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## Berlin: In Depth

February 19, 2004  
NFL Europe

With the NFLEL training camp opening in Tampa, Florida on Friday February 27, NFLEurope.com is gearing up for the start of the 2004 season by breaking down each of the six teams position by position, and looking at each team's key players.

Part two of the six-part insight guide is an inside look at the Berlin Thunder's training camp roster, which features a potent passing game and an experienced secondary.

### Quarterbacks

The Thunder may have picked up the top available passer in Rohan Davey (New England), whose strong arm has Berlin fans drooling in anticipation of seeing him in action. Sitting behind NFL superstar Tom Brady at New England guarantees that Davey is not going to win the Patriots' starting spot, but he could unseat former Galaxy player Damon Huard with a strong showing this Spring in Europe. A fourth-round draft choice, Davey was a star at LSU, leading the Tigers to the SEC title in 2001.



**Rohan Davey has a strong arm and the mechanics to be a good NFL Europe quarterback.** photo: New England Patriots

Marc Dunn (Chiefs) and David Rivers look to be behind Davey in Berlin, but they could pull off a shock and beat him out in camp. Dunn was a starter at Kansas State, completing 52% of his 147 career passes for 10 touchdowns and 10 interceptions.

Rivers spent the first four games of the last NFLEL season with Amsterdam before suffering a season-ending injury. He completed an outstanding 82% of his passes for 224 yards and two touchdowns.

### Running Backs

The running back position is up for grabs in Berlin, and new head coach Rick Lantz's first job will be to separate out the top player at this position on his team.

Ray Jackson (Tennessee) was a productive ball carrier for the University of Cincinnati, gaining 1400 yards in two seasons, and scoring 13 touchdowns. Jackson hits the hole well and runs with the forward lean that helps him add yards after initial contact. Henri Childs (Kansas City) played in 44 games at Kansas and Colorado State, rushing 214 times for 1,080 yards with six TDs and catching 58 passes for 657 yards with three TDs.

At fullback the Thunder have a pair of bruisers to open holes and pass block for Rohan Davey. Mike Malan was snatched from the Scottish Claymores in the free agent draft after spending last season as the Claymores starter. Malan showed a penchant for finding the endzone, scoring once on the ground and catching four more touchdowns - including a 34-yarder.

Malan will be challenged for the job by Ed Ileremia-Stansbury (Houston), who weighs in at 245 pounds and opened holes at UCLA as a fullback. He made the switch from All-American quarterback in high school to linebacker in college and back to offense in his junior year at UCLA. Like many other players in Europe, this will be the chance for Ileremia-Stansbury to show that he can cut it in the pros.

### **Wide Receivers**

Assuming that Rohan Davey captures the starting quarterback spot, the Thunder should benefit from his burgeoning relationship with fellow Patriots practice squad player Chad Gessner (New England).

Gessner and Davey have worked together on New England's scout team throughout the 2003 season, and while Gessner's speed and good hands would advantage any team, the fact that these two have practiced and played together before should give Berlin a significant advantage.

LaShaun Ward (Kansas City) is another who will benefit from an existing relationship, after spending 14 weeks on the Chiefs practice squad with Marc Dunn and three on the active roster in 2003. Ward appeared in one game for Kansas City, returning a kickoff 11 yards. A two-way performer at California, he saw action in 41 games, catching 59 passes for 1,223 yards with 14 TDs, returned 45 kickoffs for 1,086 yards and one TD.

Frank Murphy (Tampa Bay) has blazing speed and has already been a big-time contributor on special teams in the NFL. Murphy spent 2001 and 2002 on Tampa's active roster, catching 8 passes for 71 yards and a touchdown. He made a big impression on Jon Gruden in his first preseason game with the Buccaneers, returning a kickoff for a touchdown against the Miami Dolphins. Murphy should get the chance to expand his receiving skills with the Admirals.

Aaron Boone (Chicago) entered the NFL last year as a rookie free agent pickup by the Cowboys. A standout at the University of Kentucky, Boone left the school with 16 touchdown catches to rank third in UK history, and his 6-foot-2 size helps him get above opposing cornerbacks and make good catches.

