

## Analysis: Quarterbacks Taken In The Top Five Picks

Written by {ga=hermanfontenot}  
Sunday, April 22 2007 7:00 PM -

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Thirty six quarterbacks have been taken in the top five selections of the draft over the last forty years. How have they ended up faring? Jesse Lamovsky is here to let us know. Starting in 1967, Jesse has gone back and chronicled every quarteback taken top five, in a desperate attempt to try and determine the boom/bust chances of JaMarcus Russell and Brady Quinn ... two players the Browns are rumored to have alot of interest in.



Since the first NFL-AFL combined draft in 1967, there have been thirty-six quarterbacks taken with one of the top five overall picks. By roughly 1:15 next Saturday afternoon, the number will have grown to thirty-eight, and there is a distinct possibility that the Browns will make one of those selections.

With that in mind, I've conducted a survey of those thirty-six top-five quarterbacks, going back to 1967 and judged them as 'booms' or 'busts'. Looking into the past in this case might yield some insight on the possibilities, probabilities, and pitfalls we may encounter with our own top-five signal-caller. This holistic approach seems a little more instructive than simply using Tim 'Sofa' as the eternal benchmark for first-round quarterback success in Cleveland.

Real quick-like, since this article is long:

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The “#” denotes the place overall in which the player was picked. ‘Best QB in Draft’ is just that: the passer who provided the optimum value of that year’s draft class, at least in my most fallible opinion. As much as I can, I’m judging the merit of each selection by the standards of that position and that position only. Obviously, ‘boom’ and ‘bust’ are subjective. Steve Bartkowski, who I classified as a ‘boom’, is a lot closer to Dan Pastorini, who I classified as a ‘bust’, than to John Elway.

### ***Qualifications for Boom-Hood***

- At least a couple of seasons among the game’s elite quarterbacks, with a trip or two to Honolulu mixed in
- Notable team improvement over the course of career, culminating in playoff appearances at least
- Statistical success: more touchdowns than interceptions; completion percentage over 50%
- Success at a second or third team

### ***Qualifications for Bust-Hood***

- Poor statistics: fewer touchdowns than interceptions; completion percentage under 50%
- A career radically shortened by injuries and/or off-field problems
- Failure to ever become a viable starter

These are somewhat general qualifications, by the way. In the end, it comes down to a matter of opinion.

**1967**

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### *#3- Steve Spurrier, Florida (San Francisco)*

Spurrier, the 1966 Heisman Trophy winner, couldn't unseat aging incumbent John Brodie and never became San Francisco's full-time starter. He played ten seasons in the NFL, but was a better punter than a quarterback. **Bust (the 49ers were very good during the Future Ole Ball-Coach's prime years in the early '70s, but he couldn't elevate his own performance)**

### *#4- Bob Griese, Purdue (Miami)*

Although he wasn't as highly-touted as Spurrier, Griese still developed into one of the better game-management quarterbacks in league history and a Hall-of-Famer. **Boom (Griese threw a total of 13 passes in Miami's '73 AFC title game and Super Bowl VIII victories, so needless to say, it wasn't all about him)**

Best QB in Draft- Griese

**1969**

### *#5- Greg Cook, Cincinnati (Cincinnati)*

Cook, the first NFL protégé of Bengals offensive coach Bill Walsh, had one of the great seasons ever for a rookie QB, throwing for 15 touchdowns and just six interceptions and setting a rookie passer-rating record that stood until Dan Marino broke it in 1983. Unfortunately, Cook's arm went dead the following season, effectively ending his career. **Bus t (a bad outcome to a good pick)**

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Best QB in Draft- James Harris (8<sup>th</sup> round, 190<sup>th</sup> pick)

### 1970

*#1- Terry Bradshaw, Louisiana Tech (Pittsburgh)*

It took several years for Bradshaw to realize his potential; he threw 19 touchdown passes and 46 interceptions in his first two years and as late as his fifth season, he was still backing up Joe Gilliam. Naturally gifted but cursed with a slow learning curve, Bradshaw's career would look a great deal different if he played for a team other than Pittsburgh, which, with a great defense and running game, could afford to be patient with a young quarterback. **Boom**

*#3- Mike Phipps, Purdue (Cleveland)*

A 49% completion rate. 55 touchdown passes and 108 interceptions. An anemic 5.8 yards-per-attempt. And at-least partial authorship of the decline of the Browns from establishment power to perennial also-ran in the '70s. All of this for Paul Warfield. Other than these minor details, Mike Phipps was pretty solid. **Bust**

Best QB in Draft- Bradshaw

### 1971

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### *#1- Jim Plunkett, Stanford (New England)*

Plunkett, the 1970 Heisman winner, was expected to 'save' the woeful Patriots. But after an outstanding rookie season, his career was derailed by youthful mistakes and a bad supporting cast, and the Pats swapped him to the 49ers for draft picks in 1976. He didn't really pan out in full until he got to the Raiders, the perfect team for a gifted pure passer, which Plunkett certainly was. New England ran out of patience with him too soon, as it turned out.

