

Hits and misses; Vikings special-teams coordinator Gary Zauner has added players who are hard to tackle and players who tackle hard.

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It was a Sunday, the second day of April's NFL draft, and **Gary Zauner** was about to get his wish.

The Vikings were on the verge of drafting Patrick Chukwurah, a guy **Zauner, the team's special-teams coordinator**, was convinced would be an impact player, in the more literal, kick-coverage meaning of the word. **Zauner** had had his eye on the pass rusher from Wyoming for a while. He had a highlight film made of him at the scouting combine. As the draft neared, he got another tape of Chukwurah. On the Sunday of the draft, **Zauner** went to coach Dennis Green.

"I said if you can get this guy in the fifth round, you'll get a heck of a player," **Zauner** said.

This is one example. Zauner has always had a knack for collecting special-teams talent. Last season, he made sure the Vikings picked up Jim Nelson after he was waived by the Packers. Nelson, a backup linebacker, promptly went out and led the team with 29 special-teams tackles.

Zauner was retelling these and other stories Saturday, the day after the Vikings had beaten the Colts 28-21 in their third preseason game. It was a game in which Chukwurah had played well, both on special teams and at linebacker. **Zauner** had just finished watching the special-teams tape of the game, and he was feeling pretty good.

A special-teams unit that already has such mainstays as Chris Walsh, Moe Williams, Harold Morrow and Nelson is getting better. Friday night much of the notice when it comes to special teams went to the return game, with good reason because of Nate Jacquet's 76-yard punt return for a score and other long returns. But **Zauner** is convinced every phase of his special teams will get better this season because of the influx of new talent.

Chukwurah is one example, and linebacker Fearon Wright could be another.

Wright, who played at Rhode Island, came to **Zauner's** attention when he received a letter from Wright's agent talking about how Wright had knocked out - not down, but out - four players in one season playing special teams.

"That caught my eye," **Zauner** said. "I phoned the coaches out there, got a tape and showed it to Denny. When we were looking for some linebackers in May, they signed him as a free agent.

On Saturday, **Zauner** was looking at the special teams from Saturday. On one kickoff, Chukwurah blew up a wedge and then made the tackle. There was a play a week ago against Pittsburgh when Wright - who sprained a wrist Friday - actually took out three guys and still made a play on the ball.

Throw out one decent punt return by Indianapolis on Friday that came as the result of a low punt, and you saw the blueprint for what **Zauner** wants to see all season. The Vikings covered both punts and kicks very well; the Colts started, on average, at their 18-yard line after five kickoffs.

And the big returns **Zauner** has been looking for materialized, thanks to Jacquet, Troy Walters, and Cedric James.

And here's the good news: Some of **Zauner's** best special-teams players haven't played much yet. Williams (foot) has yet to play, and Morrow (shoulder) missed the past two games.

When they're all healthy? This group could have a big upside.

"I would definitely say that," **Zauner** said. "This could be one of the best groups we've had here."

There are still decisions to be made, jobs to be won. Jacquet's game-winning return Friday might have made the decisions on whom to keep that much more difficult, though Walters remains atop the depth chart at both punt and kickoff returns.