

## 2024 S'FELD SCOUTING SERVICES NFL DRAFT PREVIEW

### 1. Chicago

Caleb Williams

QB

USC

*S'feld Services can't find one single talking head who doesn't absolutely think this has been a slam dunk pick for the Chicago Bears since the end of the season. Well, we can tell you that if you are looking for the conventional analysis and breakdown, you've come to the wrong place. SSS is not new to the draft game and if we had a dollar for every "generational" QB that comes along every year, we could have retired from writing this preview a long, long time ago. Recency bias leads you to believe that no one has been as coveted or acclaimed as Caleb Williams, but the USC signal caller is no different from last year's version (Bryce Young) or previous iterations Trevor Lawrence, Zach Wilson, Trey Lance, Kyler Murray, Jared Goff and Carson Wentz for example. There is absolutely zero guarantee that Williams will be anything more than an above average QB at best and let me get to the real reason why SSS doesn't buy into the fact that Williams is going to improve Chicago's stock overnight. Fit. That's right. Fit. Tell me the most successful QBs in Bears history, which dates back over 100 years. Your answer? Sid Luckman and Jim McMahon. McMahon played with arguably the best running back and best defense of all time, and Sid Luckman? He played during the T-formation days of the 1940s. And while General Manager Ryan Poles has made some fantastic moves in Chi Town, he dropped the ball on one of the easiest decisions he had to make – he retained head coach Matt Eberflus. Eberflus is a wonderful person. However, he is a substandard football coach, and when it is widely known you are bringing in the top QB available and a generational talent according to some, then why would you pair that QB with a defensive guy and a rotational offensive coordinator? OCs never last long in Chicago and were part of the reason why Justin Fields never developed. Fields with an offensive-minded coach could be dangerous. With Eberflus? Just another blown opportunity. Poles could have paired Williams with a top offensive mind, but instead he retained a defensive coach and what will likely be another turnstile OC in Shane Waldron, which leads us to believe progress may not come as soon as people believe for the new Bears QB.*

**\*THE EXTRA POINT\*** – *The Bears have the whole draft in the palm of their hand after pulling off what may have been one of the biggest thefts in NFL history last year when they traded the #1 overall pick to the Carolina Panthers in exchange for two 1<sup>st</sup> round picks, two 2<sup>nd</sup> round picks and wideout DJ Moore. Carolina is currently kicking themselves for not only missing out on the #1 overall pick this year, but for drafting Bryce Young ahead of CJ Stroud, which is looking like a second colossal error. Since the Panthers don't have a 1<sup>st</sup> Round pick, we will take this time to point out that the reason Carolina is the new laughingstock of the NFL is they boast the worst owner in all football - David Tepper. Tepper undercut his head coach Frank Reich, fired him midseason, watched his #1 overall pick flounder while the #2 overall pick (Stroud) flourished, and eventually threw a drink on fans at the end of a game last season while watching his embarrassment of a team hand the Chicago Bears the #1 pick and Caleb Williams. Things went from bad to worse this offseason when the best he could do for a head coach was hiring Dave Canales from Tampa Bay, a significantly underwhelming hire. A lot was made about the shortcomings of former Panthers owner Jerry Richardson, but Panthers fans long for a return to respectability and no longer have a sweet disposition after falling into the Tepper trap.*

|                      |                       |           |            |
|----------------------|-----------------------|-----------|------------|
| <b>2. Washington</b> | <b>Jayden Daniels</b> | <b>QB</b> | <b>LSU</b> |
|----------------------|-----------------------|-----------|------------|

*If you are looking for the QB that SSS believes could take the biggest first step of any of the six potential 1<sup>st</sup> Round QBs, Daniels is it. While Caleb Williams is known as the best “off schedule” QB in the draft, SSS believes that Daniels may be the best on-schedule QB in the draft. The reason Williams gets so much credit for making things happen when a play breaks down, is because people aren’t looking deep enough to see that Williams creates off schedule plays when there is no reason to be off schedule! Williams loves moving outside the pocket, but in many instances, had he set his feet and slid a few steps to the left or the right, he would have been just fine. This is where Daniels has the ability to give you more by doing less. He has great pocket presence and SSS views him as being more of an efficient runner like Russell Wilson, only taking the running lanes when all passing options are exhausted. And to be able to pair him with new OC Kliff Kingsbury? That is a match made in heaven. Kingsbury may have struggled as a head coach, but he will excel as an OC, not having to worry about anything other than bringing the best out of Daniels.*