**Boom**

### *#2- Archie Manning, Ole Miss (New Orleans)*

With the following pick, the Saints selected Manning, as much for his box office appeal (he was a legend at nearby Ole Miss) as for his skills. The skill that came in handy the most during Archie's hazardous tenure in Nawlins was his running ability, thanks to an offensive line that operated like a row of turnstiles. Manning was injured frequently, and although when healthy he was effective, generally the Saints were too awful for it to matter. In his best statistical season, 1980, Archie completed nearly 61% of his passes for 3,716 yards and 23 touchdowns, and New Orleans went 1-15. **Boom**

### *#3- Dan Pastorini, Santa Clara (Houston)*

The third in the star-crossed quarterback Class of '71, Pastorini couldn't rise very far beyond mediocrity during his thirteen-year career, completing slightly more than half of his attempts and never throwing more touchdowns than interceptions in a season. Like Manning, he was injured often, and never really provided the balance the Oilers needed to make their Earl Campbell-led offense multi-dimensional. He was serviceable, but nothing more. **Bust (to be fair, other than John Riggins, who went sixth to the Jets, the rest of the 1971 top ten was pretty weak)**

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Best QB in Draft- Ken Anderson (3<sup>rd</sup> round, 67<sup>th</sup> pick)

### 1973

*#2- Bert Jones, LSU (Baltimore)*

Size, mobility, a cannon right arm, and the arrogance and charisma of a winner- Bert Jones was the entire package, and for a fairly brief period in the late '70s, before his career was fatally altered by a separated shoulder in a pre-season game, he was simply the best pure passer in the game. Jones almost single-handedly led a somewhat ordinary Colts team to three straight AFC East titles, and in 1976 racked up a 102.5 QB rating, an almost astronomical figure considering what defensive backs were allowed to get away with back then. **Boom**

Best QB in Draft- Jones

### 1975

*#1- Steve Bartkowski, Cal (Atlanta)*

Atlanta quarterbacks combined for four touchdowns and 31 interceptions in 1974, prompting the Falcons to trade All-Pro tackle George Kunz and the third overall pick to Baltimore for the top pick and the chance to take the consensus number-one guy in Bartkowski, who struggled for his first several seasons but became a very solid passer for the high-scoring Atlanta teams of the early '80s, throwing more than thirty touchdown passes in 1980 and '81. A meh pick, considering Walter Payton was available, but the Falcons needed to make a long-term investment in a quarterback, and did so with reasonable success. **Boom (not a big one,**

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though)

Best QB in Draft- Bartkowski

**1979**

*#3- Jack Thompson, Washington State (Cincinnati)*

The Throwin' Samoan never supplanted Ken Anderson as Cincinnati's number-one quarterback and was peddled to Tampa Bay for a first-round pick in 1983. **Bust**

Best QB in Draft- Joe Montana (3<sup>rd</sup> round, 82<sup>nd</sup> pick)

**1982**

*#4- Art Schlichter, Ohio State (Baltimore)*

Makes Ryan Leaf look like a steal. **Bust**

*#5- Jim McMahon, BYU (Chicago)*

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The oft-injured Punky QB was never even close to the best quarterback in the league, but he limited his mistakes and occasionally pulled plays out of his butt for the great Bears teams of the mid-80s. In Chicago's Super Bowl XX rout of New England, McMahon shredded a Patriots defense devoted to shutting down Walter Payton for 256 yards. He probably wasn't worth the fifth overall pick based on pure production, but, after years of wasteland-production from the position, Chicago needed to make some kind of serious commitment to the quarterback, and McMahon turned out to be the ideal field general for at least one season. **Boom**

Best QB in Draft- McMahon

### 1983

*#1- John Elway, Stanford (Baltimore)*

He boomed. It's the Colts who were busted. They should have just passed on Elway, who never made any secret of not wanting to play in Baltimore, and taken Eric Dickerson instead. **Boom**

