

The Incredibly Important, Incredibly Useless Scouting Combine

Written by {ga=ryanlewis}

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Of all the marketing successes the NFL has pulled off, of all the small, slightly intriguing annual events the NFL has turned into can't-miss TV, of all the formerly one-day events the NFL has turned into primetime television--the Scouting Combine is its prized bull.

Somehow, the NFL has managed to turn a glorified workout into a must-watch event that goes right along with the draft, which now dominates an entire weekend in late April. The NFL knows how to market, they know their demographics, they know how to appeal to people both in and out of those demographics—they know what they're doing. And to NFL scouts, these drills at the combine prove or disprove perceptions on players drawn from watching game-film, and avid fans are glued to their TVs all the while.

It matters.

It shouldn't.

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For some unknown reason, how fast a guy in a T-shirt and shorts can run 40 yards in a straight line is incredibly important to on-field success at the highest level of football. With the exception of punt and kick-off coverage, I've never seen a guy run for 40 yards directly in a straight line in a game, and I don't believe teams are out there to find that hidden gem in the first round to really solidify a coverage unit.

Running in a straight line for 40 yards in shorts doesn't translate to the field.

Given on film they both look similar, you take a running back who can run a 4.44 40-yard dash, I'll take the guy who runs a 4.5 but has better field vision and explodes through the hole with better footwork. You take the WR with the better 40-time, I'll take the guy who knows how to feel out a zone or bait the safety just one step too many to open up the field.

It shouldn't matter. I say "shouldn't" in place of "doesn't" because it unquestionably does, and nothing will change that. In fact, it'll probably continue to rise in popularity.

Browns fans, especially, should be wary of the Scouting Combine's validity.

Look at the recruitment around rookie Joe Haden one year ago. Entering the combine, Haden was a flashy speedster from Florida who could cover, tackle, and do it all. Mel Kiper Jr. of ESPN had him ranked as high as the sixth best player in the draft class, and called Haden a sure-fire top-10 pick. Then he runs a bad 40, and all of a sudden questions of whether or not he has NFL speed and whether or not he's actually the top corner in the draft surface. Never mind Haden played at Florida and lined up against some of the fastest WRs in college football, and reportedly had a bad back at the combine but decided to run anyway.

Then scouts and team executives go back to the tape, with several claiming that after reviewing him on the field, there aren't any questions about his NFL speed.

On film, he's fast. At the combine, he was slow. On film again, he's fast again. Still, questions of who was the best cornerback and if Haden had NFL speed arose.

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Despite Eric Mangini's desires to take Boise State corner Kyle Wilson (who eventually went to the New York Jets at twenty-ninth overall), Haden came to Cleveland and was one of the finalists for Defensive Rookie Of The Year with six interceptions. That sounds like the right pick was made, despite claims that were made from his combine performance. If he looks fast on film, if he plays with a motor, if he has great instincts—the combine results should be thrown out the window. Nevertheless, the combine will continue to make the NFL boatloads of cash.

With the combine beginning on Thursday, here are a couple of prospects with a lot to gain (or lose), and a few to keep a watchful eye on.

Some understood rules: first, I am discounting quarterbacks because several will end up not throwing several of the routes; second, this list doesn't include many "sleepers" because *every* player expected to land in the third round or later and *every* player from a small school has a lot to gain, and redundancy will kick in.

1. Robert Quinn, DE, North Carolina

Quinn's combine shouldn't matter—we all know he's a freakish athlete, what we don't know is how well he would have played on the field in 2010. However, with no film to review his combine carries a lot of weight with scouts. He needs to really stand out with so many questions around his size as a 4-3 DE.

2. A.J. Green, WR, Georgia and Julio Jones, WR, Alabama

There are still some (vast minority) who question whether Green or Jones is the best WR in the draft. Green is a lock for a top-10 selection while Jones could fall anywhere between just outside the top-10 to the high teens. Todd McShay of Scout' Inc. has called Green the most complete WR prospect the draft has seen since Calvin Johnson. High praise, that which Green can solidify with a great combine. Or, Jones can blow scouts away and maybe sneak into the top-10, which is highly unlikely. Two wide receivers selected in the top-10? Sounds like the Matt Millen's fantasy draft.

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3. J.J. Watt, DE, Wisconsin

Watt has lived in the low-20s on most big boards and mock drafts for quite some time, but has risen at a high rate over the past two weeks. He's listed as possible options for Cleveland at #6 and Dallas at #8, but could still fall to the lower half of the first round. Of maybe any player projected to go in the first round, Watt's combine will dictate how far he rises or falls.

4. Tyron Smith, OT, Southern California

Smith is in a class very short on quality offensive tackles, with only Nate Solder of Colorado projected to be taken ahead of him. Smith could fight to pass Solder, but either way he has a lot of intrigue after playing right tackle at USC. It should be an easy transition, but the combine will be crucial to his placement. Smith is returning from knee surgery to repair a meniscus, and will not be running until his Pro Day.

5. Von Miller, OLB, Texas A&M

With a great combine, Miller could sneak into the top-5, maybe even top-3. Miller is by far and away the best linebacker in this year's class, and is labeled as a deadly sack artist. There are concerns about his strength inside, and that he can be tossed around at times despite his explosive speed around the edge.

6. Rahim Moore, S, UCLA

Moore has potential for a big payday for lack of better options at his position. After Eric Berry and Earl Thomas went high as safeties in recent years, Moore should be the first to be taken off the board but it won't be nearly as early. With a great combine and a team looking to fit in a safety, Moore could move up quickly. He's an absolute ball-hawk, the type of player becoming more and more popular in today's game.

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7. Casey Mathews, ILB, Oregon

Every year, one guy explodes during a big game and rides the momentum to draft day—this year, it's Casey Mathews. Mathews won't be anywhere near the first round, but with a great combine he could ride the momentum into the second. Although his name alone may be enough.