

nfl 2012 draft

DRAFT AT A GLANCE

First round: 7 p.m. Thursday (10 minutes per selection; first round expected to last 3½ hours)
Rounds 2-3: 6 p.m. Friday (seven minutes per selection; two rounds expected to last 4½ hours)
Rounds 4-7: 11 a.m. Saturday (five minutes per selection; four rounds expected to last 7½ hours)

Where: Radio City Music Hall, New York
TV: ESPN, ESPN2 and NFL Network
Vikings selections (10): First round, third overall; second round (35th); third round (66th); fourth round (98th, 128th, 134th); fifth round (138th); sixth round (175th); seventh round (210th, 223rd).

First-round order

1. Indianapolis	9. Carolina	17. Cincinnati	25. Denver
2. Washington (from St. Louis)	10. Buffalo	18. San Diego	26. Houston
3. Vikings	11. Kansas City	19. Chicago	27. New England (from N.O.)
4. Cleveland	12. Seattle	20. Tennessee	28. Green Bay
5. Tampa Bay	13. Arizona	21. Cincinnati	29. Baltimore
6. St. Louis (from Washington)	14. Dallas	22. Cleveland (from Atlanta)	30. San Francisco
7. Jacksonville	15. Philadelphia	23. Detroit	31. New England
8. Miami	16. New York Jets	24. Pittsburgh	32. New York Giants

'Is he a good football player?'

• All the prep work boils down to that basic question when the Vikings make their picks.

By DAN WIEDERER
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During a break from yet another marathon draft planning summit, Vikings assistant general manager George Paton sat down, vigorously rubbed his right eye and sighed.

Paton admitted the always exciting yet seemingly endless draft preparation was producing its share of exhaustion, the evaluations of so many college players suddenly blurring together.

All that analysis, all this discussion. It was forcing everyone involved in the process to seek stimulation.

Red Bull. Coffee. Chewing tobacco. Something always within reach.

"Anything that's a legal vice, we've pretty much conquered," Paton said. "We've probably gone through a couple of cases of Red Bull in the last week alone."

In a nearby conference room, the Vikings' draft board was taking shape, a cluttered matrix of magnets that enabled the front office and coaching staff to discuss prospects in-depth while simultaneously assessing team needs.

"The excitement piece of all this is having the chance to finalize 11 months worth of work that you piecemeal together," said Scott Studwell, the Vikings director of college scouting. "You finally get to look at a picture of your draft and the football players you covet."

With 10 picks this week, including seven in the top 140, the Vikings have plenty of currency to aid their rebuilding efforts. And while their selections will be finalized Thursday, Friday and Saturday, those final draft meetings held earlier this month provided an invaluable cram session to grade and rank every player.

At a conference table in his office, General Manager Rick Spielman opened a thick, three-ring binder labeled "Offense" to provide a quick glimpse into the detailed analysis put together on Stanford quarterback Andrew Luck, the likely No. 1 pick but worth studying nonetheless.

The package included two photographs of Luck with his official measurements from the scouting combine.

After that: a statistical report plus a football biography plus pertinent medical information plus eight different scouting reports compiled by Vikings scouts and coaches. In addition, there was a character assessment, relevant background information and psychological testing results mixed in.

That's a full year study compressed into a five- or six-page report. By draft night, Spielman says he will further condense that onto one large index card.

And yes, at this stage each player has been so hyper-scrutinized that it's easy to believe there's not a single player left who can play a lick.

"Paralysis by analysis," Paton confirmed. "We shoot a lot of holes in kids. It's probably some overkill. But the biggest thing you have to guard against is second-guessing yourself. You don't want to talk yourself out of guys rather than talking yourself into them."

Added Studwell: "With all the pieces of information you pull together with a player's character and background and mentality, the biggest question by far is this: Is he a good football player? Is he a productive football player? There's a tendency for that to get lost in the equation. You have to make sure you always come back to that."

With all that in mind, here are five players the Vikings have drafted since 2007 with behind-the-scenes explanations for why they did so:

THE GREAT HOPE



CHRISTIAN PONDER

Selected: First round, 12th overall (2011)

Draft debate: With the elbow injury and concussion that hindered Ponder during his senior year at Florida State, was there evidence he could become a franchise quarterback?

