

BETTER LATE THAN NEVER

by Mark Speck

Draft Day has become one of the biggest days on the NFL calendar. It's right up there with Super Bowl Sunday and the opening Week of the season in importance. It's carried live on television. Fans gather to cheer or boo when their teams choose the available college talent. Draft experts, analysts, gurus and swamis try to predict who will take who weeks and months before the draft. Then they analyze and debate each pick for weeks and months AFTER the draft.

Most of this fuss is reserved for the top draft picks, the first rounders, the blue chippers. Teams trade up and down to get the choicest spots and players. Some teams draft for "need", players to fill certain spots or roles. Others pick the "best available athletes". Whichever is the reason, everyone wonders why a team picked a certain player, or didn't pick another one.

But what about the later draft choices? What about the players chosen last, on the very last round? No one seems to make too much of a fuss about those picks. At one time, the NFL draft lasted 30 rounds, and it was said that a G.M. or Director of Player Personnel would pick his mother-in-law on the last round to get the whole process over with. Stories circulated that owners would let their wives pick. They supposedly chose the cutest players using their photographs. No one really analyzed -- or much less cared -- who was chosen on the last round. They were usually undersized kids from undersized schools who had no realistic chance of making an NFL roster.

THE WRONG STUFF

These last choices did lead to some interesting selections. In 1973, for example, Buffalo picked a defensive back from Colorado named John (Bad Dude) Stearns. He went on to a long career in baseball as a catcher.

In that same draft, the Minnesota Vikings chose a tight end from the University of Minnesota named Dave Winfield, who chose a career in baseball and is probably headed to Cooperstown instead of Canton. In 1967, Kansas City's last choice was a flanker from U.T.E.P. named Dave (Big Daddy) Lattin. Lattin had played on U.T.E.P.'s 1966 national championship BASKETBALL team and went on to a career in both the N.B.A. and the A.B.A.

For the most part, the last draft picks are quickly forgotten, guys who can brag to his frat brothers at the college reunion that they were actually drafted by an NFL team. Guys with names like John (Model T) Ford, Bob (Choo Cboo) Train, Abe (Frito) Gonzales, Marvin Katzenstein, Myron Claxton, Willus Fjerstad, I.V. Wilson, DeWitt Methvin and Ventson Donelson. Guys who need to buy a ticket to get into the Hall of Fame.

But every once in a while, a gem slips through the cracks, a real gamer who for some reason or another was ignored by the scouts, and leave coaches, General Managers, experts, gurus and swamis scratching their heads and wondering where he came from.

SURPRISE! SURPRISE!

"The truth is pretty simple," said long-time NFL executive Jim Finks. "Someone had the player graded improperly. We didn't do our job." Scouts sometimes pay too much attention to a players' numbers.

"He didn't have the right height for an ideal back," Finks explained, "or the right speed. He simply didn't measure up on paper."

But the game isn't played on paper -- otherwise the cleats would tear it to shreds -- and that's fortunate for a lot of NFL players over the years.

The very first draft saw an example of this. The Bears, with their last pick, chose Danny Fortman, a guard and linebacker from Colgate. Legend has it that the only reason he was picked at all was that George Halas liked the sound of his name. Fortman went on to a Hall of Fame 8-year career in Chicago.

In 1947, Pittsburgh chose Warren Lahr from Case Western Reserve on the 30th and last round. The 293rd draft pick played 11 years for the Browns and finished with 40 career interceptions. In both 1950 and '51, he returned two interceptions for touchdowns.

"We were still drafting guys sight unseen," said long-time scout Bucko Kilroy, "That's why a lot of last-rounders made it."

To be fair, Case Western Reserve was in the Browns' backyard while the Steelers would have had to send a scout the daunting distance of 80 miles to look at Lahr. The Browns were obviously more impressed with what they saw than Pittsburgh was with what they didn't.

FORESIGHT

Guys like Tom Day, an offensive guard from North Carolina A & T who waited by the phone until Round 20 in 1960. The Chicago Cardinals picked him last. The 229th pick played one year for the Cards, then went to Buffalo. The Bills turned him into a defensive lineman and for the next eight years he was one of the best in the AFL.

Three years later, a flanker from Texas Southern, Homer Jones, was chosen last by the New York Giants. Jones stunned the Giants by becoming one of the NFL's top deep receiving threats. Twice he led the NFL in yards per reception and once in touchdown receptions. He could boast of 48, 49, 45 and 42 catch seasons.

