By Peter King

HERE'S THE Bo Jackson wealth question, and then there's the Keith Byars health question. But not even Jackson's football/ baseball indecision or Byars' slow-to-heal right foot can ruin what is the best draft year for running backs in the '80s.

Jackson and Byars headline this Year of the Running Back going into Tuesday's 51st National Football League draft. But if you want co-stars, we've got co-stars.

Most NFL teams would trade their backfields straight-up for Florida's Neal Anderson-John L. Williams combination; both should be among the top 20 picks. Running backs Garry James of LSU, Ron on of Iowa, Reggie Dupard of SMU and Kenneth Davis of TCU should become dominant backs immediately. This is as golden a position as the Elway-Kelly-O'Brien-Marino quarterback crop of 1983.

In 1981 and '82, six backs went in the first round, but those picks included Butch Woolfolk, Gerald Willhite, James Brooks and Booker Moore. Moore would be a fourth-round pick this year, James Brooks a third.

"It's an absolutely superior year for running backs," Cleveland executive vice president Ernie Accorsi said. "I don't recall a better year for them. If Byars were healthy, I don't recall two backs like that ever coming out in a year. After that, there's a host of others who could be 1,000-yard rushers soon."

Tampa Bay is expected to open the draft by picking Jackson. It's the only pick to be made there. It's also the riskiest. Will he play baseball? Will he play football? In which league? "He's got us all by the tail," Denver coordinator of college scouting Reed Johnson said.

And Byars. Is the fracture of the small right toe and the January bone-graft surgery worth the risk of a pick in the top 15? "No question about it: Byars is the big question mark of the draft," Washington general manager Bobby Beathard said.

The 1986 running back story: **CHAPTER I: The Dilemma** (Or, Can He Hit the Slider?)

In the Seattle Mariners' dugout, the question to outfielder Phil Bradley - who played quarterback and the outfield at Missouri from 1978-80 - was: "What would you do if you were in Bo Jackson's shoes, play football or baseball?

A kid pitcher next to him piped up. "I'd like to see him in baseball," the kid said. "I'd like to pitch to him, because I'd like to see him hit a major-league slider."

"The best thing he could do," said Bradley, "is play whatever he has the best chance of playing in the big leagues. And get up-front money. Baseball without a doubt will pay you more over the long run, but you've got to make it here first. In football, you know he's going to make the team right away and get pretty big money."

"There's no doubt he'd make more money in the first four years in a football career than he would in baseball," said NFL Management Council executive director Jack Donlan.

Jackson seems to be seriously wondering about his future. He has said, "I've never had any money in my life, so if I have to go without it for a few more years, it won't bother me." If this is so — his associates say he is quite sincere — then Tampa Bay has quite a risky pick to make. Lust Monday, Jackson accepted a long-standing invitation from the California Angels, who drafted

him last summer, to attend a game. There, he grilled mer (Ala.) High School in 1982, and as Auburn's center in this game since O.J. Simpson," one NFC personnel Reggie Jackson about his options. fielder and leadoff hitter in 1985, Jackson batted .401 director said. Said California general manager Mike Port: "He with 17 homers. This year, before his suspension, he The Giants have Jackson rated a 7.9 on their 9.0 visited with Reggie for about 20 minutes and they exstruck out 29 times in 66 at-bats, batting only .258 with scouting scale, the highest rating since Lawrence Tayplored the entire question. Bo basically asked him, 'If lor's 8.0 in 1981; Jackson would be about an 8.5 if he seven homers. you were me, what would your guidance be?" A Mets' scout, Joe Mason, has watched Jackson was committed to football. And? "Here's a guy who's got extraordinary abilit since high school and says: "Bo has a couple of out-"He's got to play football," Dodgers scouting director in both sports, and he's sitting on the fence," said Port. standing tools - speed and power. What he has to Ben Wade said. "The money's not even going to be Jackson is not a potential No. 1 pick in the baseball learn is to play baseball. He hasn't played enough." close. He's got some tools, but there's a lot of kids in draft, but he is an excellent baseball prospect, despite Truly, Jackson is a better football player. His 6.6 Class A ball with better tools than him right now." being declared ineligible the final two-thirds of this yards-per-carry average and 43 career touchdowns, his Then there's the USFL, which wants to see him in season for taking a free plane ride from the Buccaneers terrific ability to run away from everyone, his surpris-Birmingham. And there's that doubt. He really The Yankees made him their No. 2 pick out of Besseing power inside, make him "the best prospect I've seen wouldn't beat the baseball bushes for two or three years

THE DRIVE from Philadelphia to Tuscaloosa, Bucko Kilroy remembers, would take 191/2 hours. Maybe it was the tight budget or the eagerness to start the mission, but he wouldn't stop to through.

