

GAMES STARTED BY PLAYING POSITION by Tony Villiotti

So your favorite NFL team needs a wide receiver. Is it necessary to grab one early or can a team wait until later in the draft, or even pick up an undrafted free agent? For this article, **DRAFTMETRICS** analyzed information about all games started at each playing position over the past 20 years in order to identify the source of starters, both by playing position and on an overall basis.

The following table shows, for the past five seasons, the percentage of games started at each playing position by round and by undrafted free agents. For example, of the 2560 games (32 teams times 16 games times five years) started by quarterbacks, 49% were by first round draft choices. Similar tables for the past 10 years and the past 20 years are shown in an Appendix to this article.

	QB	RB	WR	TE	OL	DL	LB	DB	ALL
1st Round	49%	32%	29%	25%	22%	33%	24%	25%	27%
2nd Round	11%	14%	22%	15%	19%	14%	19%	25%	19%
3rd Round	7%	8%	14%	16%	13%	11%	15%	11%	12%
4th Round	6%	12%	10%	9%	10%	12%	9%	9%	10%
5th Round	2%	6%	3%	11%	8%	8%	8%	6%	7%
6th Round	9%	3%	4%	7%	6%	6%	5%	5%	6%
7th Round	5%	4%	8%	5%	6%	4%	5%	5%	5%
Undrafted Free Agents	11%	21%	10%	12%	16%	12%	15%	14%	14%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

It should be noted that the percentage are obviously affected by the number of draftees at each position in the various rounds. For example, there are fewer tight ends and linebackers selected in the first round than other positions, so you would expect that number of starts by first round picks at those positions will be fewer. (In a later article **DRAFTMETRICS** will focus on the “bias” and success rates in drafting by playing position.)

While there are some variations by playing position, it is no surprise that the vast majority of games are started by early round draft choices. Nearly half of all games started are by first and second round draft choices. If you add in third and fourth round selections that percentage grows to nearly 70% of all starts. The bottom line is that a team cannot count on filling needs late in the draft. Despite that, there are a few late round gems in every draft.

Before getting into comments about each playing position, **DRAFTMETRICS** offers a few additional general observations on based on the above table and the Appendix:

- The draft is very “true” in that first round picks start more games than second round picks who start more games than third round picks and so on.
 - On the other hand, the number of undrafted free agents who start games show that the draft is still more of an art than a science
- The percentage of games started by undrafted free agents has declined from a peak of 22% (includes undrafted free agents plus draft choices after the seventh round) in 1992 and 1993 to the current level of about 14%.
 - Is this due to better drafting or the limitations on training camp roster size, or both?
 - Training camp limits were set at 80 players in the 2006 Collective Bargaining Agreement (plus an exemption for players participating in the now defunct NFL Europa) but were unlimited in earlier years. The limit in the new CBA has been set at 90.
 - The percentage of starts by undrafted free agents reached a low of 12% in 2006 but slowly crept up to 15% in 2011
- The gap between games started by sixth round picks and seventh round picks has closed, at least partially due to more seventh round compensatory picks being awarded

Now on to the review by playing position. Following are the five “headlines” from the **DRAFTMETRICS** analysis:

- Nearly 50% of the games started by quarterbacks in the past five years have been by first round draft choices
- Over the last five years, the percentage of games started by undrafted free agent running backs (20.5%) is more than double the percentage of games (9.5%) started by undrafted free agent wide receivers
- Defensive linemen trail only QBs in the percentage of starts by first round draft
- More than half the games started by wide receivers are by first or second round choices
- Defensive backs are the only position where a higher percentage of games have been started by second round choices than by first round choices.

Position-by-position comments by **DRAFTMETRICS** are as follows:

Quarterback

- There has been a steady increase in the percentage of starts by first round picks
 - The percentage of starts by first round picks was in the 30% to 40% range from 1992 through 2000; sunk to 24% in 2001; and then increased to at least 40% from 2003 through 2011 (peaking at 55% in 2011)
- Over the past five years, the percentage of starts by first round picks (49%) is considerably higher than the next highest position (defensive line)

- Over that same five period, the percentage of starts by second, third, fourth and fifth round picks is the lowest of any position in each of the rounds
 - This is also true for the last ten and twenty years
- The percentage of starts by sixth round picks (thank to Tom Brady and Matt Hasselbeck) has been higher than any round but the first and second
- The percentage of starts by undrafted free agent QBs has been in decline
 - 16.6% for last 20 years; 14.9% for last 10 years; 11.5% for last five years
 - High was 29% in 1999; low was 7% in both 2010 and 2011

Running Backs

- Over the last five years there are a higher percentage of starts from undrafted free agents (20.5%) than any other position
 - The same is true over the last 10 years, but running backs are second to offensive linemen for the 20 year period
 - Percentage has ranged from low of 15% in 2004 to a high of 25% in 1995
- Over the last five years over half the games started by running backs are by the combination of first round picks and undrafted free agents
- The percentage of starts by second and third round picks is below the average
- Over the last five years, there has been a lower percentage of starts by sixth and seventh round running backs than any other position

