

THE 2002 DRAFT • PLAYER PROFILES

Antwaan Randle El

Round: **2** (62nd Overall) • Pos.: **WR**
 • Ht.: **5-9** • Wt.: **191** • School: **Indiana**

By **JIM WEXELL**
 Digest Correspondent

Antwaan Randle El believes that he plays so many sports so well because it was the only way off the mean streets of his childhood.

The Steelers' No. 2 pick grew up on Chicago's South Side but steered his way into becoming an All-American type who's admired greatly in the Midwest. Even Bobby Knight likes the kid.

But All-American kids can have bad days, too, and the second Saturday of last season was one of those for Randle El. He took one misplay particularly hard. Randle El excoriated his team's kicker for missing a potential game-tying extra point in the fourth quarter. Indiana's student newspaper reported that Randle El "went Cris Carter on him. The players had to be separated."

It was a bad time to be an Indiana football player. Then-coach Cam Cameron had made a mistake that would cost him his job by the end of the season. He had moved Randle El, a three-year starter at quarterback, to wide receiver and the results were disastrous. Indiana lost the opener 35-14, and Randle El was moved back to quarterback immediately. Indiana sputtered to a 1-5 start before winning five of its final six games.

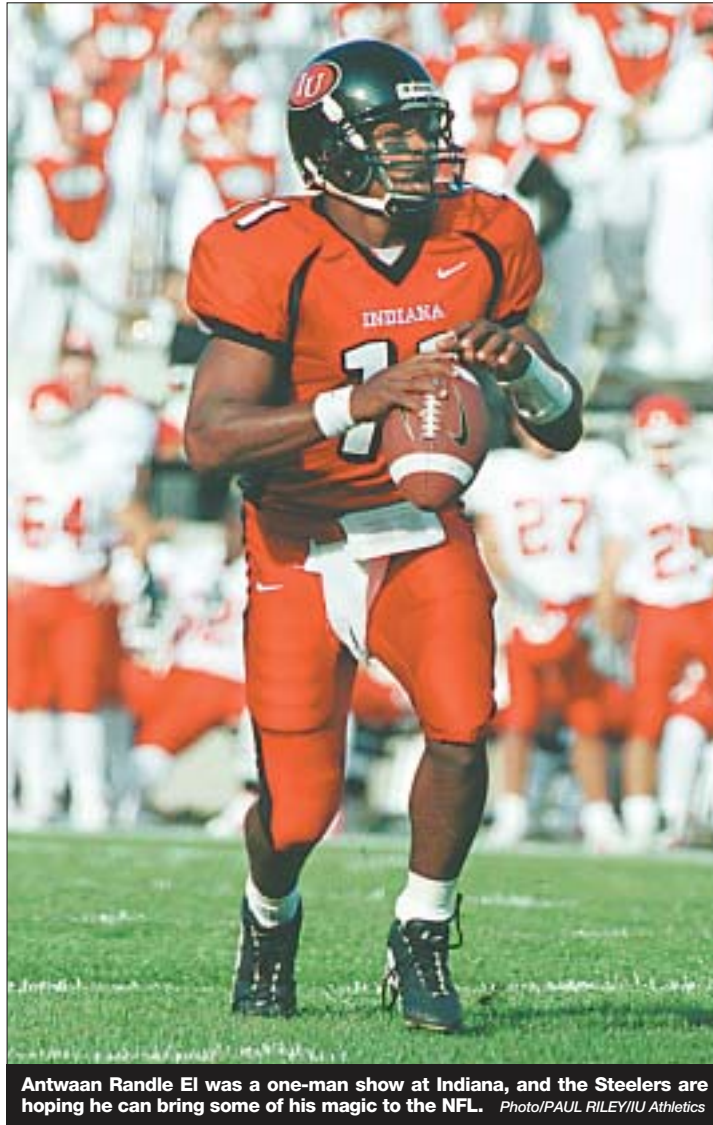
Both principals in what should have been the school's best season since 1993 have landed on their feet in the NFL. Cameron is the offensive coordinator for the San Diego Chargers, and Randle El is a wide receiver for the Steelers.

