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UT defensive back Huff is considered safe choice for draft

By **JOSEPH DUARTE**
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Texas safety Michael Huff considers himself the total package, worthy of being the first defensive back taken in this weekend's NFL draft.

He's smart enough to read offenses and not afraid to deliver big hits. He can stuff the run. He can pressure the quarterback.

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Did we mention he can cover?

"I think it's kind of a new breed of safety," Huff said at the NFL combine. "Safeties have to do more than just stay in the middle of the field and hit. Now they have to cover and blitz and do it all. That's what I like to do."

Draft analysts are so convinced Huff could be among the new breed of safeties — joining a group that includes Baltimore's Ed Reed and Pittsburgh's Troy Polamalu — that he is projected as a top-10 pick Saturday

Only two safeties — Dallas' Roy Williams (No. 8 in 2002) and Washington's Sean Taylor (No. 5 in 2004) — have been selected in the top 10 of the draft since 1991.

Huff (6-0, 204 pounds) played mostly strong safety during his four-year career at Texas, but he's also being evaluated as a cornerback. He was clocked at 4.34 seconds in the 40-yard dash at the scouting combine, which might tempt some NFL teams to move him to the outside.

NFL.com senior analyst Pat Kirwan, a former NFL scout and personnel director, calls Huff "the safest pick in the draft" on his mock draft board.

"I just love being on the field," Huff said. "Wherever a team needs me. I'll play corner, safety, linebacker, wherever, as long as I'm on the field."

Monumental stop

As a senior, Huff was named winner of the Thorpe Award as the nation's top defensive back. In the weeks leading up to the national championship game against Southern California, he publicly begged the Texas coaching staff to match him one-on-one with Heisman Trophy winner Reggie Bush.

Huff earned a reputation as a physical hitter late in his college career, showing a glimpse when he stopped Southern Cal's LenDale White on fourth-and-2 to give the Longhorns the ball for their game-winning Rose Bowl drive.

During his four-year career, Huff had seven interceptions, four of which he returned for touchdowns.

As a senior, he had 109 tackles, two sacks, 14 pass breakups and two interceptions to help the Longhorns to the national championship.

In good company

"For value to a football team, it's not even close," Texas co-defensive coordinator Duane Akina said of Huff last season.

Akina said Huff is one of the top three defensive backs he has coached, along with former Texas All-American Quentin Jammer and Arizona's Chris McAlister, both first-round picks.

Huff had his coming-out party in 2004 when he made 18 tackles against Oklahoma and held All-America receiver Mark Clayton to three catches for 19 yards. Huff should be ready for the NFL after practicing against receiver Roy Williams, a first-round pick by Detroit in 2004, and quarterback Vince Young at Texas.

"Going against probably one of the best receivers in the nation and seeing the success he's having in the NFL kind of makes me feel better about myself," Huff said. "Every day was intense. Every day he brought his 'A' game, so I knew every day I had to bring my 'A' game."

Upholding safety position

While Huff eventually wants to be mentioned with some of the elite safeties in the NFL, he is expected to achieve something Polamalu (No. 16 in 2003) and Reed (No. 24 in 2002) cannot claim — being a top-10 pick.

"It's a vital position on the field because we're the last line of defense, and we can do it all," Huff said. "So I think it's the success they're having (that makes it possible for a safety to be picked in the top 10). Hopefully I can carry on that tradition, and hopefully safeties are high draft picks from now on."

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