

COMMENTARY

Buccaneers go for complete remodeling on defense

BY JOHN ROMANO
Tampa Bay Times

TAMPA, FLA.

The pass rush is always fierce in May. Linebackers are all Pro Bowl-bound in April.

That's just the way it works in the NFL, where hope springs eternal while the scoreboard is unplugged.

And so it is around One Buc Place, where the defense has gotten an infusion of draft picks and out-of-warranty free agents in the past couple of months.

The front-office types see potential. They see passion. They see size, versatility and a dash of nastiness.

And what should you see?

A fresh start.

For now, that's enough.

There may be a half-dozen familiar faces in the huddle come September, but, make no mistake, this is a new defense. New linemen, new linebackers, new defensive backs. All three levels of the defense will have a fresh look, and that's an excellent start considering the way 2025 ended.

It wasn't the most woeful defense we've ever seen in



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Rueben Bain Jr., right, of Miami poses with NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell after being selected 15th overall pick by the Tampa Bay Buccaneers during Round One of the 2026 NFL Draft at Acrisure Stadium on April 23, 2026, in Pittsburgh

Tampa Bay, but it was the worst in quite some time. The Bucs gave up nearly 26 points per game in the final two months of the season while stumbling to a 2-7 finish.

Specifically, the Bucs had one of the worst pass defenses in the league. They couldn't get pressure from the edge, and the linebackers couldn't cover tight ends or slot receivers.

Worst of all, none of that was surprising.

Since 2023, no NFL defense has given up more passing yards than Tampa Bay. If you're the optimistic type, you could also point out that no defense has given up fewer yards on the ground than the Bucs during that time. But is that because the Bucs are great run-stoppers or because teams just know it's easier

to attack them through the air?

Considering how much revamping has gone on this offseason, the Bucs may have answered that question for you.

Essentially, they wanted to make opponents less comfortable – less confident – in passing situations.

With that in mind, they drafted Rueben Bain Jr. to be the edge rusher this

team has lacked since Shaquill Barrett was in his prime. They signed linebacker Alex Anzalone to provide better pass coverage over the middle. They drafted Keionte Scott for the all-important nickel position.

Throw in interior linemen like free agent A'Shawn Robinson and fifth-round pick DeMonte Capehart, along with rookie linebacker Josiah Trotter and veteran linebackers Christian Rozeboom and Al-Quadin Muhammad, and you have the potential for a lot of new faces on Sunday afternoons.

Or, here's another way of looking at it:

Of the 20 players with the most snaps on defense last season, 40% are no longer here, including Lavonte David, Jamel Dean, Logan Hall, Christian Izien and Haason Reddick. And SirVocea Dennis, who started 16 games at linebacker, will be hard-pressed to find regular playing time.

What the Bucs were looking for in the draft was production over potential. They cared more about what game tapes looked like instead of what the measurables suggested at the combine. For instance, neither Bain nor Trotter have elite 40 times, but both are exceptionally quick in short bursts, and that shows up on film.

And while Scott is undersized and older than the typical rookie — he'll be 25 by the season opener — he excelled in almost every

way imaginable at Miami. He had two interceptions, five sacks, 13 tackles for loss and two forced fumbles.

Does any of that guarantee a return to the glory days of defense in Tampa Bay?

Of course not.

The Bucs have drafted edge rushers (Chris Braswell and Joe Tryon-Shoyinka) who didn't work out. They signed free agents (Reddick and Akiem Hicks) who turned out to be expensive busts. They've had a revolving door in the secondary with eight players chosen in the second or third round in the seven drafts from 2018-24.

At one point or another, all of those players had similar expectations to Bain, Trotter and Scott.

But there is one basic difference:

This offseason feels like an acknowledgment that something drastic was necessary. This is more like remodeling instead of adding a few accent pillows.

With 2025 draft picks Jacob Parrish and Benjamin Morrison expected to compete for Dean's outside corner position and Calijah Kancey hopeful of staying on the field after missing most of last season with a torn pectoral, the Bucs could look dramatically different.

Now, it's true that new doesn't automatically mean better.

But considering Tampa Bay's pass defense the past few years, it's hard to imagine it being any worse.

COMMENTARY

Rookie linebacker Bain sets tone at Buccaneers minicamp

BY RICK STROUD
Tampa Bay Times/The Tribune Content Agency

Rueben Bain Jr. stepped off the bus first at the AdventHealth Training Center on Thursday wearing a No. 99 Bucs jersey backward so one word hit first: SAPP.

