DRAFT GUIDE

2022 Edition

Loading

35%

Late-Round

LATE-ROUND

FANTASY FOOTBALL

Contents

Introduction

The fantasy football world has an obsession with player analysis.

At the end of the day, that's what fantasy football is all about, right? It's about the players. We're just trying to find players who produce. We're trying to find players who outperform expectation.

It's not hard: When you're drafting, just pick the right players!

Well, it looks like my work here is done.

> In all seriousness, leaning on only player analysis in a fantasy draft is sort of like button mashing in a game of Street Fighter. It may get you a win every now and again, but good luck being victorious over the long run without a real strategy.

It was easier to win fantasy championships without strategy back in the day. Articles on draft-day values and sleepers weren't littered throughout the Internet. The hardcore fantasy manager had to do their own research. They had to sift through news articles to find relevant fantasy football information. They had to really dig and find late-round diamonds on their own.

Today, Chuck from accounting who's never watched football in his life can find detailed rankings with a simple Google search. And if he's good enough with Excel, he can probably come up with some sort of system where he's pulling in multiple cheatsheets, getting player analysis from different sources.

Perhaps this is how you've traditionally drafted. You may read articles in June and July and consume some podcasts, but when it comes to your fantasy draft, you're really not much different than Chuck. You put together some rankings, take it to your draft, and pick players one by one off of that list until your lineup is complete.

To you — and probably over 90 percent of fantasy managers out there — rankings are everything.

That way of thinking is about to end.

Hopefully.

If there's one common theme throughout this guide, it's that fantasy football is more than just the players you're selecting. Not only is it tough to find an edge against your leaguemates with player analysis, but you're also going to be wrong. A lot.

I've been analyzing fantasy football for over a decade. It's been my job — how I make my living — for nine years. Yet, like a meteorologist, I'm wrong all the time.

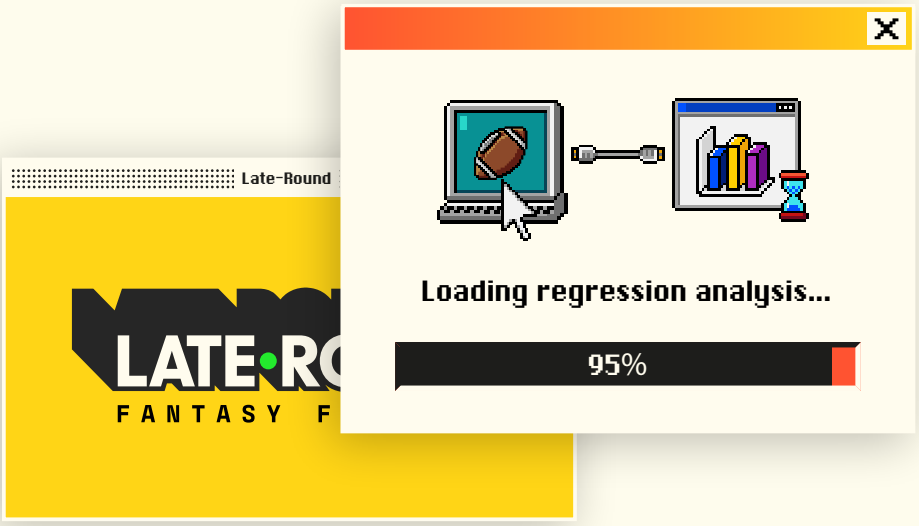
This game about a game has a ton of variance. We're trying to project how a human being is going to perform while playing football. That's about as easy to predict as my three-year-old daughter's reaction when I tell her what's for dinner.

When you draft players without a real plan, you're setting yourself up for failure by not embracing the inevitability that you're going to screw up. And it's not better player analysis that will help you.

It's strategy.

The Late-Round Draft Guide is about strategy. It's about developing a holistic understanding about the game of fantasy football and then using that knowledge to crush your drafts this summer.

Are you ready to approach the game in a different way?



Regression Is Everything

You ever go for a run and just really crush it? You started it assuming a certain mile time, but you far surpassed those expectations, as if your legs didn't want to feel pain that day.

You know that feeling?

Maybe you were faster than normal because of what you ate that morning. Maybe you got good rest the night before. Maybe your stress levels were low, and it allowed you to be ultra focused.

Whatever the reason, we know this kind of thing can happen. Whether it's your ability as a runner, cyclist, bowler, golfer, presenter, teacher… we just sometimes have good days.

But we also recognize that we're human. Those blissful moments aren't always sustainable. You can get better with practice, but those instances

where you just really exceed expectation — those instances don't happen every single day. If they did, we'd shift our expectation calculation.

This idea is no different in fantasy football.

> There's a particular expectation we have for a player. When that player far exceeds said expectation, we can't just assume he's going to do that over and over again.

If Justin Jefferson catches a 75-yard touchdown from Kirk Cousins on one play, we're not expecting Jefferson to catch 75-yard touchdowns on every play. Things just went right on that one throw. Cousins may have tossed a pretty ball. Perhaps the offensive line didn't miss any blocks. Maybe the safety missed an assignment.

This is how we know regression exists.

Regression is a return to a former or less developed state. We often talk about "regression to the mean" in mathematics, which says that if one sample of a random variable is extreme, the next sampling of the same random variable is likely to be closer to its mean, or its average.

You shot an 85 on your favorite golf course when you typically hover the 95 range? Regression to the mean tells us that the next time you golf, you should still expect to shoot close to that 95 mark. You bowled an 88 when you're typically around 100? The next game, you'll probably be closer to 100.

You catch a 75-yard pass when your yards per reception rate is 15?

You see where I'm going here?

Football — fantasy football — is a small sample size game. Because of those small samples, we run into examples where players buck mathematical trends all the time. But, eventually, regression hits.

Take a very simple statistic like yards per carry. Since 2011, we've had 46 instances where a running back saw 100 or more attempts and had a yards per carry of 5.0 or greater, all while hitting 100-plus totes the following year. So these players had 100-plus carries in back-to-back seasons, but during that first season, their yards per attempt average was better than 5.0.

Only 6 of those 46 running backs ended up increasing their yards per carry year over year.

Because of regression.

When a player does something really well for some period of time, it's going to be difficult to sustain that pace.

You can look at the opposite end of that yards per carry illustration, too. There've been 30 running backs since 2011 who had back-to-back seasons of 100 or more attempts with a yards per carry rate south of 3.5 in that first season. When comparing those running backs' yards per carry rates season over season, just four saw their rates get worse.

Because of regression.

When a player does something really *poorly* for some period of time, it's going to be difficult to sustain that pace.

Regression is inevitable in fantasy football. It, as a concept, is static. It is what it is.

Expectations do shift, though.

In 2021, James Conner scored 15 times on the ground on 202 rush attempts. Over in Denver, Javonte Williams had 4 rushing touchdowns while running the ball 203 times.

The two backs had almost identical rushing volume, but one scored on every 13.5 attempts while the other found the end zone on every 50.8 attempts.

Thanks to regression, should we expect the two to eventually meet in the middle?

Do we talk about Bruno?

In almost all cases, one player's statistical expectation — one player's statistical average in some category — will be different than another's.

An easy way to understand this is to just look at where the two running backs' touches came from. Conner had 18 rushes from within his opponent's 5-yard line. Williams had 10. Conner had more rushes within the 10 and red zone, too. If a running back is seeing those high-value attempts, he'll have an easier time scoring more touchdowns.

This doesn't mean that Conner and Williams both performed at expectation in the rushing touchdown column. In fact, they objectively didn't.

Yours truly developed an expected rushing touchdowns metric a few years ago that gives proper weight to where running backs touch the ball before spitting out the number of scores we'd expect a player to have. Using the method, based on where James Conner's rushing attempts came from last year, his touchdown total should've been closer to 10 or

11 instead of 15. Javonte Williams' expected touchdown tally was nearly seven.

In other words, Conner exceeded *his* expectation by about four touchdowns. Williams underperformed by roughly three.

You can run through a similar exercise with every player and within every statistic to get some baseline expectation.

Or you can rely on me to do that. I got you.

And, for the record, this isn't just relevant on a player level. You can do it at a team level, too.

> For example, when a team scores a whole lot of touchdowns one year, chances are, they're not going to come close to that total the following season. Even if the team's offensive pieces are largely the same.

Since my go-to reference point of 2011, 23 teams with next-season data (so we're not including the 2021 season here) scored 25 or fewer offensive touchdowns in a single season. That'd be considered a low total. Among those 23 teams, guess how many improved in the touchdown column the following year?

20 of them.

On the flip side, there have been 37 instances where a team hit 50 or more touchdowns during this timeframe. That would be considered a *high* total. Just four of those teams saw their touchdowns increase year over year, and one of those teams — the 2020 Tampa Bay Buccaneers — had more touchdowns only because the NFL went to a 17-game schedule in 2021. They played an extra game.

Where were the scores?

According to my method of figuring out how many rushing touchdowns a player should've had, the running back who underperformed in the touchdown column most last year was Miles Sanders.

It's the same deal with something like pass rates. There have been 33 teams over this same span who finished a season with more rush attempts than pass attempts. Looking at how those teams ran their offenses the following year, all but three saw their pass rate increase. And that's likely because it's just difficult to have such a run-heavy offense each season, even if team personnel and philosophy is trying to dictate it. Injuries happen, teams don't have leads and are forced to pass — there are tons of reasons as to why it's not sustainable.

You can do this with almost any statistic in football. That's how widespread regression is. That's how important it is to fake football.

Maybe you're reading this and wondering how you, someone who's really into fantasy football but not really into numbers, can do regression analysis.

The answer is, you may not be able to!

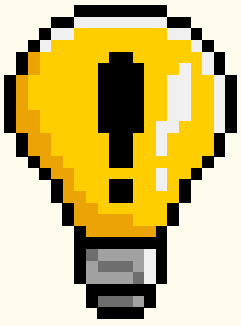
Helpful, eh?

We're still at the high-level part of the guide. The reason there's an entire section on regression is because it's *that* big of a concept to grasp. It's what screws up fantasy football managers the most.

During a draft, your leaguemates will often make decisions based off of what happened the previous year. And don't get me wrong, there's plenty of good mathematical information to gather from a prior season. It's just that when you fail to give those numbers proper context, you're bound to miss the inevitability of regression. And that leads to a misevaluation of players.

Regression is powerful in fantasy football.

You could argue that it's everything.



Embracing Variance

My relationship with season-long projections is a little unorthodox for a nerdy fantasy football analyst. You'd probably expect me to build projections, create some value-over-replacement-player formula, and crush my drafts.

That's not really how I go about things.

Why? Because projections are (usually) providing you with a most likely outcome, not a range of outcomes.

As I've noted, there's a lot of variance in fantasy football. Unforeseen things go down each year. Players get hurt. Players get traded. Players sometimes just really underperform.

All of those moving parts makes projecting player stat lines pretty difficult.

In the end, what's the reason we're actually projecting player output? To figure out how many fantasy points a player is supposed to score, right?

We're really most concerned about getting that number. That one, singular number.

Is one number really capturing what would happen to Tony Pollard's fantasy season if Ezekiel Elliott got hurt? Is one number doing a great job explaining the difference between Nick Chubb, who we have years of data on, versus Javonte Williams?

Don't take this the wrong way: Projections themselves are quite helpful to have. It's the application that can get you into trouble.

Allow me to explain.

One obvious way to use projections would be to spot any glaring misprices in the market. If a projection sees a wide receiver as the best wideout in all of fantasy football, but he's being drafted at WR20, or the 20th-ranked receiver, on average, then that wide receiver is more than likely a big value. You should draft him. And the opposite would be true as well.

> Unfortunately, the fantasy football community is getting sharper. Average draft position (ADP) is usually pretty decent at projecting who's going to be good, making those misprices tougher to spot.

OK, then what? If we're not using projections to draft off of a value-over-replacement-player formula, and if we're not going to find a full team of misvalued players with them, how can we use projections to our advantage?

Building Projections

If you're ever curious about the projection-building process, check out Episode 373 of The Late-Round Fantasy Football Podcast. That episode talks about the things to look for and how to approach the task.

Well, it's not just the end result — the thing that 99% of the fantasy football world is infatuated with — that we should be concerned with. It's not just the end projection.

It's how you get to that projection.

When you go team by team and player by player and project target shares and team pass rates and quarterback touchdown rates and so on, you really start to see how everything works together.

Once you have that high-level understanding, things become easier to grasp. You begin to see a player's range of outcomes based on the hundreds of things that could go for or against that player in a given season. And when you're on the clock during your draft, having the ability to quickly adapt is crazy important.

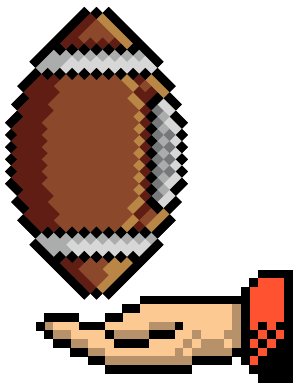
Damien Harris last season is a good example of recognizing a player's range of outcomes. History taught us that, under Bill Belichick's power, the Patriots never deployed bell-cow running backs. No player in that backfield since 2011 had finished a season with at least a 45% running back rush share (percentage of running back attempts) and a 4% target share (percentage of team targets). For some perspective, those numbers were hit by 24 running backs in 2021 alone.

On the projection front, Damien Harris' expected fantasy point output for the season aligned pretty nicely with his average draft position. He just wasn't someone to aggressively target because, even though his projection seemed fine, we knew his chances of being a true league-winning running back was small.

You may be thinking, "Wait a second. Wasn't Harris a strong value last season? JJ, are you openly admitting that you approached something incorrectly, and now you're doubling down?"

This is a process-focused game, haters.

A lot of things went Harris' way last season. He tied for second among running backs in rushing touchdowns with 15, and he saw over 200 ground attempts.



He also still finished as the RB20 in PPR points per game.

Had you built out projections last year, you would've realized that even if Harris hit his true ceiling — which he did — it wouldn't likely be a ceiling where he'd actually be a top-12, RB1-type running back in fantasy.

Now, clearly, Harris ended up being a strong value. He just needed to rank first in the league in percentage of fantasy points that came from touchdowns, something you can't at all bank on each year.

Mixing all of these ideas together can lead you to drafting values. Pretend AJ Dillon has a projection that places him at RB25. If his average draft position is *also* sitting at RB25, then Dillon would actually make sense as a draft-day value.

We inherently understand — whether through the process of creating projections or not — that Dillon's ceiling in fantasy football would be unlocked if teammate Aaron Jones got hurt. If that happened, Dillon would go from a part-time player to a potential full-blown workhorse in an Aaron Rodgers-led offense.

His projection, though, is working under the assumption that Jones is healthy. And if his projection is still matching his average draft position, then that means the market is also making the general assumption that Jones will be healthy all year.

What if Jones isn't?

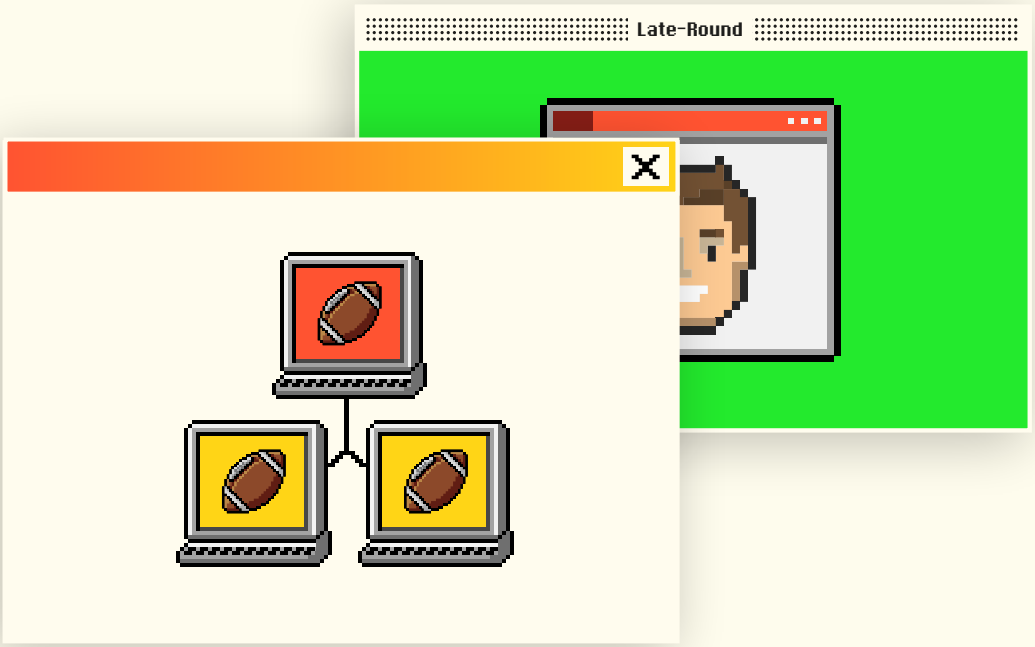
This is the difference between simply taking an end point — a fantasy point projection — versus thinking through range of outcomes.

Having that point projection can be really helpful! But it's far from over once you get there.

Similar to doing regression analysis, it would be silly for me to pretend everyone reading this is building out player projections each year. You can rely on me, don't worry. It's just key to see fantasy football's big picture before analyzing its smaller intricacies.

Backfield Teammates

Since 2011, we've had two pairs of running back teammates rank together in the top-12 in PPR season-long positional scoring . Alvin Kamara and Mark Ingram did it in 2017, and Nick Chubb and Kareem Hunt in 2020.



Structuring Rankings and Tiers

Regression is everything. Variance should be embraced.

So, uh, is everything in fantasy football just…luck?

We need to be cool with the fact that crazy things happen in both football and fantasy football. Unforeseen things. Things that are nearly impossible to project.

Does that bring a luck element to fantasy football? Of course. But as they say, luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity. (Please don't cancel me for that.)

Rankings have always been the go-to piece of content for fantasy analysts, and it's understandable as to why. Before fantasy managers start drafting, it's the one thing they look for. It's the thing they *ask* for.

The idea of rankings is good and fine, but there are natural flaws to them.

First, rankings typically aren't going to properly cater to your league settings. And I'm not just referring to scoring here, either.

We all know the difference between a PPR league and a non-PPR one. We recognize that some leagues reward six points per touchdown pass, while others give four.

Those scoring alterations can definitely shift rankings.

So can league *structure*.

Many of you probably took an economics class at some point in your life. In that class, you learned about the thrilling topic of supply and demand.

Per Investopedia, "The law of supply and demand is a theory that explains the interaction between the sellers of a resource and the buyers for that resource. The theory defines the relationship between the price of a given good or product and the willingness of people to either buy or sell it. Generally, as price increases, people are willing to supply more and demand less, and vice versa when the price falls."

> You ever sit back and wonder why running backs and wide receivers get picked before quarterbacks and tight ends in fantasy football drafts? It's because of supply and demand.

Most leagues require at least two running backs and two wide receivers in a starting lineup, while that number at quarterback and tight end is

Late-Round Beginnings

My first e-book, The Late-Round Quarterback, launched in June of 2012. The most important concept in the book centered around supply and demand.

just one. When teams need less of something, the cost for that something drops.

When you're handed rankings from a website or analyst, they're usually a one-size-fits-all format. There's nothing wrong with that — I do it, too! — but it does introduce a small problem.

When players are in higher demand, they'll see higher costs. If you played in a redraft league that started one quarterback, one running back, one wide receiver, and five tight ends, then Travis Kelce would likely get drafted first. And then Mark Andrews. And then Kyle Pitts.

Rankings aren't regularly accounting for these changes, so you've got to fine-tune things on your end. And if you haven't done that in the past, then that could be a reason for any mediocre drafting you've had through the years.

More important to the rankings discussion, though, is the amount of information they fail to give you.

Given everything I've talked about thus far, it's pretty clear that fantasy football doesn't follow super strict rules. It's a game where wild things happen.

A rankings list is far too straightforward for such a high-variance game.

I mean, think about what rankings are. They're linear in nature. They tell you that one player is better than the next who's better than the next. They're not explaining *how much* better.

> There's no wiggle room, either. Similar to projections, rankings are just giving you one single data point, limiting your flexibility.

A way to combat some of this is by creating tiers. Any Late-Round Fantasy Football Patreon subscriber knows that all of my rankings are

tiered, and it's for good reason: it allows for the end user — you — to be more nimble when you're drafting.

Tiers are groupings of players who have similar projected outputs. In PPR formats, someone may see Jonathan Taylor and Christian McCaffrey as by far the two best running backs, and both players may be projected to score similarly in 2022. If that's the case, it would make sense to group them in a tier, leaving your third-ranked running back in a separate — potentially the next — tier.

The players in each tier should be interchangeable in rank. We know variance exists, and we know our projections for players won't be entirely correct. Tiers embrace that fact — you don't need to have a strong opinion on whether you should draft Christian McCaffrey or Jonathan Taylor. If they're in the same tier, you know you like them mostly the same.

As you draft, you ideally want to be selecting players at the end of their tiers, since that results in the greatest value. If McCaffrey and Taylor are in a top tier together, and Taylor goes first overall while CMC goes eighth, then the McCaffrey pick is a lot more valuable. Because those players are swappable. You view them the same way.

My goal here isn't to make fantasy football super complicated. I'm not sitting here writing this with the assumption that you'll build out regression models and detailed projections. You don't need to approach your tiers in some nerdy way.

> The dirty little secret to fantasy football draft strategy is that being reactive is more imperative than being exact.

Hear me out for a second.

Say you're entering a two-quarterback league draft. Each team starts two signal-callers. That increases the demand for the position, and it makes quarterbacks much more valuable.

In that type of format, quarterback evaluation is going to be all over the place. Some league managers are bound to overstate the impact the additional quarterback slot makes, while some will understate it.

You have rankings, but you don't have tiers. And as things get going, you notice that quarterbacks are being drafted even earlier than you expected.

You're now up at Pick 11. There've been eight quarterbacks selected along with Jonathan Taylor and Christian McCaffrey. Your top players available are Cooper Kupp, Justin Jefferson, Ja'Marr Chase, and Tom Brady.

You pick Cooper Kupp.

That's typically how things would go if you were drafting off of rankings. You take the best player available according to said rankings.

Imagine a world, though, where you tiered those rankings. And picture that tier consisting of those same players: Cooper Kupp, Justin Jefferson, Ja'Marr Chase, and Tom Brady.

All of a sudden, your approach changes. You know you did pre-draft research to create those tiers, and you know that players in the same tier are interchangeable in rank. Given the flow of the draft — considering the number of quarterbacks that have been drafted — rather than selecting Kupp, it probably would make more sense to get Tom Brady. Then, in the second round, you can snag a wide receiver from that same tier.

It's a basic example, but it does show the importance of being reactive (going lower in a tier to get a higher-in-demand position) rather than being exact (drafting strictly off of who's next on the list).

Reacting to the Turn

If you're drafting next to the turn, make sure you pay close attention to what the team at the turn is doing. If you know they don't need a particular position, you can wait a round to draft that position, bringing more value.

Tier creation doesn't have to be totally arbitrary, either.

One quick way to generate tiers (if you don't want to use mine — I'll only be a little mad at you if that's the case) is through average draft position itself.

Many resources will share a player's actual average draft position as opposed to his average positional rank position. Cooper Kupp may fall off draft boards this year with the second overall pick, on average, but since teams will often take a player like Christian McCaffrey over him, Kupp's ADP isn't exactly 2.0. It's closer to 2.6 or 2.7.

You could realistically take an ADP list and tier players based on where there are big jumps from one ADP slot to the next. After doing that, you can just manually adjust to account for your own preferences.

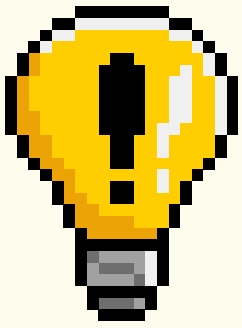
Me? I create tiers based off of my projections and a player's archetype.

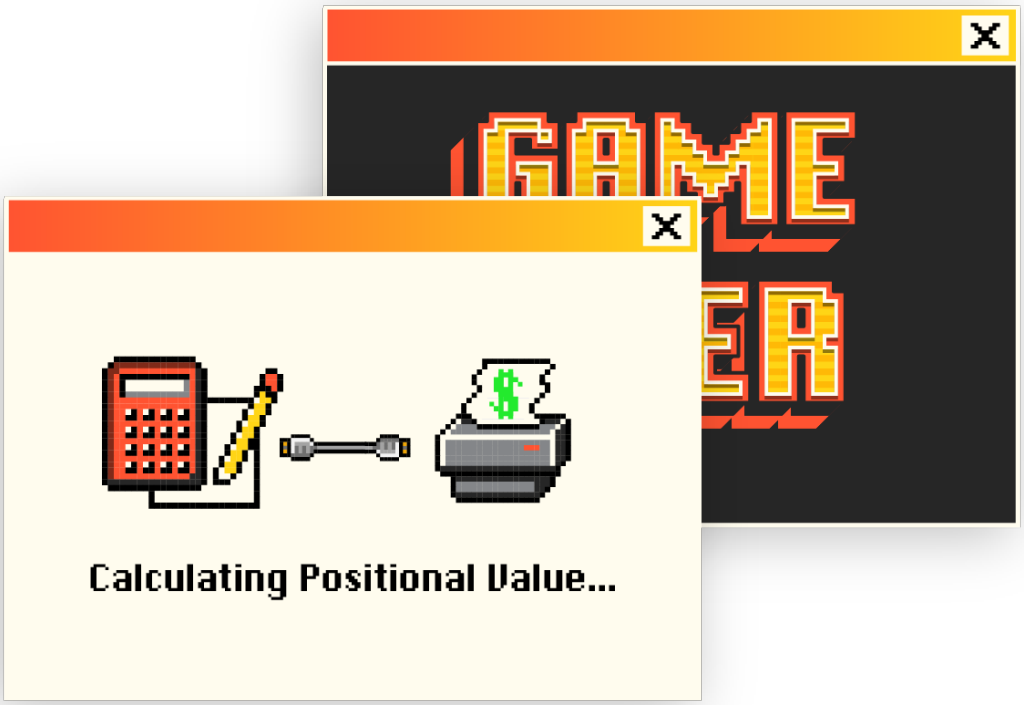
For example, imagine a situation where Tony Pollard and AJ Dillon, two "backup" running backs, were projected to score a similar number of points. Well, not only would that get them one step closer to being in the same tier, but both players also have a similar path to a ceiling in fantasy football this year: through an injury to the guy playing in front of them.

It would then be logical to place them in the same tier.

You won't find a ton of examples as clear-cut as that, but understanding how players score points can also help you formulate your tiers.

At the very least, you can just group players who you see as relatively interchangeable in rank. That'll give you permission to be more flexible and reactive, which, in turn, will acknowledge the natural variance that fantasy football brings.





Opportunity Cost and Positional Value

Before you can fully understand the value of an individual player, you should understand the value of that player's position.

Any experienced fantasy football manager knows the concept of value over replacement player, or VORP for short. Even if you're new to fantasy, you've probably seen metrics in other sports referencing the idea.

VORP tells us that, in general, we should be comparing players against their positional peers rather than across positions, at least to start.

VORP is all about a player's value over someone who would be readily available to replace him.

For example, if a quarterback averaged 20 fantasy points per game, and a replacement-level player averaged 15, then that quarterback would be providing 5 points above replacement.

Consider a landscape where the top-20 quarterbacks were projected to score within three points of one another. What would be the point in valuing one as an early-round pick? Even if that quarterback was supposed to score more overall points than any wide receiver or running back, he wouldn't be bringing much value to your team, since you're not playing a quarterback in a wide receiver spot (superflex leagues aside, of course).

> With any kind of VORP approach, your goal is to compare some player versus a replacement-level player at his position in order to see how much value the player you're analyzing holds. You're comparing a player to some baseline player who plays the same position.

How, exactly, do you compare players before a season begins?

Projections.

In order to use VORP in your fantasy draft, you're going to need a projection of some sort. Otherwise, how are you going to know which player is better than another?

You take a player projection, find your baseline player, compare that projection to said baseline's projection, and poof, you've got a number that designates value.

You can do this for every player at every position in fantasy football. Once each player has some assigned number designating value, you can then compare players across positions. That'll allow you to know when to, say, draft a quarterback over a running back. Or when to take a tight end over a wide receiver.

So, given all of this, if a quarterback is 100 points better than his baseline, and a running back is 50 points better than his, then the quarterback would be the more valuable player, right?

I wish it was that simple.

Projections, for reasons already discussed, aren't necessarily the thing you want to solely draft off of. If a VORP formula is using projections, then that's what you'd be doing if you were drafting via a VORP calculation. You'd be drafting off of projections.

Another issue with this simple, specific VORP scenario is that it doesn't account for average draft position.

That quarterback who's 100 points better than his replacement-level player may seem like a better get than the running back who's 50 points better than his, but what if the quarterback's baseline player was drafted in Round 12, while the running back's was drafted in Round 4?

All of a sudden, those 100 points are being stretched across a whole lot of rounds, while the opposite is happening at running back.

> This opens us up to another term you may have learned about in your economics course called opportunity cost, or the loss of potential gain from other alternatives when one alternative is chosen.

When you select a quarterback in Round 2, your opportunity cost is all of the running backs, wide receivers, and tight ends you didn't choose.

When you choose one thing, the opportunity cost of choosing that thing is all of the things you didn't choose.

Let's go back to our elementary VORP example. Imagine that quarterback and running back are both available with your top selection, which comes in the middle of the first round. If you decided to take the quarterback, then your opportunity cost would be the running back who was 50 points better than his baseline player.

Since those 50 points are being stretched across far fewer rounds, the opportunity cost is actually greater when you take the quarterback versus the running back. You can recover when you pass on a quarterback early, since they're available later. It's tougher to do that when the running back's replacement-level player is getting drafted so quickly. The position dries up.

That makes the selection of a first-round quarterback less valuable overall.

> Opportunity cost is something that doesn't get nearly enough attention in the fantasy space. In the end, fantasy football is just as much about the players you don't draft as it is the players you do draft.

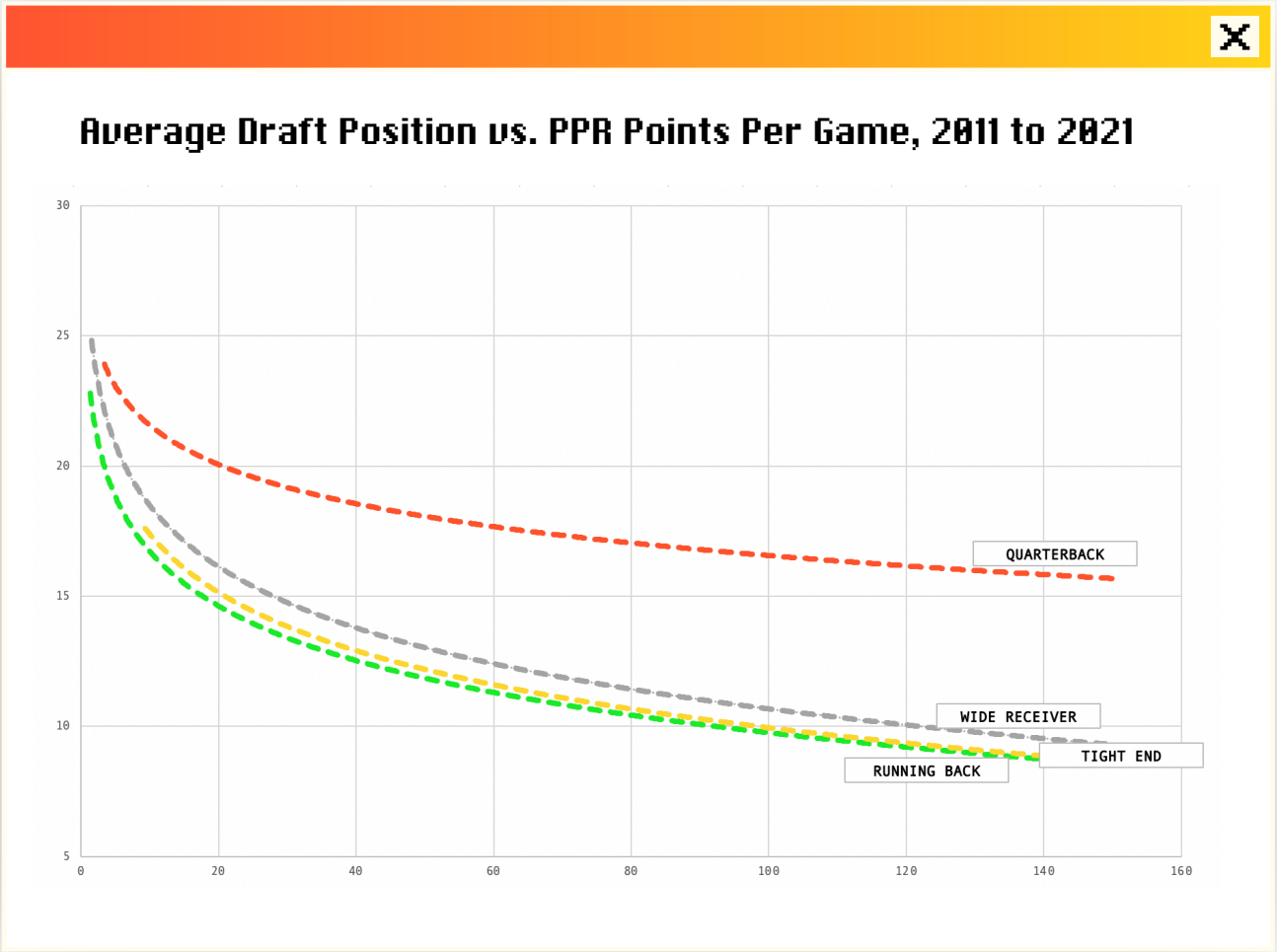
The idea of VORP isn't wrong at all, and there are more complex ways to increase accuracy with the approach. In a perfect world, we'd be super precise with our projections, and we'd nail the proper baseline player to use given our league structure and rules. It's just not very easy to do that.

