

Clarett set to challenge NFL's early entry rules

Maurice Clarett said he will challenge the NFL for early entry; however, not everyone agrees with the tailback's decision

By Marla Ridenour
Knight Ridder Newspapers (KRT)

COLUMBUS, Ohio — Even those who know Maurice Clarett might not understand his motives, whether he envisions himself as a football pioneer or feels the clock is ticking on how many more hits he can take at any level.

But the suspended Ohio State sophomore tailback made his most daring run Tuesday and filed a lawsuit against the NFL. In papers submitted by his attorney, Alan C. Milstein, in U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York, Clarett is seeking an order allowing him the option to enter the 2004 NFL Draft as a hardship case.

The suit also holds that the league's current rule that players are not eligible for the draft until three years after their high school class has graduated violates federal antitrust laws. Athletes have the opportunity to play out of high school in every other major professional sport.

"Mr. Clarett's purpose in bringing the suit is to give him the right to use his skills and abilities to earn a livelihood, a right enjoyed by young people in virtually every other profession," said a statement released by Milstein's office.

Clarett's mother, Michelle, reached at home in Youngstown, had no comment. Michelle Clarett and Milstein met with NFL executives in Washington Monday.

When NFL Commissioner Paul Tagliabue was asked earlier this month if he thought the league could win such a lawsuit, he said, "My feeling as commissioner is that we have a very strong case and that we'll win it."

The NFL issued a statement through spokesman Greg Aiello.

"We do not believe that this lawsuit serves the best interests of Maurice Clarett or college football players generally, but we look forward to explaining to the court both the very sound reasons underlying our eligibility rule and the legal impediments to the claim that was filed," Aiello said.

The NFL Players Association said in a statement Tuesday that, under the collective bargaining agreement, it wouldn't sue or be a party to a suit against the league challenging the college draft. The association declined further comment.

Clarett rushed for 1,237 yards and scored 18 touchdowns last season as the Buckeyes went 14-0 and won the national championship. In the lawsuit, Clarett claims it was "almost certain"

he would have been taken in the first round of the 2003 draft had he been eligible, and he would have made millions of dollars in a contract and signing bonus.

Clarett, who was a front-runner for the Heisman Trophy this season, is serving a university-imposed suspension of at least one season for receiving improper benefits and lying to NCAA and OSU investigators. He turns 20 on Oct. 29.

Classes begin at Ohio State Wednesday and Clarett is still under scholarship. Buckeyes Coach Jim Tressel said he expects Clarett to enroll.

"I talked to his mom last night and she said he was all set to begin classes," Tressel said. "As far as I know, he'll be in class (today)."

But Tressel was reluctant to discuss how he feels about Clarett's suit.

"I don't know really much of what's behind the decision," Tressel said. "I don't know if he's testing the waters, how he's approaching it. I really don't have much reaction because I don't have much information."

Fellow members of Clarett's class at OSU agreed they're not ready to play in the NFL. But sophomore linebacker A.J. Hawk said Clarett might be.

"You can tell sometimes he's like a man amongst boys when he's playing," Hawk said. "He's a great player."

"He's a grown man. I've still got years to mature. I know I'm not ready for that yet. I know my body's not ready for anything like the NFL for a long time."

Sophomore center Nick Mangold said, "That's his thing. I couldn't see myself doing it. I can't see myself starting for these past two games, either."

Junior kicker Mike Nugent doesn't sound confident Clarett could be as dominant in the NFL.

"Maurice wants to go right now," Nugent said. "It would be really tough to be an 18- or 19-year old running back and go and play against 26- or 27-year old guys who have been there for six or seven years and know what the NFL is all about. It seems like a completely different game. The jump from high school to college is just huge."

