

Best HBCU studs for all 32 NFL teams

With the NFL Draft coming up on April 23-25, ESPN ran a story last Wednesday with the headline – *Best small-college studs for all 32 NFL teams* – highlighting the fact that “You don’t have to play at a traditional college football power to achieve NFL stardom.”

There were 15 former black college players – nearly half the list – highlighted from the 32 teams including, among others, Pro Football Hall of Famers **Walter Payton** of Jackson State and the Chicago Bears, **Jerry Rice** of Mississippi Valley State and the San Francisco 49ers and **Larry Little** of Bethune-Cookman and the Miami Dolphins.

This week and next, the BLACK COLLEGE SPORTS PAGE would like to not only share the former HBCU players selected by the ESPN writers but complete the list with the best HBCU players from all 32 NFL teams from among the many that reached stardom.

The expanded list of HBCU standouts from all 32 teams – with their accomplishments – starts with this week’s *BCSP Xtra!!* of players from the AFC and continues in next week’s *Xtra!!* with players from the NFC.

Both will be posted on Onnidan.com, the online home of the BLACK COLLEGE SPORTS PAGE.

Compiled by **Luc Williams**, BCSP Editor

The players whose pictures below are wrapped around type are players the BLACK COLLEGE SPORTS PAGE feels deserve to be in the Pro Football Hall of Fame. They are: **Ben Coates**, **Ken Riley**, **Lemar Parrish**, **L. C. Greenwood**, **Jimmy Smith**, **Robert Mathis**, **Kenny Burroughs**, **Steve McNair**, **Otis Taylor**, **Raymond Chester** and **Clem Daniels**.

AFC EAST

BUFFALO BILLS

Frank Lewis, WR, **Grambling State** - 1978-83

Pro Bowl selection in 1981. ... Tied for fourth with 14 100-yard receiving games. ... Ranks fifth with 4,638 yards receiving despite playing only 80 games. In his pro career, which included seven years and two Super Bowl championships with the Pittsburgh Steelers, he had 397 receptions for 6,724 yards and 40 touchdowns.

OTHERS:

– **James “Shack” Harris** (1969-72), QB, **Grambling State** Drafted in the eighth round of the 1969 Common Draft by the American Football League’s Buffalo Bills, and would soon join fellow rookie O.J. Simpson in the starting backfield. Harris was the first black player to start a season at quarterback in the history of pro football. Harris was also just the second black player in the modern era (after Marlin Briscoe) to start in any game as quarterback for a professional football team.

– **Charles Rome**s (1977-86), DB, **North Carolina Central** Rome’s 137 total starts in ten seasons with Buffalo are 8th-most in team history. He played in every game for the Bills from his rookie season to 1986, starting every game from 1978 forward. Rome logged at least one interception in every year from 1978 to 1986. His 28 career interceptions are fourth in team history. He is distinguished as being the first French man to play in the National Football League.

MIAMI DOLPHINS

Larry Little, OG, **Bethune-Cookman** - 1969-80

Little immediately became a Pro Bowl player after joining the Dolphins in 1969 and was elected to the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1983. He was one of the key cogs for the Dolphins’ offense, paving the way for running backs like Larry Csonka and Mercury Morris. He was also an important member of the 1972 and 1973 Super Bowl champion Dolphins. Little was named first-team all-pro for five consecutive seasons from 1971 to 1975 and landed on the NFL’s 1970s All-Decade team.

OTHERS:

– **Lloyd Mumphord** (1969-74), DB, **Texas Southern** Played in three Super Bowls for the Dolphins, and served as their captain of the Special Teams. He currently holds NFL records for punt and kick blocks in a season and a career.

