

# Wreh-Wilson transforms himself into NFL prospect

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Sometime during the next 48 hours, NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell should step to a podium in New York and announce Blidi Wreh-Wilson as an early-round selection in the NFL Draft.

It's safe to say no one is more pleasantly surprised to see the former General McLane High School and University of Connecticut star in that position than Wreh-Wilson's father, Elliott.

"I thought he was one of those people who was going to get good grades in college and stand on the sideline holding his helmet for four years," Elliott Wreh-Wilson said of his son, who played only one season of high school football. "My wife and I are shocked by what he's done."

In five years, Blidi Wreh-Wilson has transformed himself from a raw, undersized kid forced by his parents to quit football in middle school out of fear he would get hurt into one of this draft's top cornerback prospects.

Most NFL analysts project that he will be selected in the first three rounds of the draft, which begins today at 8 p.m.

"This is what I've worked for, the chance to play professional football," Wreh-Wilson said. "No one knows what's going to happen with the draft. I've enjoyed the process, and now I'm just ready to let it play out and see how it goes."

At stake is a place for Wreh-Wilson among Erie County's football glitterati. He stands to join a list that includes Bernie Flowers, Art Baker, Fred Biletnikoff, Walley Mahle, Mike McCoy, Woody Thompson, Mark Stepnoski, Brian Milne and Bob Sanders, all high NFL Draft picks.

Sanders was the last Erie County high school graduate selected in the draft. The former Cathedral Preparatory School and University of Iowa standout went to the Indianapolis Colts 44th overall in the second round of the 2004 draft.

Wreh-Wilson's path to this point, however, isn't that of your typical football star.

A smart, scrawny kid

Wreh-Wilson spent his early childhood near Boston. The family moved to Edinboro from Malden, Mass., just as he was entering elementary school after Elliott Wreh-Wilson accepted a teaching position in the philosophy department at Edinboro University of Pennsylvania.

Wreh-Wilson and his wife, Lucinda, were born in Liberia, a West African republic colonized in the early 1800s by English-speaking black people from the United States, most of whom were freed slaves.

Elliott Wreh-Wilson's father quit school after fifth grade to help support the family after his father died. His father insisted on the importance of getting an education, even though for Elliott Wreh-Wilson it meant walking 4 miles each way to school every day.

"He would tell me, 'I have to go to work, so you have to go to school,'" Elliott Wreh-Wilson said. "I knew he would kill me if I didn't go, so I went." Elliott Wreh-Wilson left Liberia for college, eventually earning a doctoral degree from Boston University in 1994. He is now chairman of Edinboro's philosophy department.

Not surprisingly, Blidi Wreh-Wilson and his sister, T.L., grew up in a house filled with books and plenty of discussion about academics. Both became excellent, dedicated students. Blidi Wreh-Wilson received an award at General McLane's commencement for not having a single absence from kindergarten through 12th grade. T.L. later missed out on the same award because she skipped three days of school to travel with her parents to watch Wreh-Wilson play Friday night games with UConn.

During Wreh-Wilson's college recruitment, coaches pointed out that not only did he have a chance to become a decent football player, he would also help balance out the team's overall grade-point average.

The reality was that for most of Wreh-Wilson's high school career, it didn't appear football would even be an option, which is why he received virtually no interest from college football's big-time programs.

A small, slight child who in elementary school fooled his parents by stuffing the same unlaundered Dallas Cowboys No. 22 jersey -- that of star running back Emmitt Smith -- into his book bag and slipping it on before class each day, Wreh-Wilson liked the idea of playing football more than the roughness that came with it. He played quarterback for one season before moving to wide receiver. But the contact wasn't for him.

"As skinny and little as I was, it wasn't the safest thing," Wreh-Wilson recalled. "I wasn't into getting hit. I used to cry a lot."

After one such collision with a much bigger player in eighth grade, Elliott Wreh-Wilson informed his son he was done with football. Wreh-Wilson spent the next three years starring on General McLane's soccer team. He also played basketball, although longtime Lancers coach Andy Schulz remembers sizing up Wreh-Wilson as a freshman and wondering if he would ever develop by his varsity years.