**\*THE EXTRA POINT\*** – *While several others are debating whether this pick will be UNC QB Drake Maye or Daniels at #2, SSS had this pick locked in months ago. The tell-tale sign that this pick was going to be Daniels was when the Commanders signed Marcus Mariota as their backup QB. Much like the Baltimore Ravens did using mobile QB Tyler Huntley to back up Lamar Jackson, the Commanders are looking for their backup (Mariota) to have a similar style as their draftee. The best teams have backups that match what their starter does so that in the event the starter goes down, they don’t have to change their offense completely to accommodate the backup. Daniels and Mariota’s styles are a symbiotic match unlike Mariota and Mays.*

|                       |                   |           |            |
|-----------------------|-------------------|-----------|------------|
| <b>3. New England</b> | <b>Drake Maye</b> | <b>QB</b> | <b>UNC</b> |
|-----------------------|-------------------|-----------|------------|

*After more than 20 years of having their draft and essentially every other part of their organization controlled by Bill Belichick, Patriots Director of Scouting Eliot Wolf will put his stamp on the new era of “The Patriot Way” with the 3<sup>rd</sup> pick of the 2024 draft. SSS finds it hard to believe that with this rich of a QB crop and with the Patriots drafting as high as they have since they selected Drew Bledsoe #1 overall in the 1993 draft, that they won’t go QB. UNC QB Drake Maye may be the most polarizing of the QBs available, but the Patriots need to hit reset after a few dismal post-Brady years, and Maye has immense big-play ability. Maye is a big QB with good mobility that can sling it all over the field, but his play last season at UNC was very inconsistent. That being said, you don’t dump Mac Jones just to stand pat with Jacoby Brissett and Bailey Zappe. It was clear to see that Belichick’s treatment of Jones was detrimental to his progress and new head coach Jerod Mayo has even referenced that the Patriots will be building their players up under the new regime. If the Patriots can build around Maye and support him through some early ups and downs that all QBs face, then they may revert to drafting in the 20s as opposed to the top 5.*

**\*THE EXTRA POINT\*** – *Most pundits have the #3 pick pegged on New England taking a QB or trading out to rebuild a team that has a plethora of needs and could use all the draft picks they can get. And while SSS ultimately slotted Drake Maye to the Pats here, we do wonder if there is an outside chance that the Krafts, after watching all the success that former nemesis Peyton Manning*



to go to #5!" It sure is, but the typical trade chart value has been inflated like home interest rates and you will have to overpay at the highest level to make this type of move into the top 5. And while Drake Maye is likely the target the Vikings want most, especially since new Viking QB Coach Josh McCown coached Maye in high school, the Vikings can't trade any higher than Pick #5 as the top four teams aren't budging. That leaves their second-most reasonable target, McCarthy. While McCarthy wasn't the flashiest QB in college due to Michigan's run-driven offense, several teams believe he may be the most coachable as he is dedicated to playing within his limits and will not be a QB who puts you in a bad position. If efficiency is the trait you desire most, than JJ is your man, and Minnesota does have the weapons and the ability to put him in a place to succeed.

**\*THE EXTRA POINT\*** – The Vikings will likely have to give up a king's ransom to move into the #5 slot for multiple reasons. A.) A QB-rich draft always raises the trade value for the team that possesses the pick like the Chargers. B.) The cat's out of the bag that Minnesota GM Kwesi Adofo-Mensah almost gave up the farm to get current Colts QB Anthony Richardson last year, which means teams know he will pay. C.) The #23 pick really isn't as valuable as it appears as a 1<sup>st</sup> Rounder with the elite level players all disappearing around picks 16-18. D.) The Vikings have little leverage and will likely be competing with at least two or three other teams to get to this spot as the Chargers are the highest-picking team likely looking to trade out. Adofo-Mensah has struggled mightily in his first two drafts with the Vikings and it can be argued he has hit on only two or maybe three of his 15 total picks in that time. He has no margin for error this year in what can be labeled as a high-stress situation for the Vikings to make up for lost drafts by getting their future QB to not only succeed, but make their premier player WR Justin Jefferson happy.

| 6. New York Giants | Rome Odunze | WR | Washington |
|--------------------|-------------|----|------------|
|--------------------|-------------|----|------------|

The Giants have tried to find a true #1 wideout since Odell Beckham Jr. was dealt to the Cleveland Browns after the 2018 season. The team has only had one winning season since then. While there are many who feel the Giants could either trade up for a QB or take one here, SSS is under the belief that QB Daniel Jones hasn't been given a true chance to succeed with a real passing threat the past few seasons. Enter Washington standout WR Rome Odunze. Many have Odunze slipping to #9 or later in the draft, but S'feld feels that Odunze is the better play than speedster Malik Nabers from LSU. Odunze is the ultimate security blanket and catches anything thrown his way. A great comparison was recently made that Odunze's game is very Larry Fitzgerald-like and SSS approves that message. If you want to know why Washington QB Michael Penix Jr. has emerged as a 1<sup>st</sup> round QB in this year's draft it is largely due to being able to just throw it to Odunze and let him find a way to make a play. He more than makes up for not having tremendous speed by being uber-physical and manhandling opposing defensive backs not only on plays for the ball but in getting separation at the line. While it may be easy to get sucked into the showstopping plays that Nabers makes, Odunze has the every down ability to hurt you on the first, second and third levels of the field and he will revive Daniel Jones career in the same way he revived Penix's.

