

## Sports

Texas product Aaron Ross is one of the best corners available in this year's draft.

**BILLY SMITH II**: CHRONICLE



April 27, 2007, 5:34PM

# Longhorns trio has high hopes in NFL draft

Ross, Griffin, Brown latest UT defensive backs hoping to excel as pros

By **JOSEPH DUARTE**

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AUSTIN — Texas co-defensive coordinator Duane Akina has been collecting film for more than two decades.

He's no movie buff.

Instead, the mission has been to gather what are, in his estimation, "the best of highlights" — an Oscar-worthy compilation of the top defensive backs he has coached throughout his 28-year career.

The highlight tapes are a learning tool he regularly pulls out during the season. But not just anybody gets a starring role.

"Being a young defensive back looking up to those guys kind of makes you want to work that much harder so you can get on the film," said former Texas safety Michael Huff, the seventh overall pick by Oakland in last year's NFL draft. "He just won't throw anybody on there."

Chris McAlister and Daryl Lewis are prominently on display from Akina's days at Arizona. In the six years since arriving at Texas, Akina has added the likes of Rod Babers, Quentin Jammer, Nathan Vasher, Ahmad Brooks, Cedric Griffin and Huff.

The latest version, set for release before the start of next season, probably will have three new additions: cornerback Aaron Ross, safety Michael Griffin and cornerback Tarell Brown. Ross and Griffin are projected to be taken in the first round of Saturday's NFL draft, while Brown is

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expected to go in the second or third round. Huff and Cedric Griffin, a second-round pick by Minnesota, were first-day picks last year.

The Longhorns can make a case as Defensive Back U. with five players drafted during the last five years, including first-rounders Jammer (2002) and Huff (2006). Texas has produced the past two Thorpe Award winners (Huff and Ross) signifying the nation's top defensive back.

"They know the standards are incredibly high here," Akina said.

On a wall in the secondary meeting room at Moncrief-Neuhaus Athletics Complex is a sign Akina likes to recite: "Faces change, but the standard is always the same."

"We've been blessed to have really great athletes," Akina said. "I told them when they came in here, 'Because you're a great athlete doesn't mean you're going to become a great football player.' "

## Special qualities

Each has brought something different along the way. According to Akina, Babers was regarded for his technique; Huff and Brooks for their mental approach; Vasher was a playmaker who provided an unselfish model with his move from corner to strong safety; and Cedric Griffin for his almost bounty-hunter style.

"Coach Akina does a little bit of everything," Huff said. "People learn differently. He does stuff so everyone gets it."

At the time Jammer, Vasher and Babers were making names for themselves, the Longhorns were signing recruiting classes that included Huff, Ross, Michael Griffin and Brown. Along with competition for playing time, the young group had to practice every day against the wide receiver trio of Roy Williams, Sloan Thomas and B.J. Johnson.

"They kind of threw us into the fire," Huff said. "That helped us out in the long run."

Michael Griffin, a big-hitting safety, was one UT's unquestioned defensive leaders in 2006, leading the team in tackles for the second year in a row. He also blocked eight punts (second in Division I-A history) and recovered seven fumbles in his career.

Brown, a key contributor during UT's national title run as a junior, battled a broken toe and off-the-field problems this past season.



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Like Huff, Ross has been dogged by a reputation as a track guy playing football. In some cases, Ross jokes that he's slower than his girlfriend, not so bad considering she's Sanya Richards, a gold-medal winner at the 2004 Athens Olympics.

## Surprise Thorpe winner

In his first season as a starter in 2006, Ross wasn't on any award watch lists. By the end, he had tied for the Big 12 lead with six interceptions, emerged as one of the nation's most explosive punt returners and followed Huff to keep the Thorpe Award on the campus.

"I didn't have to live up to any expectations," Ross said at the Thorpe ceremony in Oklahoma City earlier this year. "Especially if you'd seen me and Huff our freshman year, we were horrible. (For coach Akina) to turn us into Thorpe Award winners in our fourth year, that speaks so highly of him."

To say thanks, McAlister gave Akina a framed No. 1 jersey. Huff bought Akina a replica Thorpe Award.

"Will I be showing film of what (one of UT's young defensive backs) is doing 10 years from now?" Akina said.

[joseph.duarte@chron.com](mailto:joseph.duarte@chron.com)

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