

NFL teams only seem to feel the urgency to start rookie passers for significant periods of the season when they've been taken in the opening two rounds. The corresponding production among the quarterbacks in each round is not much different, either. It's a healthy and conservative dose of perspective for those of you thinking about projecting Robert Griffin III or Andrew Luck to perform like Cam Newton or Andy Dalton last year. It could happen, but let someone else reach for them as their first quarterback in a re-draft league.

Explanation of the "Ceiling Score"

The Ceiling Score is what I believe the player's potential checklist score would be if he improved upon the skills and techniques from the RSP scoring checklist that I think he is capable of addressing. The closer the player's actual checklist score is to his ceiling, the closer he is to maximizing his abilities. A player with a low checklist score but a high ceiling score is likely a project or a boom-bust prospect. These players are now at the highest level of football with a lot to learn. Some players view this transition to the NFL as an opportunity to have fewer distractions from their development plan. Others find even more opportunities for distraction now that they are free from the constraints of an hourly schedule that universities impose on them.

Skill Breakdowns

The Rookie Scouting Portfolio checklists are designed to assess whether a player possesses a physical skill or technique that meets the baseline requirements that I believe will make him a successful professional. These skills and attributes are defined in the publication's glossary. However, the checklist isn't designed to differentiate how much or little of that technique each player has. Matt Ryan has the baseline level of NFL arm strength, but Michael Vick has this attribute in abundance.

So in addition to the checklists scores that measure the number of skills and attributes a player has developed to a baseline level of proficiency, the skill breakdown reports are an avenue to compare how skilled these players are in each category. I use the play-by-play notes from my film study to categorize each player.

The subheadings under each skill should be reasonably self-explanatory, but here's a quick break down.

- Star Caliber:** A level of skill that rivals the best in the game at his position.
- Starter Caliber:** A level of skill commensurate with a full-time starter at his position.
- Committee Caliber:** A baseline level of skill for a player to contribute productively in an offense.
- Reserve Caliber:** These players lack some amount of technique or athleticism to consistently be productive, but the skill is good enough to contribute to a team.
- Free Agent:** These players lack the minimum skill in a given area to make a team if evaluated strictly by this single component.
- Deficient:** The player's skill set is so lacking that they aren't likely to receive interest from a team until it improves to a at least a free agent level.

Accuracy

Accuracy is how close to target a quarterback can throw a pass. The skill requires good mechanics, patience, poise, anticipation, and in some cases good arm strength. I evaluated these players on their short, intermediate, and deep accuracy, and their accuracy on the move. NFL caliber accuracy is significantly more demanding than what is acceptable for a college quarterback. NFL offenses tend to operate with a greater emphasis on timing routes and with the expectation that an open receiver is a player in single coverage who might be considered well covered in a college game. In the NFL it's not just about getting the ball in the area of the receiver, it's about placing the ball in a tight window just away from the defender, or throwing the ball to an area where the receiver can make an adjustment to the pass in tight coverage.

<u>Star Caliber</u>	<u>Starter Caliber</u>	<u>Committee Caliber</u>	<u>Reserve Caliber</u>	<u>Free Agent</u>	<u>Deficient</u>
	Andrew Luck	Brandon Weeden	Brock Osweiler	Austin Davis	
	Case Keenum	B.J. Coleman	G.J. Kinne	Darron Thomas	
	Robert Griffin III	Chandler Harnish		Dominique Davis	
	Russell Wilson	Jacory Harris		Kellen Moore	
	Ryan Lindley	Kirk Cousins			
	Ryan Tannehill	Nick Foles			

The Best: There are a lot of ways to slice and dice this category. Luck has the best anticipation and touch in this class and his accuracy doesn't falter except when forced to attempt a high-velocity, "stick-throw" on the move. Once he acclimates to the speed of the NFL, he's going to pick defenses apart underneath and then bait opponents into coverages where he can put the ball over their heads.

Griffin has the most impressive down field accuracy on the passes that Luck has difficulty executing with consistency. He's the most likely quarterback to complete the jaw-dropping throw that makes headlines in the sports media, because he can hit the power throws with accuracy at extreme ranges of common sense. Ryan Lindley can throw with accuracy 60 yards down field from a clean pocket and he also demonstrates point-point accuracy on across-the-field throws while getting hit that nearly defy logic. The problem is his accuracy is streaky. If he cleans up what ails him, watch out.

Tannehill is the most accurate under pressure when forced to elude defenders in the pocket and [make accurate throws on the move](#). For a player many mislabel as "raw" compared to other prospects in this class, the Texas A&M passer is in my opinion has the best pocket presence in this draft. If he's less experienced in other areas, then his pocket management is bordering on the prodigious.