And, look, it's not that I'm against using VORP as a tool. It can be helpful to get a high-level feel for player value.

It's just that the fantasy community uses it for…everything.

Despite my hesitation in going all-in with VORP, the concepts are actually really useful in measuring the game in hindsight.

Rather than projecting what's going to happen through a value-over-replacement-player formula, you can look at what's already been done across many seasons to get a general feel for overall positional value.



Average draft position data courtesy of MyFantasyLeague.com

The chart above is a depiction of what's happened at each fantasy draft slot historically by position.

If you're not a math person, don't feel overwhelmed. We'll work through this together.

The x-axis (the one that moves left to right) represents a player's overall ADP up until Pick 150. The y-axis (up and down) shows us how many PPR points per game that player ended up scoring. The trendlines — the lines that you see — are just the averages across each position and across each draft slot.

If a data point were to be on the left side of this plot, then that data point would be representing an early-round pick. On the right side of the graph is where all the late-round picks are.

So, for example, move your eyes to Pick 20 on the x-axis. Now start to shift them upward. You'll meet a running back and tight end who are likely to score about 15 PPR points per game. You'll notice a wide receiver would be expected to score a little more than that. And then you'll see a quarterback hitting about 20 points per contest.

That quarterback line is much higher than the others. That's because the position scores the most points. It's higher on the y-axis.

But notice the flatness of the line. This is a quick way of visualizing the aforementioned idea of points stretching across multiple rounds. Or, it's a way of visualizing opportunity cost and positional value.

> In the early rounds, if you were to skip over a quarterback, your opportunity cost in doing so is smaller than if you were to do that at other positions. Especially running back and wide receiver.

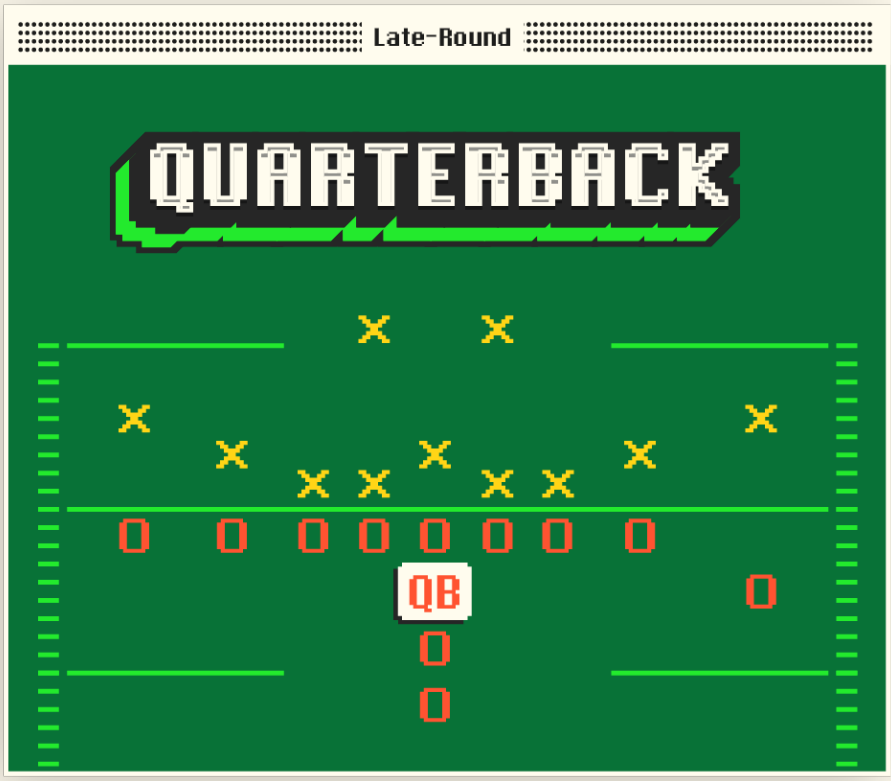
Because even if you were to get a quarterback 10, 20, 30 picks later… that quarterback would still be providing a decent amount of fantasy points per game.

The reason for this is simple: late-round quarterbacks have been pretty good through the years. They've scored a high number of fantasy points. That results in a flatter trendline.

You can see this a bit at tight end — another position where you're starting just one in a typical fantasy league — as well.

Now, this is data that expands over a decade. Our upcoming 2022 season isn't totally the same as what we saw in a year like 2015.

Quarterback was once a complete afterthought. Now? It's a little different.



Your 2022 Quarterback Strategy

In a standard fantasy league, quarterbacks inherently hold less value than running backs and wide receivers. That was visualized in the chart shown just a second ago.

It all comes back to supply and demand.

The typical fantasy football lineup consists of one quarterback starter and multiple slots for running backs and wide receivers. As I mentioned earlier, when a population needs less of something, the cost of that something is going to fall.

This is the foundation of the late-round quarterback strategy. Since the normal fantasy roster forces you to start just one quarterback, the price for a quarterback drops. You can then get usable ones late in your draft.

Many of you play in 12-team leagues. If your 12-teamer started one quarterback, two running backs, and two wide receivers — let's remove all flex spots and tight ends from the equation for a moment — then your league would be starting 12 quarterbacks, 24 running backs, and 24 wide receivers each week.

Since 2011, the 12th quarterback has been drafted, on average, at Pick 94 overall. The 24th running back has fallen off draft boards at Pick 64, and the 24th wide receiver at Pick 59. (All ADP data is from My Fantasy League's August redraft leagues.)

> The game of fantasy football has devalued the quarterback position, and fantasy managers know it, even if they don't *consciously* know it. It's all reflected in price to acquire.

What's even the point in drafting a quarterback early?

Well, quarterbacks can still be valuable. If a quarterback was guaranteed to score a billion more points than any other quarterback, and that edge was significantly higher than any other edge at any other position, you'd still draft him first overall, no?

Back in 2012, there was a young fantasy football writer who was entering the analysis space. He would eventually go on to become a diamond-level Lucio main, but before that happened, he published an e-book called *The Late-Round Quarterback*.

At the time, the fantasy football world was drafting five quarterbacks in the first two rounds of drafts, a reaction to a 2011 season that saw passing numbers skyrocket.

The Latest-Round QB

Since 2011, the latest a 12th-ranked quarterback by ADP was selected was Pick 108. That was in 2019, and the quarterback picked was Jameis Winston. He finished the year as the QB8 in points per game.

That really-mediocre-at-golf fantasy analyst went against the trend. And after a bad 2012 season for quarterbacks, things started to change. Quarterback ADP began falling year after year.

Quarterback ADP By Year

	QB1	QB5	QB10	QB15
2011	9.0	23.6	59.0	102.3
2012	3.4	16.6	60.1	100.4
2013	19.1	43.2	65.8	116.7
2014	11.0	40.7	87.2	105.2
2015	11.4	52.2	87.6	123.6
2016	22.3	55.6	93.5	120.6
2017	18.6	58.7	84.1	110.8
2018	26.1	63.6	99.9	116.6
2019	18.0	68.5	99.2	117.6

The top quarterback was drafted, on average, at Pick 9 back in 2011. That moved to an ADP of 3.4 the following year in response to huge quarterback numbers. It then fell back to 19 in 2013, and it's been around that point — slightly lower — ever since.

In general, the cost to acquire quarterbacks in season-long fantasy football fell during the 2010s. Particularly the lower-end starters, or the QB10 to QB15 group.

You already know this, but it's got to be said: I'm the one who wrote that e-book 10 years ago. I'm the one who tried to tell people to stop drafting quarterbacks so early. That was me.

It'd be silly for me to take a bunch of credit for such a change in the ADP scene. In truth, quarterback performance dictated a lot of this. Fantasy

Shoutout to the OGs

I know a lot of you reading this have been around since the beginning. Thanks for giving a stranger (me) $5 for The Late-Round Quarterback e-book back in 2012. You helped me more than you know.

managers were getting burned by earlier-round quarterbacks, as their later-round counterparts consistently outscored them. That forced those managers to draft the position later the following season.

All I did was warn them that this was coming.

In mathematics, the coefficient of determination, often shown as “R squared”, is "the proportion of the variation in the dependent variable that is predictable from the independent variable(s).”

R squared is displayed as a number between 0 and 1, or 0% and 100%, and it tells us to what extent the variance of one variable explains the variance of the second variable. An R squared of 100% means that there’s perfect correlation, and that it explains everything. An R squared of 0 tells us the opposite.

> As you’d probably guess, most variables in fantasy football don’t correlate super well to one another.

Things like yards and touchdowns do, but those are descriptive statistics. When you’re *projecting*, it’s not so clean.

Take pre-season rank versus actual fantasy points per game as an example. One variable is a projection (pre-season rank), while the other is a result (fantasy points per game).

We shouldn’t expect there to be strong correlation between those two variables. If you had perfect correlation between pre-season rank and post-season points per game, then you’d be a projections genius!

That plays out in the fantasy football market. A player’s average draft position is essentially a projection. It’s just a consensus projection. It’s a collective ranking of a particular player. So the correlation between ADP and actual, end-of-season points per game isn’t close to 100%.

For example, in 2015, the correlation between the top-18 quarterbacks by average draft position and how many points those quarterback scored (minimum 8 games played) was…zero. There was no correlation.

How is that possible? I mean, if you look at the top-18 quarterbacks who ended up playing 8 or more games that year, the reasoning becomes clear. Peyton Manning was the QB3 by ADP that season, and he scored a little over 9 points per game. Matt Ryan was the QB7, and he couldn't get to 15 points per game. Meanwhile, Cam Newton, the QB11, averaged over 24 points per contest. Carson Palmer was a beast as the pre-season QB16, finishing the year with 19.3 points per game.

In 2015, all but one quarterback who ranked in the top-18 in average draft position played 8 or more games. The top-9 quarterbacks by ADP that year averaged 17.6 points per game. The bottom-8 averaged 17.4.

In other words, mid-range and high-end QB2s — players drafted between QB13 and QB18 — performed just as well as QB1s.

That's why there was no correlation.

The 2015 season wasn't totally normal. We're typically not *that* bad at predicting quarterback play. But sometimes we are.

Peyton Manning's 2015

When looking at ADP expectation, you could easily argue that 2015 Peyton Manning was the worst quarterback selection in fantasy football over the last decade.

Top-18 Quarterback R Squared Since 2011

Year	Top-18 R Squared	Biggest Whiff
2011	13.88%	Michael Vick
2012	18.59%	Matthew Stafford
2013	37.37%	Tom Brady
2014	12.00%	Nick Foles
2015	0.37%	Peyton Manning
2016	19.17%	Cam Newton
2017	3.04%	Matt Ryan
2018	0.24%	Matthew Stafford
2019	1.12%	Baker Mayfield

The same thing actually happened in 2018. If you took the top-18 quarterbacks by average draft position that year, and you found the correlation between ADP and actual points per game scored, you'd get an R squared value that's nearly non-existent.

That's because Patrick Mahomes, the QB16, broke out that season. Ben Roethlisberger, the QB13, scored over 21 fantasy points per game. Matt Ryan hit 22 points per game as the pre-season QB14. There were plenty of QB2 hits, when no QB1 (top-12) was able to score 21 fantasy points per game.

There's a point to this, I promise.

You may have noticed that the 2020 and 2021 seasons weren't showcased in either of the quarterback charts that were just thrown at you. That was for a reason.

There's a big reveal!

The last two seasons have been…different.

Quarterbacks have been drafted earlier than the previous handful of years. And they've also been incredibly predictable.

Quarterback ADP By Year

	QB1	QB5	QB10	QB15
2011	9.0	23.6	59.0	102.3
2012	3.4	16.6	60.1	100.4
2013	19.1	43.2	65.8	116.7
2014	11.0	40.7	87.2	105.2
2015	11.4	52.2	87.6	123.6
2016	22.3	55.6	93.5	120.6
2017	18.6	58.7	84.1	110.8
2018	26.1	63.6	99.9	116.6
2019	18.0	68.5	99.2	117.6
2020	13.3	51.5	84.9	122.3
2021	17.7	50.3	84.2	124.9

Top-18 Quarterback R Squared Since 2011

Year	Top-18 R Squared	Biggest Whiff
2011	13.88%	Michael Vick
2012	18.59%	Matthew Stafford
2013	37.37%	Tom Brady
2014	12.00%	Nick Foles
2015	0.37%	Peyton Manning
2016	19.17%	Cam Newton
2017	3.04%	Matt Ryan
2018	0.24%	Matthew Stafford
2019	1.12%	Baker Mayfield
2020	55.80%	Daniel Jones
2021	52.20%	Matt Ryan

It's a rushing quarterback revolution.

The Konami Code

Terrelle Pryor, Tim Tebow, and Running Quarterback History. That was the title of an article on numberFire.com back in 2013, penned by legendary fantasy analyst (and great friend) Rich Hribar.

It's commonplace now, but nine years ago, the fantasy football universe didn't recognize the value of quarterback rushing. So Hribar wrote about it, saying that mobile quarterbacks, due to the number of points they could score on the ground, were a cheat code in fantasy football.

They were the *Konami Code* of the game.

We've seen the Konami Code in action through the years. Cam Newton's propensity to score at the goal line made him super usable in fantasy football over his career. Lamar Jackson's rushing ability is a key reason he's so effective in both real and fantasy football. I mean, even Tim Tebow was a pretty good fantasy quarterback when he played thanks to his running.

We've been hit with plenty of quarterback mobility examples throughout the last decade of football. But, during the last few seasons in particular, we've seen signal-callers take off and run more.

Tebowmania

Despite starting just 11 games in 2011, Tim Tebow ranked seventh in the league in top-12 fantasy performances at the quarterback position. His rushing production made him a cheat code in fantasy.

Percentage of League-Wide Rushing Yards By Position

	RB	WR	TE	QB
2011	86.82%	2.93%	0.12%	10.13%
2012	86.32%	2.70%	0.01%	10.96%
2013	84.62%	3.49%	0.12%	11.76%
2014	84.86%	3.43%	0.03%	11.68%
2015	85.11%	2.93%	0.09%	11.87%
2016	84.83%	4.32%	0.04%	10.81%
2017	84.19%	2.91%	0.18%	12.72%
2018	81.57%	4.47%	0.12%	13.84%
2019	82.63%	3.75%	0.27%	13.35%
2020	80.74%	3.62%	0.15%	15.49%
2021	80.38%	4.35%	0.19%	15.07%

Back in 2011, quarterback rushing yards accounted for about 10% of the league's total rushing yards. That number hovered the 10% to 12% range through 2016, but since 2017, we've slowly watched that percentage climb.

Over the last two seasons, more than 15% of league rushing yards came from quarterbacks.

That may seem like a small bump compared to the early 2010s, but we're talking about a 50% increase from just 10 seasons ago.

This has had a real impact on fantasy football.

Percentage of Top-12 Quarterback Points From Rushing

	Percent Points QB Rushing
2011	13.50%
2012	13.51%
2013	10.84%
2014	11.12%
2015	13.23%
2016	12.54%
2017	12.26%
2018	13.01%
2019	19.35%
2020	17.82%
2021	15.72%

During the last three seasons, top-12 quarterbacks in points per game (minimum 8 games active/played) have seen 19.4%, 17.8%, and 15.7% of their points come from rushing. Once again, those numbers are significantly higher than what we saw 5 to 10 years ago.

Think back to what was just said about quarterback predictability. Over the last two years, we've been way better at foreseeing which quarterbacks are going to be good in fantasy football. That's what the R squared analysis was all about.

Top fantasy quarterbacks are also scoring more points via the ground than they ever have before.

Is this all a coincidence?

Of course not.

Think about who the best mobile quarterbacks in the league are. Just put some names into your brain.

I'll wait.

Still waiting.

You good?

OK. You probably thought of Lamar Jackson first. Maybe Kyler Murray or Josh Allen. Jalen Hurts?

Do you think Tom Brady or Kirk Cousins or Matthew Stafford or Derek Carr will ever come close to the rushing production that those quarterbacks will generate?

Do you think those rushing quarterbacks could throw for the same number of touchdowns as a traditional pocket passer?

If we were taking a guess at who'd throw more touchdown passes this season, and the choices were Tom Brady and Jalen Hurts, we'd probably side with the greatest quarterback of all time. Nothing against Hurts, who's got a chance to be awesome, but he doesn't have bling on seven fingers.

Tom Brady's Dad Running

Tom Brady has 1,124 rushing yards across his entire 22-year NFL career. Lamar Jackson had 1,206 during his 2019 MVP campaign alone.

But what would be more surprising: Jalen Hurts throwing more touchdowns than Tom Brady this year, or Tom Brady outproducing Jalen Hurts as a rusher?

I think we know the answer to that.

> We generally know which quarterbacks are going to be effective rushers entering a season.

You can use math to prove this, too.

When looking at quarterbacks who had 200 or more pass attempts in back-to-back seasons since 2011, we've seen far stronger year-over-year correlation within rushing statistics than passing ones.

For instance, rushing yards per game had an R Squared value of about 72%, when passing touchdown rate (touchdowns divided by attempts) correlation has been virtually non-existent.

Quarterbacks also saw more consistency with rushing fantasy points per game than passing fantasy points per game year over year.

Given the Brady versus Hurts example we just walked through, this makes plenty of sense. The same quarterbacks are generally running the football well, when there's a little more variation to things like touchdown passes.

This, my friends, is probably the reason we're seeing quarterback prices rise in fantasy football these days.

Think about it. Across the league, quarterbacks are doing more on the ground than they ever have. And because rushing matters in fantasy football, those mobile quarterbacks are ranking high.

Rushing numbers, as we just saw, are easier to project each year than passing numbers are. That is, we usually know which quarterbacks are going to be good runners.

Fantasy managers are now better at forecasting the quarterback position as a result.

When information is more predictable, it becomes more expensive.

The thing is, the fantasy points per game edge that quarterbacks are bringing to the table isn't all that different than it's been through the years.

Points Per Game Differences By Quarterback Tier

	QB1-3 to QB4-6	QB4-6 to QB7-9	QB7-9 to QB10-12	QB10-12 to QB13-15	QB13-15 to QB16-18
2011	3.9	3.5	1.2	1.8	0.7
2012	1.9	2.2	0.6	1.2	0.7
2013	4.1	0.8	0.7	0.5	1.1
2014	2.3	1.4	0.5	0.7	1.0
2015	2.5	0.8	0.6	0.6	0.6
2016	2.3	1.9	0.3	0.7	0.6
2017	2.8	1.0	0.6	0.8	0.9
2018	2.5	0.6	1.1	1.1	0.2
2019	2.8	1.2	1.5	0.8	0.7
2020	1.5	1.1	2.6	1.9	0.3
2021	1.5	0.9	1.0	3.1	1.0

The table above shows quarterback point differential by tier. So, in 2011, the QB1 to the QB3 (minimum 8 games played) averaged 24.7 fantasy points per contest. The next tier, or the passers who finished as the QB4 to QB6 that year, averaged 20.8 points. The difference between those two numbers is 3.9, which is why you see a 3.9 in the "QB1-3 to QB4-6" column from 2011.

As the graphic shows, the last two seasons, in total, haven't really been special from a point differential, or VORP, perspective at quarterback. If anything, you could claim that the point differential in 2021 was *less* significant given the biggest drop in points per game occurred after the QB10-12 group, signaling that every hypothetical starter in a 12-team league was pretty good.

But we can't discount the value of predictability. Remember, in 2015 and 2018, we basically saw zero correlation between ADP and actualized points per game when looking at the top-18 preseason quarterbacks. That's not the case anymore.

And because we know that a healthy Josh Allen will likely be good in fantasy, or that a healthy Lamar Jackson will be good fantasy…that innately gives those players more value.

Your 2022 Plan of Attack

Does all this mean that we should put an end to drafting our quarterbacks late?

Quarterbacks *are* more predictable these days, yes. We've been better at spotting which ones are going to be good in fantasy football over the last couple of years. We shouldn't dispute that.

What we *could* debate is the sustainability of the predictiveness. Fantasy managers finally putting a premium on quarterback rushing has definitely helped those ADP-to-end-season-result R squared values discussed earlier, but those numbers are also sort of…outliers.

> To win at fantasy football, you can't just always repeat whatever strategy was successful in the previous season.

Sometimes, the best advantages can be found when you break from the market. That's *often* the case, actually.

So while I fully recognize that getting someone like Josh Allen in Round 2 or Round 3 has its advantages, it's also important to understand that we're bound to eventually see other quarterbacks emerge.

That's why, in 2022, I wouldn't advise strictly going with what appears to be the "safe" route by getting an early-round quarterback.

That's particularly true if you're thinking about being the first team in your league to select a quarterback. That can get you into a lot of trouble — if everyone else in your league waits a little while before getting *their* quarterback, your selection becomes devalued.

Instead, focus heavily on your tiers. More than usual.

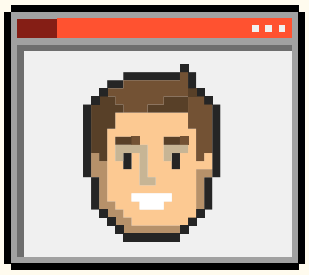
Since quarterbacks see wildly different valuations in redraft formats — more casual leagues see them go in the first round often, as an example — make sure you're appropriately tiering them pre-draft. That way, you can be reactive to their costs.

Math tells us that low-end QB1s — quarterbacks ranked in the 9 to 12 range — have still been strong bets in recent seasons. That range gave us Josh Allen and Aaron Rodgers in 2020, and it produced Tom Brady and Jalen Hurts in 2021.

You can focus there for balance (Trey Lance, for example) and maybe reach for someone right above that section of the draft (Jalen Hurts). Or you can wait to get a QB2 who's got dual-threat upside (Justin Fields).

This not only will provide you with a good expected outcome, but if things are a little different at the quarterback position this year — if things *are* less predictable — then you're not going down with the ship, since you didn't invest a ton in the position.

Don't feel the need to get an elite quarterback in the early rounds. The certainty may be there, but we're bound to eventually see something funkier go down at the position. That could happen as soon as this season.



Your 2022 Running Back Strategy

Elite running backs give you the biggest edge in fantasy football, and they have for years.

Forget about average draft position for a moment. We're just going to focus on how players finished their seasons.

You know that quarterback point differential table you saw in the last section?

Let's run through that same exercise — an exercise where we cluster players in sets of three and find the difference in points scored from one group to the next.

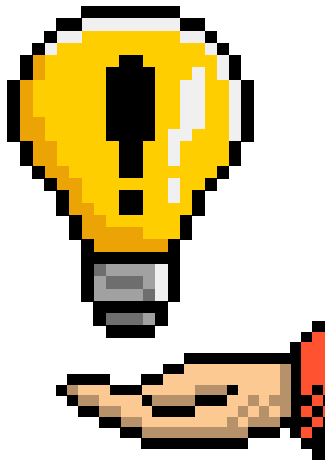
As I talked about before, there are plenty of ways to calculate VORP. A very simple method is to just look at the point differential between the best starter within a positional group to the worst theoretical starter.

At quarterback, in a 12-team league, that's the QB1 to the QB12. At running back and wide receiver, since you're starting at least two, it's the top-ranked player to the 24th-ranked one. At tight end, it's the TE1 to the TE12.

Rather than finding the difference in points per game between the top player at a position and the worst starter, let's do it by our groupings. That way, we're not skewing data by an obscenely good or bad performance at either tail end.

In 2011, for example, the RB1 to RB3 averaged 22.8 PPR points per game (minimum 8 games played). The RB22 to RB24 averaged 11.5 PPR points per game (again, minimum 8 games played). The difference between those two numbers is 11.3, representing the delta between having an elite running back to the lowest supposed starter in a 12-team league.

Clearly, when league requirements change, so does your baseline. Most leagues start more than two running backs and wide receivers, but for argument purposes, we'll assume the league setup is one quarterback, two running backs, two wide receivers, and one tight end.



PPG Differentials, Top Tier vs. Worst Starter Tier

	QB	RB	WR	TE
2011	8.6	11.3	6.9	7.1
2012	4.8	7.7	6.7	5.9
2013	5.5	10.3	8.3	5.3
2014	4.2	10.8	9.5	5.3
2015	3.9	6.9	8.1	5.4
2016	4.6	10.5	6.2	2.3
2017	4.5	11.8	7.9	6.3
2018	4.2	12.6	7.5	7.6
2019	5.5	10.4	6.0	4.7
2020	5.2	10.4	8.0	7.7
2021	3.4	10.3	8.7	5.7

At quarterback, wide receiver, and tight end, we've never seen a double-digit point-per-game differential between the high-end grouping to the low-end one. At running back, we almost exclusively see that big of a difference.

This is a quick way of showing the type of edge you get from elite players at different positions.

And, from this, it's clear that top-notch running backs are giving you the biggest advantage.

You may be questioning this data since we're only looking at players who played at least eight games. Part of the reason fantasy managers fade early-round running backs is because they get injured, right? Hindsight point differential won't tell us everything then.

You're right! There's a lot more to all of this. There's a lot more to *anything* analysis-related in fantasy football.

But I'll at least calm your mind with a couple of facts.

First off, the reason we're approaching this from a points per game perspective is because cumulative fantasy numbers tell you more about who was healthy than who was good.

If a running back scores 20 fantasy points per game — an elite points per game rate — but plays 12 games (240 cumulative season-long points), and another running back plays 16 games at 15.1 points per game (241.6), are we automatically siding with the guy who scored fewer points per game? It's not like you're taking a zero in your running back spot when the 20-points-per-game player is sidelined.

Points per game is a better indicator of success. And if we're using points per game, we've got to set some sort of games played threshold somewhere. Otherwise our numbers can become unreliable. That's where the eight — roughly half a season — figure comes into play.

But back to the original point: If running backs are getting hurt more frequently, that should undoubtedly make the position less desirable. And it does. Running backs aren't getting hurt *that* much more than even quarterbacks are, though.

Since 2011, quarterbacks ranked in the top-six by ADP have played 14.8 games per season. The next group — QB7 through QB12 — have played 14.0.

The RB1 to RB12 by ADP have played 12.9. The next 12 backs by average draft position have played 12.6.

> Yes, there's a difference there, but it's not close to dramatic enough to throw out these point-per-game differentials.

For the record, high-end wide receivers have played roughly the same number of games as quarterbacks. And then tight end sort of sits in the middle between those two positions and running back.

Games Missed By Top TEs

The TE1 through TE6 since 2011 has played an average of 13.4 games per season. The next six tight ends — the TE7 to TE12 — has played 13.2.

Not only are the games played amounts closer than expected, but this points-per-game differential analysis naturally favors quarterbacks and tight ends a bit.

Remember, we're making the assumption that this hypothetical league is starting just two running backs and two wide receivers. The vast majority of leagues start more than that. That would lower the baseline value, making the higher-end players at those positions more valuable.

Something to consider with this chart is that we're not analyzing average draft position. As the quarterback section described, a huge reason early-round quarterbacking is becoming cool again is because of predictability. When you enter a draft, you have a pretty good idea about which quarterbacks are going to be good.

We're actually not as bad as you'd think at picking running backs. Many fantasy managers get concerned about spending a high pick on one, but if you're going to win the position across an entire season, you're probably going to have to spend up.

Running Back Hit Rates By Point-Per-Game Thresholds

	>10	>12	>14	>16	>18
FH Round 1	96.4%	96.4%	85.7%	71.4%	46.4%
BH Round 1	96.6%	86.2%	75.9%	51.7%	41.4%
FH Round 2	96.3%	85.2%	74.1%	55.6%	40.7%
BH Round 2	100.0%	90.0%	70.0%	25.0%	15.0%
FH Round 3	94.7%	73.7%	57.9%	47.4%	15.8%
BH Round 3	84.2%	52.6%	31.6%	15.8%	10.5%
FH Round 4	66.7%	58.3%	45.8%	20.8%	8.3%
BH Round 4	82.6%	47.8%	30.4%	13.0%	0.0%
FH Round 5	50.0%	50.0%	18.8%	18.8%	12.5%
BH Round 5	60.0%	50.0%	10.0%	10.0%	0.0%
FH Round 6	70.6%	52.9%	11.8%	5.9%	0.0%
BH Round 6	61.1%	27.8%	16.7%	11.1%	5.6%
FH Round 7	58.3%	33.3%	25.0%	16.7%	8.3%
BH Round 7	50.0%	36.4%	22.7%	18.2%	9.1%
FH Round 8	70.0%	50.0%	30.0%	0.0%	0.0%
BH Round 8	33.3%	16.7%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
FH Round 9	36.8%	15.8%	5.3%	0.0%	0.0%
BH Round 9	33.3%	22.2%	11.1%	5.6%	0.0%

The chart above shows running back groupings and their rate of hitting different point-per-game thresholds in a given season since 2011. The first row, "FH Round 1", just means a running back was selected in the "front half" of the first round in a 12-team league, or Picks 1 to 6. "BH Round 1" is for running backs selected in the back half of the first round. The columns represent different point-per-game thresholds met by a grouping all the way to 18 points per game.

Just so we're on the same page, let's run through an example from the table. There have been 28 front-half first-round running back selections since 2011. Or, to phrase that a different way, 28 running backs have had average draft positions of 1 through 6 over the last 11 seasons. (Each of these running backs played a minimum of eight games.)

Only one single running back of those 28 failed to hit 10 PPR points per game (96.4%). Nearly half of them (13) scored 18 or more PPR points per contest (46.4%).

Notice anything interesting about the chart?

There's a reason it's color-coded — it allows you to see just how much better running back hit rates are in the first round-and-a-half versus the rest of your draft.

> The running backs you're snagging early are generally the ones who are giving you the largest point advantages.

Observe anything else?

Maybe you see the running back dead zone.

The Running Back Dead Zone

Fantasy analysts like myself have been talking about the running back dead zone for years. It's an area of drafts where, historically, the hit rates

for running backs just haven't been very good, while the hit rates for wide receivers have been excellent.

> It's a dead zone because the players you get generally aren't great, and the opportunity cost to get said players is high.

That's a rough combination of factors.

In 2021, a 16 PPR-point-per-game season would've given a running back a low-end RB1 campaign. Players in that range were providing a decent advantage at the position for your fantasy squad.

As you can see in the chart above, over 71% of front-half first-round running backs have hit that 16 mark since 2011. That drops to about 52% in the back half of the first, and then rises again to 56% in the top half of the second round.

You see a dip to 25% in the back half of the second, but that's likely due to some variance, since the front half of Round 3 has given us a strong 16-plus-points-per-game rate of about 47%.

And then there's a wall.

Running backs drafted in the back half of Round 3 have hit 16 or more PPR points per game at a rate of just 15.8%. And during Round 4, Round 5, and Round 6, that figure doesn't get much higher.

Really, Round 7 running backs have provided just as high of a ceiling over the last 11 years in fantasy football drafts as running backs found in certain areas of Round 4.

This is the running back dead zone, folks.

But…why? Why does this even exist? Why is this a thing?

It likely has to do with supply and demand.

Dead Zone By Platform

The running back dead zone will be more evident on certain fantasy platforms. You'll see sharper leagues avoid running backs in that area of drafts more often, but you can really take advantage in the everyday league.

Think about the running back position as you enter a season. How many true bell-cow backs can we safely (or, at least, relatively safely) project? How many running backs project to have elite rushing *and* receiving upside going into a season? 10? 11? 12?

In a 12-team league, those running backs are usually gone by the time you hit the middle of the third round.

> Managers, though, know that the running back position is important in fantasy football. So they reach.

They select running backs who are inferior talents in order to fill their roster. And when they're not as talented, there's opportunity for them to disappoint.

We've had 127 running backs play 8 or more games in a season while getting selected between Pick 30 to Pick 72 since 2011. That is, the middle of the third round through the sixth round.

Just 18 of those backs finished with 16 or more points per game. That's a rate of 14.2%. Round 7 running backs have hit that mark at a 17.6% rate.

There's no reason to pick running backs in that range — there hasn't been a reason historically — when you can get similar production a few rounds later.

Not all drafts are the same. I get it. Any average draft position-related analysis will have natural problems, since the cost of players varies from one league to the next.

If Josh Jacobs had an average draft position in Round 5, but he fell to Round 11, it wouldn't make much sense to pass on the opportunity to take him that late. Running backs from the dead zone still have better hit rates than running backs who are drafted as afterthoughts. They're still providing a decent floor, too.

It's just that, traditionally, backs from that area haven't been great bets. And since the majority of fantasy drafts loosely follow average draft position, it's something you have to keep in mind.

But if you get stuck and you're forced to take a dead-zone running back, there *are* ways to increase your likelihood that the runner you select will end up working out.

Beating the Dead Zone

The 14.2% RB1 hit rate for dead-zone running backs is nothing to write home about, but it's not zero percent. Running backs *are* emerging from the dead zone, and it's happening, on average, more than once per season.

Fortunately, there are ways to find which running backs to target there.

