

TREMENDOUS THREE DAYS FOR FRANCHISE



The quiet on the Saturday morning of the NFL draft was only temporary. Andy Reid sat behind his desk and offered some general thoughts about his hopes for the weekend and what he truly wanted to accomplish in

two days of selections.

The draft, he said, is always unpredictable. "You have to be ready for anything," he said.

All of the mock drafts, all of the scenarios being played out, they meant nothing if you weren't willing to pull the trigger when you saw the opportunity.

Only a few hours later, the Eagles pulled off a deal and thus changed the entire complexion of the offseason.

What happened over the course of the next three days defined the months between seasons, helped wipe away the bitter taste of defeat in the NFL championship game and sent a reassuring message to the fans and, truly, to the players in the locker room that there's again every reason to believe the Eagles can make a Super Bowl run in 2003.

In those three days, the Eagles boldly dealt to improve the present, and carefully considered to plan for the future. It was a wonderful three days, a positive three days, and three days to explore in depth right here, right now.

DAY 1

Sitting at the 30th spot in the first round of the draft, the Eagles had many options. Among them was moving up in the round. Wanting to do it was one thing; finding a dance partner was the tough part. But pre-draft conversations with teams in the 10-15 range allowed the Eagles to get a feel for what teams might be willing to trade back. San Diego was one of those teams. And the Eagles would do it if their guy was still on the board.

Suddenly, shockingly, news came down after the Bears selected Penn State defensive end Michael Haynes that the Eagles were "on the clock." Their man was on the board. And the team wasted no time in selecting Jerome McDougle from the University of Miami.

The significance of the move cannot be understated. One, the Eagles gave up only the 30th pick and the 62nd pick to move up 15 places in the first round. Two, the Eagles were aggressive and confident and attacked the draft. Three, they addressed a position that



The Eagles were able to fill two needs with the highest-rated players on their draft board when they landed defensive end Jerome McDougle (l.) and tight end L.J. Smith.



Digest Photos/DREW HALLOWELL

had been the focal point of the offseason by adding a player who was at the top of their defensive end ratings board.

McDougle participated in the team's post-draft minicamp and, while there were no pads on and the practice tempo was decidedly less than game speed, he impressed with his maturity, his physical dimensions and the little burst he had at the snap of the ball. McDougle lined up at left defensive end throughout camp, but there is reason to believe he could play right end if needed.

Anyway, Day 1 wasn't over. In the second round of the draft, the Eagles waited nervously to see if another "board" favorite, tight end L.J. Smith, would last to the 61st pick. Tight ends went off the board ... the Eagles waited. Finally, they were set to pick. Smith, whom the Eagles would have strongly considered with the 30th draft choice had they kept it, was the easy choice.

In Smith, the Eagles got themselves an athletic, soft-handed tight end who will spend some time learning from Chad Lewis before he's ready to challenge for his job. The Eagles want to stretch the field on offense. They want to send their tight end deep down the seam to make plays. Smith has that ability. He's a big-bodied player — "I'm an athlete that plays tight end," he says — with excellent speed and pass-catching skills.

With their last pick on the first day of the draft, the Eagles took Virginia wide receiver Billy McMullen, a 6-foot-4, 210-pounder who is physical and

who creates separation with his body and his quickness out of breaks. The Eagles see him as a player to challenge for the slot receiver job right away.

All in all, Day 1 was terrific. The Eagles filled needs with two top-rated players on their boards, McDougle and Smith. McMullen was a receiver they targeted long ago when they ran him through a private workout and loved what they saw.

DAY 2

In the fourth round of the draft, the Eagles went strictly by the board. They had Miami defensive end Jamaal Green rated highly. He was still there when the Eagles picked. They selected Green, a powerful speed-rushing end who could find a niche off the edge in this defense.

So just like that, the Eagles added two fast ends to the No. 1 need on the team and the Eagles looked at a depth chart that included McDougle, Green, N.D. Kalu, Derrick Burgess and Brandon Whiting.

"I know this," said Kalu during the post-draft minicamp, "there's going to be a lot of competition there."

That's the truth. The Eagles loaded up with speed and youth. They still need to replace the production Hugh Douglas provided, but there are multiple options now. Multiple "fastballs," as Reid said.

DAY 3

Talk about a shocker. News broke the day after the NFL draft was over

that the Eagles had signed the NFL's premier free safety, Brian Dawkins, to a seven-year contract. Due to be an unrestricted free agent after 2003, Dawkins instead signed on to the long-term deal and spoke glowingly about finishing his career "as an Eagle."

It was a boost of tremendous news for the fans, who worried that popular veterans nearing the later years of their careers would be allowed to leave in free agency. It was wonderful news in the locker room, where a handful of nearing- or over-30 players understood better the philosophy of Eagles management in dealing with older players.

And it was welcomed news to the coaching staff as the team retained a top-rate player.

It was the exclamation point that sent the Eagles into their post-draft minicamp. There, the Eagles practiced well and had no injuries.

Now? The sky is blue and the sun is bright. The Eagles have put last year behind them and have a team that, while there is still work to be done, should be in the thick of things once again in '03.

NEXT ISSUE

The next issue of *Eagles Digest* you will receive will be the training camp issue. It will be published in late July and will include all the latest news and a look at key preseason issues.