

Burning My Draft Card

Written by {ga=jonathanknight}

Tuesday, April 26 2011 8:00 PM - Last Updated Tuesday, April 26 2011 6:46 PM



I'm about to make a confession that could very well get me killed in this town, for I am about to stand atop the Terminal Tower and jeer an established, embraced cavalcade of hope that endures in a tempest of despair. Against my better judgment, I will chew up a Snickers bar and then spit it in the face of an annual Cleveland tradition.

I hate the NFL Draft.

Not just the draft itself, but everything before and after.

I despise Mel Kiper and his tower of hair. I loathe the endless predictions by the "experts" as to which player will be drafted when and how his "stock" has dropped either because it's raining in Paraguay or he sneezed too hard over the weekend.

Then there's the crackerjack "analysis" of the draft, where the afore-mentioned "experts"

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somehow justify a way to “grade” teams on how well they did in the draft without any of the players they drafted actually putting on a helmet, followed by the “you-can’t-sign-until-the-guy-drafted-ahead-of-you-signs” song and dance that plays out through the summer.

At the same time, I can completely understand why football fans – particularly Browns fans – love Draft Day. It’s perfectly situated to break up the long offseason with a Hungry Man Dinner-sized football fix, like having your birthday exactly six months before Christmas.

More than that, it’s a day of optimism, when there’s nothing but potential and high spirits and you can honestly believe that the Browns have acquired that one player who will take them to the promised land. Which may actually be Mentor, as it turns out.

Now, I certainly don’t want to be a buzzkill. I completely respect anyone who gets fired up about the draft and hosts murder-mystery dinner parties revolving around it or whatever else goes on. And I wish I could be as optimistic as others that the Browns will be able to dramatically improve their team in one day.

But I just can’t.

Why not, you ask?

To answer that, let’s play a little game. I’m going to ask you a series of questions. You’re invited to guess the answer, then attempt not to thrust your index finger through your eye and swirl it around.

As anyone holding a bottle of Bud Light would say, here we go:

It’s 2002. The Browns are coming off a promising 7-9 season following a 5-27 mark in their first two as an expansion team. Butch Davis, starting his second year as head coach after being

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snatched away from the University of Miami like Elian Gonzalez, still has many holes to fill. None is more important than running back, at which the 2001 Browns featured the feckless one-two punch of James Jackson and Jamel White. Luckily, there are several nice players available in the college draft.

You're Butch Davis – do you pick:

a) Clinton Portis, RB Miami

b) Brian Westbrook, RB, Villanova

Or, with your defense still under construction, do you opt for a building block in your secondary with:

c) Ed Reed, S, Miami

Any of these answers would have been correct, particularly considering Butch's not-so-secret compulsion to turn the Browns into an NFL version of the Miami



Hurricanes. Yet with all three of these future perennial Pro Bowlers available, Davis went another way, selecting William Green out of Boston College with the 15th pick, the first running back taken.

Certain the “character” and “substance abuse” problems that have followed Green throughout his athletic career will vanish once a disciplined and forthright coach like Davis takes him under

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his wing, Butch is thrilled with the selection.

Skip ahead three years. Westbrook is about to become the most versatile running back in the NFL and an annual top-five fantasy pick. Portis will enjoy his fourth straight 1,000-yard season and third of better than 1,500. Ed Reed is on his way to becoming the most dominating safety in football. And Ryan Seacrest will continue to make money, though no one's quite sure why.

Meanwhile, in 2005, William Green – with his domestic stab wound now healed and his arrest for drunken driving and marijuana possession nothing but water under the bridge – carries the ball 20 times for 78 yards for the season and never plays in the NFL again.

It's now nine years since that draft. Portis and Westbrook just keep on keepin' on and Reed is still intercepting whomever the Browns decide to put at quarterback.

To quickly hit on some other highlights of Butch Davis' draft history, let's switch the format of our little game.

In the mind of Butch Davis and the Cleveland Browns in 2001:



Gerard Warren ___ LaDainian Tomlinson

a) Will clearly have a better NFL career than

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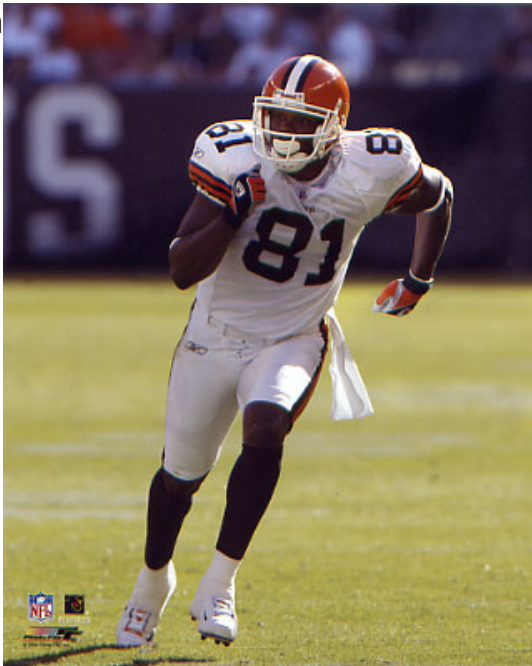
b) Is more likely to lead the Browns to the playoffs than

c) Reflects the needs of the Browns more accurately than

In this case, all three answers are correct. And all three answers would also be correct when replacing LaDainian Tomlinson with Richard Seymour, Santana Moss, Todd Heap, and Reggie Wayne.

