

Football draft hits prime

By **STUART LEVINE**

The draft, a Saturday morning staple for decades, isn't just for football fans anymore.

In moving the NFL draft to weeknight primetime, the league and its TV partners are, literally, rolling out the red carpet to give the event more of a Hollywood flair.

Celebrities — such as **Whoopi Goldberg** and **Jillian Michaels** — and athletes — the

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top college football players — will mingle in the corridors of Radio City Music Hall on April 22 when the league's future stars are selected. More prospective draftees have been invited to be a part of the show.

“We’re trying to aggregate a much larger audience,” says **Charles Coplin**, VP of programming for the NFL. “As the draft grows in popularity, it allows us do some things that creatively embrace a primetime format. We think this will attract a lot more viewers.”

Before league commissioner **Roger Goodell** comes to the podium at 7:30 ET with the St. Louis Rams’ first pick — and after the final selection has been made — NFL Network and ESPN will have plenty of opinions to share, with hours of analysis. Beginning this week, ESPN will offer an astonishing 35 hours of debate on such questions as whether an unknown wide receiver from a small Southern college can make a difference with

the Seattle Seahawks, or is a backup offensive tackle a better choice? The net will employ **Kat Cressida** as a voiceover for the draft to grab femme viewers.

Not to be outdone, NFL Network will chat up all things football over a 38-hour period.

Looking to stretch out the tension, the first round will take place Thursday while rounds two and three are skedded for Friday.

“These things always evolve, and this is now a better viewing experience and a natural progression,” says **Leah LaPlaca**, ESPN’s VP of programming.

Indeed, time itself is part of the drama. Two years ago, Notre Dame quarterback **Brady Quinn**, a presumptive top pick, sat at a table near the podium, dressed in his finest suit to meet the press — and the live audience — but was passed over ... and over ... and slid so far down the board that he finally made his escape backstage to get away from cutaway shots that highlighted his increasing discomfort.

Now *that’s* must-see TV.