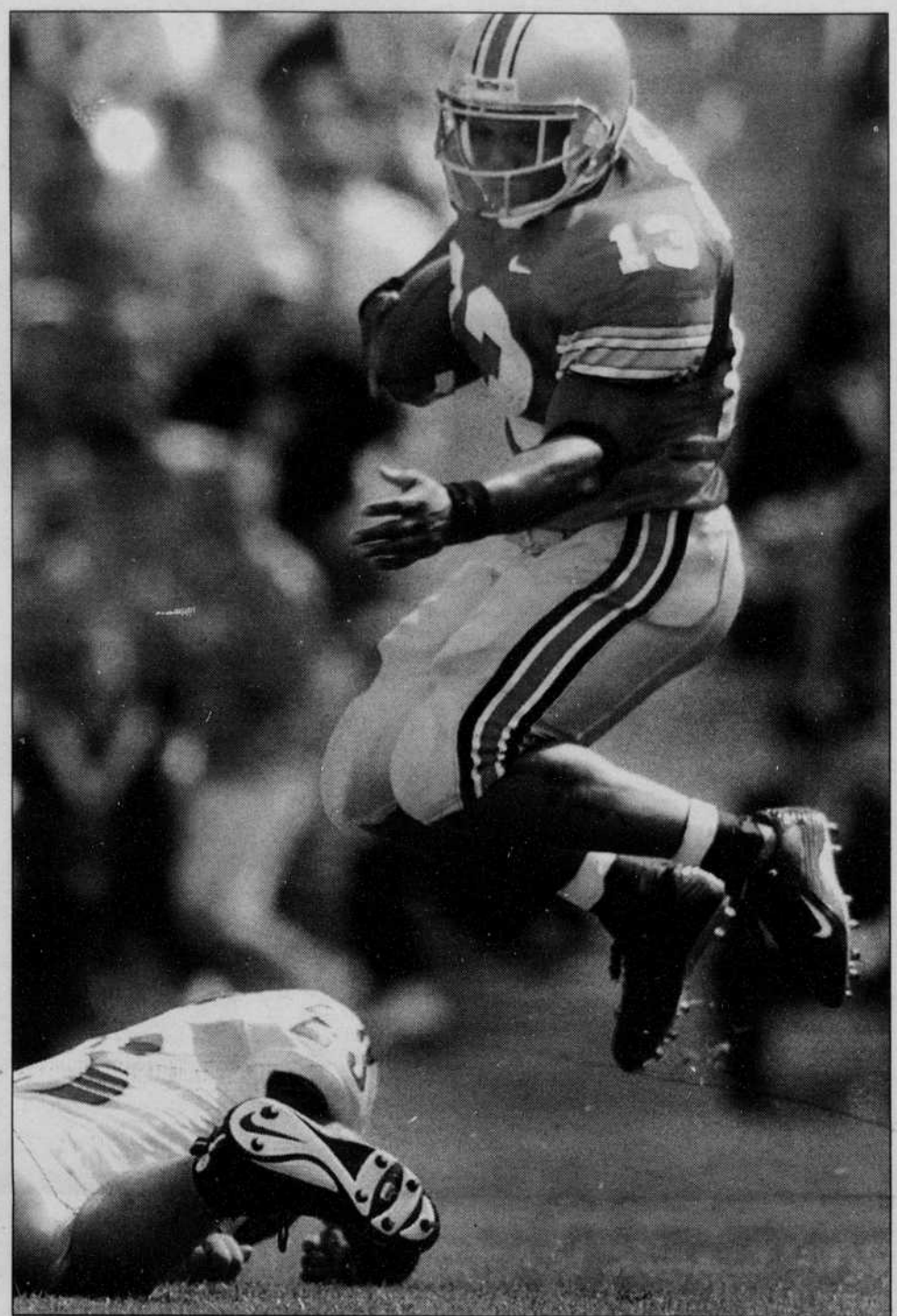
Of the five OSU players selected in the 2003 NFL Draft, only one is starting — safety Mike Doss with the Indianapolis Colts.

Hawk said he agrees with the NFL's three-year rule.

"Football is different," Hawk said. "It's a little different from basketball, there's grown men up in the NFL."

But Mangold sounded interested in following Clarett's fight.

"There's two different ways to look at it,"



Phil Mazturzo Akron Beacon Journal

Ohio State's Maurice Clarett (seen here last season) said he will challenge the NFL's early entry rule.

Mangold said. "He's saying, 'Why can't I do it now when I have the opportunity?' They're saying, 'It's our organization, we're going to do what we want to do with it.' It should be a nice little clash between them."

Defensive end Will Smith, who bypassed the

NFL to return for his senior season, had a simple message in support of his friend.

"Go Maurice!" Smith said.

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