

# THE RELATIVE VALUE OF DRAFT CHOICES by Tony Villiotti

It only seems logical that the higher the draft choice, the more valuable it is. NFL teams certainly act that way as well as it is a common draft day occurrence for teams to pay a premium to move up to a higher draft position. But is that really the case? In this article, **DRAFTMETRICS** analyzes historical draft results to:

- Determine logical “breakpoints” in draft positions based on results achieved;
- Identify “Value Groups”, representing draft positions with similar results; and
- Quantify the differences in results among the Value Groups.

This study was conducted for the draft years 1990-2009. The principal concern with using the full twenty- year study period is that the careers of players in the more recent drafts are still evolving. A 2009 draftee, for example, can only have a one-year career in this study. This will result in somewhat misleading statistics in certain cases (which will be highlighted when they occur), but will not make a difference when comparing the relative results by draft position. **DRAFTMETRICS** believes that, even with this issue, it is worth having the increased number of data points.

**DRAFTMETRICS** established a group of objective measures for purposes of this analysis including:

- Length of Career
- Career Starts
- Starter Years
- Starting Velocity
- Post-Season Honors

**Length of Career** is the number of years a player lasts in the National Football League. A player is credited with a year only if he actually played in at least one game that year. No credit is given to a player who mans the clipboard for the entire season. **Career Starts** are the number of games started by a player over his career. **Starter Years** are the number of years a player starts at least eight regular season games in a season. **Starting Velocity** is the number of seasons it takes to be credited with a starter year. For example, if a player is a rookie starter the velocity is “1”. If a player becomes a starter in his second season, the velocity is “2”. **Post-Season Honors** are really a proxy for identifying those players who have excelled in their professional career. The honors represent (a) selection to play in the Pro Bowl and/or (b) selection as an All Pro Bowl by either the Associated Press or the Pro Football Writers and Pro Football Weekly. A player is credited with a Pro Bowl selection only if he is an original selection. Alternates do not received credit, but players who miss the actual game due to injury or other reasons do receive credit.

Data for each individual player was compiled and then sorted and aggregated for each draft position (e.g., all the players selected first in the draft were combined and so forth). For simplicity, all selections after the 200th pick were combined for this analysis. The information by draft position is included at the end of this article.

The rest of the analysis is more art than science. The data was thoroughly reviewed to determine logical “break points” in terms of the results yielded by each Draft position.

The result of this review was the definition of seven “Value Groups” (or VGs) as follows:

- VG 1 consists of Draft positions 1 through 13
- VG 2 consists of Draft positions 14 through 28
- VG 3 consists of Draft positions 29 through 48
- VG 4 consists of Draft positions 49 through 74
- VG 5 consists of Draft positions 75 through 114
- VG 6 consists of Draft positions 115 through 200
- VG 7 consists of Draft positions 201 and higher

The premise of a Value Group is that all selections within a Value Group are of equal value. In other words, there would be no statistical value in moving from the 13<sup>th</sup> choice to the first choice or from the 28<sup>th</sup> to the 14<sup>th</sup> draft position. As a matter of practice, though, a team will always be willing to move up in the Draft to get a player they really covet.

It should be noted that the process of establishing Value Groups is a subjective process based on the analysis of objective information. The results by draft position are somewhat “spiky”, though there are definite identifiable trends. Looking at the results within VG 1 demonstrates this quite clearly. One could certainly make the case that the #8 draft position has been the most productive over the 20-year study period as that position ranks at or near the top in practically every objective measure. The case could also be made that the #11 draft position has results more similar to VG 2 than VG 1. In establishing the value groups, **DRAFTMETRICS** accepted the inherent spiky nature of the results and focused on identifying where there was a significant and consistent deterioration of results. **DRAFTMETRICS** welcomes challenges to its interpretation of the data. Any such challenges or any other feedback should be emailed to [draftmetrics@gmail.com](mailto:draftmetrics@gmail.com).

The following chart shows many of the key measurements for each of the Value Groups. All percentages shown are the probabilities that a player drafted in each of the Value Groups will achieve the designated measure. For example, in VG 1 100% of the players drafted should play at least one year in the NFL, etc. Please also bear in mind that, since this study includes the 1990-2009 draftees, these percentages are somewhat understated because 2009 draftees can only have played one year. Similarly, the careers of draftees from other recent years are also still in progress. The rationale for including the entire 20-year period was explained earlier in this article.

The final line item on the chart is something called the “**DRAFTMETRICS** Index”. This index, the details of which you would find quite boring, assigns a weighting of 55% to Starter Years; 20% to Career Length; 20% to Post-Season Honors; and 5% to Starting Velocity. The intention of the index is to provide an overall assessment of how the Value Groups compare. The index of VG 1 is established as 100, as that is what the other groups are being measured against. Upon request, you can receive the details of the calculation. There is nothing scientific or mathematically complex about this index. It was derived for the sole purpose of having a measure that combines all the elements that were analyzed.

**Table: Comparison of Value Groups**

	Value Groups						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Draft Positions	1-13	14-28	29-48	49-74	75-114	115-200	201+
Number Drafted	260	300	400	520	800	1720	1235
Length of Career:							
At least 1 season	100.0%	100.0%	99.5%	97.5%	93.1%	80.6%	62.2%
At least 3 seasons	89.2%	84.0%	81.8%	77.3%	66.6%	49.7%	30.0%
At least 5 seasons	71.9%	66.3%	63.0%	56.9%	43.8%	29.2%	16.3%
Starter Years:							
Start at least 1 season	93.8%	88.7%	76.0%	63.7%	45.9%	30.0%	16.1%
Start at least 3 seasons	74.6%	60.7%	55.0%	39.8%	23.6%	14.1%	7.4%
Start at least 5 seasons	53.5%	42.7%	35.3%	23.7%	14.6%	7.2%	4.0%
Start as a rookie	66.9%	45.0%	35.0%	20.8%	10.5%	5.5%	2.0%
Post-Season Honors:							
Pro Bowl selection once	39.6%	21.0%	16.0%	9.6%	3.9%	3.9%	1.7%
Pro Bowl selection 3+ times	19.2%	9.0%	6.0%	3.1%	1.1%	1.3%	0.5%
All Pro selection once	21.2%	12.3%	8.3%	5.6%	2.3%	2.2%	0.6%
All Pro selection 3+ times	7.7%	2.7%	1.8%	1.0%	0.3%	0.3%	0.0%
Starting Velocity (in years)							
To first starting season	1.4	1.8	2.0	2.3	2.6	2.8	3.5
To third starting season	3.6	3.8	4.1	4.5	4.9	5.1	5.6
To fifth starting season	5.7	5.9	6.2	6.4	6.8	7.1	7.6
<b>DRAFTMETRICS</b> Index	100	80	71	57	42	30	19

Before discussing conclusions, a few words of clarification might be necessary. Regarding Post Season honors, “Pro Bowl selection 3+ times” and “All Pro selection 3+ times” indicate the number of players who have earned the respective honors three times or more. Regarding Starting Velocity, the average years is the average of all players who achieved starter status. That is, the starting velocity to the first starting season includes all players who started at least one season.

Here are the conclusions **DRAFTMETRICS** draws from this data:

- Not surprisingly, the differences among Value Groups are least significant when looking at length of career and most pronounced among Starter Years and earning Post-Season Honors
- The largest drop off is from VG 1 to VG 2
- The smallest drop off is from VG 2 to VG 3
- The most significant difference among the groups is in Post Season Honors