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NFL teams know the best way to draft, so why aren't they doing it?

Alec Lewis Apr 16, 2024

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The [2014 NFL Draft](#) wouldn't happen for months, but according to Steve Gera, at least one [Cleveland Browns](#) executive had his mind made up on one of its most polarizing prospects.

A special assistant to head coach Rob Chudzinski, Gera had been in the [NFL](#) for more than five years. The San Diego Chargers had hired the former Marine to "do analytics" in 2007. Gera's qualifications included a recently obtained MBA from San Diego State and the fact that he'd read "Moneyball." He scouted opponents and supplied data to coaches through easy-to-read narratives.

"I would just crack jokes and make fun of our offensive coaches but also include information," Gera said recently. "Data is inherently boring and soulless. What you hear typically sounds like the first day on f— Mars. I wanted to break it down shotgun style."

The approach kept him around. Gera studied fourth-down attempts, timeout usage and draft strategies. Relationships made in that role helped him transition into becoming a coach.

That's what led him to Cleveland, where, on a plane at the beginning of the 2013 season, he says he heard a Browns executive say, "The only person I've seen who competes harder than Johnny Manziel is Michael Jordan."

"What makes you say that?" Gera asked.

"Tape," the executive said. "Watch it long enough, and you'll see it, too."



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Gera left the NFL a decade ago and has since worked in the [NBA](#) and European soccer, founded data science companies and taught. Experience in different sectors helped crystallize some of Gera's beliefs about football, and the Manziel moment epitomizes what Gera believes is one of the most faulty decision-making processes in the NFL: draft strategy.

Compare a prospect to a legend from the outset, and you — or, say, Browns owner Jimmy Haslam, who drafted Manziel No. 22 overall and then watched as the quarterback's career imploded suddenly and spectacularly — are likely to cling to that early comparison despite evidence to the contrary.

"The draft is an absolute petri dish for every cognitive bias underneath the sun," Gera said.

Conversations with 14 general managers, coaches, analytics staffers, scouts and executives in other sports — some of whom were granted anonymity because they were not authorized by their current organizations to speak about the highly competitive process — unearthed a messy concoction of uncertainty, overconfidence, competing incentives, pressure and impatience.

"Human dynamics writ large," said Hall of Fame NFL executive Bill Polian.

Even Nobel Prize-winning scholars have spent decades mulling whether there is a single best way to draft.

The answer, they've found, is a resounding yes. But only a few teams are curious enough to think differently, and even fewer are disciplined enough to act differently.

In 2011, Kevin Meers applied for an analytics internship with the [Dallas Cowboys](#). During his interview, Cowboys brass decided that Meers, who majored in economics and statistics at Harvard, was a worthwhile enough candidate to solicit feedback on [a 63-page academic paper they found fascinating](#).

The paper, "Overconfidence vs. Market Efficiency in the National Football League," had been published six years earlier by the National Bureau of Economic Research. Meers hadn't read it, hadn't even heard of it, but it was draft-related and he'd long been draft-interested.

Meers wasn't your typical draftnik. Spouting opinions on prospects did not captivate him. The allure lay in the idea that you could trade picks. Should you? Why or why not? And how do you assign value to each pick?

Cowboys executives were exploring similar questions internally, and that's how they found the paper Meers was now dissecting on their behalf.

First, he wondered, *who wrote this?*

Richard Thaler, an economics professor at the University of Chicago who would win a Nobel Prize in 2017, and Cade Massey, a business professor then at Duke University.

Their hypothesis?

Teams overestimate their abilities to delineate between stars and flops, and because of that they overvalue the "right to choose" in the draft.

Teams *massively* overestimate their abilities to delineate between stars and flops, and because of that they *heavily* overvalue the “right to choose” in the draft.

Meers combed through the paper and uncovered some highlights:

- The treasured No. 1 pick in the draft is actually the least valuable in the first round, according to the surplus value a team can create with each pick.
- Across all rounds, the probability that a player starts more games than the next player chosen at his position is just 53 percent.
- Teams generated a 174 percent return on trades by forgoing a pick this year for picks next year.

Thaler and Massey suggested that teams should accumulate picks by trading back and into the future more often. The more darts you have, the better your chance of eventually hitting the bull’s-eye.

The Cowboys’ interest led them to invite Thaler and Massey into their building for presentations. Jerry Jones dined with them.