Richard Alston (Cleveland) is making the transition from college running back to wide receiver, Adam Ziesel (Cincinnati) spent the 2003 season on the Bengals practice squad, and is considered a precise route runner and strong possession receiver. Free agent Michael Jennings makes up the Thunder's contingent at this position.

### **Tight End**

Rick Lantz protected Bryan Fletcher, the team's starting tight end in 2003. Fletcher caught four touchdowns last season for Berlin, and is a strong all-round player who has the size to block well and the speed and hands to cause problems as a receiver. Fletcher has the pedigree to make it in the NFL; his brother, Terrell, was an eight-year veteran running back with the San Diego



**2003 starter Bryan Fletcher was protected by the Thunder and will return to the team to battle for the tight end job in 2004.** photo: photo-stock.co.uk

Chargers.

Fletcher will be competing with Mike Pinkard (Kansas City) for the starting role this season. At 6-foot-4 and 259 pounds he is an excellent run blocker, but also has great hands, and has shown the ability to make yards after the catch, averaging 17.3 yards per catch in 45 games at Arizona State.

### Offensive Line

Berlin heads to Tampa with six allocated offensive linemen and three free agent draftees, all of whom will be looking to make their mark and earn a starting job in training camp.

Center Ben Claxton (Tampa Bay) looks to be the pick of this group. The 2003 fifth-round draft choice of the Denver Broncos is an explosive, nasty blocker who has the ability to punch open holes at the point of attack and has the intelligence to lead this offensive line. Claxton has worked to get stronger since his release from the Broncos, and with a good showing he could be the next NFLEL offensive lineman to make the jump to NFL starter in the mould of Joe Andruzzi and Matt Lepsis.

Harvard graduate Jamil Soriano (New England) played tackle in college but may be moved to guard in Berlin. The 6-foot-4, 310 pounder is a good blocker who uses his hands well to control defensive linemen.

Monstrous tackle Dante Ellington (Philadelphia) was one of only seven players to start a season opener as a true freshman in Alabama's history. At 6-foot-6 and 363 pounds, Ellington is the kind of road-grader that can open enormous holes for Berlin's backs.

Dion Meredith (NY Giants) spent most of the 2003 NFL season as a member of the Giants practice squad and impressed former head coach Jim Fassel with his work-ethic and ability.

Dave Kadela (Carolina) is the most experienced of the Thunder's offensive line prospects, having seen NFL action with Atlanta in 2001. At 6-foot-6 he has the size and reach to be an excellent tackle prospect in Berlin. The presence of versatile Jason Jowers (Kansas City) will give the Thunder cover along the offensive line. Troy Andrew, a former Miami Dolphins backup lineman, has played at guard and centre and may work himself into the lineup, having played with Barcelona in 2003. Jeff Grzeskowiak and Dwayne Pierce round out Berlin's players on the offensive line.

### Defensive Line

The arrival of Jim Tomsula to coach the Thunder's defense has sparked an influx of former Claymores looking to play under the inspirational former Scotland defensive line coach.

Defensive end T.J. Bingham led the Claymores with seven sacks in 2003, and was the second pick in the free agent draft by Berlin. In the seventh round the Thunder secured tackle DeVonte Peterson, who will be hooking up with Tomsula for the third consecutive year. Peterson had 22 tackles and a sack for the Claymores in 2003.

These two Tomsula disciples will be joined by LaWaylon Brown (Seattle)

and Tank Reese (Indianapolis), two allocated defensive tackles who will look to see playing time on the defensive line. Brown is a good run defender who has the size to shut down running lanes and force blocking adjustments from linemen. Reese is much shorter, but his relentless style of play fits exactly with the attitude that Tomsula demanded from his defensive line in Scotland.

However, Montique Sharpe (Kansas City) may be the best prospect on the entire line for Tomsula to work with. The seventh-round draft choice of the Kansas City Chiefs appeared in five games for the Chiefs in 2003, making four tackles and one sack. A powerful run stuffer, Sharpe slides off blocks easily, displays a head for the ball and is quick in locating the action and making tackles.