– **William Judson** (1982-89), DB, **South Carolina State** Played cornerback for eight seasons for the Miami Dolphins amassing 24 interceptions, two returned for TDs;

– **Gene Atkins** (1994-96), DB, **Florida A&M** Played three seasons for the Dolphins. Is the father of Geno Atkins, defensive tackle for the Cincinnati Bengals;

– **Oronde Gadsden** (1998-2003), WR, **Winston-Salem State** His first NFL reception was a 44-yard touchdown on opening day against the Indianapolis Colts in 1998. He ended up starting 12 games, finishing with 48 receptions, 713 yards (second on the team) and 7 receiving touchdowns. The next year, he registered 48 receptions (second on the team), a career-high 803 yards and 6 receiving touchdowns (led the team). In 2000 after Dan Marino retired, he had a career-high 56 receptions for 786 yards and 6 receiving touchdowns.

NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS

Leon Gray, OT, **Jackson State** - 1973-78

Voted into the Patriots Hall of Fame in 2019, Gray was a three-time AP first-team All-Pro selection. He spent five years with the Patriots before joining the Houston Oilers and then the New Orleans Saints.

OTHERS:

– **Ben Coates** (1991-99), TE, **Livingstone** Coates was a five-time Pro Bowl player who had six seasons with 600 yards or more. He posted a career-high with nine touchdowns in 1996, and had his best season in 1994 when he had 96 receptions for 1,174 yards and seven touchdowns. He capped off his career with one season in Baltimore, where he won Super Bowl XXXV.

– **Julius Adams** 1971-85, DE, **Texas Southern** At different points in his career, all played in New England, Adams was the Patriots’ leader in tackles and sacks. He also won the Jim Lee Hunt Memorial Award for the most outstanding Patriots linemen. He made the Pro Bowl in 1980.

NEW YORK JETS

Winston Hill, OT, **Texas Southern** - 1963-76

Played in 195 consecutive games, many of them protecting Joe Namath’s blind side. Super Bowl champion. Four-time Pro Bowler. Four-time AFL All-Star. Voted to the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 2020.

OTHERS:

– **Emerson Boozer** (1966-75), RB, **Maryland State** (now Eastern Shore) Second all-time in franchise rushing touchdowns and third in yards. Two-time AFL All-Star. Led Jets’ rushers in Super Bowl win over Baltimore. Jets Ring of Honor.

– **Rich Castor** (1970-77), TE, **Jackson State** Three-time Pro Bowler. Super Bowl champion (with Washington). Seventh all-time in franchise touchdown receptions.

– **Jerome Barkham** (1972-83), WR/TE, **Jackson State** Jets fixture through their longest playoff drought and return to contention. Pro Bowler (1973)

– **Verlon Biggs** (1965-70), DE, **Jackson State** Three-time AFL All-Star. Super Bowl champion.

– **Johnny Sample** (1966-68), DB, **Maryland State** (now E-Shore) Has the distinction of beginning only professional athlete to win all three championships, NFL (Baltimore Colts ’58), AFL (Jets ’69), and Super Bowl (Jets ’69).

AFC NORTH

BALTIMORE RAVENS

Shannon Sharpe, TE, **Savannah State** - 2000-01

Sharpe was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame on August 6, 2011. He played 12 seasons for the Broncos (1990–1999, 2002–2003) and two with the Ravens (2000–2001), winning three Super Bowls (two with Denver and one with Baltimore) and finishing his career as the NFL’s all-time leader in receptions (815), receiving yards (10,060) and receiving touchdowns (62) by a tight end.

OTHERS:

– **Jacoby Jones** (2012-14), WR/KR, **Lane** Selected to the Pro Bowl in 2012, caught 70-yard game-tying touchdown pass in the AFC Divisional vs. Denver Broncos, had 108-yard kickoff return for a touchdown in Super Bowl XLVII against the San Francisco 49ers, the longest play in Super Bowl history.

– **Steve McNair** (2006-07), QB, **Alcorn State** Started every game in 2006 season helped Baltimore to a 13–3 record and an AFC North Championship. Started six games for the Ravens in 2007.

