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# WESTWORD

## WEB EXCLUSIVES

# Mendenhall announces availability for NFL draft

by **Rexly Pena**  
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On Thursday, Jan. 13, in the Black Box Theatre, Rashard Mendenhall ('05) announced that he will forego his senior year at Illinois and enter the National Football League (NFL) draft. Mendenhall is a projected first round selection and should join former St. Louis Cardinals quarterback Jim Hart ('62) as West's only NFL players.

"I feel that this is the next step that I have to take in my career," Mendenhall said.

Many wondered why the press conference was held at Niles West and not at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Mendenhall's mother, Sybil Mendenhall, provided the answer.

"For both Rashard and Walter, this is where it all began. Both started playing on Team West, the Niles West feeder team. Then, they both played during high school. It only seems right that this press conference should be held here," she said.

Mendenhall started his speech with a little joke about his decision to play another year at Illinois. He also talked about his spot on the Illini roster and that his position could provide an opportunity for his older brother Walter to get more playing time.

While many expected the loss in the Rose Bowl to have a big influence on Mendenhall's decision, he said that the thought of going to the NFL has been on his mind since the beginning of the season. Even though the scouting combine (an annual battery of skills tests for prospective draftees) will be held next month in Indianapolis, IN, Mendenhall has no plans to leave Illinois yet. He plans to train at the university and to finish his second semester toward earning his degree in recreation.

Mendenhall said he feels confident about the scouting combine. "I just want to get better," said Mendenhall, who expects to be selected in the first round. "I am very confident in my abilities, so I guess I would be surprised [to be taken later]."

Scouting website [www.rivals.com](http://www.rivals.com) projects Mendenhall to go 25th in the first round to the Seattle Seahawks.

As for his preference, Mendenhall said, "Playing in San Diego and running alongside LaDainian Tomlinson would be great. I also like Chicago because I grew up here, and it is close to home," Mendenhall said.

Throughout the press conference, Mendenhall expressed his gratitude and love for his older brother Walter, whom he described as his idol. "I always looked up to my brother. There was always a thought in my mind that said, 'I want to be just like him,'" he said.

He also gave words of advice to current football players at Niles West. "Do not ever let anyone tell you that you cannot do anything. I have been told that a lot of times, and I am still being told that. You have to have faith in yourself that you can accomplish anything."

Team West's feeder coach Joe Galambos talked about Mendenhall's days on the feeder team.

"He started out when he was in sixth grade, and even then, he started playing with other guys who were two or three years ahead of him."

Former West head football coach Mark Egofske also talked about Mendenhall's success on the team.

"Rashard was accepted by everyone on the team. He didn't consider himself a leader. He rather saw himself as part of a whole. There were some rough times with the team, but you have to have bad times to have good times and that is what happened to Rashard."

Mendenhall's last season with the Illini was his best. During the '07 season, he broke school records for rushing in a single season (1526 yards) and touchdowns in one season (16), and he tied the record for number of games rushed for 100 yards or more (6). He averaged 6.5 yards per carry, the third best in the nation and led the Big Ten in rushing (sixth in division 1A) while being named Big Ten offensive player of the year and recipient of the *Chicago Tribune's* Silver Football Award as the Big Ten's most valuable player.



Rashard Mendenhall (r.) announces his decision to enter the NFL draft, as brother Walter listens.  
Photo by Rexly Pena