THE 2019 NFL DRAFT REPORT PRESENTS

DRAFT CLASS - A LINEBACKER HISTORY LESSON

For any rookie, their first year in the NFL is usually a learning experience. Their playing time might increase during the course of the season, but for the most, playing time will likely come on special team action or in a mop-up role. During that player’s second season, he needs to begin to apply what he learned during his rookie year. He should be prepared to enter camp challenging for a starting job and at the least, be ready to contribute. By the third year, that player needs to produce at the level expected when he was drafted. Failure to do so will see his team probably look for a replacement during that year’s draft process.

I want to stress that The NFL Draft Report is not a draft guide – rather the name we call the reports produced by our parent organization – Scouting Services Inc., which also scout for baseball and basketball teams.

It looks like this will be the Devin (White) and Devin (Bush) show when it comes to middle line-backers waiting in the green room to cross the podium on draft day. Most of the other talent here are blue collar types, but a few teams like Green Bay, the Giants and Pittsburgh are looking at a highly rated rush end as a possible transition to the second level. One player certain to follow the "Devins" among interior linebackers is Alabama's Mac Wilson, targeted by several teams as a late second round prospect.

A disappointing Pro Day in the agility tests saw Clemson's Tre Lamar's stock take a dip, as 342-pound nose guard Dexter Lawrence had a similar 40-yard dash time that the 239-pound linebacker delivered (4.95). Hard-hitting Tevon Coney came into his own with triple-digit tackles for Notre Dame last year and continued to impress during post-season action, enough to secure a draft slot at the end of Day Two draft activity. He should be joined late in the third round by West Virginia's fireplug, David Long Jr.

Among the outside linebacker group, unfortunately, the talent level is not worthy of being Round One selections. However, some teams could envision first round potential edge rushers as perhaps better fits at the second level - Kentucky's Josh Allen, Brian Burns of Florida State and Jachai Polite of in-state rival Florida. Certain to be drafted during Day Two is Polite's teammate, Vosean Walker, but teams are split whether he is better suited on the outside or inside.

Georgia's D'Andre Walker was used more off the edge last season, but has experience and versatility to line up at any linebacker spot. North Carolina State features an excellent downhill typer in Germaine Pratt, who should be the first linebacker off the board in Round Three. Notre Dame's Drue Tranquill will also likely head into the third round, especially to a team that incorporates a Cover-2 scheme. College rush end Sutton Smith is a boom or bust type that could also go in round three, but teams will need to be convinced that the undersized first level defender can drop back into coverage.

Now before I get into heavy detail on the inside/middle and outside linebacker positions, here is a little bit of history on how the linebacker position was born on the NFL depth charts.

THE IMPORTANCE FOR HAVING A STANDOUT AT THE "MIKE" POSITION

Before we analyze the current draft talent available at the inside linebacker position, allow me to provide a little bit of "classroom" work with a description of the variety of formations teams use and how the man in the middle plays an important role in those schemes. Whether playing in the classic a 4-3 formation or in a 3-4 alignment, the linebackers manning the middle positions are generally the quarterbacks of the defense – smart enough to know everybody’s assignments and savvy enough to not be fooled by misdirection or play action. Often it is the middle linebacker who receives the defensive play calls from the sideline and relays that play to the rest of the team, and in the NFL he is usually the defensive player with the electronic sideline communicator.

Inside linebackers playing the 3-4 scheme generally rely a lot on the ability of their nose guard to play over the head of the center and hold ground and occupy several offensive blockers in order to allow the linebackers to make plays. The focus of the 3-4 defensive line is to occupy offensive linemen thus freeing the linebackers to tackle the running back or to rush the passer or otherwise drop into pass coverage.

In a 3-4 defense, the larger, more run-stopping-oriented linebacker is usually still called "Mike", while the smaller, more pass protection/route coverage-oriented player is called "Will". "Mikes" usually line up towards the strong side or on the side the offense is more likely to run on (based on personnel match-ups) while "Wills" may line up on the other side or even a little farther back between the defensive line and the secondary.