In 1956, Kilroy - now New England Patriots' vice president, then Philadelphia Eagles' college scout had no scouting combines to weigh and measure play-

ers; he did it. He had no overnight air messenger shuttling him films of marginal Mississippi State prospects; he drove his Cadillac to watch the films. He had no cross-checkers or combine scouts to bounce opinions off; he was the only authority.

In fact, Kilroy was one of only five scouts in the NFL in 1956. And if he wanted to know the prospects, by golly, he had to go prospecting.

Kilroy would start looking in Alabama in late February; drive through Mississippi, Louisiana, Oklahoma and Texas; through New Mexico, Arizona, California and the Pacific Northwest; back across the

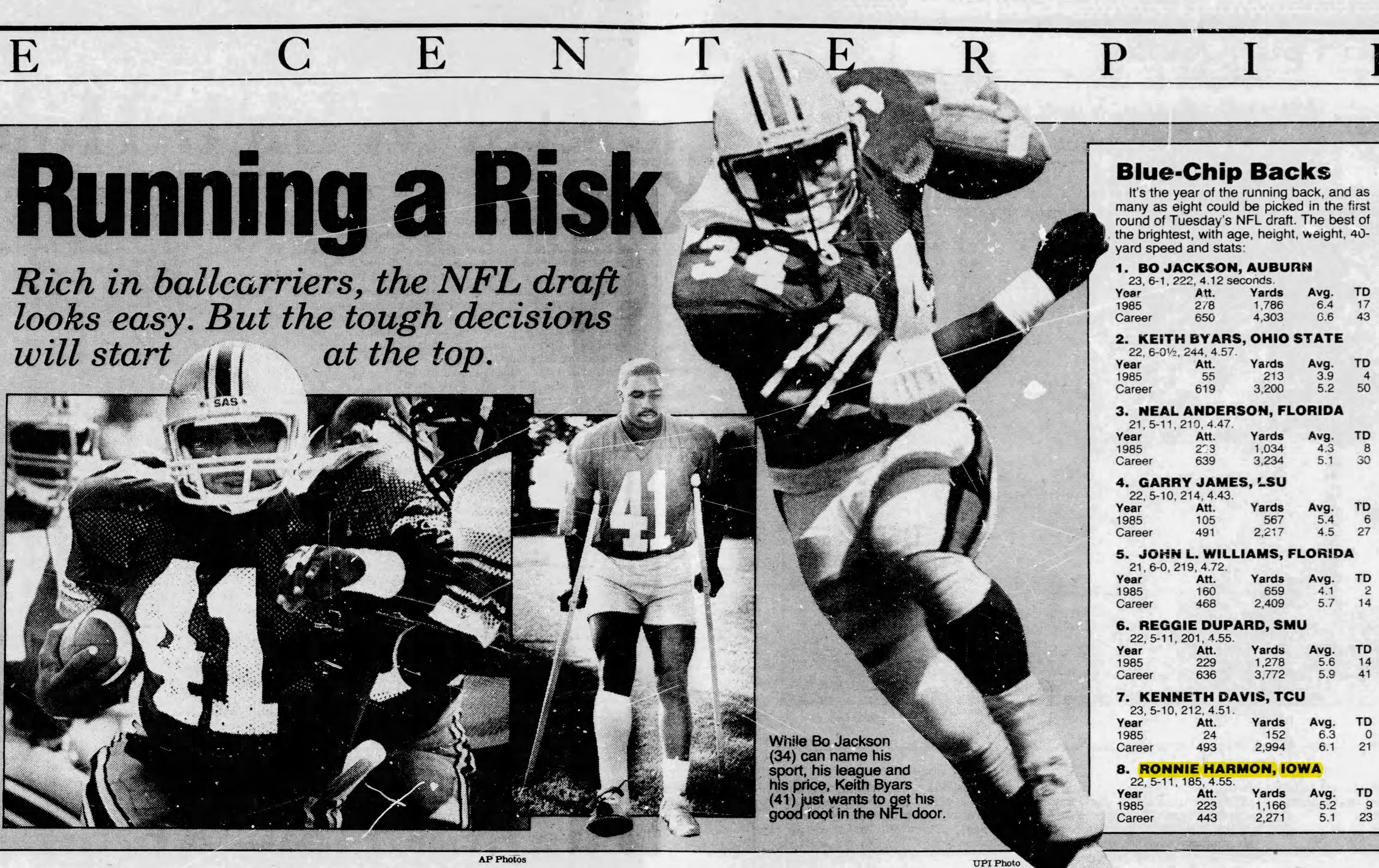
State; back into Pennsylvania to see Pitt and Penn rest. "Stop?" he asked. "I'd go 19½ hours straight State, and finally, in late May, to Notre Dame's spring practice.

