

Iupati ready to learn fate: Vandal guard projected to go in first round of NFL draft

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By Devin Rokyta, Daily News staff writer

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Only hours from the start of the NFL draft, University of Idaho guard Mike Iupati can rest assured he will be drafted in the first round, but just where he'll end up is anyone's guess.

Iupati will be watching the draft live on ESPN today at 4:30 p.m. in California and waiting for his name to be called by NFL commissioner Roger Goodell with his family and an ESPN film crew.

"I'm just excited. I can't wait to find out where I'm going, put on the pads and start playing," Iupati said in a news release issued by the UI.

It could be a quick night. The latest rumors have Iupati coming off the board at No. 8 to the Oakland Raiders. ESPN's Michael Smith tweeted, "The Mike Iupati to Oakland @ #8 talk is picking up steam. Two league sources who know the Raiders well tell me that's who they're targeting."

Most scouts have tagged Iupati as the top guard in the 2010 class, but guards are seldom drafted that high in the draft. However, Raiders' owner Al Davis doesn't always follow the traditional approach when it comes to the draft.

If Davis passes, Iupati likely won't fall far. ESPN draft expert Todd McShay has Iupati being drafted by the Atlanta Falcons with the 19th pick, while Mel Kiper projects him as the No. 23 pick and going to the Green Bay Packers.

The Seahawks, who pick 14th, also have been rumored to have shown interest in the Vandal, as have the New York Giants at 15, the San Francisco 49ers at 17 and the Pittsburgh Steelers at 18.

If Iupati comes off the board in the first round as expected, he will become the highest drafted Vandal in 43 years and since Ray McDonald went in the first in 1967. Iupati will become the highest draft choice in school history if he is grabbed higher than the 13th pick.

Wherever he's taken, Iupati is in store for a huge payday. His first purchase will be for his parents, who have dreamed of returning to their home of Samoa.

"I'm going to build my parents a house in Samoa," he said. "Then I'll probably travel to Indonesia and Australia to see the family."

Iupati has had a busy last few months preparing for the NFL draft. Since the Vandals' win in the Humanitarian Bowl, he has played in the Senior Bowl, been poked and prodded by NFL evaluators at the NFL Combine, and taken a coast-to-coast tour that took him to Miami, Kansas City, Dallas, Tampa Bay, Minnesota, Cincinnati, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Detroit and San Francisco for more evaluations.

Iupati redshirted his first year with the Vandals, before seeing playing time as a freshman and holding down a starting job as a sophomore.

Iupati rose into the national spotlight last season, finishing the year as a consensus All-American, and a first-team selection by the Football Writers' Association of America, the

American Football Coaches Association, the Associated Press and the Walter Camp Foundation.

"I have a lot of great memories - the community and my teammates," Iupati said. "I grew to love Idaho. I lived here for five years. I'm just blessed to be here and call this my home."

OTHER PROSPECTS - Washington State isn't expected to have any players drafted, however, center Kenny Alfred is a possibility in the late rounds on day three of the draft Saturday.

Alfred started 44 games in his career at WSU, was a Rimington Trophy candidate and garnered second-team All Pac-10 honors his senior season.

If Alfred isn't drafted, he'll likely receive a free agent offer somewhere in the NFL. **Devin Rokyta** can be reached at (208) 882-5561, ext. 230, or by e-mail at drokyta@dnews.com