Meanwhile, in a 4-3 defense, the middle linebacker's job is to stop runs between the tackles and watch the entire field to see the play develop. In this standard defense, middle linebackers commonly lead the team in tackles. On pass plays, the middle linebacker’s responsibilities vary based upon whether a man or zone coverage is called. A jack-of-all-trades, the middle linebacker can be asked to blitz (though they often blitz less than the outside linebacker), cover, spy the quarterback, or even have a deep middle-of-the-field responsibility in the Tampa 2 defense.

In zone coverage, the “mike” man will generally drop into hook zones across the middle of the field. However, some zones will send the outside linebackers into the flats (area directly to the left and right of the hash marks, extending 4-5 yards downfield). In a man-to-man coverage, the middle linebackers is asked to lend support covering if a second receiver exits on that side of the field. In the "Tampa 2" zone defense the middle line-backer is required to drop quickly into a deep middle zone pass coverage thus requiring a quick player at this position.

TRAITS YOU LOOK FOR IN A QUALITY OUTSIDE LINEBACKER

The outside linebacker is often referred to as "Sam" (strong-side) and "Will" (weak-side), with their primary duties usually being responsible for delivering outside containment. Those playing the "Sam" position are generally bigger and stronger

This includes the strongside and weakside designations below. They are also responsible for blitzing the quarterback.

Strongside linebacker

The strongside linebacker (SLB) is often nicknamed the "Sam" for purposes of calling a blitz. Since the strong side of the offensive team is the side on which the tight end lines up, or whichever side contains the most personnel, the strongside linebacker usually lines up across from the tight end. Often the strongside linebacker will be called upon to tackle the running back on a play, because the back will be following the tight end's block. He is most often the strongest linebacker; at the least he possesses the ability to withstand, shed, and fight off blocks from a tight end or fullback blocking the backside of a pass play. The linebacker should also have strong safety abilities in pass situation to cover the tight end in man on man situations. He should also have considerable quickness to read and get into coverage in zone situations. The strongside linebacker is also commonly known as the left outside linebacker (LOLB).

In order to have a successful 4-3 or 3-4 alignment, one of the outside ‘backers need to be big and physical. Old school coaches still call these defenders "Sam," but the title “Elephant” has been made popular by the Packers. That athlete is usually relied upon to serve as a primary pass rusher. Depending on the scheme, the Elephant can be on either side of the defensive formation.

Strength is crucial, as the Elephant will often be challenged by double-team action from the right tackle and tight end, or having to fend off the cat-quick left tackles to get into the backfield successfully from the edge. More often than not, you will see teams try to convert rush ends to this position.

The more traditional strong-side 'backer is used often for the blitz. The strong side of the offensive team is the side on which the tight end lines up, or whichever side contains the most personnel, and the strong-side linebacker usually lines up across from the tight end. He will be called upon to tackle the running back on a play, because the back will be following the tight end's block.

The strong-side should also have strong safety abilities in pass situation to cover the tight end in man on man situations. He also should also have considerable quickness to read and get into coverage in zone situations. He is also commonly known to perform on the left side of the defensive field (offensive right side).

The weak-side linebacker (Will) in a 4–3 alignment is also called the backside linebacker, or "Buck", as well as other names like Jack or Bandit. He must be the fastest of the three 'backers, because he is often the one called into pass coverage. He is also usually chasing the play from the backside, so the ability to maneuver through traffic is a necessity for that athlete.

The weak-side defender will align off the line of scrimmage at the same depth as the middle line-backer. He usually does not have to face large interior linemen one-on-one, unless one is pulling. In pass coverage, that linebacker generally covers the back that attacks his side of the field first in man coverage, while covering the weak flat in Texas Loop or hook/curl areas in zone coverage. The weak-side linebacker is also commonly known as the right outside linebacker.

THE HISTORY LESSON

Before the advent of the two-platoon system with separate units for offense and defense, the player who was the team's center on offense was often asked to be his squad's linebacker on defense. According to Wikipedia, most sources claim coach Fielding H. Yost and center Germany Schulz of the University of Michigan invented the position. Schulz was Yost's first linebacker in 1904 when he stood up from his usual position on the line. Yost was horrified at first, but came to see the wisdom in Schulz's innovation. William Dunn of Penn State was another to play linebacker soon after Schulz.

