

What affects can Media/Hype have on QB's NFL Draft status?

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Introduction

An extremely important aspect of scouting is to be able to find an answer you're looking for as well as have the conviction to defend it. This can be difficult as it may not align with what others, specifically in the mainstream media are saying. We can see that this type of disconnect can have a significant impact on the draft results we see every spring during the National Football League (NFL) Draft. In this research, I will be taking a look at some of the different reasons why this disconnect between media and scouts may occur regarding the evaluation of NFL draft prospects. I will specifically be taking a look at this idea from the angle of the quarterback position. Quarterbacks are considered to be the most position in football, if not all of sports. Due to their immense value, teams put a lot of resources into making sure they get that position in their organization right. Their importance also makes them the media's most popular position to cover. As a result of all this, the position is generally elevated to the top of each draft, meaning it becomes the most intriguing position to use when conducting this study because so much time from every angle goes into them.

Quarterbacks work as a prime example to study when considering the effects the media has on a prospect versus what the scouts may see. According to Mays (2019), "when scouting quarterbacks, teams generally try to tick off a more rigorous series of required boxes: physical traits, mental traits (including information-processing and decision-making), personality makeup (toughness, leadership, etc.), and production against quality competition." Many of these traits can be things that are only able to be discovered by the scouts who are "boots on the ground" at the college campuses. They are constantly talking to prospects face-to-face as well as the people who interact with them the most.

General Scouting Process

Before digging deeper into this topic it is important to understand the role of scouts and the overall scouting process. NFL scouting is very important to the success of each of the thirty-two franchises. It is a year-round commitment, as work for the next draft comes just a few days after the previous year's ends to ensure teams are adding young talent. A team's scouts are responsible for doing the heavy-lifting when it comes to evaluating prospects. Former Chicago Bears' Director of College Scouting Greg Gabriel (2014) says, "the scouting systems an NFL club uses will differ from team to team, but they are all looking for the same thing—proper and useful information." This useful information is all part of the final evaluation that is used to project where these prospects will go each April. Many casual observers believe that the on-field tape is the only thing that matters. While it's certainly a large piece of the puzzle, it doesn't tell the whole picture. The work teams are doing behind the scenes: interviews, medical evaluations, official visits, combine workouts, private workouts, pro day workouts are sometimes just as important as what the "All-22" can tell a talent evaluator (Cosentino, 2018).

The most common style of scouting is regional scouting. Scouts are assigned a number of schools in a certain area of the country and travel from school to school in that area. The reason for this is that it allows for the scout to develop strong relationships at each school, and those relationships become invaluable in getting useful information. By staying in the same area year after year, the scout knows the history of the prospects very well (Gabriel, 2014). The belief would then be that these area scouts know the most about each of these prospects. So why do their evaluations not always carry the most weight? There are a number of different reasons for that worth considering.

Media Personalities

A good place to start on the media side is by noting some of the most important names in the NFL Media landscape. Many of these media personalities can be very influential on the overall game of football between their reporting and sources that actually help shape narratives around the league. Their voices have had an impact on both the business and on-field aspects of the NFL. Some of these names (networks included) are:

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| -Mel Kiper Jr. : ESPN Draft Analyst | -Adam Schefter : ESPN Insider |
| -Todd McShay : ESPN Draft Analyst | -Chris Mortensen : ESPN Insider |
| -Matt Miller : ESPN Draft Analyst | -Ian Rapaport : NFLN Insider |
| -Daniel Jeremiah : NFLN Draft Analyst | -Tom Pelissaro : NFLN Insider |
| -Bucky Brooks : NFLN Draft Analyst | -Albert Breer : SI NFL Insider |
| -Mike Mayock : Former NFLN Draft Analyst | -Diana Russini : ESPN NFL Insider |
| -Greg Cosell : NFL Films | -Mike Florio : NBCSports & PFT |
| -Field Yates : ESPN NFL Analyst | -Peter King : NBC Sports |
| -Josina Anderson: CBS NFL Insider | -Jay Glazer : Fox Sports Insider |

While there are a number of other insiders/analysts, these are the ones whose opinions seem to hold the most value. These will be the names to consider when discussing some of the other aspects that go into the evaluation and ranking process of quarterback prospects. However, in some instances, even their opinions aren't held up over general media buzz.

