

# Character more important than ever to teams

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INDIANAPOLIS — Tennessee Titans general manager Mike Reinfeldt said off-the-field conduct is more important than ever for teams considering prospects at the combine.

"I think character has become a bigger and bigger thing," he said. "I think the money's a part of it. I think the clubs and coaches are very, very careful."

Adam "Pacman" Jones, the Titans' star cornerback, has been one of the most troubled players in the league in recent years. Commissioner Roger Goodell suspended Jones for the 2007 season for his off-field conduct. The sixth pick in the 2005 draft has been arrested six times since being drafted.

Jones is prohibited from working out at the Tennessee Titans' facility and may not be reinstated until at least the opening of training camps in July. Teams want to avoid such scenarios by doing their homework on troubled prospects before draft day.

"I think part of the process is getting as much information as you can gain," Reinfeldt said. "I think it's understanding all the facts as to what happened. It also involves interviewing the young man. From there, it's a gut call."

Reinfeldt wouldn't say if Jones' uncertain status would affect the way his team drafts. The Titans have the 24th pick.

"Our cornerbacks did a good job for us last year," he said. "You can never get enough good corners. You get too many good corners, somebody's going to be happy to trade for them."

## Extra motivation

Clemson defensive end Phillip Merling is skipping his senior season, but not just because he's anxious to start his pro career.

"I decided to come out early because I have a little daughter and fiancée," he said. "(My fiancée is) about to graduate from the University of South Carolina, so I thought it would be a perfect time."

Justice, Merling's 1-year-old, was the key consideration.

"If it wasn't for my daughter and stuff like that, I probably would have stayed another year in school and finished up and graduated," he said.

Merling, who is considered one of the top five defensive end prospects in the draft, is confident he's making the right move.

"I think I'm ready to play in the NFL," he said. "I just said, 'It's probably a good time to leave.'"

## Long memories

Defensive end Chris Long of Virginia has yet to meet Oakland Raiders owner Al Davis in the pre-draft process. The Raiders select fourth, and Long could be one of the top picks.

But Long does have some youthful memories related to Davis. When his father, Hall of Fame defensive end Howie Long, played for the Raiders, a young Chris engaged in some subterfuge to violate Davis' policy that family members couldn't visit with players at certain times. He remembers his mom telling him to duck down in the back seat of the car so could sneak in to see his dad without anybody noticing.

"Don't tell Al Davis that I said that," he said with a laugh.