



YOUNG PLAYERS EXCEL AS KICKOFF '06 NEARS

It's one of the highlights of the NFL preseason – watching rookies make their mark at the ultimate level.

Again in 2006, rookies from the highly touted to the previously unknown will be called upon to play key roles in their NFL debut seasons.

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

A pair of running backs from Auburn – Tampa Bay's **CARNELL "CADILLAC" WILLIAMS** and Miami's **RONNIE BROWN** – were among the most productive newcomers in 2005. Williams enjoyed a beginning unlike any other, becoming the first rookie in NFL history with three consecutive 100-yard rushing games to start a career en route to a 1,178 -yard rushing season. That production earned him the Associated Press Offensive Rookie of the Year Award and helped the Buccaneers to the NFC South title. Meanwhile in Miami, Brown led AFC rookies with 907 rushing yards, averaging 4.4 yards per carry with four touchdowns.

In Houston, a fourth-round pick from Hampton ended up in the Pro Bowl, as **JEROME MATHIS'** stellar performance returning kickoffs – a 28.6-yard average and two touchdowns – earned him All-Star honors.

Meanwhile on the defensive side of the ball, Seattle's **LOFA TATUPU** started all 16 games at linebacker, becoming only the second Seahawk rookie ever to lead the club in tackles (105; **TERRY BEESON**, 134, 1977), adding four sacks and three interceptions as Seattle advanced to Super Bowl XL. In San Diego, **SHAWNE MERRIMAN** became the first Charger rookie to lead the team in sacks with 10, earning Associated Press Defensive Rookie of the Year honors. Both Merriman and Tatupu capped the year with a trip to the Pro Bowl.

Those were among the rookie standouts of 2005. Here are 2006 rookies who have made a mark this summer and show high promise of continuing to do so in the regular season:

EXCITEMENT IN THE BIG EASY: His selection in the NFL Draft by the New Orleans Saints spawned celebrations throughout the Gulf Coast region. Now, as the Saints prepare to return to the Big Easy for their 40th season, the excitement for the regular-season debut of the dynamic **REGGIE BUSH** continues to build.

The running back has shown glimpses throughout the preseason of the talent that made him one of the most electrifying players in college football history during his time at USC, capped by his Heisman Trophy-winning campaign last season. In his first professional contest, a 19-16 win over Tennessee on August 12, Bush broke free for a 44-yard run to set up a field goal, showing the ability that has fans greatly anticipating the NFL season.

"He's one of those guys who is so competitive and so intense," says new Saints quarterback **DREW BREES**. "He truly wants to be the best."

And he's not alone. Other Saints rookies have also opened eyes, including guard **JAHRI EVANS**, who has started all three preseason games after being selected in the fourth round from Bloomsburg. "He's shown some fight," says New Orleans center **JEFF FAINE**. "And that's the most important thing for a rookie – to show some good fight."

At wide receiver, the club's seventh-round selection, **MARQUES COLSTON** of Hofstra, has been impressive, posting seven receptions for 77 yards and one touchdown. His opportunity to contribute may rise with the recent trade of veteran receiver **DONTE' STALLWORTH** to the Eagles.

"I like the progress Marques Colston's made a lot," says Saints head coach **SEAN PAYTON**. "That had a lot to do with why we traded Donte'."

GROWING IN GREEN BAY: After starring in the MAC, he's hoping to do it for the Pack. That's the goal of Green

Bay's second selection in the second round of the 2006 draft, wide receiver **GREG JENNINGS** of Western Michigan.

Jennings, who last season became the first MAC player to win MVP and Offensive Player of the Year honors in the same season since Marshall's **RANDY MOSS** in 1997, has turned heads around the league this preseason, quickly proving his big-play ability.

The Kalamazoo, Michigan native leads the NFL with 239 receiving yards, tying for fifth with 11 receptions, including an NFL preseason-long 85-yard touchdown catch against Atlanta on August 19. Jennings also added a 27-yard punt return last Monday night against Cincinnati.

"The kid is special," says Packers head coach **MIKE MC CARTHY**. "He's a young guy that's really hitting his stride very early."

Adds Jennings, "I set high standards for myself, so to just go out there and be average, that's not me. I try to stand out by my play. That's what it's all about."

FAST LEARNER: Cleveland is the seat of Cuyahoga County – and that's exactly where the Browns' first-round draft choice **KAMERION WIMBLEY** is placing opposing quarterbacks – on their seat.

Selected No. 13 overall, the elusive 6-3, 245-pounder from Florida State plays outside linebacker in Cleveland's 3-4 alignment after four years as a Seminole defensive end. With a quick first step and the advice of veteran outside 'backer teammates **WILLIE MC GINEST** and **MATT STEWART**, the rangy Wimbley is catching on in his new role. In limited playing time, the Wichita, Kansas native has a sack in each of the Browns' past two games.

In Week 2 of the preseason against Detroit, Wimbley sped past a tackle to record a sack on a third-and-six play from midfield. This past Saturday at Buffalo, Wimbley drew a holding call in the first half and later in the game worked his way into the Bills' backfield to strip the quarterback of the ball.

"The buzz you get from the crowd and from the Dawg Pound with a sack is great," says Wimbley. "You're so anxious to get that next big feeling."

"I've gotten a couple of sacks. Hopefully I can keep that momentum going."

DE MECO IN THE MIDDLE: Facing Houston middle linebacker **DE MECO RYANS** is no sit-com for NFL offenses. The Texans' second-round pick has smoothly transitioned into starting at one of the most demanding of positions on the defensive side of the ball.

Capable of playing any of Houston's three linebacker roles, the 6-4, 236-pound Ryans notched nine tackles in Denver last week within the Broncos' first four possessions. Already, the 22-year-old from Alabama displays a poise seen in seasoned pros, making correct reads and decisions.

"DeMeco continues to be a very bright spot for this football team and I expect him to be that way for a long, long time," says Texans head coach **GARY KUBIAK**.

"He is a quality, quality person and a great football player," continues Kubiak. "To ask a young rookie to be the 'Mike' linebacker in an NFL defense right from the get-go has to be a challenge. With him and (2006 NFL No. 1 overall draft choice) **MARIO WILLIAMS** at end, we should be able to build a pretty good defense around those two guys."

Ryans is ready for the challenge. "I'm in a place where I have a chance to prove something," he says. "We're a new team with new coaches. I like that. It's a way to establish our own tradition and get things going in the right way."

"Honestly, I don't think I could have ended up in a better place."

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