Griffin is the most dangerous improviser, but Wilson might be the most contained, accurate, and efficient improviser when forced to break the pocket. He reminds me of Doug Flutie in this aspect of his game. If he can keep this part of his game in the NFL, he might one day force a team to give him a chance as a starter.

Needs Improvement: Kellen Moore and Austin Davis' accuracy drops beyond the 25-yard range of the field. Both need to develop more arm strength to compete in the NFL if they hope to land a job as a primary backup. Brock Osweiler's throwing motion is both unconventional and inconsistent. His accuracy beyond swing passes, screens, and shallow crosses is spotty. Cousins and Weeden see their accuracy drop when under pressure and the difference is drastic enough that they need a lot of work before they can challenge for a starting role despite possessing some skill sets that could work in their favor down the line.

Arm Strength

This attribute might be the most overrated among the average fan. There are two components to arm strength: distance and velocity. As long as a quarterback can throw the ball 35-40 yards in length with strong accuracy and good velocity, he can produce at a high level in the NFL. Rich Gannon is a perfect example. There are some players who have improved their arm strength after entering the league (Drew Brees), but it's not a common occurrence. So a player with less than adequate arm strength is likely to have limited upside.

<u>Star Caliber</u>	<u>Starter Caliber</u>	<u>Committee Caliber</u>	<u>Reserve Caliber</u>	<u>Free Agent</u>	<u>Deficient</u>
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The Best: Griffin and Lindley have the best arm strength. I was tempted to put Lindley in the next tier with Griffin, but what the Baylor QB can do from unbalanced positions is special and Tannehill needs to step into throws that Griffin doesn't.

The Worst: Davis plays in a short passing system and when he's forced to throw the ball more than 25 yards in the air his arm strength is exposed as sub par.

Delivery

There are several components to a quarterback's delivery that could be broken down in greater detail: drops, foot spacing, set ups, and releases. The level of uniformity and fluidity with which a quarterback can move backwards, get good depth away from the line of scrimmage to see the field and access passing lanes, and set his feet and then release the ball in a timely and accurate manner is a huge part of playing the position.

Consistent accuracy comes from consistent footwork and mechanics. If a quarterback does not have good coordination and timing with his feet, his muscle memory has to work harder to throw a football with accuracy and that accuracy drops. A great way to think about accuracy is to consider the sport of boxing. Watch the movie *Million Dollar Baby* and pay close attention to the scene where the trainer is talking about footwork.

The casual boxing fan thinks about boxing as hitting with the hands, but the feet set up everything that the hands do. This is also true with football. This is why Bill Walsh stressed footwork as a vital component of a quarterback's game. It's also no coincidence that Tom Brady, who is not mobile, but extremely good at avoiding pressure in the pocket and then throwing an accurate pass, has a boxing background.

Of course, a quarterback – like a boxer – has to show good form with his upper body and as with boxing, a punch should be compact and thrown with the body behind it so it is delivered with a snap. The less compact a release is, the easier it is for the opponent to see what’s coming and react.

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The Best: The conventional viewpoint favors an over the top delivery. I understand why that’s the case from the pocket. But when on the move or dealing with pressure, the ability to deliver the ball from a three-quarter motion is actually more favorable because it is easier to generate the necessary velocity with less time and mechanical effort. Griffin has an over the top motion from the pocket, but he can also deliver it with the three-quarter motion. He’s a little more reckless and rushes this motion at times, but the results are still impressive more times than not. Tannehill shines here because of his three-quarter delivery.

Needs Improvement: Cousins, Weeden, and Osweiler are the three passers that many regard as promising prospects, but they all need a clean pocket and time to deliver the football. When they are forced to abandon the safe confines of the pocket, their footwork is lacking. All three suffer from accuracy issues because of it.

Decisions

The most important part of the position, good decision making involves understanding what the offensive is trying to do and recognizing how the defense is trying to stop them. This recognition occurs prior to the snap as well as once the play begins. A good passer understands where all his receivers are supposed to be on the field and how to set up the opponent to create openings downfield to throw the football. A successful decision maker has to have an aggressive mentality to force the defense to account for all quadrants of the field on every play. But he also needs the patience and wisdom not to force passes downfield when not necessary. The very best quarterbacks can integrate their physical skills (footwork, ball handling, arm, etc.) and conceptual understanding of the game with excellent timing and fluidity to successfully manipulate the defense.

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The Best: Luck is the best combination of decision-maker and executor of this class. He has a strong understanding of his offense and does a good job of getting his team into good plays. Zone blitzes still confuse him just like any other college quarterback so don’t expect him to come into the NFL and dominate the game on an intellectual. However, his transition could be as quick as many that have played the game. Russell Wilson’s transferred schools and threw 33 touchdowns and 4 interceptions with his new team. He’s always had a decent TD-to-INT ratio, but for a player that scrambles as much as he does, he knows how to take care of the football while still making aggressive plays down field. Nick Foles frequently called his own plays at Arizona.

