

Off the beaten path



SMALL-SCHOOL GEMS LIKE JENKINS, SILATOLU AND OTHERS FIND THEIR WAY ONTO NFL RADAR SCREENS

BY ELI KABERON

JANORIS JENKINS | NORTH ALABAMA

When looking for elite football players, NFL scouts tend to look in the hotbeds that have been producing talent for decades: Coral Gables, Fla. Los Angeles. Austin, Texas. Those places – and the universities based there – have storied histories of churning out star prospects year after year. On 2011 Week One NFL rosters, Miami (Fla.), USC and Texas each had 40 or more former players in the league, the three schools with the highest totals of the 238 colleges represented in the NFL.

That's not to say that talent only comes from high-profile schools. All across the country, scouts are searching for under-the-radar prospects from institutions

that don't have games on ESPN every week. For a variety of reasons, these players didn't end up in the SEC or Big Ten or even the Sun Belt coming out of high school. They go to junior colleges or Division II, Division III or NAIA schools and are unknown by most fans when they enter the league. Yet, the scouts who have been watching them have a feeling they'll make a big impact when fall Sundays roll around. Saints OG Jahri Evans, who went to Bloomsburg University, and Cowboys WR Miles Austin, a Monmouth University product, are two examples of players who have shined in the league despite having under-the-radar college careers.

The 2012 draft class is filled with elite players from big-name schools. Stanford QB Andrew Luck, Oklahoma State

WR Justin Blackmon and Alabama DE Courtney Upshaw all should be high-first-round picks; all three also played in BCS bowl games to start off the year. GMs, coaches and fans have been getting a good look at those players – and others like them – for years.

However, there are a few prospects who have not received enough attention because of the schools they attended. They aren't that far off from the level of talent that Luck, Blackmon and Upshaw boast and could be shaking Roger Goodell's hand fairly early on Draft Day, too.

Perhaps the first of those players to have his name called by the commissioner will be fast and athletic North Alabama CB Janoris Jenkins. His name might ring a bell for football fans be-



AMINI SILATOLU | MIDWESTERN STATE

cause from 2008-10, he was a key defender for Urban Meyer's University of Florida teams. The Gators had a 34-7 record during Jenkins' time in Gainesville, as he teamed with fellow NFL-bound defenders Brandon Spikes (Patriots), Joe Haden (Browns), Carlos Dunlap (Bengals) and Major Wright (Bears) in helping the school take home the 2008 BCS championship.

In December 2010, as the Gators were preparing for their bowl game, Meyer resigned as Florida's head coach; former University of Texas defensive coordinator Will Muschamp was hired days later. The following January, Jenkins was arrested on campus and charged with misdemeanor possession of less than 20 grams of marijuana; he reached a plea agreement on the charge and paid a fine of \$316. Three months later, as Jenkins was sitting out spring practice to recover from surgery repairing a torn labrum, he was arrested again for breaking the same drug law. The punishment this time was

another plea bargain — a \$421 fine — but also something much more severe: Muschamp had no choice but to dismiss the talented defender from the team for his multiple transgressions.

Jenkins could have done what another well-known player who had been dismissed from his college team — Ohio State QB Terrelle Pryor — did, and enter the NFL's supplemental draft in the summer of 2011. But with the league in a lockout and his stock at an all-time low, Jenkins opted to transfer.

"I had made a few mistakes, and Coach Muschamp, he was new there, and he really couldn't do nothing at the time I made those mistakes," Jenkins recalled. "So I decided to go to Division II football. I wanted to play Division II and not go into the supplemental draft because I didn't want anybody feeling like I was running from my problems. I just went to Division II because I love playing college football."

His search for a Division II school led

him to the University of North Alabama, tucked away in the town of Florence, Ala., 20 miles from the Alabama-Tennessee border. The school has an enrollment of about 6,000 students, compared to Florida's nearly 50,000. However, it also has a former Division I head coach in Terry Bowden, and Jenkins would be eligible to play immediately, while rehabbing both his injured shoulder and bruised reputation with NFL scouts.

Before Bowden agreed to allow Jenkins — who had eight interceptions in three seasons with the Gators — to join his team, he did his research. He called both Meyer and Muschamp, along with Florida athletic director Jeremy Foley, to determine what kind of person the cornerback was. Their recommendation, Bowden said, was vital because those men knew the real Jenkins. Had they said that Jenkins had a drug problem or a pattern of misbehavior, then Bowden wouldn't have allowed him to play for the Lions.

"All of them felt he was well worth the risk and that he had not been a problem," said Bowden, who, since talking with PFW, took the head-coaching job at the University of Akron. "(Jenkins' arrests) were out of character, and he deserved a shot. And then, obviously, he had great talent.

"Every one of them had felt the violations had occurred in a unique situation where they were between coaches and he was going through surgery, couldn't go through spring ball and had gotten himself kind of away from the new group and not involved with it."

Jenkins, the transfer from the big school, could have used his time in Florence as a layover on the way to bigger and better things. Instead, he became a part of the school's community and a key member of the team. His teammates voted him captain, an honor Bowden said never before had been given to a one-year transfer player at North Alabama.

"I think his talent speaks for itself," the coach said of Jenkins, who had three punt-return touchdowns in 2011. "But I think he really made a great plus for himself by having a great year here both on and off the field."

The NFL isn't worried about Jenkins' ability as a football player. One front-office executive told PFW that Jenkins "has top-10 talent. ... He has great feet, hips and burst — he's got it all." It's the off-field issues that worry the teams.

