

Overview and Fantasy Impact of the WR Position

Wide receivers are beginning to generate a greater impact as rookies, but most of the time it is in a supporting role with stretches of strong play. Hakeem Nicks, Percy Harvin, and Austin Collie had the three best stretches of the rookie receivers, but Louis Murphy, Mike Wallace, Jeremy Maclin, Mike Thomas, and Johnnie Knox also made brief, but significant appearances. In 2008, DeSean Jackson and Eddie Royal had enough success to be considered No. 2 and No. 3 fantasy receivers for a lineup. History still may be against the norm of having at least one, No.1 fantasy receiver each year with the frequency of runners, but their overall impact was good enough last year to consider them as late-round picks and priority free agents in re-drafts.

Even with great incorporation of spread offense philosophies in the NFL, receiver remains one of the more difficult positions to play in the NFL. The offensive and defensive schemes are more complex, there are far more adjustments at the line of scrimmage, and the speed of the game is ratcheted up a notch. What is considered “open” in the pros is a route a majority of college quarterbacks would not deliver. Dynasty leaguers should temper their expectations when selecting a receiver in the opening rounds of a draft, because it often takes a receiver two to four years to develop into an NFL starter. In most situations, re-draft owners would be best advised to use caution, and draft a rookie receiver late—if at all.

It is no surprise that the *Rookie Scouting Portfolio's* evaluation method yields lower scores for wide receivers across the board than running back, because there is typically an extended adjustment period. Other than quarterback, receivers require more significant coaching than any other position: blocking, route running, releases against press coverage, and route adjustments based on the play call are all common issues rookies face. The majority of college offenses only need to exploit a receiver's athletic talents to create a successful passing game.

Timing routes such as skinny posts, deep posts, and deep ins aren't as common in college ball as are hitches, streaks, fades, and slants—routes that allow a receiver to out-run, out-jump, or out-muscle his opponent and rely less on timing and technique. It's still important, just not as much. When you look at these scores, there are a number of receivers with grades in the mid-to-high 70s who can develop into quality contributors at the next level.

This year's rookie crop is like navigating through a minefield. There are some big-name prospects that I think have significant limitations, but lesser regarded players with supposed limitations that I like more. There are an unusually high number of big-bodied prospects with great measurements, but not much of a track record when it comes to production. Determining which ones have the most potential is tricky. By far, receiver remains the most difficult position to evaluate in the RSP because opportunities to watch them are far more limited than quarterbacks and running backs.

Overrated Receiver Prospects

Jacoby Ford, Clemson: The Tigers wide receiver is a college champion in the 60 meters and ran a 2010 combine-best, 4.22-40. He's a short, compact receiver who catches the ball with his hands and is capable of getting deep on any player in single coverage. Ford is also a dangerous return specialist. I was at first impressed with Ford during the initial practice of the Senior Bowl, but as the week progressed, he looked more like the player I saw in games: a small receiver that doesn't know how to use his speed on the field. A receiver that catches the ball too close to his body, which can lead to drops when he has to make receptions in tight coverage or catch a high-velocity pass. As fast as he is in a straight-line, his burst is average and he seems to lack a consistently effective first move to make a defender miss in the open field.

I believe Ford's ball-carrying issues stem from a desire to avoid contact as much as possible. Have you ever watched a person try to disguise a motivation with an action that just doesn't seem authentic? This is exactly how to describe Jacoby Ford with the ball in his hand when he is in the flat with a defender bearing down on him. He conveniently finds ways to make a move that forces him to run out of bounds and the first thing he does is make a frustrated gesture about going out of bounds. I don't believe it's an accident. It happens far too often and there are too many instances where he avoids contact that validate the idea that he's simply putting on an act to avoid being labeled as soft.

Ford will show flashes of his big play ability against a busted coverage or defensive back that makes a huge mistake in single coverage, but he's primarily an underneath option whose greatest potential is as a return specialist.

Demaryius Thomas, Georgia Tech: If someone told you that a cargo plane was an F-16 you would point out his error if you knew the difference, right? For months I have been hearing that Georgia Tech receiver Demaryius Thomas is similar to Calvin Johnson, but Thomas lacks the speed, agility, leaping ability, and hands of Johnson. Thomas is fast enough to get downfield, agile enough to veer away from defenders in the open field, and reliable enough to catch the football in coverage. But he lacks game-breaking speed. Georgia Tech's offense was a ground-focused attack with a great deal of misdirection that helped Thomas get behind the secondary due to play action that forced DBs to account for outside runs.

It's impressive to say that Thomas accounted for 59 percent of his offense's passing game, but he was frequently the only receiver split wide of the formation. It's not that impressive to say that at least 80 percent of his routes were limited to hitches, screens, quick throws, and fades. This isn't a fact, but it's a reasonably accurate estimation.

Compared to Johnson, Thomas is far less consistent catching the football. He often fights the ball on rare routes over the middle and he loses focus too often on easier routes. He is capable of the tough catch and has strong enough hands to rip the ball away from the opposition, but his flair for the spectacular is far less frequent than his fellow alumnus.

Thomas might run a 4.5-40, but Johnson has 4.3 speed and better acceleration. Johnson is likely the next great all-purpose threat. Thomas's talent is far more comparable to Plaxico Burress, who was a very good player once he developed, but not a great player. There's a difference.

