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ROOKIES ON THE RISE: NFC NEWCOMERS MAKE MAJOR IMPACT

As the NFL season approaches the halfway point, rookies around the league are making an impact.

And success among this rookie class has come in all shapes in sizes.

While a pair of first-round draft picks with Heisman Trophies and national championship rings – New Orleans running back **REGGIE BUSH** (No. 2) and Arizona quarterback **MATT LEINART** (No. 10) – have brought their well-documented NCAA success to the NFL, lesser-known stars-in-the-making such as the Saints' **MARQUES COLSTON**, a seventh-round selection from Hofstra who leads all rookies with 414 receiving yards and four touchdowns, and Tampa Bay quarterback **BRUCE GRADKOWSKI**, a sixth-rounder from Toledo who has guided the Bucs to consecutive wins, have also made their mark.

Playmakers also are emerging on the defensive side of the ball. In Chicago, where the 6-0 Bears are shutting down opposing offenses, help has been rolling in like the tide...the Crimson Tide. Defensive end **MARK ANDERSON**, a fifth-round pick out of Alabama, has registered 6.5 sacks, tops among rookies and tied for third overall in the NFL. Over in the Motor City, **ERNIE SIMS**, the Florida State linebacker who was selected by Detroit in the first round (No. 9), has emerged as a defensive force by leading the team in tackles with 74.

A team-by-team look at some of this year's outstanding NFC rookies:

ARIZONA: Starting at quarterback is first-round pick **MATT LEINART**. The 2004 Heisman Trophy winner from USC has started the Cardinals' last three games and has thrown for 742 yards and four touchdowns, becoming the first rookie in NFL history to pass for two first-quarter touchdowns in each of his first two starts...Tight end **LEONARD POPE**, the club's third-round selection from Georgia, has seen action in all seven games, registering four catches for 50 yards.

ATLANTA: The Falcons' top-ranked rushing attack (232.0 yards per game) has been boosted by rookie running back **JERIOUS NORWOOD**. The third-round pick out of Mississippi State has 38 carries for 290 yards for a 7.6 yards-per-carry average, the highest mark among NFL running backs with at least 30 attempts...On defense, cornerback **JIMMY WILLIAMS**, the club's first selection in the 2006 draft (second round, Virginia Tech) has played in all six games, with one start.

CAROLINA: For the fourth consecutive year, the Panthers have had a rookie defensive back start at least one game. Second-round cornerback **RICHARD MARSHALL** (Fresno State) has played in all seven games (one start) and leads all NFL rookies with two interceptions, including a 30-yard INT-TD...Running back **DE ANGELO WILLIAMS** (first round, Memphis) is averaging 5.3 yards per carry (26 attempts, 139 yards) and has registered one touchdown. Both Marshall (23.0 yards per return) and Williams (21.6) have also seen action returning kicks.

CHICAGO: A pair of rookies have helped the Bears top the NFC in defense (243.2 yards per game, 9.8 points per game) en route to their 6-0 start. Defensive end **MARK ANDERSON** (fifth round, Alabama) leads all rookies with 6.5 sacks and safety **DANIEAL MANNING** (second round, Abilene Christian) has recorded 26 tackles and one interception...Another second-round choice, **DEVIN HESTER** (Miami), leads the NFL with a 13.6 punt-return average and has touchdowns of 84 and 83 yards, becoming the third rookie in history to record two punt-return touchdowns of at least 80 yards.

DALLAS: Safety **PAT WATKINS**, a fifth-round draft pick out of Florida State, has started all six games for the Cowboys and ranks fifth on the team with 30 tackles...First-round linebacker **BOBBY CARPENTER** (Ohio State), whose father **ROB** played for head coach **BILL PARCELLS** with the NY Giants (1983-85), has seen action in three games...On the offensive side of the ball, tight end **ANTHONY FASANO**, the club's second-round pick out of Notre Dame, has played in all six contests (three starts), hauling in five passes for 55 yards and averaging 11.0-yards per catch.

DETROIT: Leading the team in tackles with 74 is rookie linebacker **ERNIE SIMS**, the Lions' first-round draft pick out of Florida State who has started all seven games and has led the club in tackles in five of those seven. Also bolstering the Detroit defense is the team's second-round selection **DANIEL BULLOCKS**. The safety out of Nebraska has played in all seven games, starting each of the past five, and has 41 tackles.

GREEN BAY: Wide receiver **GREG JENNINGS** (second round, Western Michigan) has shown the offensive skills that led him to being named the Mid-American Conference's MVP and offensive player of the year last season. Jennings, who led the NFL with 328 receiving yards in the preseason, ranks second among all rookie wide receivers with 21 receptions, 378 yards and three receiving touchdowns...Defensively, first-round pick **A.J. HAWK** (Ohio State) has provided solid play at linebacker, racking up a team-high 58 tackles with 2.5 sacks, tying for the second-most by an NFC rookie.