One year later, two offensive linemen, Bill Curry from Georgia Tech and Milt Sunde from the University of Minnesota, were picked last, by Green Bay and Minnesota, respectively. Both played over 10 years and participated in Super Bowls and Pro Bowls.

In 1967, one of the most "famous" of the last round picks -- Dan Abramowicz -- was chosen on the 17th round by New Orleans. One scout said Dan had "glacial speed". But he also had superb hands and fierce determination.

"Danny made it on something that's hard to measure: competitive spirit", said Jim Finks.

Although chosen 420th, the flanker from Xavier proved he belonged in the NFL by catching a league-high 73 passes in 1969 and breaking Lance Alworth's record for catches in consecutive games.

In 1971, both Randy Vataha -- 418th pick by the Rams -- and Don Nottingham -- 441st pick by the Colts -- were last rounders who surprised everyone by being solid NFL players.

WHO HAS A RED FACE NOW?

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A year later, linebackers Stan White from Ohio State and Ted Washington from Mississippi Valley State didn't get the call until the 17th and last round. Washington played ten years for the Oilers, and White was even better. He was named the Colts' defensive captain and set an NFL record for interceptions by a linebacker with eight in 1975.

The scouts had based their reports on White on the facts that he had suffered a pinched nerve in his neck, missed a lot of practice and had a subpar senior season.

"I was really shook and humiliated by the whole thing," said White, "I wouldn't leave my room for two days after the draft. I stayed in my closet and my girlfriend brought me my meals for two days.

White spent the next decade serving opponents their lunches on Sundays.

Although the scouting and drafting process has evolved and been upgraded over the years, mistakes still are made. In 1977, Rod Martin was chosen last by the Raiders. He played on two Super Bowl championship teams and was the MVP of Super Bowl XV.

Two years later, the Rams used their 328th and last choice on wide receiver Drew Hill from Georgia Tech. Hill wound up playing 14 years in the NFL and was one of the league's top receivers and kick returners. He had five 1,000 yard receiving seasons.

In 1983, the Denver Broncos had one last choice to make in the draft. It was Round 12, draft pick number 310. It was late and everyone probably wanted to go home. The Broncos chose a defensive tackle from the University of Minnesota who many probably felt was too small for the NFL. His name: Karl Mecklenburg.

Three years later, Minnesota had one last choice. With their 318th and last pick, the Vikings took Florida State linebacker Jesse Solomon. He played well for the Vikings and then went to Dallas in the Herschel Walker trade and starred on defense for the Cowboys championship teams.

As late as 1991, when Dallas chose defensive back Larry Brown and Washington tabbed U.N.L.V. receiver Keenan McCardell on the last round, good players slip past the scouts and through the cracks in the system. As stated before, the game isn't played on paper. It's on the field where these players showed they belonged despite their lack of "numbers."

Now that the NFL draft has been shortened, the days of the 17th or 20th round "afterthought" is gone. But the names, determination, competitiveness and fortitude of these men won't be forgotten. They are a part of pro football lore. As Stan White so aptly put it, "Their scouting is very intricate to them, but there are a lot of things you can't measure with a ruler or a stop-watch."

The following is a list of some last round NFL draft choices and those players drafted before them, players their teams obviously thought more of. See which ones are more recognizable.

1947 Pittsburgh

Last Pick-Warren Lahr

Previous Picks-Hub Bechtol, Meatball Meeks, Binks Bushmaler.

1960 Chicago Cardinals

Last Pick-Tom Day

Previous Picks-Dewitt Hoopes, Bob Haas.

1963 New York Giants

Last Pick-Homer Jones

Previous Picks-Dick Skelly, Burt Petkus.

1964 Minnesota

Last Pick-Milt Sunde

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Previous Picks-H.O. Estes, Sandy Sands, Jerry McClurg.

1967 New Orleans

Last Pick-Dan Abramowicz

Previous Picks-Tom Stangle, Gary Crossnickle, Marcus Rhoden.

1971 Baltimore

Last Pick-Don Nottingham

Previous Picks-Ken Frith, Willie Bogan, Mike Mikolayunas.

1972 Baltimore

Last Pick-Stan White

Previous Picks-Al Quails, Gary Hambell, Robin Parkhouse.

1979 Los Angeles Rams

Last Pick-Drew Hill

Previous Picks-Derwin Tucker, Grady Ebensberger, Jesse Deramus.

1986 Minnesota

Last Pick-Jesse Solomon

Previous Picks-Thomas Rooks, Gary Schippang, Joe Cormier.

1991 Washington

Last Pick-Keenan McCardell

Previous Picks-Dennis Ransom, Charles Bell, Chris Shale.