However, there are various historical claims tied to the linebacker position, including some before 1904. For example, Percy Given of Georgetown is another center with a claim to the title "first linebacker," supposedly standing up behind the line well before Schulz in a game against Navy in 1902. Despite Given, most sources have the first linebacker in the South as Frank Juhan of Sewanee.

Ernest Cozens of the University of Pennsylvania was one of the first of the "roving centers," as the linebacker position was known during its early stages, that was coined by Hank Ketcham of Yale. Walter E. Bachman of Lafayette was said to be "the developer of the "roving center" concept". Edgar Garbisch of Army was credited with developing the "roving center method" of playing defensive football in 1921.

In professional football, Cal Hubbard is credited with pioneering the linebacker position. He starred as a tackle and end, playing off the line in a style similar to that of a modern linebacker. However, the first player to be designated and drafted as a pure linebacker was Notre Dame's George Connor, the fifth overall selection by the New York Giants in 1946.

George Leo Connor would go on to star for the Chicago Bears from 1948 to 1955. He played tackle on offense, and on defense was recognized as one of the sport's first linebackers. He is a member of the Pro Football Hall of Fame and of the College Football Hall of Fame. He attended both the College of the Holy Cross and the University of Notre Dame. He won the first Outland Trophy as the best college lineman in 1946. Sportswriter Grantland Rice once observed Connor was "the closest thing to a Greek God since Apollo."

The Chicago native was not expected to survive infancy, weighing only three pounds at his premature birth. He played two years of college football at Holy Cross and was a second-team All-America selection by the Associated Press in 1943. He then served in the United States Navy during World War II. After the war, Connor was drafted in the first round, fifth overall by the New York Giants in 1946, but instead transferred to the University of Notre Dame to be closer to his ill father.

Connor was twice a consensus All-American as a tackle for the Notre Dame Fighting Irish football team, in 1946 and 1947. He won the first Outland Trophy as the nation's best college interior lineman in 1946. He was also a key component of Notre Dame's 1946 and 1947 national championship teams, and was the captain of the unbeaten 1947 team.

After graduating, Connor signed with the Chicago Bears in 1948 for $13,000 a year guaranteed for three years, a high salary at the time for a lineman. He played for the team from 1948 through 1955. In eight seasons, he was named a first-team All-Pro five times, and was an invitee to the first four Pro Bowls.

At first exclusively a tackle on defense, in a game in 1949 Bears head coach George Halas ordered Connor to stand upright outside the end in an attempt to thwart the running of Philadelphia Eagles halfback Steve Van Buren. The plan worked, as Connor held Van Buren in check and the Bears handed the Eagles their only loss of the season. "We always set high standards for George Connor and he exceeded them," said Halas.

Connor became one of the first big, mobile linebackers in the NFL. Connor retired during training camp in 1956, still bothered by a knee injury sustained in 1954. In 1963, he was inducted into the College Football Hall of Fame. He was enshrined in the Pro Football Hall of Fame with the class of 1975. He is a member of the National Football League 1940s All-Decade Team, selected by the Pro Football Hall of Fame committee in 1969 to honor the best players of the 1940s.

According to DraftHistory.com, it was not until 1952 that the next player to be designated as a line-backer was drafted. With the second overall pick in the 1952 draft, the defunct Yanks selected Les Richter out of California. The Boston Yanks are the only officially defunct NFL team ever to have the first overall NFL draft pick. They had it twice, in 1944 and 1946. Both times they selected a quarter-back from the University of Notre Dame: Angelo Bertelli (1944) and Frank Dancewicz (1946). Owner Ted Collins moved his "defunct" Yanks franchise to New York in 1949, where it continued for one year as the Bulldogs and two years known as the New York Yanks.

At the University of California, Richter played guard and linebacker for the Golden Bears. He was twice recognized as a consensus All-American and first-team All-Pacific Coast, in 1950 and 1951. After graduation, he served in the Korean War for the U.S. Army for two years. After he was selected by the New York Yanks, the team folded before the 1952 season, and the Dallas Texans assumed the rights to Richter. They traded him to the Los Angeles Rams for eleven players, the second largest deal ever made for a single player.

