

Overrated RB Prospects

Lendale White, USC: White is the consensus power back in this class. He is viewed as a bruising runner with excellent footwork, short area quickness, and short-yardage prowess. While I believe White has the potential to be the runner a team can build around to establish an offensive identity, he lacks the effort on and off the field to be rated so highly.

In the games I studied, White was much easier to bring down with leg and waist tackles than his size and purported skill should dictate. The USC runner also gained nearly 25 pounds late in the season. This lack of physical discipline should be a red flag for teams considering a large financial investment in White. A player with fluctuating weight can inhibit his stamina and be more susceptible to injuries that might not have occurred if he were consistently in shape.

Additionally, there were several instances on film where White did not show good effort or technique as a blocker. White may have an immediate impact as a short-yardage player, but his prospects as a full-time starter will be limited if he cannot pass protect. I also found White to demonstrate complacency with his approach to goal line running. He often took for granted that his offensive line was going to open huge holes for him to tear through untouched, only to get stuffed at the point of attack because he didn't run hard or low enough to get past the initial contact. While I would certainly select White—and he'll be given the opportunity to see a lot of goal line opportunities as a rookie in the right situation—I can think of at least a few other rookie runners I'd rather have on my roster.

Brian Calhoun, Wisconsin: Calhoun had a great 2005 for a well-coached Wisconsin team known for its great system for running the football. Barry Alvarez has publicly stated Calhoun is the best runner he has coached at Wisconsin. Considering the alumni—Michael Bennett and Ron Dayne—Calhoun should be at the very least, a quality NFL backup with talent to be a bigger contributor in the right situation. He definitely has better vision than these two backs and is just as good, if not a better receiver.

Like Dayne and Bennett, Calhoun ran behind an offensive line that opened massive holes in most of Wisconsin's games. His high-yardage outputs were the result of getting into the second level untouched on at least a third of his total carries on a weekly basis. This won't be a likely occurrence in the NFL.

I did not see Calhoun demonstrate a physical style of play against defenders bigger than corners and safeties. When he faced smaller holes, or good penetration from the defensive front seven, Calhoun wasn't able to do much more than fall forward. He has some yards after contact skills that remind me of Warrick Dunn, but he doesn't do this nearly at the level of skill as the Falcons' runner. Overall, Calhoun should have moments where he looks dynamic, but I'm not convinced until I see him in an environment where he proves he has the individual skills to create openings against a quality professional team.

Leon Washington, Florida State: Washington isn't considered a big-time player, but I continue to hear him mentioned as a sleeper. I agree Washington has skills that should help an NFL team but he doesn't have great power or quickness to overcome his lack of size. While Marion Butts and Warrick Dunn had successful NFL careers, many other FSU alums were either disappointments or role players in the NFL: Sammie Smith, Dexter Carter, Amp Lee, Travis Minor, and Greg Jones.

Look for Washington to make a team, but don't get too excited about his chances of doing anything more than fulfilling a third down, or change of pace role.

Underrated RB Prospects

Joseph Addai, LSU: I think Addai is one of the best skill players in this draft. He can do everything you want from a feature running back: block, catch, get the tough yards, or bounce it outside for a long gain. He doesn't have elite measurements or physical skills, but he is the Hines Ward of running backs: tough, football smart, and often making a critical play for his team with or without the ball in his hands. These are the things you'll notice about Addai when you read the analysis of the game film.

Addai is underrated because he arrived to LSU as a runner coming off a knee injury, and most college teams didn't want to take a chance on him. Plus, Addai competed with more sought-after recruits at the position and unselfishly contributed in any way he could to make a difference on the field.

I think Addai would be a perfect match for a team like the Indianapolis Colts because he possesses the all-around skills for their offense. Regardless of where Addai winds up, I believe he'll be an impact player for years to come.

Wali Lundy, Virginia: Lundy has a similar body type to Addai and has similar skill sets, but less dynamic. The difference is Lundy hasn't demonstrated the same level of production against top tier competition on as consistent a basis. For the past two years, he shared time with Alvin Pearman and both backs served as complements to the multi-dimensional, Marques Hagans. When Lundy was considered a top prospect, he was performing with Falcons QB Matt Schaub as the Cavaliers starter.