Wide Receivers

- Undrafted free agents start a lower percentage of games at WR than at any other position
 - 9.5% in last five years (next lowest was QB at 11.5%), 10.9% in last 10 years and 12.2% over last 20 years
 - Low was 6% in 2006 and high was 18% in 1992
- More than half of the games started by WRs are by first and second round draft choices
- 75% of games started are by choices in the first four rounds, highest of any position
- Over the last five years, the percentage of WR starts for seventh round draft picks is higher than rounds five and six combined

Tight Ends

- The percentage of starts by first round picks at TE is on the increase
 - 18.3% over the last 20 years; to 22.5% over last 10 years to 24.5% over last five years
 - 1st round starts didn't exceed the 20% level in any season until 2005
 - Lowest was 8% in 1992 and highest was 28% in 2009
- Over the last five years, TEs drafted in round one through four have the lowest percentage of starts of any position
- For the last five years, TEs drafted in rounds five through seven have the highest percentage of games started of all positions

Offensive Line

- For both the last five years and the last 10 years first round offensive line picks have the lowest percentage of starts than any position
 - For 20 years offensive linemen are ahead of linebackers and tight ends
- The percentage of starts by first round picks has been very stable, ranging between 20% and 26%
 - Even more stable since 2001 with the range being 20% to 23%
- The percentage of starts by undrafted free agents are lower than only running backs for five and 10 years and are the highest for the 20 year period
 - Percentage has been between 14% and 16% since 2005
- There are more offensive line starters than any other position, so this accounts for the source of offensive linemen being more spread out over the draft than other positions

Defensive Line

- Defensive linemen trail only QBs in the percentage of starts from first round draft choices
- Defensive linemen rank near the bottom of starts by undrafted free agents
 - Higher than only QBs and WRs for the last five years
 - Higher than only WRs for the past 10 and 20 years
 - Defensive line is in the bottom three in all three time periods reviewed
- For the past five years, defensive linemen have the highest combined percentage of starts from fourth and fifth round picks

Linebackers

- There has been a recent trend for an increasing percentage of starts by undrafted free agents
 - 12% in 2005 and 2006 increasing to 18% in 2011
 - This was preceded by a big drop from a peak of 27% in 1995 to 11% in 2003
- Linebackers join offensive linemen and tight ends in the fewest starts from first and second round picks
- The percentage of starts from third and fourth round picks has been on a decline
 - Over 30% from 1992 through 2007, then dropped off to a low of 19% in 2010

Defensive Backs

- DB is the only position where there is a higher percentage of starts from second round picks than first round picks
 - This is true for five-year, 10-year and 20-year periods
- The percentage of games started by undrafted free agents is below the average
- First and second round picks account for over 50% of all games started except for 20-year period, when it is 48%

APPENDIX

Percentage of Starts by Round and Playing Position: Last Ten Years (2002-2011)

	QB	RB	WR	TE	OL	DL	LB	DB	ALL
1 st Round	46%	30%	31%	23%	21%	34%	23%	24%	27%
2 nd Round	11%	14%	23%	17%	18%	14%	18%	27%	19%
3 rd Round	6%	11%	13%	14%	13%	11%	17%	12%	13%
4 th Round	6%	12%	8%	9%	10%	10%	12%	10%	10%
5 th Round	2%	5%	4%	9%	8%	8%	7%	6%	7%
6 th Round	10%	5%	4%	6%	5%	6%	5%	4%	5%
7 th Round	4%	4%	6%	7%	8%	5%	4%	4%	5%
Undrafted Free Agents	15%	19%	11%	15%	17%	12%	14%	13%	14%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Note: Percentages may not add to 100% due to rounding and games started by players selected in the supplemental draft, which are not included in the table

Percentage of Starts by Round and Playing Position: Last Twenty Years (1992-2011)

	QB	RB	WR	TE	OL	DL	LB	DB	ALL
1 st Round	40%	29%	32%	18%	23%	33%	22%	24%	27%
2 nd Round	12%	16%	21%	18%	17%	14%	20%	24%	18%
3 rd Round	8%	11%	13%	12%	12%	11%	15%	11%	12%
4 th Round	7%	10%	9%	10%	9%	10%	10%	9%	9%
5 th Round	2%	6%	4%	10%	7%	7%	7%	6%	7%
6 th Round	9%	6%	4%	8%	5%	6%	5%	4%	5%
7 th Round	3%	3%	4%	8%	6%	4%	4%	5%	5%
Undrafted Free Agents	17%	19%	12%	16%	21%	14%	17%	17%	17%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Note: Percentages may not add to 100% due to rounding and games started by players selected in the supplemental draft, which are not included in the table