Best QB in Draft- Elway

### 1986

*#3- Jim Everett, Purdue (Houston)*

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The Oilers traded Everett's rights to the Rams, who had been shuffling quarterbacks for years and felt they needed a franchise guy to take them over the top. Everett had some good years- in 1989 he threw for 4,300 yards and took the Rams to the NFC Championship Game- but eventually he fell victim to the decline of his surrounding cast and his own bad habits, most notably throwing off of his back foot. **Bust**

Best QB in Draft- Mark Rypien (6<sup>th</sup> round, 146<sup>th</sup> pick)

### 1987

*#1- Vinny Testaverde, Miami (Tampa Bay)*

In his first full season as a starter, 1988, Vinny completed 47% of his passes for thirteen touchdowns and *35 interceptions*. And you thought Charlie Frye was bad last year. Testaverde found his greatest success as a game-manager for Bills Parcels and Belichick. Not a horrible pick in retrospect, but the Buccaneers would have screwed up anyone's career at that point in their franchise history. **Bust (35 interceptions!)**

Best QB in Draft- Rich Gannon (4<sup>th</sup> round, 98<sup>th</sup> pick)

### 1989

*#1- Troy Aikman, UCLA (Dallas)*

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Aikman was injured quite a bit and never put up great numbers (with Dallas's rushing attack, he didn't have to), but he was a clubhouse leader, and when asked to step up and deliver, he almost invariably did. He brought every intangible you want in a quarterback, and he was a winner. **Boom**

Best QB in Draft- Aikman

### 1990

*#1- Jeff George, Illinois (Indianapolis)*

All of the physical skills in the world can't make up for a toxic personality, especially in a quarterback. George had one of the game's great throwing arms, but the fact that he was also one of the game's great jerks limited his value. He quickly wore out his welcome in Indy, as he did everywhere, and by 1994 he had been jettisoned by the Colts in favor of Jim Harbaugh, who had half of Jeff George's talent and a hundred times his leadership and intangibles. **Bust**

Best QB in Draft- Neil O'Donnell (3<sup>rd</sup> round, 70<sup>th</sup> pick)

### 1993

*#1- Drew Bledsoe, Washington State (New England)*

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Bledsoe's arm helped lift the Patriots out of their early '90s doldrums. Three times he threw for over 4,000 yards, and in 1996 he guided New England to the Super Bowl. He had his defects- limited mobility, and a habit of throwing interceptions (206 for his career and four in his team's Super Bowl XXXI loss to Green Bay), but he was drafted as a franchise quarterback, and filled the role well enough. **Boom**

*#2- Rick Mirer, Notre Dame (Seattle)*

Mirer had a very promising rookie year as a starter for the Seahawks, but soon faded into mediocrity, spending most of his career as a backup and throwing fifty touchdowns and 76 interceptions. **Bust**

Best QB in Draft- Mark Brunell (5<sup>th</sup> round, 118<sup>th</sup> pick)

**1994**

*#3- Heath Shuler, Tennessee (Washington)*

Had the Redskins known Shuler would be in D.C. in 2007 as a Congressman, they might have thought twice about this pick. **Bust**

Best QB in Draft- Trent Dilfer (1<sup>st</sup> round, 6<sup>th</sup> pick)

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### 1995

*#3- Steve McNair, Alcorn State (Houston)*

The physically imposing McNair sat the bench for the first two years of his career, learning the game, than emerged as a star for the powerful Titans teams of the late '90s and early '00s. His passing, running, and toughness were keys in Tennessee's Super Bowl run in 1999, and in 2003, he split the league MVP award with Peyton Manning. For his career, McNair has over 30,000 passing yards and over 3,500 rushing yards. **Boom**

*#5- Kerry Collins, Penn State (Carolina)*

Collins has been a mixed bag as a pro. He helped the Panthers get all the way to the NFC title game as a second-year expansion team in 1996, but was drummed out of Carolina thanks to ineffectiveness and some well-publicized problems with alcohol. He went to New York, led the Giants to the Super Bowl in 2000, but put on one of the worst quarterbacking performances of all time once there, completing just 15 of 39 passes and throwing four interceptions in his team's one-sided loss to the Ravens. **Bust**

Best QB in Draft- McNair

### 1998

*#1- Peyton Manning, Tennessee (Indianapolis)*

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The epitome of what you want from a highly-drafted quarterback. **Boom**