Draft Media Coverage

In recent years, the media coverage of the NFL Draft and its prospects has grown to a place that seemed inconceivable. With more channels, platforms, and social media, all sports

have had an increase in coverage. This hasn't been only seen during NFL Draft weekend, but the months leading up to it. In recent years, the school's Pro Days have begun to be televised and the NFL Scouting Combine's workouts have even moved into a primetime slot. This larger spotlight doesn't just affect them once they've declared, it also means their whole journey from high school to college ball to that point has been spectated by many. This heightened coverage has certainly played a role in how the draft plays out every spring.

A big piece of the media's coverage of the draft and its prospects are mock drafts. Mock drafts are projections for the upcoming draft used to predict where players may land. These have varying value for NFL front offices. As Bechta (2011) tells us, "When looking at mock drafts and player rankings the media doesn't have the whole picture to make the most accurate projections." However, there are some in the media who are dialed into organizations around the league, so their mock drafts are more what they're hearing around the industry. Those mock drafts are likely to carry some more weight than others. For a specific example, NFL Network's Daniel Jeremiah, a former scout is connected to a specific organization specifically the New York Jets, where he's close with General Manager Joe Douglas. So with that in mind, what he has them doing in his mock draft is worth noting. These are the types of things that have a more practical effect on the NFL Draft from mocks aside from being just a fun speculator's read for fans.

Additionally, the media can be used to adjust draft stocks of players, either in a positive or negative way. The way that it covers players can really help develop the narrative that comes with a player. "One scout called this time of year (offseason) in the NFL "The Bulls--- Season." And there is lots of it. So, so much. The lying about prospects. The lying by prospects, their agents, teams, scouts, and coaches, (Freeman, 2014)." This lying by the organizations is a way to

try to alter draft stocks by using the media to their advantage. This is something that should be considered when looking at what the media is reporting on prospects.

Heisman Trophy Hype

One other factor to consider in assessing how quarterback prospects are getting evaluated is by looking at the ones who have taken home the Heisman Trophy Award. This is an honor that is given to the most outstanding player in college football every season. The award was first given out in 1935, with most winners over the past twenty years being at the quarterback position. To that point, since 2014 the trophy has gone to a signal-caller seven out of the last nine years. Of those seven quarterbacks, all of them went in the first round with four of them going first overall (Winston, Mayfield, Murray, Burrow). While these winners have all been highly talented prospects, I feel it is fair to question if their draft stock was raised based on their reputation as a Heisman Trophy winner in addition to the media coverage that comes along with it.

One of the biggest examples of “Heisman Hype” I can remember is Johnny Manziel. Manziel was one of the most electrifying players to ever take home the award. Due to that, the media coverage of him at the time was one of the craziest I can remember. The levels of hype were reflected in the number of mock drafts released right before that draft which had him going in the top 5 picks. This was generally the consensus in the media with many citing things like “the energy and spectacular playmaking ability that Manziel would bring” as factors as to why (Brooks, 2014). When the draft came around he eventually fell just a bit to the twenty-second pick of the first round where the Cleveland Browns selected him. While the media played a role in him rising that high, scouts were not necessarily on that same page. One NFL scout believed

Manziel "has Canada written all over him," (Wesseling, 2013). Scouts also raised concerns over his extracurricular activities and height (*NFL mock draft 2014: Who will pick Johnny Manziel?*, 2014). Manziel was out of the NFL by 2015 due to maturity issues and struggles to adjust the pro game which eventually led him to a stint in the Canadian Football League (CFL), all of which was correctly predicted by scouts.

This example shows that there can be a disconnect from the media's evaluation of players due to college awards and that of those who are doing the day-to-day grind of studying them inside and out. It is important to note, that college success does not translate to NFL success. Being able to see through that and evaluate the players based on what they can bring to an NFL team is just so important in all of this evaluation.

