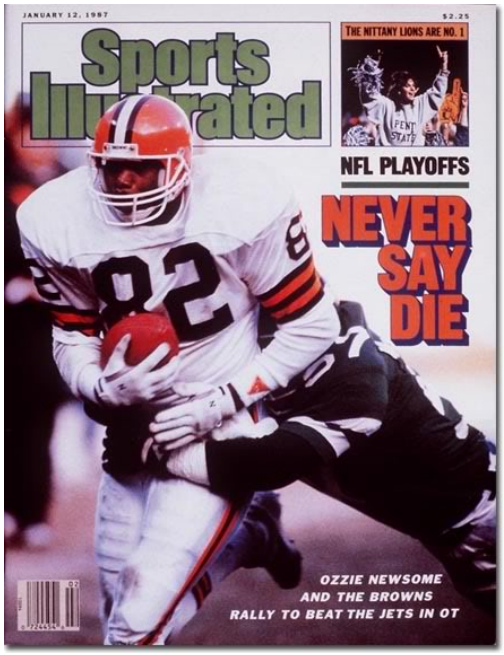
Just two good players. That's what Jesse Lamovsky says constitutes a successful draft. From Winslow and Sean Jones in '04, to Clay and Ozzie in '78, to Jim Brown and Gene Hickerson in '57 ... Jesse looks back on the most successful pairs of Browns same year draftees in the history of the franchise. An absolutely superb piece to start the week for us here at The Cleveland Fan.




The ultimate NFL Draft class, to give the Devil his due, belongs to the Pittsburgh Steelers, who in 1974 selected four future Hall-of-Famers with their first five picks and, thanks to this rich haul, instantly went from a very good team to one of the greatest teams of all time. Every year at Draft time, teams aspire to land the kind of star-studded class the Steelers landed in ’74.

The cold hard facts, however, are that most draftees do not pan out. The history of the NFL Draft is littered with examples of teams that go year after year without picking a single player who can even be considered serviceable. Largely, it’s a matter of gleaning quality out of quantity. A team should consider itself very fortunate if it selects two future top-notch starting players out of a draft class several times larger than that, and the Browns, who have fanned the breeze Russell Branyan-style on more than a few drafts, are no exception. On some notable occasions, Cleveland has landed those two top-notch players- guys who are so good, they render the rest of the draft class damn near irrelevant.

Here are the five best examples of just two good players making for an outstanding Browns draft:

**2004**

**Kellen Winslow, Jr., Tight End, Miami (Fl.), 1st round, 6th pick**

**Sean Jones, Safety, Georgia, 2nd round, 59th pick**

They say you can't really judge a draft until three seasons later. After three seasons, it might be safe to call this, Butch Davis's last draft, a success. It didn't seem that way at first, when Davis dealt a high second-round pick to Detroit just to move down one spot and take K2- whom the Lions weren't going to take anyway- than had to reach back into the second round just to grab Sean Jones. For two seasons, while Winslow and Jones struggled with injuries and inexperience, this draft was best-known for being the one and only time in recorded history Matt Millen actually outsmarted someone.

But in year three, Butch Davis was vindicated (at least somewhat). After sitting out his rookie season due to a knee injury and playing almost exclusively on special teams in his second year (where he might have led the league in holding penalties that wiped out return touchdowns), Jones emerged in 2006 as one of the league's best young safeties, a combination of hitting power and playmaking ability not seen around here since Eric Turner. Winslow, still not completely healthy from multiple knee injuries which wiped out his first two seasons, shattered the Browns' reception record and displayed the wondrous hands and competitive fire that made him the best tight end prospect since his Hall-of-Fame father.

**1981**

**Hanford Dixon, Cornerback, Southern Mississippi, 1st round 22nd pick**

**Eddie Johnson, Linebacker, Louisiana Tech, 7th round, 187th pick**

1981 was a dark season for the Browns- they crumbled to 5-11 and last place just one year after winning the AFC Central title and losing to the Raiders in the Red Right 88 playoff game. But the seeds of a revival were already in place with the additions of Dixon and Johnson, who would become the heart and soul of the brash, barking Dawg Defense. Hanford went to three straight Pro Bowls in 1986-88 and was widely considered the best cornerback in pro football during his prime. The late Eddie Johnson, a defensive captain for much of his ten-year career, was that classic breed- the linebacker who is supposedly too small and too slow, but simply makes plays on the field. He wasn't a great player, but he was a glue player.

*'81 Draft Trivia*: The Browns drafted a future NWA superstar in the fourth round, one more highly-touted coming out of college than Eddie Johnson; the late Ron Simmons, a linebacker from Florida State. They also invited to training camp a rookie free-agent linebacker named Sam Mills; alas, Mills was released by Cleveland, and went on to the Saints, where he would become the leader of that team's heralded "Dome Patrol" linebacker corps.

