

SPORTS

The NFL's Almost Perfect Prospect

The best way to understand the hype around the Bengals' Joe Burrow is by looking at his flaws. There aren't many.

By Andrew Beaton

There wasn't a technical glitch or unforeseen stunner that threw the start of this year's NFL draft into chaos. The Cincinnati Bengals began this unprecedented, remote draft day by selecting the player who has spent months anointed as the No. 1 pick in waiting: Joe Burrow.

The Bengals had the No. 1 pick because they were a terrible team last season, and teams that stink at football tend to need a new quarterback. Burrow, most experts say, is the best one available. He's a transcendent talent with the potential to resurrect a moribund franchise that hasn't won a playoff game since before he was born.

But the immense intrigue around Burrow is that some believe he's even more than simply the top guy available in this year's class. They say he's the most flawless quarterback prospect in recent memory.

"It's the cleanest film I've ever seen from a college quarterback," former NFL quarterback and NBC Sports analyst Chris Simms said recently.

It isn't hard to understand why people feel this way: Burrow just had arguably the greatest college season ever. He led LSU to a national championship. He won the Heisman Trophy. He put up unfathomable numbers—60 touchdowns with only six interceptions—while playing in the best league in college football. He made the best defenders in the SEC look like the worst defenders in the Big 12.

But the funny thing about the NFL draft is that even can't-miss prospects sometimes do just that. They miss. Players, including and perhaps especially quarterbacks, are praised as sublime talents and eventually get labeled as the nastiest four-letter word in sports: a bust.

Burrow seemingly has the ability to escape that fate. He can throw short passes and long passes. He can run. He can even get away with smoking a cigar inside the locker



Joe Burrow had one of the greatest seasons in college history.

room like he's been endowed with the bravado of Joe Namath.

So perhaps the best way to understand the breadth of his abilities is by looking for the minute holes in his résumé—the ones that will be revisited if he somehow doesn't find his way to stardom.

The Age Factor

Burrow is an outlier in many respects. One of those is when he was born: He's already 23 years old. And the reason that could be important is that this places him further along a developmental curve than other players. The logic would go that his performance was boosted because he was older than most of his com-

petitors in college. It's the same reason why college basketball players may perform better as seniors but the freshmen are still the top picks in the draft. Teams see more growth potential in someone who's younger.

There are a couple of ways of viewing Burrow's age. One is by comparing him to the player who's projected to be taken second: Ohio State defensive end Chase Young turned 21 last week. The other is by looking at current NFL players. Jets quarterback Sam Darnold has been in the NFL for two years—and he's six months younger than Burrow.

A more telling example may be another NFL quarterback who just

finished his second season. Lamar Jackson showed just how much a player's performance can leap at such a young age when he won the MVP and led the Ravens to an NFL-best record. And Jackson is a month younger than Burrow.

Those Hands

The most dramatic moment at this year's NFL combine occurred when Joe Burrow had his hands measured. They came in at 9 inches—from pinkie to thumb—which is seen as slightly less than optimal for an NFL quarterback. Finally, scouts found a flaw with Joe Burrow: his hands were fractions of an inch too small.

"I think it's a non-factor," Burrow said when he had to face the music and publicly address the size of his mittens.

In all likelihood, despite most NFL quarterbacks having larger hands than him, he's right: it won't be a problem. But the moment he coughs up his first professional fumble, it will surely be raised.

The first reason NFL teams sometimes obsess over this particular piece of minutia is because they pride themselves on whipping themselves into a tizzy over every piece of minutia. The second reason is that they believe smaller hands can lead to decreased ball security. Bigger hands make it easier to grip the ball firmly.

Burrow, though, has never had a problem with that: He fumbled only four times during his last season at LSU.

The Arm Strength

It doesn't take long to realize Burrow can make every type of throw. He threw seven touchdowns in the College Football Playoff semifinal against Oklahoma. And then the teams took their break for half-time. He hits receivers on slants, crosses, outs and bombs.

But when evaluators have compared the sheer strength of his arm to other young quarterbacks, some believe it leaves a bit to be desired. "He does not have a huge arm," said NFL Network analyst Daniel Jeremiah.

Jeremiah watched him throw in a workout with Darnold and Buffalo Bills quarterback Josh Allen, two young quarterbacks who are around his age, and he said Burrow came up a tick short. He said Burrow doesn't have the same sort of natural cannon that others like Patrick Mahomes and Carson Wentz possess.

But none of these things mattered for the Cincinnati Bengals. They had the chance to take the closest thing in the draft to the perfect quarterback prospect. So did just that and took Joe Burrow.

—Joe Flint contributed to this article.



A study found that home-court advantage is driven by referee bias.

There are some people who might not let these scholarly findings past their peer review: the referees themselves.

"I think the fans actually believe they have influence," said retired NBA official Joey Crawford, "and we as referees know that they don't."

There are few people on earth with a better understanding of referees. In the past 25 years, nobody officiated more NBA Finals games than Crawford, whose father and brother were both Major League Baseball umpires. On this matter, he is adamant.

"It's a total fallacy," he said. "I know referees, and I know what we talk about, and I know what permeates our profession. Nobody ever talks about the fans."

