THE NFL DRAFT REPORT PRESENTS

THE 2019 SAFETY DRAFT CLASS

That old saying "safety in numbers" will not apply to this draft class. While about nine of the safeties in this class will likely be taken within the first two days of the draft, much like the cornerback position, the rush on defensive linemen could squeeze the safeties out of the first round, or at least until the tail-end of Day One.

Playing safety in the National Football League is undergoing quite a few changes. No longer do teams require their safeties to stay deep in the zone, as they like the more physical guys that can step up in the box and operate like a Cover-2 linebacker. Arizona saw their defense become shutdown caliber by moving Deone Buchanan to right inside linebacker a few years ago and Carolina also incorporated a similar process for veteran Thomas Davis on the outside of the second level.

Generally, the safeties operate under their team’s “cover” system. In a Cover-One scheme, the strong safety will usually stay with the tight end in pass coverage and the free safety will align in center-field. The strong safety operates on the side of the field where multiple receivers are stationed, no more than a few yards off the line of scrimmage and close to the tight end. The free safety can then drop back in the deep areas of the middle of the field, maintaining eye contact on the quarterback.

In Cover-Two assignments, both of the safeties stay in the deep third area of the zone, generally 10-to-15 yards back from the line of scrimmage and an equal distance from each other along the sidelines. The free safety needs to cover the deeper part and stay with any receiver that enters the zone. The strong safety keeps his eyes on the ball carrier, ready to step up and plug the inside rush lanes or angle to the runner if the opponent gets past the line of scrimmage. Both safeties check to make sure they do not allow any receiver to run a deep route down the middle.

In Cover-Three schemes, you might see the safeties work in unison with a slot cornerback or an outside linebacker. The free safety will usually stay deep in the zone and assist both cornerbacks covering along the sidelines. The free safety will likely think “pass” but if the ball carrier crosses the line of scrimmage, he will come downhill to tackle.

The strong safety will align a few yards off the tight end and must cover the under-zone areas to prevent the slot receivers or backs from having success on screens. He also must be in pursuit and take proper angles if it is a running play past the line of scrimmage. Meanwhile, the free safety keys on the quarterback, closing with urgency when the ball leaves the passer’s hands.

For any rookie, their first year in the NFL is usually a learning experience. Their playing time might increase during the course of the season, but for the most, playing time will likely come on special team action or in a mop-up role. During that player’s second season, he needs to begin to apply what he learned during his rookie year. He should be prepared to enter camp challenging for a starting job and at the least, be ready to contribute. By the third year, that player needs to produce at the level expected when he was drafted. Failure to do so will see his team probably look for a replacement during that year’s draft process.

VETERAN FREE AGENT SAFETY MARKET VERY ACTIVE THIS OFF-SEASON

Maybe the 2018 off-season was an aberration, as several high profile safeties in that market found few, if any offers coming their way. Eric Reid even had to wait for the season to commence and injuries occur before Carolina came knocking at his door. One year later, the Panthers recruit finally got the deal he should have received from any other team - three years for a total of 22.5MM.

There were fifty-seven safeties that were on 2018 NFL rosters to enter the free agency pool, with twenty-seven of them securing new deals. Among the twenty-seven new deals, twelve received multi-year contracts, including five safeties going home with four-year deals. Nine of them were guaranteed a minimum of ten million dollars to ink their new deals.

Seven safeties actually returned to the teams they played for in 2018, but just two of them - Reid and Tennessee's Kenny Vaccaro (who, like Reid, was part of the 2018 safety snub) - walked away with multiple years on their deals. Among those that signed, just three are strong safeties - Reid, Vaccaro and Briean Boddy-Calhoun, who left Cleveland to sign a one-year 900K deal with the Houston Texans.

After first contemplating about placing the franchise tag on Landon College (11.2MM), the Giants decided their former second rounder was not worth the dash for cash. Citing shoulder woes as the issue, Collins also had issues in the locker room with players and management that the coaching staff felt they could do without. Division rivals, Washington, was ready to pounce and pounce they did, as Collins went home with 44.5MM in guarantees on a six-year deal that will average out to fourteen million per season.

Kansas City let Eric Berry go after they also kicked out fourteen million for his replacement in 2019, as former Houston Texan, Tyrann Mathieu will average that over the next three seasons. Earl Thomas was expected to bolt Seattle, but Dallas seemed like his logical destination. However, the Pokes, short on cash and needing to address their defensive line, could not match the four years and fifty-five million the former Seahawk got to replace Eric Weddle in Baltimore.

Meanwhile, Weddle takes his All-Pro performances back to the west coast, as the Rams inked the former Raven to two years for a total of 10.5 million. The move then led to Rams All-Pro safety LaMarcus Joyner heading up the Pacific Highway, where Gruden and Company handed him forty-two million (21.3MM guaranteed) for the next four years.

