

THE FREE PLAY

Draft recap, part one: The Bears (maybe) turn a corner, offense takes the spotlight, and the Falcons win the Weird Pick Award

BY JALEN MAKI

The 2024 NFL Draft has come and gone, and on the whole, it went about as expected. The guy who was expected to go first overall indeed did; per draft tradition, a team made a head-scratching pick; and an already good team once again added multiple blue-chip players.

In the first round, at 25th overall, the Packers selected Arizona offensive tackle Jordan Morgan. Green Bay then took Texas A&M linebacker Edgerrin Cooper and Georgia safety Javon Bullard in round two; USC running back MarShawn Lloyd and Missouri linebacker Ty’Ron Hopper in round three; Oregon safety Evan Williams in round four; Duke center Jacob Monk and Oregon State safety Kitan Oladapo in round five; Georgia State offensive tackle Travis Glover in round six; and Tulane quarterback Michael Pratt and Penn State cornerback Kalen King in the seventh and final round.

We’ll take a closer look at the Packers’ selections next week, but first, here’s a quick rundown of some notable storylines from this year’s draft.

The Bears hit a home run (and it’s upsetting)

It pains me to say that it appears the Chicago Bears

knocked it out of the park last week.

The Bears surprised no one with their first pick, taking USC quarterback Caleb Williams at first overall. Williams had been the consensus top pick for a long time, and Chicago landed one of the most promising and exciting QB prospects this side of Andrew Luck. Over the following few picks, the board fell in the Bears’ favor, and they were able to select Washington wide receiver Rome Odunze at pick nine. Chicago drafted a punter in the fourth round, which is a bit mystifying to me, but they now have one of the top quarterback prospects in recent memory and are teaming him with one of the most electric receivers in the draft, so I think general manager Ryan Poles has earned a little slack.

Somewhat ironically, Williams and Odunze have drawn comparisons to former Packers quarterback Aaron Rodgers and wide receiver Davante Adams, respectively. The thought of being on the other end of such a dynamic duo is chilling, but even if the pair doesn’t live up to that (quite unfair) level of hype, Chicago undeniably took a massive step forward as a franchise last week. Four or five years down the road, we

could be looking back at this Draft as the turning point for the long-beleaguered Bears.

Quarterback frenzy

Williams was the first of six quarterbacks taken within the first 12 picks, ahead of LSU’s Jayden Daniels to the Washington Commanders at second overall, Drake Maye (North Carolina) to the New England Patriots at pick three, Michael Penix Jr. (Washington) to the Atlanta Falcons at eight, JJ McCarthy (Michigan) to the Minnesota Vikings at 10, and Bo Nix (Oregon) to the Denver Broncos at 12. That’s a pretty wild volume of quarterbacks to be taken in the first round, and it’s something we might not see again anytime soon, even as the league becomes increasingly quarterback-focused. The last time six QBs went in round one was in 1983 – a class that produced Hall of Famers John Elway, Jim Kelly, and Dan Marino.

I’m not sure if I would’ve made some of these picks if I were a GM – from a value perspective, I don’t think I could talk myself into taking Nix with the 12th pick. Later in the first round, or sometime after that? Maybe. But in today’s NFL, if you don’t have the quarterback position figured out, you’re going to struggle to win games, and teams were willing to roll the dice in hopes they’ve found their QBs of the future.

Offensive players shine early

The 2024 NFL Draft set a new league record: Twenty-three offensive players were taken in the first round, including the first 14 picks in a row.

This might be indicative of a few things: Teams val-

ued offense over defense; this draft class was loaded with offensive talent; or the defensive players weren’t as appealing in comparison to their counterparts on the other side of the ball. It also might’ve been a combination of these factors. Regardless, the early run on offensive players shows that teams didn’t hesitate to bring in dudes who they believe can help them put points on the board.

The Falcons win the 2024 Weird Pick Award

Pretty much every year, at least one team makes a pick that leaves analysts and viewers confused to varying degrees. That’s not to say that these picks can’t or don’t work out; it’s just that from a value perspective, there are usually more easily justifiable picks that could’ve been made at that given time.

The Falcons’ selection of Penix is the most perplexing of this year’s draft, and for this reason they are the winners of the 2024 Weird Pick Award, which I just made up. Congrats, Atlanta!

Penix was likely not evaluated by most teams as being a top-ten-caliber player or considered among the top three quarterbacks in this year’s class; however, the lefty QB was the 2023 Heisman runner-up and can spin a great deep ball. In a vacuum, I can see why a team would be happy to take a player like Penix early, but there’s an important element to consider – the Falcons signed former Vikings quarterback Kirk Cousins to a four-year, \$180 million deal this offseason.