"He couldn't dribble with his left hand, and he was just this skinny little kid," Schulz said. "I said, 'What are we going to do with him?' Well, we all saw what a success story he's become."

Wreh-Wilson stuck with basketball, and as a junior he helped Schulz and General McLane win the PIAA Class AAA championship just a few months after the school had won the state football title.

Wreh-Wilson's friends had been urging him for years to return to football. They finally persuaded him by the end of his junior year to give the sport another try. But that was only half the battle.

"He came to me and said he wanted to play football again," Elliott Wreh-Wilson said. "I told him, 'Well, you've grown a little, so maybe we'll give this another shot. At least you shouldn't break into pieces now.'"

From curiosity to stardom

At one of General McLane's first football conditioning workouts before his senior year, Wreh-Wilson sprinted down the field and soared over a defender to catch a pass. Lancers coach Jim Wells immediately recognized what he had in Wreh-Wilson.

"He jumped about 10 feet in the air and came down with the ball, and I said to my assistant coaches, 'Now that's a Division I athlete,'" Wells recalled. "They thought I was crazy. But we had just seen Drew Astorino (quarterback for General McLane's state championship team) go to Penn State, and this kid was every bit as talented as Drew -- and 3 inches taller."

What stood out for Wells was the same effortless movement and explosion-on-demand that would lead to Wreh-Wilson receiving interest from smaller Division I schools before he finished the first half of his only season of high school football. Eventually he settled on UConn for its academics and the opportunity to play cornerback. His parents were delighted with the choice.

"I knew it was a good school, and I knew he would work hard on his grades," Elliott Wreh-Wilson said. "So I felt he would be fine no matter what happened with football."

But Wreh-Wilson wasn't content with a roster spot. Admittedly carrying "a pretty big chip on my shoulder" because of the lack of interest from major programs, Wreh-Wilson channeled that motivation and became the total package with the Huskies.

He filled out into a 6-foot-1-inch, 195-pound pro prospect by the end of his college career. As a senior, he was an all-Big East Conference second-team selection, team captain and team MVP.

Paul Pasqualoni, a former NFL assistant who spent six seasons with the Dallas Cowboys and Miami Dolphins, inherited Wreh-Wilson when he took over as UConn's coach two years ago.

"When I first got there, looking at him as a cornerback, I knew the kid had all the measurables -- excellent speed, athletic ability and he could cover," Pasqualoni said. "But for me, trust and respect as a football player doesn't happen overnight. I have to be around a guy for a while to see how he is. I'm big on dependability. How consistent are you? Do you play up to your ability all the time? That's how I define toughness in football, not from a contact standpoint. And I found out this is one tough kid who can play."

Wreh-Wilson took care of business in the classroom. He graduated in December with dual degrees in economics and agricultural and resource economics. But the idea of pursuing something in his degree field is on hold for now while Wreh-Wilson chases the dream of playing in the NFL.

Since football season ended, nearly every day has been a whirlwind, he said. In January, Wreh-Wilson

attended the Senior Bowl all-star game in Mobile, Ala., where he practiced in front of NFL scouts. In February, he was invited to the NFL Scouting Combine in Indianapolis as one of the top 330 college players in the country.

In Indianapolis, he believed he held his own in most of the drills scouts use to evaluate college players for NFL readiness, although his official 40-yard dash time of 4.53 seconds led some analysts to question his ability to cover fast pro receivers. At UConn's subsequent pro day, where he worked out for a group of NFL coaches that included New England's Bill Belichick, Wreh-Wilson ran a 40-yard dash time ranging from 4.33 to 4.39 seconds, depending on the report. He was satisfied he had answered questions about his speed.

"I knew I was capable of a better time than I ran at the combine," Wreh-Wilson said.

In the weeks that followed, he continued to train and field calls from teams interested in flying him to their cities for interviews and workouts, often with little advance notice. The list included the Pittsburgh Steelers, Tampa Bay Buccaneers and Jacksonville Jaguars.

