

Duke's Jamison Crowder on verge of NFL dream

Laura Keeley - newsobserver.com

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Jamison Crowder first started dreaming of the NFL in fourth grade, when he started playing football.

This weekend, that dream will become a reality.

Crowder, the ACC's leader in career pass receptions, could hear his name called Friday in the NFL draft. Analysts project him to go in the 3-5 round range. The second and third rounds are Friday night, and the draft finishes with rounds 4-7 Saturday afternoon.

Crowder, along with offensive guard Laken Tomlinson (projected as a late first or second-round pick) will give the Blue Devils multiple picks in the same draft for the first time since 2004. Offensive tackle Takoby Cofield has a chance to be a late-round pick as well.

Crowder started playing football in a Charlotte-area league near his hometown of Monroe, and he quickly realized he was one of the best players. That's when the NFL dream began. And it was after his sophomore year at Duke, when he caught 108 passes for 1,360 yards (part of 1,832 all-purpose yards) that he realized it was more than just a dream — it was a legitimate possibility.

"Once I got a little comfortable playing my sophomore year and made a lot of plays, I felt like if I kept up the hard work and kept on the task and course that I was going, I thought that I would have an opportunity to play at the next level," Crowder said.

At 5-foot-8, 185 pounds, Crowder lacks ideal NFL size. But watch the film from his career at Duke — 283 catches for 3,641 yards and 23 touchdowns, in addition to four touchdowns as a punt returner—and his NFL potential becomes clear.

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After Duke's season ended with a 36-31 loss to Arizona State in the Sun Bowl, Crowder went to Tampa to train at the Performance Compound. He turned heads with his performances in Senior Bowl practices in January, especially on the first day in Mobile, Ala. At the February NFL Combine in Indianapolis, he had trouble with his takeoff in the 40-yard dash and ran a disappointing 4.56 — tied for the 27th-fastest time among 39 receivers who ran. A month later at Duke's pro day in front of representatives from 29 NFL teams, he ran better, posting a 4.46 and 4.48, according to NFL.com (the 4.46 would have ranked him tied for 17th at the Combine).

Since then, Crowder had worked out for representatives from the New England Patriots, Tampa Bay Buccaneers and Houston Texans on campus at Duke. He went to Charlotte to work out for the Panthers on a day the team hosted local prospects, and last week he visited the Atlanta Falcons to tour their facilities and work out. He was prepared for the worst for the individual workouts, expecting grueling sessions, but he was pleasantly surprised when they were just garden-variety workouts instead.

Crowder caught up with former teammates and current NFL players Matt Daniels (Jacksonville Jaguars) and Ross Cockrell (Buffalo Bills) while at Duke. Their main piece of advice: study the playbook, because you will be expected to know it quickly. Duke offensive coordinator Scottie Montgomery, who played receiver for three years in the NFL, also has been available for questions and advice.

It's been a long predraft process, Crowder said of the past four months, but he has enjoyed it, especially the opportunity to travel to different cities. He made his final trip Tuesday, flying to Chicago for a predraft party hosted by the NFL Players Association. Tomlinson was there, too, and while Crowder left Thursday morning to fly home, Tomlinson prepared to attend the first round Thursday night at the invitation of the NFL.

Crowder plans to spend the weekend at home with family, not necessary watching the draft — maybe more like channel surfing, checking in occasionally as he waits for his call. He figures he will be anxious, waiting to figure out where his professional career will begin. But he knows not many people get the opportunity to prepare for their eventual selection in the NFL Draft, so he has kept it in perspective, feeling grateful for his chance.