
A Franchise Quarterback

Midway through the 2004 season a local eatery named a calorie-infused sandwich after him: the Ben Roethlis-Burger—a grilled beef patty, bacon, barbecue sauce, ranch dressing, and melted cheddar and provolone cheese between two buns. The rookie quarterback from Findlay, Ohio, and Miami University of Ohio had captured the heart of the city and was leading the Steelers to victory after victory. But five months earlier, when the Steelers drafted Roethlisberger in the first round, many experts and fans questioned the wisdom of the choice. In 1970 the Steelers drafted Terry Bradshaw, another quarterback from a smaller school, in the first round, and he eventually vindicated the selection. No one could have guessed how soon Roethlisberger would turn the Steelers draft team into a collection of savants.

SIGNAL OF CHANGE: STEELERS MAKE QB TOP PICK FOR FIRST TIME IN 24 YEARS

Ed Bouchette

The Steelers made a large down payment on the future and placed the destiny of Tommy Maddox in question when they broke a 24-year silence and drafted a quarterback in the first round yesterday.

Ben Roethlisberger, a 6-foot-5, 240-pounder with immense stature and talent, became the first quarterback drafted by the Steelers in the first round in 24 years and only the fourth in 50 years. By taking Roethlisberger from Miami of Ohio with the 11th overall choice, he became the highest quarterback draft pick by the Steelers since they selected Terry Bradshaw No. 1 overall in 1970.

Cornerback Ricardo Colclough of obscure Tusculum College in Tennessee became their second-round pick. The Steelers fulfilled one of their goals of replenishing their fading cornerback position by trading a fourth-round choice to Indianapolis to move up six spots in order to draft Colclough with the 38th overall pick.

“We thought it was reasonable to do,” defensive coordinator Dick

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LeBeau said. "He was attractive enough to us to make the commitment."

In the third round, the Steelers drafted for another obvious need, offensive tackle with their choice of 6-foot-7, 343-pound Max Starks of Florida, a three-year starter. Starks will get an opportunity to win the starting job at right tackle, a problem area for the Steelers last season that they did not address until yesterday.

"It's good to get players at two positions where we need young depth," Steelers director of football operations Kevin Colbert said of the picks after Roethlisberger, "and both Ricardo and Max filled that for us."

While the Steelers missed out on the quarterback they wanted first, Philip Rivers of North Carolina State, the Steelers did not miss out on Roethlisberger because Jacksonville and Houston rebuffed trade offers made by Buffalo that would have allowed the Bills to draft the quarterback just in front of the Steelers.

The Steelers, whose fans cheered the pick at a special Heinz Field draft gathering, were not a bit disappointed.

"We're excited," Colbert said. "We think this kid's potential is unlimited. I don't even think he's scratched the surface yet. . . . He hasn't peaked yet. We're excited when he does peak, he's going to be a Steeler."

They plan to have Roethlisberger spend one year behind Maddox and/or Charlie Batch and then move into the starting job in 2005, similar to what Cincinnati has done with the No. 1 overall pick last year, Carson Palmer.

"This is a good situation to be in because of the veterans we have in front of him," coach Bill Cowher said, "because of the veterans we have on our offensive football team.

"If there is a situation for a young quarterback to not come in and feel the pressures of having to turn a football team around, we think this is one of those situations that exists."

Roethlisberger, dressed in Steelers colors (black suit, gold tie) at the NFL draft headquarters at Madison Square Garden in New York, said he is willing to follow whatever timetable his new employers want.

"I am more than willing to do whatever it is that coach asks of me that is best for the team," said Roethlisberger, a native of Findlay, Ohio, "whether that is coming in and play right now or learn behind Tommy for a little while."

The questions now turn toward Maddox, 32, their starter the past two seasons who has been trying to get more money. The Steelers also have Brian St. Pierre, their fifth-round draft choice last year, on the roster, so one must go. Could it be Maddox through a trade? "You can never have . . . enough good players at any one position," Colbert said without answering the question, "especially at this one, because this is the most important."