College Football Playoffs Hype

Similar to the increased notoriety and media attention quarterbacks get for winning the Heisman Trophy, the College Football Playoff (CFP) provides an increase, though it doesn't seem to be quite as much based on the more recent draft results. Quarterbacks who have made the college football playoffs, since its inception in 2014, have gone anywhere from 1st overall to undrafted. This case is harder to pin down but there are certainly examples of it allowing players to be over-drafted. There are however instances where they have been under-drafted despite the experience of playing in these marquee games.

To look at what the CFP could do for a quarterbacks potential draft stock, look no further than Ohio State trigger-man Cardale Jones. Jones led the Buckeyes to a CFP Championship coming in and only playing three games that season to do so following injuries to both QB J.T. Barrett and QB Braxton Miller. Babb (2016) sums up what many were saying, "following the

national championship, Jones opted to stay in Columbus — a mild surprise, perhaps, considering his measurables and resume — and it was easy to see Heisman Trophy contention and first-round draft potential in the quarterback’s future.” When he returned the following season he was unable to maintain his high draft stock due to poor performance. This led to many questioning if he was even an NFL QB. Among them, ESPN analyst Todd McShay said, “He has a lot of growing to do before he’s even ready to compete for a backup job in the league,” (2016). As Jones’ career played out McShay was correct, and he was out of the NFL three years after he was drafted. He still ended up being selected in the fourth round of the 2016 NFL Draft, part of which I do believe was because of the media hype he received following his CFP run the previous season. Another example is that the opinions of scouts can be ignored sometimes by the noise that comes from the media.

GroupThink

Many of these examples are affected by groupthink. Groupthink is a psychological phenomenon in which people strive for consensus within a group. In many cases, people will set aside their personal beliefs or adopt the opinion of the rest of the group (Cherry, 2020). We see this idea of groupthink as one of the biggest issues the NFL faces. Any aspect of player evaluation is no exception, and scouts have to be aware of it. Scouts should look to avoid groupthink even if sometimes it means they are wrong. This was spoken well by former Colts General Manager Ryan Grigson who said, “If you just agree with everyone, then you have shelter. If you stand outside the pack and you beat the drum for something that’s not popular, then you stand alone. But it shows you have courage. It also shows you believe in that player and that

opinion you formulated by hard work,” (Kuharsky, 2013). Going to bat for a player that others don’t see as highly is likely very difficult, but it is what makes a scouts’ job so important.

On the media side, with the increase in coverage, it’s hard not to think it only invites more of a groupthink mentality. With the 24/7 coverage, and dozens of people telling you a prospect is “can’t-miss” it’s hard to fight against that and say they are wrong. I believe we see a lot of organizations fall-in line with consensus to avoid the heat of being considered a draft day “loser”, which is a concept only stirred up by the media’s opinions on players that are presented to fans. While it may not affect every organization to differing amounts, it’d be hard to say it doesn’t at least play some factor in almost all of them.

Other Specific Cases:

Tahj Boyd (2014) - Tahj Boyd was a highly successful college quarterback at a big-time college program Clemson. He was projected to go as high as the 2nd overall pick going into his final season (Kadar, 2013). A reason being is that, as Bedard (2016), Boyd graduated as the ACC’s career leader in passing touchdowns (107), total touchdowns (133) and passer rating (155.2)—Jameis Winston has since edged him in the last category. He stands second, behind Philip Rivers in total yards (13,069) and passing yards (11,904). However, when his draft came around he was selected in the 6th round and didn’t make it through summer cuts. That spring NFL Network Draft Analyst Mike Mayock said, “He’s highly inconsistent from an accuracy perspective and his pocket awareness is the big problem. As soon as he sees a flash of color, he’s out of the pocket. He’s a little bit of a developmental pick. I think he’ll go late in the draft,” (Smith, 2014). So what changed in the seven months between these evaluations? Boyd’s game likely didn’t all the much, making it suspicious as to why he was ever projected as high as the 2nd overall. The media driving that perception put him in a higher light than his tape and traits said he should have.