*#2- Ryan Leaf, Washington State (San Diego)*

The epitome of what you *don't* want from a highly-drafted quarterback. **Bust**

Best QB in Draft- Manning

**1999**

*#1- Tim Couch, Kentucky (Cleveland)*

Coming from a gimmick offense at Kentucky, Couch, who couldn't even throw the ball properly when he was drafted, may never have been a star anyway. But he was doomed by the terrible team that drafted him. **Bust**

*#2- Donovan McNabb, Syracuse (Philadelphia)*

Eagles' fans wanted Ricky Williams with this pick, but McNabb turned out alright, developing into an excellent quarterback and leading the Eagles to the Super Bowl in 2004. He also helped turn around a team that was one of the worst in football in the late '90s. **Boom**

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*#3- Akili Smith, Oregon (Cincinnati)*

A one-year wonder in college, Smith was a brutal failure in the pros, even by the standards of Jeff Tedford-taught quarterbacks. **Bust**

Best QB in Draft- McNabb

**2001**

*#1- Michael Vick, Virginia Tech (Atlanta)*

The Falcons, in crying need of a quarterback *and* a player who could sell tickets in one of America's worst pro sports towns, swapped picks with the Chargers for the first overall selection and the rights to Vick, who was expected to revolutionize the quarterback position. But while he grew to legendary status in

*Madden Football*

, Vick remains the new-age Bobby Douglass in the real game, while the man San Diego drafted, LaDainian Tomlinson, has turned into one of the all-time great backs.

**Bust (almost a carbon copy of the franchise passing on Walter Payton for Bartkowski-but Bart was better than Mike Vick)**

Best QB in Draft- Drew Brees (2<sup>nd</sup> round, 32<sup>nd</sup> pick)

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### 2002

#### *#1- David Carr, Fresno State (Houston)*

Like Tim Couch, Carr was destined for failure in the NFL, playing behind one of the most porous offensive lines in many a year. Worse, he was a big reason why the Texans passed on hometown boy Vince Young, a decision that looks disastrous now, and will probably look even worse as the years go on. **Bust**

#### *#3- Joey Harrington, Oregon (Detroit)*

Yet another Jeff Tedford quarterback who hasn't exactly set the NFL on its ear, Harrington lacked the skills and the leadership to be a success, and was 86ed by the Lions after the 2005 season. **Bust**

Best QB in Draft- I'm going to punt, because this entire class sucks

### 2003

#### *#1- Carson Palmer, USC (Cincinnati)*

After whiffing on David Klinger and Akili Smith, the Bengals hit a home run with the gifted Palmer, who has keyed Cincinnati's resurgence. **Boom**

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Best QB in Draft- Palmer

### ***To Be Determined...***

#### **2004**

*#1- Eli Manning, Ole Miss (N.Y. Giants)*

Peyton's little brother has been brilliant in stretches, awful in others, and his most notable trademark thus far is his inconsistency. Boom or bust? The returns thus far are rather underwhelming.

*#4- Phillip Rivers, N.C. State (San Diego)*

Rivers has started only one full season in the NFL, 2006, and made the Pro Bowl, throwing for 3,388 yards and 22 touchdowns. So far so good for the man who drew comparisons to Bernie coming out of college.

#### **2005**

*#1- Alex Smith, Utah (San Francisco)*

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Smith suffered through a horrendous rookie campaign (1-11 touchdown-interception ratio), but made a quantum leap in 2006, throwing for nearly 3,000 yards and a passable 16-16 TD-INT ratio for a developing 49ers team.

### 2006

*#3- Vince Young, Texas (Tennessee)*

Physically gifted, and with the strength and will to carry an under-talented team on his back, Young has the tangibles and intangibles to be a championship quarterback, even if he still passes like he's flicking dog-doo off his hand. One thing is for certain: he will be incredible in *Madden '08*.

### ***The Tabulations...***

Quarterbacks taken in the Top 5 of the Draft since 1967: 36

Booms: 15

Busts: 17

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Too Early to Tell: Four

Hall-of-Famers: Four (Five, when Peyton Manning is inducted)

Best QB in Draft by Year: Eleven of Twenty Years (not counting 2004-06)

So, roughly, based on history, there is about a 10-to-15% chance of landing an absolute stud in the top five, a 10-15% chance of landing a franchise-killer, and a two-thirds chance of landing someone ranging from somewhat above to somewhat below average. More often than not, though, the pick yields at-least decent value.

**Retraction!** [In my last column](#), I referred to 1981 Browns draft pick and NWA superstar Ron Simmons as “the late” Ron Simmons. Thankfully, Mr. Simmons is indeed present and accounted for among us living, which is more than can be said about my quality of research.

*Mea culpa*