Vastly underrated Chicago Bears safety Adrian Amos, a fifth round steal, left the Windy City, joining Collins, Thomas, Joyner and Vaccaro with at least a four-year contract. His deal with Green Bay will see him going to the bank with nine million during each of the next four years. That deal included twelve million in guarantees.

Below is a list of the safeties that secured multi-season contracts;

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| PLAYER | AGE | FROM | TO | YRS | DOLLARS | AAV | TOTAL  GTD | 2019 CAP |
| Landon Collins (F) | 25 | NYG | WAS | 6 | 84,000,000 | 14,000,000 | 44,500,000 | 4,000,000 |
| Earl Thomas (F) | 30 | SEA | BAL | 4 | 55,000,000 | 13,750,000 | 32,000,000 | 7,000,000 |
| Tyrann Mathieu (F) | 27 | HOU | KC | 3 | 42,000,000 | 14,000,000 | 26,800,000 | 5,933,333 |
| LaMarcus Joyner (F) | 28 | LAR | OAK | 4 | 42,000,000 | 10,500,000 | 21,300,000 | 9,050,000 |
| Adrian Amos (F) | 26 | CHI | GB | 4 | 36,000,000 | 9,000,000 | 12,000,000 | 5,900,000 |
| Kareem Jackson (D) | 31 | HOU | DEN | 3 | 33,000,000 | 11,000,000 | 23,000,000 | 6,000,000 |
| Kenny Vaccaro (S) | 28 | TEN | TEN | 4 | 24,000,000 | 6,000,000 | 11,500,000 | 3,156,250 |
| Tashaun Gipson (F) | 29 | JAC | HOU | 3 | 22,500,000 | 7,500,000 | 11,250,000 | 7,500,000 |
| Eric Reid (S) | 27 | CAR | CAR | 3 | 22,000,000 | 7,350,000 | 10,000,000 | 4,406,250 |
| Eric Weddle (F) | 34 | BAL | LAR | 2 | 10,502,050 | 5,251,025 | 6,251,526 | 5,751,525 |
| Antoine Bethea (F) | 35 | ARI | NYG | 2 | 6,500,000 | 3,250,000 | 3,475,000 | 3,625,000 |
| Terrence Brooks (F) | 27 | NYJ | NE | 2 | 3,250,000 | 1,625,000 | 1,305,000 | 1,450,000 |

Thirteen others signed one-year deals, as teams wanted most to come in and prove it before talking long-term contract. The interesting factor is their age, as only new Philadelphia Eagle and former Minnesota Viking, Andrew Sendejo, is the only one from this group over age thirty (31). Three of the one-year deals see those players return to the teams they played for in 2018, including Jimmie Ward, who received 4.5 million from San Francisco, despite not having a role in their secondary.

Four of those that accepted one-year deals are currently listed as a starter for their new teams - HaHa Clinton-Dix (Washington to Chicago for three million), Clayton Geathers (stood with the Colts for three million), Adrian Phillips (returns to the Chargers for two million) and Kentrell Brice (left Green Bay for Tampa Bay, at one million). In addition to Ward not having a starting job, Sendejo got 1.3 million to join Dallas from Minnesota, as the Pokes also hedged their bets at free safety by handing George Iloka 1.02 million after he was surprisingly cut by Cincinnati.

Here is a look at the veteran safeties who signed one-year deals;

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| PLAYER | AGE | FROM | TO | YRS | DOLLARS | AAV | TOTAL  GTD | 2019 CAP |
| Jimmie Ward (F) | 28 | SF | SF | 1 | 4,500,000 | 4,500,000 | 3,000,000 | 3,843,750 |
| HaHa Clinton-Dix (F) | 26 | WAS | CHI | 1 | 3,000,000 | 3,000,000 | 500,000 | 3,250,000 |
| Clayton Geathers (F) | 27 | IND | IND | 1 | 2,750,000 | 2,750,000 | 1,250,000 | 3,000,000 |
| Adrian Phillips (F) | 27 | LAC | LAC | 1 | 2,000,000 | 2,000,000 | 1,250,000 | 2,000,000 |
| Andrew Sendejo (F) | 31 | MIN | PHI | 1 | 1,300,000 | 1,300,000 | 500,000 | 1,300,000 |
| George Iloka (F) | 29 | MIN | DAL | 1 | 1,020,000 | 1,020,000 | 300,000 | 735,000 |
| Kentrell Brice (D) | 25 | GB | TB | 1 | 1,000,000 | 1,000,000 | - | 975,000 |
| Andrew Adams (D) | 26 | TB | DET | 1 | 920,000 | 920,000 | 100,000 | 901,250 |
| Briean Boddy-Calhoun (S) | 26 | CLE | HOU | 1 | 900,000 | 900,000 | - | 900,000 |
| Josh Shaw (F) | 27 | TB | ARI | 1 | 895,000 | 895,000 | 45,000 | 735,000 |
| Antone Exum (F) | 28 | SF | SF | 1 | 855,000 | 855,000 | 50,000 | 695,000 |
| Curtis Riley (F) | 27 | NYG | OAK | 1 | 810,000 | 810,000 | 165,000 | 810,000 |
| Antonio Hamilton (D) | 26 | NYG | NYG | N/A | - | - | - | - |

