

IU program taps into Warren Central's talent

By MICHAEL MAROT
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

INDIANAPOLIS

The Indiana Hoosiers believe the state's best high school team can create a similar script in college. They'll get a chance to find out starting in the fall. Defensive lineman Jeff Boyd and safety Jerimy Finch, both from Warren Central, orally committed to the Hoosiers this weekend. Two other Warriors, offensive lineman Andrew McDonald and defensive back Chris Adkins, already had committed to Indiana. That means nearly one-fourth of the Hoosiers' 17 early commit-

ments come from the most successful high school program in state history. The players want to continue their success at the college level. "We all wanted to play together, and we all wanted to help turn it around down there together," Boyd said Sunday. Coach Terry Hoepfner has repeatedly stressed the importance of attracting the state's top players to Bloomington, and getting the Warren Central quartet could prove a major coup. In November, the Warriors became the first team in the 34-year history of the state tournament to win four consecutive titles.

Finch, McDonald and Boyd were rewarded with first-team all-state selections, while Adkins received honorable-mention honors. Together, they helped the Warriors extend the state's longest tournament winning streak to 24 games and produce a 56-4 record in the past four seasons. But it was the camaraderie they didn't want to break up, and Indiana seemed the perfect place to keep their friendships and winning ways together. "I like it because it was close to home, and I liked that family bond," Boyd said. Boyd, at 6-foot-3, 280 pounds, said Indiana coaches told him he could

play both defensive end and defensive tackle, something other schools couldn't promise. He may also get a chance to play next season as a true freshman. Hoepfner is prohibited by NCAA rules from commenting on recruits until after they officially sign a national letter of intent in February. Boyd said he chose the Hoosiers over Kentucky but had also received interest from other schools. Finch is a 6-2, 212-pound safety who would provide more size and better athleticism in a secondary that struggled last season. McDonald, at 6-6, 280 pounds, would help reinforce last year's strong offensive line class that

Hoepfner dubbed the "seven blocks of granite." Adkins, like Finch, is expected to play in the secondary. Another Warren Central senior, Mr. Football winner Darren Evans, will not join his teammates in Bloomington. Evans already committed to Virginia Tech. Boyd said Indiana's Warren Central contingent will build on the progress Hoepfner has made in the past two seasons and help the Hoosiers end the Big Ten's longest bowl drought. Indiana has not played in a bowl game since 1993. "I'm very excited about what he's done," Boyd said. "And we're all very excited to stay together."

"We all wanted to play together, and we all wanted to help turn it around down there together."

Jeff Boyd
Warren Central High School defensive lineman on he and other Warriors players committing to the Indiana University football program

• Patriots

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squandered their timeouts, forcing them to try a tying field goal from 54 yards with no time left.

That's why Bill Belichick is 13-2 in the postseason and Schottenheimer is 5-13. Belichick's teams take advantage of the opportunity to make plays, such as those by Brown, Faulk or Gostkowski. Or by Mike Vrabel, Richard Seymour, Tedy Bruschi or Rosevelt Colvin. Schottenheimer's don't. It's not an accident.

The Patriots, just the fourth-seeded team in the AFC, are never the same from week to week. They're a team whose runners are far better than their receivers, and they stopped running when they couldn't Sunday and still won despite being outrushed 148-51.

More important, Belichick seems to instinctively know who'll help his team after he lets the likes of Vinatieri, Deion Branch, Willie McGinest and other important players leave.

It all goes back to safety Lawyer Milloy, whom he let go at the start of the 2003 season, just after the Patriots had won the first of their three Super Bowls. Belichick doesn't necessarily select stars for his team.

Despite their success, the Patriots usually have fewer Pro Bowlers than other good teams, such as San Diego, which had nine this season. New England has one: defensive lineman Richard Seymour, who because of injuries wasn't as good as usual.

But he gets playmakers. Or guys he thinks will be playmakers, like Jabar Gaffney, who has two consecutive 100-yard games in the playoffs after having just one in the past six seasons with Houston. Gaffney's 18 receptions in the playoffs are seven more than he had in the regular season after being signed off the street.

Most of all, Belichick loves role players. And role players often win him games.

"If you put them in one particular spot, you might have a guy that's better at that one thing than they are," he said. "But when you look at the player's versatility, his intelligence, his physical skills, his ability to understand concepts and adapt to different situations, that he just has so much value on a broad base, that that's really more valuable to your team even than a guy who's better at one."

Enter Brown, who's been with the Patriots for 14 seasons as a wide receiver, kick returner and occasional defensive back.