"I remember going to Arizona State in 1956 and somebody told me, 'You're the first scout we've ever had here,'" Kilroy said. "In my time," said former quart rback Lee Gross-

cup, the Giants' first-round draft pick in 1959, "scouting was rough-and-ready. Today it's high tech. We're talking about the manual typewriter versus the word processor.

We're talking about checkers who check checkers who check scouting reports that check combine reports. The Giants saw Alabama defensive end Jon Hand with six different sets of eyes last season, including coach Bill Parcells and general manager George Young.

We're talking about teams filing scouting reports on portable computer terminals, which the Denver Broncos do.





We're talking about teams flying in 50 prospects to room." Denver coordinator of college scouting Reed give them their third postseason physical exam, Johnson said, "looks like a room where you place bets on draft day." Johnson's room contains 32 telephones. which the Jets do. We're talking about a huge scouting combine giv-Welcome to state of the art.

ing 350 top college prospects an 11-hour once-over in

"What hapened over the years," said Kilroy, "is that people found out they can't make a mistake with late January, including a podiatrist's exam to check on foot alignment. their top picks. They've found they not only lose the We're talking about teams storing draft personnel pick but lose the tremendous amount of money they knowledge in huge computers, which Dallas does with have to spend to sign the pick. Teams use scouts as a Santa Clara, Calif., software firm. their insurance policies."

We're talking about teams, with bonus money at the ready, staking out more than 200 marginal prospects on draft day, signing 50 or 60 of them when the draft ends at midnight and getting a huge jump on freeagent-seeking teams that politely wait until after the realizes you can have a farmer who runs just as fast as next morning's breakfast. Denver does that. "My an inner-city kid."

Said Western Michigan linebacker John Offerdahl, an intensely scouted senior: "I think teams are scouting more 'cecause they realize if they don't they may lose out on another Walter Payton. The NFL

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and risk not making the big time, would he? "My love for baseball is the same as it is for football," Jackson said Wednesday. Stay tuned. **CHAPTER II: A Bone to Pick** (Or, The Traveling Physical Exam

Detroit, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia and Cincinnati examined the foot, and they think, in time, that Keith Byars will be okay. Dallas and Houston, among others, are skeptical.

"From what I hear, from all the different reports,

combine in January and three more times in the The exposure to players has skyrocketed. Grossspring for any scout who cared to find him in Kalamacup, for instance, thinks he was scouted only once his three-year college career at Utah. He came east zoo, Mich. He flew to Long Island for a Jets' physical. "People have looked at success," said Dallas vice with Utah to play Army in 1957, and he threw for 326 yards and two touchdowns. It was the best president for personnel development Gil Brandt. "Dallas was a draft-built team. Pittsburgh was a game of his career. Giants assistant coach Allie draft-built team. When we met in the Super Bowl (in Sherman was in the stands. The Giants made hin the 10th overall choice in the 1959 draft. Grosscup 1979), there was only one player not signed or drafted did nothing for the Giants, shuffled from taxi squad originally by us." to taxi squad and finished his career unceremonclubs pool resources to find players. But teams, looking iously playing on a dirt field for the minor-league for the edge Dallas found in the early '70s by beating Hartford Charter Oaks.

