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Draft philosophy: 'Steelers guys make the team'

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By Gary Mihoces, USA TODAY

PITTSBURGH — The Monongahela River flows by the practice fields of the Pittsburgh Steelers. Their stadium sits along the Allegheny. But the river that feeds the roster of the Super Bowl champs is the National Football League Draft.

Picking collegians based on pro potential can be a crapshoot. And in this era of free agency, teams such as the Washington Redskins can sign talented veterans from other teams at premium prices.

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But the Steelers are a model team for building through the draft. Nineteen of Pittsburgh's 22 starters in Super Bowl XL were drafted by the Steelers (17) or signed as undrafted rookies (two).

They've nailed a succession of first-rounders, including young, marquee stars in quarterback [Ben Roethlisberger](#) and safety [Troy Polamalu](#), and regularly found key players, such as wide receiver and Super Bowl MVP [Hines Ward](#) and linebacker [Joey Porter](#), in later rounds.

The Steelers have done it with continuity at the top. They have no general manager, but coach Bill Cowher and director of football operations Kevin Colbert, both Pittsburgh natives, will be together for their seventh draft. Cowher and Colbert have a clear-cut notion of what kinds of players they want to fit game plans that feature an offense balancing run and pass and a defense known for stopping the run and blitzing quarterbacks from anywhere.

Decisions are made with input from scouts who work year round and position coaches who get their say when the NFL season is done.

And the franchise is committed, from the ownership of the Rooney family on down, to getting it done with the draft. Pittsburgh hasn't been without a first-round pick since it traded its top choice to the Green Bay Packers in 1967.

Though their Super Bowl title places them last (32nd) in this year's picking order, they have 10 picks in seven rounds.

This Saturday and Sunday, two occasional racquetball foes, Cowher and Colbert, will collaborate again to take their shots.

"These two days are like the first game of the year," Cowher says.

Says Colbert: "You prepare all year and you go in with a certain plan, and you have to adjust as the game unfolds. ... It's exciting."

Free agency can offer a quick fix and grab offseason headlines. Quality, consistent drafting can pay off at playoff time. "The draft is the reason why the Steelers won the Super Bowl," ESPN draft analyst Mel Kiper says. "And I don't know of anybody that won a Super Bowl because of free agency."

Sure, a little luck helps. It was nice for the Steelers that Roethlisberger (27-4 as a starter in two seasons) was available at the 11th spot in 2004. But more important, the Steelers seem to trust their own judgment and not necessarily NFL pre-draft wisdom.

Picking 30th last year, they chose Virginia tight end [Heath Miller](#) in the first round. His offseason sports hernia surgery might have scared off others, but he recovered nicely, caught seven touchdown passes and looms as a Steelers mainstay as a blocker and receiver.

"I am confident there are 32 players that we can take as a first pick that will definitely help this team," Colbert says of this weekend's draft.

In 2003 the Steelers traded up in the first round to get Polamalu, a blitzing, pass-covering, heavy-hitting safety from Southern California who fits their attacking defense. To get that 16th pick from the Kansas City Chiefs, the Steelers sent their 27th selection and picks in the third and sixth rounds.

The Steelers have wiggle room again this year. Beyond their original seven picks, they have three (two fourth-rounders and a fifth) awarded by the NFL as compensation for players lost to free agency before last season.

It's an opportunity to add more bricks to a foundation that has yielded 10 playoff appearances in 14 seasons under Cowher.

Compensatory picks can't be traded, but the Steelers could swap some of their other seven to maneuver in the draft.

"I don't think you can ever have enough picks," says Colbert, who adds the Steelers might move up for "a player that we might not have a shot at if we wait."

Long history of notable names

Cowher is the NFL's longest-tenured head coach. Before Colbert's arrival in 2000, Tom Donahue was director of football operations. He and Cowher had their communication problems.

Enter Colbert, the former pro scouting director with the Detroit Lions (1990-99).

Cowher on Colbert: "I think it is a great process here, and Kevin does a fantastic job of taking everybody's input. It is an accumulation of a lot of people's viewpoints."

Last month NFL general managers voted Steelers President Arthur Rooney II executive of the year. Colbert placed fourth.