But not many officials know what it's like to call big-time games without tens of thousands of screaming lunatics in their ears. Which is where a couple dozen Italian soccer refs come in.

Their performances before empty stands in 2007 delivered the key finding of the Swedish economists' study: Referee bias, the biggest factor in home-field advantage, all but disappeared in games behind closed doors. "Soccer referees are supposed to be neutral," they wrote. "Yet we find evidence that Italian referees change their behavior in games played without spectators."

In most soccer matches, their study found, home-field advantage holds true. The referees call fewer fouls and give fewer yellow and red cards to the home team. But not in the Italy sample. Home teams were penalized so much more and road teams were penalized so much less that it created a swing of 3.96 fouls per match.

Subsequent papers on this effect in soccer were able to get even more granular. One study of the German Bundesliga found that home-field effects were most pronounced in stadiums that didn't have a running track between the field and the stands. The closer fans were to the action, the more likely they were to sway their calls.

Crawford said this theory didn't match his reality. "You don't even hear the fans," he said. But in the spirit of scientific exploration, he offered a hypothesis of his own: He's guessing that NBA players and coaches might not lobby for so many calls in a silent, empty arena. Why?

"Because everybody can hear you," he said.



Tua Tagovailoa was the No. 5 pick.

Tagovailoa Is Picked By Dolphins

By Andrew Beaton

There was one question hanging over this year's NFL draft: Where would Tua Tagovailoa go?

He didn't have to wait long to find the answer: the Miami Dolphins with the fifth pick.

Drafts are defined by their quarterbacks, and after Joe Burrow went No. 1 to the Cincinnati Bengals, there was mystery and intrigue. Tagovailoa was transcendent at Alabama, leading the team to a stunning national championship comeback off the bench as a freshman. But his final college season ended with a gruesome hip injury. In the eyes of some, he went from a sure thing to a question mark.

The draft, which took place amid unprecedented conditions because of the coronavirus, began much as planned on Thursday night.

Burrow led things off. Defensive end Chase Young went to the Redskins at No. 2 and he was followed by cornerback Jeff Okudah to the Lions. Then the Giants took offensive tackle Andrew Thomas at No. 4.

After that, the Dolphins made Tagovailoa the face of their rebuild. The Chargers followed at No. 6 with the quarterback some believed could leapfrog Tagovailoa, Oregon's Justin Herbert.

The early run on quarterbacks made sense: in a league increasingly dominated by passing, it was the third time in the common draft era that three quarterbacks went in the top six picks.

The Big Winners of Sports Without Fans: The Refs

THE WORLD'S GREATEST athletes are just like us: When they go back to work, their offices will be unrecognizable. The next time there are games to watch, they will almost certainly be played in empty arenas, a reality that went from unrealistic to optimistic over the course of the

By Joshua Robinson, Ben Cohen and Andrew Beaton

most disruptive six weeks in sports history. But it turns out this kind of workplace disturbance happened once before.

It all started with another morbid event, a 2007 soccer riot in Sicily, where hundreds of supporters were injured and Italian authorities took the extraordinary step of banning fans from matches. But two Swedish economists spotted opportunity in disaster. This was a rare chance to answer a question of human behavior that is now being asked in the dystopian sports landscape of the coronavirus pandemic.

What changes at major sporting events when there are no crowds? The answer is that one population gets closer to perfection in do-

ing its job than under any other circumstance. Those elite performers: the referees.

The study's authors noticed that in stadiums without fans, the behavior of the games' supposedly neutral arbiters shifted dramatically. And only by playing games in silence could the researchers determine how officiating calls were inherently biased by the mere presence of other human beings.

But even after they published their results, they wished they had more data. It would take a pandemic for them to get what they wanted. "Our little study is becoming relevant again," said Mikael Priks, who wrote the paper with Per Pettersson-Lidbom, his University of Stockholm colleague.

Now sports leagues around the world are confronting the bleak reality of playing behind closed doors to come out of hibernation. Major League Baseball is considering a plan that would put teams in a bubble to play games in Arizona. The NBA and NHL are weighing similar proposals to stage their postseasons. German soccer is hoping to resume play in empty stadiums in early May. A future without fans is

the only feasible option that public-health experts can see until there is widespread testing or a vaccine.

There is reason to believe that these events will have dramatic implications on the games themselves. This is the first time in the modern history of sports that they won't have drunk fans calling them blind, telling them how to do their jobs and generally trying to influence their decision-making.

For decades the question of home-court advantage has pulled at researchers, but only recently have they discovered that it's largely a function of psychology. In their 2011 book "Scorecasting," Toby Moskowitz and L. Jon Wertheim presented compelling evidence that it's mostly a matter of referee bias. In a world without fans, that bias might decrease. "I suspect they will make much fairer decisions," said Moskowitz, a Yale economist.

This makes sense. Imagine you worked for a company that invited thousands of strangers to heckle you relentlessly all day every day, so much that it became part of your routine. But then one day, the office bans them. Would you get better or worse at your job?

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: GERALD HERBERT/ASSOCIATED PRESS; NFL/ASSOCIATED PRESS; CHRIS CARLSON/ASSOCIATED PRESS