the bushes for the Rayfield Wrights (Fort Valley Contrast this to Offerdahl, who should be a secondor third-round pick in Tuesday's draft. At least 10 State), Jethro Pughs (Elizabeth City State) and Cliff Harrises (Ouchita Baptist), began assembling large scouts watched him practice in the spring before h scouting staffs and large budgets to find the can't-miss senior season. At least one scout was present at each guys who formerly were can't-find. Denver now spends of Western Michigan's 11 games. By midseason, three scouts a week were perched in the WMU stands an estimated \$1.4 million on scouting. Do you miss the good old days, Bucko? "The old watching practice; they'd chat with him afterward to days?" Kilroy, a convert, asked. "You gotta be kidget a feel of his intelligence. He played in two postseading. Forget it. It's a much better game today, and son all-star games, where entire coaching staffs watched everything he did. He worked out for the scouting is much better." - Peter King

Avg. TD Yards 1,786 Avg. TD Yards 213 Avg. TD Yards 1,034 3,234 Avg. TD Yards 567 2,217 Yards 659 2,409 Avg. TD

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everything is positive," New England director of player personnel Dick Steinberg said. "The procedure is simple, and the foot's fine."

Byars broke a bone at the base of his small right toe last August and aggravated the break twice last fall. In January, bone was grafted from his right hip to the toe to stabilize the injury. The cast was removed April 17. Byars visited about 11 NFL team physicians in April he saw five last weekend - walking with a cane. The injury is severe, detractors say, because Byars is a 244pound back who puts inordinate stress on that exact area when cutting. Last summer, Jackson and Byars were good bets to be the 1-2 picks in the draft. But the foot injury limited him to four games and 213 yards in 1985.

"They've told me," Byars said, speaking of the doctors, "that I'll be able to play." But there are skeptics, Dallas included. "Our doc-

tors said the bone hasn't healed yet, and they lon't know when it will," Cowboys public relations director Doug Todd said.

Ohio State medics are confident he'll be ready to play this fall. "Would I stake my reputation on it?" said Ohio State trainer Billy Hill. "For what it's worth, yeah." And team physician Robert Murphy said, "I don't think it's much of a gamble. I think he stands a very good chance of having a normal foot."

"With Byars," Bengals personnel director Pete Brown said, "it depends on who you talk to last." Steinberg's best guess: "I think he'll make the first

round, somewhere in the top 15 picks."

CHAPTER III: The Supporting Cast (Or, Canton, Ohio, Here They Come)

"They come in different sizes, shapes and speeds," said Mike Hicley, the Jets' director of player personnel. "But there's quality attached to all of 'em."

The running back crop, truly, has eight potential first-round draft choices. And a ninth, fullback Anthony Toney of Texas A&M, is being whispered around Philadelphia as the Eagles' shocker of a No. 1 pick. Quick scouting reports on those below the Jackson/Byars strata, from New Orleans scouting director Joe Woolley:

On Florida running back Anderson: "Outstanding size-speed ratio with good potential to be a great back." On Florida fullback Williams: "Something special about him. A fullback who can play one-back or tailback and do it all, right away." On Toney: "Good hands, and at 223 and running a 4.65 (-second) 40. that tells you a lot about him." On LSU running back James: "Outstanding speed for a back his size." On SMU running back Dupard: "Good all-around solid kid with good receiving ability." On Iowa running back Harm "Guts, hands, running ability, speed."

"Sounds like a recording, doesn't it?" Woolley said, chuckling. "I'd venture to say 28 teams' draft boards right now could have 28 different combinations of the running backs they like."

"A few of those guys will spill into the second round, and you'll probably still be able to get a quality guy like Dalton Hilliard [of LSU] in the third," said Steelers vice president Art Rooney Jr.

New Orleans (picking sixth) or Kansas City (seventh) are favored to take Anderson. Williams could land in Minnesota (eighth), Seattle (15th) or with the Giants (19th) or Jets (22nd). Pittsburgh (ninth) likes Byars and James. The 49ers (18th) are made for Harmon; his brother Derrick plays there. Davis and Dupard will land late in the first round or early in the second.

The Year of the Running Back, thus, seems assured. With two asterisks.

Combines were founded in the early '60s to help