

## Feeling a Draft: Current Roster Evaluation

Written by {ga=jta1975}

Wednesday, March 14 2012 10:00 AM -

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With NFL free agency starting Tuesday, I want to spend some time getting into the current team roster so we can gauge the biggest holes. Teams evaluated their own rosters weeks ago as they formulated their offseason plans. The plan will be a comprehensive outline for improving the team during the offseason. All teams will evaluate the players currently on their roster in order to determine what their team needs are.

Part of their internal evaluation will include an opinion on the younger players who didn't get much game time or time on film to evaluate them as well as players that were on the injured reserve and missed big chunks of the season.

Once they evaluate the current roster they will determine what the priority list of internal free agents they want to resign looks like and they will also formulate a wish list of free agents from other teams they want to sign.

Last year, because of the lockout, the draft was before free agency so teams had many more holes to fill during the draft, but this year it is back to the way we are used to seeing it done. Now teams will target free agents to sign and resign before they have to make picks in the draft.

Having the ability to sign free agents affects the first 3 rounds more than the later rounds because you are drafting players that you expect to play fairly early in their NFL careers when you take them in the first 3 rounds. The mid-round and later round picks are players who tend to need development so free agency doesn't affect them as much.

You hear people say things like a team likes to draft the best player available (BPA) so roster holes don't matter as much to those teams.... but in reality they are just misusing the term BPA.

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Every team sets their draft board based on talent but there are plenty of players who have similar grades that are stacked on draft boards based on team need. Teams always draft BPA but it is based on their team composition in addition to draft grade. If this wasn't the case you would not see any team pass up players who play the most important position on the team (QB) just because they had a starter they believed in.

In the early rounds teams draft the most talented players that can impact their teams, not simply the most talented players....especially if the drafted player is not going to beat out a player on their roster who is already playing that position. I expect this mentality to be even more important now that rookie contracts are shortened and cheaper. Teams will have even less time to see if a player is worth keeping so they will probably be even more conscious about taking players early in the draft who can actually get on the field for them. The only position you may see the teams willing to take higher even if they will sit early is QB, and that is because the cost of early round QBs is cheaper than it has been in a long time and the position is so important.

With the lower cost associated you will also see teams take more chances on players that may be boom or bust players. For example, it only cost the Carolina Panthers 4 years and 22 million to sign Cam Newton, so it was much easier to take the risk involved.

You may say only cost?...Well if you compare that to the 6 year, \$78 million dollar, \$50 million guaranteed contract that Sam Bradford signed the year before you understand what I mean by 'only'. It happened not just with Cam Newton last year, it happened with all the other QBs in the draft. Jake Locker, Blaine Gabbert, and Christian Ponder all went in the top 12 picks last year but were all rated as borderline or late first round picks by most draft "experts", but the price was much cheaper for teams to find out their worth than in years past so teams took the risk.

The CBA wasn't agreed to yet but most people believed the rookie pay scale would be adjusted and teams took chances accordingly. Gabbert and Locker were both top 10 picks as QBs, yet they both signed for only \$12 million over 4 years. That would have cost teams three times that amount in years past, so given the importance of the position, teams were willing to take the gamble.

Like I said earlier, I think you will see this trend of taking chances on players continue as long as the paychecks won't handcuff an organization and based on what rookies made last year,

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teams will be more willing to take some chances, especially at the marquee positions.

Now that I have talked a bit about how roster evaluations affects a team's offseason plan, let's focus on some Browns-specific offseason plans because we have seen a few moves already that will affect free agency and draft plans.

The first thing they have done that will affect how they maneuver through the offseason was resigning LB D'Qwell Jackson. Most fans anticipated the move and understood that if they didn't resign him outright they probably would have designated him their franchise player so resigning him wasn't a surprise. The signing probably didn't change the fact that they will add some players to the LB core but it did probably change the priority level they put on the position.

Instead of going into the offseason without a MLB the Browns not only have one, but they have one who is coming off of a year in which he led the league in solo tackles and finished second in the league in total tackles. So although they need to upgrade the overall talent at the position, they can at least say they have a high-class starter in the middle.

Signing Jackson also allowed them to put the franchise designation on kicker Phil Dawson who, for whatever reason, can't seem to agree on a longer term deal with the team. This is actually the second year in a row that Dawson has been designated Cleveland's franchise player so they are obviously having a difficult time putting a value on him that he and his agent think is appropriate.

I am pretty sure age has a lot to do with the team and player not agreeing, but regardless of the reason, at least the Browns will have a reliable kicker and Dawson isn't making out too bad himself getting paid 3.9 million which, for a kicker, is more than fair compensation for the position.

The latest move the Browns made was cutting starting RT Tony Pashos. The veteran RT played well below expectations last year and it was more than likely due to the bad ankle he had. The injury actually made the cut even more justifiable because Pashos has been injured for the last 3 years and he has only started 16 games twice in his 9 year career. The move isn't a shock and most knew Cleveland wasn't looking for Pashos to be the future of the position.

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Now that we have discussed the two major moves the Browns have done so far this offseason, let's look at the roster by position groups as we try to prioritize some team needs.

