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“MAN”NING of NEW YORK

By Patricia Traina

Not since Giants fans were heard asking “Phil who?” has a Big Blue first round draft pick generated this much excitement and intrigue.

The source is 23 year-old Elisha Nelson (Eli) Manning, former Mississippi standout, the son of Archie, the brother of Indianapolis’ Peyton – and the Giants’ future.

The youngest Manning in a successful football family comes to New York as the number one overall pick in the 2004 draft via a trade with San Diego in what made for interesting drama.

In the weeks leading up to the draft, the 6-5, 230 lbs. Manning made it known that he would not sign with San Diego, who held the first overall pick and, who despite coveting North Carolina State QB Phillip Rivers, never backed down from Manning’s threats to boycott the season if the club selected him.

As luck would have it, the Giants were able to work out a trade with the Chargers shortly before the fourth overall selection was announced. In order to get their quarterback of the future, the Giants selected and then traded the rights to Rivers, plus their 2003 third round pick, and their first and fifth picks in next year’s draft.

The deal was the talk of the draft, as many questioned whether the Giants gave up too much for the player they feel can be the cornerstone of their offense for many years to come.

However, new Giants head coach Tom Coughlin scoffed at that idea considering what the club stands to get in return. “When you go through this process and the number one player on the board is within striking distance, as a franchise, you exercise every option you can to see whether that player could be a New York Giant.”

Added GM Ernie Accorsi, who last created a buzz this big with a draft pick back in 1983 when as general manager of the Baltimore Colts he ignored the similar pre-draft threats of Stanford QB John Elway, whom Accorsi not only drafted, but who also sees similarity between the newest Hall of Famer and the youngster he hopes will one day join Elway in Canton.

“He has size, arm, tremendous athletic ability, poise, class and probably more important than the obvious physical attributes that you have is the fact that he lifted his team,” an

enthused Accorsi said after the trade was made. "I thought this year in particular he made his teammates play better and that is an element that a lot of the top quarterbacks have."

For Manning, who politely refuses to discuss his reasons for not wanting to play for San Diego (it's been rumored that his father Archie did not want to see his youngest son end up with an organization whose front office and coaching staff appear to have shaky futures), news of the trade to the storied Giants franchise quickly turned the youngster's forced smile he gave when he posed with the Chargers jersey after the pick was announced into a real one.

And when he made his first appearance at Giants Stadium just hours after the deal that sent shockwaves across the country was made public, he was enthusiastically greeted by the fans gathered for the team's annual draft day party with chants of "Eli! Eli! Eli!"

Proudly wearing his new Giants cap and his new jersey number ten – given to him by veteran punter Jeff Feagles, who wore the number last year – Manning met the New York media and acknowledged that there's a lot of work to be done as he takes over for the since released Kerry Collins.

"I've seen how hard Peyton prepared and how much work and dedication he puts into football to be a successful quarterback, so I know what it takes," he said. "You have to keep working hard, keep trying to get better and learn from all the mistakes and learn from every experience you get in the first year."

And what about the pressures of helping the Giants reverse the fortunes of 4-12 season and winning over his veteran teammates, many of whom publicly came out with their support of Collins in the days before the draft?

"I think he will be able to handle it," said his father, Archie. "It is a huge transition and I am not sure what kind of disposition a person needs to handle this best, but he is a pretty level guy and he knows hard work got him to this point. And he won't stop that."

"Obviously dealing with pressure that is something I have been used to," added the rookie, nicknamed "Easy" for his laid back demeanor. "I've been under the limelight and under pressure a lot following in Peyton and my Dad's footsteps. And I don't worry about pressure."

That's fine with his Manning's new teammates, who desperately want to rebound from last year's 4-12 fiasco. And to make sure that Manning has no more pressure than usual, his teammates are prepared to step up and help their new offensive leader adjust to life in the NFL.

"We're going to throw all the stats out from previous years and rally around Eli," said WR Ike Hilliard, referring to the stats which say that rookie quarterbacks typically struggle early in their careers. "The onus is on us now as a veteran playmaking group. We all have to make Eli's job a bit easier."

“I think it's always a challenge when you're playing football in this league to succeed despite the odds,” added RB Tiki Barber. “That's not going to be easy, but what worth doing is?”

But is Manning really ready to take over as starter from day one? “I think he'll be ready very shortly,” said Coughlin. “It's not an easy league to just walk right into. But the talent, the ability, the pedigree, being able to perform under pressure, and all those things are there.”

Manning himself is optimistic about his future with the Giants. “I like the organization,” he said. “I think things will work out here.”

The Giants and their fans are counting on it.

{Sidebar Text Follows}

The Skinny on Eli Manning

Elisha "Eli" Manning

Height: 6-5

Weight: 221

College: Mississippi

Wonderlic: 39

Birthdate: Jan. 3, 1981

Hometown: New Orleans, LA

- Redshirted in 1999 and was a backup in 2000.
- Was starting quarterback from 2001-2003 and now holds 45 school, game, season and career records, including most touchdown passes (79), a mark previously set by his father.
- Earned the *Maxwell* (nation's top college athlete) and the *Johnny Unitas Golden Arm* (nation's top senior quarterback) in 2003.
- Marketing major who made the Chancellor's Honor Roll in Fall of 1999 and Fall of 2002, the Dean's Honor Roll in Spring of 2000 and Fall of 2000, the U.M.A.A. Honor Roll in Spring of 2001, Spring of 2002 and Spring of 2003

SCOUTING REPORT

Positives

Has a very smooth set-up and delivery and gets the ball out quickly, seldom with any wasted motion. He has a good arm and most scouts believe it's a livelier arm than brother Peyton. Has good touch and timing, and throws a nice spiral.

Accurate with the short to intermediate passes. Self-described pocket passer who has good agility in the pocket and who can throw accurately on the move when flushed out. More mobile than his brother.

Keeps his poise in tight situations, and makes good decisions. Is comfortable when called upon to audibilize and knows when to put the ball away and run. Reads opposing defenses well and picks up blitzes quickly.

Negatives

Forces throws into tight coverage at times. Doesn't quite have a rocket arm, but does have a good feel in the pocket, a quick release, and shows tremendous intelligence in decision making. Seems a little less intense than brother Peyton. Needs to improve his deep ball accuracy but has the arm to get it there. Definitely needs to get stronger in his upper body to better absorb hits.

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