Here's another variation – in the second round in 2001, Butch decided to select a receiver. Let's compare notes on the top two available candidates:

Quincy Morgan



- *From Kansas State, which, as we all know, has regularly churned out skill-position superstars*
- *Would fit right in with the equally underwhelming wide receivers the Browns already have*
- *Had hands surgically removed in high school*

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Chad Johnson

- *An arrogant jackass, an important qualification to play on a Butch Davis team*
- *Was born in Miami and at some point probably watched The Birdcage, making him instantly appealing to anyone obsessed with all things South Beach*

- *Actually capable of catching passes*

Apparently drawn to the mystical nature of the letter Q that starts his name, Butch eschewed common sense and opted for Morgan. Seven 1,000-yard seasons, 66 touchdowns, a bizarre name change, and a *Dancing With the Stars* appearance later, Johnso-Cinco has made Quincy Morgan as forgettable as a Mesopotamian high school dropout.

A year later, Butch also deemed that Andre Davis was a better wide receiver than either Antwan Randle El or Deion Branch and that Andra Davis was a better linebacker than Scott Fujita.

But this is not to pick on good ol' Butch Davis, who has since moved on and is the process of turning the North Carolina program into a menagerie of southern-fried thugs emerging from a haze of sky-blue pot smoke with just enough talent to score a grease-stained invitation to the Chick-Fil-A Bowl each year. The trend goes much deeper.

Before Butch ever hit town, we'd decided Courtney Brown was far better suited for the NFL than Jamal Lewis, Brian Urlacher, Shaun Alexander, and John Abraham. We decided to use Tim Couch as a primary building block for the franchise instead of Donovan McNabb, Edgerrin James, Torry Holt, or Champ Bailey.

Clearly, over the past 12 years, Draft Day has served little more purpose for us than a Messin' With Sasquatch commercial. But that's only because we made the mistake of having somebody in charge who didn't know what he was doing when we brought in Dwight Clark. And then Butch Davis. And then Phil Savage. And then George Koninis.

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But it's not just us, right? It happens to everybody.

Let's randomly pick another team and take a look at their success rate – say, the Old Browns.

We need look no further than their last draft in 1995, when they'd fallen in love with Penn State tight end Kyle Brady, spelling out his name in peas on their dinner plates and sending him little notes spritzed with perfume. Then, when the New York Jets shockingly took Brady a pick before, the Browns panicked like a hormonal bride-to-be in Filene's Basement. Paralyzed by uncertainty and certain there were no other players out there as talented and hunky as Kyle Brady they traded down and settled for Ohio State linebacker Craig Powell, whom even John Cooper had never heard of.

Whew – disaster averted. It wasn't as if the Browns could have done any better. It's not as if they could have stayed put and drafted Warren Sapp or Ty Law or Derrick Brooks. (And yet, since any of these picks would have simply helped the Baltimore Ravens be even more dominant defensively over the next decade, let's all be thankful they didn't.)

But the Panic of '95 was far from an isolated incident.

Ed King over Roman Phifer. Lawyer Tillman over Carnell Lake. Van Waiters over Bill Romanowski. Gregg Rakoczy over Tim McDonald *and* Christian Okoye.

That little toe-tapping string took place in a dazzling four-year period during which the Browns brilliantly set up their 1990s fall. And, remarkably, none of those mistakes was the true Hindenburg of any particular Draft Day.

For that, let's go to the lightning round of our little game.

It's 1987. You've just traded one of the stars of your defense, linebacker Chip Banks, to get the fifth overall pick in the draft and are looking to bolste

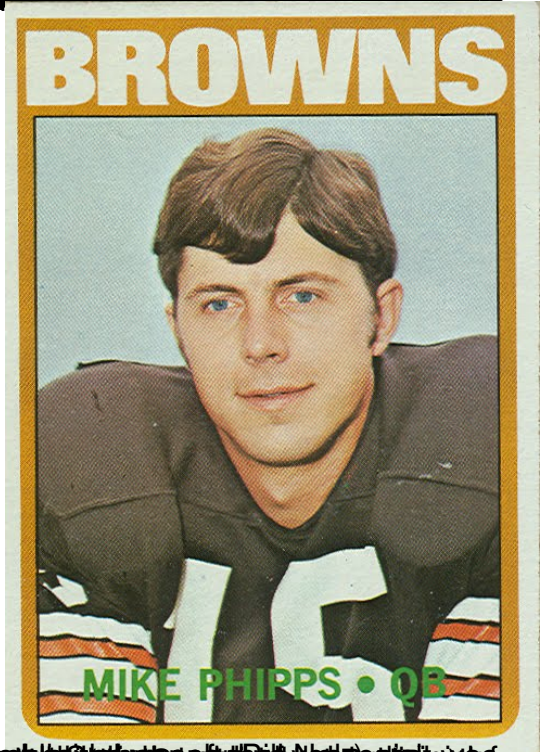
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~~Champion of the belt in the Super Bowl, with a record of 16-1-1 in 1974. He led the Browns to their only Super Bowl victory in 1974.~~



~~MIKE PHIPPS was drafted by the Cleveland Browns in the first round of the 1974 NFL Draft. He played for the Browns from 1974 to 1978.~~