**QBs** Players: Colt McCoy, Seneca Wallace, Thaddeus Lewis

This position is obviously the talk of the town right now (and forever?). Colt McCoy was underwhelming in his first stint as full time starter. Some people still believe in him and feel the quality of weapons and not his play is the biggest factor in the offenses struggles, while others say he proved he is not a difference maker.

Future: I think McCoy is a keeper no matter if he is a starter or not. If the Browns upgrade the position he is more than an adequate backup so he will be a Brown this year. Seneca Wallace can go. He is a good backup but he has never and will never be the mentoring type. If the Browns do upgrade, McCoy will be the backup so Wallace's spot on the team will be in even greater jeopardy. Thad Lewis has a lot of potential and I think he can beat out Wallace if given a fair shot. He should still end up being Cleveland's third string QB when it is all said and done.

Priority Level: High-Medium

**RBs** Players: Montario Hardesty, Brandon Jackson, Chris Ogbonnaya

The RB group didn't get it done last year, durability was an issue and explosive plays didn't exist. Peyton Hillis isn't a listed player because he is a free agent so the Browns will have to make a decision on signing him or another back once free agency starts

Future: The Browns need to add to this group for sure this offseason. Brandon Jackson is coming off of injury and didn't play a single snap in the 2011 season. Hardesty missed his first year in the league due to injury and couldn't stay healthy at all last year, so the Browns shouldn't trust him until he proves he should be trusted. Ogbonnaya is just a guy and can be easily replaced.

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In my opinion, Hillis didn't mesh well with the blocking scheme and isn't worth the drama he caused last year so he should only be resigned if the Browns get him cheap. They need to add some explosiveness to the group.

Priority Level: Medium

**WRs** Players: Greg Little, Jordan Norwood, Mohamed Massaquoi, Josh Cribbs, Carlton Mitchell, Rod Windsor

There is only one player in the group who performed at a high level last year and that was rookie Greg Little. He dropped way too many balls but the entire group dropped their share, so I am not going to throw the rookie under the bus for drops. The group lacks speed and doesn't get much separation.

Future: As far as I am concerned the only must have is Little. Jordan Norwood is a player I thought of as a good slot WR but he didn't play much in the slot. Mitchell can't get on the field, Massaquoi is inconsistent and injury prone, Windsor didn't play, Cribbs is a roster asset but as a WR he hasn't proven to be anything special. Little showed great promise as a rookie and, although he needs to get more consistent catching the ball, he only played the position for one year in college so he has the potential to improve dramatically in that area. If Little continues to improve he will be a really good WR in the league. After his rookie year he already has more catches in a season than any other WR on our roster so the rest can go and the Browns won't be missing too much of anything.

This group needs the most work of any position on the roster so expect the Browns to improve the overall quality and add some speed and explosiveness as well

Priority Level: High

**TEs/FBs** Players: Ben Watson, Evan Moore, Jordan Cameron, Dan Gronkowski, Owen

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Marecic, Eddie Williams

The Browns TE role changed dramatically from what it was in 2010. In 2010 TE Ben Watson led the team in receptions and was a huge factor in the game plan from week to week. The TEs didn't play a huge factor in the 2011 offense at all. Evan Moore entered 2011 thought of as a matchup nightmare for opposing teams but was seldom thrown to and Ben Watson missed a lot of time with injuries.

Future: Jordan Cameron is the future of the position and athletically he is a fabulous prospect. The thing that impressed me the most when watching the film from his end of the year playing time was his ability to block. He is a former basketball player and was a wide receiver for his first 3 years in college, but he can already block much better than Evan Moore....but I guess that isn't saying much because Moore is a horrible blocker.

Moore was a huge disappointment. He signed a 3 year 8.5 million dollar deal last year and he caught 34 balls and had 3 TDs. He is making too much money to be a decoy but he is so bad at blocking he can't stay on the field. If the Browns are not going to keep him on the field, they need to cut him and use his money elsewhere because you don't pay reserve TEs that are a liability on special teams that kind of money.

Rookie Owen Marecic proved he was not worth being the first FB selected in the draft. He is not a good or powerful run blocker, he has a concussion issue, and he is about as unnatural with the football in his hands as a FB can be. The Browns used a 4th round pick on him so he isn't going anywhere but they could easily cut him and no one would notice except opposing LBs who constantly seek him out during running plays.

The Browns could use an H-back type of player who can execute 'wham' blocks with power as well as catch the ball out of the backfield. It can be a TE or FB but they really don't have one on the roster.

Priority Level: Low

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**OL** Players: Alex Mack, Joe Thomas, Jason Pinkston, Shawn Lauvao, Eric Steinbach

With exceptions of future players these are the only linemen the Browns have under contract right now. They had a bumpy year as they tried to infuse first time starters at guard and they rotated RTs early in the year as Tony Pashos tried to get healthy.

Future: The good thing is the two most important components are in their prime with LT Joe Thomas and C Alex Mack. The young guards showed promise but lacked consistency. In my opinion, best case scenario with the two guards is if they compete with each other for one spot and the other got upgraded. Eric Steinbach is coming off of back surgery and is due to make over 6 million dollars this year so his spot is in jeopardy. It would be nice to have the veteran presence but not sure Steinbach is worth the price. The Browns need to find a RT of the future and I expect them to address the position this offseason.