MATCHING UP THIS YEAR'S SAFETIES WITH TEAMS IN NEED

Prior to the veteran free agency period, seven teams gave strong indications that they would use either Day One or Two picks to fill the needs that they have at the two safety positions. With twenty-seven veterans moving on during the free agent period, including Green Bay getting a vastly underrated talent in Adrian Amos from rival Chicago, the Packers could still dip back into the draft pool during Day Two. While Amos and Josh Jones can play both spots, a hard hitter like Maryland's Darnell Savage (pick #44) could allow Amos to slide to the slot corner position during obvious passing situations.

The Eagles and Kansas City want to continue their redevelopments in the secondary and could use their first round picks to do so, but at the moment, outside of Mississippi State's Jonathan Abram, there are doubts that any safeties will hear their names called on Day One. Abram has the pass coverage quickness teams look for, but he is also an impact hitter whose upper body strength could see him step into the second level for Cover-2 duties. The former Georgia product (left for personal reasons) came into his own at Mississippi State and his ability to keep the action in front of him makes him a nice compliment next to Tyrann Mathieu in the Chiefs secondary (#29).

The Eagles and Packers could also invest a first rounder in Abram, but the Eagles have more pressing needs at cornerback and on the offensive line that might be more of a priority. If the Eagles do go the cornerback route first, that would give them a chance to move Jalen Mills back to his more natural position inside the defensive backfield.

Green Bay needs more help on both defensive lines and possibly even be enticed with Ed Oliver or T.J. Hockenson with pick #12, but at #30, could Delaware swingman Nasir Adderley make sense? First, he's a legacy, as his cousin, Herb was an All-Pro defensive back for the team and second, that versatility and experience at Rover in college could help the Pack fill a pressing need at slot corner that has been vacant since Casey Hayward bolted for the Chargers.

The second round might be a more logical residence for the two safeties mentioned above, but that round will also see Savage, Chauncey Gardner-Johnson of Florida, Iowa's Amani Hooker, Taylor Rapp of Washington and versatile Virginia standout, Juan Thornhill, all be off the board by pick #64.

San Francisco is showing keen interest in the Washington Cougar and are not worried about Taylor Rapp's poor 40-yard time at the NFL Scouting Combine. Some folks run 4.3 in their undies/4.7 with their equipment on. Rapp runs 4.7 in shorts and 4.7 with his uni - let's just say he carries his equipment well.

With ten safeties on the roster, the 49ers expect Jaquiski Tartt to remain at strong safety, but even after re-signing Jimmie Ward to a one-year deal, the team was on the verge of trading him away at the deadline last year before the deal fell through. Rapp, more of a strong-side guy, but he has proven to be versatile in three years with the U-W first unit. One look at Rapp and Abram, chiseled torsos seem to be the rage. He's a physical striker in the Steve Atwater mold who excels closing on the ball. A true tackler, he is one of those safeties you want if you system requires players at that position to play in the box vs. the run. The 49ers might have to use their second rounder (#36), as Jacksonville (#38), Tampa Bay (#39), Green Bay (#44), Miami (#48) and Cleveland (#49) would not hesitate pulling the trigger if the Cougar standout is still available in round two.

The Jaguars have a big hole that needed to be filled at free safety. They found a keeper at strong safety in last year's third round selection, Rodney Harrison-Alabama, and they could do a wash-rinse-repeat if fellow Crimson Tide safety Deionte Thompson is there during Day Two action. Yes, he does have a frail-looking frame, but he has the range of a cornerback and you have to like his moxie on the field. Once the pass is in the air, he suddenly becomes a ball-hawk. He has exceptional Cover-1 skills and he's not the type who will shy away from contact in attempts to wrap up the outside leg of a ball carrier in run support.

Thompson could also be the object of affection in Tampa Bay, as they are another team on the lookout for safety help during the draft's second day. They would not mind if either Darnell Savage or Nasir Adderley are there when they choose at #39, but let's not count out Virginia's Juan Thornhill, who this ole scout accidentally referred to as "Josh" in my previous report, in regards to the Cavalier switching to cornerback due to his fantastic coverage skills. With a big hole to fill at left corner, the Bucs have to be placing Thornhill into that "gotta have" category.

