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Selections solid despite barriers

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Last year's Bear draft had two strikes against it even before it began. Winning Super Bowl XX meant the Bears selected at the end of every round. And they wasted their third-round pick on a wide receiver for the second straight year. But on balance, the 1986 Bear draft was a success. Four players - first-round running back Neal Anderson, second-round cornerback Vestee Jackson, fourth-round tackle Paul Blair and fifth-round wide receiver Lew Barnes - rostered. Eighth-round defensive back Maurice Douglass was waived on the last cutdown but re-activated Nov. 26. Brigham Young's Glen Kozlowski, an 11th-round wide receiver projected as a possible safety, spent the season rehabilitating a college knee injury.

Personnel director Bill Tobin knew Illinois wide receiver David Williams was a gamble in the third round last spring - just like TCU's James Maness had been a risky pick the year before. Both were so-called "long-striders,"which meant they would have to adjust to NFL-style bump-and-run. Maness also developed a drug problem. Williams got in Bear coach Mike Ditka's doghouse for his failure to run proper routes. Neither player is with the team.

But Anderson was an unqualified success. After reporting late because of a contract hassle, he turned into the league's most devastating special teams player. That proved his heart. He proved his ability as a runner and receiver in limited duty as Walter Payton's backup.

Anderson's duty will be less limited in 1987.

In a recent interview with Pro Football Weekly, Anderson told more about himself than agent Norby Walters when asked about Walters' questionable reputation. "He (Walters) said that he could influence certain teams to draft me or that he could guarantee that, through his skill as a negotiator, he could get me a certain amount of money or make sure that I would see a good amount of playing time," Anderson said. "It was amusing. I know there are quite a few players out there who believe that kind of stuff. The only thing that gets you money or playing time is what you produce on the field."

Anderson hired respectable Florida attorney Steve Rappenecker instead. He gained 143 yards on 35 carries and scored his first NFL touchdown on a 58-yard pass from Doug Flutie against Dallas in the final regular season game. The 5-8, 163-pound Barnes caught four passes for 54 yards as a backup. Early on, he had trouble holding onto the football. But his confidence grew after an 85-yard kickoff return for a touchdown against Tampa in Week 14.

The Bears hoped to insert Jackson into the starting lineup for the season opener. But he wasn't able to beat out Reggie Phillips, a 1985 No. 2, until Week Nine. Jackson finished with three interceptions. But most teams attacked him relentlessly. Part of Jackson's problem was the rest of the Bear defense - it was so strong.

Ditka liked Blair from the beginning even though he showed up late for training camp because of contract difficulties. Then a practice injury forced Blair to undergo arthroscopic knee surgery. Still, he was the No. 2 offensive tackle, left and right, by the end of the year. But he got heavy. Blair's weight neared 300 pounds at one point. Ditka wants him at 275.

Give the Bears a solid "B" for the 1986 draft. They weren't in a position to duplicate the dream draft of 1983 that produced Pro Bowlers Jim Covert, Dave Duerson and Richard Dent and starters Willie Gault, Mike Richardson, Tom Thayer and Mark Bortz. But they managed to avoid repeating the embarrassment of 1968 when their first selection was a painfully talentless running back from USC named Mike Hull.

The Bears' top 1986 choice was a winner - Florida's Neal Anderson. Credit: Associated Press

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