

Troubled running back Williams returns to Miami

CORAL GABLES, Fla. (AP) —Willie Williams has a past nobody can be proud of, including 11 arrests, jail time and two stints on probation.

Miami gave him a chance —perhaps his last —at having a bright future and the former high school All-American linebacker, who was one of the nation's most-coveted recruits in 2004, is vowing to make the most of the opportunity.

"I'm going to make sure they made the right decision,"

during a wasted weekend.

He was accused of setting off hotel fire extinguishers, getting into a bar fight with another man and hugging a woman without her permission on that Gainesville trip. Williams ultimately pleaded no contest, and was sentenced to three more years of probation in July 2004.

"I have a lot of faith in the kid, but he needed some guidance," said Paul Lazarus, Williams' attorney. "The best thing that could have happened to him —and also to

In the classroom, Williams is exceeding expectations. And away from the field, Williams is adhering to all rules passed down by both a Broward County judge and university officials; he's never failed tests that would detect drug or alcohol use, and has stayed out of trouble.

"Willie is doing well. He's done well in school," Miami coach Larry Coker said. "The offseason work has gone well for Willie. He's healthy. ... He handled it well. Things have gone well for him in the

offseason. Now, let's go and compete for a job. He's a guy that's really trying to get a job."

Teammates knew of Williams' well-publicized past when the school signed him a year ago, yet welcomed him warmly —and not just because of his football potential, said offensive lineman Eric Winston.

"I'm a big second-chance guy, and to win us over, all he had to do is what was asked," Winston said. "That's tough enough for most people. We

ask a lot of our guys, so he didn't have to do anything extra."

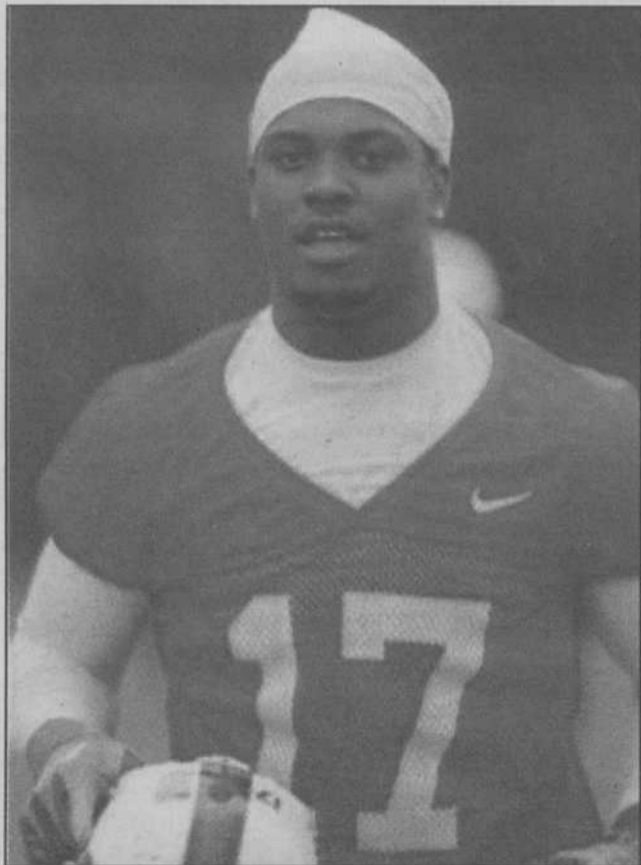
Williams is listed behind senior Leon Williams on the spring depth chart at middle linebacker, yet it wouldn't surprise anyone for the redshirt freshman to be in the lineup when Miami opens the season at Florida State on Sept. 5.

Some even projected Williams to be an impact player by the end of Miami's 2004 season, but he missed the entire year with an array of

injuries. He tore a ligament in his right knee during an August practice, then broke his right thumb after slipping while getting out of his truck.

He's healthy now, and feels like his old self again. He just won't be going back to his old ways.

"I consider myself a very lucky guy, a very lucky and blessed guy," Williams said. "Who knew someone could have this many chances? This is basically a whole 'nother chance for me, and I feel very lucky."



Miami's oft-arrested Willie Williams heads off the field after a team practice earlier this month in Coral Gables, Fla.

Williams said Wednesday after Miami's second spring practice. "Everything I did wrong, I'm kind of working to make it right. I know I've done some things in the past. I know I've made some mistakes. But everybody makes mistakes. I can't fault nobody but myself."

And the 6-foot-3, 230-pound Williams has certainly made plenty of mistakes.

The first entry was made on his arrest record in 1999; over the next five years, 10 other incidents —burglaries and thefts, mostly—led to more time in police custody, and his checkered past was something Miami officials insist they were not fully aware of when offering him a scholarship.

When he made a recruiting trip to Florida in January 2004 —around the same time an 18-month probation sentence for stealing stereo equipment was set to expire —the product of Miami Carol City High School nearly saw his opportunity to play big-time college football vanish

society —was that he be allowed to go to UM."

Said Williams: "That was just so stressful. I just thought it was all over at some points."

Miami ultimately decided to admit Williams, but the move also prompted university president Donna Shalala to take an unprecedented step. She sent a letter to the entire university community, detailing strict regulations Williams would follow to stay there, including extra academic and off-campus behavioral monitoring.

"I think he's done just fine," Shalala said. "He's followed every rule we've asked him to follow, and when he hasn't, someone has yanked him back and reminded him. He's been a good freshman."

"We take character seriously," added Shalala, who was Health and Human Services Secretary under President Clinton. "Of course I had reservations. ... But I'm pleased he's making progress."

That progress is being made both on and off the field.

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