The message was impossible to miss.

Bain and Warren Sapp both came out of Miami. Both arrived in Tampa Bay as first-round picks charged with bringing violence, swagger and disruption to the defensive line. So before Bain even took a rep at rookie minicamp, he made sure everyone knew whose path he was chasing.

"It was a sense of pride," Bain said. "Everybody can see the Sapp and see the No. 99 for the Bucs. It speaks to the brotherhood we have at the University of Miami. ... This is home for me."

Then the first rookie minicamp workout came Friday and Bain backed up the statement. He didn't look like a rookie edge rusher. He looked like a tone-setter.

"He looked like he was in midseason form," head coach Todd Bowles said.

Bain led the Bucs outside linebackers through a series of drills on the blocking sled. His ability to bend low to the ground was on display during the hoop drill. He was so explosive getting off the snap that he routinely beat blockers around the edge for would-be sacks.

To put it mildly, Bain didn't perform like a rookie. It became clear during the 90-minute practice that he wasn't taking a single rep at anything less than full speed.

"No, he's not, and he brings a certain attitude to your defense, obviously," Bowles said. "We tried to get a couple of those guys in here this year, obviously with Bain, A'Shawn (Robinson's) attitude. You're talking about the newcomers, (Josiah) Trotter and Keionte (Scott) as well along with (Calijah) Kancey and all the guys we already have on defense. It just brings them closer together and makes them push each

other to work harder."

Bain said he had some modest goals entering rookie minicamp. "Establishing (trust with) my coaches," he said. "Trusting my teammates. Showing why they picked me. Being the player they had expectations for when they took me in the draft."

As he has done for much of his coaching career, Bowles played quarterback during the defensive install period at practice.

"I can see defensively who has a vein in their head and may need to see it again," Bowles said. "Or if they do the wrong thing, I can put it into a formation to where they learn from it and correct mistakes better that way. I can see everybody's eyes and I can see everybody's face and it's more for me - not to play quarterback - but for me to see the entire picture and know who needs it again and who may miss something."

"When a coach is telling them something and they still got a vein in their head, they didn't comprehend, so I'll probably need to run that play again so they can get that. It's a good view for me to see whether they're getting it or not."

Clearly, Bain picked things up quickly. The Bucs may have been surprised that he was still available with the No. 15 overall pick, but what he demonstrated during his first NFL practice did not shock them.

"Obviously, he's from Miami so he's going to be practicing in the heat where a lot of the other guys are going to struggle adjusting to this weather," Bowles said. "It didn't bother him at all. He came in in great shape, and he ran around well, and he's kind of picked up some things very well."

Let's be clear about one thing. Bain isn't trying to compare himself to Sapp, a first-ballot Pro Football Hall of Famer. But he also isn't afraid to continue to try and meet the standard set by him at Miami and now Tampa Bay.

"He's got an old soul, so to speak," Bowles said of Bain. "He understands his lineage. He understands the guys that came before him.

They've got a lot of great players down at the University of Miami, as well as the high schools down there, as well as he grew up around all those guys. He grew up around Teddy Bridgewater and Lavonte (David) and Kancey and all those guys himself.

"He understands tempo, he understands pace, he understands how to play hard. He understands to pay homage to the guys that come before him and were down there and he patterns his game like that."

For Bain, there is the work he will have to put in as a rookie on the defensive line. Then there is his lineage. He takes pride in both.

Broncos, Chiefs to kick off 2026 season on MNF

Field Level Media

The Kansas City Chiefs and Denver Broncos take their AFC West rivalry to primetime in the opening "Monday Night Football" game of the 2026 season.

The location was not yet announced.

Chiefs quarterback Patrick Mahomes is work-

ing his way back from a torn ACL and has targeted a return for the Week 1 matchup.

Broncos quarterback Bo Nix also ended his season with an injury that required surgery. Head coach Sean Payton said Nix is expected to be "full speed" for training camp after two procedures on his ankle.

Denver swept the Chiefs last season and won the division for the first time since 2015, the last time the Broncos won the Super Bowl.

Kansas City won the West from 2016-24 but finished in third place in the division in 2025.

The Chiefs were rumored to be under consideration to visit the Seahawks in the NFL Opening Night game that features the defending Super Bowl champions.

The NFL has not announced Seattle's opponent with the full NFL schedule to be released Thursday night.

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