

College players reaping benefits, putting off NFL

The lures of professional football didn't entice these players and they're being rewarded with great seasons

BY PAUL NEWBERRY
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

ATHENS, Ga. — David Pollack kept going back and forth, trying to decide whether he wanted to play on Saturdays or Sundays.

The lure of college life was strong. So was the idea of playing in the NFL. Finally, Georgia's star defensive end came to a decision that seems a bit out of place in today's world.

One more year with the Bulldogs. Sundays could wait.

"That's the best decision I ever made," Pollack said, without a hint of regret about returning for his senior season. "And not just for football. For my life, too."

He wasn't alone. Down at Auburn, star running backs Carnell Williams and Ronnie Brown, along with cornerback Carlos Rogers, all decided to hang around for their senior years.

Even Pollack's best friend, Georgia quarterback David Greene, had a chance to enter the draft. He never seriously considered it.

Now, all five of these seniors — yep, they still have those in college football — are at the forefront for one of the biggest Saturdays of the season.

The No. 8 Bulldogs (8-1) will try to bolster their hopes of reaching the Bowl Championship Series when they travel to Auburn, where the third-ranked Tigers (9-0) are right in the thick of the national championship race.

It's the oldest rivalry in the Deep South, a worthy platform to show all those underclassmen that staying in school can pay off — even when there are no actual dollars involved.

"It's not just good for us or Georgia or our conference," Auburn coach Tommy Tuberville said. "It's great for college football to see guys come

back for their senior year and have success. I think all these guys will have improved their stature and matured toward the next level with the way they've played."

No argument there. Pollack, who had 14 sacks as a sophomore, dropped off to 7.5 last season while facing almost constant double-teaming.

Still, he was told by NFL scouts that he would be drafted somewhere in the first round.

It wasn't enough to lure him away, and he'll certainly go higher than he would have last April. Despite the continued double-teams, Pollack already has matched his sack total from a year ago, setting a school record with 31 in his career.

Plus, he's caused tremendous havoc up front, creating space for his teammates such as Odell Thurman and Thomas Davis to make plays. Not surprisingly, Georgia ranks among the top 15 nationally in both points allowed and total defense.

Along the way, Pollack has gained a level of maturity that prepared him for the real world — a world he wasn't ready to face a year ago.

"I grew up more in the past year than at any time in my life," Pollack said. "I learned to cook more. I learned to clean more. I can do my own clothes. I don't eat fried foods anymore. It's just a matter of growing up."

For Auburn's trio, the decision to stay also worked out just fine.

Start with Williams and Brown, who have a job-sharing arrangement that benefits them both. Cadillac ranks fourth in the Southeastern Conference with 862 yards, including nine touchdowns.

Brown is averaging 7.3 yards

per carry, has scored seven touchdowns and ranks just behind his teammate in the SEC's rushing stats (689 yards).

Rogers, meanwhile, is a semifinalist for the Jim Thorpe Award as the nation's top defensive back and one of the leaders for a unit that has surrendered just 9.7 points a game — second fewest in the nation.

By hanging around, they could be part of one of the greatest seasons in school history.

"I feel that was one of the best decisions I've ever made in my life, to come back to Auburn University," Williams said. "Just to be a part of what we're doing and the atmosphere around here and things like that, I'm very happy with the decision that I've made."

His happiness doesn't figure to wane on draft day.

Williams and Brown were both projected as possible second-round picks if they had left school early.

With the way they've played as seniors, there's a chance they'll be in line for the really big first-round money.

It's the same situation for Rogers, who likely would have gone somewhere between the second and fourth round this past April.

By coming back for another year of school, he might crack the first round, too.

"Looking back on it, I'm glad I did it," Brown said. "Some of the things we've done this season, I'm glad I didn't miss any of it. I'm looking forward to the future, too."

Ahh, the future. When the seas on ends, another group of NFL wannabes — including Georgia's Davis and Thurman — will have to decide: stay in school or go to the pros?

Even though it worked out for Pollack, he doesn't expect his path to become a trend. Some players face financial hardships at home, making it hard for them to turn down a paycheck.

"I don't have any kids. A lot of guys in college have kids," Pollack said. "And I was blessed. My parents aren't hurting for money. I'm sure if my parents were in dire need of money, I probably would have left."

Davis has a son who turns one next month and is leaning toward the NFL, though he will certainly listen

to any advice Pollack has to offer about staying in school.

"Guys have things in their life they need to accomplish, they need to handle," Davis said. "I'm a different person. My situation is totally different."

In other words, let's enjoy this while we can.

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ANDREW SMASH

Bowling Green's Omar Jacobs surprising leader in pass TDs

The Falcon's signal caller this year leads the MAC in passer rating and the nation in passing touchdowns

BY JOHN SEEWER
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

BOWLING GREEN, Ohio — Bowling Green quarterback Omar Jacobs gets some ribbing from his teammates when he misses badly on a pass.

Luckily for him, it doesn't happen very often.

Jacobs leads the nation with 27 touchdown passes and ranks fourth in passing efficiency — a stellar debut for a player with a tough act to follow. The sophomore took over for Josh Harris, a three-year starter who ended a record-breaking career with Bowling Green in the Motor City Bowl last year.

"I'll throw a bad ball and it's like, 'Josh would have made that throw,'" Jacobs said. "I just laugh at them and keep going."

The Falcons' offense hasn't missed a beat this season, averaging 42 points and 492 yards.

Now Jacobs looks like the next in a line of stellar quarterbacks from the Mid-American Conference that

includes Harris, NFL starters Byron Leftwich and Chad Pennington, and Pittsburgh Steelers rookie Ben Roethlisberger.

Jacobs has completed 70 percent of his passes and thrown only two interceptions for the Falcons (7-2 overall, 5-1 MAC), going into Saturday's matchup with Marshall.

His 170.1 passer rating tops that of the MAC's better known quarterbacks, Bruce Gradkowski of Toledo and Charlie Frye of Akron. Jacobs is also ahead of big names such as California's Aaron Rodgers, Oklahoma's Jason White and USC's Matt Leinart.

What impresses his teammates and coaches most, though, is his poise and confidence.

"I never really get rattled," Jacobs said. "You never see me yelling or showing a lot of emotion on the field."

Bowling Green coach Gregg Brandon knew Jacobs would be just fine after the first series of the season-opener at No. 2 Oklahoma.

"I couldn't even hear anybody in the headset, and Omar was out there like it's just another day," Brandon said.

Jacobs threw for two touchdowns in the 40-24 loss. Afterward, Brandon told his team, "We found our quarterback."

His first touchdown pass came when he scrambled after his protection broke down and threw over a defender to Charles Sharon.

"It was an amazing play that a first-year starter against Oklahoma wasn't supposed to make," wide receiver Cole Magner said. "From that point on, I knew we had something special."

Scott Mruzckowski, a senior center and the team's lead jokester, said Jacobs has more poise than anyone he's been around.

"He's such a great student of the game," Mruzckowski said. "He knows where his receivers are going to be in certain coverages. That's what separates him right now from other quarterbacks in the league and in the country."

Another key to his breakout season is the surrounding cast. The senior-dominated offensive line has allowed just seven sacks all season, and he has a quintet of experienced receivers.



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