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NFL DRAFT

NFL draft class is heavy on the charisma

Today will reveal which teams get these special players

By Suzanne Halliburton
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NEW YORK — This incoming rookie class, which will officially come together during the NFL draft this weekend, is top heavy with glamorous star power like no group selected before it.

In a stunning surprise worthy of a Hollywood plot twist, though, Reggie Bush, Matt Leinart and Vince Young found themselves overshadowed Friday by Mario Williams. The North Carolina State defensive end signed a deal with the Houston Texans, who will make him the No. 1 pick when the draft opens today. The intriguing turn of events also ushered Williams into the high-voltage company of:

- Bush, the Heisman Trophy-winning running back with the dazzling smile and legendary moves. No longer destined to be the Texans' choice at No. 1 and embroiled in a burgeoning controversy about his family's relationship with an agent, he's still in line to be the second overall pick. And the former Southern California star's already the national pitchman for a chain of sandwich shops.
- Leinart, Bush's quarterback at Southern Cal and the 2004 Heisman winner who has an agent representing his football interests and one pushing him in Hollywood. He's meant for a career in the bright lights, which is why he promised to do a "Lambeau Leap" if the New York Jets call his name.
- Former Texas quarterback Young, the most charismatic of them all who could land with Tennessee at No. 3. The Longhorn had a Pied Piper effect on his Texas teammates — they called it the Vince Vibe when he was wearing burnt orange — taking them to the national championship with a victory over Leinart and Bush's Trojans on Jan. 4.

And he's become the focus of this class of all football classes.

"They know we're phenomenal athletes," Young said Friday of his class' popularity. "And they see how we carry ourselves off the field."

Any of the four would have been the first pick of last year's draft, since all have graded out higher than former Utah quarterback Alex Smith, the top choice of 2005.

"These are exceptional players," said Gil Brandt, senior draft analyst for NFL.com. "We're getting better players every year.

"Last year, we didn't have a lot of star power at the top of the draft. This year we have three quarterbacks who could go in the top 10. That, in itself, tells you a lot."

And Young, who was the Sports Illustrated cover boy for this week's draft edition, was having the same charismatic effect Friday on a different group of guys, the five other college football stars who have been brought in this week to make promotional appearances on behalf of the NFL. All were smiling and showing off expensive suits as they were shuttled from three promotional stops in Manhattan, finishing atop the Radio City Music Hall marquee for a giant-sized photo shoot.

Young appeared to be the group leader, exchanging high fives and hugs with everyone. His magnetism was especially on display with the younger set. The six players toured "The Zone" at Kravis Children's Hospital at Mount Sinai Medical Center, across the street from Central Park. The Zone is an area equal parts for play and education that was funded by former Dallas Cowboys quarterback Troy Aikman and country superstar Garth Brooks.

There were normal chairs for the players and small white ones for the kids. Young, however, lowered his 6-foot-5-inch, 228-pound frame into a kid-sized plastic chair — "pop a squat," he said with a laugh — so that he could sit beside a young boy. A teen-aged amputee, who leaned his crutches against the wall, showed no fear in asking the players questions.

He first wanted to know what they hoped to accomplish, directing his question to Young and then to Bush, who was sitting beside him.

Young talked of playing well to impress his peers. "I want all the guys in the league, everybody involved in the NFL, to respect me," he said.

Williams talked of how each of the six wanted their team next year to be drafting 32nd, the spot reserved for the Super Bowl champion.

Then the youngster asked who would be the first to play for a Super Bowl champ.

Maryland's Vernon Davis, the sculpted, dreadlock-wearing tight end who is faster than all but one wide receiver in the draft, immediately declared his intentions.

"Not so fast," Young said as the two bumped fists for a makeshift high five.

Young has 45 friends and relatives in town for what's been a near week-long celebration in New York. He prayed with his long-time pastor, Shelton Smith, on Thursday night. Smith also anointed him on the head at the conclusion of the prayer.

Young also packed his suitcase with custom-made suits and shoes for the special occasion. On Friday, he wore a black, four-button suit with raspberry-colored pin stripes. His black alligator shoes also had a raspberry stripe to match. He has something even more spectacular in mind for Saturday's draft.


"I want to stand out," he said, playfully.

That mission has been accomplished no matter what happens in the draft.

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