Meers, whom the Cowboys ultimately hired, expected a team that understood Thaler and Massey’s research would serve as the perfect place to learn. But he would learn what so many others in professional sports have over the years: analysis is only as good as a decision-maker’s willingness to put it into action.

Thaler and Massey, specifically, understand this better than most. They’ve met with countless teams. Most, if not all, seem receptive to their findings only to toss them aside and operate the way they always have.

“I think the industry is relatively aware of Dick and Cade’s research on the draft,” one longtime NFL executive said. “But I don’t think there have been a lot of people willing to say: I’m going to fully invest in doing this differently than it’s always been done.”

The night before the 2002 NFL Draft, [Indianapolis Colts](#) owner Jim Irsay walked into the team’s draft room with a friend who, according to Polian, considered himself a bit of a draft expert.

The team’s GM since 1998, Polian had been sitting at a long, rectangular table in the front of the room with first-year coach Tony Dungy. Irsay’s friend spotted them and squinted at the 12-by-15-foot board categorizing every player by grade. The wall on the right side of the room had been prepped to show every pick throughout the draft. On the wall on the left, there were two columns headlined DNDC (do not draft, character) and DNDM (do not draft, medical).

“Look at those guys,” the friend blurted out, pointing at the board. “You mean to tell me you’re not going to draft any of those guys?”

“No,” Dungy hollered over. “We’re not interested.”

“Why?” Irsay’s friend replied. “They’re all good players.”

“Well,” Dungy said, “they don’t fit us.”

“People outside the draft rooms only know about 55 percent of what goes into making up the grade,” Polian said recently. “They do not know the personality, the security issues, the medical issues. And they shouldn’t.”

But if teams have all of this inside information, why do they still miss so often?

More than a decade ago, one NFL team commissioned a study into whether certain GMs were better than others at the draft. Though some posted better track records than others, specifically [Baltimore’s](#) Ozzie Newsome, the answer was mostly not.

This is not to say all of the league’s top personnel people are poor evaluators. In fact, there is a line of thinking that the smaller the variation in skill among competitors, the [more ripe the situation is for randomness to sway the results](#).

Many executives and scouts, believers in their own methods of evaluation, would disagree vehemently.

The idea of trading down, in particular, consistently repulsed Polian. “I firmly do not believe you trade a high pick, which is going to be a difference-maker, in order to pick up two picks,” he said.

But that’s the issue, one former NFL executive pointed out. That logic assumes the player you’re initially picking will *actually* become a difference-maker.

“The problem for everyone in sports is that nobody wants to admit how random and arbitrary it is,” the former executive said. “Admitting that it’s arbitrary takes away from your specific abilities.”

Even true believers in trading down don’t hold to the dogma 100 percent of the time. Meers, who became the Browns’ director of research and strategy in 2016, said that exceptions are worth making at the quarterback position and if your team needs a star.

If you have a franchise quarterback, one longtime NFL executive said, you might want to act aggressively to show a commitment to winning.

“I don’t think Dick and Cade were suggesting that any of this is an absolute,” the executive added. “But it’s just, once you run into the realities of it, it’s there. There is absolutely a bias against or fear of admitting uncertainty and trading back time and time again.

“Which is why it’s valuable.”



Fans might not be thrilled with the idea of their team trading down in the draft. (David Eulitt / Getty Images)

Another consideration that prevents teams from accumulating more picks is the number of competing incentives among decision-makers. Teams preach collaboration, alignment and shared vision, but their end goals may conflict directly with different segments of the organization.

A general manager might be more focused on his job security over the long-term direction of the organization. A head coach may believe unreasonably in his own ability to mold a player. Coordinators and position coaches want to add talent to their groups, while scouts may quite literally pound the table for the players they unearthed during the pre-draft process.

"Everybody is spitting falsehoods about how good they think a player is because they want one more bullet in the chamber for themselves," one longtime executive from another professional league said. "That's reasonable and rational, that they would behave in their own self-interest, but you have to find a way to discount it as a GM.

"Is the coach in this situation 20 percent crazy? Is the offensive coordinator 40 percent crazy? Is the linebackers coach 60 percent crazy? Because they might be. They're thinking in a way humans would think."

The former NFL executive suggested the inherent irrationality drove him "a little crazy."

"When you grow up, you think these teams are so good, and they're all trying to pedal in the same direction and win," he added. "And when you're there, you realize that very few are really doing that. Everyone is just looking out for themselves."