During his nine years with the Rams, Richter did not miss a game, playing through various injuries including a broken cheekbone. He scored 193 points, which included a touchdown, 106 extra points, and 29 field goals. On defense, he intercepted 16 passes. His 24 field goals attempted during the 1955 season led the NFL.

The Rams struggled during that time, winning six or more games four times in nine seasons. The high mark for the team was in 1955, when it reached the championship game and lost to the Cleveland Browns. Richter was selected to eight straight Pro Bowls, from 1954 to 1961, and was four times recognized as a first-team All-Pro. He played center for his final season, in 1962, taking over for injured starter Art Hunter.

After retiring from football, Richter was involved with auto racing in a variety of positions. He was vice-president of special projects for International Speedway Corporation, chairman of the board for the International Race of Champions, and senior vice president of operations for NASCAR.

In 1953, two linebackers received that designation when they were drafted. Both would go on to not only make a name for themselves playing the game, but also coaching an NFL team. In the seventh round, Pittsburgh's Joe Schmidt was selected by the Detroit Lions. For the Panthers, he played from 1950 to 1952. During his first two years as a Pittsburgh football player, the team compiled losing records of 1-8 in 1950 and 3-7 in 1951.

As a senior, Schmidt was the captain of the 1952 Pittsburgh team that compiled a 6–3 record, including victories over Ohio State, Notre Dame, and Army. Prior to the Notre Dame game, Schmidt gave a speech that was credited with motivating the team to defeat the heavily favored Notre Dame team. In the Notre Dame game, Schmidt sustained a concussion and hemorrhage that required him to be hospitalized for ten days.

At the end of the 1952 season, Schmidt was selected as a first-team All-American by the International News Service. He was also selected to play in the Senior Bowl. He played thirteen seasons with Detroit (1953 to 1965), where he won two NFL championships (1953 and 1957), and, between 1954 and 1963, he played in ten consecutive Pro Bowl games and was selected each year as a first-team All-Pro player. He was also voted by his fellow NFL players as the NFL's most valuable defensive player in 1960 and 1963, named to the NFL 1950s All-Decade Team, and inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1973.

From 1967 to 1972, Schmidt was the head coach of the Detroit Lions. In six years under Schmidt, the Lions compiled a 43-34-7 record and finished in second place each year from 1969 to 1972. After retiring from the Lions, Schmidt worked as a manufacturer's representative in the automobile industry in Detroit.

Dayton's Chuck Noll was a 20th round selection by the Cleveland Browns in that 1953 draft. He had

planned to attend Notre Dame, but during a practice before his freshman year he suffered an epileptic seizure on the field. Notre Dame coach Frank Leahy refused to take the risk of allowing Noll to play there and so Noll accepted a football scholarship to the University of Dayton. As a member of the Dayton Flyers football team, he was a lineman, linebacker and a co-captain, and acquired the nickname, the "Pope," for his "'infallible' grasp of the game."

Noll was drafted by the Cleveland Browns with the 239th pick in the 1953 NFL draft. During his first year, the Browns lost to the Detroit Lions in the NFL championship. The next two years the Browns were NFL champions. Although the undersized, he was drafted as a linebacker, but head coach Paul Brown used him as one of his "messenger guards" to send play calls to the quarterback (beginning with Otto Graham). Brown recalled that Noll soon "could have called the plays himself without any help from the bench. That's how smart he was."

According to Art Rooney, Jr. (director of scouting for the Steelers before and during most of Noll's tenure), however, Noll felt demeaned by Brown's use of him in that way and "disliked the term 'messenger boy' so much that as coach of the Steelers he entrusted all the play calling to his quarterbacks." He was paid only $5,000 per season with the Browns and so while there he acted as substitute teacher at Holy Name High School and sold insurance on the side.

During that period Noll also attended Cleveland-Marshall College of Law at night. He told Dan Rooney that he decided against becoming a lawyer because "he didn't really like the constant confrontation and arguments that come with being a lawyer." Instead, when Noll lost the starting guard position to John Wooten, he chose to retire at age 27 expecting to begin his coaching career at his alma mater.