The first thing to look for with a dead-zone running back — and you could say this goes for *any* running back — is pass-catching ability. The 18 backs who've materialized from the dead zone since 2011 — the ones who scored 16 or more PPR points per game — averaged a target share of 10.2%. For the dead-zone failures, it was 7.0%.

Not only that, but successful dead-zone running backs have averaged a rush-attempts-per-target rate of 4.7 during this timeframe. That number's 4.2 if you remove Derrick Henry's 2019 from the sample, too.

The unsuccessful dead-zone backs were at 5.6 — they were seeing more rush attempts per target, signaling that they weren't as heavily involved as receivers.

This makes plenty of sense.

> Not only are we looking at PPR formats with this analysis, but targets are more valuable than rushes for running backs in all formats.

A running back seeing a high proportion of his touches through the air is a running back who's generating more value in fantasy football, assuming the volume is relatively high.

Team offense seems to matter a bit, too. The successful dead-zone running backs played in offenses that averaged 2.7 touchdowns per game, while the unsuccessful group was at 2.3. This may not be as actionable since we're not going to be perfect at projecting which offenses will be good. But it's at least something to think about.

And then the final thing to look for with dead-zone running backs is age.

Of our 18 successful dead-zone running backs, 6 of them were rookies. Another three were second-year players.

> That means half of the dead-zone running backs who emerged and were effective were first- and second-year players.

Rookies seem to be the best group to bet on. We've seen almost 29% of rookies drafted in the running back dead zone since 2011 end their first seasons with 16 or more PPR points per game. That's 10 percentage points higher than the second-most successful group, Year 2 players.

If a young running back is getting selected in the dead zone, that's likely an indication that he's talented. We have no data on the player at the NFL level, so his price is relatively high in drafts because we think he's pretty good at the game. And if he's pretty good at the game, then he's got a real opportunity to become something.

Remember, the theory is that dead-zone running backs are generally inferior talents. They're being pushed up draft boards because of need, not necessarily because of ability. So if you're able to spot *ability* in that area of your draft, you can still come out on top.

In the end, if you're stuck in a draft or just want to get some exposure to the running back dead zone, target young pass-catching backs who are in good offenses.

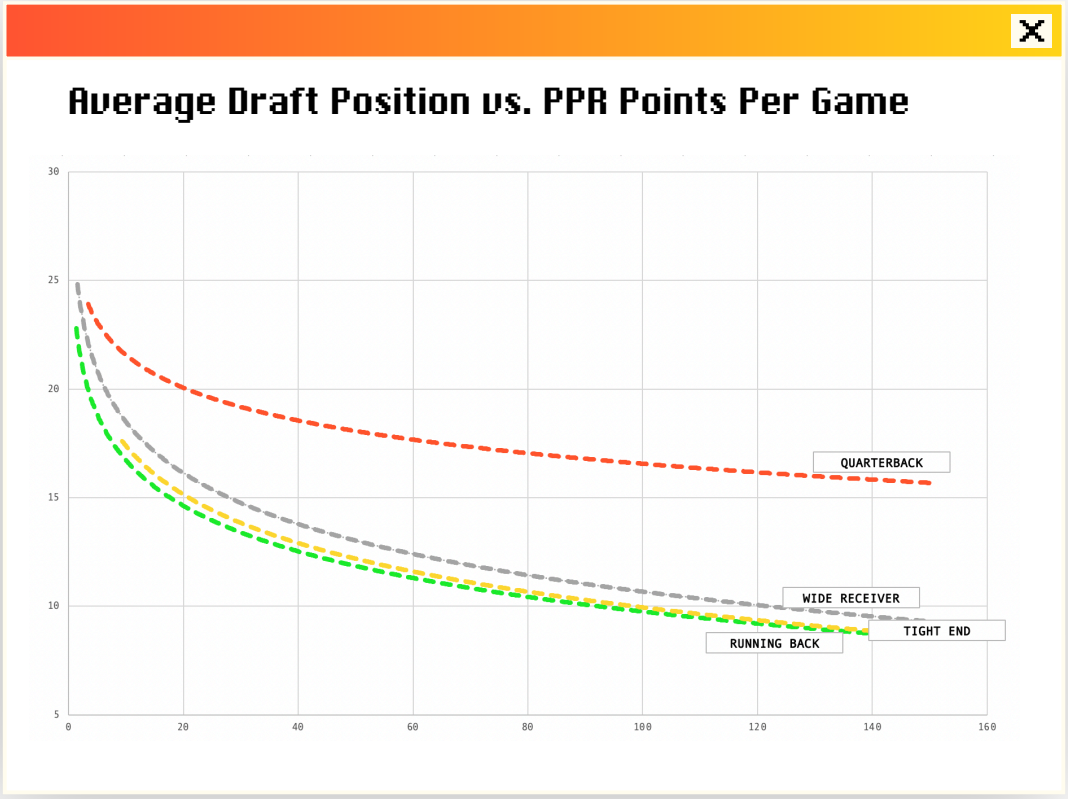
Defining Breakouts

We now know that running backs have great hit rates in the first two-and-a-half rounds of drafts, and that the running back dead zone, while beatable, is a place where you want to avoid the position.

What about the middle and late rounds of your draft?

To be truthful — and that's all I've been so far, I promise — you won't find league-winning, breakout running backs late in drafts very often. Of the 532 running backs who have played 8 or more games while having ADPs after Pick 60 (Round 5) since 2011, just 18 of them hit 16 or more PPR points per game in a season. That's just 3.3% of the overall group.

Because the sample of hits is so small, we can look at things a different way: via expectation.



Remember this guy? It shows every running back's average draft position (x-axis) since 2011 versus how many points that running back scored (y-axis) per game. In essence, it's showing us expectation. It's showing us the number of points we'd expect a player to score at a particular ADP.

Every single running back — or player, but we're focused on the backs here — has some sort of expected points per game number based on his ADP. At the end of the season, he's going to have either played above or below that expected value.

Are there ways to spot the running backs who exceed expectation most?

Before answering that question, we've got to first wrap our heads around the idea of expectation.

Since each draft position has a unique expected point value, that means expectation is shifting from player to player. If a player is drafted at, say, Pick 74, he's expected to score a lot more fantasy points per game than someone who's selected at Pick 204.

A running back at Pick 74 who exceeds expectation by 5 fantasy points per game, then, is going to score more for your fantasy roster than a running back at Pick 204 who does the same thing. Their starting points are different.

We also know that our approaches can change depending on where we are in a draft. In the late rounds, you're throwing darts. You don't even remotely care if the player busts — you're just trying to find players who have crazy-high ceilings. You may not be *as* wild with your draft choices in the middle rounds.

So, to help with this, let's examine these non-early-round breakout running backs by dividing them into middle-round picks and late-round picks.

Middle-round running backs will consist of every running back selected between Picks 61 and 108 since 2011, representing Rounds 6 through 9 of a 12-team draft. Late-round running backs are the ones drafted

after that point through Round 15, or Picks 109 to 180.

During our timeframe of 2011 to 2021, we've had 128 middle-round running back selections and 231 late-round ones. Of the 128 middle-round backs, 31 exceeded their ADP points-per-game expectation by 3-plus points, making up 24.2% of the sample**.** That number was 56 with the late-rounders — also 24.2% of that group.

The number three is totally arbitrary. Being three points per game above expectation — that's just a number that I pulled out of thin air to get a large enough grouping for meaningful analysis.

A quarter of a subset doesn't necessarily show us who broke out, though, right? We'd want breakouts to be a little rarer than that.

So these players who've exceeded expectation by three or more points per game…we'll call them *moderate* breakouts. (I'm very creative.)

True breakouts are players who exceed expectation by six or more points per game. Within our samples, that represents 8.6% of all middle-round running backs and 8.2% of all late-round ones.

Do these moderate and true breakout running backs share any characteristics?

You know it.

The Biggest Breakouts

The best middle-round breakout over the last 11 seasons came from Fred Jackson in 2011. The top late-round breakout was James Conner in 2018, when he took over the Steelers' backfield for Le'Veon Bell.

Middle-Round Running Back Breakouts

Ambiguous Backfields

One thing that's abundantly clear with middle-round running back breakouts is that they typically come from what I've infamously dubbed *ambiguous backfields*.

Looking at the 31 middle-round moderate breakouts since 2011 — the 31 running backs who ended up exceeding ADP expectation by 3 or more points — the average ADP of the top running back from those players' NFL backfields has been 68.2. Phrased a different way, there

aren't highly-drafted stud running backs sharing backfields with these breakout backs.

Some of our middle-round moderate breakouts were the top running backs selected from their NFL team, but not a single running back from the middle rounds who exceeded expectation by 3 or more points per game had a running back teammate selected in the first two rounds (top-24) of fantasy drafts.

After those first two rounds, things start to change.

Middle-Round Running Back Teammate ADP and Hit Rates

Top Teammate ADP	Total in Sample	Breakouts	Rate
Pick 1-12	6	0	0.00%
Pick 13-24	7	0	0.00%
Pick 25-36	5	3	60.00%
Pick 37-48	10	4	40.00%
Pick 49-60	8	1	12.50%
Pick 61-72	36	7	19.44%
Pick 73-84	31	10	32.26%
Pick 85-96	12	3	25.00%
Pick 97-108	13	3	23.08%

You may be surprised to see the number of moderate breakout running backs who've come from backfields with third- and fourth-round running backs by average draft position, and I was, too. Our sample sizes are small, sure, but it does play into the running back dead zone idea pretty well.

As I noted earlier, the reason the running back dead zone exists is likely due to supply and demand. Managers freak out after missing on a bell-

cow running back early, so they force the issue. They end up drafting players who probably shouldn't be drafted so early strictly based on a lack of supply of running backs.

With these moderate middle-round breakouts, we're analyzing running backs who were drafted in Rounds 6 through 9. If they've got a running back teammate getting selected in the dead zone, that means they're an NFL team's RB2 (at best) by ADP, yet they're *still* getting selected in the middle rounds.

> That tells us they're probably pretty talented. And if they're pretty talented, then they've got a shot to unseat or dig into the workload of one of the overrated dead-zone backs.

That's why, despite a small sample, these numbers aren't totally illogical.

Now that we're talking about team RB2s, let's dig into the topic a little further.

Our sample of middle-round running backs consists of 75 team RB1s and 53 team non-RB1s (we'll call them RB2s). That is, 75 of the 128 running backs were the first running back selected from their real, actual NFL team.

Through the years, we've seen those RB1s hit at a higher rate than RB2s or worse.

Middle-Round Team RB1 vs. Team RB2 Hit Rates

	Total in Sample	Breakouts	Rate
Team RB1s	75	22	29.33%
RB2s or Worse	53	9	16.98%

Moderate middle-round breakouts seem to happen more when the running back is his NFL team's top running back by ADP. Those team RB1s have exceeded expectation by three or more points at a 29% rate, when the RB2s are around 17%.

To be candid, if you move our threshold to exceeding expectation by four or more points instead of three, the gap between RB1 hit rates and RB2 hit rates compresses. The RB1s are still better, but it's not necessary to go all-in on *only* RB1s.

That's particularly true when considering what we just talked through with RB2s who have RB1 teammates in the dead zone. If you were only selecting team RB1s in the middle rounds, then you'd miss out on all that RB2 goodness.

A little confused? To make this all a little easier to comprehend, let's check out a table that breaks down the hit rates of different middle-round subsets.

Middle-Round Running Back Teammate ADP and Hit Rates

	Total in Sample	Breakouts	Rate
RB1 With Teammate in Middle Rounds	12	5	41.67%
RB1 With Teammate in Late Rounds	63	17	26.98%
RB2 With Teammate in Round 1-2	13	0	0.00%
RB2 With Teammate in Rounds 3-5	23	8	34.78%
RB2 With Teammate in Middle Rounds	17	1	5.88%

There are three distinct groups it seems like you should be choosing from when looking for moderate middle-round breakouts.

The first is team RB1s who have teammates drafted in the middle rounds with them. This makes some sense: If two running backs have middle-round ADPs, it's telling us that drafters just have no idea which running back will emerge. Historically, the market's actually been pretty good — based on our ADP source — at choosing the back who ends up outperforming expectation.

An example of this happened just last season with Leonard Fournette and Ronald Jones. Fournette was the top running back drafted in the Tampa Bay backfield by ADP, and he ended up being a massive value. Ronald Jones, an RB2 with a teammate who was also getting drafted in the middle rounds with him, was a bust.

Middle-round team RB1s who have teammates that get drafted late are still fine, too. They probably don't hit at as high of a rate as the other types of RB1s because, in this scenario, the situation may not be all that enticing. If just one running back from a team is getting selected in the single-digit rounds, and that running back isn't going early, that tells us that perhaps the state of that running back's team isn't all that great.

And then the final subset is what we just talked through, which is team RB2s who have RB1 teammates who get picked up in the dead zone.

That's all for moderate breakouts.

Things actually do change when we move our focus to *true* breakouts.

Remember, true breakouts are running backs who outperform ADP expectation by *six* points per game. They happen far less frequently than moderate breakouts — 24.2% of middle-round running backs have ended up as moderate breakouts, whereas 8.6% have been true breakouts.

Because no moderate breakout came from a backfield that had a Round 1 or 2 running back, no true breakout came from a backfield like that, either. But there are some differences between what we saw with running backs who exceeded expectation by three points per game versus the guys who hit the six points per game mark.

Middle-Round Team RB1 vs. Team RB2 Hit Rates

	Total in Sample	Breakouts	Rate
Team RB1s	75	7	9.33%
RB2s or Worse	53	4	7.55%

The true breakout hit rate gap between middle-round RB1s and RB2s shrunk compared to what we saw with the moderate breakout group. Considering the same trend occurred when looking at players who exceeded expectation by four points per game or more, it appears as though if you're looking for a *ceiling* from your middle-round running back, going with an RB1 is slightly better, but the advantage isn't the end-all.

And the running back subset breakdown changes a bit, too.

Middle-Round Running Back Teammate ADP and Hit Rates

	Total in Sample	Breakouts	Rate
RB1 With Teammate in Middle Rounds	12	1	8.33%
RB1 With Teammate in Late Rounds	63	6	9.52%
RB2 With Teammate in Round 1-2	13	0	0.00%
RB2 With Teammate in Rounds 3-5	23	4	17.39%
RB2 With Teammate in Middle Rounds	17	0	0.00%

Oh?

The middle-round RB1s still hit at a higher rate than the RB2s when looking at true breakouts, but the RB2s who have teammates getting drafted in the dead zone have been money.

These types of team RB2s may have higher ceilings because of situation.

As you saw earlier, team RB1s are exceeding expectation by three or more points more often than these team RB2s who have teammates getting drafted in the dead zone. You could say team RB1s are just generally safer bets.

But these backup running backs who have teammates going in the dead zone — they're in pretty unique situations.

Not only is their talent level likely high, as I alluded to earlier, but they could be in desirable offenses for fantasy football. That's why there are two running backs being drafted from the same backfield in the single-digit rounds.

These RB2s also have weekly upside if their teammate misses time. Of the four running backs we're looking at here who were true breakouts with a teammate in the dead zone, in three cases, that dead-zone teammate was sidelined.

Last season, James Conner materialized as a bell-cow, and his production was helped — boosted — by an injured Chase Edmonds.

Austin Ekeler was one of the true breakouts in 2019, and Melvin Gordon started that season missing the first four games due to a holdout.

CJ Spiller scored 9.4 points per game above expectation in 2012. Fred Jackson, his top teammate by ADP, was sidelined for six games that year.

With these middle-round team RB2s who have teammates who are drafted in the dead zone, it's sort of a perfect combo. They're clearly talented, or else they wouldn't have the average draft positions that they have. They're probably not that much worse — if at all — compared to their teammates. So upside naturally exists within them.

But there's even more of a ceiling if that top running back goes down.

Overall, when it comes to middle-round running backs, you want to target them from ambiguous backfields. Ideally, the team RB1 has a teammate drafted in the middle rounds with him, or the RB2 that you're drafting has a teammate who typically gets drafted in the dead zone. All the while, you should avoid running backs who have studs in their backfield. They've historically not — never — been worth it.

Pass-Catching Upside

Across almost any fantasy football format, targets are more valuable than rush attempts. That's only exaggerated in a full PPR format, which is where all this analysis is coming from.

Unsurprisingly, targets matter for breakout running backs.

Loosely Following Criteria

With any ADP analysis, it's vital to remember that these are just trends. ADP will shift throughout an offseason, and the data we're looking at is data from August.

Receiving Statistics By Running Back Breakout Type

Breakout Type	Target Share	Att/Tar
Moderate Breakout	9.6%	4.7
True Breakout	11.2%	3.5
Non-Breakout	5.6%	7.4

The average target share of the 31 moderate middle-round breakouts since 2011 was 9.6%. That jumps to 11.2% for our true breakouts, or running backs who've exceeded expectation by 6 or more points. Players who didn't break out? 5.6%.

Just four moderate running back breakouts failed to get to that 5.6% target share. And none of those moderate breakouts were true breakouts.

You can look at this through an attempts-per-target lens, too. The players who didn't break out saw 7.4 rush attempts for every target. That number falls to 4.7 for moderate breakouts and 3.5 for true breakouts.

The bigger the breakout, the higher the proportion of touches that came through the air.

Target targets.

Avoid the Olds

It would make sense for younger running backs to exceed expectation more frequently than older ones, wouldn't it? With aged running backs, we generally know what we're getting, so we're probably better at accurately projecting their outcomes.

Breakout Rate By Career Year, Middle-Round RBs

Year in League	Total in Sample	Moderate	True
1	22	31.8%	4.5%
2	16	37.5%	12.5%
3	17	35.3%	17.6%
4	13	15.4%	0.0%
5	17	23.5%	23.5%
6	13	15.4%	0.0%
7	11	9.1%	9.1%
8	8	12.5%	0.0%
9	4	25.0%	0.0%
10	2	0.0%	0.0%
11	3	0.0%	0.0%
12	1	100.0%	0.0%
13	1	0.0%	0.0%

In our sample of 128 middle-round running backs, we had 22 rookies, the highest of any subset. That's reasonable since it's rare for running backs to play six, seven, or eight years in the league. Younger running backs make up more of the running back population across the NFL.

Of those 22 rookies, 7 — 31.8% — were moderate breakouts. Just one (4.6%) was a true breakout.

You can see in the table above that we don't usually see older running backs exceed expectation at an elite rate. They're rarely true breakouts. In fact, we've had just one running back since 2011 exceed expectation by more than six points per game who was past the fifth year of his NFL career.

When finding value in these middle rounds, it's not necessary to focus solely on younger running backs. You should, however, avoid older ones. Rushers in the middle of their careers — players in Year 3 to Year 5 — have been fine targets.

Late-Round Running Back Breakouts

We now know to aim for ambiguous backfields when looking for breakout running backs in the middle rounds. We also want our running backs to not be old and to be good pass-catchers.

Do the same rules apply for late-round running back breakouts?

Mostly.

Ambiguous Backfields

If you recall, we haven't seen a middle-round running back breakout who had a backfield teammate drafted in the early rounds since 2011.

That's a little different with late-round running backs.

Late-Round Running Back Teammate ADP and Hit Rates

Top Teammate ADP	Total in Sample	Breakouts	Rate
Pick 1-12	33	5	15.15%
Pick 13-24	32	5	15.63%
Pick 25-36	25	9	36.00%
Pick 37-48	28	5	17.86%
Pick 49-60	17	5	29.41%
Pick 61-72	26	7	26.92%
Pick 73-84	22	7	31.82%
Pick 85-96	9	3	33.33%
Pick 97-108	15	3	20.00%
Outside Top 108	24	7	29.17%

This table is identical to the moderate breakouts one you saw earlier. It's just that the running backs we're analyzing are in the late rounds now.

Of the 231 running backs selected between Picks 109 and 180, 33 had teammate running backs drafted in Round 1. Of those 33, 5 ended up exceeding ADP expectation by 3 or more points per game.

Compared to the middle-round running backs, the late-round ones seem to come through a little better when they've got teammates being selected early in drafts. But, like the middle-round running backs, as backfields get more ambiguous, hit rates seem to increase.

Late-Round Running Back Teammate ADP and Hit Rates

Top Teammate ADP	Total in Sample	Breakouts	Rate
Top 5 Rounds	135	29	21.48%
Not Top 5 Rounds	96	27	28.13%

Moderate late-round breakout running backs have usually come from backfields where the team's RB1 is drafted after the dead zone area.

That's still the case when we look at *true* late-round breakout running backs, or running backs who've exceed expectation by six or more points per game.

Late-Round Running Back Teammate ADP and Hit Rates

Top Teammate ADP	Total in Sample	Breakouts	Rate
Pick 1-12	33	3	9.09%
Pick 13-24	32	1	3.13%
Pick 25-36	25	1	4.00%
Pick 37-48	28	0	0.00%
Pick 49-60	17	2	11.76%
Pick 61-72	26	5	19.23%
Pick 73-84	22	1	4.55%
Pick 85-96	9	2	22.22%
Pick 97-108	15	2	13.33%
Outside Top 108	24	1	4.17%

We've seen three big hits with running back handcuffs in the late rounds over the last decade, and two of the three came from the Pittsburgh Steelers' backfield. One was James Conner when he took over for Le'Veon Bell, and the other was DeAngelo Williams when he…took over for Le'Veon Bell.

We can't discredit those hits, but it's important to recognize that Pittsburgh's been a unique situation in recent memory. A holdout was the reason Conner even got an opportunity, and not all teams are going to be willing to make a backup running back a true workhorse.

This data does tell us, though, that you're better off using a late-round pick for a handcuff than a middle-round one. We think we know way more than we do about handcuffs entering the season, so there's no reason to get cocky and put a premium on that player.

(In 2022, you likely won't have to deal with this dilemma regardless.)

Even with the difference in true running back breakout hit rate, ambiguity wins out.

Late-Round Running Back Teammate ADP and Hit Rates

Top Teammate ADP	Total in Sample	Breakouts	Rate
Top 5 Rounds	135	7	5.19%
Not Top 5 Rounds	96	11	11.46%

If you can find a running back in the late rounds who's got a teammate going in the middle rounds, then that's a running back worth looking into.

Since we're dealing with late-round running backs, we're not going to see a ton of team RB1s in our sample. How often are you drafting a team's first running back by ADP in the double-digit rounds?

According to this data, the answer to that is 6.5% of the time. Of the 231 late-round running backs in our overall sample, 15 were team RB1s.

The group is small, so take it all with a grain of salt, but team RB1s do seem to have higher moderate breakout rates than team RB2s (or worse). But none of them have been *true* breakouts.

Late-Round Team RB1 vs. Team RB2 Hit Rates

	Total in Sample	Moderate	True
Team RB1s	15	26.67%	0.00%
RB2s or Worse	216	24.07%	8.80%

With middle-round running backs, team RB1s have given you a slight advantage. In the late rounds, you probably don't need to be that concerned about them.

Instead, just focus on backfield ambiguity.

Pass-Catching Upside

Let's keep this short and sweet: once again, pass-catching is a big factor in determining a running back breakout.

Moderate breakouts from the late rounds averaged a 9.6% target share during their valuable season, and that number was 10.8% for true breakouts, or backs who played six points per game above expectation. For non-breakout running backs, the average target share was 4.8%.

That's a more significant difference than what we saw with middle-round running backs, but this demographic is also a lot worse. Plenty of late-round players barely see playing time, and that lowers a target share average.

In sum, though, you still want to try and obtain pass-catchers late, or players who you forecast to catch some balls.

Age Is Just a Number

Age mattered with middle-round running back breakouts — we barely saw breakouts happen when a player reached his sixth NFL season.

That's not the case with late-round backs.

Breakout Rate By Career Year, Late-Round RBs

Year in League	Total in Sample	Moderate	True
1	49	22.4%	8.2%
2	44	20.5%	9.1%
3	37	18.9%	0.0%
4	25	40.0%	8.0%
5	18	27.8%	16.7%
6	13	15.4%	0.0%
7	19	36.8%	21.1%
8	6	33.3%	16.7%
9	6	0.0%	0.0%
10	4	25.0%	25.0%
11	3	0.0%	0.0%
12	4	50.0%	0.0%
13	2	0.0%	0.0%
14	1	0.0%	0.0%

When DeAngelo Williams took over for Le'Veon Bell in the Steelers backfield back in 2015, it was his 10th NFL season. And he exceeded expectation by more than six points per game.

Back in 2015, Danny Woodhead was playing his seventh season in the league. He caught 80 passes en route to performing nearly seven points per game above expectation that year.

These types of seasons from veterans happen way more often with late-round running backs than middle-round ones.

And there may be a reasonable thought as to why.

Late-round running backs are forgotten players. They're not sexy. They don't have a big workload projected to go their way.

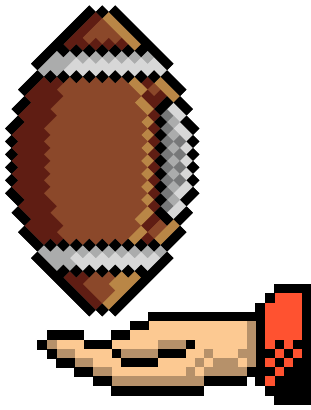
Fantasy managers are going to want to get the shiny new toy earlier in their draft. Why wouldn't you?

But let me list the names of the six late-round running backs who were true breakouts while playing in their seventh year of their career or later.

Darren Sproles. Ahmad Bradshaw. DeAngelo Williams. Danny Woodhead. Fred Jackson. LeGarrette Blount.

When these big seasons happened — when those running backs played way over expectation — they didn't exactly come from nowhere.

Darren Sproles was coming off a year where he saw 59 receptions. Ahmad Bradshaw, the year before his breakout, suffered a serious injury. He already had years of strong production under his belt.



DeAngelo Williams was a stud for Carolina before getting his opportunity in Pittsburgh. Danny Woodhead had plenty of success in New England before his 2015 season in San Diego, and he was coming off a serious injury, too.

It was the same story with Fred Jackson: He was coming off an injury, but his production was fine pre-injury.

And then remember LeGarrette Blount's 18-touchdown 2016? Yeah, well, the year prior, he rushed for over 700 yards in 12 games.

These older dudes breaking out in the late rounds aren't nobodies. At all. Usually an injury derailed their previous season, resulting in lower ADP. Or their production was there, but it wasn't good enough to be a startable running back, so managers just wrote them off since they'd be another year older.

You don't need to focus exclusively on younger running backs in the late rounds. The old guys can get it done, too.

Your 2022 Plan of Attack

Phew. I need to take a break and ride my Peloton or something after all that.

Your running back draft approach in 2022 isn't as complicated as it seems.

First off, we know that running backs selected in the first two rounds of drafts have typically provided a good floor-ceiling combination. You should feel good about starting your drafts with one or two running backs. In most formats, I'd advise you to at least get one before mostly avoiding the position in Rounds 3 through 5 or 6.

If you get a little adventurous and take a running back from the dead zone, remember to get a younger one who's a pass-catcher. The two backs to feel OK about in that area of the draft this year seem to be Travis Etienne (elite pass-catcher) and Breece Hall (a studly rookie).

As you enter the middle rounds, direct your attention to team RB1s. Or get team RB2s who have teammates getting drafted in the running back dead zone. And, of course, make sure the players aren't too old and can catch passes.

An example of a team RB1 to target would be — gasp — Clyde Edwards-Helaire. Yes, I know, he's burned you over his first two years in the league. But even with Jerick McKinnon in town, CEH could see a lot of pass-catching work. And he fits a lot of the breakout criteria. Let's just hope his ADP continues to drop post-McKinnon signing.

As for a team RB2 who's got a teammate RB1 leaving draft boards in the dead zone… how about Tony Pollard? Could this finally be the year?

Despite Ezekiel Elliott's projected workload, Pollard's being elevated into the middle rounds because of a probable receiving role to go along with

A Note on Zero RB

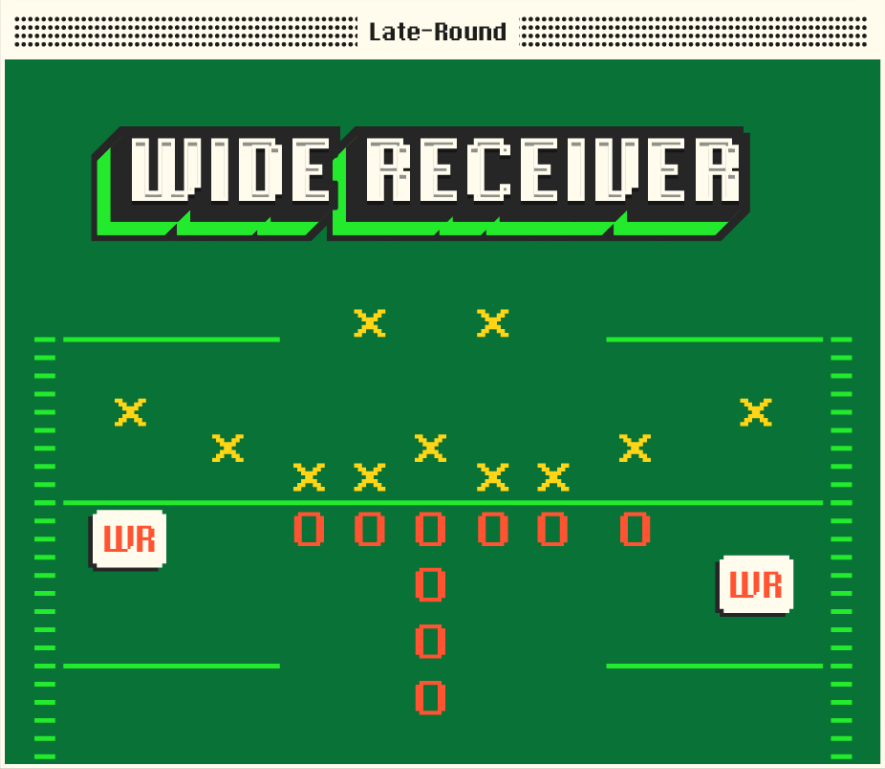
Going with a Zero RB approach can be effective, but league format matters. In a full PPR league where you can flex players, going wide receiver-heavy makes sense. Zero RB is tougher to pull off in standard leagues.

raw talent. Zeke's a dead-zone back who lost a step last year — potentially due to injury — and is being drafted in that area mostly due to projected volume.

This is the exact scenario that's hit well in the past.

When you reach the late rounds, remember that age isn't that big of a deal, and you want to target pass-catchers who have teammates getting selected in the middle rounds.

There'll be more specific running back picks later in the guide. This is to just get your brain going about what to look for.



Your 2022 Wide Receiver Strategy

I tossed out a table in the running back section that showed a basic VORP idea for the four main positions in fantasy football. We saw that, since 2011, elite running backs have provided the largest point advantage over their position.

Wide receiver is probably number two on that list.

PPG Differentials, Top Tier vs. Worst Starter Tier

	QB	RB	WR	TE
2011	8.6	11.3	6.9	7.1
2012	4.8	7.7	6.7	5.9
2013	5.5	10.3	8.3	5.3
2014	4.2	10.8	9.5	5.3
2015	3.9	6.9	8.1	5.4
2016	4.6	10.5	6.2	2.3
2017	4.5	11.8	7.9	6.3
2018	4.2	12.6	7.5	7.6
2019	5.5	10.4	6.0	4.7
2020	5.2	10.4	8.0	7.7
2021	3.4	10.3	8.7	5.7

Remember that the numbers shown above are using a baseline of the average points per game for the WR22 to WR24 in a given season. Most leagues start way more than two wide receivers. So, technically, the gaps here could very easily be larger.

Regardless, we at least can come together and unite around the idea that wide receivers matter in fantasy football. Oftentimes a lot.

We're also not terrible at predicting which wide receivers are going to do well in a given season.

Wide Receiver Hit Rates By Point-Per-Game Threshold

	>10	>12	>14	>16	>18
FH Round 1	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	77.8%
BH Round 1	95.0%	95.0%	85.0%	75.0%	60.0%
FH Round 2	91.7%	87.5%	70.8%	62.5%	33.3%
BH Round 2	100.0%	88.0%	76.0%	60.0%	32.0%
FH Round 3	100.0%	93.1%	79.3%	44.8%	24.1%
BH Round 3	92.0%	84.0%	60.0%	24.0%	4.0%
FH Round 4	86.4%	68.2%	40.9%	22.7%	9.1%
BH Round 4	88.6%	74.3%	51.4%	22.9%	14.3%
FH Round 5	76.0%	60.0%	52.0%	36.0%	12.0%
BH Round 5	83.8%	73.0%	45.9%	35.1%	10.8%
FH Round 6	81.8%	50.0%	36.4%	13.6%	9.1%
BH Round 6	83.3%	55.6%	38.9%	22.2%	5.6%
FH Round 7	65.2%	34.8%	13.0%	8.7%	0.0%
BH Round 7	69.6%	34.8%	21.7%	8.7%	0.0%
FH Round 8	70.0%	50.0%	35.0%	25.0%	5.0%
BH Round 8	64.7%	23.5%	17.6%	5.9%	5.9%
FH Round 9	45.5%	36.4%	18.2%	4.5%	0.0%
BH Round 9	63.6%	36.4%	13.6%	4.5%	0.0%

There haven't been many top-half-of-the-first-round wide receivers selected over the last 11 seasons (9 of them), but they've been good. *Really* good.

Each one was able to hit at least 16 PPR points per game in their minimum eight-game season played, and even though the chart doesn't show this, the lowest average from any of them was 17.4 PPR points per game (Calvin Johnson in 2014).

