PROFILE

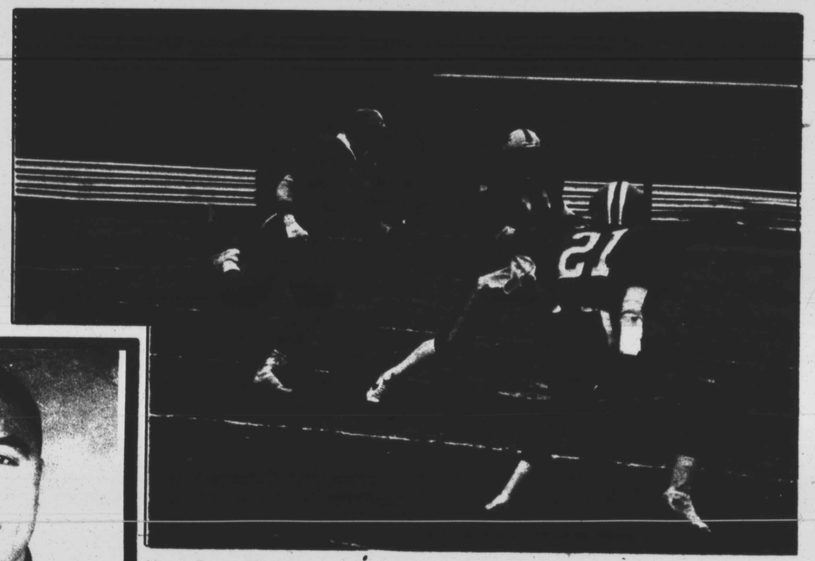
Donald Evans: A longtime dream is fulfilled

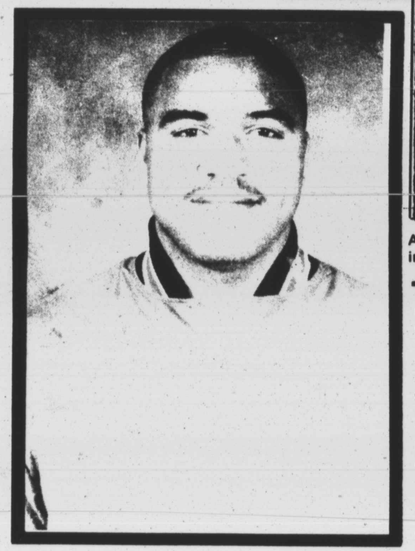
By ROSCOE NANCE
Review Staff Writer

LIKE hundreds of other collegians, defensive end Donald Evans faced NFL Draft Day filled with anticipation -- hoping against hope that he would be among the chosen ones.

Despite being 6-2, 267 pounds and consistently running 4.5 and 4.6 40-yard dashes, Evans wasn't labeled a can't-miss prospect by the so-called experts. He was from Winston-Salem State, a small, predominantly black NCAA Division II program, making him a prime candidate to be selected in the late rounds -- or not at all.

However, the Los Angeles Rams saw something in Evans that they liked.





Above, Evans (56) in hot pursuit of an enemy quarterback. Left, the draft results bring a winning smile (color photo by James Parker).

Apparently, they saw something they liked a whole lot, because they chose him on the second round, using their first pick in the draft.

"I was kind of surprised," said Evans, the first black-college player to go in the draft. "I felt like I was one of the best at my position. I felt like I could be a No. 1 pick. But I didn't know if any team wanted to take a chance on me, a small-college Division II football player. I figured maybe I'd go on the fourth round."

Most of the scouting reports had Evans projected as a sixth- or seventh-round pick. But the Rams think he's just what they're looking for -- a fast and quick outside pass rusher who will make an immediate impact.

"I intend to start him right away," said Coach John Robinson. "He's going to learn this game on the run."

Evans is relatively inexperienced at defensive end because he played a little bit of everywhere for Winston-Salem. He was recruited as a 225-pound tailback. However, he moved to tight end after putting on 25 pounds. When Coach Bill Hayes needed help on defense, Evans went to linebacker and then to end.

Even though Evans gained 42 pounds in his five years at Winston-Salem, he says he doesn't have a problem with his weight -- that he has only 10 percent body fat.

"I got on a good weight program and was eating well," he said.

Evans first caught the Rams' eye at an NFL scouting combine in New Orleans in February. They worked him again in April at their training facility. But he had no idea they would select him.

"The Rams didn't say too much to me," he said. "They worked me out and said I did OK. Everything was low-key. Everything was balanced. Nobody said, 'Don, we really want you.' They didn't explode over me, other than just saying they needed a rush guy. Just like other teams, they had needs."

It was that way with all the others who worked him out, too. That left Evans wondering where he would fall in the draft. But it didn't diminish his confidence in his ability to play the game.

"I figured whenever I did get drafted, I'd give it my best and try to make the team."

Playing in the NFL has been a longtime dream for Evans, the youngest of 16 children. But he accepted being drafted with mixed emotions.

Shortly after the Rams selected him, his 65-year-old mother, Novella Evans, had her right foot amputated. She later died days after the draft.

"It takes a lot of joy out of the day," Evans had said in an interview before his mother's death. "I woke up thinking about her. When I got drafted, I was real excited. Five minutes later, I was thinking about my mom. My main concern is her."

The Rams wanted him to fly to Los Angeles for a press conference. But he begged off in order to spend a couple of days with his mother.

"That's my girl," said Evans.

Novella Evans initially was opposed to the youngest of her 16 children playing football. Like many mothers, she thought the sport was too dangerous.

"She came to two games in high school," said Evans. "The first time was my junior year. A guy broke his hip. She came my senior year and another guy broke his collarbone. I told her pain and people getting hurt are part of football."

A special bond existed between Evans and his mother, who had her first child when she was 14. His father died the year after Evans was born. The money he'll make in pro ball will go a long way in supporting his family.

"I've been standing in poverty ever since I was a baby," he had said before his mother died. "I'm going to do some good things for her, repay her some love."

Roscoe Nance is a sportswriter for USA Today.

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