CINCINNATI BENGALS

Ken Riley, CB, **Florida A&M** - 1969-83

Riley seamlessly made the transition to cornerback after spending his college days as Florida A&M’s starting quarterback. He menaced NFL passers during his 15-year career and tallied 65 total interceptions, good for fifth all-time and easily a franchise record that will be nearly impossible to break. His name isn’t as notable as former Bengals quarterback Ken Anderson, another small-school product with Hall of Fame numbers, but he deserves some love for an unheralded and should-be Hall of Fame career.

OTHERS:

– **Lemar Parrish** (1970-82), DB, **Lincoln (Mo.)** Eight-time Pro Bowl selection, One-time First-Team All-Pro, led the NFL in fumbles returned for touchdown (1) in 1977/73, in interceptions returned for touchdown (1) in 1977, and ranks fifth all-time in non-offensive touchdowns (13). Parrish left the Bengals as the team’s all-time leader in touchdowns scored by “return or recovery” with 13 (four on punt returns, four on interception returns, three on fumble returns, one on a kickoff return, and one on a blocked field goal return);

– **Coy Bacon** (1968-81), DL, **Jackson State** Three Pro Bowl selections, twice with the Bengals, played in 180 games, led the NFL in safeties in 1976.

– **Charlie Joiner** (1964-69), WR, **Grambling State** Pro Football Hall of Fame inductee, three-time Pro Bowl selection, one-time First-Team All-Pro selection.

– **Louis Breeden** (1977-87), DB, **North Carolina Central** AFC Champion (1981), One First-Team All-Pro selection.

CLEVELAND BROWNS

Leroy Kelly, RB, **Morgan State** - 1964-73

The Browns drafted Kelly out of Morgan State in the eighth round of the 1964 draft. Playing behind the legendary Jim Brown, Kelly immediately became an NFL champion in his first season. When Brown retired two years later, Kelly became an All-Pro in his first season as the starter, then won rushing titles the following two years. He was voted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1994.

OTHERS:

– **Len Ford** (1950-57), DE, **Morgan State** Terrorized QBs before sacks were an official stat and was named first-team All-Pro each year from 1951-1954. He was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1976.

– **Carl Hairston** (1984-90), DT, **Maryland State** (now E. Shore) Played 15 years in the pros, seven with the Browns and unofficially registered 94 quarterback sacks — 15 in 1979, when he led the NFL. (The NFL didn’t start keeping official tackle stats until 1982, Hairston’s seventh season.)

PITTSBURGH STEELERS

Mel Blount, CB, **Southern** - 1970-83

Blount is the Steelers’ all-time leader with 57 career interceptions, tied for 12th on the NFL list. Blount was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1989. He won four Super Bowl championships. In 1975, Blount led the NFL with 11 interceptions and was named AP NFL Defensive Player of the Year. The Steelers won their second Super Bowl that year and Blount earned the first of his five Pro Bowl berths and the first of his two All-Pro selections.

OTHERS:

– **L. C. Greenwood** (1969-81), DE, **Arkansas-Pine Bluff** Four-time Super Bowl champion had 73.5 sacks in his career, second on the Steelers’ all-time list. Recovered 14 fumbles in his career and was named to six Pro Bowls. He was a first-team All-Pro in 1974 and 1975. According to Pro Football Reference, Greenwood had four sacks in the Steelers’ 21–17 win over the Dallas Cowboys in Super Bowl X.

– **John Stallworth** (1974-87), WR, **Alabama A&M** Retired as Steelers’ all-time leader with 537 receptions, 8,723 receiving yards and 63 receiving touchdowns. Four-time Super Bowl champion, caught winning 73-yard TD pass in SB XIV. Inducted into Hall of Fame in 2002.

– **Donnie Shell** (1974-87), S, **South Carolina State** Four Super Bowl rings, 51 career interceptions, 19 fumble recoveries, three-time first team All-Pro, five straight Pro Bowls. Inducted into the Hall of Fame in 2020.

– **Eric Holmes** (1988-97), LB, **Texas Southern** Two-time Super Bowl champion.

– **Greg Lloyd** (1971-77), DT, **Valley State** 34 forced fumbles, the most in Steelers’ history, 54.5 sacks, five straight Pro Bowls, three first team All-Pro honors.