Like Drew Carey's little yodeler, it has been all uphill for Thornhill the last few years. In 2017, he not only broke up twelve passes and picked off four others, but he made five tackles in the backfield. He tacked on 98 tackles, five more for losses, snared six thefts and batted away seven balls last season, despite being used in a variety of secondary roles. Few play with their back to the ball as well as this safety, but the way he jams receivers and attacks the ball in flight, I'd much rather him roam the field as a free safety to take advantage of the range he has moving around the field.

Miami, with pick #48, are also high on Thornhill, as starter Reshard Jones remains in roster limbo, with the team hoping to find a taker for his contract. If Thornhill is gone, the team could stay in-state, with Florida's Chauncey Gardner-Johnson (#48) or Miami's Sheldrick Redwine (#116, fourth round) as viable options. With Minkah Fitzpatrick on the strong side and T.J. McDonald at free safety, having a third option, especially if Jones is sent packing, might be a good move. Remember, they face Tom Brady and Company twice per year, a team with a slew of slot receivers that are generally the safeties' duties to handle.

Gardner-Johnson, the Outback Bowl MVP, is a heavy striker who also has the speed to handle zone duties. He enjoys using his hands to dislodge receivers from their route's progression, especially the tight ends. He has smooth transition skills and great recovery burst, but is the type that will need a smart free safety to position him, as he's often fooled by play action and misdirections.

Miami's Sheldrick Redwine, who will probably see his secondary mates Jaquan Johnson and Mike Jackson join him as draftees, is blessed with 4.44 speed, but like Chauncey-Johnson, he does have lapses on the field - more hesitation than anything, as it does take him a bit to process the action. Still, he has experience at slot corner, hits with good force and has that second gear needed to recover when receivers get behind him.

Three teams with pressing secondary needs that need to be addressed during Day Two action are the Cleveland Browns, Houston Texans and Dallas Cowboys, all lamenting big losses during the off-season. The Browns threw former first rounder Jabrill Peppers into the deal to get Odell Beckham and the Texans lost a solid leader why the Honey Badger replaced Eric Berry in Kansas City. Dallas' loss came from their indecision on whether to jump into the action for a player who begged their head coach to "get after him" in free agency - Earl Thomas.

Knowing that John Dorsey is one of the better talent evaluators on this planet, a perfect marriage for him with pick #49 has to be Iowa's Amani Hooker. The Hawkeye was selected the Big Ten Conference's Defensive Back of the Year after posting 65 tackles with four pass thefts and seven break-ups in 2018. In this day and age where teams like interchangeable parts at safety, Hooker can easily play either spot. He can lend support vs. the run and excels in the downhill game. He is very alert, much like Eric Reid and easily recognizes route progression and his numbers show that he has obvious ball skills. On top of it, he's one of the best gunners in college and who does not love a special teams ace?

Houston needs a thumper in their defensive backfield, but you have to wonder if they would invest a second round pick (#55) or unearth a third round sleeper (#86) with one from my old school, Colorado. Evan Worthington might be unfamiliar to most, but the Buffs' standout was a three-sport star under the surname, White.

Looking for a new start after he was suspended for the 2016 season, he changed his last name to Worthington, his mom's maiden name. In the two years since, he's delivered 154 tackles with four interceptions and thirteen pass deflections before his 2018 campaign ended after nine games due to a concussion.

Like Thornhill, Worthington could be an invaluable, interchangeable part for some lucky team. He has that well-built body that makes him a forceful tackler, along with showing range to roam the field. With his transition out of the backpedal, he could also do a pretty efficient job in moments where he has to handle man coverage. Last season, receivers vs. him gained just five percent of their yardage after the catch.

Day Three is where teams start looking at guys with redeeming value, yet have a few blemishes. Round Four could be the place when Marshall's Malik Grant, Miami's Jaquan Johnson, and Utah's Mike Blair could hear their names called. The next wave of safeties should include a few stars who lost a bit of luster in 2018 - Wisconsin's D'Cota Dixon, Boston College's Lukas Denis and USC's Marvell Tell III. Lukas' team-mate, Will Harris has a chance to slip into the third round, as the Rams are looking for a Lamarcus Joyner replacement.

Indiana's Jonathan Crawford, Oregon's Ugo Amadi, Wyoming's Andrew Wingard, Mike Bell-Fresno State, Mike Edwards-Kentucky, Texas Tech's Jah'Shawn Johnson and Temple's Delvon Randall are guys to look for during the final stages of the draft.

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