



YOUNG PLAYERS EXCEL AS KICKOFF '05 NEARS

After starring on Saturdays in their college careers, NFL rookies have continued to excel this summer with their new teams.

"The biggest thing a rookie has to fight is frustration because it is a very natural thing to feel lost and overwhelmed," says Pittsburgh Steelers head coach **BILL COWHER**. "But all these things will start to become a little clearer and a little more comfortable."

Last year, an impressive number of rookies made a successful transition into the NFL and had a major impact.

Steelers quarterback **BEN ROETHLISBERGER** plowed a new frontier in rookie passing production, winning all 13 of his regular-season starts. The No. 11 overall pick in 2004 set a new high in rookie passer rating (98.1), surpassing the 96.0 mark set by **DAN MARINO** in 1983. **ELI MANNING** of the Giants finished his first NFL season strong, passing for five TDs against three interceptions in his last three starts, posting a passer rating above 100.0 in two of the three games.

Detroit's **KEVIN JONES** set the standard for rookie running backs, rushing for 1,133 yards, averaging 4.7 yards per carry with five touchdowns. Tampa Bay wide receiver **MICHAEL CLAYTON** was an offensive threat, posting a rookie-best 80 receptions and 1,193 yards, while Buffalo wideout **LEE EVANS** led rookies with nine touchdowns.

Kansas City defensive end **JARED ALLEN** topped the class with 9.0 sacks, followed by New Orleans defensive end **WILL SMITH** with 7.5. Rookies were especially proficient in interceptions a year ago. No fewer than six led or tied for their teams' lead in pickoffs. Among that group were Carolina Panthers cornerback **CHRIS GAMBLE**, who tied for the NFC lead with six picks, and Houston's **DUNTA ROBINSON**, who paced the Texans with six.

Those were among the rookie standouts of 2004. Here are 2005 rookies who have made a mark this summer and show high promise of continuing to do so in the regular season:

BULLDOZER IN THE BACKFIELD: He's 6-4, 256 pounds...and a running back! And for **BRANDON JACOBS** of the New York Giants, so far, the bigger the better.

The club's fourth-round selection from Southern Illinois has wasted no time making a good impression, leading Giants RBs with 164 yards rushing on 37 carries in the preseason. Jacobs, who shared time in the backfield at Auburn in 2003 with top-five picks **RONNIE BROWN** (No. 2) of Miami and **CARNELL WILLIAMS** (No. 5) of Tampa Bay, transferred to Southern Illinois for an opportunity to increase his playing time.

In one season with the Salukis, he rushed for 922 yards and 19 touchdowns, averaging 122.1 yards per game and 6.6 yards per carry.

"I was very excited when we drafted Brandon," says Giants general manager **ERNIE ACCORSI** of the day-two draft pick. "The biggest worry that I had was anytime you have to sleep on it, you start looking at the board. Size and speed usually catches people's eyes. I was worried sick that he was going to get picked. Obviously he has short-yardage specialization, but he can play anywhere on the field. He's a big back who can run."

Jacobs demonstrated his ability immediately, rushing for 73 yards on 12 carries, an average of 6.1 yards per carry, in an August 13 game against Cleveland.

"Guys are big and strong in the NFL and everyone out there is moving as fast as you are," says Jacobs. "If you see a hole, you have to get in it. If you don't, you won't gain a yard."

HELP ON THE LINE: In an effort to bolster the club's offensive line, the New Orleans Saints used their first-round

selection on Oklahoma tackle **JAMMAL BROWN**. So far, the results have been impressive.

Brown started all four preseason games, including those against the Super Bowl champion New England Patriots and the always formidable defense of the Baltimore Ravens. The 6-6, 313-pounder is hoping that experience serves him well when the club kicks off the regular season against the Carolina Panthers in Week 1.

"It's a great challenge for me to go against great players," says Brown. "Playing against top guys always makes it fun. As a rookie, I know other teams are going to try to test me, but the key for me is not to back down. I can't ever back down and I need to keep working hard to be successful."

Brown enjoyed an outstanding collegiate career at Oklahoma, earning the 2004 Outland Trophy as the nation's top offensive lineman. While with the Sooners, he allowed only one sack in his final two seasons, earning all-Big 12 honors in each of his final three years.

CRIBBS LOOKS SPECIAL: Before joining the Cleveland Browns as a rookie free agent this spring, **JOSH CRIBBS** had not returned a kickoff since he played at Washington D.C.'s Dunbar High. However, the former Kent State quarterback has turned heads in Cleveland on special teams, as Browns head coach **ROMEO CRENNEL** has tabbed the 6-1, 192-pounder as his No. 1 kickoff-return man. Cribbs also racks up tackles on coverage units.

"Josh still has a ways to go at receiver," says Crennel, "but he's impressed me on special teams."

Cribbs passed and rushed for more than 1,000 yards in three of his four seasons with the Golden Flashes. He threw 55 TD passes in his career and rushed for 38 more. His vision, quick starts, and sharp cuts made him the Mid-American Conference's all-time leading rushing quarterback (3,670 yards).

Heading into the final weekend of preseason action, Cribbs stood atop the league with a glistening 29.6-yard average among kickoff returners with at least seven returns.

"I'm raising the bar," says Cribbs. "It's up and it's going to stay there. It'll only get higher."

IMPACT AT D-BACK: Among the league's rookie defensive backs likely to receive playing time on Kickoff Weekend is a pair of safeties drafted in the fourth round: the Tennessee Titans' **VINCENT FULLER** and **KERRY RHODES** of the New York Jets.

Fuller, a quarterback during his days at Baltimore's Woodlawn High, can quickly read an opposing offense. Selected from Virginia Tech, the 6-1, 190-pounder may earn the right to be Tennessee's No. 1 option at nickel back. His versatility has earned him a chance to contribute at both safety positions and in nickel and dime packages. The 23-year-old business information technology degree-holder also plays on special teams.

"It's hard to find a guy who can do the number of things that he can," says Titans head coach **JEFF FISHER**. "But you have to be careful that you don't dilute him such that he is not effective at anything." Fuller is one of three NFL defenders with a pair of defensive fumble recoveries this preseason.

Rhodes, from Louisville, entered the final week as one of five AFC players with a pair of interceptions and is the only rookie in that group. He is neck-and-neck with second-year pro **OLIVER CELESTIN** for the Jets' starting strong safety job.

Rhodes has shown a knack for being around the ball, much like the Jets' second-year safety **ERIK COLEMAN**. Coleman won his starting post last season and played in more than 98 percent of the defense's plays.

"I talk to Erik all the time," says Rhodes. "He's helped me a lot so far by telling me to be calm out there and play certain situations in my head, so when they happen on the field I know what's going on." The Jets' secondary will be tested in Week 1 as the team travels to Kansas City, possessors of the NFL's No. 1 offense in 2004.

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