He made the play of the game Sunday, knocking the ball loose from San Diego's Marlon McCree after McCree intercepted a pass by Tom Brady with just more than six minutes left and the Chargers leading 21-13.

The Patriots went on to score and tie the game on a 2-point conversion run on a direct snap to Faulk, a valuable contributor as a runner, receiver and return man in eight seasons with New England.

Brady, who was intercepted three times, then came through as usual in the clutch, driving the Patriots from their own 15 to the San Diego 13 to set up Gostkowski's winning field goal. The big play: a 49-yard pass to Reche Caldwell, who had 66 receptions in four years with the Chargers but had a team-leading 61 for the Patriots this season.

That's the kind of game that gets into the heads of opponents: the "Uh-oh. Here come the Patriots" mind-set that dooms some opponents before they even step on the field.

That's not likely to happen to Indianapolis. In fact, the Colts may even be glad their playing New England instead of San Diego, which handled them last season and would have been the home team if it had won.

But somewhere in the collective psyche of the Colts, there has to be this thought: "Uh-oh. Here come the Patriots."

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Saints' coach not about to join critics of Chicago QB

By BRETT MARTEL
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

METAIRIE, La.

A former quarterback himself, Saints coach Sean Payton was not about to discount the abilities of the erratic Rex Grossman.

Especially not after some of the throws he saw the embattled Chicago signal-caller make in ousting the Seattle Seahawks from the playoffs.

"With the weight of a lot of people on his shoulders and playing in his first playoff game this year, I thought he was outstanding," Payton said Monday as the Saints prepared to play Chicago in next weekend's NFC title game. "It's a funny business because you're graded each week on your last performance."

Although the Bears (14-3) have the best record in the NFC, the Saints (11-6) seem to have a decisive advantage at quarterback. Drew Brees threw for a personal-best and NFL-leading 4,418 yards during the regular season while directing the league's top offense.

The New Orleans quarterback threw 26 touchdown passes, compared to 11 interceptions.

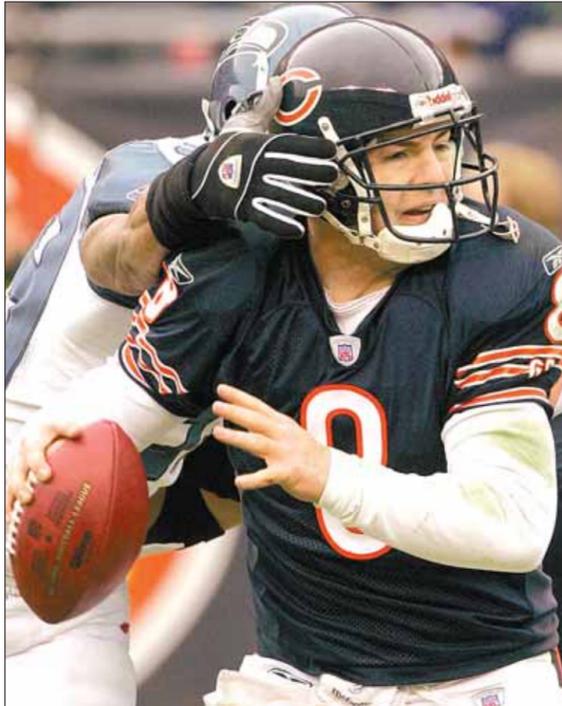
Grossman threw for 3,193 yards, 23 TDs and 20 interceptions during the regular season. He was harshly criticized as inconsistent and derided for admitting he had not prepared as thoroughly as he normally would for the Bears' regular-season finale. Grossman completed only two passes and threw three interceptions before being benched with a 0.0 quarterback rating in that game, a 26-7 loss to Green Bay.

In Sunday's divisional playoff game, he threw his 21st interception and lost a fumble on a sack that led to a Seattle touchdown, but he otherwise played well enough to lead the Bears to their first NFC title game in 18 years.

He completed 21 of 38 passes for 282 yards, including a 68-yard TD pass to Bernard Berrian.

The Saints' secondary has been hurt by such big plays recently, such as Donte Stallworth's 75-yard TD in Saturday night's playoff game. They also gave up a 55-yard touchdown pass to the Giants' Plaxico Burress three games ago.

Payton said he was particularly impressed by Grossman's 30-yard



Seahawks linebacker Julian Peterson, back, tackles Bears quarterback Rex Grossman during an NFC divisional playoff game in Chicago on Sunday.

completion on a third-down play in overtime to set up the winning field goal.