Unlike the running back position, there isn't much of a dead zone at wide receiver. Hit rates do seem to drop after the middle of Round 3, but the decline in successes is much steadier than what we see at the running back position.

Overlaying the running back dead zone data on top of these new numbers produces some interesting insights.

Running Back Dead Zone Hit Rates, RB vs. WR

		>10	>12	>14	>16	>18
WR	BH Round 3	92.0%	84.0%	60.0%	24.0%	4.0%
RB	BH Round 3	84.2%	52.6%	31.6%	15.8%	10.5%
WR	TH Round 4	86.4%	68.2%	40.9%	22.7%	9.1%
RB	TH Round 4	66.7%	58.3%	45.8%	20.8%	8.3%
WR	BH Round 4	88.6%	74.3%	51.4%	22.9%	14.3%
RB	BH Round 4	82.6%	47.8%	30.4%	13.0%	0.0%
WR	TH Round 5	76.0%	60.0%	52.0%	36.0%	12.0%
RB	TH Round 5	50.0%	50.0%	18.8%	18.8%	12.5%
WR	BH Round 5	83.8%	73.0%	45.9%	35.1%	10.8%
RB	BH Round 5	60.0%	50.0%	10.0%	10.0%	0.0%
WR	TH Round 6	81.8%	50.0%	36.4%	13.6%	9.1%
RB	TH Round 6	70.6%	52.9%	11.8%	5.9%	0.0%
WR	BH Round 6	83.3%	55.6%	38.9%	22.2%	5.6%
RB	BH Round 6	61.1%	27.8%	16.7%	11.1%	5.6%

If you can immediately understand the Pittsburgh Steelers themed table above, then you're ahead of the game. I made it, and I can barely grasp it.

Kidding, kidding. I can *totally,* uh, read this thing.

It's actually pretty straightforward. Rather than looking at hit rates at different point-per-game thresholds across all single-digit rounds, the table narrows it down to just the dead zone. So it's looking at the back half of Round 3, the top half of Round 4, and so on.

Each white row represents wide receiver numbers, while the yellow rows signify running backs.

Peep that first "BH Round 3" rectangle. The white area is showing you how often wide receivers who've been drafted in the back half of Round 3 have hit different point-per-game thresholds since 2011. The *yellow* portion is for running backs.

In that area of the draft, wide receivers have gotten to 16 PPR points per game more often than running backs have, but running backs have hit 18 PPR points per game more frequently.

One of the things I mentioned earlier about the running back dead zone was how wide receivers are better gambles in that area of the draft.

This table sort of establishes that.

For some tabular context, the RB10 last year in points per game, D'Andre Swift, scored 16.1 fantasy points per contest. Over the last three years in general, running backs who've scored 16 PPR points per contest have finished around the top-10 at the position.

Wide receivers have ranked closer to the 12th-best player at the position with 16 PPR points per game during this time, but it's mostly been the same.

But, yeah, the dead zone table isn't *exactly* an apples to apples comparison since wide receivers generally score more points than running backs do. It is, however, really powerful when you consider flex spots, or positions in your lineup where you can play either a running back or a wideout. And the majority of fantasy leagues include flexes.

Because in PPR formats, it's pretty clear which direction to go in during that area of the draft. Wide receivers are giving fantasy managers 16 or more PPR points per game at a better rate than running backs at every single level of the dead zone. And they're nearly doing the same with 18-plus points per game as well.

This should absolutely shape your draft strategy. Every single year.

Comparing Hit Rates

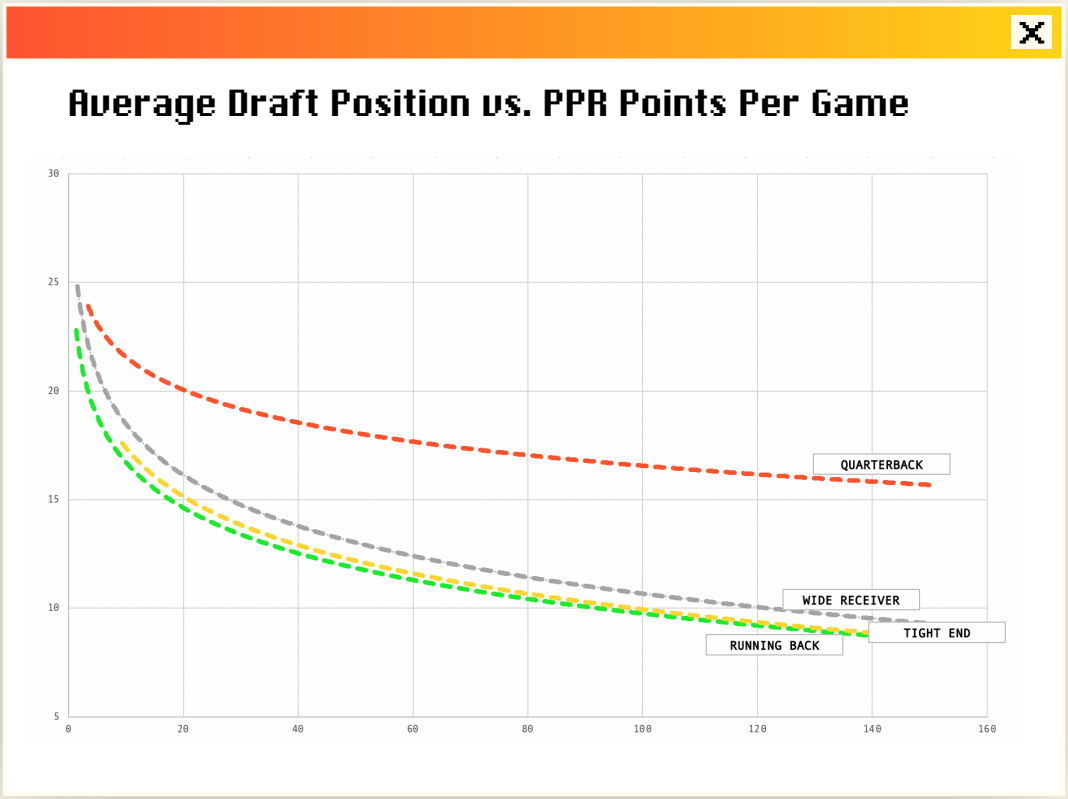
Just 14.2% of running backs drafted between Picks 30 and 72 have scored 16-plus PPR points per game since 2011. At wide receiver, that number is 25.3%.

Defining Breakouts

Now you know to smash those wide receivers in the running back dead zone. Great.

And then…?

Similar to running backs, there are ways to spot breakout wide receivers in the middle and late rounds of your draft.



This graph? Again?

I'll keep things less wordy this time around, don't worry.

To reiterate what's been said already, the x-axis on this scatterplot represents average draft position since 2011, while the y-axis shows us how many points per game a player scored. The trendline is showing expectation, or the number of points per game we'd expect a wide receiver (or someone at another position) to score at a particular ADP.

As we did with running backs, we'll be analyzing breakout wide receivers by looking at middle-round players (Pick 61 through 108, or Rounds 6

through 9 of a 12-team league) and late-round ones (Picks 109 to 180, or Rounds 10 through 15). These wide receivers had to have played at least eight games in their analyzed season to count. And we'll be defining them the same way we did previously: by moderate and true breakouts.

Since 2011, using our criteria, we've had 167 middle-round wide receivers get selected. Of those 167, 41 were moderate breakouts, exceeding ADP expectation by 3 or more points. That was good for a 24.6% rate. We then had 12 who were *true* breakouts (exceeded expectation by six or more points), giving us a true breakout rate of 7.2%. Those numbers were pretty similar to the running back sample we were working off of earlier.

Shifting our focus to *late-round* wideouts, we've had 285 of them get selected since 2011. Among the 285, 68, or 23.9%, were considered moderate breakouts, exceeding ADP expectation by 3-plus points. And then 14 of the 285 were true breakouts — that's a rate of 4.9%.

Let's look at some of the traits these guys share.

Middle-Round Wide Receiver Breakouts

Ambiguous Wide Receiver Corps

Surprise, surprise!

The fact that middle-round wide receivers tend to come from ambiguous wide receiver groups isn't shocking. Elite players gobble up high target shares, leaving less opportunity for an alternative in their offense.

But, as we know, two wide receivers on the same team can eat. This isn't quite like the running back position, where only one is typically on the field at once.

We see more forgiving numbers at wide receiver than we did running back as a result.

Middle-Round Wide Receiver Teammate ADP and Hit Rates

Top Teammate ADP	Total in Sample	Breakouts	Rate
Pick 1-12	11	3	27.27%
Pick 13-24	13	2	15.38%
Pick 25-36	18	2	11.11%
Pick 37-48	12	4	33.33%
Pick 49-60	14	3	21.43%
Pick 61-72	30	11	36.67%
Pick 73-84	30	5	16.67%
Pick 85-96	23	6	26.09%
Pick 97-108	16	5	31.25%

We haven't seen a middle-round moderate running back breakout since 2011 when the running back had a teammate get selected in the first two rounds of fantasy drafts.

That's not really what's happening at wide receiver.

These breakouts *are* still coming from more ambiguous situations, though. When a middle-round wide receiver had a wide receiver teammate selected in the first three rounds, he exceeded ADP expectation by three or more points at a 16.7% rate. When the first teammate wide receiver was selected *after* Round 3, that number rose to 27.2%.

The same math holds with *true* breakouts, or players who exceeded ADP expectation by 6 or more points. Just 2.4% of middle-round wide receivers with a teammate selected in the first three rounds ended up as a true breakout. That was 8.8% for middle-round wideouts *without* early-round teammates.

The One True Breakout

There's been just one true breakout since 2011 from a middle-round wide receiver who had a wide receiver teammate go in Rounds 1 through 3. Any guesses? It was Emmanuel Sanders in 2014.

With this type of analysis, we're comparing team WR2s or worse to potential team WR1s. If a middle-round wide receiver has a teammate getting drafted in the early rounds, that means that middle-round wide receiver isn't his team's top wideout by ADP.

If a middle-round wide receiver *doesn't* have a teammate getting selected in the first three round, that means he *might* be his team's top wideout by ADP.

And, historically, those team WR1s have hit at a better rate. A solid 29.1% of middle-round team WR1s were moderate breakouts, with WR2s (or worse) coming in at 20.5%. The true breakout rates were a little closer, but WR1s still won out 12.7% to 10.2%.

When it comes to finding middle-round wide receiver breakouts, you ideally want them to not have elite wide receivers on their team. And you should strive for players who are the first wide receiver selected from their team by average draft position.

Surprise, surprise.

Ignore Third-Year Wide Receiver Talk

"Wide receivers tend to break out during their third season in the league."

Not exactly.

Even if you want to give that generally-accepted concept the benefit of the doubt, I can at least confidently say that third-year wide receivers aren't beating ADP any better than other types of wideouts.

They've arguably been worst.

Breakout Rate By Career Year, Middle-Round WRs

Year in League	Total in Sample	Moderate	True
1	16	31.3%	12.5%
2	27	40.7%	11.1%
3	21	9.5%	4.8%
4	16	12.5%	0.0%
5	20	20.0%	10.0%
6	16	37.5%	12.5%
7	8	12.5%	0.0%
8	14	21.4%	0.0%
9	7	28.6%	0.0%
10	7	14.3%	14.3%
11	9	11.1%	0.0%
12	3	66.7%	33.3%
13	1	100.0%	0.0%
14	1	0.0%	0.0%
15	0	N/A	N/A
16	1	0.0%	0.0%

Middle-round third-year wideouts have become moderate breakouts at a sub-10% rate since 2011. That's essentially the trashiest number of any wide receiver age group. And the group doesn't do amazing when looking at true breakout rates, either.

Year 3 wide receivers aren't great gets in the middle rounds. But Year 1? Year 2?

All day.

A solid 16 of the 41 middle-round moderate breakouts who have surfaced since 2011 have been first- or second-year players. Second-year middle-rounders are especially beastly — almost 41% of them have been moderate breakouts during this time.

In our sample, we've had 12 second-year wide receivers get selected as their team's WR1. Their average difference between expected points per

game and actual points per game was 1.93. Meaning these second-year wideouts, on average, exceeded expectation by nearly two PPR points per game.

Go after Year 2 wide receivers in the middle rounds, especially when they're team WR1s.

We've also seen some pretty interesting hit rates from fifth- and sixth-year wide receivers out of the middle rounds through the years. Why?

Between a market undervaluing player talent and players coming off of their rookie contracts, there could be a variety of reasons. There also could be some survivorship bias happening — players who are in Year 5 or Year 6 and are being drafted in the middle rounds are likely good football players. So your consideration set for that age group is filled with higher-end pass-catchers, whereas that isn't always the case for younger players. And they're not quite old enough to be on the decline.

The fact that this trend exists tells us that the market may be undervaluing some of these players based on age.

When you look at the 10 Year 5 and Year 6 moderate breakouts from the middle rounds over the last 11 seasons, these aren't players who are becoming household names at 27 or 28 years old. They're established veterans who often have great seasons under their belt. Think Stefon Diggs in 2020 when he went to Buffalo (ADP of 60.6). Eric Decker in 2015. Robert Woods in 2018.

Each of the fifth- or sixth-year middle-round breakout wide receivers that we've witnessed over the past decade have been players who've been there before. They've given us at least a WR3-type season in the past. They're not bursting onto the scene in their fifth season. They're just in a situation that may not be as favorable, or they've got brand new surroundings, causing the market to devalue them.

Focusing your efforts on first- and second-year wide receivers in the middle rounds is a smart call. Just make sure to not ignore those wideouts who have more of a foundation.

Don't Overstate Situation

You'd probably assume breakout wide receivers have good quarterbacks throwing them the ball. Or that these wideouts are coming from prolific offenses, allowing them to score more fantasy points.

Nope.

The average quarterback ADP for the middle-round moderate breakout wide receivers since 2011 (that was a mouthful) has been a little over 115. So their quarterbacks, on average, have flown off of fantasy draft boards at Pick 115.

For *non*-breakouts, that number is actually *lower*. Non-breakouts have seen their quarterback drafted at Pick 109 on average.

So, no, don't worry much about where the wide receiver's quarterback is getting drafted.

There *might* be some signal to offensive situation when analyzing in hindsight, but it doesn't seem incredibly noteworthy. Moderate breakouts have been in offenses that averaged 2.55 touchdowns per game, when the alternatives have been in offenses averaging 2.34 per game.

Sure, draft a wide receiver in a good offense. It's just a lot easier said than done.

This may be the right time to mention that tight ends don't seem to influence any of this data. Wide receivers can impact tight ends (we'll get to that in a bit), but if there's an elite tight end on a roster, it doesn't seem to affect a middle-round wide receiver's potential to break out.

Tight ends are altering wide receiver production, but it's likely already priced into a player's ADP. That's probably why it's not getting picked up with the analysis.

Why Don't QBs Matter?

Keep in mind that all of this analysis is comparing a player to his market expectation. There's a chance that there's no signal with quarterbacks because it's already embedded in a player's price.

Late-Round Wide Receiver Breakouts

Middle-round wide receivers hit at a better rate when they're first- and second-year players, but don't ignore established fifth- and sixth-year guys, either. And, ideally, you'd be able to snag a team WR1 in that Round 6 to 9 range, since they come through more frequently than team WR2s or worse.

The same guidelines don't really work for late-round wide receivers.

My apologies.

Ambiguous Wide Receiver Corps

With middle-round wide receivers, we generally want to target team WR1s over team WR2s.

You can forget about that with late-round receivers.

As we learned earlier, there've been 285 wide receivers who've played at least 8 games and who've been drafted between Picks 109 and 180 (Round 10 to 15) since 2011. That's our sample of late-round wide receivers. In that group, 68 wideouts were moderate breakouts, and 14 were true breakouts.

Since we're dealing with the late rounds, it only makes sense that a lower proportion of wide receivers in the Round 10 to 15 range have been team WR1s. And that's the case — 38 of the 285 wide receivers drafted have been team WR1s, while the rest are team WR2s or lower.

Late-Round Team WR1 vs. Team WR2 Hit Rates

	Total in Sample	Moderate	True
Team WR1s	38	21.05%	5.26%
WR2s or Worse	247	24.29%	4.86%

…And WR1s haven't fared any better than team WR2s or worse.

A team's top wide receiver getting drafted so late tells us that the team might not be all that good. Could you imagine Patrick Mahomes' top wide receiver getting taken in a double-digit round?

Not only that, but is there really a difference between a WR1 who's getting selected in Round 12 versus a WR2 from his same team going in Round 13? It's not like the market is screaming at us to draft the WR1.

When that gap is greater, it indicates one player is superior over another. That could be why middle-round WR1s perform at a higher level.

So, no, you don't need a team WR1 when targeting late-round wide receiver breakouts.

If you recall with middle-round wide receivers, we saw that we generally wanted to avoid wideouts who had teammates getting selected in the first three rounds of fantasy drafts.

That's *mostly* the case for late-round ones. Mostly.

Remember, there are 285 wide receivers who've played 8 games and who've been drafted between Picks 109 and 180 (Round 10 to 15) since 2011. That's our sample of late-round wide receivers.

In that group, 68 wide receivers were moderate breakouts, and 14 were true breakouts.

And these wide receivers had teammates getting drafted from absolutely everywhere.

Late-Round Wide Receiver Teammate ADP and Hit Rates

Top Teammate ADP	Total in Sample	Moderate	True
Pick 1-12	27	14.8%	0.0%
Pick 13-24	40	15.0%	7.5%
Pick 25-36	30	36.7%	16.7%
Pick 37-48	34	26.5%	5.9%
Pick 49-60	26	34.6%	0.0%
Pick 61-72	16	43.8%	6.3%
Pick 73-84	18	16.7%	0.0%
Pick 85-96	11	45.5%	0.0%
Pick 97-108	15	13.3%	6.7%
Pick 109-120	24	12.5%	0.0%
Pick 121-132	20	10.0%	0.0%
Pick 133 and Beyond	24	29.2%	8.3%

Late-round wide receivers seem to arise more often when they don't have an early-round teammate, but it's not as dramatic as what we saw with middle-round wide receivers.

In fact, our big late-round breakouts — our *true* breakouts — are actually coming from these early-round teammate situations.

We've had 14 true breakouts in our sample, and 8 of them came from wide receivers who had teammates selected in Rounds 1 through 3.

This seems like…not nothing.

Investigating this further, these breakouts seem to be team WR2s. Not team WR3s or worse.

Late-Round Wide Receiver Hit Rates, WR2s and WR3s

Grouping	Top Teammate ADP	Moderate	True
Team WR2	Pick 1-36	25.0%	11.4%
Team WR3	Pick 1-36	18.9%	5.7%

This table is saying that some NFL team has a wide receiver getting selected in the first three rounds of fantasy drafts on average, and then there's this *massive* gap until you get to their number-two wide receiver.

Those number-two wide receivers — those WR2s — are giving us strong breakout rates.

Wait a minute. So *these* WR2s with early-round teammates are doing well, but the middle-round WR2s aren't?

Make it make sense!

When trying to answer this question, I had a discovery: these late-round WR2s seem to consistently be young, unproven players. Some of the successes include Justin Jefferson and Michael Thomas as rookies, and Alshon Jeffery as a second-year player. There may have been some question marks about their role in their respective offenses entering the season, but there was at least some open opportunity to do work alongside a stud.

We just don't see scenarios like that very much in the middle rounds. Just 9.6% of the entire middle-round wide receiver sample that we've been working off of consists of rookies. That's almost 22% with late-round wideouts.

When you combine first- and second-year players, you see a similar delta: Roughly 25% of middle-round wide receivers have been Freshman and Sophomores in the NFL, when 42% of late-round wide receivers have been Year 1 or Year 2 players.

We're bound to see these situations pop up more with late-round wide receivers. It's easier to find young, unproven WR2 talent late in drafts who have teammates getting drafted early.

It all just comes back to age.

Age Is More Than Just a Number

When studying late-round running backs, we noticed that age didn't seem to matter. Younger running backs didn't necessarily break out any more or less than older ones in the latter parts of drafts.

At wide receiver, age is a bigger deal.

Breakout Rate By Career Year, Late-Round WRs

Year in League	Total in Sample	Moderate	True
1	62	27.4%	6.5%
2	58	20.7%	5.2%
3	23	21.7%	8.7%
4	36	22.2%	2.8%
5	25	36.0%	16.0%
6	21	23.8%	0.0%
7	16	12.5%	0.0%
8	12	25.0%	0.0%
9	9	33.3%	0.0%
10	9	22.2%	0.0%
11	5	20.0%	0.0%
12	3	33.3%	0.0%
13	3	0.0%	0.0%
14	1	0.0%	0.0%
15	1	0.0%	0.0%
16	0	N/A	N/A
17	1	0.0%	0.0%
18	0	N/A	N/A

Within our sample, we haven't seen a true late-round wide receiver breakout come from a player who's been in Year 6 of his career or later. So all of the huge seasons we see from late-round wideouts are coming from younger players.

Of course, the majority of our late-round picks are younger players. Even when looking at proportions, though, it's easy to see that the elder wideouts aren't getting it done.

Ignore Offensive Situation

The data for middle-round wide receivers is similar to the data for late-round ones as it pertains to offensive situation.

It doesn't matter.

The quarterbacks for late-round wide receiver breakouts had worse average draft positions than the quarterbacks for late-round wideouts who failed to break out. There's not much to take away regarding a wide receiver's team's ability to score on offense, either.

So, once again, you can largely ignore the greater team picture.

Rookie Wide Receivers Are Your Friend

No analysis is flawless. You can poke holes in a lot of approaches.

So let me poke a hole in mine.

When comparing points per game to expected points per game, you're doing it across an entire season. But, as we know, rookies are unique in that they don't follow a normal trajectory. They're learning when they enter the league. They're not always ready.

This matters a little less at running back, since fantasy gamers generally understand that running backs don't take much time to adapt to the NFL game. But wide receiver? Back in the day, people would actively *avoid* wide receivers in fantasy drafts, knowing that it wasn't the easiest transition from college to pros.

When it comes to middle-round breakout wide receivers, rookies are pretty good targets. As one of the age charts above shows, first-year middle-round wide receivers have ended up as a moderate breakout over 31% of the time. Rookies were one of the best age groups for moderate breakouts.

That may be underselling them.

Again, when seeing if a player exceeded ADP expectation or not, we're looking at *full-season* numbers. It's a points per game average across an entire season.

That won't favor rookies.

Remember Amon-Ra St. Brown's season last year? He wasn't doing much at all in terms of production during the front half of 2021, and then his usage picked up. Players got injured. And he went absolutely bananas down the stretch, helping fantasy managers win championships.

St. Brown's an easy example, but we've seen this type of thing happen a ton through the years. Elijah Moore turned it up after the Jets' bye last year. Mike Evans had a fine first half of his rookie season, but he was even better during the second half. AJ Brown. Justin Blackmon. Chris Godwin.

The list goes on and on.

We've seen 143 rookie wide receivers get drafted — they had some sort of ADP — while playing 8 games during their first year since 2011. And we're talking *every* rookie wideout here, ranging from Amari Cooper and his 42nd overall ADP all the way to Ryan Switzer and his Pick 253 ADP.

Rookie wide receivers with top-100 ADPs have been kind of awesome.

No, they've been *really* awesome.

Chase's Historic Season

Ja'Marr Chase's ADP fell to the middle rounds last year after his preseason struggles. He ended the year as the most valuable middle-round rookie we've seen since 2011, beating Mike Evans.

Rookie Wide Receiver Hit Rates, 2011 to 2021

	Total in Sample	Exceed Rate	Moderate Rate	True Rate
Top-100	14	78.57%	35.71%	14.29%
100-150	27	48.15%	29.63%	7.41%
Past 150	102	37.25%	18.63%	3.92%

These top-100 numbers don't look identical to the middle-round ones from earlier because the middle-round data is pulling from players picked between Pick 60 and Pick 108. We're analyzing a slightly different sample.

But the sample of high-end rookie wideouts is insanely impressive.

Think about what it takes for a rookie wide receiver to be drafted in the top-100 of a redraft league. He's probably a highly-touted first-round NFL Draft pick. Often an *early* first-rounder.

Entering his rookie campaign, he's got the talent, but he's not being drafted super high because he's probably not locked-in as his team's top wide receiver. He's got to prove it first.

Well, given the way the market's behaved in the past, fantasy managers have probably been too conservative with these players.

Just given this information alone, it's clear you should be targeting these rookies. Nearly 80% of them exceeded ADP expectation. About 36% were moderate breakouts, while 14.3% were true breakouts. Both of those numbers were well above average compared to a random wide receiver outside of the demographic.

Rookie wide receivers who were selected between Picks 100 and 150 didn't perform as well. They weren't *terrible*, but they were completely

average. Technically, they were *below* average, since 52% of them failed to play better than expectation.

The dart-throw rookie wide receivers were even worse. Of the 102 rookie wideouts selected after Pick 150, only 37% played better than ADP expectation. And we rarely have had any true breakouts from that group.

This is only telling part of the story.

I know I sound like a broken record, but these are *season-long* numbers. Rookie wide receivers tend to perform better during the second half of the season.

Let's do a little exercise. Instead of looking at every rookie wide receiver with an ADP who played at least eight games since 2011, let's look at every rookie wide receiver with an ADP who played at least five games during the first half of his rookie campaign to go along with five games across the second half.

You see where I'm going with this?

That shrinks our sample size from 143 rookie wide receivers to 107, with much of the loss occurring with wide receivers drafted after Pick 150.

What happens when we use second-half-of-the-season points per game for these wide receivers rather than full-season points per game?

Rookie Wide Receiver 2nd-Half Hit Rates, 2011 to 2021

	Total in Sample	Exceed Rate	Moderate Rate	True Rate
Top-100	12	83.33%	41.67%	16.67%
100-150	23	73.91%	34.78%	8.70%
Past 150	72	43.06%	19.44%	4.17%

Well then.

Every category improved. Every single one.

The biggest jump was seen in the Pick 100 to 150 group. When looking at their season-long numbers, they exceeded expectation at a 48% rate. When spotting breakouts via their *second-half* numbers, that soars to almost 74%.

The rookie wide receivers who get selected super late have performed far worse than their first-year peers, and that's probably because they're in speculation territory. Not many rookie wideouts will become something each year, and there are *tons* of them that get drafted late. So it's really just a math equation — the numerator is small, and the denominator is big.

But that's not the key takeaway here.

Rookie wide receivers can be really good when analyzing through season-long numbers. But when focusing only on their second-half numbers, those already-decent hit rates look…amazing.

And that's happening during the part of the season where you win fantasy championships.

Your 2022 Plan of Attack

Are we going to take another Peloton break, or…?

Look, I know it's easy to dismiss historical ADP data, but the market can help. Because the market repeats itself — and its mistakes — often.

> Wide receivers are better risk-averse selections to make in the early rounds of drafts than running backs are.

I've been analyzing via PPR formats, but it's not a whole lot different in other league structures. It's all relative.

Getting a first-round wide receiver has traditionally yielded safe results, but we know difference-making running backs go in the beginning rounds, too. So you don't have to go get a wide receiver because of that. You should just know that it's OK to.

Once you hit the running back dead zone, it's game on.

Wide receivers come through big time compared to running backs in that part of the draft, so gobbling up a few in most leagues should lead to a good expected outcome.

When you hit the middle rounds of your draft, you'll want to focus on two things: team WR1s and youth. Getting a team's top receiver by ADP isn't the end-all, but it helps increase your probability of winning the position.

And the way people talk about third-year breakouts. . .yeah, it's actually a wide receiver's second year you should be concerned with. Rookies are also good targets.

Don't dismiss fifth- and sixth-year veterans in Rounds 6 to 9, either. Especially when they've established themselves as useful fantasy football pieces in the past.

You'll generally have better hit rates with your middle-round wide receivers when they don't have an early-round teammate attached to them. A more ambiguous wide receiver corps is good.

Using this middle-round wide receiver criteria, you could immediately look at Rashod Bateman, Elijah Moore, Amon-Ra St. Brown, Drake London, and Kadarius Toney. They usually get selected within that range. They're all first- or second-year players. Each one is the top wide receiver getting selected from his team by ADP.

Those are the types of players who tend to pan out in the middle rounds.

When you reach the double-digit rounds, things are a bit more of a crapshoot. Age matters to some degree, but only from the perspective that you don't want really old pass-catchers.

And if you're targeting a team WR2, it's not a bad thing if his team's WR1 is getting drafted in the first three rounds. As long as the WR2 is young. You need that youth.

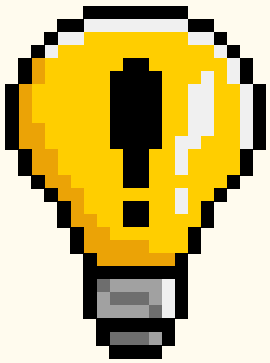
Right now, rookies like Alec Pierce and Jahan Dotson sort of fit that mold.

For all wide receivers, don't be too concerned with team situation. Where a wide receiver's quarterback gets drafted doesn't really matter, and while it's nice to have players in good offenses, it's not all that easy to know which offenses will be good.

And one random sidenote: You may have noticed that inexperience is a consistent theme with a lot of the player strategy breakdowns in this guide.

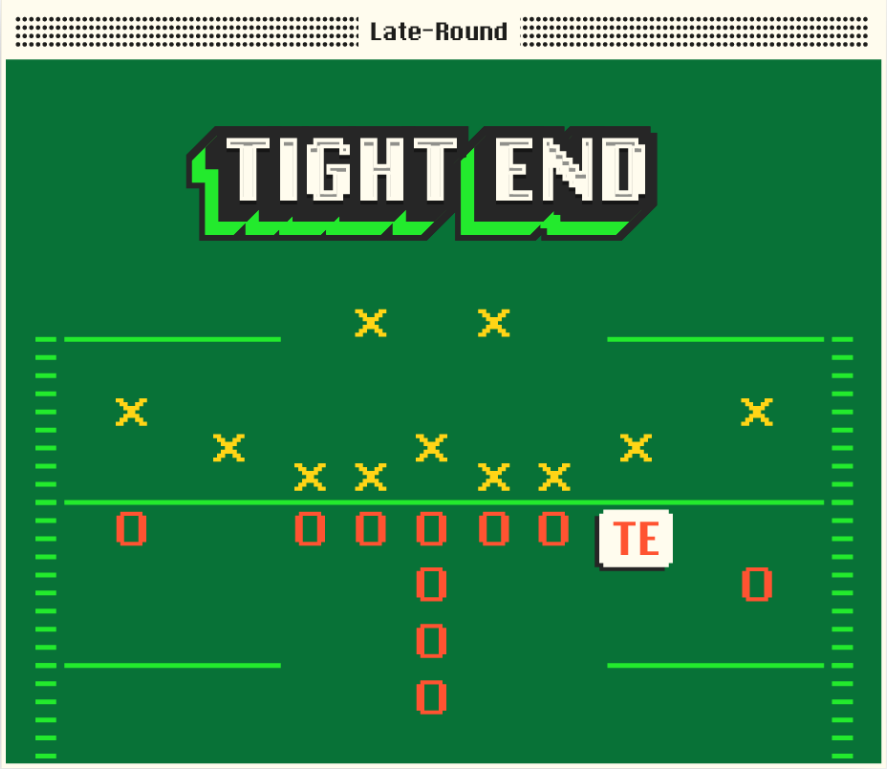
It's because inexperience leads to ambiguity. Ambiguity brings lower costs. And lower costs provide better values.

There will always be a youth movement in dynasty fantasy football, but it's an important aspect to the season-long game as well. The market factors in age and inexperience a little too much in the wrong direction. It doesn't realize the ceiling that younger players can provide in a given season, let alone at the end of a season. Instead, it focuses on short-term situation, pushing aside actual talent.



How do I know this? Because everything about these breakout studies is in relation to the market. The fact that younger players tend to beat their ADP expectation most — more particularly in the middle rounds, when stakes are higher — tells you that the fantasy football world is playing scared. When they don't know something about a player, they avoid that player.

Will the trend continue at tight end?



Your 2022 Tight End Strategy

The running back and wide receiver positions in fantasy football share a lot in common. Not only do they score similarly in most formats, but they're cornerstones. The fantasy football supply and demand formula favors them.

Tight ends are like quarterbacks, and that allows for a number of different strategies to develop.

You see, every team goes hard at running backs and wide receivers early and often in a fantasy draft. Very rarely do you run into a squad that's snatching up multiple quarterbacks and tight ends in the beginning portion of a draft.

Because that wouldn't be logical. You're only starting one of them, so the supply and…you get the idea at this point.

Similar to quarterback — thanks to that nifty concept of supply and demand — we generally see back-end tight end starters get selected in the later rounds of drafts. And that can create a lot of differing opinions on when to actually attack the position.

Tight End ADP By Year

	TE1	TE5	TE10	TE15
2011	38.0	60.4	106.4	143.0
2012	15.0	59.3	93.1	133.7
2013	18.7	61.3	106.5	133.4
2014	9.4	59.8	91.3	137.9
2015	12.3	69.3	110.3	135.4
2016	12.6	70.7	97.8	135.6
2017	21.0	61.9	92.1	143.1
2018	22.0	64.2	98.5	140.5
2019	17.1	67.5	104.5	137.0
2020	17.5	65.4	91.9	137.7
2021	10.8	56.0	102.0	133.6

Since about 2014, the 10th-ranked tight end by average draft position has typically fallen off draft boards around Pick 100. You could wait well past that point and get the worst hypothetical starter in a 12-team league.