AFC SOUTH

HOUSTON TEXANS

Jerome Mathis (2005-07), WR/KR, **Hampton**

Earned a Pro Bowl selection as a kick returner and was an All-Pro as a rookie with the Texans in 2005. Mathis recorded the third fastest, 40 time (4:26 seconds) ever at the NFL Combine. Only to be broken by Chris Johnson in 2008 and John Ross in 2017.

OTHERS:

– **Jacoby Jones** (2007-11), WR, **Lane** Drafted by Houston in the third round of the 2007 draft, Jones spent five seasons in Houston, contributing at receiver and as a returner. His best season with the Texans came in 2010, when he caught 51 passes for 562 yards and three touchdowns.

– **Corey Bradford** (2002-05), WR, **Jackson State** Former Green Bay Packer joined the Texans for their inaugural season and led the team with 697 receiving yards.

INDIANAPOLIS COLTS / BALTIMORE COLTS

Robert Mathis, DE, **Alabama A&M** - 2003-16

Selected in the fifth round of the 2003 draft, teamed with Dwight Freeney to form one of the best pass-rushing duos in the NFL. Mathis played with a chip on his shoulder because some scouts believed he would struggle at the next level because he went to a small college. Mathis is the Colts’ franchise leader in sacks (123) and was named to the Pro Bowl five times. His best season was in 2013 when he had 19.5 sacks.

OTHERS:

– **Willie Richardson** (1963-69, ’71), WR, **Jackson State** Had three good seasons from 1967-69, making two Pro Bowls and was All-Pro first team in 1967 when he had 860 yards and 8 touchdowns;

– **Antoine Bethea** (2006-13), S, **Howard** The sixth-round pick established himself as a starter as a rookie and played in 123 games over eight seasons with 806 tackles, 14 interceptions and two Pro Bowls.

JACKSONVILLE JAGUARS

Jimmy Smith, WR, **Jackson State** - 1995-2005

Smith was a second-round draft pick by Dallas in 1992 before joining the Jaguars and went on to become the franchise’s all-time leader in receptions, yards and TD catches. He had nine 1,000-yard seasons, including seven in a row (1996-2002), and made five Pro Bowls. His 12,287 yards receiving rank 23rd all-time in NFL history and is more than Charlie Joyner, Michael Irvin, Lance Alworth, and Don Maynard, all of whom are Hall of Famers.

OTHERS:

– **Rashawn Mathis** (2003-12), CB, **Bethune-Cookman** Holds Jaguar records for most interceptions (30), most return yards (512), most defensive TDs (3) and most passes defended (99). In 2006, collecting eight interceptions (tied for third in the league) and was voted to the Pro Bowl.

HOUSTON OILERS / TENNESSEE OILERS-TITANS

– **Robert Brazile** (1975-84), LB, **Jackson State**

He never missed a game during his career, starting all 147 of the Oilers’ games during his decade in the NFL. Ranks second to Gregg Bingham in franchise history with 1,281 career tackles. Earned seven consecutive Pro Bowl selections from 1976 through 1982 and was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 2018.

OTHERS:

– **Elvin Bethea** (1968-83), DL, **North Carolina A&T** Played 16 seasons for the Oilers, second only to Bruce Matthews, appeared in 210 regular-season games and another eight playoff contests. Recognized as the franchise’s career sack leader with 105 – including a team-record 17 in 1973. Inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 2003, Bethea earned one American Football League All-Star selection and seven Pro Bowl nods during his career.

– **Ken Houston** (1967-72), DB, **Prairie View A&M** Earned AFL All-Star or Pro Bowl status in five consecutive seasons after his rookie campaign. Recorded 25 interceptions as an Oiler and returned nine of them for touchdowns. Was traded to Washington in 1973 and earned seven more Pro Bowl nods in a row. Inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1986.

