



Donovan McNabb walks off the field after missing a two-point conversion against the New York Giants.

McNabb still working on improving his game

By Rob Maadi
ASSOCIATED PRESS WRITER

PHILADELPHIA — Tom Couch has done it. So has Daunte Culpepper and Akili Smith and Cade McNown and Shaun King.

Each member of the Class of 1999 quarterbacks has had a really big game except for one — Donovan McNabb.

McNabb, the second quarterback selected and No. 2 overall pick last year, posted his first 200-yard game Sunday in a 33-18 loss to the New York Giants. But, 177 of his 214 yards came in the second half after the Giants took a 20-3 lead.

"Donovan did some good things, and there are some things that he could take out of this and work on," Eagles coach Andy Reid said. "It was a little bit here, and a little bit there, good and bad, and he knows it. He's very realistic about this thing and we'll get that worked on."

The Eagles are 3-5 in McNabb's eight starts. His best game came against Washington last season when he was 16-of-28 for 172 yards, two touchdowns and no interceptions. He also ran for 71 yards. But, the Eagles lost 20-17.

McNabb had three touchdowns in 38-31 victory over St. Louis in the regular season

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Eagles coach

finale. But, the Rams played their junior varsity in the second half and McNabb was only 15-of-32 for 179 yards and two interceptions.

Until he proves he can beat teams in the air, defenses will continue to focus on shutting down Duce Staley and daring McNabb to throw.

"I love it," McNabb said. "It's a challenge on my part."

McNabb may eventually prove to be the best of the group. He has all the physical tools — a strong arm and excellent speed. He also has the intangibles — a solid work ethic, tremendous poise and maturity.

But, it hasn't translated into a really big game yet. Not like the others.

Couch, the No. 1 pick in '99, had a three-touchdown, no interception game against New Orleans, and a 19-for-35, 262-yard, two-touchdown game against Tennessee last season.

He was 19-of-31 for 259 yards and two touchdowns in Cleveland's 24-7 victory at Cincinnati on Sunday.

Smith, the No. 3 pick in '99, started just four games last year while battling injuries. Even though his 55.6 rating was the lowest among the six rookie quarterbacks, he did have a 25-for-42, 221-yard, two-touchdown, no-interception game against the Browns.

McNown, selected 12th overall by Chicago, had a three-touchdown, 272-yard performance against Washington and a 255-yard, one-touchdown game against the Eagles among his first six starts.

He was superb in the season opener against Minnesota. McNown threw for 290 yards, two touchdowns and no interceptions, and rushed for 87 yards and one touchdown.

Culpepper, who did not take a snap last season after going to Minnesota at No. 11, is 2-0 as a starter.

He beat Chicago on the ground by running for three touchdowns in the opener, and beat Miami in the air with a 355-yard performance on Sunday.

Even King, who was selected in the second round and 50th overall by Tampa Bay, had more success than McNabb.

King had a two-touchdown, 297-yard game against Detroit last year and threw a game-winning touchdown to beat Washington in the playoffs.

Meanwhile, McNabb is having difficulty finding open receivers.

"There were times the receivers and I weren't on the same page. There were times when we were on the same page, but they were covered," McNabb said in the aftermath of the loss to New York.

Still, Reid believes McNabb will develop into the franchise quarterback the organization expected he'd become when he passed on several trade offers and selected ninth with the second pick.

"He's better than he was at the end of last year. And he will do nothing but get better. This thing moves on," Reid said. "He's a competitor. He'll work on his game. Some times he's trying to make too much happen. I've seen that before. He'll learn, and he's going to get better. He sees this as a challenge."

Gator quarterback question left wide open; Palmer to start Saturday

By Doug Ferguson
ASSOCIATED PRESS WRITER

GAINESVILLE, Fla. — The Florida Gators last won a championship in 1956 — the last time made it through an entire season playing musical quarterbacks.

Heading into their first year, the issue is far from settled.

The starter in Saturday's Conference showdown at Tennessee will be Jesse Palmer, a sophomore who has started — but not in the Gators' first two games.

Coach Steve Spurrier has given resounding endorsement to "We sort of think Jesse is our quarterback," he said. "I hope to pick up his play a little bit there."