Carlton Mitchell, South Florida: Mitchell is another winner in the Underwear Olympics. A 6'3", 215-lbs, junior with 4.4-speed, a 36-inch vertical leap, and rocked out body with a mother equally rocked-out as a cut-woman for pro boxer Antonio Tarver. Watch YouTube, and there are highlights of Mitchell turning crossing routes into the final stretch of the 400 meters. You'd think Michael Johnson decided to reclaim his NCAA eligibility.

I like Mitchell's speed. I also like that he will come back to the football when his QB is in trouble and he has soft enough hands to make difficult catches downfield that require good concentration with his back to the passer. These two qualities make Mitchell a quality prospect worth drafting, but his deficiencies make him overrated as one of the best 10-15 prospects at his position.

For all of that muscle, Mitchell did not look comfortable with physical play. He shied away from contact and frequently chose to run out of bounds. He's the most unphysical, physical-looking receiver I've ever seen. His routes are generally restricted to deep posts, comebacks, streaks, and crossing routes. Only one of these requires any type of hard break to get separation. Mitchell also catches the ball too close to his body and fights the football.

To be kind, Terrell Owens came from a small school and had to learn new routes and overcome drops. Yet, Owens was a street fighter with the ball in his hands. Mitchell has to prove he's more than a track star with potential.

Underrated Receiver Prospects

Andre Roberts, The Citadel: Roberts is a small-school prospect with big-time game. He has great body control to make catches of errant throws, runs routes anywhere on the field, and has strong skills after the catch. He's a versatile player and had one of the best punt returns I have seen in a couple of years. He can weave through traffic, set up blocks, and make strong cuts. What I really like his skill to defeat the jam on a consistent basis. I have seen projects from others that believe Roberts will be a slot receiver. I agree with those that say he will start his career there, but I would like to point out that Greg Jennings has nearly identical dimensions as Roberts. I think Roberts might be a better player than Jennings was at this stage of their careers. If Roberts joins a team with a veteran quarterback, he'll be a candidate to make an immediate impact in 2010.

Chris McGaha, Arizona State McGaha could be this year's Austin Collie. Their physiques and strengths are frighteningly similar. Collie doesn't quite have the burst of McGaha, but he doesn't fall into the Josh Reed Category that I discussed in the 2009 RSP because his burst isn't that far off and he might have better deep speed. His leaping ability is excellent and he has skill for winning jump balls against good defensive backs. McGaha runs good routes, getting low into his breaks and stemming deeper routes. He isn't great after the catch, but he might actually have more room to run as the slot receiver or a secondary option split wide.

Blair White, Michigan State: When you listen to White's story about beginning the Spartans' repeatedly for a chance to walk on to the football team, you instantly think he's an overachiever. You'd be wrong. White's work ethic might be Rudy-esque, but his physical skills are top-drawer. White is a savvy route runner, has great hands to adjust to the football, and the toughness to make plays in traffic. He's also mentally tough. He showed the ability to react correctly to defenders trying to trick him with changes to their methods at key points of games. White also has a great burst to get on top of single coverage and enough long speed to sustain it. He is going to make a team feel very fortunate.

Emmanuel Sanders, SMU: Mardy Gilyard is a fine prospect, but I think Sanders is a similar kind of player that has a chance to be a better receiver. Sanders has the speed, agility, and vision to make big plays from anywhere on the field as a runner after the catch. He also possesses excellent body control to adjust to the football as a deep threat. Despite a skinny frame, Sanders is a physical player that understands how to lower his pads, split defenders, and finish runs for extra yardage. He might be the best deep threat in this class.

Scott Long, Louisville: The 6-2, 216-lb. senior missed significant portions of his college career due to a knee injury that generated a blood clot that traveled to his lungs. Now completely healthy, Long has 4.4 speed, a 4.09 shuttle time, and a 41.5 vertical leap to go along with good hands, skills to adjust to the football, and the size to break tackles in the open field. I initially listed Long as a project, but I think he'll progress quickly enough. He will be talked about on draft day.

Projects

Seyi Ajirotutu, Fresno State: Ajirotutu has excellent body control, soft hands, and some skills after the catch. He has good build-up speed to stretch the defense. If he can improve his speed, he might have Chad Ochocinco-like potential. If not, I think he'll make a dynamic possession player. Cecil Lammey reported from the East-West Shrine game that Ajirotutu received individual instruction from Keenan McCardell and soaked up the knowledge like a sponge and applied it the next day as if he the knowledge under his cleats before he came to the event. As we saw last year, Mike Wallace was a quick learner. It can happen.

Duke Calhoun, Memphis: Calhoun has the size, speed, hands, and body control to be an effective starter. He needs to work on defeating press coverage, running intermediate and deep routes, and bulking up a little more. He has a good football IQ and doesn't mind playing a physical style of the game.

David Gettis, Baylor: Gettis wins the Most Likely To Be The Next Miles Austin award. Big, fast, physical, and aggressive, Gettis floundered on a Baylor offense. Like Carlton Mitchell, who I think would be better off rated as a project, Gettis should grow into a starting role within three to four years once he learns to use his body to his advantage. Right now, he gets pushed around trying to escape press coverage and he needs to develop more consistency to every aspect of his game.