Noll was surprised, however, when he was not offered an open position on the University of Dayton coaching staff. However, he was offered a position by Sid Gillman on the staff of the Los Angeles Chargers, during its inaugural season. He then became assistant to head Coach Don Shula of the NFL Baltimore Colts from 1965 to 1968, when he was selected as the NFL Pittsburgh Steelers' head coach.

During Noll's six-year tenure with the Chargers, where he was defensive line coach, the defensive backfield coach and defensive coordinator, the team appeared in five AFL championship games. Gillman said that Noll "had a great way with players," specifically "If a guy didn't do the job expected, Chuck could climb on his back."

Massive defensive tackle Ernie Ladd said that Noll was a "fiery guy" but also "the best teacher I ever played under." "He and I were always fighting, always squabbling, but he had a great way of teaching. I take my hat off to Chuck. He was one of the main reasons for our success." The defensive line under Noll became known as the "Fearsome Foursome," and during 1961 defensive end Earl Faison was named AFL rookie of the year.

With the Baltimore Colts, Noll was defensive backfield coach and later defensive coordinator. Together with assistant coach Bill Arnsbarger the Colts employed shifting alignments of rotating zone and maximum blitz defensive packages. In 1968, Noll's last season as defensive coordinator, the Baltimore Colts compiled a record of 13–1 and tied the NFL season record for fewest points allowed (144).

Noll was named the 14th head coach of the Pittsburgh Steelers on January 27, 1969, after Penn State coach Joe Paterno turned down an offer for the position. He was the youngest coach in NFL history at the time. Steelers owner Art Rooney would later credit Don Shula as the person who recommended Noll as a head coach Noll implemented a defensive system in Pittsburgh that became the legendary "Steel Curtain" defense.

His coaching style earned him the nickname of The Emperor Chaz by sports announcer Myron Cope. Noll was the first head coach to win four Super Bowls, coaching the Steelers to victory in Super Bowl IX (1975), Super Bowl X (1976), Super Bowl XIII (1979), and Super Bowl XIV (1980).

The key to Noll's coaching success during this run was the Steelers' skill in selecting outstanding players in the NFL college player draft. Noll's first round one pick was Joe Greene, a defensive tackle from North Texas State, who went on to become a perennial All-Pro and anchor the defensive line. During the next few years, the Steelers drafted quarterback Terry Bradshaw (Louisiana Tech) and running back Franco Harris (Penn State) as round one picks.

In the 1974 draft, Noll and the Steelers achieved a level of drafting success never seen before or since, when they selected four future Hall of Fame players with their first five picks: wide receivers Lynn Swann and John Stallworth, middle linebacker Jack Lambert, and center Mike Webster. To this day, no other draft by any team has included more than two future Hall of Famers.

A native of Pittsburgh, he played college football for the University of Pittsburgh Panthers team from 1950 to 1952. He was selected by the International News Service as a first-team All-American in 1952 and was inducted into the College Football Hall of Fame in 2000.

ONLY A FEW ARE CALLED TO THE HALL OF FAME

Currently, thirty-three linebackers have entered the National Football League Hall of Fame. That list includes;