– **Steve McNair** (1999-2005), QB, **Alcorn State** - The Houston Oilers selected McNair with the No. 3 pick in the 1995 NFL draft. McNair helped lead Tennessee to a Super Bowl appearance in 1999, the franchise’s first season being known as the Titans. He went on to lead the Titans to three more playoff appearances and was named to three Pro Bowls. McNair’s best season was in 2003 when he led the NFL with a 100.4 passer rating and was named co-MVP with Peyton Manning.

– **Kenny Burroughs** (1971-81), WR, **Texas Southern** Led the Oilers in receiving yards eight times in 11 seasons. Led the NFL in receiving yards in 1975 and ranked second in 1977, earning Pro Bowl honors both seasons. Burroughs’ 408 catches and 6,906 receiving yards rank seventh and third, respectively, in franchise history. He scored 49 touchdowns as an Oiler.

AFC WEST

DENVER BRONCOS

Shannon Sharpe, TE, **Savannah State** - 1990-99, 2002-03

The Broncos have had plenty of success with players from smaller programs such as Rod Smith and **Billy Thompson**, but Sharpe leads the way. The Hall of Famer was selected in the seventh round of the 1990 draft. He arrived as a wide receiver, but was switched to tight end by Dan Reeves’ staff. He won three Super Bowl rings -- two with the Broncos, one with the Baltimore Ravens -- and was named to eight Pro Bowls. He was enshrined in the Pro Football Hall of Fame’s Class of 2011.

OTHERS:

– **Billy Thompson** (1969-81), DB, **Maryland Eastern Shore** Was a three-time Pro Bowl selection, an All-Pro selection in 1977 and was inducted into the Bronco Ring of Fame in 1987. Played all 13 years in Denver amassing 40 interceptions for team-best 794 yards.

– **Barney Chavous** (1973-85), DE, **South Carolina State** Was selected by the Broncos in the second round of the 1973 NFL draft and he went on to spend his entire 13-year career in Denver. Had 23 sacks in the four years the league started keeping those stats.

– **Al Dentons** (1964-70), WR, **Florida A&M** In seven years with Denver, caught 280 passes for 4,275 yards and 32 TDs. Best season was 1967 when he caught 46 passes for 899 yards and 11 TDs.

KANSAS CITY CHIEFS

Emmitt Thomas, CB, **Bishop** - 1966-78

In 1969 when Chiefs won the Super Bowl, Thomas led the AFL in interceptions with nine. In 1974, he led the NFL with 12 interceptions. He earned one AFL All-Star selection and four Pro Bowl nods during his career. Thomas holds Chiefs franchise records for career interceptions (58), single-season interceptions (12) and career interception return yards (927). He was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 2008 and returned as defensive backs coach from 2010 through 2018.

OTHERS:

– **BUICK Buchanan** (1963-75), DT, **Grambling State** First African-American to be No. 1 overall pick to the Chiefs in 1963. Had speed and strength at 6-7, 270. Batted down 16 passes in 1967, played in 182 games, 166 straight. He was named to the AFL All-Star Game from the 1964 through 1969 seasons and the Pro Bowl the following two seasons.

– **Willie Lanier** (1967-77), MLB, **Morgan State** Hard-hitting middle linebacker that set the standard for sideline-to-sideline play. Recorded 27 career interceptions, recovered 18 fumbles, second only to Derrick Thomas in franchise history. He played 149 games for the Chiefs, missing just five games during his career, and was enshrined into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1986.

– **Otis Taylor** (1965-75), WR, **Prairie View A&M** One of the most feared receivers in a league known for wide-open passing. He went to the AFL All-Star Game in the 1966 season and the Pro Bowl in the 1971 and 1972 seasons. Taylor ranks fifth in franchise history with 410 receptions and second with 7,306 receiving yards, behind only Tony Gonzalez. His spectacular 46-yard touchdown reception in Super Bowl IV, in which he humbled two would-be tacklers, was called “the signature play in team history” by legendary owner Lamar Hunt.

– **Albert Lewis** (1983-93), CB, **Grambling State** Registered 38 interceptions to rank fifth on the team’s career list. He was selected to four consecutive Pro Bowls from 1987 through 1990 and holds the franchise record with 10 career blocked punts.