Priority Level: Medium-High

**DBs** Players: CBs Joe Haden, Sheldon Brown, Buster Skrine, James Dockery, Safeties- T.J. Ward, Usama Young, Eric Hagg, Ray Ventrone

The Browns played well in the secondary as a unit last year and minus Mike Adams and Demetri Patterson they will have everyone returning for this coming season.

Future: Joe Haden is a special player but the other starter Sheldon Brown needs upgraded. I think Brown can play safety but you never really know until you see him there and the Browns have not indicated they are moving him. I like the promise of Buster Skrine and think he will be an excellent slot CB but I am really excited by James Dockery. Dockery has already added some muscle weight this off season and he has the skills to be a really good 'man coverage' CB in the league. He may push for the starter opposite Haden when it is all said and done. Patterson was good but it is not essential we resign him.

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At safety I am a bit skeptical Young and Ward are a good mix at the position. Neither is very good at playing the passing game and they both play better around the line of scrimmage. I am interested to see if Brown can be a good free safety and if he can I think the Browns will be much better off in the secondary. Mike Adams is a good, versatile player to have on the roster but I doubt the Browns resign him because he can probably make more with another team.

Priority Level: Low-Medium

**LBs** Players: D'Qwell Jackson, Chris Gocong, Scott Fujita, Ben Jacobs, Kaluka Maiava, Quinton Spears, Brian Smith

The Browns were good at the MLB and SLB this year but struggled to make plays on the weak side. Jackson had a great year and Gocong played well once he took over on the strong side from Fujita. Maiava filled in on the weak side but didn't make many plays.

Future: I think Spears has a future in the league as a pass rusher so if he can develop as a LB enough to get on the field the Browns will be better on 3rd down. I also think they should resign restricted FA Titus Brown who really started to understand how to play LB in the NFL after playing DE in college. Gocong was irrelevant as a WLB but played great as a SLB so if the Browns plan on playing him there I am on board. They need to cut ties with Fujita and infuse some younger talent who can play the weak side or find a MLB (maybe Brown) and put Jackson on the weak side. Either way they could use an addition either through a young FA or through the draft.

Priority Level: Low-Medium

**DL** Players: Ahtyba Rubin, Phil Taylor, Jabaal Sheard, Scott Paxson, Jayme Mitchell, Emmanuel Stephens, Brian Schaefering, Brian Sanford, Kiante Tripp

By far this is probably the deepest and most productive group on the team. With two DTs in the

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top 8 in DL tackles in 2011 and a rookie DE that finished with 8.5 sacks the Browns are in good shape when it comes to the group. RDE is a position that can use an upgrade but the other 3 starters are good and young so the Browns are heading in the right direction.

Future: The Browns need to generate some pass rush from the RDE spot but if they resign restricted free agent Marcus Benard he could be the player who provides that pressure. If they seek anything throughout the offseason on the inside it will probably be for depth and if it is a quality player they will be on the path to making the inside group dominant. Even if the Browns don't put a lot of resources into the DL, they have 3 of 4 starters as impact players and the group is clearly the best overall position group on the team.

Priority Level: Low

So that is the roster through my eyes and with free agency starting Tuesday at 4pm you could see the Browns sign some younger players with potential to fill in the roster but since this regime is really focused on building a team through the draft I wouldn't expect a spending spree.

I am not going to get into a giant wish list because the reality of signing the type of players on my list is probably just a dream because many of the best players would have to be overpaid to come to Cleveland and this organization doesn't seem big on paying premiums for players.

I am not saying the Browns won't sign any players I just think they won't be spending big money to get the top names. The only position I see them spending a great deal of money on is maybe WR. Our WR group is bad across the board and the free agency crop is pretty talented.

You could also see them spending money on a RT if they can find one that is more than a quick fix and it is always possible the organization brings in a QB but I am not sold on them bringing in a player they will consider an automatic starter through free agency. I think if they bring one in it will be for a veteran presence more than anything.

I know the series is called "Feeling a Draft" and we have really not talked about the draft a

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whole lot but remember that the draft is part of an offseason plan and in order to get a better feel on what a team will do in the draft we have to coordinate it with free agency so we stay in tune with roster needs.

Draft boards are unique to teams because of styles of play and team needs so don't think best player available means the highest rated player on my board... it really means the highest rated player on my board that best fits my team.

So Browns fans, as you get over the shock of losing the RG3 sweepstakes, keep in mind that there is always more than one way to get things done. Please, as quick as you can just kill the notion that the team is doomed for years to come because they aren't bringing RG3 to town.

I am sure Team President Mike Holmgren and GM Tom Heckert understand the importance of having a good QB so we will have to wait and see what the plan is. Remember, Cleveland plays in a division that doesn't have a QB who was a top ten pick and all 3 of the other teams in our division made the playoffs last year so there is hope to win games without the biggest name QB in the draft.....Until next time....Go Browns.