

Tough Road to NFL for HBCU Players

Contributed by Darren Sands -- Black College Wire
Thursday, 30 April 2009

Getting exposure, recognition is difficult

For Javarris Williams, choosing a school had everything to do with the opportunity to play his freshman year as much as it did with his desire to play in the NFL

So it baffled some to learn that he turned down scholarship offers from several Big 12 schools including Texas, an institution with a long history of producing NFL players. Instead, he chose Tennessee State University, a school that, up until Williams's freshman year, had most famously produced Ed "Too Tall" Jones. But Williams wanted more. In December of 2008, he earned his bachelor's degree in business information systems and by then, had rushed for 4,329 yards and 42 touchdowns in four seasons, and was named the Ohio Valley Conference Offensive Player of the Year in 2008, despite sitting out the last two games of his senior year with a hamstring pull.

When the folksy glitz of autumn Saturdays on black college campuses fades for would-be NFL players, each begins a long road to draft day in which they will be evaluated against players from larger programs, whose names are often a part of the national sports lexicon. In comparison, top NFL draft prospects from HBCUs spend their college careers in relative obscurity.

Williams, however, wowed scouts with a 4.51 in the 40-yard dash at the NFL combine, which was better than the two best-known running backs in college football: the 4.59 of Ohio State's Chris "Beanie" Wells, and that of Georgia's Knowshon Moreno, who ran a 4.62. Wells and Moreno benched 225-pounds 25 times. And so did Williams.

"At first nobody knew who I was," Williams said, saying that the other running backs seemed to address him differently. "Then after a few events everybody was, like, what's good, J-Dub? Now I'm getting nicknames. I showed that I could hold my own."

Alan Herman, Williams's Manhattan-based agent, knew that the issue wasn't just one of Williams holding his own, but also about getting the right exposure.

"Javarris got into the East-West Shrine Game and played a huge role against Division I talent, dominating against Division I players," Herman said. (Williams rushed for 56 yards and a touchdown in the game, a showcase for top prospects.) "Not only did he hold his own, but he looked damn good. So getting into those games is almost a must."

Getting into even one of those games never happened for Tuskegee quarterback Jacary Atkinson, who led his team to a 22-1 record in the past two years. He was perhaps the most prolific offensive player in Southern Intercollegiate Athletic Conference -- and the most recognizable name in all of black college football -- but none of it was enough to help him get invited to the combine.

"The NFL is notorious for making mistakes like this," Atkinson's agent, Harold Lewis, said, adding that of the players who participate in the combine, nearly half do not get drafted.

The real value in being invited to the combine is gaining an audience in front of each of the 32 team's general managers, owners, scouts and coaches, Lewis said, and an audience is something HBCU players struggle to get. There were only three teams present at Tuskegee's Pro Day: Jacksonville, Tennessee and the New York Giants.

The NFL prospects at Tennessee State, for instance, were far more fortunate. In 2008, 12 teams attended the school's Pro Day. This year there were nearly 20, according to sports information director Wallace Dooley. The increase was likely due to the emergence of former Tennessee State cornerback Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie, who was picked 16th by the Arizona Cardinals in the 2008 Draft. He made 42 tackles and nabbed four interceptions, including one that he returned 99 yards for a touchdown in a week 14 win over the St. Louis Rams. He made eight starts and helped solidify Arizona's defense leading up to its improbable appearance in the Super Bowl.

"We're going on visits and getting attention because of what he did in the league," Williams said. "He did all that for us. He put us on the map."

Eddie Robinson Jr., who was drafted by the Houston Oilers in 1993 out of Alabama State and does color commentary of black college football games on ESPNU, says that players from HBCUs often feel a sense of responsibility towards their school and teammates they leave behind.

“For a guy like Cromartie, he knows he has to make the scouts say, ‘You know what? I need to go back down to Tennessee State and find another guy like that.’ Even for me, I felt I had a duty to the university to do well and let everyone know that kids at Alabama State can perform at this level. You don’t want to be that kid that gets to that level and doesn’t perform well.

“And that’s perhaps more so than a kid from a big school who probably feels like they deserve the opportunity. Being from an HBCU, you really appreciate the opportunity.”

Poor facilities, budget constraints

Herman said Williams flourished at Tennessee State’s pro day despite less than desirable field conditions. Lewis added that Tuskegee wide receiver prospect Jason English ran a 4.37 40-yard dash on a similarly difficult surface.

The field conditions, both said, offered a glimpse into a lasting stigma among NFL teams about facilities at small schools. Herman said it was reinforced when the Tennessee Titans approached him for a tape of one of Williams’s better games. Footage of the game, upon further investigation, did not exist. Others, he said, were taken at bad angles and did not allow teams to evaluate players adequately.

Sometimes budget constraints affect player development, Herman said. In 1992, offensive lineman James Brown of Virginia State was taken by the Dallas Cowboys in the third round. According to Herman, he never had an offensive line coach. Rather, he had raw talent, ability and love for the game. And it carried them all the way to the draft.

“These schools aren’t in a bowl games, not getting millions from TV networks,” Herman said. “So you may have fewer coaches and players not be getting the attention they need to develop.”

This year’s draft

The Kansas City Chiefs selected Williams in the seventh round, 212th overall in last Saturday’s draft. He may very well get a chance to play early; former Penn State running back Larry Johnson reportedly wants out of Kansas City and the Chiefs need depth at the position.

Former Tuskegee receiver Jason English struck a free-agent deal with the Jacksonville Jaguars and is expected to see time as a slot receiver or on special teams. Former Tennessee State offensive lineman Cornelius Lewis landed an undrafted free-agent deal with the Indianapolis Colts; and Hampton’s Justin Brown and Dennis Conley signed undrafted free-agent deals with the Arizona Cardinals and Chicago Bears, respectively.

As for Atkinson, he has yet to sign with an NFL team, prompting observers to imply NFL teams are hesitant to sign quarterbacks from small programs. His agent still believes he will succeed as a quarterback -- and in the NFL.

“One day, the league is going to look up and realize that these are the hungry kids,” Atkinson’s agent, Harold Lewis said of athletes from HBCUs. “I tell my guys to try not get caught up in the combine, but I wonder if the teams know that if given the opportunity, these kids would walk to Indianapolis.”

{moshaloscan}

Darren Sands is a Black College Wire contributor.