"Every day before the draft has been kind of like read and react," he said, comparing the predraft scramble to the way he approached opposing offenses on the field. "You don't know who's going to call, what they're looking for, whether they're concerned about something or they just want to get to know you better."

## The waiting game

Most NFL Draft analysts project Wreh-Wilson as a second- or third-round pick. A few suggest he could go in the first round. Others suggest that he might not be picked until Saturday when the draft concludes with rounds four through seven.

"There are 32 NFL teams, but you only need one team to really like you," Wreh-Wilson said. "That can be enough to make you a first-round pick."

While draft analysts have raved about Wreh-Wilson's size, speed and instincts, some disagree on his coverage ability, and a few have expressed concerns about his tackling.

Wells, who coached him at General McLane, believes anyone looking for serious holes in Wreh-Wilson's game is digging too deep.

"You can't teach the intangibles, and he's got those to go along with the talent," Wells said. "I think he's a steal."

ESPN analyst Mel Kiper Jr. suggests the good outweighs the bad and predicted Wreh-Wilson will go to the Washington Redskins with the 51st pick overall in the second round.

"What I like about (Wreh-Wilson) is I like the fact that in this league you've got to be able to cover, and certainly he can do that," Kiper said in a pre-draft conference call with reporters earlier this month. "He has, obviously, the height you want. He's over 6 feet. You think about the length, you think about the ability that he showed at Connecticut to match up in coverage and do a good job. His tackling is so-so at times, a little sloppy as a tackler; he's got to shore that up. But he's worthy of being a second-round draft choice."

Wreh-Wilson's New York-based agent, Jared Fox of Sportstars Inc., said Wreh-Wilson has put himself in the best possible position for this weekend. What's a little surprising, Fox said, is that some teams seem worried about Wreh-Wilson's smarts.

"Believe it or not, when NFL teams interview really intelligent kids like Blidi, sometimes it's a double-edged sword," Fox said. "They hear him talk, they find out his dad's a philosophy professor, and they start to wonder if this guy's too smart for football, if he's going to be able to handle the physical side of the NFL. Our challenge is to tell his side of the story, which is that just because he can put a full sentence together doesn't mean he's not a tough kid or a tough player."

Pasqualoni, the UConn coach, laughs at the notion that Wreh-Wilson's intellect could be a drawback.

"I was in the NFL for six seasons, and I would say that a player can never be too smart," Pasqualoni said. "Especially at the position he plays, cornerback, you have to have someone who's very dependable, who plays at a very high level on a consistent basis, and that's Blidi. I wouldn't worry about drafting a smart guy."

For his part, Wreh-Wilson said he's not worried about much of anything as he awaits the identity of his future employer.

He's been back in Edinboro for about a week, training and visiting friends and family. He plans to watch the NFL draft action tonight at home without trying to guess where he might be selected.

"This is something you only get to do once, and it's been great seeing my friends happy for me, my family happy for me, the buzz it's created in the Edinboro community and in Erie," he said. "I'm loving the experience. When I left high school and went away to UConn, no one knew what was going to happen. Now here we are, and we'll see what happens next."

And when the pick comes in, at least one person in the Wreh-Wilson household will continue to be amazed.

"In my language," Elliott Wreh-Wilson said, "you would say this is something that opens your mouth wide."

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## NFL DRAFT SCHEDULE

- First round: Today, 8 p.m.
- Second and third rounds: Friday, 6:30 p.m.
- Rounds 4-7: Saturday, noon
- TV: ESPN and NFL Network

## Blidi Wreh-Wilson: By the Numbers

NFL Scouting Combine results

- 40-yard dash: 4.53 seconds
- Bench press: 14 repetitions at 225 pounds
- Vertical jump: 36 inches
- Broad jump: 128 inches
- Three-cone drill: 6.97 seconds
- 20-yard shuttle run: 4.12 seconds
- 60-yard shuttle run: 11.56 seconds

UConn pro day 40-yard dash time

- 4.33 to 4.39 seconds, depending on reports