The difference was the offensive system. When Lundy burst onto the college scene, Virginia was a more traditional offensive team and the backs ran out of the I-formation. When Hagans became the starter, the Cavaliers switched to a spread offense. Lundy was effective but does not have the kind of suddenness of a scat-back. He works best out of a formation where he can be a downhill runner that uses more build-up speed and power to get through the first level of the defense.

I don't believe Lundy will be an impact rookie, but in 2-3 years don't be surprised if a team is considering him as their starter.

Maurice Jones-Drew, UCLA: I love watching this guy play football. If there is a small back in this draft that I would say has the best chance to succeed Warrick Dunn as an every down runner that defies his size, Jones-Drew is it. He is simply a great football player that can make an impact as a runner, receiver, and special teams ace.

Kansas State's Darren Sproles was last year's pound for pound, great runner. What makes Jones-Drew more dynamic? The fact that Jones-Drew is 207 pounds at 5-6, has great speed, and has a much better chance to contribute as a between the tackles runner. From a proportional standpoint, this is a big back. If he maintained a similar height-to-weight distribution, at 5-10 he'd be at least a 220-lb., runner.

Why is this important? Because it should tell you that Jones-Drew's low center of gravity and size should make him at least a viable change of pace runner. He shouldn't be a gimmick-ridden, player that spends most of his time on special teams. He will be capable of gaining yards after contact because of his combination of speed, quickness, repertoire of moves, and power. This is also a player with a lot of competitive fire. If Warrick Dunn and Brian Westbrook can be impact players in an offense, Jones-Drew has a shot.

RB Projects

Damien Rhodes, Syracuse: Rhodes was a big-time prospect that spent much of his career at Syracuse splitting carries with Walter Reyes. Both backs are an interesting contrast. Reyes is an under-sized back with some good intangibles. Rhodes looks the part of an NFL back—6-0, 217—and has good speed and power, but didn't fulfill expectations. I believe much of this has to do with Rhodes being on a team in transition. In 2005, Greg Robinson took over the Syracuse job, and installed a West Coast Offense. While Rhodes had some big efforts against smaller competition, he and his team weren't as good against the bigger names.

What I like about Rhodes is his smooth running style. He has that effortless gait that appears as if he's not running as fast as he is—much like former Minnesota RB Robert Smith. He is a decent receiver, has good balance, lateral movement, and enough power to be a factor inside or out. The biggest question mark is his vision. When studying the tape Rhodes appeared to miss some big lanes where he could have cut back for long gains.

If a runner can't see the holes at this level, it is unlikely that he'll ever develop this skill. Vision is one of the traits where a high degree of intuition is key for success at the most instinctive position in football. Yet, the change of offensive systems and lack of every down playing time early in Rhodes career could have an impact. All these changes may have forced to Rhodes to think more about what is happening on the play, which can make running the football inherently more difficult. Only time will tell, but Rhodes has the physical skill to be a fine, NFL runner. Whether he has the intuitive traits are another story.

P.J. Daniels, Georgia Tech: Daniels began his career in such a way that he appeared to be headed towards a first-day pick at the NFL's annual selection meeting, but injuries and missed games dropped the Yellow Jacket runner further down the draft radar. Daniels is a strong runner with good balance, quickness, and vision. He can make the first player miss and bounce the play outside.

Daniels didn't time very well at the combine, but he possesses good functional speed. There are enough examples of the Georgia Tech runner making plays that it's difficult to ignore his skills in lieu of a bunch of stopwatches. I wouldn't be surprised at all if Daniels finds his way into an NFL starting lineup and makes it tough for a team to put him back on the bench.

A.J. Harris, Northern Illinois: Harris is a 230-lb., runner with enough speed to be a force in the second level of a defense. He plays behind more-heralded runner Garrett Wolfe, but has the natural skills that could make him a more productive NFL player than at Northern Illinois. The Huskies have become a program known for producing NFL prospects in recent years and Harris could very well be the next in line of Michael Turner and Justin McCareins.

D'Arrius Howard, Arkansas: At 6-0, 236 lbs., Howard is a powerful, downhill runner with a nose for the goal line and enough speed to get outside. He split time with a variety of backs at Arkansas but he has the raw potential to be an every down runner.