David Fales (2014) - In the same draft as Boyd, David Fales had a similar situation. He was seen as a potential 1st round pick and ended up being a 6th round pick. Many, on both the media and scouting side, thought he had questionable arm strength and didn’t feel he could push the ball down the field but promoted him as a first-rounder going into his final season. The feelings on that trait didn’t change much throughout the season. But that opinion was not shared by then San Francisco head coach Jim Harbaugh. Harbaugh, who has had success developing and evaluating quarterbacks, said, "I think he

sees the field. I think he throws the ball downfield," Harbaugh said. "A lot of quarterbacks are doing what they're taught in their systems. He's a guy that is an example of a quarterback who throws to the outside lanes. He throws the ball in the seams and gets it downfield and sees the field well. He's got a real savviness about the position," (Breech, 2014). What this example shows is that we not only must consider the disconnect between media and scouts, but also the disconnect that occurs between individuals within each separate field.

Mayfield/Jackson (2018) - Both Baker Mayfield and Lamar Jackson were Heisman winners during their time at college and part of the 2018 NFL Draft. As we've discussed that has generally affected those players positively in recent years. However, at the time people didn't see it. In an article by Sports Illustrated Insider Albert Breer (2017) he spoke to talent evaluators writing, "I could only find one evaluator who believed that Mayfield had a legitimate shot at going in the first round. Most think he'll go in what one scout referred to as "Dak Prescott territory," which is to say somewhere in the middle rounds." As for Jackson, many were concerned about his ability to stay healthy with his running tendencies, his frame, and how "raw" he was as a thrower. In the draft, these two both went first round despite some serious questions and it's fair to question if they were affected by the media bump. In hindsight today however Mayfield's rise to the first pick seems questionable, especially when compared to Jackson going with the last pick in round one.

Joe Burrow (2020) - One of the wildest draft stock rises from a QB prospect was Joe Burrow. Burrow had to transfer from Ohio State to LSU after losing a QB competition to Dwyane Haskins. Following his junior season in 2018, the LSU quarterback was considered to be at best a fifth-round pick. One prominent scouting service ranked eight senior QBs above Burrow in the 2020 class (Mays, 2019). Then he shot up the boards with Todd McShay saying, "Burrow has gone from Day 3 prospect to potential first-rounder in six games." The rise didn't end there. Burrow's incredible season continued when he won the Heisman Trophy, broke single-season passing records, and won the CFP National Championship. As has been discussed, the impact those accolades can have on a prospect rising the boards is immense. In the case of Burrow, he rose all the way to the first overall pick in the span of one season.

My Conclusions

In reviewing NFL Drafts throughout the years, it's hard to deny that media, general hype, and other types of wider recognition have had a varying impact on how quarterback prospects are perceived, ranked, and eventually drafted. A lot of times it can be different than what a scout sees. Daniel Kelly, a former NFL scout with the New York Jets, sums it up fairly well by saying,

“If a major sports media outlet says something, it becomes like something that was said in the Bible and anyone who dares to disagree gets verbally shredded on social media,” (Kelly, 2021). In regards to last years’ draft Kelly (2021) stated, “If the collective mainstream media says Zach Wilson is a ‘generational talent’, then by God he is. Overnight, people who have never even studied him on game film, are ready to fight to the verbal death to defend this narrative.”

This type of groupthink among evaluators has swayed opinions on players, who scouts have had their own views on for years. It is my belief that it won’t change much either. It will only continue to occur and maybe even get more difficult as fans, media outlets, and pundits will keep gaining easier access to prospects’ highlights and rankings, even starting at the high school level due to new social channels (through recruiting sites and apps, film/highlight sharing, and even common social media sites). This will likely add both improvements and challenges to scouts. While they will have more access to prospects themselves, so will others making “outside noise” more difficult than ever for scouts to avoid when sticking to their convictions on their player evaluations.

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