SAN DIEGO / LOS ANGELES CHARGERS

Charlie Joiner, WR, **Grambling State** - 1976-86

Had the most productive of his 18 years with the Chargers, exceeding 1,000 yards receiving in a season four times and going to three Pro Bowls (1976, 1979–80). Joiner was selected All-Pro in 1980 and 2nd Team All-AFC in 1976.

OTHERS:

– **Gary “Big Hands” Johnson** (1975-84), DT, **Grambling State** Finished his career with 67 sacks, which was most in team history at that time. His 17.5 sacks in 1980 still stand as the high-water mark for single-season sacks. He was a four-time All-Pro and a four-time Pro Bowl selection. With **Harold Jackson’s** retirement after 1983, Joiner became the NFL’s active leader in receiving yards, then 4th all-time. He remained the league leader for his three remaining seasons, breaking Don Maynard’s all-time record of 11,834 yards in Week 5 of 1986. He finished his 18 AFL/NFL seasons with 750 receptions for 12,146 yards (16.2 average per catch) and 65 touchdowns. He retired as the then-NFL leader in career receptions, yards, and games played by a wide receiver (239).

– **Speedy Duncan** (1963-70), DB/KR, **Jackson State** A multiple threat as a corner and return specialist, Duncan had the most combined punt and kickoff return yards in team history. He was a three-time all-AFL selection.

– **Doug Wilkerson** (1971-84), OT, **North Carolina Central** Made the Pro Bowl three straight years (1980–82) and was also named All-Pro in 1982. Retired with the second most games played in Chargers history.

OAKLAND / LOS ANGELES / LAS VEGAS RAIDERS

Art Shell, OT, **Maryland State** - 1968-94

Shell participated in 24 playoff contests, including Super Bowls XI and XV, and was named to eight Pro Bowls and was elected to the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1989. In 1999, he was ranked number 55 on The Sporting News’ list of the 100 Greatest Football Players. He played all of his 15 years in Oakland and was a major part of two Raiders Super Bowl victories.

OTHERS:

– **Willie Brown** (1967-78), CB, **Grambling State** Served as defensive captain for 10 of his 12 years with the team. He was named to five AFL All-Star games and four NFL Pro Bowls. He was also named All-AFL three times and All-NFL four times. Brown was selected to the American Football League All-Time Team and was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame on July 28, 1984, his first year of eligibility. In 1999, he was ranked number 50 on The Sporting News’ list of the 100 Greatest Football Players, making him the highest-ranking Raiders player.

– **Raymond Chester** (1978-81), WR/TE, **Morgan State** Was elected to four Pro Bowls during his time with the Raiders. He also started on their Super Bowl XL winning squad. With his 42 receptions, 556 yards, and 7 touchdowns, Chester’s performance earned him the NFL Rookie of the Year and his first of four Pro Bowl selections.

– **George Atkinson**, DB, **Morris Brown** Set the Raiders’ single-game record for punt return yardage in 1968, with 205 yards against Buffalo. He ranks fifth on the Raiders all-time interception list with 30.

– **Henry Lawrence**, OT, **Florida A&M** Played on all three Raiders Super Bowl winning teams. Lawrence was a Pro Bowler twice during his 13-year career

– **Clem Daniels** (1961-67), RB, **Prairie View A&M** Spent seven years with Raiders as an AFL All-Star in 1963, 1964, 1965 and 1966. In 1963, Daniels was The Sporting News American Football League Player of the Year, with a 5.1 yards/carry average, gaining 1,099 yards. He was the All-Time leading rusher in the American Football League and was selected to the All-Time All-AFL Team.



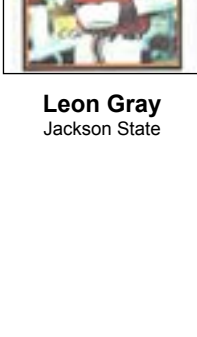
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