Getting arrested for marijuana possession twice in a four-month span while at Florida shows a lack of understanding and discipline, two characteristics the league values highly. There was an incident during the 2011 season in which Jenkins was ejected from a game and suspended for half of the next one for throwing a punch at an opponent, which Bowden believes happened because the former Gator was a "marked man" by opponents wanting to show up the future

BIG SCHOOLS DOMINATE DRAFT

Over the past 10 years, a total of 2,560 players have been drafted into the NFL. PFW charted all of those picks by conference and found that nearly three-fourths of the players drafted from 2002-11 came from BCS conference schools. The SEC led the way with 407 picks (15.9 percent), followed by the Big Ten. ACC, Pac-10 (now called the Pac-12), Big 12 and Big East, along with Notre Dame, which combined to produce 58 percent of draft picks. Another 16.4 percent of draft choices came from the rest of the Division I-A schools. Division II, the level of football that both Janoris Jenkins and Amini Silatolu played at last season, produced just 56 draft choices (2.2 percent) during the past decade of drafts. NCAA Division III, NAIA and Canadian universities, along with community colleges, combined to account for less than one percent of draft picks over the time span covered.

	PCT.
BCS	73.9
Other D-I	16.4
D-I-AA	6.8
D-II	2.2
D-III	0.4
NAIA	0.2
Community college	0.04
Canada	0.04
	100.0

NFL draft choice playing in the Gulf South Conference. And there is a belief that North Alabama University is a haven for troubled players who have had issues at Division I schools.

"They have a lot of 'character' guys," an NFL evaluator told PFW in the fall of 2011. "I don't think Jenkins is a bad kid. I think he just has some issues he is going to have to work through."

Jenkins acknowledges his past transgressions and said that when he talks to NFL scouts, coaches and front-office executives, he is honest about what happened earlier in his career. The man who describes himself as a "ballhawk" and someone who "has a great feel and love for the game" believes his career will be defined by what he does between the white lines, not some incidents off the field.

"I'd just be honest with them, straightforward with them, let them know what happened on my decision to go (to) Division II," Jenkins said. "I could just speak on what happened and take them from there."

There are other small-school prospects who will be taken early in the draft. WR Brian Quick of Appalachian State has great size and ability. Montana's Trumaine Johnson is a physical cornerback who dominated opposing pass catchers. And then there's OL Amini Silatolu, from Northwestern State University, who remains one of the bigger question marks in the entire class.

Located in Wichita Falls, Texas — which is a short drive south on I-44 from the Oklahoma border — Northwestern State has produced four NFL players in its history; the most well-known is former Colts RB Dominic Rhodes. Silatolu, a 320-pound offensive lineman, is expected to be the highest-drafted and best of all of them. A first-team Division II All-American in 2011 by the American Football Coaches' Association as a tackle, he is projected to play guard at the professional level. His own coach described him as "physical, aggressive, mean and nasty," and some believe that Silatolu is

as good as they come in terms of interior linemen in the 2012 draft class.

The concern for NFL teams, however, is both the level of competition he faced at Northwestern State and the reason he went to the school in the first place.

"That's the question mark that everyone will have, that week in and week out, Division II football is not Division I football," said Bill Maskill, the head coach at Northwestern State, about the opponents Silatolu was assigned to block. "What he was told by player personnel directors, as well as scouts, is that he has to dominate at this level to show that he is not just an average player. And he has done that."

Silatolu prefers to keep to himself — he chose not to comment for this story despite several interview attempts, and his father, Saia, described him to PFW as "very quiet" — but he has had issues with others. Though no charges were filed, Silatolu has been involved in multiple fights during his time in school, and alcohol abuse is believed to be a concern.

He also had troubles with his grades throughout his college career. Despite attending a summer camp at the University of California (at Berkeley) and being interested in the school coming out of Tracy (Calif.) West High School as a defensive lineman in 2007, Silatolu was forced to attend San Joaquin Delta College (Calif.) because he couldn't qualify academically for any Division I program. He spent two years there, in the process switching positions, before trying to head to a high-major school a second time. Several big-name programs were interested, including schools in the Pac-12 and SEC, but Silatolu committed to Nevada prior to the 2009 season and was prepared to play for the Wolf Pack. But, again, poor scores on tests prevented him from meeting the academic standards. Instead of waiting to qualify, Silatolu opted to transfer to Northwestern State, where he could step on campus and play from Day One. In both his seasons at the Division II school, he was named the Lone Star Conference's Of-

fensive Lineman of the Year.

The academic issues could present a problem if NFL teams believe he will have trouble learning a playbook. One league evaluator said that Silatolu could be a second-round pick "if teams are OK with (his) intelligence. His talent says he could go in the first (round). But you've got to be OK with his intelligence." However, the evaluator also said he "loved the player and would love to have him on our team."

Maskill said that Silatolu's grades were "adequate" at Northwestern State but that he believes absolutely that the lineman will be able to understand the blocking schemes and protections in the NFL, especially if he makes the expected transition from tackle to guard. Matt Loggins, who was the strength-and-conditioning coach when Silatolu was at Tracy West and also a linebackers coach at San Joaquin Delta during Silatolu's time there, also said he was confident the learning curve wouldn't be too steep for a player "who would just roll through and defeat opposing linemen on a regular basis" in college.

Thirty-two teams will have the chance at selecting Jenkins, Silatolu and the other small-school prospects in April. Some will turn into the next Michael Strahan, who joined the Giants as a little-known second-round pick in 1993 from Texas Southern and developed into a perennial All-Pro. Others will follow in the footsteps of Jordan Beck, a linebacker selected in the third round from Cal Poly by the Falcons in 2005 who was out of the league by 2007.

All 32 will ask the same questions of the small-school players: How good would they be against elite competition? Can they adjust to playing better players? Is there room for them to improve? Why did they go to a small school in the first place?

The answers that they provide on the field will determine whether the small-school route was worth it or if it proved to be a large mistake.