



PHOTOGRAPH BY AL DIAZ adiaz@miamiherald.com

Dolphins players huddle during the first day of rookie minicamp on Friday.

COMMENTARY

Journey to NFL dream begins and ends at rookie camp

BY OMAR KELLY
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Imagine a place of employment where everyone in the building is laboring to live out their childhood dream.

Whether they were a draft pick, earlier or later than expected.

Or maybe signed as an undrafted rookie free agent. Some could simply be tryout players such as former Florida State quarterback Thomas Castellanos, who was working at receiver during this week's Miami Dolphins rookie camp with the goal of impressing enough to get signed.

From this point on everything they do has a different weight to it because these athletes either succeed, becoming an NFL player, or their NFL dream dies, forcing them to find a new career path.

"It's been such a special moment because we've worked so hard to get here," Kady Proctor, the Dolphins' 2026 first-round pick, told the assembled media at the conclusion of rookie camp's first day.

"I loved it," Proctor said, referring to the work the new Dolphins put in under a relatively warm day, which featured a heat index in the low 90s.

Proctor bragged about properly hydrating himself before practice, which is something past and present Dolphins coaches and trainers annually lecture the newcomers about to avoid dehydration, and the use of intravenous fluids.

"I feel so good honestly, especially [wearing] my number," Proctor said, brushing the front of his 74 jersey, which happens to be the number he wore as a three-year starter at the University of Alabama. "I got my number!"

This weekend is about more than the professional jersey they are sporting for their new team. This is the beginning of a childhood dream achieved.

"This is everything, and more," said tight end Seydou Traore, a French-born member of the NFL's International Pathway Program, which got Miami granted a roster exemption for him.

They will be measured, timed, run through conditioning work after the on-field position work and then required to go lift weights.

Then they review the session and learn plays for the next day's installation on the team's newly issued tablet.

No more classwork for grades, like in college.

These grades determine how long your professional career lasts, how much money a player can potentially earn, and if they will get a shot to become a rookie starter, like so many of the Dolphins draftees can.

Welcome NFL rookie. Better learn quickly because Proctor, corner-

back Chris Johnson, inside linebacker Jacob Rodriguez, tight end Will Kacmarek, receivers Caleb Douglas and Kevin Coleman Jr., and maybe Michael Taaffe or another draftee, will be needed immediately to begin Miami's full-scale rebuild.

The runway is open for more than half a dozen of these rookies to become starters in 2026 considering Miami's two vacancies on the starting offensive line, three vacancies at receiver, and an opening for an in-line tight end role.

The Dolphins also must find two defensive ends who can set the edge, three cornerbacks capable of starting in the NFL and two starting safeties.

That's a long list of needs, and that's before injuries begin to dilute an already watered-down roster, which is composed of 24 rookies and three dozen minimum salary players looking to make a name for themselves, or find contributing roles in Miami.

"I'm trying to learn as much as I can, put my head down and grind," said Taaffe, whom the Dolphins drafted in the fifth round.

"We need to learn from scratch. Nobody knows more than they should," Taaffe continued. "Just got to put your head down and grind. [Best way] to get respect is with your work ethic. It's about what you do on the field, not what you say."

Then there are those fighting and clawing to extend their NFL dream, such as Mason Reiger, who signed as a rookie free agent because his draft stock tanked because of medical evaluation.

In 2024 Reiger sustained what one doctor recommended should have been a career-ending knee injury he suffered at Louisville, which required a skin-and-bone graft.

He transferred to Wisconsin to continue his collegiate career and shined at Wisconsin as a starter. He signed in the East-West Shrine bowl, winning the Defensive Player of the Week honors.

Unfortunately, nothing he did stood out more than the medical report on his knee.

That's why he wasn't drafted. But the Dolphins were the most aggressive team when it came to signing him, giving the edge rusher \$250,000 of guaranteed money in his two-year contract.

"Some doctor thought I should take it into consideration, and I personally didn't agree with that," Reiger said. "I just have full confidence in my physical health, the ability to move on and continue playing football."

"The fact that I wasn't drafted means I haven't done enough."

One more football lifer fighting for his dream.

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