Supply and demand exists, so the point advantages that higher-end tight ends give you — assuming early-round tight ends actually end up being good — get stretched across more rounds, making the position less desirable.

PPG Differentials, Top Tier vs. Worst Starter Tier

	QB	RB	WR	TE
2011	8.6	11.3	6.9	7.1
2012	4.8	7.7	6.7	5.9
2013	5.5	10.3	8.3	5.3
2014	4.2	10.8	9.5	5.3
2015	3.9	6.9	8.1	5.4
2016	4.6	10.5	6.2	2.3
2017	4.5	11.8	7.9	6.3
2018	4.2	12.6	7.5	7.6
2019	5.5	10.4	6.0	4.7
2020	5.2	10.4	8.0	7.7
2021	3.4	10.3	8.7	5.7

We can go back to this trusty chart to get a clearer picture of all this. The top tight end tier versus the bottom starter group has been better than the quarterback position through the years, but it hasn't been as good as running back and wide receiver.

Quarterbacks have become more predictable over the last couple of seasons, making them a little more appetizing in the early and middle rounds. Thanks to sharper drafters, it's not as easy to get good late-round quarterbacks in the current fantasy football world. We learned that earlier.

That predictability has actually been stronger at tight end than quarterback through the years, though, and it has to do with the position's studs. Guys like Travis Kelce, Rob Gronkowski, and Jimmy Graham showed great consistency over the last decade-plus, leading to better R squared numbers compared to the quarterback position.

Top-18 Tight End vs. Quarterback Predictability

Year	TE Top-18 R Squared	QB Top-18 R Squared
2011	4.02%	13.88%
2012	26.83%	18.59%
2013	64.16%	37.37%
2014	4.45%	12.00%
2015	33.61%	0.37%
2016	49.49%	19.17%
2017	34.80%	3.04%
2018	0.01%	0.24%
2019	32.90%	1.12%
2020	35.98%	55.80%
2021	28.04%	52.20%

This is definitely a quick way of showing this idea, but the table above depicts the correlation between ADP and points per game since 2011 at both quarterback and tight end. It's the same chart you saw earlier with quarterbacks, but now tight ends are squeezed in there.

As I talked about before, quarterbacks have seen back-to-back seasons of really strong correlation when looking at pre-season expectation (ADP) versus post-season result (points per game). Tight end hasn't had the same type of blip, but when looking at top-18 players by ADP through the years, the position has been more predictable in total.

> This is one of the reasons why it's generally been more enticing to grab an early-round tight end versus an early-round quarterback.

The best tight ends are giving you more of a point advantage over their position than quarterbacks do versus theirs, but we've also done a better job of figuring out which tight ends to target. There's oddly been a little more turnover at quarterback.

Not only that, but of the four positions in fantasy football, on a weekly basis, tight end is the least predictable. It's hardest to forecast, while quarterback is easiest.

The reasoning behind that is pretty simple: quarterbacks touch the ball on every play, and they throw it 30-plus times per contest. We've got a large sample size to work off of and project heading into a given game.

Tight ends don't have that luxury. They run fewer routes than wide receivers do, and they're targeted at a lower rate as well. That lack of volume leads to more volatility.

In turn, having one of the elite players who *isn't* as volatile can bring forth an advantage.

Here's another way to visualize this:

Tight End Hit Rates By Point Per Game Threshold

	>10	>12	>14	>16	>18
Round 1	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	50.0%	0.0%
Round 2	100.0%	90.0%	80.0%	50.0%	20.0%
Round 3	100.0%	88.9%	55.6%	22.2%	11.1%
Round 4	100.0%	80.0%	60.0%	20.0%	0.0%
Round 5	62.5%	50.0%	18.8%	6.3%	0.0%
Round 6	73.3%	40.0%	6.7%	6.7%	0.0%
Round 7	30.0%	20.0%	20.0%	10.0%	10.0%
Round 8	52.9%	23.5%	11.8%	0.0%	0.0%
Round 9	28.6%	9.5%	4.8%	4.8%	4.8%
Round 10	75.0%	41.7%	33.3%	8.3%	0.0%
Round 11	31.3%	6.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Round 12	50.0%	23.1%	11.5%	3.8%	0.0%
Round 13	21.7%	4.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Round 14	30.8%	19.2%	7.7%	3.8%	0.0%
Round 15	13.5%	5.4%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%

Early-round tight ends provide way more stability than tight ends you get in other parts of the draft.

We haven't had a ton of tight ends get drafted in the first two rounds on average since 2011, but the hit rates for those players have been favorable. Half of the 12 first- and second-round tight ends have produced 16-plus PPR points per game, a rate that no other round has come close to during this timeframe.

> If you're aiming for a serious point advantage at tight end, you're going to have to pay up.

But it's not as simple as just taking a tight end in the early rounds. There's an opportunity cost involved in doing that, as you'd be losing out on those aforementioned stud running backs and wide receivers.

And considering how late you can get semi-viable tight ends — tight ends who can produce like middle-round ones — it's not always advantageous to get an elite tight end early. You can easily go either direction in a given season.

And you can feel a little more confident in those middle- and later-round picks when you've got math on your side.

Defining Breakouts

Outside the top players at the position, tight end has been a mess.

Since 2011 — and this is shown in the Christmas-themed table on the previous page — Round 14 tight ends haven't been all that different than Round 8 ones. Round 10 tight ends have straight up been better than tight ends from Round 6.

Because of this replaceability, middle-round tight ends have been some of the worst imaginable selections over the last decade in fantasy football.

We might as well call the middle rounds the tight end dead zone while we're at it.

There's got to be a way to increase our odds of hitting on one of those tight ends, though, yeah?

Let's do a little breakout tight end analysis.

Since 2011, we've had 204 tight ends get drafted from Pick 60 to Pick 180. In a 12-team league, those picks represent Round 6 through 15.

Now, typically, we'd split this sample size up into middle-round picks and late-round picks, and then your boy would start digging into trends within each cluster. That's what we did with running backs and wide receivers, at least.

Since tight end is flatter in nature, and because there aren't as many of them overall, we'll be looking at breakout tight ends in one giant group.

Cool?

Of those 204 tight ends, 40 ended up exceeding average draft position expectation by 3 or more PPR points per game. So 19.6% (40/204) of our sample is considered a *moderate* breakout.

Just 13 of the players were able to outperform ADP expectation by 6 or more points. That means 6.4% (13/204) of these tight ends are *true* breakouts.

There are trends. We must explore them.

Middle- and Late-Round Tight End Breakouts

Target Top Pass-Catchers

When a middle-round running back has been the top running back selected from his NFL team by ADP, his breakout rate has been above average.

When a middle-round wide receiver has been the top wide receiver selected from his NFL team by ADP, his breakout rate has been above average.

When a non-early-round tight end has been the top pass-catcher selected from his NFL team by ADP… his breakout rate has been above average.

Tight End Hit Rate By Pass-Catcher ADP Rank

	Total in Sample	Moderate	True
#1 Pass-Catcher	19	26.32%	10.53%
#2 Pass-Catcher	67	17.91%	5.97%
#3 or Worse	118	19.49%	5.93%

Just 19 tight ends since 2011 have been drafted after Round 5 as the first pass-catcher from their NFL team. But those players have done pretty well.

And, for the record, these numbers look even better when looking strictly at late-round tight ends. Our sample size isn't all that big, but during our timespan, eight tight ends were picked in Rounds 10 to 15 while being the top pass-catcher from their NFL team by ADP. Out of

those eight, three became moderate breakouts, while one was a true breakout.

If you're unable to get a top team pass-catcher, don't stress over whether or not the tight end is the second-, third-, or even fourth-ranked pass-catcher on his team. Data suggests it doesn't really matter.

Data also suggests that, if a tight end isn't his team's top pass-catcher, you don't need to worry much about where his teammates are drafted.

Really, it's top pass-catcher or bust.

High-End Quarterbacks Help

Quarterback situation didn't seem to be a big deal at wide receiver, but it matters a bit at tight end.

Tight End Hit Rates By Quarterback ADP and Rank

	QB ADP	QB Rank
Non-Breakout	116.8	16.0
Moderate Breakout	109.5	15.0
True Breakout	98.1	13.1

When you take all of the quarterbacks who are attached to the tight ends who failed to break out, their average ADPs ended up being about 117. And those quarterbacks had a preseason rank, on average, of QB16.

As you moved to the moderate breakout and then into the true breakout group, those numbers got lower. The quarterbacks got *better*.

Another way of looking at this is through quarterback rank groups.

Tight End Hit Rates By Quarterback Rank Group

	Total in Sample	Moderate	True
QB1 to QB5	31	29.03%	12.90%
QB6 to QB10	39	17.95%	5.13%
QB11 to QB15	39	20.51%	5.13%
QB16 to QB20	33	15.15%	3.03%
QB21 to QB25	26	11.54%	7.69%
QB26 to QB30	24	20.83%	8.33%
QB31+	12	25.00%	0.00%

Tight ends who've been attached to top-five quarterbacks have provided a much higher ceiling than their counterparts.

This is really evident when looking at late-round options. In our sample, there are 21 tight ends who were drafted after Pick 100 while having a quarterback with a top-five positional ADP. Eight of those players broke out moderately (38.1%).

Combining these first two ideas — that you should target top team pass-catchers, and that you should target good quarterback play — can bring the goods, too.

In our sample, we have 19 middle-round (Picks 60 to 108) tight ends who *weren't* their team's top pass-catcher, and who had a quarterback getting drafted outside the top-16 at the position. So these tight ends were competing for touches, and they were competing for touches with a below-average quarterback.

One of them broke out. And it was a moderate breakout, not even a true one.

Don't ignore the quarterback situation for your middle- and late-round tight ends.

Avoiding Rookies Is a Must

It's common knowledge in fantasy circles that tight ends don't do a whole lot as rookies. The position is tough to play in the NFL — they've got a lot of different things to do — making the transition hard from college to the pros.

As much as I wish I could throw a curveball and be contrarian, data backs this up.

The Lone Breakout

Of those 19 middle-round tight ends who didn't have a top-half quarterback throwing them the ball, the single breakout was Zach Ertz in 2016.

Breakout Rate By Career Year, TEs

Year in League	Total in Sample	Moderate	True
1	16	6.25%	0.00%
2	26	30.77%	15.38%
3	28	25.00%	10.71%
4	21	9.52%	0.00%
5	29	13.79%	6.90%
6	19	15.79%	5.26%
7	11	27.27%	0.00%
8	11	27.27%	9.09%
9	9	11.11%	0.00%
10	9	33.33%	11.11%
11	6	0.00%	0.00%
12	6	33.33%	16.67%
13	4	25.00%	0.00%
14	3	0.00%	0.00%
15	2	50.00%	0.00%
16	2	50.00%	0.00%
17	2	0.00%	0.00%

Just a little over 6% of rookie tight ends have exceeded ADP expectation by 3 or more points, and none of them have done it by 6 or more.

Second-year tight ends, though? They're pretty decent gets, with the second-best moderate and true breakout rates of any demographic

Admittedly, the tight end age chart is a little tough to read. It's hard to find obvious trends.

It does seem like targeting second- and third-year tight ends isn't a bad call, though. You can't see it in that table, but seven of the top-eight breakouts in our sample — players who outperformed ADP expectation most — were second- or third-year tight ends.

Athleticism Matters, But It Also Doesn't

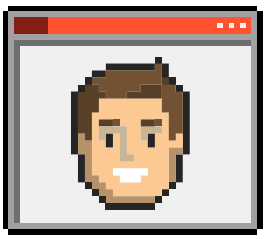
Not every tight end participates in athleticism testing at the NFL Combine, but many of them do. And since 2000, the average Height-Adjusted Speed Score at the tight end position has hovered around the 97 mark.

That probably means absolutely nothing to you.

Back in the day, Bill Barnwell created a metric called Speed Score, which helps adjust a player's 40-yard dash time for his weight. After all, someone weighing 170 pounds is going to have an easier time sprinting than someone who weighs 270.

Years later, Shawn Siegele talked about adjusting Speed Score for height. Because, like weight, height can factor into how fast someone's able to run.

Height-Adjusted Speed Score (HaSS for short) is just a way of adjusting a player's 40-yard dash time for size. For height and weight.



The average tight end has had a HaSS in the 97 range through the years. The average *breakout* tight end has been closer to 112.

Brilliant! We should target athletic tight ends then, yes?

Well, yeah, you should. The problem is that the vast majority of tight ends who make it into the fantasy football player pool are athletic.

When looking at our sample, the *non*-breakouts have had an average HaSS of about 107. So the guys who aren't exceeding ADP expectation are monsters, too.

With that being said, it's still good to know that we've seen zero tight end breakouts since 2011 when the tight end had a HaSS of 90 or lower. That number's just 17.5% when looking at the 100 HaSS threshold.

It may be tough to apply this knowledge in a draft, but it's good information to have upstairs.

Your 2022 Plan of Attack

To pay up or not to pay up, that is the question.

You likely won't be super disappointed if you spend an early-round pick on someone like Travis Kelce or Mark Andrews this season. Through the years, those players have been better than the rest of their position. And it's an unpredictable position, giving them even more added value.

But there's an opportunity cost involved. You're missing out on really, really good running backs and wide receivers when you make that tight end choice. And, as we know, reasonable late-round tight ends appear all the time. They're really no different than middle-round ones.

> That means you can wait. You can wait until the double-digit rounds and still get a viable player.

So should you pay up?

This is where relying on projections can be helpful. My initial 2022 projections like Kelce and Andrews, but they're not *in love*. It's easy to

justify waiting on the position and throwing some darts at other tight ends.

But who? Which tight ends should you be targeting?

We know we should look for top team pass-catchers by ADP first. Unfortunately, in 2022, there aren't really any of those outside of the tight ends going in the early rounds.

OK, how about tight ends who are tied to top quarterbacks?

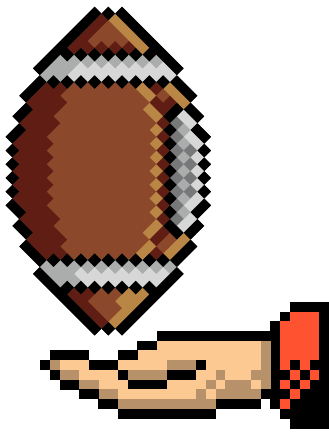
How about Gerald Everett?

Everett is now on the Chargers, so he's playing with a top-five quarterback in Justin Herbert. In the past, players like Everett have hit at a really great rate. So he makes some sense.

Second- or third-year tight ends should be targets, too.

Cole Kmet is a late-round option who's in line to see a big target share in the Bears offense. He's a third-year player, and we know third-year guys (and second-year ones) have provided the biggest ceilings at the position over the last decade.

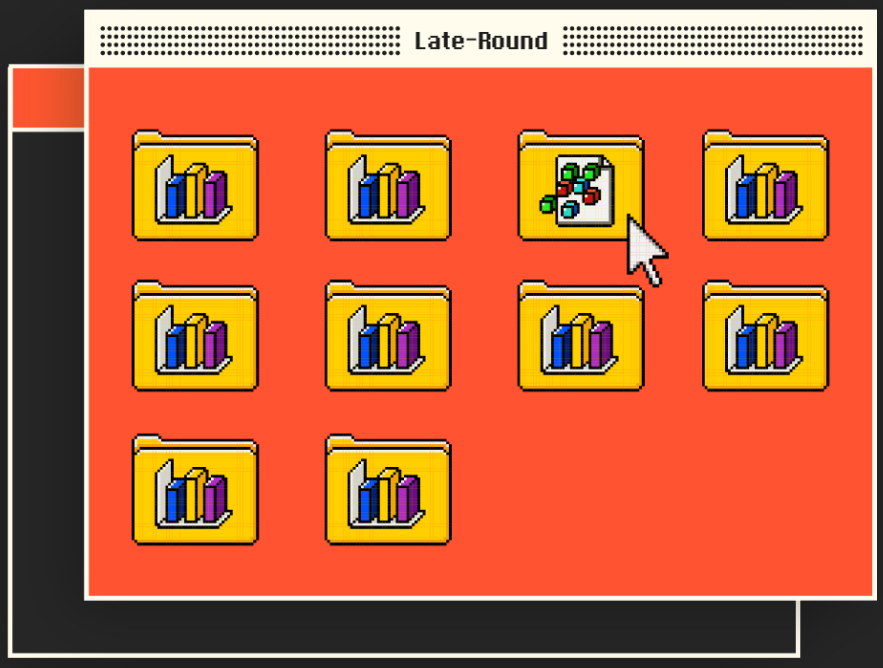
Maybe Albert Okwuegbunam? He's a third-year player, too, and he's tied to a strong quarterback in Russell Wilson.



There's a lot of *that* this year. There are a lot of players who only sorta kinda follow the criteria. Irv Smith? David Njoku? Maybe even Hunter Henry?

There are at least sensible tight ends you can target really late in your drafts that support passing on an early-round option.

All I ask is that you mostly ignore the tight end dead zone.



Team-Level Regression

Feeling good? Is your brain exhausted?

You're past the tough part, I promise.

You now have a pretty good understanding of fantasy football strategy. Positional value is easier to grasp. Economic phrases like opportunity cost and supply and demand have a whole new meaning. Spotting potential breakouts at different positions isn't as difficult as it once was.

Now it's time to dig into specific examples. Now we can look at who to target in our drafts and why.

Almost.

Before providing lists of players to target and avoid, it's not a bad idea to view the 2022 fantasy landscape at a team level.

This is how projections are created. At least how *mine* are created. I inspect every NFL team, look at recent trends, study their coaches, and generate top-level numbers.

Part of this research — a big part of it — is regression analysis. I spoke to all of this earlier in the guide, but regression happens at both the player *and* team levels.

> When a team does something insane one year, we can't just expect them to do it again the next season.

To keep things nice and clean, we'll be splitting these team regression breakdowns up by ***team philosophy*** and ***team scoring***.

The team philosophy section will cover teams who are bound to regress in statistics like pass rate or plays run.

With the scoring portion, we'll be looking into teams who scored in funky ways last year.

Player projections stem from team ones. If a team is expected to go a certain direction, players will follow. That's why covering this topic is important.

Team Philosophy Regression

The Ravens are unlikely to run as many plays this season.

In 2021, Baltimore ran 69.7 plays per game. Not only was that the most in the NFL, but it was the 11th-highest mark within the statistic over the last 11 seasons.

We've had 16 teams with next-season data (so 2021 teams aren't included here) who've run at least 69 plays per game across an entire season since 2011. Of those 16, none saw an increase in year-over-year plays run, and the average drop in plays was about 4.1 per game.

The Ravens had a weird 2021. At least for them. It was Greg Roman's third year as Baltimore's offensive coordinator, and it was Lamar Jackson's third season as the full-time starter.

In their two previous seasons — 2019 and 2020 — Baltimore ran 66.5 and 62.1 plays per game. They also had pass-to-rush attempt ratios of 0.74 and 0.73. They ran the ball a whole lot more than they threw it.

That ratio jumped to 1.18 last year.

So the Ravens not only ran more plays a season ago, but they leaned on the pass more than usual — more than the typical Greg Roman offense has. That resulted in a whole lot of pass attempts. The Ravens ranked 9th in total pass attempts.

But they were 23rd in pass rate.

If and when either of those numbers — plays run *or* pass rate — drops this year, the Ravens will look more like the 2019 and 2020 version as opposed to the 2021 squad. We should expect them to run fewer plays and be a little more run-friendly in 2022.

The Seahawks will probably run more plays in 2022.

Russell Wilson is out of Seattle, so everyone's understandably down on the Seahawks. I am, too. But one thing we can be a little excited about is

Bateman and Andrews

The Ravens may see fewer pass attempts this year, but it may not be a huge deal for Mark Andrews and Rashod Bateman. Their ADPs generally reflect this, and they can capture a huge target share in the offense.

the fact that they're not going to see so few plays run next year. Or, they probably won't.

The Seahawks ran just 56.1 plays per game in 2021. That was the third-lowest we've seen from any team since 2011.

Over the last 11 seasons, there've been 24 teams with next-season data that ran fewer than 60 plays per contest. Only two of those teams ran fewer plays the following season, with the average increase in plays being 4.1.

This is really just the previous exercise in reverse. It sheds some light to how unproductive Seattle was last year. An average drive from Seattle took 2 minutes and 19 seconds, 12 seconds slower than any other team in football.

Pete Carroll wants to run the ball. He *loves* running the football. And they're going to try to do that. They'll try to be methodical. It just may be tough to be as ineffective on the volume front as they were a season ago.

The Eagles will likely be more pass-heavy this year.

Philadelphia ranked dead last in the NFL in pass rate last year. So much of that was driven by a change in approach after a 2-5 start. Through seven games, the Eagles had a pass-to-rush attempt ratio of 1.48. That was well above the league's average at the time.

After Week 7 — from Week 8 through the end of the year — that fell to 0.65. That's a 39.3% pass rate. Tennessee was the closest team in pass rate during this stretch, and they were at 48.4%.

Since 2011, we've had 34 teams with following-season data who ran the ball more than they threw it across a season. Only four of those teams had a decrease in pass rate year over year, and none of those declines were significant. Meanwhile, the average increase in pass-to-rush ratio was 0.22.

The Eagles changed their philosophy halfway through last season, yes, but they also faced a pretty beatable schedule, finishing the season 7-4.

Winning teams have positive game scripts, leading to more rushing. So don't ignore that aspect to all of this, too.

Regardless, a little regression and the addition of AJ Brown should lead you to believe that this Jalen Hurts-led offense is going to see more passes in 2022.

The Buccaneers are bound to be more run-friendly this season.

Tom Brady has been Tampa Bay's starting quarterback for two seasons now, and during this time, the Buccaneers have thrown it more than any other team in the NFL. They have 37 more raw pass attempts than the second-ranked Steelers, and their 64.3% pass rate is tops in the league, too.

Last season really buoyed these numbers. The Bucs threw it 731 times, and their 1.90 pass-to-rush attempt ratio was easily highest in the league.

Teams don't repeat that kind of approach. Only four teams since 2011 have had a higher pass rate than what Tampa Bay had last season, and each of those teams saw a dramatic dip in pass rate the following season, dropping, on average, by nearly 10 percentage points.

The Bucs weren't as pass-heavy during Brady's first year in Tampa Bay as they were during his second, so regression should be the expected. That's only emphasized when you consider the movement at pass-catcher that the Bucs will see in 2022.

The Steelers will probably run the ball more in 2022.

I just mentioned it when talking about the Buccaneers, but the Steelers have been the second-most pass-friendly team in the league over the last two years. The immobile Ben Roethlisberger loved to get the ball out quick in order to not take sacks and hide his bad offensive line, and it led to a whole lot of low average depth of target throws.

The same logic with Tampa Bay is true with Pittsburgh, though the Steelers haven't been the passing maniacs that the Buccaneers have been over the last couple of seasons.

Don't forget that there's a chance we see a lot of rookie Kenny Pickett for the Steelers this year, too, and rookie quarterbacks haven't been big passers in the NFL. Big Ben hit 600-plus pass attempts in each of his final two seasons, when we've only see that from three first-year passers in NFL history.

Regression will hit the Steelers' pass rate, and we can feel better about banking on that given their new quarterback situation.

Team Scoring Regression

The Rams will likely have more rushing touchdowns in 2022.

Matthew Stafford was one of two quarterbacks last season with 40-plus passing touchdowns, and you can point to one statistic that influenced that number most: goal-line attempts. Only Justin Herbert had more attempts from within his opponent's five-yard line in 2021.

That resulted in over 80% of the Rams touchdowns coming via the pass. That was the highest mark in football last year.

Since 2011, 29 teams had a pass-to-rush touchdown ratio that high — 29 teams saw at least 80% of their offensive touchdowns through the air. Of those 29, only 2 saw that number *increase* the following season. The average decline was 13.4%.

Last year, LA scored 41 passing touchdowns and 10 rushing touchdowns. Imagine the Rams with a pass-to-rush touchdown rate of about 67% — the standard 13% decline — instead of 80%.

That 41 passing touchdown total would fall to 34, and the rushing touchdowns would go from 10 to 17.

You don't think that can have a serious trickle-down effect?

Russell Wilson Magic

The highest pass-to-rush touchdown ratio since 2011 came in 2017 when nearly 90% of the Seahawks' touchdowns came through the air.

The Eagles are probably going to have more passing touchdowns this season.

There's even more reason to be bullish on the Eagles' passing attack this year: they were the anti-Rams in 2021.

While LA was throwing for touchdowns at an unsustainable rate, you could say Philly was *running* for scores at an unsustainable rate.

The Eagles finished last year with the lowest pass-to-rush touchdown ratio in the NFL. Just 44.4% of their touchdowns were passing touchdowns.

Sure, sure — a mobile quarterback like Jalen Hurts is going to skew these numbers towards the run a little bit. But Philadelphia had the eighth-lowest rate since 2011. That's not nothing.

Each of the seven teams ranked below them within this statistic saw a serious increase in passing touchdown rate the following season. The rise among the group was almost 20%.

To put that another way, a 55% to 60% pass-to-rush touchdown rate is more likely for Philadelphia next season. That should make the passing and receiving projections in the offense look a little nicer.

The Giants are almost definitely going to score more offensive touchdowns in 2022.

One of the easiest teams to buy into as a value this year is the New York Giants.

The G-Men have scored the fewest touchdowns in football in back-to-back seasons. For real. You can blame personnel all you want, but it's easier to point the finger at an incompetent coaching staff.

That staff is gone. In their place is a head coach in Brian Daboll who helped build a Buffalo Bills offense into one of the biggest powerhouses in the NFL.

Since 2011, 16 NFL teams with next-season data have scored 1.5 touchdowns per game or fewer in a given season. All but one of those teams was able to see that number get better year over year, and the average uptick in scores per game has been 0.82 among that group.

It may seem like a small number, but 0.82 touchdowns per game is anything but small. Across a 17-game season, we're talking 14 additional touchdowns for the Giants.

It's tough to be *this* bad over a long period of time. The Giants offense should be better for fantasy football in 2022.

Update Tracker

The Players to Target, Players to Avoid, Late-Round Dart Throws, and Rankings and Tiers sections will be updated each week through August. You can find a list of the big weekly changes below.

July 8th

- Added Breece Hall as a player to target
- Added Damien Harris as a player to avoid
- Added Wan'Dale Robinson as a late-round dart
- Bumped up DJ Moore, Robbie Anderson, and Terrace Marshall in rankings post-Baker Mayfield trade

July 15th

- Removed Gabriel Davis as a player to target
- Removed Nick Chubb as a player to avoid
- Added Cordarrelle Patterson as a player to avoid
- Added Dalton Schultz as a player to avoid
- Added Isaiah McKenzie as a late-round dart throw

July 22nd

- Removed Dameon Pierce as a player to target
- Added David Njoku as a player to target
- Removed Amari Cooper as a player to avoid
- Removed Cameron Brate from top-200 post-Kyle Rudolph signing

July 29th

- Added JuJu Smith-Schuster as a player to target
- Removed Chris Godwin as a player to avoid
- Added Rashaad Penny as a player to avoid
- Added an update to Julio Jones

August 5th

- Removed Tim Patrick as a player to target
- Removed Irv Smith as a player to target
- Removed Patrick Mahomes as a player to avoid

- Added Rondale Moore as a player to target
- Re-added Dameon Pierce as a player to target
- Added Cam Akers as a player to avoid
- Added Isiah Pacheco as a late-round dart throw
- Added Mo Alie-Cox as a late-round dart throw
- Removed Mark Ingram as a late-round dart throw
- Added a link to an audio file in the Top-200 Cheatsheet section that explains how to properly use the rankings and tiers

August 12th

- Added Michael Pittman as a player to target
- Added Chase Edmonds as a player to target
- Added Elijah Moore as a player to target
- Added Albert Okwuegbunam as a player to target
- Added Josh Allen as a player to avoid
- Added David Montgomery as a player to avoid
- Updated blurbs to reflect more current ADP data

August 17th

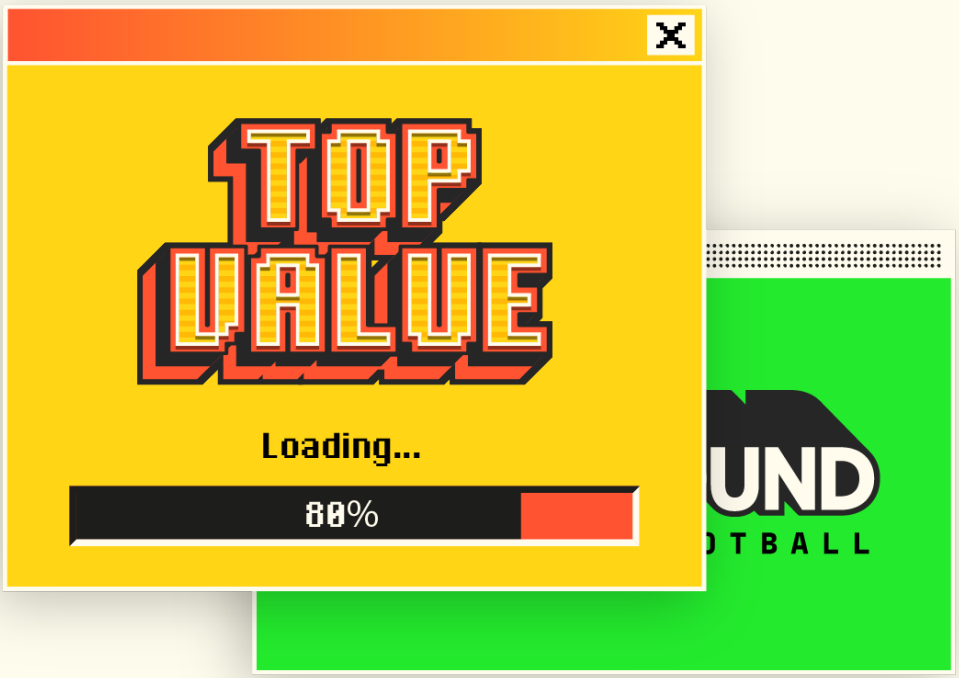
- Added Eno Benjamin as a late-round dart throw
- Updated each player blurb to include the date that they were added to the guide

August 23rd

- Updated top-200 rankings and tiers

August 26th

- Removed Cordarrelle Patterson as a player to avoid
- Added Najee Harris as a player to avoid
- Added an update to Breece Hall's blurb



Players to Target

The fantasy football world has an obsession with player analysis.

At the end of the day, that's what fantasy football is all about, right? It's about the players. We're just trying to find players who produce. We're trying to find players who outperform expectation.

It's not hard: When you're drafting, just pick the right players!

(This is my Tarantino moment.)

You just read 120 pages of a fantasy football PDF, and player analysis took up like, what, 2% of the content?

It's not that player analysis doesn't matter. It's that having a strategic foundation matters more.

Now that you've got those tools, you — we — can start digging into specific players. Who should you be looking to draft this year? Which players have a lot going for them?

As is the case with any sort of "players to target" breakdown, this is all about how to view these guys versus average draft position. It'd be easy to just list all the best players in fantasy football and tell you to draft them, but that doesn't do you any good. You're not going to have a team full of Jonathan Taylors.

> Unfortunately, there's no single way to see how the consensus is viewing players. One fantasy platform will have different ADP information than another.

I'll lean largely on the half-PPR consensus rankings and ADP on FantasyPros to find these values. I figure that a lot of people in your league may follow those, so knowing which players to target against those rankings might be helpful. Maybe? That seems reasonable?

The list of players that you're about to read will change over the next couple of months. As news breaks and ADP shifts, values do, too.

You ready to finally read some player analysis?

Note: The following section will be updated each week through the end of August.

Quarterbacks to Target

Jalen Hurts, QB, Philadelphia Eagles *(Added July 1st)*

You're not shocked to see Hurts here, are you?

We know mobility matters at the quarterback position, and Hurts is coming off a season where he added 9.2 fantasy points per game with his legs alone. He led all quarterbacks in rushing yards, and he only trailed Lamar Jackson in prorated rush share — he saw the second-highest percentage of team rush attempts.

Now, those rushing numbers from a year ago were boosted by 10 scores on the ground, and there's almost no chance he repeats that performance. But as you read in the team regression section, the Eagles are bound to be more pass-heavy this year. That'll lead to more passing touchdowns, and it could also result in more scrambles. Last year, Hurts was third in the NFL with 51 scrambles, per Pro Football Focus.

The addition of AJ Brown doesn't hurt, either.

Hurts had a lot of consistency with his fantasy performances last year, but his production was anything but stable. It was always going to be hard for him to keep up his rushing touchdown pace. With these other things working in his favor, the sky is the limit.

Trey Lance, QB, San Francisco 49ers *(Added July 1st)*

We didn't get to see a lot of Trey Lance last season, but what we saw was solid.

In Lance's two starts, he scored 14.6 and 19.1 points, respectively, and he missed out on a rushing touchdown by about an inch. More importantly, he ran the ball 24 times in those two contests. For context, Lamar Jackson has averaged fewer rush attempts per start over the last three seasons.

The system and weapons are there in San Francisco. I mean, Jimmy freaking Garoppolo ranked second in the NFL in yards per attempt last

year. Imagine getting that type of passing production with double-digit rush attempts per game.

As it stands, Lance is the quintessential later-round quarterback this year.

Justin Fields, QB, Chicago Bears *(Added July 1st)*

With the quarterback market being sharper, it's become more difficult to find true late-round options who have sincere mobility. Justin Fields fits that bill, though.

