

## The Best Player Available

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

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With the NFL draft looming like another rain cloud over an Ohio spring day, fans in these parts are still wondering what to think. The hard core among them have read every draft preview written by anyone with access to a keyboard and a web site. They've scoured all of the various mock drafts for insight. They've debated their buddies over beers. And yet until someone representing the Cleveland Browns shoves an index card in front of NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell next Thursday night, there is no way of really knowing how to fill in the blank that follows the statement "with the 6th pick in the 2011 NFL draft, the Cleveland Browns select...."

If waiting is the hardest part, it's also just about the best thing about the draft. Anticipation, speculation, tea-leaf reading, call it what you want but the NFL knows full well that what attracts people to their made-for-television NFL draft spectacle, now spread over 3 days, is the anticipation.

And no matter what actually happens, it never lives up to the hype—just like Christmas.

Browns' general manager Tom Heckert gave the traditional pre-draft press conference a few days ago where he was as purposely vague as the plot to a M. Knight Shyamalan film. I think

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Marla Ridenour from the Akron Beacon Journal aptly captured the proceedings when she admitted how absurd it was for her to listen back to Heckert's chuckle trying to discern meaning in it when he laughingly suggested he didn't share the same perception as many others about North Carolina defensive end Robert Quinn and Auburn defensive tackle Nick Fairley.

That's what these things come down to and yet we know that it was never Heckert's intent to really offer any insight into the Browns' thinking about the draft. That's not a criticism, either. No good could come from being forthcoming and that's the point. Heckert is no different then any team's general manager. Draft plans are treated by NFL teams like Coca-Cola executives treat the formula for its soft drink.

But that doesn't mean that Heckert's press conference was a total waste of time. For example, I really believe him that the team will be following a "best available player" philosophy because, as he frankly noted, the team has holes just about everywhere. Outside of left tackle, there isn't a top player in the draft that couldn't help this team.

As obvious as a point Heckert made, it was also refreshing. It's not that the Browns' don't have some decent players on the roster, they do. But so many of the players they shove into starting roles are more suited for and would be playing back up positions on really good NFL teams. In a nutshell, that's why the Browns continue to struggle.

The conventional wisdom emerging is that despite the talent deficit on this team the Browns' biggest need is at receiver. Most mock drafts have the Browns filling that need first. Heckert, of course, gave no clue unless you think he was employing a little reverse psychology in suggesting that he's well satisfied with the Browns' current crop of receivers.

Maybe Heckert was doing just that but then I think back to last season when he said the same thing and then went about proving that point by essentially not bringing in any receivers to compete with the rather pedestrian group the Browns currently have on the roster.

Last season should have convinced Heckert that a significant upgrade is needed in that group, but perhaps not as the most pressing need. It just doesn't feel like Heckert will go in that direction. Indeed if you ask 10 people, be it fans or personnel experts from other teams, you're likely to get 10 different opinions on the Browns' biggest need.

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In some ways though it's just that kind of divergent opinion that makes the draft so much fun in the first place. With a plethora of gaping needs but no consensus on which pothole should get filled first, the Browns can virtually go in any direction and delight one group of fans and tick off another.

As much fun as this all can be, one of the least pleasant side bars to the run up to the draft is the real damage it can do to the reputation to a prospective player. In the rush that teams have to disguise their intentions, they have no problem using their various "unnamed sources" to trash a player they may secretly covet.

This year's victims seem to be Ryan Mallett, about whom various unconfirmed suspicions about his character are flying about, and Da'Quan Bowers, the Clemson defensive end, about whom various unconfirmed reports on the condition of his knee are likewise flying about.

Heckert didn't address Mallett, probably because there is no reason to deflect attention away from a player the Browns aren't going to draft anyway. But he did address Bowers and contributed to the mess by saying that the team believes Bowers' "knee is going to be all right."

That's code, of course, for saying that the knee is still a problem. If that's the case, then so be it but it's puzzling why Heckert would couch it in the vein that team doctors have examined Bowers "a hundred times" and are lukewarm in their assessment. Maybe Heckert believes Bowers is likely to be the best available player but he doesn't want to repeat the Montario Hardesty scenario of last year. Maybe it's just another way of telling other teams that the Browns remain interested in hopes that someone will grab Bowers before the Browns have to make a tough decision about him.

Either way, though, it's Bowers' future that's being bandied about like a shuttlecock in a backyard game of badminton and you can't help but feel a little sorry for him. If nothing else, it's going to cost Bowers some money either way.

But if you remain convinced that there is some value in trying to figure out if Heckert was really offering any clues as to the team's draft plans and assuming that his discussion about receivers

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and Bowers were some indication of his real thoughts, then perhaps the most meaningful statement he gave was with respect to how he believes teams are constructed.

"Quarterbacks are No. 1 and then, I think you go left tackle, defensive end, corners; I think those are the groups," Heckert said. "You can't hide corners; you can't hide left tackles and if you can't get to the quarterback, you're in trouble. That's just league-wide."

That too may be stating the obvious but on the other hand, understanding that philosophy is about the only way to understand why Heckert makes the decisions he does. The issue then is how exactly does Heckert execute on that philosophy and when. He tends to like undersized defensive ends which he thinks can be had later in the draft when other teams aren't looking. If that's the case, then it would hardly surprise if the Browns start off with another cornerback.

Thus, by simple process of elimination the Browns end up drafting Patrick Peterson, the LSU corner with the 6th pick of the draft. It helps, too, that a compelling case can be made that Peterson would be the best available player at that moment. I'd tell you to write it in stone, but anyone writing anything in stone regarding the NFL draft does so at his own peril.

There will be many that disagree with that analysis, of course, but that's also the point. The fans still have something to talk about. As soon as the draft ends another round of debate begins anew, the draft's winners and losers. What makes that both a sublime and ridiculous exercise is the speed at which those curbside analyses are made without even any games having even been played.

Unfortunately, with the the other rain cloud looming over the NFL at the moment in the form of the serious labor problems the league is facing, those curbside opinions may be all we have to debate for the next several months. Even if Peterson is the one for the Browns, there is every chance right now that it will be a long time before the fans have any real idea whether or not the pick even made sense.