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Inductee | Class | Position | Team(s) | Years |
| Chuck Bednarek | 1967 | Linebacker-Center | Philadelphia Eagles | 1949-1962 |
| Bobby Bell  | 1983 | Linebacker/ Defensive end | Kansas City Chiefs | 1963–1974 |
| Robert Brazile  | 2018 | Linebacker | Houston Oilers | 1975–1984 |
| Derrick Brooks | 2014 | Linebacker | Tampa Bay Buccaneers | 1995–2008 |
| Nick Buoniconti | 2001 | Linebacker | Boston Patriots | 1962–1968 |
| Nick Buoniconti | 2001 | Linebacker | Miami Dolphins | 1969–1974, 1976 |
| Dick Butkus\*\* | 1979 | Linebacker | Chicago Bears | 1965–1973 |
| Harry Carson | 2006 | Linebacker | New York Giants | 1976–1988 |
| George Connor | 1975 | Linebacker | Chicago Bears | 1948–1955 |
| Chris Doleman | 2012 | Defensive end/ Linebacker | Minnesota Vikings | 1985–1993, 1999 |
| Chris Doleman | 2012 | Defensive end/ Linebacker | Atlanta Falcons | 1994–1995 |
| Chris Doleman | 2012 | Defensive end/ Linebacker | San Francisco 49ers | 1996–1998 |
| Bill George | 1974 | Linebacker | Chicago Bears | 1952–1965 |
| Bill George | 1974 | Linebacker | Los Angeles Rams | 1966 |
| Kevin Greene | 2016 | Linebacker | Los Angeles Rams | 1985–1992 |
| Kevin Greene | 2016 | Linebacker | Pittsburgh Steelers | 1993–1995 |
| Kevin Greene | 2016 | Linebacker | Carolina Panthers | 1996, 1998–1999 |
| Kevin Greene | 2016 | Linebacker | San Francisco 49ers | 1997 |
| Charles Haley | 2015 | Defensive end/ Linebacker | San Francisco 49ers | 1986–1991, 1998–1999 |
| Charles Haley | 2015 | Defensive end/ Linebacker | Dallas Cowboys | 1992–1996 |
| Jack Ham\*\* | 1988 | Outside Linebacker | Pittsburgh Steelers | 1971–1982 |
| Chris Hanburger | 2011 | Linebacker | Washington Redskins | 1965–1978 |
| Ted Hendricks | 1990 | Linebacker | Baltimore Colts | 1969–1973 |
| Ted Hendricks | 1990 | Linebacker | Green Bay Packers | 1974 |
| Ted Hendricks | 1990 | Linebacker | Oakland/ Los Angeles Raiders | 1975–1983 |
| Clarke Hinkle | 1964 | Linebacker | Green Bay Packers | 1932-1941 |
| Sam Huff | 1982 | Linebacker | New York Giants | 1956–1963 |
| Sam Huff | 1982 | Linebacker | Washington Redskins | 1964–1967, 1969 |
| Rickey Jackson | 2010 | Linebacker/ Defensive end | New Orleans Saints | 1981–1993 |
| Rickey Jackson | 2010 | Linebacker/ Defensive end | San Francisco 49ers | 1994–1995 |
| Jack Lambert\*\* | 1990 | Middle Linebacker | Pittsburgh Steelers | 1974–1984 |
| Willie Lanier | 1986 | Middle Linebacker | Kansas City Chiefs | 1967–1977 |
| Ray Lewis\*\* | 2018 | Middle Linebacker | Baltimore Ravens | 1996–2012 |
| Bronko Nagurski | 1998 | Linebacker-Fullback | Chicago Bears | 1930-37, 1943 |
| Ray Nitschke\*\* | 1978 | Middle Linebacker | Green Bay Packers | 1958–1972 |
| Les Richter  | 2011 | Linebacker/Center/Kicker | Los Angeles Rams | 1954–1962 |
| Dave Robinson  | 2013 | Linebacker | Green Bay Packers | 1963–1972 |
| Dave Robinson  | 2013 | Linebacker | Washington Redskins | 1973–1974 |
| Joe Schmidt | 1973 | Linebacker | Detroit Lions | 1953–1965 |
| Junior Seau | 2015 | Linebacker | San Diego Chargers | 1990–2002 |
| Junior Seau | 2015 | Linebacker | Miami Dolphins | 2003–2005 |
| Junior Seau | 2015 | Linebacker | New England Patriots | 2006–2009 |
| Mike Singletary\*\* | 1998 | Middle Linebacker | Chicago Bears | 1981–1992 |
| Lawrence Taylor\*\* | 1999 | Linebacker | New York Giants | 1981–1993 |
| Derrick Thomas | 2009 | Linebacker | Kansas City Chiefs | 1989–1999 |
| Andre Tippett | 2008 | Linebacker | New England Patriots | 1982–1993 |
| Brian Urlacher\*\* | 2018 | Linebacker | Chicago Bears | 2000–2012 |
| Dave Wilcox  | 2000 | Linebacker | San Francisco 49ers | 1964–1974 |