People may remember Fields' rookie year as mediocre, but things started to click for him a bit down the stretch. After a rough outing against the Buccaneers in Week 7, Fields started and finished four more games through the end of the season. He scored no fewer than 16.9 points in any of those games, averaging 19.7 points per contest. Those are low-end QB1 numbers.

Fields averaged 8.5 rush attempts per game during that stretch, adding nearly 8 points per game on the ground alone. Any improvement as a passer could elevate Fields to QB1 status in 2022.

My projections have Fields as the QB14, but he's usually taken around QB16 or QB17. There's room for growth in that projection, too.

Kirk Cousins, QB, Minnesota Vikings *(Added July 1st)*

I'm not anti-pocket passer. We just know that the Konami Code is real, so it's easy to be drawn towards mobile quarterbacks.

Someone who won't bring that rushing juice is Kirk Cousins.

Cousins' time in Minnesota under Mike Zimmer has resulted in a lot of good-not-great production. He's been a low-end QB1 over the last two seasons on a points per game basis, but he ranked as a mid-range QB2 during his first two years with the Vikings.

Why expect anything different this year?

Well, Zimmer's gone. In his place is Kevin O'Connell, who served as Rams' offensive coordinator in 2020 and 2021. He was also Washington's OC in 2019.

Last season, as you read in the regression candidates section, Matthew Stafford was second in the NFL in throws from within his opponent's 5-yard line. The Rams led the league in pass rate in that area of the field.

That trend hasn't existed every year that O'Connell's been offensive coordinator, but it's clear he's someone who formulates his gameplans around personnel. LA added Stafford last year, and they had a much higher neutral-script pass rate.

Cousins is closer in talent to Stafford than he is Jared Goff or Case Keenum, the quarterbacks O'Connell managed in 2020 and 2019. We know Cousins can at least produce low-end QB1 numbers, but what if this is a season where we see him spike his touchdown rate? There are already reports talking about how the Vikings' offense is going to see a boost in passing volume, which makes sense given the coaching changes.

In order for a true pocket passer to have a difference-making season in fantasy football, he needs to have somewhat of an outlier season in touchdown rate. He needs to throw touchdowns as a pace that's a little abnormal. We saw that with Stafford in 2021, coming through with his highest touchdown rate of his 13-year career.

Why not Cousins?

Running Backs to Target

Saquon Barkley, RB, New York Giants *(Added July 1st)*

Drafting Saquon Barkley isn't easy. He's played a grand total of 15 games over the last two years, and after an ankle injury in Week 5 last season, he wasn't 100 percent for much of his 2021 campaign. And when he *was* active, the Giants weren't exactly bringing their A game — Mike Glennon and Jake Fromm were getting action at quarterback.

It's clear that the ankle wasn't right for Barkley last season, though. Over the first four games of the year — before the injury — he was averaging an 81.2% running back rush share and 13.6% target share per game. Those are very good numbers. After his return, those marks dropped to 65.2% and 12.9%, respectively.

He had a couple of rough games to begin the year, but before his injury, he knocked out two straight outings with elite production, scoring 21.4 and 29.6 PPR points. We at least were seeing the top-notch production we know he can bring to the table.

It was noted earlier that the Giants have been dreadful offensively over the last two seasons, and that regression is in their favor. That's reinforced by the Brian Daboll hiring — Jason Garrett, the Giants' ex-offensive coordinator, is an abomination of an offensive mind, and Daboll's at least shown, over the last couple of seasons, that he can be creative and grow an offense.

Barkley is set to see the lion's share of work once again in an offense that lacks any substantial running back depth. The offense should be a little more pass-friendly, too, playing into Barkley's strengths.

Let's just be real here: the reason Barkley is sometimes falling to the third round of fantasy drafts is because of his injury history. It's because, over the last two seasons, he's been hurt. And maybe that turns you off. But that's the running back position. Doctors who study this for a living aren't overly concerned about Barkley's health, since he's had plenty of time to rehab.

If he comes back at full strength, he has more upside than anyone going around him in fantasy drafts.

Travis Etienne, RB, Jacksonville Jaguars *(Added July 1st)*

I've already brought up Travis Etienne as a player to target — he fits the criteria we look for when seeking out a running back who could potentially beat the dead zone.

He's a second-year player — he's young — and he's an elite pass-catching back. Or we think he is.

The reason he's not going higher in drafts isn't because of talent. He was a near 98th percentile running back in my prospect model, a ranking that's typically only hit by top fantasy backs.

It's not talent holding him back. It's ambiguity. It's the fact that we just don't know exactly how he's going to be deployed, and we don't know for certain if he's going to make an impact in the NFL.

Fortunately for Etienne, teammate James Robinson — a proven workhorse in the league — is coming off a dreaded Achilles tendon rupture. It happened late in the season, so there's very little chance he comes back at the start of the year. And even if he does, he'll likely be limited.

That's going to give Etienne a chance to shine. He may not be someone who sees 20-plus carries consistently in the NFL, but he's got a shot to capture a 15-plus percent target share in a Jags' offense that doesn't have locked-in studs at pass-catcher.

You want to target young running backs who catch passes in the dead zone. Etienne is worth the risk.

Breece Hall, RB, New York Jets *(Added July 8th)*

Upon reflection, Breece Hall probably should've been listed as a player to target when this guide originally launched. Because history is on his side.

Hall's an elite prospect. My model has him as a 97th percentile running back, and his numbers were so good that he actually had a positive Draft Capital Delta — it viewed him as being *underdrafted.*

As I talked about earlier, the best dead-zone running back demographic is rookies. First-year running backs have seen well above average hit rates out of that area of the draft, with nearly 30% of them hitting 16-plus PPR points per game since 2011.

Fantasy managers have been fine with drafting rookie talent at the top of drafts in the past — see Najee Harris last year — but there's a perception that Hall will be splitting his time with teammate Michael Carter. And while Carter will undoubtedly see looks this year, do we really know exactly what this split is going to look like?

Is that split not being reflected in Hall's price to acquire?

Unlike other dead-zone backs, Hall's not being boosted in ADP because of projected workload. He's getting drafted in the dead zone because he's talented. And that talent is a huge reason, in my eyes, that we've seen rookies crush expectation out of the running back dead zone historically.

There's a decent chance Hall *does* share a backfield this season. It won't be some 50-50 split, but it's likely that Carter will be involved.

But what if Hall's talent is undeniable? Don't you want a piece of that upside?

Update: Was it premature for me to say that the Jets backfield won't be a 50-50 split? Probably. Sometimes I won't get the best reads on situations right away. It's not that I've doubted Carter as a player, it's just that Hall himself is a great prospect, and the Jets used good draft capital to get him.

The reason I'm even bringing this up is because there's more and more talk about this being a split backfield. And there's more and more talk about Michael Carter having a serious role.

But! I do think adding Hall to your fantasy roster is a nice long-term play. Rookies tend to produce better during the second half of the season, and given Hall's overall prospect profile, he's got true league-winning potential. That's especially true when you consider the Jets schedule gets much easier down the stretch. They get the Lions, Jaguars, and Seahawks in the fantasy playoffs.

So here's my revised take: As Breece Hall's ADP slips given recent reports, draft him. Having him as an RB2 or RB3 is the way to go, since you'd have a strong alternative or two at running back in that case.

Michael Carter's in play, too. Zero RB teams could get some cheap production to start the season with Carter. The Jets may also see some negative game scripts against a tough schedule, benefitting the pass-catching Carter.

This has always been a play on talent combined with things hitting for Hall at the right time. We shouldn't completely *overreact* to recent news, but reacting in some way is rational.

Tony Pollard, RB, Dallas Cowboys *(Added July 1st)*

Middle-round team RB2s by ADP who have running back teammates getting drafted in the dead zone have had serious success in the past. We saw that earlier: their true breakout rates have been best compared to any other type of running back subset.

That's exactly what we've got with Tony Pollard this year.

In truth, Pollard's current ADP — he's the RB31 on FantasyPros — is essentially at his *projection*. Since that projection is assuming Ezekiel Elliott will be healthy, then that means the market isn't really pricing in Pollard's upside. Because if Zeke goes down or misses time, Pollard would take on a pretty sweet role in a pretty sweet offense.

At a baseline, Pollard's going to see pass-catching work in Dallas. We want our running backs — our hopeful breakout running backs — to be receivers. He can still fill a flex role in a worst-case scenario.

In a best-case one? Watch out.

Chase Edmonds, RB, Miami Dolphins *(Added August 12th)*

We want middle-round running backs who are the first running back selected from their NFL team. We want middle-round running backs to

be pass-catchers. We want middle-round running backs to not be past their fifth year in the league.

So far so good for Chase Edmonds, eh?

In a part-time role over the last couple of seasons in Arizona, Edmonds has seen target share per game averages of 13.2% and 12.3%. For some context, in 2021, his prorated target share was ninth-best among all running backs who played eight or more games.

He was a pretty freaking good runner last year, too. Among the 49 backs with 100 or more carries, Edmonds was second in yards per carry minus his running back teammates' yards per carry. Meaning, Edmonds' yards per tote was significantly better than James Conner's in Arizona.

Within that same grouping, Edmonds was fourth in percentage of runs that went 10 or more yards and 17th in percentage of runs that went 20-plus yards.

The Dolphins went after Edmonds in free agency and gave him the most lucrative contract in that backfield. He probably won't be a bell-cow for them, but we should expect a hefty target share to go along with a decent number of touches on the ground. In a half PPR or full PPR format, that can get him into your starting lineup.

Kenneth Gainwell, RB, Philadelphia Eagles *(Added July 1st)*

Over the offseason, I built a model that helps project how running backs and wide receivers will perform in Year 2 and Year 3 of their NFL careers. It takes their prospect score (from my prospect model) and combines it with some statistical factors from their rookie season, and it creates their very-cleverly-named Year 2 score.

One of the biggest Year 2 Model surprises is undoubtedly Kenneth Gainwell, who ranked in the 84th percentile. That was a little better than Rhamondre Stevenson, and not a whole lot worse than Elijah Mitchell.

Gainwell finished his rookie season with a 10.8% target share. That was ninth-highest among all running backs, and it ranked in the top-20 when adjusted for games played.

Not too bad for a first-year back that no one cared about, eh?

He just wasn't all that relevant in fantasy football because the Eagles used a whole lot of backs, and they were also pretty run-heavy.

But what's been the theme here lately? That's right — Philly's going to throw more this year. And if that happens, don't be surprised if Gainwell, who's part of an ambiguous backfield by ADP, is involved.

He's a later-round pick, so don't expect the world. There's just a non-zero chance he's straight-up better than Miles Sanders.

Dameon Pierce, RB, Houston Texans *(Added July 1st)*

My prospect model wasn't in love with Dameon Pierce. He never captured his entire backfield in college, and that resulted in a best-season total yards per team play rate of just 0.87. For some context, that's like a 6th percentile mark in the model.

Fewer than 10% of running back prospects in the model with a sub-1.0 best-season total yards per team play rate were able to hit 10 or more PPR points per game in one of their first three seasons in the league. And only two backs — Chris Carson and Josh Jacobs — got to 15.

So why in the world should you be targeting Pierce?

Honestly? Because of price.

According to FantasyPros, rankers have Pierce just four spots ahead of teammate Marlon Mack. Pierce had poor cumulative numbers in college because his coaches split his backfield, but a lot of his tackle-breaking data is favorable. And despite such mediocre playing time, he still had a best-season reception share of a little over 7%.

We don't need to worry about late-round team RB1s like we do middle-round ones, but Pierce is a fine get in the double-digit rounds of drafts.

Wide Receivers to Target

Michael Pittman, WR, Indianapolis Colts *(Added August 12th)*

Michael Pittman saw a huge jump from Year 1 to Year 2, and not enough people are talking about it.

He was fine enough as a rookie, but he couldn't stay healthy throughout the entirety of the season. He finished with a yards per route run rate of 1.37, a below-average number for a rookie wide receiver with 50 or more targets.

Things turned around completely in 2021, his second year in the league. That yards per route run rate climbed to 1.95, a 78th percentile mark among 50-plus target second-year wideouts.

Pittman didn't hit 130 targets last season, but he was in a run-heavy offense. His target share was actually north of 25%. Since 2011, here are the wide receivers with a per-game target share of at least 25% to go along with a yards per route run rate of 1.9 during Year 2: Sammy Watkins, Josh Gordon, AJ Brown, Justin Jefferson, Odell Beckham, Michael Thomas, Mike Evans, Alshon Jeffery, AJ Green, DeAndre Hopkins, Allen Robinson, Courtland Sutton, Jarvis Landry, Kendall Wright, and Michael Pittman.

There are some iffy players on that list, but the vast majority are alphas. They're studs.

Pittman rated extremely well in analyst Matt Harmon's Reception Perception process, too. With an (hopefully) improved quarterback situation to go along with some natural regression, Indianapolis should be more pass-friendly in 2022. That'll benefit Pittman tremendously.

Don't be surprised if he finishes as a legit WR1 option this year.

Mike Williams, WR, Los Angeles Chargers *(Added July 1st)*

You're bound to see wildly different valuations for Mike Williams depending on where you're drafting. He's getting a shout in this section because, over on FantasyPros, aggregate ADP has him at WR19, below DK Metcalf.

I'd take Williams over Metcalf easily.

I'm still on #TeamKeenanAllen, but Williams had a nice breakout season in 2021. He started the year off hot with four top-15 wide receiver performances over his first five games, averaging a target share per contest of 25.1%.

And then he hurt his knee. He only missed one game last year, but his splits pre- and post-knee injury are so glaring that it almost had to have had some impact on his game.

After Week 5, Williams' target share per contest fell to 17.8%. Across the six games directly after the knee injury, that share was just a little over 15%.

His fantasy points per contest fell to 11.8 after it was 23.2 during his healthy stretch.

Maybe it wasn't the knee. Maybe Williams just regressed after playing out of his mind to start last season. That's certainly possible.

I'm just willing to pay more than that FantasyPros price tag. Williams is a 27-year-old wideout who was once selected seventh overall in the NFL Draft. He's talented. And he's the number-two option — pretty clearly — in an offense led by one of the best quarterbacks in the game. And it's an offense that was seventh in neutral script pass rate last year.

Williams should be drafted as a high-end WR2, not a low-end one.

Allen Robinson, WR, Los Angeles Rams *(Added July 1st)*

During the 2020 season, Allen Robinson caught 102 passes for 1,250 yards and 6 touchdowns with Mitch Trubisky and Nick Foles at quarterback.

During the 2021 season…he didn't.

Last year was tough on A-Rob. With new quarterbacks and a coaching staff that seemed to not care about making him the focal point of the offense, Robinson saw his yards per game rate plummet from 78.1 to 34.2.

As probably all of you know, Robinson's no longer a Chicago Bear. He's on the Rams. It's one of the best situational upgrades imaginable for a wide receiver who's never had respectable quarterback play. Like, ever.

The downside with Robinson is that this could be it. He's going to be 29 years old in August, so it's very possible that he hit the age wall.

But what if he's still good?

According to Pro Football Focus, Allen Robinson graded out pretty closely to Marquise Brown and Jerry Jeudy last year. The masses don't seem to have much of a problem with drafting *them* early.

So why Robinson, a player who has an incredible statistical resume? Why Robinson, a player who *finally* has a competent quarterback?

The Rams have been good to their wide receivers under Sean McVay. Thanks to his use of 11 personnel, LA's lowest wide receiver target share during the McVay era has been 63%. That would've been a top-10 number in 2021, for context.

Wide receivers can eat in this offense. We saw that last year with Cooper Kupp's historic season, and even Robert Woods, pre-injury, was averaging over 15 PPR points per game.

Over the last four years under McVay, the Rams have had at least two wide receivers hit a prorated (adjusts for games played) target share of

21% or greater each season. Meaning their number-two wide receiver by target share had a 21% target share per game at a minimum.

Without injury, that type of share from Robinson in this Rams offense could easily yield 130 targets. He can hit eight targets per contest with a reasonable outcome.

Robinson is a lower-end WR2 according to FantasyPros right now when he has top-12 upside. Even with Cooper Kupp in that offense. All it'll take is for last year to be more of a hiccup than anything else. And that's possible given what Robinson was working with.

Rashod Bateman, WR, Baltimore Ravens *(Added July 1st)*

We've established that the Ravens are probably going to run fewer plays and also be more of a run-heavy team in 2022. That may not stop Rashod Bateman from being a value.

It'll always be tougher for Lamar Jackson's wide receivers to be fantasy relevant. Because as long as Jackson's quarterbacking, his offenses are more than likely going to lean heavily on the run. That limits volume, which limits fantasy points.

To combat the lower passing volume, a player like Bateman will need to see a larger percentage of his team's targets.

Since 2011, roughly 26% of wide receivers who played at least 8 games and hit 16 PPR points per game (roughly WR1 numbers) came from offenses that threw the ball fewer than 35 times per contest. The average game-adjusted target share among that group was 27.4%. For the group who played in an offense with more passing, it was 26.1%.

Players will have an easier time seeing volume in pass-heavier offenses. They'll score more points. Duh. But it's possible to maintain that point scoring when a target share is high.

Considering Bateman's competition, he has a chance to get that high of a target share. Just last season, Baltimore fed Marquise Brown 24.5% of the team's season-long targets. That was 26% on a per-game basis.

Why not Bateman, who was a better prospect entering the league according to my model?

He's also got good historical ADP trends working in his favor. He's a second-year wide receiver, and he's the top wide receiver being selected from the Ravens. He's the clear-cut number-one wideout.

Maybe Bateman doesn't have a top-five ceiling, but he's someone who should be able to exceed expectation and potentially become a moderate breakout this year.

Elijah Moore, WR, New York Jets *(Added August 12th)*

I can't help it. I'm an Elijah Moore stan.

Chances are, Moore's not going to be a huge riser during the preseason because of situation. Zach Wilson is an unknown at quarterback, and the team has plenty of competition throughout after drafting Garrett Wilson in the top-half of the first round in April.

But, man, Elijah Moore is good.

He's now a second-year wide receiver, and he's a middle-round one in terms of average draft position. We know those players have come through big time for us in the past.

He didn't get to play a full season as a rookie, but he showed off his talent last year. Over his final seven games of the season, he averaged WR1 numbers, coming through with 17.7 PPR points per game and a target share per game of 22.1%.

Moore finished his first year in the league with a 1.75 yards per route run rate. The list of rookie wideouts since 2011 who were able to hit 1.7 yards per route run to go along with a per-game target share of at least 20% is…spectacular. I'll list out the names just so you're fully aware: Odell Beckham, Justin Jefferson, Ja'Marr Chase, AJ Green, Julio Jones, Mike Evans, Keenan Allen, Terry McLaurin, Kelvin Benjamin, Amari

Cooper, Devonta smith, Jaylen Waddle, Amon-Ra St. Brown, Brandon Aiyuk, Stefon Diggs, and our guy, Elijah Moore.

Draft him.

Gabriel Davis, WR, Buffalo Bills

Gabriel Davis may be the most polarizing player in fantasy football this year. Clearly, I lean on the side of "draft him."

It does depend where you're playing, though. Over on FantasyPros, rankers have Davis as the WR33.

Give me that all day.

The argument for Davis — at least *my* argument for Davis — isn't to just point to his insane playoff performance against the Chiefs this past January. His 8-catch, 201-yard, 4-touchdown outing doesn't hurt, but it's far from the main reason you should draft him.

Davis was buried behind Emmanuel Sanders for some time last year before finally getting more action down the stretch. He ended up playing significant snaps — at least 70% of Buffalo's offensive snaps — in six games (includes the playoffs).

During those contests, Davis averaged a target share per game rate of 20.2%, and he found the end zone 8 times, scoring in 4 of the 6 games.

He also finished the season with a top-15 yards per route run rate. It was better than a ton of good wide receivers like Mike Williams, Chris Godwin, Brandin Cooks, Michael Pittman, CeeDee Lamb, and DK Metcalf, to name a handful.

Not bad!

He's now scored 13 regular-season touchdowns across his two years in the league. And, remember, that was in limited time.

~~Since 2010, only 29 players — including Davis — have hit that touchdown mark during their first two seasons. Out of that group, 21 of them have played their third season (players like Justin Jefferson haven't), and in that third season, they were active for at least eight games.~~

~~Those players averaged 14.7 PPR points per game during that third campaign, with just 5 falling below 12 points per game.~~

~~FantasyPros rankers have Davis going 87th overall. (I'm fully aware he goes much higher in best-ball drafts.) Let's assume he goes *67th* overall in your home leagues this summer. Based on that ADP, he'd be expected to score somewhere around 11.8 PPR points per game.~~

~~You don't think he can exceed that as the potential number-two option in one of the most potent offenses in the league? Given how strong he's been at finding the end zone and commanding targets when active?~~

~~It's fine if you're not fully bought in. There are reasons to be nervous.~~

~~But a fifth- or sixth-round pick for Davis isn't a huge investment. You're not buying into him long-term. You're just buying into the possibility that he could destroy with Josh Allen.~~

Update: Davis' ADP is on the rise on every platform, making him a lot less appetizing of a pick compared to where he was even just a couple of weeks ago.

There's upside there. All of the things that are crossed out above still apply. But as I go through these summer months, things start to pop into my head. Like how Davis is the WR2 on his own team with a top-round wideout, and how that may bring somewhat of a capped ceiling to his season. Or how he's a third-year wide receiver, and we often see those types of wideouts *not* break out versus the market.

Davis isn't quite a middle-round pick, though, so perhaps those rules don't fully apply. I'm still in on him at the right cost — and his ranking and tier didn't really change for me this week — but that pricetag is rising. In turn, I can't highlight him as a player to actively target.

JuJu Smith-Schuster, WR, Kansas City Chiefs *(Added July 29th)*

I'll look at consensus ADP over on FantasyPros each week to find the best options for this section of the guide, but sometimes players slip through the cracks. That's the case with JuJu Smith-Schuster.

My rankings have Smith-Schuster at WR26 and a top-five round pick. The masses see JuJu as the WR32 and more of a seventh-rounder.

That deserves a shout in this players to target section, right?

Remember the age chart in the breakout wide receiver section earlier? The one that showed how second-year middle-round wide receivers were great bets?

That same chart showed us that fifth- and sixth-year wide receivers tend to pan out at a high rate, too.

That's where JuJu's at. After five years in Pittsburgh, Smith-Schuster is now in the favorable Kansas City offense. The Chiefs have been a top-10 team in pass rate in each of the last four years, and during this time, the team's wide receiver group hasn't ranked lower than 12th in fantasy scoring in any season.

Tyreek Hill's near 25% adjusted target share is gone, opening things up for another wide receiver to step in. Why not Smith-Schuster?

No, he's not going to play the same role Hill did in the Chiefs offense. While Hill could stretch the field, JuJu's been more of a slot guy — during his last completed season in Pittsburgh, he ran almost 85% of his snaps from the slot.

He wasn't very efficient the last time we saw him healthy, which is a huge reason why people are off of him in 2022. My counterargument to that is that his situation wasn't exactly great for efficiency.

The Steelers' offense over the last couple of years with Ben Roethlisberger consisted of a bunch of quick, low average-depth-of-

target (aDOT) passes to protect an aged quarterback and mask a bad offensive line. Smith-Schuster's aDOT in 2020 — his last healthy season with the team — was just six yards. That ranked in the first to second percentile among all 100-plus target wide receiver seasons since 2011.

You can't expect extreme efficiency when a wide receiver is catching the ball so close to the line of scrimmage. (Unless that player is someone like Percy Harvin, who was a yards-after-the-catch machine.)

Smith-Schuster's deeper peripherals looked just fine. Just 9.4% of his targets were on 15-plus air yard throws in 2020, a number less than half of what he'd seen in his three previous seasons in the league. But his catch rate and effectiveness on those targets was nearly identical to any other season.

In other words, the Steelers simply didn't use him down the field much.

That may not change dramatically in Kansas City, but the fact that he's still been fine when called upon down the field is at least evidence that Smith-Schuster may still has something to offer. And he was still maintaining a target share per game rate of almost 20% with really strong competition in the Pittsburgh offense in 2020.

Smith-Schuster has some of the best age-adjusted production in NFL history. He's a sixth-year player, but he's still just 25 years old. With the change in scenery, it wouldn't shock me if he's one of the better middle-round wide receiver values in 2022.

And as much as I like Skyy Moore as a prospect, and as much as I think Marquez Valdes-Scantling is a fine pick at his price point, it's not like JuJu's got to beat a whole lot of proven competition to get where we need him to get to.

Drake London, WR, Atlanta Falcons *(Added July 1st)*

Say it with me: rookie wide receivers are good bets in season-long leagues.

We saw earlier that about 79% of rookie wide receivers who get selected in the top-100 overall in season-long leagues end up exceeding ADP expectation. Their moderate breakout rate is 35.7%, and their true breakout rate is 14.3%. Not only are both of those numbers significantly higher than the general wide receiver population, but those numbers get even better when you focus only on the second half of the season, when rookies typically shine.

Drake London is the best wide receiver in this class. He ranked highest in my prospect model, and he was the top one picked in the NFL Draft. He has the potential to make a Mike Evans-like impact in the NFL.

There's not a whole lot in his way in Atlanta. The quarterback situation could be better, but we've found that quarterback ADP doesn't correlate to wide receiver breakouts. It doesn't matter. If London sees a 21% or 22% target share in Atlanta's offense — that may even be a conservative estimate — then he shouldn't have any trouble paying off at cost.

Kadarius Toney, WR, New York Giants *(Added July 1st)*

Toney's a second-year player who's being selected as his team's WR1 by ADP. We had that with Rashad Bateman, too, and since 2011, those players have been moderate breakouts at a 42% clip. That's pretty unreal.

The Giants, as I've discussed, are bound to be better offensively this season. That'll help all of the playmakers in the offense, including Toney, who showed off a nice, high ceiling last season as a rookie.

Toney played at least 50% of New York's snaps in seven games last year. He averaged a target share per game rate of 20.7% in those games. His fantasy points per game total wasn't great, but what should we expect with what he was working with?

The fact is, Toney got the ball when he was on the field, which is a sign of talent. Per Pro Football Focus' data, the only 50-plus target players who saw more targets per route run last year were Antonio Brown, Cooper Kupp, Davante Adams, and AJ Brown.

Once again, the opportunity cost in getting a player like Toney is not high. He's worth the gamble.

~~**Tim Patrick, WR, Denver Broncos**~~

~~Denver's pass-catchers have become a lot more appetizing with Russell Wilson in town. I'm totally cool with you gravitating towards someone like Courtland Sutton in your draft, but we know to expect the unexpected in fantasy football. We know crazy things happen. We know that what we think is going to go down doesn't always go down.~~

~~The market seems to believe that Courtland Sutton and Jerry Jeudy are going to see big target shares in the Broncos offense. That's probably not wrong. But what if they're not as locked-in as we think? What if Tim Patrick is more involved than anticipated?~~

~~Is it that strange to think that could be the case? Jerry Jeudy was banged up last year, sure, but he returned from his injury in Week 8. In games where both Jeudy and Patrick were active from that point on, Patrick ran 12 more routes than Jeudy did.~~

~~Jeudy was more effective per route run, and he's the better player. Or he has more potential to be the better player.~~

~~But the Broncos signed Tim Patrick last season to a fairly lucrative three-year deal, and some in the Denver media are already predicting Patrick over Jeudy this year.~~

~~That's not something I'd bank on, but he *did* play a little more after Jeudy's return in 2021. It's not that implausible. And in a worst-case scenario, if Patrick's not a full-blown starter, you've got a player who can see some production if Sutton or Jeudy get hurt.~~

Update: Patrick is out for the season with a torn ACL. Do not draft him.

Rondale Moore, WR, Arizona Cardinals ***(Added August 5th)***

As a rookie in 2021, Rondale Moore had an average depth of target of 1.2 yards. That was the lowest mark from any wide receiver with 50 or more targets since 2011.

It's tough to be a worthwhile starter in fantasy football with that pitiful of an aDOT. He had a high catch rate thanks to catching passes so close to the line of scrimmage, but any receiver playing the role Moore had as a rookie would need a ton of volume to be a fantasy starter.

There's some good here, I promise. When Moore was on the field last year, the Cardinals tried to get him the ball. Of the 100-plus rookie wide receivers since 2011 to have hit 50 or more targets, Moore's rookie campaign ranked 11th in targets per route run. His yards per route run rate, despite such a low aDOT, was still in the top half of that group, finishing above players like DJ Moore, Allen Robinson, and Diontae Johnson.

Christian Kirk is no longer in Arizona, and he played about 79% of his snaps from the slot last year. As a smaller, shiftier receiver, that's likely Moore's natural NFL position. Head coach Kliff Kingsbury seems to agree, saying in late July, "Rondale Moore is gonna have a huge role with Christian leaving."

Don't forget that Moore had some of the best age-adjusted college production we've ever seen. As a Freshman at Purdue, he caught 114 passes for 1,258 yards. He was a 90th percentile prospect in my model, and he's a 90th percentile player in my *Year 2* model, which helps determine how well a player is going to perform in Years 2 and 3 of his NFL career. Players with a score in the 90th to 95th percentile provide a 14-plus PPR point per game year in one of those two seasons at about a 60% clip.

It's an offense with a good quarterback. There's less competition with Kirk gone and DeAndre Hopkins suspended to start the year. Don't sleep on Rondale Moore.

Tight Ends to Target

Cole Kmet, TE, Chicago Bears *(Added July 1st)*

The fact that Cole Kmet didn't score a touchdown last year is honestly insane. He's just the second tight end since 2011 with more than 75 targets to not find the end zone, and he's the first to not get a touchdown after seeing more than 85 targets.

But he had 93 targets. That's the thing we should care about most. As a second-year player, Cole Kmet had 93 targets and a 17.8% target share.

Naturally, we should assume that rises a bit in Year 3, especially with the lack of competition in the Chicago offense. Jimmy Graham is gone, and the top and only established wide receiver there is Darnell Mooney.

Kmet could walk into a 20% target share for Chicago this year after ranking in the top-10 in targets per route run at tight end last year. Since 2011, 67 tight ends have played 8 or more games with an adjusted (for games played) target share of at least 20%. Of those 67, 63 ended up scoring 10 or more PPR points per game. Last season, 10-plus points per game would've made a tight end a low-end TE1 in fantasy football. (That's because the position is a dumpster fire.)

Getting that in the double-digit rounds is money.

~~**Irv Smith, TE, Minnesota Vikings**~~

~~We didn't get to see Irv Smith last year because of a meniscus injury, but the breakout potential was there. Kyle Rudolph was out of the picture, Adam Thielen was another year older, and Kirk Cousins isn't all that bad of a quarterback.~~

~~Assuming all is well with his rehab, things look better on paper this year. I already talked through a lot of this with Kirk Cousins earlier, but the Vikings are bound to throw the ball more with Kevin O'Connell as head coach. Adam Thielen is going to be 32 years old and has now missed time in three straight seasons. Smith himself, back in 2020, was sixth in yards per target among tight ends with 40 or more looks.~~

~~There are ways for Smith to capture a large target share in Minnesota's offense this year. With a later-round ADP, he's a low-cost, high-reward option.~~

Update: I wouldn't be drafting Irv Smith aggressively with the news that he underwent thumb surgery. It's not a certainty that he'll be ready for Week 1. If his rising ADP stays steady, you shouldn't be drafting him.

Gerald Everett, TE, Los Angeles Chargers *(Added July 1st)*

When a late-round tight end has a top-five quarterback by ADP, good things happen. You may recall, but of the 21 tight ends drafted after Pick 100 since 2011 who had a top-5 quarterback (by ADP) throwing them the ball, 8 ended up breaking out. That's a much more substantial breakout rate than the ordinary tight end in that sample.

The Chargers have Keenan Allen, Mike Williams, and Austin Ekeler who will command a large cumulative target share in the offense, but there aren't many obvious secondary options there. Josh Palmer is a fine dart throw, but couldn't Gerald Everett take on a nice role in the offense?

In 2021, LA was 14th in the NFL in tight end target share, and the guy who saw the majority of that work, Jared Cook, is gone. Cook was a shell of himself last season, too, given he was 34 years old.

If Everett approaches a 15% target share in this high-powered Chargers O, he can sneak into the top-10 at the position.

Evan Engram, TE, Jacksonville Jaguars *(Added July 1st)*

New Jacksonville Jaguars head coach Doug Pederson isn't a stranger to using tight ends. As head coach of the Eagles from 2016 to 2020, Philadelphia ranked 2nd, 4th, 1st, 2nd, and 2nd in tight end target share.

I'll be the first to admit that data like that is largely driven by personnel, and the Eagles had some good tight ends like Zach Ertz and Dallas Goedert through the years.

But Pederson loves 12 personnel groupings. He loves multiple tight end sets. And that could be the reason why the Jags went out and signed Evan Engram this offseason despite already having a pass-catching Dan Arnold on the roster.

Engram might be dust, but he was also part of those previously mentioned garbage New York Giants teams. We've seen production from Engram in the past — he can line up all over the field — and he's still just 27 years old. He'll be 28 in September.

Jacksonville doesn't have alpha receivers in their offense commanding a 25% target share. There's room for Engram to surprise people, especially if Pederson implements his typical offense.

David Njoku, TE, Cleveland Browns *(Added July 22nd)*

David Njoku is being ranked far too low over on FantasyPros. As it stands, rankers have 22 tight ends above him.

I have 15 ahead of him.

Njoku is stepping into the top tight end role on the Browns with the departure of Austin Hooper. Last season, Hooper saw an adjusted target share of 13.2%, the highest for Cleveland at the position.

