

Traveling Away to College, Common Side Effect: NFL Success

By Mike Band

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“To exist is to change, to change is to mature, to mature is to go on creating oneself endlessly.”

-Henry Bergson, French Philosopher & 1927 Nobel Prize in Literature

Clearly, Bergson had much grander thoughts in mind than to provide NFL teams with insight on whom they ought to select each year in the annual NFL Draft. But it would probably make a lot of sense for today's NFL owners, general managers, and player personnel directors to delve a little more deeply into the point Bergson was trying to make over 80 years ago.

It's actually pretty simple. To be successful in the NFL, even the most talented players must be humble, be willing to work hard and be eager to learn. But it appears they also need a high level of maturity—See 1999 draft toss up, Peyton Manning or Ryan Leaf.

To find those special players, scouts must watch as much film as possible in order to evaluate a player's true value. What better way to start than to watch the high school prospects of the U.S. Army All-American Game?

During the game, defensive end Ronald Powell from California committed to the University of Florida. He's a 5-star recruit from Moreno Valley who recently referred to his family as his “backbone.” So I got to thinking, what would make a 5-star recruit who has some of the best football programs in his own backyard leave his friends, his family and admirers and travel more than 2000 miles away to play college football?

Powell could have many reasons for making this long journey. Maybe he liked the coaching staff; maybe he always wanted to play in The Swamp. But whatever his reasons were, he may not realize that he may have dramatically increased his chance of success in the NFL.

Huh?

Here are the facts: Of the 128 players selected in the first round since 2006, only 24 traveled at least two states away from their hometown to attend college as follows:

2009- Matthew Stafford (Texas to Georgia), Knowshon Moreno (New Jersey to Georgia), Brian Cushing (New Jersey to Southern Cal), Percy Harvin (Virginia to Florida), Vontae Davis (Washington DC to Illinois)

2008- Chris Long (California to Virginia), Derrick Harvey (Maryland to Florida), Keith Rivers (Florida to Southern Cal), Jerod Mayo (Virginia to Tennessee), Ryan Clady (Southern California to Boise State), Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie (Florida to Tennessee State), Chris Johnson (Florida to East Carolina)

2007- Lawrence Timmons (South Carolina to Florida State), Jarvis Moss (Texas to Florida), Leon Hall (California to Michigan), Dwayne Bowe (South Florida to Louisiana State), Greg Olsen (New Jersey to Miami)

2006- D'Brickashaw Ferguson (New York to Virginia), Jay Cutler (Indiana to Vanderbilt), Haloti Ngata (Utah to Oregon), Kamerion Wimbley (Kansas to Florida State), Davin Joseph (Florida to Oklahoma), Santonio Holmes (Florida to Ohio State), Mathias Kiwanuka (Indiana to Boston College)

Here's the interesting part. Only 2 of those 24 players have yet to live up to their pre-draft expectations in the NFL: Derrick Harvey and Jarvis Moss. That's an astounding success rate of 92%!

In fact, in 2009, the five players listed have already cemented themselves as starting caliber players, despite having only one year of experience. Percy Harvin won the award for Offensive Rookie of the Year and Brian Cushing won the Defensive Award. Matt Stafford showed he can compete as a

starting quarterback in the league and Knowshon Moreno ran for almost 1,000 yards as a rookie. Don't disregard Vontae Davis, a starting cornerback for the Miami Dolphins.

And that was no fluke. In 2008, Jerod Mayo was the Defensive Rookie of the Year. Ryan Clady started every game at left tackle for two straight seasons and was elected to the 2010 Pro Bowl. Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie is also a Pro Bowl selection this season. Oh and I forgot to mention Tennessee's Chris Johnson, who rushed for over 2,000 yards and set NFL records in only his second season.

The list goes on.

This is not to say that a player who stayed within their home state will not succeed at the pro level, but it is true that the percentages of success will be much lower. Of the 32 first round picks in each draft, generally half will end up being "busts" in the NFL. That translates into a mere 50% average success rate.

There are many factors that could affect the success rate of these athletes and there are many other considerations that an NFL team has to evaluate in making their selection. But if you can choose a player who played away from home in college versus one who stayed home, all other things being equal, you should go with the player who left his mama's home cooking behind.

Bergson had it right. Being "on your own" and making your way in a new environment leads to maturity. And based on the stats above, maturity appears to lead to increasing the odds of NFL success, especially if you are can already bench press 400 lbs, run a 4.4 40-yard dash or can throw a football 60 yards.

Practical application of this pattern you ask? Well, it seems to me that if you're a NFL team and your picking in the first round, you're now on the clock and it's a toss-up between two players that you think can both help your team immediately, you might be best served to keep in mind that the player who left the comforts of 'home' to try and make a name for himself at the college level, is probably better prepared to do the same when he gets to the NFL.

Maybe there's something to it; maybe not. But stats don't lie.

Here is a list of the 2010 first round worthy players according to Scouts Inc. who left their comforts of home to play college football:

Ndamukong Suh, Nebraska
Joe Haden, Florida
Derrick Morgan, Georgia Tech
CJ Spiller, Clemson
Taylor Mays, USC
Carlos Dunlap, Florida
Bruce Campbell, Maryland
Brandon Spikes, Florida
Golden Tate, Notre Dame
Jimmy Clausen, Notre Dame
Arrelious Benn, Illinois
Rob Gronkowski, Arizona
Kyle Wilson, Boise State
Aaron Hernandez, Florida

Will they follow this pattern? Only time will tell.

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