

Commentary

Bills keep making wise choices in draft

Buried underneath the mock drafts, the draft analysis, the mock draft analysis, the talking heads, the surprises, the steals and the stretches, the NFL draft comes down to one thing: Which team has the more intelligent, football-savvy people running the organization?

It's easy to point a finger at Detroit and say the Lions have made the most draft blunders the past several years. It's simple to look at the team that drafts the "consensus top player" and say it made a good choice. But what's difficult is to admire a team that goes smart instead of flashy.

Sure, the Oakland Raiders have made headlines by selecting JaMarcus Russell and Darren McFadden in the past two drafts. Both were considered "must-have guys." But take a look at what the Buffalo Bills have done in recent years. They didn't turn any heads at Radio City Music Hall with their selections this past weekend, nor have they since taking Willis McGahee (remember when we thought that was a good move?) in 2003.

No, Buffalo has consistently made an effort to not necessarily take the "best" player but the right one. The Bills' brain trust of Chief Operating Officer Russ Brandon, Vice President of College Scouting Tom Modrak and Coach Dick Jauron didn't drop any bombs by selecting Leodis McKelvin and James Hardy on Saturday. But they addressed the highest priorities of the team.

McKelvin was the highest-rated cornerback in the draft, and the Bills were smart to snatch him before anyone else did. He should start opposite Terrence McGee and aid the Bills in stopping the pass better than they did in 2007. He isn't a big interception guy, but he's a great cover man.

Hardy wasn't considered the best receiver available, but he fits the Bills with his height and leaping ability. Do you know how much his vertical leap and long arms will help second-year quarterback Trent Edwards develop next season? Edwards won't have to make the perfect pass to Hardy — he can just toss the ball in the air and let the 6-foot-6 former basketball player go get it.

Buffalo also added much-needed depth at defensive end with Chris Ellis and picked up a sure-handed tight end in Derek Fine. The rest of the picks may not challenge for starting roles, but they could fill in some of those holes on the all-important special teams.

All of this comes on the heels of smart moves the Bills have made the previous two years. The 2007 draft brought running back Marshawn Lynch, linebacker Paul Posluszny and Edwards to Buffalo. All of those picks gave the Bills exactly what they needed, a feature back, a run-stopping defensive leader and a QB who makes the right decisions. In 2006, Buffalo sealed up a gaping hole with solid safety in Donte Whitner. The Bills also took defensive tackle John McCargo, but the jury is still out on him. This will be a telling year for him.

The Bills could have made headlines last year by drafting quarterback Brady Quinn in the first round, but they chose to nab Lynch and wait to get Edwards in the third round. In 2006, highly touted quarterbacks Matt Leinart and Jay Cutler and running back Laurence Maroney were still on the board when Buffalo picked Whitner.

This is three years in a row the Bills have made good moves in the draft. These players have already started contributing on a large scale and played well. This can only mean many more wins in the near future.

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Buffalo draftees fill major needs

by CHRISTOPHER GORDON
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Buffalo Bills Chief Operating Officer Russ Brandon admitted that the team had some anxious moments as one of its biggest rivals, the New England Patriots, selected on spot ahead of them in the first round of Saturday's draft.

Like the Bills, one of their biggest needs was at cornerback after the defending AFC Champions lost its two starting corners, Asante Samuel and Randall Gay, to free agency. The second the Patriots selected a linebacker, it must have felt like Christmas came early for the Bills as they selected Troy corner Leodis McKelvin, considered by some to be the top corner in this year's draft.

"We're excited about our selection," said Brandon. "We're very excited to get Leodis in the mix. We sweat through the whole process."

What the Bills are getting is a player whom they said not only is an outstanding cover cornerback with great speed, but gives the team an additional threat as a returner. McKelvin tied an NCAA record with eight return touchdowns in his career, including seven punt returns and one kickoff return.

Although the Bills have two outstanding returners on the team — Terrence McGee and Roscoe Parish, who have a combined eight kickoff and punt returns for touchdowns in their Bills careers — they are excited to let McKelvin be a part of that group.

At 5-foot-10, 192 pounds, McKelvin not only possesses great cover ability, but speed as well, as he ran the 40-yard dash in 4.38 seconds — the same time as Bills receiver Lee Evans.

"An all-around cornerback is something that's hard to find," said Vice-President of College Scouting Tom Modrak.