Kevin Stefanski arrived in Cleveland in 2020, and over the last two seasons, the Browns have used their tight ends…a lot. They've been a run-heavy team, ranking 29th in pass attempts during this two-year timeframe. But they run a lot of multiple tight end sets — despite running the ball so much, the Browns actually have ranked fourth in the NFL in tight end routes run over the last two seasons, per Pro Football Focus' data. They've been seventh in tight end targets.

So don't let the ground-focused offense fool you: The Browns love to target their tight ends. And now that there are fewer of them, there's a chance a player like Njoku can gobble up a larger target share in the offense.

The man is still just 26 years old, and he signed a new four-year deal this offseason. Even if Deshaun Watson doesn't play this year, Njoku can still come through with a decent fantasy season. If Watson *does* play? We're talking top-6 to -8 upside.

Albert Okwuegbunam, TE, Denver Broncos *(Added August 12th)*

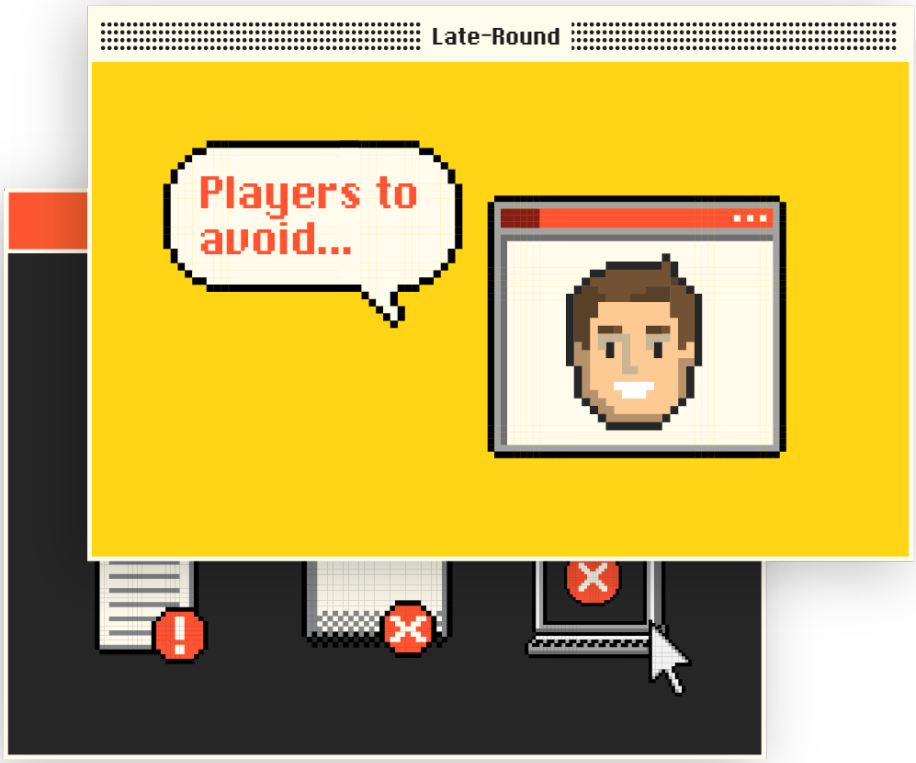
Albert O got a shout in the tight end section you read earlier, so it makes sense to give him a blurb in this players to target area, too.

With Tim Patrick's season-ending ACL tear, the Broncos are thinner than expected at pass-catcher. Courtland Sutton and Jerry Jeudy are going to gobble up a lot of looks, and KJ Hamler is a decent bet to see some, too.

But don't forget about Okwuegbunam. He's a 6'6'' machine who ran a 4.49 40-yard dash, giving him one of the best height-adjusted Speed Scores we've ever seen at the tight end position. He hasn't been *that* productive so far in his career while playing behind Noah Fant in Denver, but Fant is gone. He's in Seattle now.

And on 40 targets last year, Albert O crushed. Of the 45 tight ends with 30 or more targets, only George Kittle, Dallas Goedert, Mark Andrews, Rob Gronkowski, and Kyle Pitts had a better yards per route run rate than Okwuegbunam. That's it.

He's got a top quarterback throwing to him, he's an athlete, and we have some evidence that he can ball. Albert O isn't a bad breakout candidate.



Players to Avoid

Writing up players to target is always easier than doing the same for players to avoid.

With players to target, we're usually talking about middle- and late-round selections. They're guys who are undervalued by the market, and to be undervalued means a player is probably not being selected very high.

When costs are lower, stakes are lower. And when stakes are lower, you lovely consumers don't light my Twitter mentions on fire.

It wouldn't be very helpful if I only talked about 13th- and 14th-round picks in a players to avoid breakdown. Instead, I'm talking about a lot of top-five or -six round picks. They're guys who are overvalued by the… you get it. It's been a long guide. You don't need me to explain this, right?

Just keep in mind that I don't hate the players you're about to read. It's just that the market seems to be a little too high on them. There are better alternatives where they're getting drafted, that's all.

But they're good players. These players to avoid aren't bad.

That's sort of the entire point.

Note: The following section will be updated each week through the end of August.

Quarterbacks to Avoid

~~**Patrick Mahomes, QB, Kansas City Chiefs**~~

~~We're off to a flaming hot start with Patrick Mahomes, the greatest young quarterback of all time.~~

~~What am I doing?~~

~~What I'm doing is being realistic. Mahomes is the consensus QB3 right now, going ahead of Lamar Jackson, Kyler Murray, and Jalen Hurts, three quarterbacks who bring a lot more to the table with their mobility. It's not that Mahomes *isn't* mobile, it's just that he's not quite like them.~~

~~As good as he is — as historic as he's been — we need to stop pretending that Patrick Mahomes has been a fantasy football deity.~~

~~Since his 50-touchdown breakout campaign in 2018, Mahomes has ranked fifth, first, and fifth in quarterback scoring on a points per game basis. That's great! Mahomes has been amazing!~~

~~But is it draft-him-as-a-top-three-quarterback-no-matter-what good?~~

~~The obvious reason to be worried about Mahomes this year is the lack of Tyreek Hill. Mahomes' top receiver is a Miami Dolphin now. And a lot of other secondary pieces moved away from Kansas City this offseason, too.~~

~~Maybe the newcomers step up and crush it. And, to be transparent, in limited time without Hill in the past, Mahomes has been fine in fantasy.~~

~~But Mahomes wasn't as good last season as he's typically been. According to Pro Football Focus, he ranked 13th among relevant quarterbacks in passing grade. He was fourth in 2020 and 2019, and he ranked second in 2018. That combined with the loss of Hill makes him more volatile than the market seems to think.~~

~~Let me be clear: It's unlikely we see Patrick Mahomes totally flop. It's just that I've got Murray, Jackson, and Hurts in the same tier, so there's~~

~~no reason to buy at the top of said tier. I'd rather get the last player remaining of the group.~~

Update: Quite simply, this update is the result of thinking about the Chiefs offensive situation in more detail. Mahomes will likely go at the top of his tier, and I prefer going with someone like Kyler Murray or Jalen Hurts a little later, but shouting him out as an avoid probably isn't the right idea. Players like Burrow and Stafford — at ADP, of course — are more reasonable avoids. (Remember, this goes for season-long leagues, not necessarily best-ball ones.)

Josh Allen, QB, Buffalo Bills *(Added August 12th)*

In the quarterback section, you learned that top quarterbacks in fantasy football aren't necessarily giving you a larger points per game edge these days, but they're definitely giving you a *predictability* edge. Josh Allen is my QB1 this year because, yes, he projects to score the most points at quarterback. But we can also feel pretty good about him finishing high within his position.

The thing is, you're not just drafting quarterbacks in fantasy football. And that's the problem with Allen.

Allen has a second-round cost in redraft leagues this year. He's often going ahead of potential bell-cow running backs like Leonard Fournette and Saquon Barkley, per FantasyPros' aggregate ADP, giving him a super high opportunity cost. Remember, running back and wide receiver hit rates are unbelievably high in the first two rounds of fantasy drafts.

Meanwhile, when looking at that compiled ADP, Kyler Murray is going near Pick 60. Jalen Hurts is going well after Pick 60. And their projections aren't wildly far off from Allen's entering 2022.

We know that there's historically been a large drop-off in running back production after about the middle of the third round, and wide receivers start to get weaker after the running back dead zone. So taking on a Murray or a Hurts means you're not losing out on nearly as much when selecting them.

If Allen falls into the fourth round — or even the latter parts of the third round — then that's different. You can pounce if you're *really* wanting the stability. Otherwise, in most home leagues this year, he's looking like someone who's likely to be overdrafted, even though he's still my QB1 in 2022.

Joe Burrow, QB, Cincinnati Bengals *(Added July 1st)*

The biggest gap at quarterback between what the market is saying and what my projections are saying is with Joe Burrow.

It's not hard to see the potential — the guy has some of the best weapons in the league, and the Bengals thankfully upgraded their offensive line.

The issue is that his 2021 season was probably better than you think. And I'm sure you think highly of it.

Burrow had an 8.9 yards per attempt rate last year. We've only seen that number hit by 12 other quarterbacks with 300 or more pass attempts in a season since the merger. And none of those players did it more than once.

We'll see some regression there. And we may see some regression in the touchdown column, since Burrow had a 6.5% touchdown rate last year. That's not substantially high, but that's a statistic that generally meets back at the mean.

Among quarterbacks with back-to-back seasons of 300-plus attempts since 2011 who also had a touchdown rate of 6% or better, just 11% saw an increase in touchdown rate after hitting that mark. The average decline in touchdown rate was 1.6%.

Even with those numbers for Burrow last year, he still wasn't that impressive in fantasy. He finished as the QB10 in points per game. Last-season finishes aren't the end-all, but it does give us a framework to help understand some of these statistics.

Is there that big of a difference between Russell Wilson and Joe Burrow? If you answered no, then just wait a second in your draft and get Wilson instead.

Matthew Stafford, QB, Los Angeles Rams *(Added July 1st)*

You've already read about Stafford a little bit over the last couple of sections of this guide, but, man, things really went his way in 2021.

He was great, don't get me wrong. You don't throw 41 touchdowns as a bad quarterback.

But to get to 41 touchdown passes in 17 games, some things had to go right.

Like I said earlier, Stafford was second in the NFL in goal-line pass attempts last year, leading to 14 goal-line touchdowns. That's tied for the eighth-most since 2011.

Quite simply, keeping up that pace won't be easy.

That translated to a touchdown rate of 6.8%. You could say that Stafford's situation in 2021 was the best of his career, and I wouldn't disagree, but that touchdown rate was also by far the highest of his career. And as we just learned with Joe Burrow, touchdown rate regresses. And it sometimes regresses hard.

Stafford's not the worst pick in the world at QB11, but I'd much rather go after the rushing upside with Trey Lance at this point.

Running Backs to Avoid

~~Nick Chubb, RB, Cleveland Browns~~

~~Nick Chubb probably won't lose your fantasy football league for you. And if that's your thing — if you like to play it cautiously in the early rounds — then you can ignore this advice.~~

~~I just can't get behind Chubb over players like Leonard Fournette and Saquon Barkley. Over on FantasyPros, rankers have him ahead of those guys in half-PPR leagues.~~

~~Chubb has now played four years in the NFL, and he's never had a prorated target share — a target share prorated across a full NFL season — of 10%. Over the last two seasons, it's been just 6.1% and 4.9%.~~

~~That's why Chubb's had great-but-not-elite numbers in fantasy through the years. He was the RB9 last year in half-PPR points per game (minimum 8 games played), and he's finished as the RB7, RB10, and RB21 in his other three seasons in the league.~~

~~Yes, yes, I know — historical finishes aren't everything. But where's Nick Chubb's ceiling coming from? How is he going to get a top-five season with what we know? We know that he's not much of a pass-catcher, and we know there's a chance he doesn't have Deshaun Watson for a lot — if not all — of the 2022 season.~~

~~If Kareem Hunt was gone (which is possible), it'd be a different story. We could at least make the case for a path to upside. But the upside for Chubb is going to come in the form of touchdowns, and how can we be confident those are coming — at least with the knowledge we have now — in this Cleveland Browns' offense?~~

~~Chubb can live up to ADP expectation, but I want my second-round picks to have true top-tier upside. You can see that with a player like Leonard Fournette, but it's harder to envision it with Chubb.~~

Update: With more thought, it's probably not worthwhile to call Chubb a player to avoid. As I noted, his ceiling is unlikely to be elite — Jonathan Taylor-like — but he's fine enough at ADP. And every fantasy analyst seems to make the same point about him, driving down his cost.

Najee Harris, RB, Pittsburgh Steelers *(Added August 26th)*

I've done a lot of drafts this offseason, and while I've gotten Najee Harris in some, it's become increasingly clear that I'm lower than the consensus on him.

Harris is no doubt a safe bet. There's not much behind him on the Steelers depth chart — though Jaylen Warren has really impressed — and he's coming off a season where he ranked first in snap share at running back across the NFL, touching the ball over 380 times.

We want volume in fantasy football. Yes. But will that volume be there again this year?

Looking at history, the answer to that is "probably not." Harris finished last season with 22.4 touches (attempts plus receptions) per game, which was the 28th-highest mark of any running back since 2011 who played 8 or more games. Pretty impressive for a rookie, huh?

We've seen 79 running backs during this time hit 20 touches per contest. Of those 79, 61 have next-season data where, in that following season, they played 8 or more games.

Among those 61 backs, just 14 improved their year-over-year touches per game average. And only 26 of the 61 (42.6%) were able to get to 20 touches per game again.

Maybe Harris ends up beating those odds, but there's reason to doubt that. Ben Roethlisberger's no longer in the picture, and that could change the frequency in which Harris sees the ball through the air.

Sharp Football Analysis' Rich Hribar brought this up on a show I did with him a few weeks ago, but Harris saw a ton of looks behind the line of scrimmage last year. Per Pro Football Focus, 43 of his targets came from behind the line, leading all players.

Whether it's Mitch Trubisky or Kenny Pickett under center for Pittsburgh, there's going to be more mobility at quarterback. Instead of dumping the ball off to the running back, we could see extended plays, or even the quarterback himself taking off and running. Roethlisberger ran the ball just 20 times last year, and only 3 of those were scrambles.

Harris should see enough volume to be a safe pick, but there's a lot up in the air, potentially preventing a true top-3 or -4 season. And that's what

you should really strive for when taking a running back in the middle of the first round.

Antonio Gibson, RB, Washington Commanders *(Added July 1st)*

I'm old enough to remember when Antonio Gibson was going to be a bell-cow back. It was a glorious 24 hours. JD McKissic was headed to Buffalo, and that backfield was going to be all Gibson's.

We were owned.

McKissic decided that Washington was a better spot for him, so he crushed Buffalo's hopes, turned around, and re-signed with the Commanders. And then, just a month later, Washington drafted Brian Robinson in the third round.

And now this is a disaster.

I've been a fan of Gibson's talent since he entered the league, and I've, at times, bought into the notion that he'll eventually be a true three-down back. Maybe it happens someday, but I wouldn't bank on it occurring in 2022.

Gibson's been oddly better on the ground than through the air in the NFL. I say "oddly" because he played wide receiver in college — you'd think that part of his game would develop first.

In two NFL seasons, Gibson's seen no more than 10% of Washington's targets in a single season. Running backs not named Derrick Henry typically need to get well over that hump to be ultra-productive in fantasy.

With McKissic and his adjusted target share of 15.4% last season returning to the Commanders, it makes it a lot more difficult to envision Gibson taking on a bigger receiving role.

And Brian Robinson is a wildcard, too. Ron Rivera has already compared Gibson and Robinson to the 1-2 punch of Jonathan Stewart and D'Angelo Williams — two backs Rivera coached from 2011 to 2014 —

which leads me to believe that Washington won't be afraid to split this backfield up. Robinson's already got plenty of experience handling the ball, having played five years at Alabama and running it 271 times last season.

Gibson should be the 1A in this crowded backfield, but he's a typical dead-zone running back at this point. He now needs two injuries to happen to become a true bell-cow, and that's not something I'd want to buy into.

(Note: This is more relevant for redraft leagues and not best-ball leagues, where Gibson's price is tanking.)

David Montgomery, RB, Chicago Bears *(Added August 12th)*

It seems like fantasy drafters are making a lot of assumptions with David Montgomery this season. I've been lower on him all offseason than the consensus, and now report after report is dropping, signaling that things likely won't look as perfect for Montgomery in 2022.

I say "perfect" because that's kind of what his setup has been like over the last couple of seasons. Last year, only Najee Harris had a higher snap rate in games played than Montgomery. In 2020 when he broke out, Montgomery ranked *first* in snap rate.

A lot has changed. The Bears have a brand new coaching staff, and that staff has evidently been giving Montgomery some special teams reps. If that's not enough for you to question his workload this year, there was another report talking about Khalil Herbert being more involved this year.

Is this just offseason junk? I mean, sure, we have to take any statement made by a beat reporter with a grain of salt.

But doesn't this all make some sense?

When a new coaching staff enters the picture, they're more likely to be objective with their approach to existing players on the team. They have

no ties to them. They weren't the ones who drafted David Montgomery in the third round of the 2019 NFL Draft.

Last season, Khalil Herbert gained 20 or more yards on 3.9% of his rushes. Montgomery was at 2.2%. Herbert had a Success rate over 41%, when Montgomery's was 39.7%. Herbert saw double-digit carries in four games, and he ranked as a top-12 fantasy running back in two of those contests. He also posted 100 yards on the ground against the Buccaneers. He was the only player to do that in 2021.

Oh, and he looked *good* in my model, with a top-three Draft Capital Delta in his class. He was underdrafted.

Is David Montgomery objectively that much better than Khalil Herbert?

The Bears also have Pro Football Focus' 31st-ranked offensive line this season, and they've got a mobile quarterback who could steal some goal-line looks.

Things aren't as pretty as they seem for David Montgomery. Instead of getting him, draft Khalil Herbert much later.

Josh Jacobs, RB, Las Vegas Raiders *(Added July 1st)*

We go from one dead-zone back to another, this time focusing on Josh Jacobs.

Jacobs' pass-catching has always been a question mark in fantasy, but he low-key had a pretty good season in that regard last year. He caught 54 of 64 targets, and he was just 1 of 7 running backs to get to 50 receptions.

Things are shifting for the Raiders, though. There's a new coaching staff, and head coach Josh McDaniels has a history of using multiple running backs in his backfields. He did it for years in New England, and reports out of Vegas are revealing that the team will likely go with a committee approach in 2022 after selecting Zamir White in April's draft.

If we were guaranteed the same workload in 2022 for Jacobs that he saw in 2021, he probably wouldn't be someone to avoid. The Raiders have an opportunity to be pretty good offensively, allowing for a lot of scoring opportunities.

That's just not the direction things are moving. Vegas decided to not pick up Jacobs' fifth-year option, and with this new coaching staff, they could be ready to move on, making Jacobs a risky selection in the dead zone.

Elijah Mitchell, RB, San Francisco 49ers *(Added July 1st)*

Last offseason, I did a study on The Late-Round Fantasy Football Podcast on how mobile quarterbacks impact the personnel around them in fantasy football. In short, they're not necessarily beneficial for running backs, despite what people think. While backs may be a little more efficient with a mobile quarterback, they lose some opportunities by the goal-line, and they also typically see lower target shares.

As an example, since 2011, there've been 45 seasons where a quarterback played half of the season for his team while hitting an adjusted rush share of 20% or more. So on a per-game basis, they were seeing at least one-fifth of their team's rush attempts.

The average team running back target share for those quarterbacks was 18.1%. That's almost two percentage points lower than the NFL's average over this span.

With the mobile Trey Lance under center, we could see Elijah Mitchell be limited as a receiver. And Mitchell already was likely going to have issues there.

At his rookie-season pace, had he played the full season, he would've only hit a 6.2% target share. He finished the year with just 20 targets. He more or less got it done in fantasy with 15 PPR points per game, but he failed to see a target in 5 of 11 contests last year.

As we know because I've said it a billion times in this document, targets are more valuable than attempts are across all fantasy football league scoring structures.

Let's just put it this way: Last season, Mitchell finished as the RB12 in half PPR formats with 14.1 points per game. Since 2011, two-thirds of running backs to play at least eight games and score 14 half-PPR points per game hit a 10% target share. That's even more dramatic when looking at full PPR leagues.

Mitchell's now got Trey Lance and rookie Ty Davis-Price to deal with. He has a reasonable shot to be an RB2, but I question the upside.

Cam Akers, RB, Los Angeles Rams *(Added August 5th)*

Everyone made a huge deal about Cam Akers' inefficiency in last year's playoff, but according to numberFire's expected points model, Akers actually had a better Success Rate on the ground than Sony Michel during the Rams' Super Bowl run. The offensive line just couldn't get much push, and LA faced a lot of tough rush defenses on their way to the Lombardi.

It would seem like I should be in on Cam Akers then, right?

In truth, he's fine enough in best ball given where he typically gets drafted. If you're playing in a tournament-style format, he's capable of scoring a couple of touchdowns in a particular week, so the upside in a stack is there.

This is about managed season-long leagues. And according to FantasyPros' aggregate ADP data, Cam Akers is being drafted, on average, at…Pick 32?!

It's hard for me to back Akers over Michael Pittman and only two spots later than Tee Higgins.

Sean McVay, just this month, came out and said that he thinks the Rams have "two starting running backs" when referencing Akers and teammate Darrell Henderson. It's just a coach saying something, sure, but we also saw Henderson with a better Success Rate last year than Akers.

The Rams also haven't used their running backs in the passing game in ages. Over the last two seasons since Todd Gurley left town, no team has targeted the running back position at a lower rate than Los Angeles. And only Baltimore has seen fewer total running back targets.

That's going to have to increase in order for Akers to have an RB1 ceiling. And that combined with the potential for somewhat of a split backfield makes Akers a risky bet in the third round.

At the end of Round 4 or into Round 5? That's a different story.

Damien Harris, RB, New England Patriots *(Added July 8th)*

It may seem like bad process to fade a middle-round running back who's the RB1 on his team by ADP, but Damien Harris fails to hit one of the key attributes needed for a breakout running back: He's not a pass-catcher.

No New England Patriots running back since 2011 has hit a 6% adjusted (for games played) target share while carrying the ball 100-plus times. Dion Lewis came close in 2017 with his 35 targets in 16 games, but that accounted for 5.99% of the Patriots' overall looks through the air. During that timeframe, we've seen 503 running backs across the league hit those two marks.

The Patriots' ability to completely own fantasy football managers is honestly impressive.

Over the last two seasons in half PPR leagues, high-end RB2s have come in around 14 points per game. Of the 158 running backs since 2011 with 100-plus carries and an adjusted (for games played) target share under 6%, just 4 were able to hit 14 half-PPR points per game.

What are the actual odds that Damien Harris, with more backfield competition this year than last year, finishes as a high-end RB2? I mean, the guy scored 15 rushing touchdowns last year, and he still failed to get to that 14 mark.

If you're going to target a New England running back this year, go for Rhamondre Stevenson, who has more upside as a receiver. Harris is

ranked as the RB25 over on FantasyPros, but I've got him well below that at RB35.

~~Cordarrelle Patterson, RB, Atlanta Falcons~~

~~Nothing against Cordarrelle Patterson, but I like my middle-round running backs young.~~

~~You saw it earlier, but we've had one single true breakout running back from the middle rounds since 2011 who was past his fifth year in the league. And that subset made up about 34% of the middle-round running back sample, too.~~

~~To put that another way, 9% of middle-round true breakouts since 2011 were beyond their fifth NFL season, but 34% of the middle-round sample was past that fifth year.~~

~~Their moderate breakout rates aren't nearly as good, either. Among the 43 middle-round running backs we've been analyzing who had already played five years in the NFL, just 14% surpassed ADP expectation by 3 or more points. That was 29.4% when looking at the younger backs.~~

~~Patterson has a shot to outplay his ADP, but it would be a surprise if he's a league-winning type player in 2022.~~

~~Oh, and the other two middle-round geriatric backs this year to be a little concerned about? Melvin Gordon and Kareem Hunt.~~

Update: Turns out, I like Patterson just as much as other analysts do over on FantasyPros. He's climbed up my draft board a little bit in recent weeks for two reasons. First, some of the backfields in that area of the draft are becoming even more jumbled. And then, second, none of the backups have seemed to really emerge. So, in the end, having Patterson on this list to begin with wasn't the right call.

Rashaad Penny, RB, Seattle Seahawks *(Added July 29th)*

The more I think about Rashaad Penny this season, the more I dislike him for fantasy purposes.

He's part of an ambiguous middle-round backfield, and, as we know, that can bring forth a breakout. The problem is that he's probably not going to be a prolific pass-catcher.

In fact, that's a *huge* problem. Penny had an unbelievable stretch last season, but he also totaled eight targets. His attempts-to-targets ratio in 2021 was 14.9, which ranked 22nd highest out of over 500 running backs who had 100 or more carries in a season since 2011. Of the near 120 running backs with 100 to 130 rush attempts during this time (Penny had 119 last year), Penny's target total was third-lowest.

So he's likely not going to play a big pass-catching role, and that's on a team with a win total of 5.5, per FanDuel Sportsbook. If they're trailing in games, are they really going to be able to establish the run?

The Seahawks offensive line is also ranked dead last entering the year according to Pro Football Focus, and that'll aid in the inevitable decline of Penny's 2021 yards per carry rate. His average was 6.3 last year — Penny became the fifth running back since 2011 with 100 or more carries and a yards per tote average over 6.0 last season. None of the other four players have come close to repeating the feat. Because it's incredibly difficult to do so.

Oh, and did I mention that the Seahawks selected running back Kenneth Walker in the second round of this year's draft? We've seen them not care a whole lot about draft capital and let talent win out for playing time in the past, but the concern for Walker as a prospect wasn't his running ability at all. It was his pass-catching potential. So the thing that he should do well at the NFL level is the exact thing that Rashaad Penny brought to the table for Seattle down the stretch last year.

The question really is, "Where's the upside?" It's hard to imagine a scenario where Penny comes through with an RB1 season, or even a high-end RB2 one. With his cost rising thanks to a recent report about him receiving 20 carries per game, he's not worth the investment in most formats.

Wide Receivers to Avoid

Deebo Samuel, WR, San Francisco 49ers *(Added July 1st)*

I'm clearly not a 49ers hater since Trey Lance is my favorite quarterback target this year, but I do have my worries about his weapons. That's what happens when a large chunk of the offense goes to the quarterback's legs.

You know that sample of 45 quarterback seasons where the passer played 8 games with an adjusted rush share of at least 20%? Well, we saw 26% of those quarterbacks help produce a top-12 wide receiver (WR1) in half-point PPR leagues. All things being equal, that's technically lower than an expected outcome.

And what's interesting — but not surprising — about the wideouts who came through as a WR1 in that scenario is just how much of their offense they had to take in order to get there. The average target share among the WR1 seasons was about 27%. That's three percentage points higher than the overall WR1 population.

This is happening because offenses with mobile quarterbacks generally skew run-heavy, so wide receivers need capture more of their offenses in order to maintain top production.

Maybe Deebo Samuel's able to get to that 27% mark in 2022, assuming he sticks with San Francisco. He technically fell short of it last year on a per-game basis, but that was mostly due to his role shift halfway through the year, when he started seeing a ton of work on the ground.

During the front half of last season, before that change in role, Deebo's target share per game was 33.4%. Would he have kept that going throughout the entirety of the season?

Doubtful.

Brandon Aiyuk wasn't heavily involved to start last year, and we just don't see that kind of target share often. Even a 27% share is tough to come by — it happens like six times per year at the position.

I don't think anyone's expecting Samuel to repeat 2021, where he scored eight times as a runner. But I do think folks believe that Samuel's going to be able to crush it as a receiver in a run-first offense with a mobile quarterback.

Historically, that's been a tough bet.

I'd personally rather go the CeeDee Lamb or Mike Evans route.

Diontae Johnson, WR, Pittsburgh Steelers *(Added July 1st)*

This one hurts.

I'm a huge Diontae Johnson stan. Your boy was on him heavily the year he broke out, and I'm a big "targets are earned" analyst, so I'm not a believer that his "inefficiency" matters all that much.

If he was bad, the Steelers wouldn't feed him the way they feed him.

My hesitation with Johnson this year relates to the quarterback change. And it's not because I think Ben Roethlisberger was amazing, it's that I think Ben Roethlisberger was amazing for Diontae Johnson.

No quarterback got rid of the ball faster than Roethlisberger in both 2020 and 2021. Seriously. According to Pro Football Focus, he was first in the league in average throw time in both seasons. Or maybe it's last in the league? Whatever, you get what I mean.

Roethlisberger didn't want to get sacked behind a makeshift offensive line. He was a statue in the pocket. That forced these quick-release throws to Johnson — this is why Johnson's had such low average depth of targets the last couple of years. People read that as inefficiency, but it's just how he was used.

No matter who plays quarterback for Pittsburgh, they're going to be more active. Both Mitch Trubisky and Kenny Pickett can escape the pocket, and that's exactly what offensive coordinator Matt Canada wants.

I'd guess the Steelers are going to run the ball more without Big Ben this year, too. They've been second in the league in pass rate in each of the last two seasons. That'll limit Johnson's upside as well.

And if Kenny Pickett starts a lot of games for Pittsburgh, that's not good news, either. Rookie quarterbacks have historically not been great for pass-catchers. Since 2011, we've had 33 rookie quarterbacks toss the rock 300 times in a season. Of those 33 first-year passers, just three were able to give us a wide receiver who scored at least 13 half PPR points per game. That 13 points per game mark is where the WR12 ranked last year.

Johnson is still getting drafted as a high-end WR2, when he should be more of a lower-end one in half PPR leagues.

Amari Cooper, WR, Cleveland Browns *(Added July 1st)*

There's just too much up in the air in Cleveland for me to draft Amari Cooper.

The Browns may not have Deshaun Watson this year, and with Kevin Stefanski the last two seasons, they've ranked 29th and 27th in pass rate.

They also use the tight end a lot in the offense, and that's resulted in team wide receiver target shares of 56.1% and 50.4% in 2020 and 2021, respectively. Those marks ranked 19th and 31st in the league.

Cooper should be able to hit a nice target share himself, but the situation is anything but good. I'll change my tune if Deshaun Watson miraculously gets a short suspension, but that's not something I'm anticipating happening.

Update: This matters a lot less now that Cooper's average draft position has fallen over the last few weeks.

~~Chris Godwin, WR, Tampa Bay Buccaneers~~

A healthy Chris Godwin would be, what, a second-round pick? An early third-rounder?

Too bad he's not healthy.

You can get Godwin in the fifth to sixth round of drafts right now, but there's *a lot* of risk involved in doing that.

According to Bucs beat writer Leo Haggerty, Tampa Bay is likely going to take their time with Godwin's return from a late-season ACL tear. He mentioned November — possibly December — as a return date for him.

Seems crazy, doesn't it?

Well, Fantasy Points' Dr. Edwin Porras, who's a doctor of physical therapy, isn't optimistic about Godwin's early-season return, either. Per Porras, the earliest that Godwin is likely to return is October 3rd. But that's even pushing it.

We should definitely give more weight to late-season performances, and if you have Godwin for the end of the season, that can be helpful for your playoff push. But in most leagues, there's a big cost to holding onto a worthless asset for potentially half the season. Until his price falls, Godwin's an avoid.

Update: Godwin surprisingly didn't land on the PUP list entering camp, making his outlook a little more favorable. With that being said, Rick Stroud of the Tampa Bay Times said on The Rich Eisen Show this week that the Bucs are likely more wishful than hopeful that Godwin will be ready for Week 1. So the original early October timeline is still in play.

A wide receiver coming off an ACL tear and potentially starting his season post-Week 1 is a risky bet. But with so much up in the air with Godwin right now, it doesn't seem right for me to plant him on this players to avoid list.

Hunter Renfrow, WR, Las Vegas Raiders *(Added July 1st)*

Rooting for Hunter Renfrow is a lot of fun. You feel this weird bond to him because he's built like Travis from the IT department. You can relate to him.

My heart wants to draft him everywhere this year, but my head says it's not the best idea.

Going back to the breakout work earlier, we learned that middle-round wide receivers with early-round teammates have slightly lower hit rates than the alternative. Renfrow has that, with new teammate Davante Adams getting snagged in the first two rounds on average.

And my fear is that with Adams and a healthy Darren Waller in the lineup, Renfrow's not going to see the type of red-zone work he saw last year. The only wide receivers who had more red-zone targets than Renfrow in 2021 were Cooper Kupp, Stefon Diggs, Davante Adams, and Chris Godwin. That's it. That's the list.

That's why Renfrow's nine touchdowns weren't flukey. Nothing about what he did was flukey. It's just not going to be easy to keep up that pace with both Waller *and* Adams.

Renfrow seems like a fine enough option to give stability and meet expectation, but I question the upside.

Michael Gallup, WR, Dallas Cowboys *(Added July 1st)*

I'm having a hard time understanding Michael Gallup's ADP. He tore up his knee at the end of last season — Week 17 to be exact — and we're supposed to draft him over Kadarius Toney? We're taking him right next to Russel Gage?

What?

Gallup isn't even a lock to be a productive fantasy asset when healthy. I mean, he'd probably be a potential breakout candidate if that ACL never tore, but in four NFL seasons, he's given us one WR2-type campaign.

Dr. Edwin Porras believes there's a chance Gallup could be out until mid-November. It seems like some of the timelines out there from beat reporters are optimistic.

