

Executing the Reverse

Judging the Drafts

These are the remaining players from the last five drafts. The overall numbers are relatively equal, but the Bills own a decided advantage from 1984 to 1987, a critical period because those are the young veterans who should form the nucleus of the club.

From 1984-87, the Bills have 17 of their draft picks, eight of whom are starters. The Jets have 11 and eight. Also consider that the Bills traded two No. 1 picks and a No. 2 to acquire Pro Bowl LB Cornelius Bennett in a blockbuster trade two years ago.

BILLS

Year	Pos.	Player	Rnd.	Status
1984	P	John Kidd	5	Starter
1985	DE	Bruce Smith	1	Pro Bowl
	CB	x-Derrick Burroughs	1	Starter
	QB	Frank Reich	3	Backup
	WR	Andre Reed	4	Starter
1986	RB	Ronnie Harmon	1	Backup
	T	Will Wolford	1	Starter
	C	Leonard Burton	3	Backup
	DE	Mark Pike	7	Backup
	TE	Butch Rolle	7	Backup
1987	LB	x-Shane Conlan	1	Pro Bowl
	CB	Nate Odomes	2	Starter
	RB	Jamie Mueller	3	Backup
	DE	Leon Seals	4	Backup
	NT	x-Bruce Mesner	8	Backup
	TE	Keith McKeeler	9	Backup
	T	Howard Ballard	11	Starter
1988	RB	Thurman Thomas	2	Starter
	S	x-John Hagy	8	Backup
	NT	Jeff Wright	8	Backup
	LB	Carlton Bailey	9	Backup
1989	WR	Don Beebe	3	Backup
	WR	x-John Kolesar	4	Backup
	CB	Chris Hale	7	Backup

JETS

1984	C	Jim Sweeney	2	Starter	
	LB	Kyle Clifton	3	Starter	
	TE	* x-Billy Griggs	8	Backup	
1985	WR	Al Toon	1	Pro Bowl	
	LB	Troy Benson	5	Starter	
	S	x-Rich Miano	6	Starter	
	CB	*-Kerry Glenn	10	Backup	
1986	G	Mike Haight	1	Starter	
1987	RB	Roger Vick	1	Starter	
	LB	Alex Gordon	2	Starter	
	NT	Gerald Nichols	7	Backup	
	G	Dave Cadigan	1	Backup	
	CB	x-Terry Williams	2	Backup	
1988	S	Erik McMillan	3	Pro Bowl	
	CB	James Hasty	3	Starter	
	T	x-Mike Withycombe	5	Backup	
	DE	Paul Frase	6	Starter	
	TE	Keith Neubert	8	Backup	
	CB	John Booty	10	Backup	
	1989	LB	Jeff Lageman	1	Starter
		DE	Dennis Byrd	2	Backup
LB		Joe Mott	3	Backup	
DE		Ron Stallworth	4	Backup	
DE		Marvin Washington	6	Backup	
S		x-Stevon Moore	7	Backup	
RB		A.B. Brown	8	Backup	

x — Injured reserve
* — Re-signed

Drafts from 1984-87 put Bills in contention but leave the Jets with very little to show

By Rich Cimini

Orchard Park — When the Jets and Bills met here in 1985, the Jets won convincingly, 27-7. Earlier that year, the Jets clobbered the weaklings from upstate, 42-3. The Jets were regarded as a team on the rise. They finished 11-5, the winningest season under coach Joe Walton. The pitiful Bills wound up 2-14 for the second straight year.

The two teams meet today at Rich Stadium, but the circumstances have changed considerably. The Jets are 1-5, reeling from a three-game losing streak. They reside in last place of the AFC East. The Bills are 4-2, atop the division. They were a popular preseason choice to reach the Super Bowl.

Why are Jets fans screaming for Walton's head while Bills fans are screaming for joy?

Check the rosters. Better yet, check the recent drafts.

The Bills, under the guidance of general manager Bill Polian, rebuilt the franchise with solid drafting and astute trading. The Jets, under the leadership of a three-man committee headed by no one, are struggling because of poor drafting during a critical four-year period.

Examine the drafts from 1984-87. Those are critical years. The players should be reaching their athletic prime. "They are the young veterans," said Polian, who was named NFL executive of the year last season, three years after becoming the Bills' GM. "They should be the nucleus of your team."

The Bills scored big during that span. Seventeen players drafted from 1984-87 remain on the roster. Eight are starters, including two Pro Bowl players — defensive end Bruce Smith and linebacker Shane Conlan, who's on injured reserve with a sprained knee. And don't forget Pro Bowl linebacker Cornelius Bennett, who was acquired from the Colts in a blockbuster trade that cost the Bills three high picks — two No. 1s and a No. 2.

Now for the Jets. From 1984-87, they drafted 11 players that remain on the roster (two were resigned), including eight starters. The only Pro Bowl player is wide receiver Al Toon (Class of '85), who won't play today because of two sprained ankles.

Mike Hickey, the Jets' director of player personnel, is the man responsible for drafting. Understandably, he was reluctant to discuss reasons for the Jets' collapse.

"There's no clear-cut answers to why we're losing," Hickey said. "We could point fingers or place the blame, but all that matters is we're a losing team right now. We're all at fault."