Edge rusher Brenden Givan (Miami) is a former linebacker who is making the conversion to defensive end. Givan fits the Dolphins' scheme of developing under-sized players to be speed rushers in the NFL. With a year on the Ravens practice squad, he could be a surprise player in pass rush situations for Berlin.

Making up the rotation at defensive end is Browns' practice squad player Israel Idonije (Cleveland), a 6-foot-7 former Canadian college football star. Idonije was a first-team all-Canadian in his senior year in college, who led the nation in sacks and used his size to over-power blockers and often got his hands up to disrupt quarterbacks passing.

With this embarrassment of riches, Jim Tomsula should be able to craft a dominating defensive line in Berlin that should at least match the ones that he put together in Scotland.

### **Linebackers**

Continuing the Claymores connection will be Yubrenal Isabelle, who was selected in the third round of the free agent draft. Isabelle led Scotland with 48 tackles in 2003, and proved to be a strong run and pass defender.

Isabelle will be joined by Lawrence Flugence (New England), a convert from defensive end who showed good run stopping skills in his brief time as a middle linebacker. Flugence has a good nose for the ball and seemed to always be in the thick of the action as a player at Texas Tech.

Another possibility at the position is James Cotton (Atlanta), who had nine sacks with the Calgary Stampeders in the CFL in 2001 on the way to a Grey Cup title. Cotton was the seventh-round choice of the Chicago Bears in 2000.

Paul LaCoste (Indianapolis) is a former CFL and XFL star who saw time with the Colts in 2001. A good player at Mississippi State, LaCoste is looking to make a break-through with the Thunder. LaCoste will be the oldest player on Berlin's roster.

Competing with LaCoste will be Jason Kazar (Kansas City), who appeared in 14 games as a senior at Kansas State, including getting the starting nod in the 2001 Cotton Bowl. Shawn Price (Carolina) is Berlin's final player at linebacker, and is another player looking to switch from college defensive end to linebacker in the pros.

### **Cornerback**

The Thunder will go to Tampa with three allocated players and three free

agent cornerbacks.

Keith Heyward-Johnson is yet another former Claymores defensive player who was reunited with Tomsula through the free agent draft. Heyward-Johnson was a starter in Scotland in 2002, making 36 tackles and an interception.

Berlin selected James Thornton with the first overall pick in the free agent draft. Thornton played his college football at Morris Brown University and boasts NFL experience with the Chicago Bears.

Darrell Rideaux (Indianapolis) will be one of the fastest players on the Berlin roster. At 5-foot-8, Rideaux is thought to be under-sized, but he makes up for it with the brutality of the hits that he lays on receivers. An excellent coverage player, Rideaux should earn one of the starting slots at corner for Berlin.

Jermaine Mays (Minnesota) played collegiately with the Minnesota Gophers, and has spent extended time with the Vikings through the 2003 season. Mays was noted for his special teams play at Minnesota, and will give the Thunder an advantage with his proven ability at blocking punts.

Providing depth at the position are Willie Ford (Kansas City) and Oliver Celestin. Ford garnered practice squad experience with Tennessee and Pittsburgh in 2002 after entering the NFL as a rookie free agent with Oakland, and produced 110 tackles and three interceptions at Syracuse. Celestin worked with Cris Carter's FAST programme to improve foot-speed prior to the 2003 NFL draft with first-round draft choice Charles Rogers.

### **Safety**

The Thunder were assigned promising safety Keith Davis (Dallas), who missed the 2003 NFL season after being shot in the hip and arm on the eve of training camp. Davis was released and then resigned by Bill Parcells in Dallas after his injury. In 2002 Davis spent time on Dallas' active roster, recording five tackles, two quarterback pressures and a pass defended in three games.

Free safety DeShaun Hill was a fifth round pick in the free agent draft, and comes off a good career at USC. Hill had 54 tackles for the Trojans as a senior in 2002, including four in the Orange Bowl win against Iowa. He has good speed and loves to make a hit in the open field.

In total contrast to Hill, Scott Farley (New England) played at tiny Williams College, a Division III school. The versatile player was used at wide receiver, safety, kicker, punter, and returned kicks and punts for the team.

Kickers and Punters will be assigned to the Thunder on their arrival at camp.

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