Maddox and Vann McElroy, his agent, have said Dan Rooney promised to talk to them about restructuring the veteran quarterback's contract after the draft.

"Tommy will visit with them and we'll go from there," McElroy said.

But how much more money will or even can they give Maddox? Roethlisberger, represented by agent Leigh Steinberg, will command a signing bonus anywhere between \$7 million and \$9 million on a six-year contract. The Steelers have little salary cap room left as it is, and Maddox does not have nearly the kind of bargaining leverage today as he would had they not drafted a quarterback.

Maddox has three more years left on a contract he signed before the 2002 season, when he was the backup to Kordell Stewart. It calls for him to be paid \$750,000 in salary plus incentives based on the number of games he plays, yards passing, completion percentage, etc. He earned about \$400,000 in extra pay in each of the past two seasons by reaching those bonuses after he became the starter.

The Steelers preferred to draft Rivers, but the San Diego Chargers foiled that early. They drafted Eli Manning, but had a deal in the works with the Giants that if Rivers lasted until No. 4, New York would draft him and the teams would then swap quarterbacks.

The Giants paid a steep price by shipping their picks in the first and fifth rounds next year and a No. 3 this year to San Diego.

As the first round unfolded, the Steelers knew one team could prevent them from getting Roethlisberger—Buffalo, which wanted a quarterback to succeed a fading Drew Bledsoe.

Tom Donahoe, the Bills president and general manager, rated Roethlisberger higher than Rivers and talked with the Jacksonville Jaguars at No. 9 and the Houston Texans at 10 about making a trade to move from No. 13.

The Jaguars and Texans, though, declined the offer. The Jaguars felt they weren't offered enough. The Texans wanted to draft cornerback

Dunta Robinson and knew if they traded with Buffalo, the Jets would draft Robinson at No. 12.

"One thing you have to remember," Donahoe said of his failed bid to get Roethlisberger, "it always takes two to tango."

Thus, Roethlisberger fell to the Steelers, and Donahoe traded with Dallas to draft quarterback J. P. Losman at No. 22.

"A lot of people have talked about, athletically, he may have a lot better attributes than some of the other two picked in front of him," Cowher said. He said the only questions scouts had of Roethlisberger were his experience and the level of college football he played.

Those reports seemed to rile Roethlisberger. He started three seasons at Miami University after playing only one year at quarterback in high school because, he said, the coach preferred to play his son there. He opted for the draft after his junior year at Miami, where he was the Mid-American Conference offensive player of the year, completing 69.1 percent of his passes for 4,486 yards, 37 touchdowns and 10 interceptions.

"People knocked me for the time that I played and the level of competition," Roethlisberger said, "but I have played there for three years. I have been in school for four. Randy Moss, Chad Pennington and Byron Leftwich came out of the MAC; they are not doing too badly right now in the NFL."

Colclough was projected as a late pick in the first round or early in the second. He visited the Steelers two weeks ago, and Tuesday he ran a 4.4 in the 40 for NFL scouts. He was finally over a nagging hamstring injury that had prevented him from sprinting earlier in the year.

"I don't know too much about their depth at corner," Colclough said, "but if I get an opportunity to show my talent, and if I get an opportunity to come in and play, I should make a big impact."

LeBeau expected him to at least be part of a group of three or four cornerbacks who play in their dime passing defense. "I definitely think he's going to help us."

Colclough, a Sumter, S.C., native, is the first player from Tusculum to be drafted by an NFL team.

"I never heard of the place," LeBeau said. "I don't know where it is. I say that unashamedly because I don't think anyone in the building knew where it was."

Colbert said Starks played the past two seasons with a high ankle sprain that has since healed, and the Steelers expect him to be better.

"Do I think I was playing at 100 percent? I would say no," Starks said.

Steelers offensive line coach Russ Grimm said Starks got better as the season went on, culminating with physical play in the Senior Bowl.

"You need a cab to get around this guy," Grimm said.