

2011 NFL Draft Preview



by Nate
Winkler

April is arguably the greatest sports month on the calendar. It begins with the culmination of the NCAA's March Madness and the hope that springs eternal with Major League Baseball's Opening Day. The NHL and NBA playoffs get underway shortly thereafter, and tucked in there is golf's crown jewel, The Masters. While these are all events worth celebrating, my favorite event this month will occur in just a few days. It will not take place on a field of play, but rather it will happen in Radio City Music Hall. Beginning Thursday night with Round 1, and ending over the weekend with "Mr. Irrelevant," the NFL will conduct its annual draft to determine which college/amateur players will get to fulfill their dreams and become professional athletes.

As most people who follow the NFL are aware, the league is currently in the middle of a labor disagreement between the players and owners that could threaten the 2011 season. This article isn't meant to be about that, but the work stoppage does affect the dynamics of the draft in a few interesting ways. First of all, teams are not able to trade players for each other or draft picks, which is how many players (think Randy Moss and Richard Seymour) end up changing uniforms.



Secondly, there is no free agency period, which would normally have taken place between the end of last season and the draft. Most teams usually address some of their needs for the upcoming season through free agency, and without that ability this year the draft will be accentuated even more. Also, this year's draft has a higher than normal influx of underclassmen, due to the seemingly imminent rookie wage scale that is being proposed in the new labor agreement. This can create a draft pool with less polished players, so there may be a need to be more patient with the lower round guys while they develop.

I have spent countless hours since the scouting combine in February listening to the various talking heads, reading scouting reports and mock drafts, and doing my own independent research, and based on what I've found, here is my best guess at how the first round could play out. There is also the possibility of teams trading up or down, as the Patriots have a reputation for doing. It's important to note that New England has three of the first 33 draft picks, and six of the first 92, both of which are unprecedented. Don't expect Bill Belichick and company to be holding pat with that kind of ammunition.

First Round: Thursday, April 28th at 8 P.M. (ESPN, NFL Network)

<u>Pick</u>	<u>Team</u>	<u>Projected Pick:</u> <u>(*denotes</u> <u>underclassmen)</u>	<u>Nate's Notes:</u>
1	Carolina Panthers	(QB) Cam Newton- Auburn	2010 Heisman Winner has too much upside to pass up, despite short body of work and some character concerns. Has the potential to be a once in a generation QB.

2	Denver Broncos	(DT) Marcel Dareus- Alabama	A strong, physical presence with a nasty side, he will instantly help one of the league's most woeful defensive fronts.
3	Buffalo Bills	(LB) Von Miller- Texas A&M	This year's most complete edge rusher, will create havoc in the backfield but wasn't asked to drop into coverage much in college.
4	Cincinnati Bengals	(QB) Blaine Gabbert-Missouri	With Carson Palmer's situation unsettled, both on and off the field, this is the Bengals' chance to solidify the key position for the next decade.
5	Arizona Cardinals	(WR) A.J. Green- Georgia	The Cardinals probably hope Gabbert(4) falls to them here as they desperately need a QB, but if not, look for them to either take the dynamic Green or try to trade down for more picks.
6	Cleveland Browns	(DB) Patrick Peterson-LSU	A seemingly "can't miss" prospect, Peterson has the potential to be a game changer on defense and special teams a la Deion Sanders, and will be hard for the teams above to pass up.
7	San Francisco 49ers	(DT) Nick Fairley- Auburn	Many experts say it's a toss-up between him and Dareus for the top DL prospect, but Fairley's stock has taken a hit due to character and work ethic concerns, despite superior numbers.

8	Tennessee Titans	(DE) Robert Quinn-North Carolina	Although Quinn did not play a down in 2010 due to a suspension, he is a talented pass rusher and most GM's are convinced he's prepared to be a solid citizen. He's also been the beneficiary of Da'Quan Bowers' (14) slide due to health concerns.
9	Dallas Cowboys	(OT) Tyron Smith-Southern Cal	Smith is the highest rated offensive lineman in the draft, and the Cowboys desperately need a big earth-mover to shore up that unit, which was one of the oldest and slowest in the league last year.
10	Washington Redskins	(WR) Julio Jones-Alabama	A big, strong receiver that can beat the jam at the line of scrimmage and make plays both vertically and in traffic, Jones should help the 'Skins lackluster offense instantly.
11	Houston Texans	(DB) Prince Amukamara-Nebraska	The road to the playoffs for the Texans goes through Indy, and Peyton Manning. After proving himself in the pass-happy Big XII, "The Pharoah" could turn into a shutdown corner that may help Houston finally get over the hump.
12	Minnesota Vikings	(DE) Cameron Jordan-California	An intelligent, coachable defender who can play any of the DL positions, and is athletic enough to stand up and drop into coverage. Played both 3-4 and 4-3 at Cal, Not an elite pass rusher, but an all-around talent who is solid in all phases.

