

Ex-teammate convinced Oher to stay

QB Snead glad lineman listened to Willis

By Scott Cacciola

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OXFORD, Miss. -- Ole Miss junior left tackle Michael Oher had been convinced for several weeks that he would forgo his senior season and enter the NFL Draft. On Monday, he even made his decision official by contacting Ole Miss sports information director Langston Rogers, who posted the news on the school's Web site. Oher was gone, long gone.

"I was out of here," Oher said.

But sometime between Monday and Wednesday -- Oher cannot recall when, exactly -- he heard from friends that Patrick Willis, a rookie linebacker with the San Francisco 49ers and a former Ole Miss teammate, had some opinions about Oher's future. So Oher telephoned Willis, and the two shared a lengthy and productive conversation.

Willis, who had been projected to be a second- or third-round pick after his junior season, opted to return for his senior year, which proved an astute decision. After winning the Butkus Award as the country's top linebacker, Willis was drafted 11th overall and signed a \$16.7-million deal. He told Oher that he should consider returning to school.

"He told me that I'd be all right if I was to come out, I'm one of the best out there," Oher said. "But if I was to come back, give it another shot this year, I'd have a chance to be an even higher, top-10, top-5 type guy. So I listened to him a little bit, and it played a little role."

Underclassmen who declared had until today to withdraw their names from the draft, and Oher took advantage of the window. He met with reporters at the Indoor Practice Facility on Thursday afternoon, one day after he announced that he had changed his mind: Oher is back at Ole Miss for one final season, and at least one teammate seemed excited.

"Just a big smile on my face," said quarterback Jevan Snead, who should benefit from Oher's protection. "Sigh of relief. Not having to worry about getting killed is a great thing. It just gives you a lot more confidence back there knowing you have time to

throw."

It has been an eventful week for Ole Miss football. In addition to Oher's flip-flop, coach Houston Nutt hired former Ole Miss quarterback Kent Austin to be his offensive coordinator. Austin recently coached the Saskatchewan Roughriders of the Canadian Football League to the Grey Cup Championship, and Snead, who sat out last season after transferring from Texas, said he feels hopeful that Austin, a product of the wide-open CFL, will want to spread the field and pass the football.

"That's great for me, because that's what I'm used to," said Snead, who added that he has met four or fives times with Nutt. "He said it's going to be a pro-style offense, but he's not afraid to spread it out and even go deep. We're going to throw it."

Snead had not spoken with reporters since Nutt was hired in November, and questions had lingered: Was Snead concerned about the coaching situation? Was he unhappy?

"I was never going anywhere," Snead said. "This is my team. This is my home now so I'm excited about it no matter who the coach is going to be. I'm glad it's Houston Nutt. I couldn't be more excited. I can't wait to play for him."

Snead underwent arthroscopic surgery on his right knee in November, and he said he expects to be 100 percent by the start of spring practices in March.

As for Oher, he had spent recent weeks working out at D1 Sports Training in Nashville alongside former Arkansas standouts Peyton Hillis and Marcus Monk. Oher said they were surprised to learn that he had decided to return to school. But his time in Nashville was productive; he went from 334 pounds to 317.

"I'm faster," said Oher, a first-team All-SEC selection last season. "For me, it's very important to come back and win some games, because that hasn't happened before. I'm looking forward to it. We've got a good group of guys, and I think we can get the job done with a good coach."

When Oher changed his mind about the draft, the first person he called was Sue Mitchell, his tutor. Then he called his father, Sean Tuohy. Oher flew from Nashville to Oxford on Wednesday afternoon.

"When I touched down in Oxford, I just felt comfortable, like I was back at home," Oher said. "It felt good to sleep in my bed again."

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