AS THE WHO SANG, SOMETIMES PEOPLE FORGET

Not all great players get the recognition they deserve. I a take on a golf phrase, I identified what I'd like to call the "back nine" who have yet to receive a call to spend a summer day in Canton, Ohio. Others might also be worthy, but these nine come with tremendous pedigree;

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Player | Team(s) Played For | Years |
| Bill Bergey | Cincinnati Bengals (1969–1973)Philadelphia Eagles (1974–1980) | 1969-80 |
| Bergey was drafted by the Cincinnati Bengals in the second round of the 1969 Common Draft and was an AFL All-Star in his first year. After five years in Cincinnati, he was traded to Philadelphia for two first round picks after he had previously signed with the Florida Blazers in the defunct World Football League. With the Eagles, Bergey, a four-time All-Pro, set the NFL record for most interceptions by a linebacker and became the highest-paid defensive player in the league with a four-year contract for $1 million. He earned Eagles MVP status three times. Bergey recorded 233 tackles in a single season with the Eagles. He was a popular player who was the foundation of the "Gang Green" defense that brought the Eagles back to the playoffs in 1978, 1979, and to the Super Bowl in 1980. He was inducted into the Eagles Roll of Honor in 1988. |
| Mike Curtis | Baltimore Colts (1965–1975)Seattle Seahawks (1976)Washington Redskins (1977–1978) | 1965-78 |
| Curtis was drafted as a fullback in the first round of the 1965 NFL Draft by the Colts, but later switched to linebacker on the weak side (away from the tight end). He was a team captain for most of his Baltimore career. In 1970, he had five interceptions and that same season made a key pass theft that set up the game-winning field goal in the Colts' Super Bowl V win over the Dallas Cowboys with just 59 seconds left in the game.[1] He and Ted Hendricks, member of the Pro Football Hall of Fame, formed a potent tandem at the linebacker position from 1969 to 1973, after which Hendricks was traded. Curtis was named the Colts' Most Valuable Player in 1974. He was a four-time Pro Bowler in 1968, 1970, 1971 and 1974. He was considered one of the meanest players of his era. Although sacks were not official during the time he played, Curtis was a good blitzer, recording 22 sacks, including one in which a famous photograph was taken of Curtis tackling Roman Gabriel's head. Curtis also picked off 25 passes and was named the AFC Defensive Player of the Year in 1970. |
| Randy Gradishar | Denver Broncos | 1973-84 |
| The 14th overall selection by the Broncos in the 1973 draft, Gradishar was the 1978 NFL Defensive Player of the Year, performing in seven Pro Bowls. He retired after the 1983 season, finishing his career with the NFL record for most tackles all time with 2,049, and 20 interceptions, which he returned for 335 yards and three touchdowns. He also recovered 13 fumbles, returning them for 72 yards and one touchdown. He also recorded 20 sacks according to Bronco team records. |
| Lee Roy Jordan  | Dallas Cowboys | 1963-76 |
| Jordan was already a gridiron legend from his college days at Alabama when the Cowboys used the sixth overall pick to take him in 1963. The five-time Pro Bowl member competed in 186 games through fourteen seasons. He became the franchise's all-time leader in solo tackles (743) in his 14 seasons with the Cowboys. He was a two-time All-Pro and a five-time Pro Bowler. He also helped the Cowboys to three Super Bowls and five NFC Championship games. Jordan was an able defender against the run and pass, and had a penchant for recovering loose footballs. He remains tied for second in club history with 18 career fumble recoveries. More than 25 years after his retirement, Jordan still ranks second in Cowboys' history in career solo tackles with 743, second in career assisted tackles with 493, second in combined total tackles with 1,236 and first with 154th consecutive starts. He also holds the third and fourth highest totals of solo tackles in a single season with 100 in 1975 and 97 in 1968. In his 14 NFL seasons, he intercepted 32 passes (seventh in club history), returning them for 472 yards and three touchdowns. |
| Karl Meckenburg | Denver Broncos | 1983-94 |