13	Detroit Lions	(DE/LB) Aldon Smith- Missouri	Coach Jim Schwartz wants to stock his cupboard with front seven disrupters, and Smith will be a perfect complement to Suh and Co. Has the ability to provide pressure from the edge and is athletic enough to cover most TE's.
14	St. Louis Rams	(DE) Da'Quan Bowers-Clemson	Bowers was a chic top 3 pick early on in the evaluation process, but has seen his stock slide recently over growing injury concerns. If, if, if he can stay on the field, he has the potential to be an elite pass rusher, and would be a steal for the Rams at this slot.
15	Miami Dolphins	(DE) J.J. Watt- Wisconsin	Get your DE's while they're hot, as it looks like the 'Phins will go with Watt, the Big Ten standout who's high motor and intangibles make him a quiet favorite among many of the league's scouts. It wouldn't be a shocker if he goes earlier in lieu of one of the edge defenders listed above.
16	Jacksonville Jaguars	(OT) Anthony Castonzo-Boston College	Could end up as a rare but coveted All-Pro LT, this 4 year starter from just down the road at Chestnut Hill makes up for his slight lack of strength with quickness, technique, and guile.

17	New England Patriots*	(DE) Ryan Kerrigan-Purdue	The Patriots, if they stay put, would likely consider taking a DE here, as they are still searching for answers following Richard Seymour's departure. Kerrigan may not end up with a bust in Canton, but will be a solid pro that will improve his team, which is the Patriot Way.
18	San Diego Chargers	(OL) Mike Pouncey-Florida	An anchor for the Gators over his career, he's portrayed as a can't miss interior lineman, especially after seeing his brother perform as a rookie for the Steelers last year. (His injury leading up to the game was one of the main storylines of S.B. XLV)
19	New York Giants	(DT) Corey Liuget-Illinois	After a temporary reprieve, we're back on the DL here as the G-men land an underrated force here in Liuget. Has the makeup to become a stalwart in the middle against the run, as well as forcing pressure right up the middle of the pocket, which makes QB's squirm.
20	Tampa Bay Buccaneers	(OT) Gabe Carimi-Wisconsin	Arguably one of the toughest players in all of this year's draft, Carimi should be able to walk in and take over at the RT position, giving the young Bucs some stability to grow around.

21	Kansas City Chiefs	(CB) Jimmy Smith-Colorado	Although he comes with a trail of red flags, regarding his character, Smith has the athleticism and moxie to be an elite DB in the league. The Chiefs would likely roll the dice to get some help for their oft-scorched secondary from a year ago.
22	Indianapolis Colts	(RB) Mark Ingram-Alabama	The former Heisman Trophy winner comes with some durability concerns, he was a workhorse for the Crimson Tide over the last couple of seasons, but he is a strong, compact runner who almost never loses yardage. The next Emmitt Smith may be a stretch, but you can draw many parallels.
23	Philadelphia Eagles	(OT) Derek Sherrod-Mississippi State	The Eagles will take their highest rated O-lineman left at this point, which will either be Sherrod or Watkins (29). Sherrod is a monster at 6'6", 320, and should develop into a solid starter on either side of the line, protecting one of the league's hottest commodities in Michael Vick.
24	New Orleans Saints	(DL) Phil Taylor-Baylor	A freakish athlete for a man weighing over 330 pounds, Taylor has the potential to anchor a defensive line and create a lot of happy (and rich) linebackers with his ability to tie up offensive lineman and lead blockers.

25	Seattle Seahawks	(DE) Adrian Clayborn-Iowa	Seattle could surprise here and take a QB (TCU's Andy Dalton is among the strongest candidates to be the 3rd QB off the board), but if they don't look for them to take Clayborn, who is a top 15 talent but has some health concerns.
26	Baltimore Ravens	(DT) Cameron Heyward-Ohio State	Son of the late, great Craig "Ironhead" Heyward, he plays with the fervor and tenacity that his father was known for. Has a high motor, jumps off the film when watching the OSU defense, and could be a case of the rich getting richer if the Ravens grab him here.
27	Atlanta Falcons	(DT) Muhammad Wilkerson-Temple	The Falcon's would be ecstatic if Wilkerson fell to them here, as some have him going much higher. Can play DE in the 3-4 and is a stout defender who can hold his ground against the run and make plays in the backfield as well.
28	New England Patriots	(OL) Nate Solder- Colorado	Tom Terrific would likely cry less and dance more if the Pats were to add this pass blocking specialist from the Big XII. Solder would provide relief to a unit that is growing gray and less athletic by the year.

29	Chicago Bears	(OL) Danny Watkins-Baylor	Watkins is an interesting story. Already 26 and a former firefighter from British Columbia, he is a mature and reliable presence who can play either Guard or Tackle. Shoring up this unit is unquestionably the Bears #1 priority on draft day.
30	New York Jets	(LB) Akeem Ayers-UCLA	Would be a great fit as an inside LB in a 3-4, and the Jets could use an infusion of youth on that side of the ball. Plays a physical, disciplined game that Rex Ryan loves.
31	Pittsburgh Steelers	(WR) Torrey Smith-Maryland	A big play threat who consistently made defenders look JV during his career as a Terp, will need to work to polish his game to become a complete receiver in the NFL.
32	Green Bay Packers	(DL) Marvin Austin-North Carolina	An incredible talent who put up monster numbers while on the field, but improper actions with an agent got him kicked off the team prior to the 2010 season. Immense upside but "me first" perception could cost him dearly.