Public pressure may prevent some teams from enacting the newer approach. Make seven picks, and you'll be judged seven times. Make three trades and 10 picks, and you'll be judged 13 times. Watch other teams nail picks you traded — or miss on picks you traded for — and negative narratives can quickly form.

Ownership plays a pivotal role. In many cases, franchise owners are men and women who built business empires by making sound decisions over long periods of time. And yet, they struggle to duplicate this approach with their sports team.

Offer Jones \$100 this year or \$274 next year and his answer will unquestionably be the latter. But offer him a third-rounder this year or a second-rounder next year and he's likely to think it over a little longer.

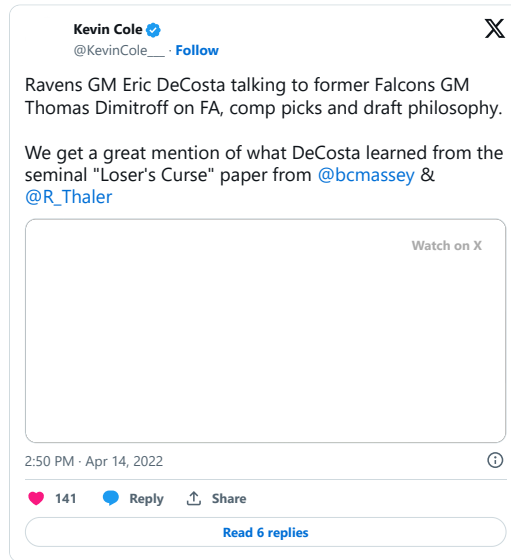
Jones met with Thaler and Massey and fully understood their research results. Then, during his team's draft preparations, he listened to Cowboys executives and scouts. By draft night, Dallas was not trading down but *up* for players the team had barely considered.

Luke Bornn, who from 2017-20 was the vice president of strategy and analytics for the Sacramento Kings and who has since managed multiple European soccer teams alongside former Oakland A's executive Billy Beane — of "Moneyball" fame — has thought a lot about the role of ownership.

"You have an environment in sports where there are very high-dollar decisions being made, and it's simultaneously a very emotional playground in which to make those decisions," Bornn said. "Those two things combined lead to bizarre behavior ... which is sticky. Things happen where you might look back and say, 'Why in the world do they do that?'"

In 2013, Thaler and Massey published another paper, "The loser's curse: Decision making and market efficiency in the National Football League draft," finding that some teams had adapted their processes, but "slowly and insufficiently."

Coincidentally, around that time, Ravens GM Eric DeCosta said the following on a podcast: “There was a really seminal article written in 2005. It was really about the draft and how teams should trade back and always acquire picks — and never trade up.”



DeCosta doubled down in 2021 when a reporter mentioned the Ravens as one of the top drafting teams in the NFL. “We’ve probably had the most picks over that span,” he said. “That goes back to a philosophy that I think Ozzie started back in 1996.”

Other teams have tried to garner more picks with varying success.

The Minnesota Vikings’ analytics staff recommended that GM Rick Spielman amass more picks, so he tried, completing 37 draft-pick trades from 2011 to 2020. Results were mixed, and fans constantly dinged Spielman for moving down.

“I’ve been told that if I could trade my mother for a seventh-round pick, I would do that,” Spielman said. “I always thought that the more opportunities you had, the better odds you had.”

Colts GM Chris Ballard once ended a news conference by saying, “I love ‘dem picks,” teasing reporters about the possibility that they’d sit through the entire first round for no reason. Later on, he explained the thought process behind his comment: “I think we’re pretty good at what we do, but there needs to be a little luck involved, and the more picks you have, the more chances of luck are going to show up.”

Other teams eschew this type of thinking. Jones and [New Orleans Saints](#) GM Mickey Loomis both tend to trade future picks, while [Miami Dolphins](#) GM Chris Grier and [Jacksonville Jaguars](#) GM Trent Baalke tend to trade up.

Thinking back to his time with the Browns, especially during the draft process, Gera is not surprised to hear that teams are still operating so inefficiently nearly 20 years after Thaler and Massey published their paper. During his season with Cleveland, Gera was not even sure who was making the final selection on each pick.

“The thing here that I would tell you is the way the sausage is made is not always pretty or very organized,” Gera said. “And I think it would blow away most fans.”

(Illustration: Sean Reilly / The Athletic; photos: Tom Pennington, Marlin Levison, Harold Hoch / Getty Images)

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