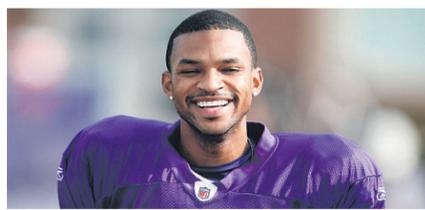
Why the Vikings were sold: They loved what they saw on tape from Ponder during the 2009 season, impressed by his accuracy, arm strength and ability to progress through reads quickly. They loved what they saw at the Senior Bowl in January 2011, where Ponder wound up as MVP, continuing to show his athleticism and an ability to buy second chances.

But the lightbulb went on for good during a visit that a group of Vikings officials — Spielman, coach Leslie Frazier, offensive coordinator Bill Musgrave and quarterbacks coach Craig Johnson — made to Tallahassee, Fla. Ponder's maturity, confidence and intelligence in discussing offensive concepts won the Vikings over.

"He was the only one who could go through our entire offense without taking a note," Spielman said. "It was almost surreal. He didn't have to take notes but yet could regurgitate everything back to us."

Now: Ponder, inconsistent as a rookie, still will be given every opportunity to reward the Vikings' faith, needing to show significant improvement during his second season and hoping to traverse the bridge that takes him from believing he can be a consistent NFL standout to proving he is one.

MEASURABLE MISS



MARCUS McCAULEY

Selected: Third round, 72nd overall (2007)

Draft debate: When a player looks the part, how much value do you place on that?

Why the Vikings were sold: They measure height and weight and speed, strength and agility at the NFL combine. And truth be told, the Vikings looked at McCauley and thought they saw worlds of potential. He was 6-1, 200 pounds. He had blazing speed and was fluid.

"He fit the prototype for what a standout corner is in our league," Spielman said. "Plain and simple."

Alas, the combine has no definitive tests for passion and ambition.

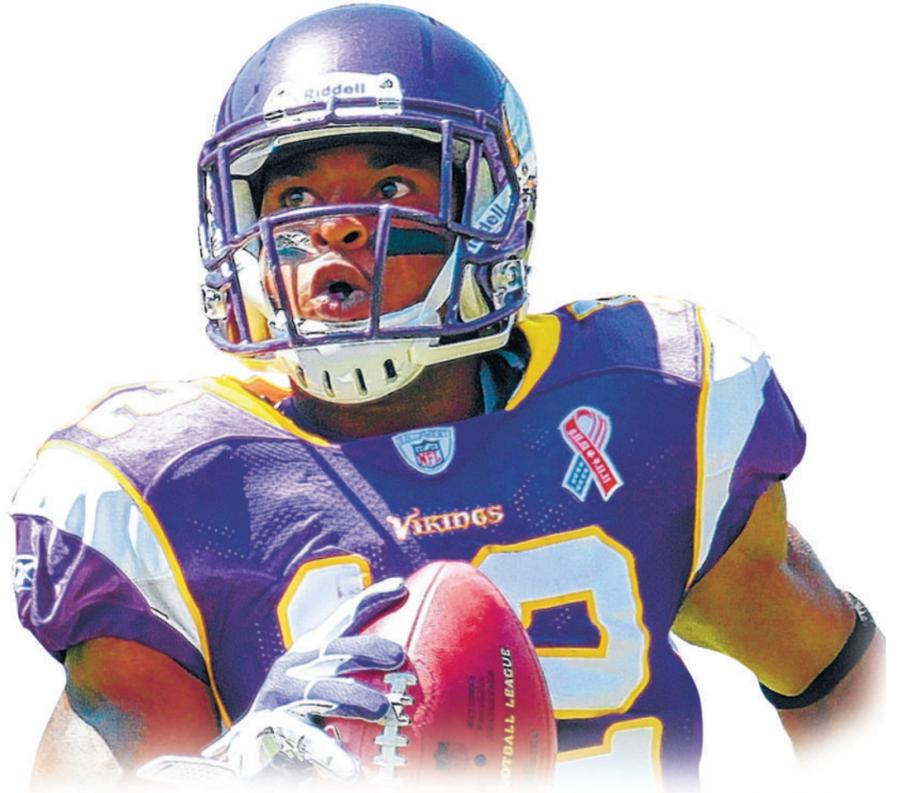
Now: McCauley started nine games as a rookie and played in 26 contests over his two seasons in Minnesota. But the Vikings cut him at the end of training camp in 2009, and he never has been able to stick elsewhere. So what went wrong? The Vikings didn't trust their instincts enough, falling in love with the flashes of brilliance they saw on tape coupled with McCauley's impressive size, speed and athleticism.

But the promising corner didn't have the passion to fuel an emergence.