Critics might argue that Hickey should be blamed. Clearly, the team is suffering from a lack of talent produced from 1984-87. The Class of '88 — Erik McMillan and James Hasty — appears sol-

id, and this year's rookie crop shows potential, but it's hard to overcome a few lean years.

"There's no way a team can realistically contend with rookies," Polian said. "We had a great draft in '87 — we got Conlan, Cornelius and [Nate] Odomes — but we still had a losing year."

"The Jets' new guys look pretty darn good, but it always takes a while with rookies," Polian said. "You can't force feed them. You need a solid foundation before you start to see the results."

The Jets had two No. 1 picks in 1984 — the makings of a good foundation — but Russell Carter and Ron Faurot were busts. Only center Jim Sweeney and linebacker Kyle Clifton, two solid starters, remain from that class.

Hickey plucked Toon in '85, along with linebacker Troy Benson (No. 5) and safety Rich Miano (No. 6), who underwent reconstructive surgery last week. The '86 class was a disaster. Only guard Mike Haight (No. 1) remains, and he's nothing more than a complementary player.

"When you have a bad year, it usually comes back to haunt you," said Polian, speaking in general terms.

Fullback Roger Vick (No. 1) and linebacker Alex Gordon (No. 2) arrived in '87. Vick showed improvement last season, but it's obvious he never will be an impact player. He has rushed for 14 yards in his last 17 carries. Gordon was supposed to be a pass rusher, but he has only nine sacks in two-plus seasons.

Injuries, of course, have contributed to the Jets' undoing. The receiving corps, minus Toon and Wesley Walker, has been decimated. Tough blows, for sure, but a lack of depth also is to blame. In the last three years, the Jets drafted three receivers in the sixth round or higher, but they're all gone.

The glut of players accumulated from 1984-87 has provided the Bills with solid depth, enabling them to overcome key injuries. They also have a few players on the verge of Pro Bowl status — receiver Andre Reed leads the AFC with 43 catches and left tackle Will Wolford is one of the most promising linemen in the league.

"As far as the draft goes, '85 was our watershed year," said Polian, who also executed trades for defensive end Art Still and safety Leonard Smith. "That got us on the road back. The following year, we got Wolford and, of course, we signed [Jim] Kelly. We had a good year in '87, and last year we picked up [Thurman] Thomas."

"We've come a long way," Polian said. "In '85, we were bereft of personnel. People used to joke that we were 2-14 on merit."

The Jets aren't that bad, but it's obvious they're feeling the aftershocks of mistakes that were made a few years back.



Mike Hickey

THE GAME

JETS (1-5) at BILLS (4-2)
1 p.m., Rich Stadium

TV: Channel 4. Radio: WCBS (880).
Line: Bills by 6½.

Deciding factors: Protecting Ken O'Brien. The Jets' offensive line is banged up and the Bills boast two premier pass rushers, OLB Cornelius Bennett and DE Bruce Smith. Bennett has only a half sack, but he's waiting to explode. Key matchup: LT Jeff Criswell vs. Smith (4½ sacks). If O'Brien is injured, it's Mark Malone. Scary thought.

The Jets' defense must stop RB Thurman Thomas (453 yards). With backup QB Frank Reich subbing for Jim Kelly, running the ball is essential for the Bills. Marv Levy runs a conservative offense, and it wouldn't make sense to open up with a mediocre passer.

The emotional factor is key. The Bills are coming off an

inspiring Monday night win over the Rams. Can they get revved up for the 1-5 Jets?

What to expect: The Bills' run defense has been hurt by the loss of ILB Shane Conlan, so look for the Jets to run up the gut. The Jets will use screens and draws to slow the Bills' pass rush. Criswell will get help from tight ends to block Smith. Defensively, the Jets may disguise coverages, hoping to confuse Reich.

Reich will lead a high-percentage offense — lots of running and short passes. The Bills can't afford turnovers. Levy fears FS Erik McMillan and CB James Hasty, both of whom scored last week. Defensively, the Bills will turn up the heat on O'Brien. Why not? Their corners should be able to handle WRs Chris Burkett and JoJo Townsell in single coverage.

Injuries: Jets — WR Al Toon (sprained ankles) and

backup WR Michael Harper (knee surgery) are out. Backup TE Billy Griggs (separated shoulder) is out. TE Mickey Shuler (hand, ribs), TE Keith Neubert (Achilles) and QB Kyle Mackey (elbow) are questionable. RG Dan Alexander (calf, ankle), LG Mike Haight (rib, calf) and LT Jeff Criswell (thigh) are probable. Bills — QB Jim Kelly (shoulder) is out. Reich will start. Backup S Dwight Drane (thigh) is questionable. RILB Ray Bentley (head) is probable.

Notes: C Jim Sweeney moves to LT if Criswell aggravates thigh bruise. Adam Schreiber then replaces Sweeney. . . . Jets' offense has produced one TD in last three games. . . . Buffalo's Andre Reed leads the AFC with 43 catches. . . . Yes, it's true: The Bills have allowed more points (160) than the Jets (158). . . . Bills lead the AFC in rushing offense. . . . Bills have won the last three games in the series.