Needs Improvement: Ryan Tannehill and Robert Griffin will throw blind while under pressure and along with Ryan Lindley, they have the tendency to try down field throws in tight coverage with defenders hanging off them. They are frequently a step too far across the line that separates aggressiveness from recklessness. Brandon Weeden’s game can go haywire when under pressure and like Griffin, he’ll rush his decision making. He knows what he’s supposed to do, but tries to force the matter and gets reckless. [It’s a matter of intelligence overriding wisdom](#) and losing the battle.

Ball Handling

There are three components to *Ball Handling* for quarterbacks: basic transactions (snaps and hand offs), safety (ball carriage and protection), and sleight of hand (play fakes and pump fakes). The first two are required to play the position. The final component is an elevated skill that reveals the players that take pride in the details of their craft. Some college offenses don't place as much emphasis on play fakes and pump fakes. And in some cases there are quarterbacks that lack the hand size to execute all varieties of play fakes and pump fakes. Therefore it's not a hard and fast rule that elevated skill at ball handling is a surefire sign of craftsmanship.

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The Best: Luck and Tannehill deliver nice play fakes, but [UTC Mocs QB B.J. Coleman has honed his ball-handling technique](#) as well as his footwork, ball carriage, and release to mimic Peyton Manning's. If Coleman can continue to get seasoning and learn the finer points of the game, he has the physical skills – and fundamentals – to develop into a better pro than collegian.

Needs Improvement: Griffin executes good play fakes, but he has to work on carrying the ball closer to his body when scrambling outside the pocket. Certainly he'll be difficult to catch, but in the NFL he'll still need to show more care or pay the price of turnovers. Darron Thomas and Kirk Cousins are inconsistent with their effort and sale of play fakes. They need to learn to execute in a more believable way with their upper body.

Pocket Presence

Cam Newton's phenomenal rookie year had several contributing factors, but most prominent among them was his ability to remain in the pocket when defenders were flying around him and still keep his eyes down field. Newton was able to decide when and when not to move with an economy of steps to climb or sidestep pressure while maintaining a throwing form and mindset (eyes downfield). Until a player comes along to blow the notion to smithereens, no quarterback can have long-term success in the NFL until he learns how to command the pocket.

A quarterback has to have an adequate feel for where the pressure is coming from, how to maneuver away from it while still in a position to find an open receiver and release an accurate pass, and have the toughness to step into an oncoming defender to release an accurate throw. None of this involves speed, tackle-breaking, or elaborate jukes, spins, or cuts. The great ball-carrying skills that Vick and others have can aid a quarterback, but more times than not it can limit him from reaching his potential as a passer.

When a quarterback has good pocket presence he is more likely to have poise, which helps a passer make positive plays in tough situations.

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The Best: As I've mentioned earlier, [Tannehill's pocket presence is pro-caliber](#) and somewhat shocking when you consider he played wide receiver for two years and walked onto the A&M squad. He does everything a quarterback coach wants to see when it comes to sliding, climbing the ladder, or reducing the shoulder to avoid an oncoming defender off the edge or up the middle – [and do it with an economy of movement](#) that belies the fact that he has the speed and athleticism to burn a defense for a long gain.

It might seem surprising that Brock Osweiler is listed as high as I have him in this area, but when I studied his game I saw a player capable of reducing the shoulder, breaking the grasp of a defender, and demonstrating quick feet to slide away from pressure. He senses pressure and often reacts well to it, but because he lacks a consistent and efficient throwing motion, he limits the efficiency that his pocket management could provide his game.

Needs Improvement: Robert Griffin III does a strong job of staying in the pocket and even climbing or sliding away from pressure. His problem is pacing. Everything Griffin does is at a hyper pace and he can create more trouble with his reactions because he lacks the skill to react with an economy of movement that Tannehill and many of the great NFL quarterbacks have. If he can learn to react a little slower and with greater economy, he'll find more opportunities to make bigger plays with his arm than he already does.

Scrambling

Scrambling can be an extension of pocket presence, but I believe it's different because a player that scrambles has made a commitment to break the pocket and disrupt his teammates' blocking scheme to the point of no return. At this point, a scrambler will either create an open look to throw the ball downfield on an improvised play, get positive yardage downfield, or get sacked. The best scramblers still tend to be players that produce extremely good or bad results. Ben Roethlisberger is known as a great scrambler, but he also has pocket presence.