"You're talking about a team that finished as the No. 1 seed in the NFC and, you know, (the quarterback position) always seems to carry a little bit more criticism or applause than sometimes necessary," Payton said. "Certainly in a big city, that's always a challenge, and he's shouldered that well. ..."

"What's most important is those players have a belief in him. Everything else outside of that is unimportant, and he came up big."

Rashied Davis, who caught the long overtime pass from Grossman, agreed.

"Rex is a great player, very resilient," Davis said. "People tear him up, but I think people tend to overdo it when it comes to him."

Payton is familiar with the type of scrutiny quarterbacks can face in Chicago. He went to junior high and high school in nearby Naperville, Ill. He played college football at Eastern Illinois — also Tony Romo's alma mater — from 1982-86. He then played for the Arena Football

League's Chicago Bruisers in 1987 before getting a brief shot in the NFL that same year as a replacement player for the Bears during a players' strike.

He appeared in three games. His final pass, he recalled, was an interception during a 19-17 loss to the Saints.

He'd like to think Grossman will suffer a similar fate next Sunday, but he's not counting on it.

In fact, Payton went so far as to mention Grossman in the same sentence as Tom Brady, who at 12-1 in his postseason career is arguably the best playoff quarterback in the NFL.

"Getting good quarterback play figures into winning," Payton said. "You saw New England with one of the best quarterbacks in the league and the significance he has on that team. ... You watch a guy like Brady in a game like that and there's confidence, and so obviously, at that position it's important that he plays well and you saw it with Grossman as well."

"I thought he played outstanding in a big game with added pressure on him."

• Defense

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defensive tackle Anthony McFarland said. "We just hadn't played it for some reason, and there's no better time to do it than in the playoffs."

Especially with Tom Brady and the Patriots coming to town.

Winners of three of the past five Super Bowls, the No. 4-seeded Patriots are coming off a 24-21 win at No. 1 seed San Diego. They didn't play particularly well but exploited enough Chargers mistakes to set up an improbable showdown in the RCA Dome.

New England scored 11 unanswered points in the final 3½ minutes to earn the win.

"I think everybody showed confidence," Patriots wide receiver Reche Caldwell said. "I think that's when we're at our best. We've got to make plays in the defining moments of the game."

"That's why this organization, this team has been so good, because they do a good job making plays when it really counts."

By contrast, the Colts haven't. Not in the playoffs, at least.

Heading into this postseason, the Colts were 3-6 in playoff games in the Manning era. Two of the losses were against the Patriots, including a bitter 24-14 defeat in the 2003 AFC Championship



The Ravens' Derrick Mason, center, is brought down by Colts players, from left, Cato June, Gary Brackett and Marlin Jackson during Saturday's AFC divisional playoff game.

Game. The other was a 20-3 defeat in the divisional playoff the following year.

Both losses were in Foxborough, Mass.

Although the Colts have longed for the opportunity to host a critical playoff game, home field isn't always an overwhelming advantage.

It wasn't for San Diego on Sunday or the Ravens on Saturday, and it wasn't for the Colts last season against Pittsburgh in the divisional playoffs.

"I don't think (it's an advantage) home or road," Dungy said. "It's just really playing well week in and week out, doing what you're supposed to do on every play."

• Divided

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Super Bowl against each other," said Remington council member Brian Melchi.

Jasper County lies in the Central time zone in large part due to its proximity to Chicago, but many clocks in Remington, where the tallest buildings are grain elevators, are set to Eastern time to stay in step with the Hoosier capital, Melchi said.

One's as likely to see sports fans decked out in Bears gear, said Melchi, himself a Colts fan.

"I would guess we're pretty evenly split," he said.

Directly to the north, the Colts' marketing department concedes Lake and Porter counties to the Bears, but that's as far as it will

ing to go. The Colts' network of radio affiliates includes stations in the surrounding cities of Michigan City, South Bend and Monticello and even crosses the state line at Danville, Ill.

The Colts have fewer than 100 season ticketholders in Lake and Porter counties, the Post-Tribune of Merrillville reported.

NFL teams observe a strict non-compete pact with neighboring clubs, said Colts spokesman Craig Kelley.

"It's just not something we do," Kelly said. "Lake and Porter County is the Bears' market."

Even in Jasper County, one need not venture far to reach the Bears' sphere of influence. In the neighboring city of Rensselaer, a late-season Monday night game between the Colts and Cincinnati Bengals drew just a handful of fans to Rico's Bar & Grill, owner Ron Klauer said.

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