Through their history, the Steelers' fortunes have risen and fallen with their drafts. Their early decades were more notable for draft quirks:

- Pittsburgh's very first draftee in 1936, halfback Bill Shakespeare from Notre Dame, was memorable as a Steeler in name only.
- Their first pick in 1938 led the team in rushing as a rookie out of Colorado but left to pursue different goals. That was future U.S. Supreme Court Justice Byron "Whizzer" White.
- In 1955 the Steelers spent a ninth-round pick on a quarterback who failed to impress and was cut in camp. Johnny Unitas, a Pittsburgh native, became a Hall of Famer for the Baltimore Colts.

The golden era of Steelers draft history began in 1969 with the first-round selection of "Mean Joe" Greene from North Texas State.

Ensuing drafts brought quarterback Terry Bradshaw, running back Franco Harris and linebacker Jack Ham. The 1974 draft delivered wide receiver Lynn Swann (first round), linebacker Jack Lambert (second), wide receiver John Stallworth (fourth) and center Mike Webster (fifth). All became Hall of Famers and helped make the Steelers the "Team of the Seventies."

The current Steelers reflect eight years of fruitful drafting, starting with the 1998 selections of guard [Alan Faneca](#) (first round) and Ward (third). The 1999 first-round pick, wide receiver [Troy Edwards](#), never developed into an impact player. But that draft yielded two

current defensive stalwarts, Porter and end [Aaron Smith](#).

The Steelers have been on a roll since then, hitting on every first-round pick and more. And 2004 rookie free agent [Willie Parker](#) had a 75-yard touchdown run in the Super Bowl.

"It has been a time-tested process that we have," Cowher says. "And it certainly has proven that we have been able to get competitive players, the types of players that fit us and address some of the situations that exist on our team, whether it be through free agency losses, the status of contracts."

Free agency hasn't hurt draft

David Carter, professor of sports business at the University of Southern California, acknowledges the value of the draft in replenishing talent: "There's never been a better, more streamlined player development system in sports."

But he also notes the draft has become a spectacle unto itself.

"People have complained over the last few years about college basketball, some of these high schoolers going pro, so many international players in the NBA and the fact that nobody knows too many of these emerging college stars because they're not there very long," Carter says.

But as soon as the Super Bowl is over, NFL draft hype begins.

"The Mel Kipers of the world, the ESPN draft coverage, the cult following that the event has ... allow the NFL to indirectly fill the airwaves, the talk radio air space, and fill hours and hours of programming on cable sports networks just on speculation and hype and interest," Carter added. "So this cottage industry that is the NFL Draft pays huge dividends."

Yet when the current system of free agency arrived in 1993, there was speculation the draft might lose its sizzle.

"It was almost like, 'Oh, the Mel Kipers of the world are going to go by the wayside and nobody is going to care about the draft. ... It's all about free agency now,'" Kiper says.

Kiper says he anticipated the opposite. "The way I saw it was the draft was going to be more valuable because it was a cheaper way to get players than free agency," he says. "Free agency has never been a way in football, with cohesion being so critical, that you can just throw a group of players together and say go out and be cohesive and win."

Says Cowher: "You are looking for production, you are looking for character, you are looking for dependability. I think you have to get the guys that fit your system offensively and defensively. We take all those things into account."

Beyond the retirement of running back Jerome "The Bus" Bettis, the Steelers have taken hits via free agency since the Super Bowl.

All-purpose wide receiver/punt returner [Antwaan Randle El](#), who threw a TD pass in the Super Bowl, left for the Redskins. Defensive end [Kimo von Oelhoffen](#) signed with the New York Jets, and safety [Chris Hope](#) joined the Tennessee Titans.

But after entering the offseason with 12 unrestricted free agents, the Steelers have re-signed nine, including starting cornerback [Deshae Townsend](#) and defensive end [Brett Keisel](#), a seventh-round pick in 2002 who will get a shot at replacing von Oelhoffen. Pittsburgh has added free agent [Ryan Clark](#), a starting safety last season with Washington.

And now the Steelers will seek to round up more talent via the draft.

Penn State quarterback Michael Robinson, expected to be a middle-round pick, also has played wide receiver and running back and might be a candidate to replace Randle El.

As usual, the Steelers are tight-lipped about their possible picks. "There is no reason to tip your hand," Colbert says.

OK then, what do they look for when they are trying to measure whether a player is a Steelers kind of guy? "The Steelers guys make

the team, and the guys that don't make the team are not Steelers guys," Cowher says with a grin. "I think we are like everybody. Everyone is looking for good players."

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