| The Broncos drafted Mecklenburg in the 12th round with the 310th pick overall. In spite of his low selection, he went on to become an integral part of the Broncos' Super Bowl teams of the 1980s. He played in six Pro Bowls. His 79.5 sacks is the third highest total in franchise history; he is one of only three Broncos with four sacks in a game, and the only one to do so twice. In 2001, during half time of a game against the Baltimore Ravens, he and Dennis Smith were inducted into the Denver Broncos Ring of Fame. He is also in the Colorado Sports Hall of Fame and serves on the Broncos Alumni Council. He closed out his career with 1,118 tackles. |
| Sam Mills | Cleveland Browns (1981)Toronto Argonauts (1982)Phil./Baltimore Stars (1983–1985)New Orleans Saints (1986–1994)Carolina Panthers (1995–1997) | 1981-97 |
| Undrafted in 1981, Mills tried out with the Cleveland Browns and was cut. He then tried out with the Toronto Argonauts of the Canadian Football League and was cut again. The United States Football League began playing in 1983 and Mills tried out for the Philadelphia Stars. Not only did he make the team, he became an instant success. Nicknamed the "Field Mouse," the 5'9" Mills was known for his leadership and intensity both on and off the field. The USFL folded after 1985 but it did have many successes. Six members of the USFL have been inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame, including four players. He would go on to star for New Orleans and later joined the Carolina Panthers, where he later coached as an assistant from 1998-2004. |
| Hardy Nickerson | Pittsburgh Steelers (1987–1992)Tampa Bay Buccaneers (1993–99)Jacksonville Jaguars (2000–2001)Green Bay Packers (2002) | 1987-2002 |
| Nickerson played as linebacker for four teams over 16 seasons, from 1987 to 2002. He spent the prime of his career with the Tampa Bay Buccaneers. He played in five Pro Bowls (1993, 1996–1999) and was named "Whizzer" White NFL Man of the Year (1997), in addition to earning a berth on the NFL 1990s All-Decade Team. For his career, he made 1,586 with 21 sacks and a dozen interceptions. |
| Tommy Nobis  | Atlanta Falcons | 1966-76 |
| Nobis became the first player drafted by the expansion Atlanta Falcons [1] as well as the second linebacker to be chosen first overall when he was taken with the #1 pick in the 1966 NFL draft, held on November 27, 1965. The Houston Oilers also selected him in the AFL draft. This presented a dilemma and also sparked a debate that reached as far as outer space when astronaut Frank Borman, aboard Gemini 7, talked back to earth with the message, "tell Nobis to sign with Houston." (Borman's sons were ball boys for the Oilers.) Nobis instead signed with Atlanta on December 14 and became the first member of the Atlanta Falcons gaining the nickname "Mr. Falcon." During the Falcons inaugural season in 1966, he won the league's NFL Rookie of the Year, was voted to the Pro Bowl and amassed 294 combined tackles which still stands today as the team's all-time single-season record,[1] and is unofficially the most tackles ever credited to one player, in a season, in NFL history. In eleven professional seasons he led the Falcons in tackles nine times, went to five Pro Bowls (one in 1972 after two knee surgeries), was named All-Pro twice and was chosen for the NFL's "All-Decade Team" for the 1960s. |
| Jessie Tuggle | Atlanta Falcons | 1987-2000 |
| After going undrafted out of Valdosta State, Tuggle signed with the Falcons through a chance encounter. After being a role player his rookie season, he recorded 108 tackles by virtue of eight starts. Becoming a bona fide star on the Atlanta defense, marked by the 1989-1993 period in which Tuggle racked up 969 tackles. During that stretch, he made his first Pro Bowl appearance in 1992. The high point in Tuggle's career was 1998, when he played in Super Bowl XXXIII and was voted to the Pro Bowl. In his 14 seasons, he recorded 1,640 tackles (164 assisted), 21 sacks, 6 interceptions, which he returned for 106 yards and a touchdown, 10 forced fumbles and 37 pass deflections. He also recovered 10 fumbles, returning them for 155 yards and an NFL record 5 touchdowns. Tuggle also holds the record for most tackles from 1990 to 1999 with 1,293. At the time of his retirement, he held the NFL record for touchdowns via fumble recoveries with five. |

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