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The Best: Griffin has the best upside in this area because of his speed. However, Luck, Wilson, and Tannehill are excellent on the move. Wilson might be the best scrambler-thrower on a broken play or buying time in the red zone. There's traces of Doug Flutie in his ability to weave around the pocket and find the open man. Wilson also has an underrated arm and when he gets outside the pocket [he can throw the deep ball with accuracy while on the move](#).

Needs Improvement: Nick Foles needs to get lighter on his feet or he isn't going to stay on an NFL roster. When forced to move, he's ineffective.

Durability

Durability is designed to measure the player's ability to play with pain, overcome injury, and determine if he has any chronic issues that may prevent him from reaching his full potential as a pro. Some injuries are more a test of the player's work ethic than they are career-threatening occurrence. Others test both their recuperative powers and character. More players slide in the draft due to injury history than most any other factor about them.

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Notable Positives: Brandon Weeden played a season with a thumb injury and performed at a high level for the college game. NIU quarterback Chandler Harnish returned from an ACL tear and still performed with strong mobility. In his bowl game performance, he played half the game with an ankle injury and it barely fazed him.

Notable Negatives: Griffin has torn an ACL and he takes a lot of hits at the college level where he's slow to rise and in noticeable pain. Unless this is an act, he's in store for a lot more and with greater intensity. He will have to become more selective about throwing the ball into a heavy rush in the ways he's done at Baylor or risk major injury. He's a courageous player, but often a little too reckless even in and around the pocket.

Football I.Q.

These quarterbacks integrate their physical and conceptual skills better than the rest of their class and if they continue to develop, their on-field intelligence should make them players to watch in the NFL.

Russell Wilson, Wisconsin: As I'll mention later in this publication, there are players that inspire the media and fans to label them "the next." For short running backs, it's Warrick Dunn or Maurice Jones-Drew. For short receivers it's Steve Smith. For short quarterbacks, it's Drew Brees. Russell Wilson is not the next Drew Brees. His game is different from Brees. If he works hard and is fortunate with where he lands in the NFL, he might evolve to a place where he draws comparisons to Brees, but that's too far into the future.

The fact that people compare Wilson to Brees is a reflection of Wilson's smarts, mobility, accuracy, and game management. If there's a player with whom Wilson's game has even more elements in common it's Doug Flutie. Wilson has a great knack for scrambling around tight quarters and keeping his eyes down field and body in a position to deliver the ball. He didn't have to do this as much behind Wisconsin's great offensive line, but it was a different matter at N.C. State where I believe he faced a higher caliber of defensive talent in the ACC.

Wilson does a great job of navigating bodies flying around the field and making the right decision. Check out [these highlights from his freshman and sophomore years at N.C. State](#) and you'll see the vision as a runner and passer to find the open field or open man and the aggressiveness and skill to make the throw to a spot where his teammates can make the play. These improvisational skills remind me of Flutie, except Wilson is bigger, faster, and has a stronger arm. He actually has a better feel for the pace of the game and how to fit within it than Robert Griffin because he isn't prone to rushing his movements like Griffin.

Other quarterbacks of note with a strong Football IQ:

Andrew Luck, Stanford: The Stanford QB has more athleticism than his billing as a "smart passer," suggests. He's a strong, fluid athlete who can buy time and do the little things with fakes and looks to bait a defense.

Ryan Tannehill, Texas A&M: In addition to his excellent pocket presence, Tannehill also has a good arsenal of fakes and moves that he uses as if they are second nature to his game. A 100-catch receiver for two years, the game physically and mentally has an easy feel for him. Think of the players in recent history that played different positions in college before going pro and that list includes players with great football IQ: Hines Ward was a running back, wide receiver, and quarterback at Georgia. Fellow Bulldog Robert Edwards was a cornerback and running back. Charles Woodson played cornerback and receiver at Michigan, and Ricky Watters was a flanker at Notre Dame.

Jacory Harris, Miami: This may come as a surprise because Harris' career seemed to backslide after initial success at Miami, but former NFL QB coach Mark Whipple told the ESPN television crew during Harris' junior year that Harris had a great football IQ. Although it's usually dubious news when a player tells the media that NFL coaches he met with were astonished by his knowledge of defenses, Whipple's commentary and Harris' early success in Miami lends credence to the idea it is true. I can only speculate what Harris' problems were if it wasn't his knowledge of the game and I don't want to do that. Just don't be surprised if he actually gets drafted or signed to a free agent contract.

Classic Pocket Passers

These quarterbacks might not have the physical skills to play in any system, but they are a good match for a pocket passing offense where they can work off play action to buy time on intermediate and deep routes.

Ryan Lindley Jacory Harris Brandon Weeden Brock Osweiler B.J. Coleman Kirk Cousins Nick Foles

West Coast Friendly