McKelvin is confident he will be on the field when the defense takes its first snap in 2008.

"I'm going to come in and keep my starting job," said McKelvin.

This fills a need that the team has had since Nate Clements signed with the San Francisco 49ers after the 2006 season. The Bills believe that the position is much deeper now with the additions of McKelvin and former Philadelphia Eagle William James. Along with incumbent starters Terrence McGee and Jabari Greer, and third-year player Ashton Youboty, the Bills believe they offer a talented group at the position.

McKelvin said that while he would like to be in the mix on returns, he has no doubt that his greatest contributions will be on defense.

"I think of myself as a cornerback and then a returner," said McKelvin.

And if its any indication of how successful he will be, Troy has had two all-pros — linebacker Demarcus Ware of Dallas and defensive end Osi Umenyiora of the Giants — currently playing in the NFL.

Come training camp, the Bills second round pick, wide receiver James Hardy



The Buffalo Bills addressed two of their biggest needs in the first day of the NFL Draft by taking cornerback Leodis McKelvin, top, and wide receiver James Hardy, bottom. Both players are expected to start next year.

of Indiana, will not be difficult to spot. For a team whose top receivers, Evans, Parish and Josh Reed, all stand at 5-foot-10 or less, the 6-foot-6 Hardy will add the size dimension that the team was looking for when the offseason began.

"Adding a big receiver was something we talked about for a long time," said Brandon.

When the Bills had a chance to make their choice, they had several options still on the board, including Malcolm Kelly of Oklahoma and Limas Sweed of Texas, both of whom were 6-foot-4. But the Bills got the player they wanted.

"We stayed true to our board and we're very pleased with our two picks," said Brandon.

Modrak said he is an "unusually tall wide receiver," whom he said the Bills liked in part because he has "good bend for a tall guy."

Modrak said he has good speed for a tall receiver, running in the 4.5 range. But he added that the Bills liked both the mismatches he can create, as well as his nose for the end zone. Hardy had 16 touchdown receptions in 2007 and scored 36 in his 36-game career at Indiana, where he played basketball before converting to football.

Hardy said he and the Bills brass first talked at the scouting combine. At that time they discussed their need for a tall wide receiver and wanting to improve

end zone numbers. The Bills scored 20 offensive touchdowns in 2007.

"At the combine, me and the coaches discussed that," said Hardy.

He said when his team is driving and in the red zone, "another light comes on."

Jauron said Hardy's presence can help in the red zone, because with his size he can outjump defenders for the football.

"We're very optimistic. We need to score," said Jauron.

His presence may also be able to help second-year running back Marshawn Lynch become a greater threat near the goal line.

Hardy said he believes he will contribute and make a successful transition to the NFL.

"All I have to do is adjust to the speed," said Hardy. "We will get in the endzone a lot this year."

In the third round, the Buffalo Bills selected defensive end Chris Ellis of Virginia Tech. Listed at 6-foot-4 and 263 pounds, Ellis should contribute to the Bills as a pass-rushing specialist.

The Buffalo Bills used the rest of the draft to add depth as well as to give the team options on special teams. In the fourth round, they selected another corner, one sporting the perfect name, with Reggie Corner from Akron.

They added tight end depth with Derek Fine from Kansas in round four. Outside linebacker Alvin Bowen of Iowa State was selected in the fifth round, and Xavier Omon, a running back from Southwest Missouri State, was selected in the sixth round. Buffalo added offensive tackle Demetrius Bell from Northwestern State, wide receiver Steve Johnson, who stands 6-foot-2 from Kentucky and Kennard Cox, a 6-foot corner from Pittsburgh.

The Bills indicated they would like to see some of these players contribute on special teams, following the departure of key members Coy Wire, Sam Aiken and Josh Stamer.

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BILLS 2008 DRAFT

Round	Player	School
1	Leodis Martin (CB)	Troy
2	James Hardy (WR)	Indiana
3	Chris Ellis (DE)	Virginia Tech
4	Reggie Corner (CB)	Akron
4	Derek Fine (TE)	Kansas
5	Alvin Bowen (LB)	Iowa State
6	Xavier Omon (RB)	Northwest Missouri State
7	Demetrius Bell (OT)	Northwestern State (LA)
7	Steve Johnson (WR)	Kentucky
7	Kennard Cox (CB)	Pittsburgh