A wide receiver? Didn't Cameron explain that moving Randle El back to quarterback from wide receiver "was the most obvious decision in the history of the game"? Hasn't anyone learned any lessons here?

"You have to realize," said Steelers scout Mark Gorscak, "he was the only weapon Indiana had. He was the whole team, the whole show. The move to wide receiver probably shouldn't have been made in the first place. Everybody in the profession said it would last just about one game, and that's what happened. Here, he has a good cast, a veteran team. He obviously won't have to carry the team. At Indiana, he was the team."

Randle El caught four passes for 30 yards in his only official game as a wide receiver, yet the Steelers felt they needed to draft the 5-foot-10, 191-pounder in the second round.

All-around athlete brings unbridled enthusiasm



Antwaan Randle El was a one-man show at Indiana, and the Steelers are hoping he can bring some of his magic to the NFL. Photo/PAUL RILEY/IU Athletics

Even though he is a projection as a wide receiver, the Steelers didn't think Randle El would last until their next pick.

"The buzz was that the Rams wanted him to replace Az Hakim and that Cameron wanted him in San Diego," Gorscak said. "He would have been picked within a few spots if we hadn't taken him."

Gorscak explained why he believes Randle El will flourish in his new position.

"Remember growing up how there was always one kid who picked things up so quickly? Well, Antwaan is a natural athlete who's

good at everything. He picks up everything so easily. He's a bright kid, a sharp kid. That's the main reason — he's such a natural athlete."

Gorscak liked what Randle El did at the position in Indiana's opener and again in the Senior Bowl where he was named MVP.

"I liked the emotion he brought, and his route running. He has natural skills," Gorscak said. "All I know is he was the most fun guy I ever graded in seven years of scouting. He was a pleasure. He was fun. His emotion and energy leapt off the field. And I don't think

(playing) quarterback is out of the question. First, he has to learn wide receiver. Let him focus on one thing. His role will evolve as years go by."

Right now, Randle El will line up in the slot and return punts. And the scouting report on the latter?

"I think he's a little different than Jermaine Lewis," Gorscak said of the NFL's best return man. "But he's very quick with a good change of direction. I don't think he has great long-haul speed like Lewis has, but quickness, change of direction, suddenness — I think he's proven that."

"The kid has an upside. All he needs are repetitions to get better."

Repetitions are something Randle El has lacked throughout his athletic career, only because he's been spread so thin. He also played baseball and basketball at Indiana. In fact, he was a favorite of Knight's, who's notorious for being tough on his players.

"The kid's got a fantastic personality. His enthusiasm is a real key," Knight said of his point guard in 1998. "He has a desire to play and to play well. He really gives a lot of himself, and part of his personality is, I think, he expects a lot from others. It's very evident in the way he's played with the football team."

Injuries curtailed Randle El's basketball career. Mounting studies forced the former 14th-round draft pick of the Chicago Cubs to abandon the baseball team. He was a center fielder who could run and throw.

As for his personality, Randle El has been an inspiration to kids in the Midwest because of his gracious climb to stardom out of a very tough neighborhood.

"He is an apple-a-day, peanut-butter-and-jelly, apple-pie kind of kid," said Rocky Hill, Randle El's basketball coach and principal at Thornton Township High School. "He's the type of kid everyone looked up to. Everyone liked Antwaan. He had this charisma that made everyone follow him."

Big Ten defenders have said tackling Randle El is like tackling smoke, but a columnist for *The Detroit News* may have summed him up best, though. After Randle El passed for 147 yards and ran for 134 against Michigan State, he wrote: "If Barry Sanders was a quarterback, this is what he would look like."

Another projection worth watching.