Buying injured players makes a lot more sense when those players have a proven track record. We just don't know yet with Gallup. His cost to acquire is far too high when there are legitimate options being selected near him in drafts.

Update: The points still stand for Michael Gallup, but his ADP has fallen dramatically since this was written.

Tight Ends to Avoid

TJ Hockenson, TE, Detroit Lions *(Added July 1st)*

The go-to anti-Amon-Ra St. Brown argument always focuses on the fact that TJ Hockenson and D'Andre Swift were sidelined down the stretch last year, allowing ARSB to thrive. That once they're back, St. Brown won't come close to the type of target share he had in the fantasy playoffs.

Why are we acting like TJ Hockenson is Travis Kelce?

No, seriously: Why is Hockenson a better pass-catching option than Amon-Ra St. Brown? What has Hockenson actually done?

From where I'm sitting, the answer to that is, "Not a whole lot." Hock has been in the league for three years, and he's yet to separate himself as a true stud at the position. He's outperformed ADP expectation in two of three seasons, but he's never done it at an insane rate. He's never been this crazy league-winning breakout.

Why expect that to change in 2022? St. Brown's another year in, and the Lions added weapons in DJ Chark and Jameson Williams. The rookie may not get to play right away because of an ACL tear, but regardless, this offense has more competition in 2022 than Hockenson's dealt with in the past.

He's a middle-round tight end who's not the top pass-catcher getting drafted from his team by ADP. His quarterback isn't being drafted highly. We know this is a bad combo.

Hockenson isn't a bad football player, but there's not enough separating him from some of the late-round options at the position.

Dawson Knox, TE, Buffalo Bills *(Added July 1st)*

The only relevant fantasy football tight end last season who scored a higher percentage of his points via touchdowns than Dawson Knox was Hunter Henry. Pro Football Focus had Knox's expected touchdown total at 7.5 thanks to heavy red-zone usage, but he outperformed that and scored 9.

Regression is coming.

And if Knox can't improve on his 13% game-adjusted target share, it's tough to see a scenario where he's able to jump into that elite tier of tight ends. I mean, that's what we're striving for, right? Our entire approach to the tight end position should be to target upside. To find one of the few tight ends who *actually* can give you an edge each week.

Drafting a TE10 who finishes as the TE8 is like buying a Natty Light at the bar and accidentally getting a Bud Light. I suppose it's an upgrade, but does it really matter?

Knox needs a big uptick in target share this year, but we can't project that to come in an offense that's ranked in the bottom-three in tight end target share in each of the last two seasons.

Pat Freiermuth, TE, Pittsburgh Steelers *(Added July 1st)*

Tight ends in NFL history to catch 60-plus passes as rookies: Keith Jackson, Kyle Pitts, Jeremy Shockey, Evan Engram, and Pat Freiermuth.

Yeah, Freiermuth had an extra game to get it done, but it's still impressive. He had a *great* rookie season, and we can't discount that.

Why not buy into him this year, then?

For a few reasons.

First, he outperformed touchdown expectation last year by about a touchdown and a half. He'll regress in the touchdown column.

Second, the Steelers did nothing but add to their pass-catching arsenal. Last year, Freiermuth was only really competing with Diontae Johnson and Chase Claypool, since JuJu Smith-Schuster missed the majority of the season. This year, those two wide receivers are back, and Pittsburgh took George Pickens in the second round of the NFL Draft. You'd hope to see progression from his 13% adjusted target share, but that's easier said than done.

Lastly, we're going to run into the same issue we ran into with Diontae Johnson situationally. Pittsburgh is likely to throw it less in 2022, and the offense may see a lot of Kenny Pickett. We've only really seen three tight ends emerge with rookie quarterbacks as higher-end options in fantasy football over the last 11 seasons, and those players didn't have nearly the competition for targets that Freiermuth does.

Maybe Freiermuth takes a huge leap forward and commands a ton of looks, but that still may not get him to top-five tight end territory. At a low-end TE1 cost, he's someone to pass on.

Dalton Schultz, TE, Dallas Cowboys *(Added July 15th)*

Dalton Schultz's ADP is out of control.

One consistent theme throughout this guide is that player talent matters. Some players will see better production via situation, sure, but the player himself has to be good in order to really thrive.

Right now, the pro-Schultz argument is pretty situation-based. Amari Cooper is out of Dallas, and Michael Gallup is injured. There really isn't much competition.

That's not untrue, but is Schultz that special? Is he special enough to catapult himself into the top tier at tight end? If he's not, then why draft him in the early sixth round? Why take him 20 to 30 picks ahead of Dallas Goedert?

Of the 25 tight ends with 50 or more targets last year, Schultz ranked 13th in targets per route run and 12th in yards per route run. All five tight ends who are currently being drafted ahead of him in redraft leagues were significantly better in both statistics. As was TJ Hockenson and Dallas Goedert, two tight ends who are now getting selected a good bit after him.

Schultz has also been around for four years now. He's seen improvement in the volume department over the last couple of seasons, which is great, but he's never surpassed 1.5 yards per route run in his career.

When we're drafting a tight end in the middle rounds, we should be looking for high upside, right? Well, over the last five years, the TE3 in points per game has averaged 12.3 half PPR points per contest. For reference, Schultz was at 10.0 points per game with that scoring last year.

Since 2011, we've had 27 instances where a tight end hit that 12.3 mark. The lowest yards per route run among that group was 1.72. And the average target share was north of 23%.

In two games without Amari Cooper last year, Schultz averaged a 17% target share per game. His season-long total was under 16.4%.

Nearly every single one of those tight ends was either an elite athlete or had a proven track record of success, too. The only true outliers were Gary Barnidge and Julius Thomas.

It's not that Schultz can't meet ADP expectation. In fact, he's a really safe bet to be a top-eight tight end this year.

I just don't see why he has a substantially higher ceiling than someone like Dallas Goedert, who ranked second in yards per route run among 50-plus target tight ends last year and seventh the year before.

Schultz isn't the top pass-catcher on his team by ADP. He's been just a little above-average statistically throughout his career. And what happens when Michael Gallup returns, or if Jalen Tolbert becomes something during the second half — the most important part — of the fantasy season?

Buying into situation for what appears to be a good-but-not-great tight end talent generally gets you into trouble.

Always strive for ceiling at tight end.

Late-Round Dart Throws

Each draft pick is not created equal.

When looking at players to target and avoid, we've focused on higher-leverage picks. There was an emphasis on players who were being selected in the early and middle rounds, with some later-round options sprinkled in there.

But some of us — a lot of you — play in leagues that are deeper. Instead of 14 or 15 rounds, there are 20 or 21.

You need some darts to throw.

In the late rounds, there's no reason to be concerned about a player's floor.

You're going to drop a lot of your end-of-draft picks early in the season anyway, so why not get players who have a shot to be true league-winners?

Since we're not fearful about a late-round dart's floor, this entire section is about optimism. I'll only be making the case for a player's realistic ceiling, giving you reason to select them late.

Note: The following section will be updated each week through the end of August.

Daniel Jones, QB, New York Giants *(Added July 1st)*

With Jason Mehrret as offensive coordinator last year, Daniel Jones finished with the same points per game average as Derek Carr. That was while throwing just 10 touchdowns in 11 games.

Jones has the Konami Code. It's not as obvious with him as it is with some of our premier quarterback rushers in the NFL, but Jones ran for just three fewer yards per game last year than Kyler Murray.

With a new coaching staff and solid weapons, Jones could surprise and be a top-12 or -15 quarterback in 2022.

Brian Robinson, RB, Washington Commanders *(Added July 1st)*

What if we just take Ron Rivera's word for it?

You already read about Rivera's desire to make his backfield more of a committee, which means Robinson could be in store for more work than anticipated during his rookie campaign. That has the potential to make him flex-worthy in deeper formats, but let's not pretend Antonio Gibson's done a phenomenal job staying healthy so far in the NFL. An injury to Gibson would lead to 15-plus carries per game for Robinson.

And we know Robinson can handle that. He had an average profile in my prospect model, but he was solid at Alabama, often digging into the workloads of NFLers like Najee Harris, Damien Harris, and Josh Jacobs. He was capable on all three downs, too.

Robinson's got that handcuff-who-can-sometimes-be-a-flex appeal.

Tyler Allgeier, RB, Atlanta Falcons *(Added July 1st)*

The Falcons running back depth chart features a 31-year-old, a 30-year-old, and a rookie. That rookie is Tyler Allgeier, and even though he was a Day 3 pick, he wasn't a bad prospect.

My model (I know you're sick of hearing me say that phrase) had Allgeier as a 70th percentile running back. Typically, those players don't amount

to much, but some do. Allgeier also had a +7.6% Draft Capital Delta, which is a statistic that measures whether the model sees a player as having been drafted too high or too low. In Allgeier's case, he was a value for Atlanta.

He's an interesting player, having played a little linebacker at BYU. During his final collegiate season, though, he ran the ball 276 times for over 1,600 yards, and his 28 receptions led to a strong 11% reception share.

There's not *that* much in the way for Allgeier to see a good number of touches as a rookie.

Tyrion Davis-Price, RB, San Francisco 49ers *(Added July 1st)*

FantasyPros rankers have Ty Davis-Price as a complete afterthought at RB80.

Is the positive case for TDP really that hard?

All you have to do is point at Kyle Shanahan. He's been head coach of the 49ers since 2017, and in those five seasons, the 49ers have had five different lead rushers. Seriously. 2017 was Carlos Hyde, 2018 was Matt Breida, the next year was Raheem Mostert, then Jeff Wilson, and then Elijah Mitchell.

Injuries played a role there, sure, but the younger Shanahan has notoriously used out-of-nowhere running backs in his offenses. We saw that just last season.

If Davis-Price looks good this summer, he could carve out a spot in the backfield. Shanahan's not afraid of giving worthy players a shot, regardless of their status.

~~Mark Ingram, RB, New Orleans Saints~~

~~There's a chance — nothing is confirmed yet — Alvin Kamara gets some sort of suspension this season for an incident in Las Vegas a handful of~~

~~months ago. If that happens, Mark Ingram's the next man up in the Saints' backfield.~~

~~Ingram could see work regardless. In 2021, when both Kamara and Ingram were healthy, the old guy averaged a running back rush share of about 32%. When Kamara missed time, Ingram was a full-blown bell-cow.~~

~~Remember, super late-round running backs don't need to be young. We often see older players exceed expectation there. Perhaps that's Ingram this year.~~

Update: It's looking less probable that Alvin Kamara is going to be suspended this year for his off-the-field incident this offseason. At the very least, it likely won't happen at the beginning of the season. That would mean you'd be holding onto Ingram for weeks and weeks without any real direction on the situation, so he'd likely be the first player you'd drop after Week 1 anyway. You can still draft him for insurance, but he's not as glaring of a value anymore.

Jerick McKinnon, RB, Kansas City Chiefs *(Added July 1st)*

Clyde Edwards-Helaire actually fits the breakout running back criteria pretty well this year. He's a middle-round pick who's the top running back option on his team by ADP, and he's (hopefully) a pass-catcher. It doesn't hurt that he's playing in a Patrick Mahomes-led offense.

But Jerick McKinnon is playing with Mahomes now, too, after re-signing with the Chiefs in June. If you recall, McKinnon became the Chiefs' top back in last year's playoff after Edwards-Helaire suffered a Week 16 injury. Even when CEH returned from injury — he likely wasn't 100% — McKinnon continued seeing a good workload.

During the Chiefs' three playoff games last year, McKinnon saw 64.1% of the team's running back rushes and 14.5% of their targets.

If CEH continues to disappoint, McKinnon may be able to grab hold of the receiving role out of that backfield.

Isiah Pacheco, RB, Kansas City Chiefs *(Added August 5th)*

Speaking of that Kansas City backfield, something that's been obviously missing is explosiveness. Clyde Edwards-Helaire failed to register a 20-plus yard run last year, and he's been near the bottom of the league in big runs over the last two years.

So what did the Chiefs do? They brought in Ronald Jones, a big-play threat, and drafted Isiah Pacheco, the running back with the best weight-adjusted 40-yard dash time at this year's NFL Combine.

As a seventh-rounder, expectations weren't high for Pacheco, but my prospect model liked him a lot more than the NFL did. He had a Draft Capital Delta of +10.7%, which was the third-highest mark in this year's class. That essentially tells us that the model saw him as underdrafted — he should've gone earlier.

Now we're seeing reports that Pacheco's getting some first-team reps.

Yes, please.

There's still a chance he doesn't make the team, but those odds seem to be dropping with every passing day. If he's on the squad, there's not a whole lot to overcome to get some playing time.

Eno Benjamin, RB, Arizona Cardinals *(Added August 17th)*

James Conner is the lead back in Arizona, but let's not pretend there's loads of stability there. It's Conner's sixth year in the league, and he's yet to play a full season due to injury.

Not only that, but Conner's upside wasn't really unleashed until a Chase Edmonds injury early in a Week 9 game versus San Francisco last year. From Weeks 1 through 8, Conner averaged 11.5 PPR points, a 53.0% running back rush share, and a 2.1% target share per game. Edmonds was actually averaging more points per game than Conner up until that injury.

After that point in time, those numbers rose to 23.6 PPR points, a 74.4% running back rush share, and a 12.8% target share per game.

Eno Benjamin had an opportunity to seize Edmonds' receiving role when all this went down last season, and he failed to do so (though he did struggle through injury). So, understandably, it's hard to buy into Benjamin this year for that fact.

But camp news is positive for Benjamin, a player my prospect model really liked when he came out a couple of years ago. In cases like this, it seems fine to buy into reports, since the player's average draft position isn't rising significantly. At worst, you have someone you can drop early in the season. At best, you've got a player who can take on a legitimate receiving role in a good offense who also has upside if his starter goes down.

Alec Pierce, WR, Indianapolis Colts *(Added July 1st)*

Was I a fan of Alec Pierce during the pre-draft process? Not really. We've seen players like him bust in the past. A lot of them. His collegiate statistical profile wasn't very strong, but he was elevated in the draft because he's a heck of an athlete. Chris Conley was his closest comparison in my model.

But variance exists. I'm going to be wrong. And the Alec Pierce investment in redraft is not significant whatsoever.

It's true that later-round rookie wide receivers aren't usually the rooks that you want to go after in redraft. We saw earlier that rookies in the top-100 hit really well, and then guys selected between Picks 100 and 150 tend to blow up during the second half of the season.

Pierce is past that. He is, however, a young late-rounder who's being drafted as his team's WR2 (depending on your source, of course) with a teammate WR1 — Michael Pittman — going in the early rounds.

The hopeful case for Pierce is that he immediately grabs hold of the number-two wide receiver job for Indy and is able to hit a target share in the teens right away. He has a chance to do that.

KJ Osborn, WR, Minnesota Vikings *(Added July 1st)*

Fewer than 50% of Minnesota's snaps last year featured 11 personnel, or a grouping where we see three wideouts on the field at the same time. The average across the league was 61%. Clearly Justin Jefferson and Adam Thielen are the 1-2 punch at wide receiver for the Vikings, so second-year wideout KJ Osborn didn't see as many snaps as he could've seen in a different offense.

With the previously-mentioned shift in offensive philosophy, though, we could see more three-wide sets in Minnesota this season. Kevin O'Connell comes from the Sean McVay coaching tree, and McVay has used 11 personnel more than any other coach since joining the Rams. If that rubs off on O'Connell, then Osborn should be on the field a lot more in 2022.

And he's got some upside if something happens to the oft-injured Thielen as well.

KJ Hamler, WR, Denver Broncos *(Added July 1st)*

The Denver Broncos could have an elite offense in 2022, so I want pieces of it. The market — quite transparently — seems to think the best options are Javonte Williams, Jerry Jeudy, and Courtland Sutton, and while I'd agree, we still have to recognize that we haven't seen this coaching staff in action. We haven't see Russell Wilson play a game for them yet, either.

KJ Hamler is a big-play threat who ran a 4.32 at the NFL Combine a couple of years ago. He was an 87th percentile prospect in my trusty model, and there've been plenty of rumblings about him taking on a Tyler Lockett-like role for Wilson's offense.

At worst, like Tim Patrick, Hamler would be elevated with an injury to one of the higher-end starters. At best, he's good enough to carve out a role.

Julio Jones, WR, Tampa Bay Buccaneers *(Added July 1st)*

True breakouts don't really happen with older, late-round wide receivers. You should be focused on younger pass-catchers at the end of your drafts.

But the Julio Jones situation is a little different, in my eyes. He's not on an NFL team, and that's undoubtedly pushing his ADP down. If he signs with a team like Green Bay or Tampa Bay, what's going to happen?

His ADP is going to rise. Probably by a lot, too.

Jones may be toast, but we're looking at the positives here. What if he's not? What if last year was just the result of injury? After all, he did see over a 17% target share across his first seven games.

It seems like Jones' cost is going to increase as soon as he signs somewhere. You might as well get the discount now and cross your fingers that there's still a little bit of the old Julio left.

Update: Well, Jones is indeed a Tampa Bay Buccaneer. And as the blurb predicted, his average draft position is rising.

Jones is probably not going to be a full-time player, but he offers plenty of upside in a pass-heavy offense. Chris Godwin is still banged up, and Russell Gage isn't necessarily a proven commodity. My guess is that the Buccaneers wanted a combination of Godwin insurance as well as a bigger body to help in the red zone with Rob Gronkowski's retirement. He's probably an easier guy to grab in a best-ball format, but don't sleep on the veteran who had an underrated yards per route run rate when healthy last year.

Romeo Doubs, WR, Green Bay Packers *(Added July 1st)*

Speaking of the Packers, we know that wide receiver situation is quite ambiguous. Allen Lazard is someone to target, but no one in that passing attack is solidified as a go-to threat.

Christian Watson will understandably get rookie buzz in Green Bay, but don't sleep on Romeo Doubs. Yes, I know, late-round rookies aren't great bets. There are so many of them, and not many work out.

But Doubs is in an intriguing spot. He had a better Draft Capital Delta than Watson did in my prospect model, and there's a chance he's the one who takes on the role that Marquez Valdes-Scantling left behind when he went to Kansas City. Pro Football Focus' data says that Doubs ranked in the top-30 in deep-ball yards and deep-ball receptions last year in college football, and in 2020, he finished third in deep-ball yards, trailing only Devonta smith and Dyami brown.

He's not a bad dart considering the quarterback he's attached to.

Wan'Dale Robinson, WR, New York Giants *(Added July 8th)*

I sound like a broken record, but the Giants are probably going to score a lot more touchdowns this year than they did the last two seasons. That's part of the reason Danny Dimes makes a lot of sense as a late-round dart at quarterback, and it's one of the pieces to Kadarius Toney's intrigue.

Wan'Dale Robinson should be thrown out there as a dart, too. Sterling Shepard is still recovering from an Achilles injury, and given his age, there's no telling if he's even going to play this year. There's a real chance Robinson, who graded out as Pro Football Focus' third-best slot wideout in college football last year, takes on that role for the Giants right away. We should probably expect it, to be honest.

And Robinson was a good prospect. My model graded him out as a near 93rd percentile prospect, better than players like Skyy Moore and George Pickens. Yours truly more subjectively bumped him down the rookie rankings list because of his size, but there's still a lot to like about his profile. There's a reason he's on a lot of my dynasty squads.

This new regime drafted Robinson early. They wanted him. They don't have ties to some of the other wide receivers on the team. There's a chance Robinson is a surprise late-round rookie this year.

Isaiah McKenzie, WR, Buffalo Bills *(Added July 15th)*

Isaiah McKenzie basically isn't being thought about by FantasyPros rankers right now. He's ranked as the 109th wide receiver in half PPR formats, falling behind the player he could be replacing this season, Cole Beasley. (That's correct — he's being ranked after a player who's teamless.)

Meanwhile, Jamison Crowder — McKenzie's new teammate — is ranked at WR68.

I'm not totally against Crowder at that type of price point, but McKenzie is reportedly in the lead to snag the slot role in the Buffalo offense. Maybe that turns into nothing. Maybe the Bills rotate players there all year long. But at a literal free price point, you could do much worse than select a player who could be on the field consistently in three-wide sets within one of the most favorable passing offenses in football.

Over the last two seasons in that role, Cole Beasley has seen adjusted target shares of 19% and 20%. He hit an average of seven targets per game in both seasons.

Beasley actually missed one game last year, and in that contest, McKenzie saw nearly 28% of Buffalo's targets and scored 29.4 PPR points as the team's primary slot weapon.

This isn't to say — at all — that this is what we should expect from the 27-year-old if he ends up winning the slot job. It's just to provide evidence that there's some serious potential with this role.

Brevin Jordan, TE, Houston Texans *(Added July 1st)*

Brevin Jordan, as a rookie in an offense led by a first-year quarterback, ranked in the top-20 in targets per route run last year at the tight end position. He was ahead of players like Dalton Schultz and David Njoku. And he was 12th in the league in targets per snap.

The Houston Texans have question marks littered throughout their offense. Some will probably turn out and be good, and one of those

players could end up being Jordan, who should see a big increase in snaps during his second season in the league.

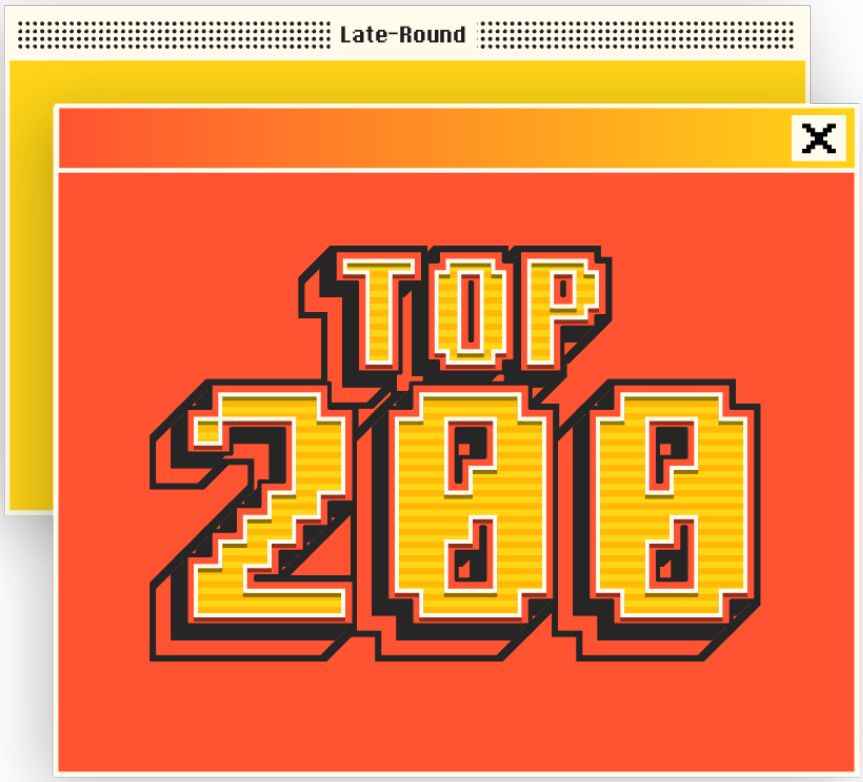
Mo Alie-Cox, TE, Indianapolis Colts *(Added August 5th)*

We've needed another tight end dart throw, so how about Mo Alie-Cox?

The former basketball player (I had to get that in there) is looking like the top tight end for the Colts with reports of Kylen Granson and Jelani Woods having up-and-down camps. And, remember, Jack Doyle retired this offseason.

MAC ranked in the 60th percentile in yards per route run last season among 30-plus target tight ends, and he's had two seasons — 2020 and 2021 — with elite yards per route run efficiency.

I'm a fan of targeting late-round pass-catchers from the Colts because of the potential quarterback upgrade alongside the ambiguity they've got going on at receiver. Mo Alie-Cox is one of those names.



Top-200 Cheatsheet

I asked a simple question at the start of this draft guide: Are you ready to approach the game in a different way?

You've read about variance in fantasy football and why VORP analysis has flaws. You see the value in understanding regression. You've hopefully gotten a better grasp on positional value and opportunity cost. You know what the running back dead zone is, and you now can increase your probability of hitting on players in that area of the draft. You can spot breakouts at each position, too.

You have the tools to dominate your draft.

You got this.

If you want a companion as you draft, you can take a look at the final page of this document and grab — or print — my top-200 half PPR rankings.

Sorry, not rankings. *Tiers*. You know I'm an anti-rankings analyst.

Tiers. You can get my half PPR *tiers*.

Let's crush some drafts.

Note: You can assume the tiers are based on a half-PPR league that starts one quarterback, two running backs, three wide receivers, one tight end, and one flex.

For more information on how to utilize the rankings and tiers cheatsheet, you can listen to the nine-minute audio file attached in the link below.

LISTEN NOW

(Rankings last updated August 26th)

Overall	Player	Pos	Rank	Tier	Overall	Player	Pos	Rank	Tier	Overall	Player	Pos	Rank	Tier
1	Jonathan Taylor	RB	1	1	68	David Montgomery	RB	23	13	135	Rachaad White	RB	48	24
2	Christian McCaffrey	RB	2	1	69	Adam Thielen	WR	35	13	136	Tyler Allgeier	RB	49	24
3	Justin Jefferson	WR	1	2	70	Amari Cooper	WR	36	13	137	Isaiah McKenzie	WR	60	24
4	Cooper Kupp	WR	2	2	71	Kadarius Toney	WR	37	13	138	Jalen Tolbert	WR	61	24
5	Austin Ekeler	RB	3	3	72	Tony Pollard	RB	24	14	139	Jakobi Meyers	WR	62	24
6	Ja'Marr Chase	WR	3	3	73	Christian Kirk	WR	38	14	140	Jameson Williams	WR	63	25
7	Dalvin Cook	RB	4	3	74	Brandon Aiyuk	WR	39	14	141	DeVante Parker	WR	64	25
8	Stefon Diggs	WR	4	4	75	Hunter Renfrow	WR	40	14	142	Michael Gallup	WR	65	25
9	Derrick Henry	RB	5	4	76	Chris Olave	WR	41	14	143	Albert Okwuegbunam	TE	13	26
10	Joe Mixon	RB	6	4	77	Chase Edmonds	RB	25	14	144	KJ Hamler	WR	66	26
11	CeeDee Lamb	WR	5	4	78	Clyde Edwards-Helaire	RB	26	14	145	Tua Tagovailoa	QB	17	26
12	D'Andre Swift	RB	7	4	79	Miles Sanders	RB	27	15	146	Irv Smith	TE	14	26
13	Saquon Barkley	RB	8	4	80	Dalton Schultz	TE	6	15	147	Pat Freiermuth	TE	15	27
14	Najee Harris	RB	9	5	81	Russell Wilson	QB	7	15	148	Robert Tonyan	TE	16	27
15	Alvin Kamara	RB	10	5	82	Allen Lazard	WR	42	16	149	Josh Palmer	WR	67	27
16	Travis Kelce	TE	1	5	83	Josh Jacobs	RB	28	16	150	Alec Pierce	WR	68	27
17	Davante Adams	WR	6	5	84	DeAndre Hopkins	WR	43	17	151	Christian Watson	WR	69	27
18	Leonard Fournette	RB	11	5	85	Robert Woods	WR	44	17	152	DJ Chark	WR	70	27
19	Aaron Jones	RB	12	5	86	Tyler Lockett	WR	45	17	153	Wan'Dale Robinson	WR	71	27
20	Mike Evans	WR	7	5	87	Tom Brady	QB	8	17	154	KJ Osborn	WR	72	27
21	Deebo Samuel	WR	8	6	88	Dallas Goedert	TE	7	17	155	Nico Collins	WR	73	27
22	Nick Chubb	RB	13	6	89	Joe Burrow	QB	9	17	156	Isaiah Spiller	RB	50	27
23	Tyreek Hill	WR	9	7	90	Trey Lance	QB	10	17	157	Van Jefferson	WR	74	27
24	Tee Higgins	WR	10	7	91	Dameon Pierce	RB	29	17	158	Mike Gesicki	TE	17	28
25	Michael Pittman	WR	11	7	92	Rhamondre Stevenson	RB	30	17	159	Hunter Henry	TE	18	28
26	AJ Brown	WR	12	7	93	Skyy Moore	WR	46	17	160	Gerald Everett	TE	19	28
27	Javonte Williams	RB	14	7	94	Chase Claypool	WR	47	17	161	Trevor Lawrence	QB	18	28
28	DJ Moore	WR	13	8	95	TJ Hockenson	TE	8	18	162	Alexander Mattison	RB	51	28
29	Mark Andrews	TE	2	8	96	Dak Prescott	QB	11	18	163	Zamir White	RB	52	28
30	Keenan Allen	WR	14	8	97	Kareem Hunt	RB	31	18	164	Jerick McKinnon	RB	53	28
31	Courtland Sutton	WR	15	8	98	Rondale Moore	WR	48	18	165	Marvin Jones	WR	75	29
32	Mike Williams	WR	16	8	99	Rashaad Penny	RB	32	19	166	Mecole Hardman	WR	76	29
33	Allen Robinson	WR	17	9	100	Cordarrelle Patterson	RB	33	19	167	Daniel Jones	QB	19	29
34	Kyle Pitts	TE	3	9	101	George Pickens	WR	49	19	168	Jameis Winston	QB	20	29
35	Terry McLaurin	WR	18	9	102	Devin Singletary	RB	34	19	169	Evan Engram	TE	20	29
36	James Conner	RB	15	9	103	James Cook	RB	35	19	170	Jamaal Williams	RB	54	29
37	Travis Etienne	RB	16	9	104	Antonio Gibson	RB	36	19	171	Tyler Higbee	TE	21	30
38	Breece Hall	RB	17	9	105	Marquez Valdes-Scantling	WR	50	20	172	Eno Benjamin	RB	55	30
39	Jaylen Waddle	WR	19	9	106	Treylon Burks	WR	51	20	173	Tyrion Davis-Price	RB	56	30
40	Jerry Jeudy	WR	20	9	107	Russell Gage	WR	52	20	174	Ameer Abdullah	RB	57	31
41	Ezekiel Elliott	RB	18	9	108	Damien Harris	RB	37	20	175	Ty Montgomery	RB	58	31
42	Marquise Brown	WR	21	10	109	Melvin Gordon	RB	38	20	176	Robbie Anderson	WR	77	31
43	Josh Allen	QB	1	10	110	Garrett Wilson	WR	53	20	177	Austin Hooper	TE	22	31
44	Diontae Johnson	WR	22	10	111	Romeo Doubs	WR	54	20	178	Parris Campbell	WR	78	31
45	JuJu Smith-Schuster	WR	23	10	112	Zach Ertz	TE	9	20	179	JD McKissic	RB	59	31
46	Gabriel Davis	WR	24	10	113	Tyler Boyd	WR	55	20	180	Raheem Mostert	RB	60	31
47	Michael Thomas	WR	25	10	114	Aaron Rodgers	QB	12	21	181	Donovan Peoples-Jones	WR	79	31
48	Rashod Bateman	WR	26	10	115	Darrell Henderson	RB	39	21	182	Jamison Crowder	WR	80	31
49	Darnell Mooney	WR	27	10	116	Kenneth Gainwell	RB	40	21	183	Curtis Samuel	WR	81	31
50	Chris Godwin	WR	28	10	117	Brian Robinson	RB	41	21	184	Sammy Watkins	WR	82	31
51	Brandin Cooks	WR	29	10	118	Matthew Stafford	QB	13	22	185	Ryan Tannehill	QB	21	32
52	Darren Waller	TE	4	11	119	Justin Fields	QB	14	22	186	Matt Ryan	QB	22	32
53	Cam Akers	RB	19	11	120	Kenneth Walker	RB	42	22	187	David Bell	WR	83	33
54	DK Metcalf	WR	30	11	121	Julio Jones	WR	56	22	188	Corey Davis	WR	84	33
55	JK Dobbins	RB	20	11	122	Dawson Knox	TE	10	22	189	Mac Jones	QB	23	33
56	George Kittle	TE	5	11	123	Cole Kmet	TE	11	23	190	Zay Jones	WR	85	33
57	Justin Herbert	QB	2	11	124	Isiah Pacheco	RB	43	23	191	Jared Goff	QB	24	33
58	Jalen Hurts	QB	3	11	125	Michael Carter	RB	44	23	192	Noah Fant	TE	23	33
59	Elijah Moore	WR	31	11	126	Nyheim Hines	RB	45	23	193	Brevin Jordan	TE	24	33
60	Amon-Ra St. Brown	WR	32	11	127	James Robinson	RB	46	23	194	Kyle Philips	WR	86	33
61	Patrick Mahomes	QB	4	11	128	Khalil Herbert	RB	47	23	195	Marlon Mack	RB	61	34
62	Kyler Murray	QB	5	11	129	Jahan Dotson	WR	57	23	196	Mark Ingram	RB	62	34
63	Lamar Jackson	QB	6	11	130	Kenny Golladay	WR	58	23	197	Gus Edwards	RB	63	34
64	AJ Dillon	RB	21	12	131	Jarvis Landry	WR	59	24	198	Randall Cobb	WR	87	34
65	Drake London	WR	33	12	132	Kirk Cousins	QB	15	24	199	Hayden Hurst	TE	25	34
66	Devonta Smith	WR	34	12	133	Derek Carr	QB	16	24	200	D'Ernest Johnson	RB	64	34
67	Elijah Mitchell	RB	22	13	134	David Njoku	TE	12	24					