If he doesn't, Spurrier said, "I'd like to see freshman Rex Grossman start his debut with the first when Spurrier lost patience. Grossman responded with 20 down passes in a 55-0 win over Tennessee State.

There's also freshman Brock Berlin, who is supposed to be the first one off the bench last week.

"I don't know what I said? Three or four years ago?" Spurrier said, trying to explain why he changed his mind. "Maybe in practice he did look good. One of them looks better than the other one. Rex looks better than all of them."

"I think Jesse is our best quarterback to start there against Tennessee."

Palmer is the only Florida quarterback to have experience playing before 108,000 fans.

He started two years ago in Knoxville, completing his first 10 passes while alternating plays with Doug Johnson.

In the way the Gators have been playing the Heisman Trophy winner Danny Wuerffel guided them to their fourth SEC title and only national championship in four years ago. Back then, Spurrier was much easier.

The coach called the play. The quarterback threw the ball. Any number of blazing receivers caught it. And the band played.

"It's not as easy as it used to be," Spurrier said.

Palmer has started well in each of the first two games, both against overmatched teams.

But somewhere along the way, he has missed a read or a receiver, or both. The visor comes off Spurrier's head and the quarterback shuffle is on.

This one took root in the second quarter last week, when Palmer never saw Alex Willis break free in the secondary. Spurrier whirled around and had the following conversation with Grossman.

"Did you see Alex?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do you think you can hit him?"

"Yes, sir."

"Go in there and hit him."

Two plays later, the same number was called. Willis broke free. Grossman threw him the ball and the Gators scored on a 16-yard touchdown.

"If we think we've got a player better than the other one playing, we'll give him a chance," Spurrier said. "We don't like it like that particularly, but you've got to earn your way."

Until that point, Palmer was 13-of-23 for 139 yards and a touchdown. Grossman finished 9-of-14 for 95 yards and one interception. Two of his first three passes went for touchdowns.

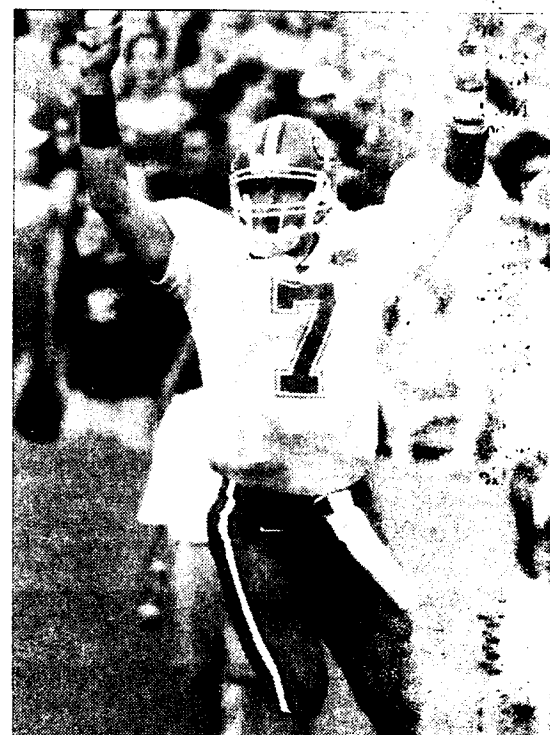
It's possible that Spurrier could go back to what he has done at different points in the last three games, sending in a new quarterback every play. It's not ideal, but it at least gives Spurrier a chance to give marching orders with hopes they will not be forgotten.

Palmer was on the defense the whole time, gripping the podium as he read on six occasions, that it was Spurrier's decision.

"I've done some good things and some bad things, too," Palmer said when asked to grade himself. "You'd have to ask coach. He could probably give you a better diagnosis. You just go along with it and prepare yourself to play, the same way I did the last two games."

Spurrier would rather Palmer prove himself — the sooner the better.

He hasn't had stability at quarterback since Wuerffel in 1996, and the Tennessee game tends to go a long way toward deciding championships.



Florida QB Jesse Palmer celebrates after a touchdown. His team played Middle Tennessee State.

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