just gave him the money and said, 'Go make plays.'?"

Maturity matters and teams consider it. Campbell, who stands nearly 6-8 and is the tallest of the defensive end prospects, gave up his senior season at Miami (Fla.), but with good reason. He graduated in December with a degree in sociology.

"There's something to be said for that," McCloughan says. "If you were hiring a guy for a construction job, would you want him to leave when he was three-quarters done?"

Racing through the educational process can be a bit like the 40-yard dash, with the NFL the tempting ribbon at the finish line. Some prospects graduate from high school early to be on campus for their university's spring practices, so another four-year dose of personal growth is truncated in pursuit of treacherous shores. USA TODAY reported the number of early arrivals this year at 105 at the 66 Bowl Championship Series-affiliated schools. There were 15 in 2002.

Chris Stankovich, a sports psychology consultant based in Columbus, Ohio, wonders: "With so few players going on to the pros, who is being served?"

"Developmentally, there are so many changes cognitively for people ages 16 to 23. But as long as the money is there, you always find people pushing the envelope."

Ohio State defensive end Vernon Gholston played in consecutive national championship games, both losses, and decided to turn pro. He figures as a top 10 pick.

"I felt like it was my time," he says. "A decision like this isn't something you come to in one day. You kind of play the whole season that way. I knew all along I could have an opportunity like this."

Clemson defensive end Phillip Merling says he'd have stuck around for his senior season but he had to factor in his personal circumstances. He has a 1-year-old daughter and a fiancée graduating from South Carolina.



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"If it wasn't for my daughter, I probably would have stayed another year of school, finish up and graduate," he says.

But he played as a freshman, started the last two years and had seven sacks and 21 quarterback pressures as a junior for the Tigers.

"I think I'm ready to play in the NFL," he says. "I had a pretty good college year."

The NFL clearly hungers for the kids after deciding to allow them in beginning in 1989 to stave off lawsuits. Three were No. 1 picks that year, the fewest ever.

Exploring the unknown

NFL teams cannot scout junior players while they are playing. When their representatives visit college campuses during the fall, they can only request film of draft-eligible seniors. So the emergence of about 50 new players by the January filing deadline creates information issues.

Review of game tape. Background checks. Careful scrutiny at the combine of these new faces.

"You don't really know the juniors at all because you haven't scouted them, you haven't asked coaches about them, you haven't met them. Even when you go to the school you don't even pay attention to those guys because you're so focused on doing the seniors," says Green Bay Packers general manager Ted Thompson.

The getting-acquainted period happens quickly. University of Miami (Fla.) safety Kenny Phillips declared as a junior, went to the combine and met with 22 teams.

The interview period is 15 minutes but it's a start.

Stewart, 21, says he has dreamed of this moment "since I was little." Football, he says, "is a passion of mine. It's something I've been blessed to do."

Now he'll be paid to do it, putting his college education, short as it was, to good use.