



Friday, February 24, 2006

Prospect threw 110 TD passes in two seasons

By Len Pasquarelli
ESPN.com

Here's what Brett Elliott has in common with counterparts Matt Leinart of Southern California and Texas' Vince Young: Like those two more celebrated quarterbacks, both likely to be among the top five prospects selected in the NFL draft April 29, Elliott won't throw during the scouting combine workouts this weekend.

But there is one big thing Elliott, who tossed 110 touchdown passes the last two seasons at Division III Linfield College, *doesn't* share with Leinart and Young. He wasn't even provided the choice of participating in the on-field workouts because, despite incredibly gaudy statistics and an arm deemed NFL-worthy by several league scouts, he wasn't invited to the combine sessions.

"I'd have jumped through every hoop they put in front of me, if I was there," said Elliott, who compiled a 23-1 record in his two seasons as the starter at Linfield, and led the school to the Division III championship in 2004. "But you can't do what they won't let you do, you know? Like most players, all this [draft] stuff is virgin territory to me. But with what I did in college, and how I performed in the two all-star games in which I played, yeah, I thought I'd at least get a shot to prove myself [at the combine]. Maybe it's some kind of stigma, you know, about playing at a Division III school."

If there is such a stigma, though, one would think NFL scouts might be interested enough in Elliott, just based on raw statistics alone, to have wanted a first-hand look at him. Here's a guy who threw for 8,614 yards the past two years, tossed 49 touchdown passes during a 2005 season that was considered a *down* year for him, and established 31 school records.

In only two seasons at Linfield, the preposterously prolific Elliott, who began his career playing for Urban Meyer at Utah before transferring after the 2003 campaign, threw for 450-plus yards on six occasions and 528 yards in his career finale. He had four or more touchdown passes 15 times and authored a pair of seven-touchdown pass outings. In his first season, Linfield, a school of about 1,800 students located in McMinnville, Ore., averaged 50 points. The average plummeted all the way to 48 points last season. Elliott's career completion rate of 68.1 percent is the NCAA record for all divisions.

And it's not as if Elliott registered his pinball game-level numbers in a gimmick-type offense like the run-and-shoot, the four-wideout formation that historically inflates passing statistics. Linfield coach Jay Locey is a man who conceded he tries to adapt his style to the talent on hand. But the Wildcats didn't spread the field. They generally used a three-wide receiver/one-back set during the two years Elliott played there.

Nor is Elliott physically deficient from a stature standpoint. According to each of the two combine services most NFL franchises subscribe to, Blesto and National Football Scouting, Inc., Elliott measured 6-foot-2 7/8 and 203 pounds before the start of the 2005 season. His current weight, Elliott said earlier this week, is 201 pounds.

"He's just a special player," Locey said. "A real feel for the game. Uncanny accuracy. Gets the ball to the right people. Very smart."

Based on nothing more than the curiosity factor, one would think Elliott might have merited an invitation to the combine, where two dozen quarterbacks, including a few of dubious pedigree, have assembled.

Among the 24 quarterback prospects in Indianapolis this weekend: Marcus Vick of Virginia Tech, who was twice suspended by Hokies coach Frank Beamer and ultimately dismissed from the university; Kellen Clemens of Oregon, who has a pin in his surgically repaired left ankle; at least three players -- Michael Robinson (Penn State), Brad Smith (Missouri) and D.J. Shockley (Georgia) -- who might have to switch positions to have a chance of ever making an NFL roster; Boston College's Quinton Porter, who logged only seven starts in his final two college seasons; and little-known players Barrick Nealey (Texas State), Travis Lulay (Montana State) and Tarvaris Jackson (Alabama State).

Yet when the combine selection committee took recommendations and assessed which prospects might have the most potential to excel in the NFL, Elliott was left out in the cold.

Only one quarterback at the combine, Bruce Eugene of Grambling, has more touchdown passes for his *career* than Elliott threw the last two seasons, when he completed 567 of 833 passes (including an amazing 61 touchdown passes in 2004), tossed just 20 interceptions and was sacked only a dozen times. And at 6-1 and 265 pounds, Eugene, who threw for 13,513 yards and 140 touchdowns, appears more a candidate for *fullback* than quarterback.