Cousins, who will be 36 when Week One rolls around, is coming off a season-ending Achilles tear, but

the length and value of his contract – which includes a \$50 million signing bonus and \$100 million guaranteed – indicates that Atlanta’s brass want him on the field for the foreseeable future. The Falcons might’ve looked at the Packers’ quarterback strategy – draft a guy with potential upside, sit him, and let him get comfortable in the offense over the course of a few years before giving him a shot – and liked what it’s produced. Understandable, but Penix, who turns 24 next week, is presumably further along in his growth as a quarterback than, say, the 21-year-old McCarthy, so from a development perspective, having him hang out on the bench for several seasons probably isn’t a necessity. Spending that kind of draft capital on a guy who might not see significant playing time with your team until he’s in his late 20s is odd, especially considering that at pick eight, there were plenty of talented players on the board who could have had an immediate positive impact on a team that should reasonably be ascending.

If Cousins isn’t ready to go at the start of the season, Penix provides an intriguing backup option, and it appears that the Falcons want Penix to eventually succeed Cousins. Also worth noting is that from 2018 to 2021, while at Indiana, Penix suffered four season-ending injuries, including two tears of his right ACL. I’m a believer in drafting a quarterback before you need one, but Atlanta may have reached in

taking Penix at eight overall.

The Eagles are annoyingly good at acquiring talent

The Philadelphia Eagles deserve a tip of the cap.

For two drafts in a row, they’ve capitalized on a board falling in their favor and brought in top defensive prospects. And folks, I’m not above admitting that I’m jealous.

Last week, the Eagles managed to land both Toledo cornerback Quinyon Mitchell and Iowa defensive back Cooper DeJean, doubling up on very skilled defenders. They did the same thing in 2023: The Birds selected Georgia defensive tackle Jalen Carter, who was regarded as being among the best players in that draft and was a steal at ninth overall. Carter’s Bulldog teammate, outside linebacker Nolan Smith, slipped down the board, and the Eagles nabbed him at pick 31. Although Smith hasn’t been as much of a contributor as the Philly front office has hoped, their ability to keep adding high-quality players to their already talented roster is impressive – and infuriating. They can’t keep getting away with this!

Next week

Keep an eye out for next week’s column, where we’ll dive into the Packers’ draft.

Jalen’s columns, “The Free Play” and “Movies You Gotta See,” can be found online at www.medium.com/@jalenmaki.

Sports and Nature Briefs

Lincoln County summer trails open

Lincoln County’s summer ATV/UTV, horseback riding and mountain bike trails are open as of 8 a.m. today (Wednesday, May 1). The Lincoln County Forestry, Land and Parks Department is asking the public to stay on designated trails, observe and follow all signs and respect private property trails may pass through. For more information and updates, visit www.co.lincoln.wi.us or call 715-539-1033.

Spring Wildflower Hike

The Northwoods Chapter of the Ice Age Trail Alliance will host its annual guided Spring Wildflower Hike through Lincoln County’s Harrison Hills on Saturday, May 11 at 10 a.m. Participants will meet at the Ice Age Trail head on Turtle Lake Rd. Terrain will be moderately difficult. For more information, contact Ruby Jaecks at 715-551-1118 or brjaecks@outlook.com.

Open gym

Open gym, for basketball only, will be held in the Tomahawk school complex fieldhouse from 7 p.m. to 9 p.m. each Wednesday through May, excluding days when school is not in session. All participants must sign a waiver form. Children under the age of 16 must be accompanied by an adult age 21 or older.

TOMAHAWK SPORTS TRIVIA: WEEK 180

The Tomahawk Leader will feature one local sports trivia question per week, provided by Bob Skubal, retired coach, historian, and author of “History of Tomahawk Sports.” Email leadernews@mmlocal.com if you know the answer!

The first person to tell us the correct answer each week will have their name published in the paper if they wish, along with their correct answer to the question.

Week 179 question: The THS girls’ basketball team won their first of two conference championships in the 1977-78 season. Who was the head coach: Bill Sullivan, Linda Mochalski or Joanne Foster?

Week 179 answer: The head coach of the 1977-78 THS girls’ basketball team was Bill Sullivan. Linda Mochalski and Joanne Foster were his assistants.

Congrats to Jacob Felser for being the first to correctly answer last week’s question!

Week 180 question: What member of the 1977-78 THS girls’ basketball team won the Lumberjack Conference Southern Division scoring title: Paula Pintens, Jean Cordova or Charlotte Smith?

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Date (CDT)	Morning		Evening	
	Minor	Major	Minor	Major
May 1	2:08AM	6:08AM	11:16AM	6:35PM
May 2	2:37AM	7:01AM	12:37PM	7:27PM
May 3	3:00AM	7:52AM	1:58PM	8:17PM
May 4	3:20AM	8:42AM	3:18PM	9:06PM
May 5	3:39AM	9:31AM	4:40PM	9:56PM
May 6	4:00AM	10:22AM	6:02PM	---
May 7	4:23AM	10:48PM	7:25PM	11:15AM

Solunar fishing and hunting chart for Tomahawk. Major feeding periods last two hours and minors run one hour. New Moon is May 8th.

Tomahawk Emergency

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