"That was certainly a big piece of it," Studwell said. "The mentality, the toughness, the competitiveness, the grit. He just didn't have it."

In some ways, it was the cautionary tale of falling too deeply in love with a combine performance without more closely examining what's below the surface.

"You can see when you interview guys and when you go through this process, guys who have that fire in their eyes and love what they do," Spielman said. "That needs to be there."



Star Tribune file photos

THE CALCULATED RISK

PERCY HARVIN

Selected: First round, 22nd overall (2009)

Draft debate: How in the world could a top 10-caliber talent slide into the 20s?

Why the Vikings were sold: There were many reasons to be scared away. Harvin had a reputation for being temperamental and had several marijuana-related transgressions, including a failed drug test at the 2009 combine. Questions also loomed about his size and durability. In all, 20 teams passed on him in the first round, including Detroit twice.

The Vikings? They went into draft day with one thought. Said Spielman: "You're patient. You don't let anybody see you sweat. But internally we were all thinking, 'Please drop to us!'"

The Vikings had sent coach Brad Childress to Florida shortly before the draft to visit with the dynamic receiver. Childress was asked to determine if Harvin was a "Vikings fit" on all levels.

"There were concerns," Studwell said. "If anyone tells you differently, they're lying. But at the end of the day, we felt like it was manageable and everybody signed off on it. We felt like we could bring Percy in and get him to conform to what we would ask him to do."

Ultimately, Harvin's talent was too good to pass up.

"We all talked to people we knew in the Florida program, coaches we knew," Paton said. "And the main thing is everyone said he's a guy you want on your football team. That's what we do. We play football. And this guy loves to play football."

Now: Harvin is coming off his best NFL season, having caught 87 passes for 967 yards and six touchdowns in 2011. He is a huge part of the Vikings' plans. "There have been a few bumps in the road," Studwell said. "And they're probably always will be with Percy. But we're OK handling those."

LATE-ROUND LUCK



JOHN SULLIVAN

Selected: Sixth round, 187th overall (2008)

Draft debate: Did Sullivan's intelligence and work ethic give him a chance to be a serviceable backup?

Why the Vikings were sold: To be frank, the Vikings commemorated the Sullivan selection with an indifferent shrug not a fist pump. The Notre Dame center seemed a bit undersized, a little slow. At the combine, he managed only 21 repetitions of 225 pounds on the bench press. So how did he wind up with the Vikings? Said Studwell: "There is value in every pick. And there's value in every round."

At pick No. 187, the Vikings pegged Sullivan as a likely reserve. They liked what they saw of him at the Senior Bowl and were impressed by his intangibles during the interview process, when Sullivan diagrammed and discussed plays on the whiteboard with remarkable intelligence.

"Now was he going to be ready right off the bat? No," Spielman said. "But because he has smarts, because he has passion for the game, because he's going to fit what our coaches want from a scheme standpoint, we felt comfortable taking a chance. Those kinds of guys, in some capacity, can help you win football games."

Now: Sullivan has become a Spielman favorite, an impact starting center whom the organization rewarded in December with a five-year, \$25 million contract extension. "He was a pleasant surprise from the day we got him," Studwell said. "We got lucky."

RESOLUTE ROLE PLAYER



MISTRAL RAYMOND

Selected: Sixth round, 170th overall (2011)

Draft debate: Could Raymond's mental toughness fuel his promise?

Why the Vikings were sold: A cornerback during his senior season at South Florida, Raymond also had the versatility to play safety. Yes, there were notable concerns with his fluidity and thin frame. But in getting to know Raymond during the pre-draft process, the Vikings fell in love with his character, deeply admiring the resolve he had shown through some galling personal tragedy.

Raymond had persevered through a horrific incident in which his mother's house was firebombed and his sister was shot seven times. He endured again after his mom died from a lung illness. He pressed on after his half-sister died. And he turned himself into an NFL prospect even after beginning his college career at a small junior college in Iowa because no programs had recruited him.

During a visit to Winter Park last spring, Raymond sat in Frazier's office and emanated positive energy.

"Learning about him as a person gave us an idea that this guy could overcome odds," Frazier said. "And in pro football, that's a big part of succeeding. When things aren't right, how are you going to deal with it? I just felt like if this guy got an opportunity, he would make the most of it."

Now: Raymond played sparingly on defense as a rookie, seeing his most extensive action in the final month after the secondary had been gutted. But the Vikings have no depth at safety right now and are banking on Raymond taking a big step forward in 2012.