



2008 PFW/PFWA Awards: All-Rookie Team

Offensive stars aplenty

By Michael Blunda
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While defensive players tend to have a leg up on their offensive counterparts in Year One, it was 2008's crop of offensive players that excelled. Two quarterbacks started all 16 games and led their teams to the playoffs, three running backs finished in the top eight in rushing and a slew of tackles stepped right in and dominated. Without further ado, here is the Pro Football Weekly/Professional Football Writers of America All-Rookie team.

Offense

Not only did Falcons QB Matt Ryan buck the trend by leading his team to the postseason, but he did it with a club that had won four games the previous year. With a calm demeanor rarely seen in rookie signalcallers, Ryan is clearly the leader of the All-Rookie offense.

It was a truly remarkable season for first-year rushers, but Matt Forté and Chris Johnson rose above the rest. The dual-threat Forté was the Bears' missing piece in the backfield, racking up 1,715 yards from scrimmage and scoring 12 touchdowns. Johnson, meanwhile, proved to be much more than a change-of-pace back, using his top-end speed to greatly enhance Tennessee's offense. He rushed for 1,228 yards and scored 10 TDs.

At receiver — a spot where rookies don't often make big impacts — Eddie Royal and DeSean Jackson each helped diversify his team's offense. Royal proved to be a terrific complement to Brandon Marshall in Denver, making loads of big plays and catching 91 passes for 980 yards and five TDs. At the same time, Jackson provided Eagles QB Donovan McNabb with the deep threat he'd long been missing, piling up 912 yards with a 14.7-yard average. Both wideouts also had success returning punts.

Joining them is TE John Carlson, who seized the opportunity to be Seattle's primary pass catcher when injuries struck their receiving corps. With sure hands and a sharp football mind, he led Seattle with 55 receptions for 627 yards and five scores.

Not one but two Colts O-linemen picked up All-Rookie honors this season. **ORG Mike Pollak proved to be a solid addition, starting all 13 games he played in.** An even bigger surprise, though, was C Jamey Richard. Not drafted until the seventh round, Richard filled in admirably for the injured Jeff Saturday and brought an element of toughness to the line.

They're joined inside by Saints OLG Carl Nicks, who entered the starting lineup early on and never gave up the job. A 13-game starter, Nicks helped keep QB Drew Brees upright.

It was a particularly strong class for offensive tackles, but none was better than the Broncos' Ryan Clady. The Boise State product proved to be a natural for the Denver offense, allowing a measly half a sack all season. He looks like a future star at the position.

ALL-ROOKIE TEAM

OFFENSE

Quarterback

Matt Ryan / Falcons

Running backs

Matt Forté / Bears

Chris Johnson / Titans

Wide receivers

Eddie Royal / Broncos

DeSean Jackson / Eagles

Tight end

John Carlson / Seahawks

Center

Jamey Richard / Colts

Offensive guards

Mike Pollak / Colts

Carl Nicks / Saints

Offensive tackles

Ryan Clady / Broncos

Jake Long / Dolphins

DEFENSE

Defensive linemen

Chris Long / Rams

Kendall Langford /

Dolphins

Sedrick Ellis / Saints

Jason Jones / Titans

Linebackers

Jerod Mayo / Patriots

Curtis Lofton / Falcons

Xavier Adibi / Texans

Cornerbacks

Dominique Rodgers-

Cromartie / Cardinals

Brandon Flowers / Chiefs

Safeties

Chris Horton / Redskins

Kenny Phillips / Giants

SPECIALISTS

Placekicker

Dan Carpenter / Dolphins

Punter

Brett Kern / Broncos

Punt returner

Clifton Smith / Buccaneers

Kickoff returner

Leodis McKelvin / Bills

The other bookend on the O-line is Dolphins OT Jake Long, the first overall pick in '08. Long did not disappoint in his initial campaign, displaying his skills as a tremendous run blocker and thriving in Miami's "Wildcat" packages.

Defense

When the Dolphins took DE Phillip Merling early in Round Two, they expected him to make immediate noise. Instead, it was third-round pick Kendall Langford who stepped into a tough spot as a 3-4 end and played very well.

On the opposite end of the line is Rams DE Chris Long, who didn't quite light it up as a rookie. While he finished with just four sacks, Long showed signs of becoming an impact pass rusher. Drafted No. 2 overall, he is a hard worker who is sure to improve next season.

On the inside is Saints DT Sedrick Ellis, who still had an impressive rookie season despite missing three games due to knee surgery. In addition to notching four sacks, his presence made New Orleans' entire pass rush better.

He's lining up next to Tennessee's Jason Jones, who made nice contributions even while stuck behind Pro Bowler Albert Haynesworth. Jones exploded for 3½ sacks in a big clash with Pittsburgh and tied for the rookie sack lead with five.

Defensively, no rookie made more of a splash than Patriots LB Jerod Mayo. He was one of the few constants in a defense hit hard by injuries, and his 128 tackles was good for 10th in the league.

Joining him in the linebacking corps is Atlanta's Curtis Lofton. A relentless force against the run, he racked up 94 tackles and gave life to a defense much in need of a boost.

Although he didn't do much until the second half of the year, Texans LB Xavier Adibi is the third linebacker. Adibi used his speed to make the most of his opportunity and was a nice complement to MLB DeMeco Ryans.

The secondary is led by speedy CB Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie, who provided the Cardinals with a dynamic playmaker, intercepting four passes and defending 19. Opposite D.R.C. is the Chiefs' Brandon Flowers, who played well as a full-time starter, piling up 69 tackles and picking off two passes.

Our All-Rookie safeties provide an interesting contrast. Even though he was nearly Mr. Irrelevant last year, Redskins SS Chris Horton used his big-hitting ability to make an instant difference. Besides his 76 tackles, he also had three interceptions. FS Kenny Phillips, on the other hand, was a first-round pick for the Giants, but he, too, proved to be a vicious hitter and added athleticism to the team's secondary.

Special teams

Leading the kicking unit is PK Dan Carpenter, who connected on 21-of-25 field-goal attempts for Miami. He is joined by Broncos P Brett Kern, whose punts averaged 46.7 yards.

The returners are the Bucs' Clifton Smith and Buffalo's Leodis McKelvin. Smith made the Pro Bowl after having gone undrafted, leading the NFC in punt-return average. And although McKelvin didn't start returning kicks until midseason, he may have been the league's best return man in the second half.