**1978**

**Clay Matthews, Linebacker, USC, 1st round, 12th pick**

**Ozzie Newsome, Flanker, Alabama, 1st round, 23rd pick**

When you have two picks in the first round, it's important to get value for both of them- and it's difficult to imagine getting more value than Clay Matthews and Ozzie Newsome. Clay was an outstanding, durable player who had a knack for the interception, made four Pro Bowls, and drove the same 1973 Opal to training camp season after season. He was the Zelig of the Browns, starting his career in Cleveland under Sam Rutigliano, and ending it under Bill Belicheck. Newsome, taken with a pick acquired obtained from Chicago for Mike Phipps (no, this does *not* "cancel out" the Paul Warfield trade) was converted to tight end as a rookie and

immediately became one of the best in the game at that position during an era of great tight ends. The Wizard is the only Cleveland Hall-of-Famer to begin his career after the AFL-NFL merger. Oddly enough, while Newsome was a converted college receiver playing tight end, his teammate, receiver Dave Logan, played tight end at the University of Colorado.

**1964**

**Paul Warfield, Halfback, Ohio State, 1st round, 11th pick**

**Leroy Kelly, Halfback, Morgan State, 8th round, 110th pick**

With Jim Brown coming off a record 1,863-yard season, the Browns weren't exactly in crying need of backfield help, but figured out a way to shoehorn their pair of future Hall-of-Fame draftees into the mix. Warfield, a track star at Ohio State, was moved to flanker, Kelly to the kick return teams. Both were outstanding as rookies, helping the Browns to the NFL Championship, and both were arguably the best players at their position in football during their primes. Kelly won the NFL rushing title in 1967 and '68; he was the only 1,000-yard rusher in the league both years, and in 1968 he scored twenty touchdowns and led the league in scoring as well as rushing. Warfield had just one 1,000-yard season in his own career, but made up for quantity with quality, averaging 20.1 yards per catch and scoring every fifth reception.

*'64 Draft Trivia*: Warfield was also selected by the Buffalo Bills in the fourth round of the 1964 AFL Draft, then a separate entity from the NFL Draft. Kelly went un-drafted by the AFL. Warfield grew up a Browns fan in Warren, Ohio, making his choice of teams an easy one. (That's the real rub in the infamous Warfield-for-Phipps trade- not only was Warfield a great player, a great sportsman, and one of the game's true gentlemen, he was the ultimate Cleveland Brown, born and raised in the Brown and Orange. You don't trade men like him.)

**1957**

**Jim Brown, Fullback, Syracuse, 1st round, 6th pick**

**Gene Hickerson, Guard, Ole Miss, 7th round, 78th pick**

This might be considered the best Browns draft of all time even if they *hadn't* taken the best pulling guard of all time way down in the seventh round. Jim Brown's selection, as is well-known, came about as the result of Cleveland's loss of a three-way coin flip between themselves, the Baltimore Colts, and the Steelers. When Pittsburgh selected Paul Brown's first choice, Purdue quarterback Len Dawson, the Cleveland patriarch happily settled for Jim Brown, quite possibly the only man widely considered the GOAT in two separate sports- football and lacrosse. Gene Hickerson quickly established himself as the heart of the offensive line that cracked open holes for the gifted fullback. He blocked for three Hall-of-Famers (Brown, Bobby Mitchell, and Leroy Kelly), made six Pro Bowls, and in his seventeen-year career never played for a team with a losing record.

*'57 Draft Trivia*: It was a thirty-round draft in those days, and in 1957 the Browns selected a number of quality players not named Brown or Hickerson. Second-round pick Milt Plum, a quarterback from Penn State, started several seasons for the Browns and Lions and in 1960 put together what is still one of the all-time great seasons for a signal-caller- a 60% completion percentage, 21 touchdown passes to just five interceptions, and a 110.4 passer rating, the third-best single-season rating in NFL history, just behind a couple of guys named Young and Montana. Fifth-round pick Henry Jordan never found a place in Cleveland, but emerged as a star at defensive tackle for Vince Lombardi's Green Bay powerhouse and was posthumously elected to the Hall of Fame in 1995.

Another 1957 draftee who didn't quite pan out on the field was the twenty-ninth-round selection of the Chicago Cardinals, a talkative halfback from Florida State named Lee Corso.

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It’s possible, year-in and year-out, to find those two good players that can make the draft a success all by themselves. It’s almost the best we can hope for. Because classes like that of the 1974 Steelers come along once in, well… ever. Four future Hall-of-Famers is the platinum standard. But considering the draft history of this organization, a pair of Pro Bowlers is plenty good enough.