Leinart, who might be the first quarterback chosen, had 99 touchdown passes in his career. Young threw for 44 touchdowns and rushed for 37 more. Fast-rising Jay Cutler of Vanderbilt, the "other" quarterback expected to be a top-10 pick, had 59 touchdown passes. The two dozen quarterbacks invited to the NFL combine *averaged* 57.8 touchdown passes for their careers. No doubt, it's difficult to compare Elliott's feats at the Division III level to the accomplishments of those quarterbacks on hand at the combine this weekend. But 61 touchdown passes in a season, even throwing in nothing more than seven-on-seven drills against a collection of junior high school defensive backs, is next to impossible to overlook.

The NFL scouts, though, found a way to ignore Elliott's numbers.

"I guess the people who run the combine have reasons why I'm not there," said Elliott, who won both the Gagliardi Trophy and the Melberger Award, given to the most outstanding Division III player. "But to see that many [quarterbacks] invited, and not be among them, it's frustrating and a little humbling, too. I really don't know what happened. No one has explained it to me. So I guess I've just got to move on."

It isn't as if Elliott is completely off the NFL landscape. He played in a pair of college all-star games -- the Hula Bowl, in which he threw the winning TD pass, and the Las Vegas All-American Classic -- and has been in front of league scouts. But he will apparently have to enhance his image on the league radar screen during his two scheduled workouts (March 2 at Linfield and March 15 at Oregon State) to convince NFL scouts he is worthy of a late-round flier or at least a free-agent contract.

ESPN.com surveyed six area scouts and college scouting directors, and when queried about Elliott, all but one claimed some level of familiarity with him. One scout rated Elliott's arm strength as "high average." While the other four who said they felt comfortable enough to appraise his skills weren't as flattering, all but one acknowledged his arm is sufficient enough for the NFL. "There are definitely players on [NFL] rosters," admitted one area scout, "with arms no better than his."

That said, Elliott is still going to face long odds in getting into a training camp this summer.

Of the 14 quarterbacks selected in the seven rounds of the 2005 draft, only two did not attend last year's combine. In the last dozen years, just 16 non-combine quarterbacks were chosen in the draft. So while Leinart and Young are playing spectator in Indianapolis this weekend, Elliott will be working out in Oregon, readying himself for his two March auditions.

"Whatever I can do to boost my chances," Elliott said, "I'm ready to do. I just enjoy playing football. I really do have a passion for the game."

"I'd have jumped through every hoop they put in front of me, if I was there. But you can't do what they won't let you do, you know?"

—Brett Elliott

Ironically, one of Elliott's biggest boosters is [San Francisco 49ers](#) quarterback Alex Smith, the top pick in the 2005 draft, and a former Utah teammate who speaks with Elliott on a fairly regular basis. Elliott actually started ahead of Smith in 2002. In 2003, he beat out Smith for the starting job again, broke his wrist in the second game of the season, and never got his job back. Elliott eventually decided to transfer when it became obvious that Meyer was going to go with Smith as the long-term starter.

The two seasons he spent at Linfield College were enjoyable ones for Elliott, who covered basketball for the sports section of the school newspaper during the offseason and liked the purist nature of football at the Division III level.

"There aren't any scholarships," he said. "Everyone, including me, paid his own way. So you know that the guys with you in the huddle are there because they want to be there. I don't know, I just felt like there was something pretty refreshing about that, something that made the experience even more satisfying. But I sure wouldn't mind making some of the money back with [an NFL] contract. I'd just like the chance to see how I measure up."

At the two all-star games in which he participated, Elliott said, he was initially apprehensive about moving up in competition, and facing players from more prominent schools. After the first few practices, however, Elliott was no longer overwhelmed and felt he more than held his own. Auburn coach Tommy Tuberville and East Carolina coach Skip Holtz, his coach and offensive coordinator, respectively, in the Hula Bowl, have provided positive recommendations to NFL scouts, and Elliott hopes that will pay off for him.

"If it doesn't happen, then I'll figure out something else to do," said Elliott, who graduated with a degree in communications and hopes to have a career in broadcasting, although not just yet. "Look, it's every player's dream to hear his name called out on ESPN during the draft, and I'm no different. But if it doesn't happen, I'll figure something out. I'm going to give it a while. If not the NFL, then I'll play in the CFL, the Arena League, whatever. Because I really do feel like I belong."

Even if the NFL scouts, at least for combine week, don't necessarily agree.

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