

Browns' Savage not likely to go defense at first

by Steve Doerschuk - CNS

BEREA, Ohio - Much is made of the Browns' negligence in drafting offensive lineman.

Fair enough. The team has invested two first-day picks in eight drafts, a pair of centers - Melvin Fowler, Jeff Faine - now playing elsewhere. The expansion-era grade for importing young blockers is a solid "F."

Seldom scrutinized is the team's defensive line drafting, which, if not more derelict than on the other side of the trenches, has arguably yielded even worse results.

Courtney Brown and Gerard Warren were top-three overall picks in 2000 and 2001. Sad stories, both.

During the last five drafts, the only defensive linemen drafted were in Round 5 (Amon Gordon, 2004) and Round 6 (Antonio Garay, 2003; Andrew Hoffman, 2005; Babtunde Oshinowo, 2006). Gordon and Garay got cut. Hoffman moved to offense. Oshinowo didn't see the field until Dec. 31.

There's no guarantee Phil Savage, in his third year as Browns' general manager, will take his first serious stab at a collegiate defensive line star. It'll be a shock if Savage goes defense in Round 1. His team ranked 26th in offense in 2005, 31st in 2006. The compromise might be to use the Round 2 pick on a defensive lineman. Easier said than done, given the scarcity of candidates worth a No. 36 pick and suited to play on a three-man front. Tennessee tackle Justin Harrell is the man to watch if he slips out of the first round. The 6-foot-5 Harrell seems to fit on several levels:

- He was a Round 2 prospect last year before opting not to leave Tennessee early.
- There's a decent chance he won't go in Round 1 after missing all but three games in 2006 with a biceps injury.
- The injury seems to be behind him; he bench pressed 225 pounds 31 times at a March 21 Pro Day.
- He's muscling up, going from 300 pounds at the Combine to 314 at the Pro Day, giving him the right bulk to play either end or nose in Cleveland's scheme.

Harrell suffered the biceps injury against Air Force early last season. It was assumed his Tennessee career was over. Yet he begged into a subsequent game against Florida. He played. His team lost. He shut it down for the year.

Harrell showed his feisty streak at the Combine, saying, "My goal is to be the first D-tackle drafted."

The top tackles who could be available to the Browns after Round 1 appear to be Harrell and Tank Tyler of North Carolina State. Harrell projects as a safer pick. This is reflected by Pro Football Weekly's conclusions regarding:

- On Harrell: "A very efficient run stopper who could develop into a complete player ... could easily have fit into Round 1."

- On Tyler: "Looks overweight and out of shape, and laziness shows up in his play. ... Prototype professional nose tackle (but) very much a hot-and-cold player."

It can be argued strong defenses can be built without spending high draft picks on interior defensive linemen. It happened in Baltimore, where Savage was an influential personnel man through 2004.

From 1996 to 2004, Baltimore never spent a pick higher than No. 51 on a defensive tackle. This left a talent gap that prompted the post-Savage Ravens to trade with Cleveland for the 2006 Round 1 pick that netted defensive tackle Haloti Ngata.

Savage was left with his own talent gap in Cleveland. He thought hard about picking Ngata last year. Now, it appears he might be staring down Harrell.

ON THE RADAR

The best of the big, run-stuffing defensive linemen the Browns are weighing for the draft:

1.) Alan Branch (6-5 3/4, 324), Michigan. He'll come into first-round play only if the Browns trade out of the

No. 3 overall pick.

2.) Adam Carriker (6-6, 296), Nebraska. In the same boat as Branch in relation to Cleveland; could be a monster 3-4 end.

3.) Jamaal Anderson (6-6, 288), Arkansas. Stock has dropped this 4-3 end type to a mid-first-round projection.

4.) Justin Harrell (6-5, 314), Tennessee. A first-round talent whose lost 2006 could drop him to Cleveland in second round.

5.) Tank Tyler (6-2 1/4, 306), N.C. State. Nose tackle prospect could slide amid character, consistency issues.

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