MINNESOTA: Defensive end **RAY EDWARDS**, the club's fourth-round selection out of Purdue, has registered 2.5 sacks and is one of only three rookies in the conference with at least 2.5 sacks. Edwards has recorded at least 0.5 sack in each of the past three games...Contributing in the secondary are safety **GREG BLUE** (fifth round, Georgia) and cornerback **CEDRIC GRIFFIN** (second round, Texas) who have both seen action in all six games with one start each. Griffin is one of six rookies in the NFC with an interception.

NEW ORLEANS: The 2005 Heisman Trophy winner has come as advertised as **REGGIE BUSH** (first round, USC) has electrified the New Orleans' faithful. Bush ranks first among all running backs with 38 receptions (285 yards) and has 196 rushing yards to go along with 161 punt-return yards, including a 65-yard touchdown...Seventh-round wide receiver **MARQUES COLSTON** from Hofstra leads all NFL rookies with 414 receiving yards and four touchdown catches, while his 27 receptions trail only teammate Bush...Safety **ROMAN HARPER** (second round, Alabama) broke into the lineup and started the first five games of the season before a knee injury sidelined him for the rest of the season...Punter **STEVE WEATHERFORD**, a free agent from Illinois, has averaged 44.8 yards per punt with a 38.2-yard net average.

NEW YORK: The Giants' defense has seen contributions from a quartet of rookies. Defensive tackle **BARRY COFIELD**, a fourth-round selection from Northwestern, has started every game and posted 1.5 sacks. First-round defensive end **MATHIAS KIWANUKA** (Boston College) has seen action in all six games. Linebacker **GERRIS WILKINSON**, the club's third-round pick out of Georgia Tech, has played in each of New York's six contests. And cornerback **KEVIN DOCKERY**, a free agent from Mississippi State, has seen action in the past four games, including a rookie-long 96-yard interception-return TD.

PHILADELPHIA: Rookie free agent wide receiver **HANK BASKETT**, who was acquired by the Eagles in a trade with the Minnesota Vikings, has made an impact on the NFL's top-ranked passing offense (291.9). Baskett, who recorded his first 100-yard game in Week 5, has nine catches for 202 yards (22.4 average), including an 87-yard touchdown reception...Defensive tackle **BRODRICK BUNKLEY** (first round, Florida State) has seen action in all seven games and has helped the defensive line register 23 of the team's league-best 25 sacks...Sixth-round defensive tackle **LA JUAN RAMSEY** (USC) has played in five games and has notched an interception.

ST. LOUIS: First-round cornerback **TYE HILL** was brought in to help the secondary and the former Clemson star has stepped up, seeing action in all six games and registering an interception...Defensive end **VICTOR ADEYANJU**, the team's fourth-round selection out of Indiana, has played in every game, including four consecutive starts, and has 1.0 sack...On offense, tight end **JOE KLOPFENSTEIN** (second round, Colorado) has recorded seven catches for 118 yards (16.9 average) with one touchdown.

SAN FRANCISCO: With two selections in the first round, the 49ers were hoping for an immediate impact from their rookies and they got it. Tight end **VERNON DAVIS**, the sixth-overall selection out of Maryland, had a 31-yard touchdown reception in his first game but has missed time due to injury. Linebacker **MANNY LAWSON**, the 22nd pick from North Carolina State, has played in six games (four starts), contributing 2.0 sacks and has blocked a punt on special teams. Fourth-rounder **MICHAEL ROBINSON**, the Penn State quarterback who converted to running back in the NFL, has rushed for two TDs.

SEATTLE: The Seahawks drafted for defense with each of their first two picks and both players have stepped into contributing roles right away. Second-round defensive end **DARRYL TAPP** from Virginia Tech has played in all six games, recording 2.0 sacks. Assisting in the secondary is cornerback **KELLY JENNINGS**, the club's first choice out of Miami, who has seen action in each of Seattle's six games...Punter **RYAN PLACKEMEIER** (seventh round, Wake Forest) is fourth in the NFC with a 45.7 gross average.

TAMPA BAY: The Buccaneers have gotten an immediate impact out of sixth-round quarterback **BRUCE GRADKOWSKI**. The former Toledo star has led the team to come-from-behind victories in the final minute in each of the past two games. Gradkowski is tied for the lead among rookies with four touchdown passes and has thrown only one interception...Tampa Bay's first two picks focused on the offensive line, and both players have started at least two games this year. Second-rounder **JEREMY TRUEBLOOD** (Boston College) has played in five games (three starts) while first-rounder **DAVIN JOSEPH** (Oklahoma) has seen action in three games (two starts).

WASHINGTON: The Redskins' defense has received a boost from a trio of rookies. Second-round linebacker **ROCKY MC INTOSH** (Miami) has seen action in all seven games. Defensive tackle **KEDRIC GOLSTON** (sixth round, Georgia) has registered 0.5 sack in seven games, making four starts. Another defensive tackle, **ANTHONY MONTGOMERY** (fifth round, Minnesota) has made one start and has 0.5 sack in four games played.