**\*THE EXTRA POINT\*** – It's hard to believe that Giants head coach Brian Daboll is entering the year under the gun but if Daniel Jones doesn't show improvement in 2024, Daboll's seat may be hotter than most expect. Daboll's predecessors Joe Judge (2020-21), Pat Shurmer (2018-19), Steve Spagnuolo (2017) and Ben McAdoo (2016-17) all failed to make it past two years as the head man in New York. That tells SSS that the Mara ownership group would get rid of Daboll in a New York minute if they thought he was underperforming after Year 3.

**7. Tennessee Joe Alt OT Notre Dame**

Everybody gather around. Do you hear that? Do you hear that? Complete silence. With all the hubbub, rumors and spectacle that is taking place among the teams with top 5 picks, Tennessee is a team that is laying low in the weeds and hoping to fade into the background so that no one takes the player that makes the most sense for them. Notre Dame OT Joe Alt. A player so devoid of attention that even his name is boring. But you know what isn't boring? His game. With teams scrambling and gathering as much information as they can on the top QBs and WRs, the Titans see the top tackle fall to them at #7 and they can't submit the card with his name on it fast enough. You might as well call him Control-Alt-Delete because he will reboot the Titans system in no time and give QB Will Levis some breathing room to operate. The Notre Dame standout is the system update required to set up a firewall preventing opposing defensive linemen from compromising the core.

**\*THE EXTRA POINT\*** – It's a new dawn and a new day in Tennessee as Titans owner Amy Adams Strunk fired head coach Mike Vrabel after last season and elected to go in a different direction with new head coach Brian Callahan. Thoughts? SSS doesn't like it, and even more surprising than Bill Belichick being left out in the cold when the coaching openings were filled, we are stunned that no team offered Vrabel a gig. That would have been unimaginable a few years ago but here we are and Strunk seems to want to do things her way, a new way. Never mind that Vrabel was undercut with a GM who traded away his most valuable asset a few years ago in AJ Brown but couldn't find a player remotely close to replacing him. The issues in Tennessee lie at the feet of many folks, but SSS doesn't believe Vrabel was one of them.

**8. Atlanta Dallas Turner OLB Alabama**

SSS has long predicted that there will be a few minor surprises in this draft and a couple major ones. One spot where a major one could take place is with the Falcons at #8. SSS believes that new head coach Raheem Morris will be very enticed as a defensive mastermind to have the option at #8 of taking the first defensive player off the board with do-everything Bama OLB Dallas Turner. However, if SSS was controlling the Falcons draft, the play here should be Georgia TE Brock Bowers. Bowers teamed with QB Kirk Cousins would give this offense more juice than Orenthal, and while the Falcons have added a few pieces to the offense, they have too many "potential" playmakers and not enough actual ones. And don't get us wrong, Turner will be a tremendous addition to a sleepy good defense that finished 11<sup>th</sup> overall in the NFL last season. It was once said of former Chicago Bear linebacker Brian Urlacher that he really started to figure out how to be great when he stopped overthinking and just started playing downhill. The same can be said for Turner. Just put him on the field and let him see ball, find ball. There may be no other defensive player in this draft that can

match his closing burst on quarterbacks and running backs. His athleticism and ability to get off blocks is otherworldly.

**\*THE EXTRA POINT\*** – Did anybody have a more eventful offseason than the Atlanta Falcons? They found a way to get the top free agent QB in Kirk Cousins and flirted with hiring the greatest coach in NFL history in Bill Belichick. SSS was baffled by the Falcons decision to pass on Belichick, but we are starting to warm to the idea of Raheem Morris getting another crack as a head coach and learning from his mistakes the first time around in Tampa Bay. With a younger team and a veteran QB already in place, Belichick may have not been the right fit with this sort of team, and Morris does have the ability in a weak division to get off to a fast start in the A-T-L.

**9. Chicago Malik Nabers WR LSU**

Draft slot #9 is going to create the happiest of problems for the Chicago Bears. Already having the #1 player in the draft secured, the Bears now find that they have LSU WR Malik Nabers, Georgia TE Brock Bowers or the ability to trade out of the pick to add to their arsenal. SSS initially believed that the Bears would trade out of this position as they only have four total picks (#1, #9, #75 & #122) in this year's draft. And while GM Ryan Pace knows this is a premium place to pick up selections, he can't pass up on the idea of giving QB Caleb Williams the cast of DJ Moore, Keenan Allen and Malik Nabers. I think you could argue this would be the best receiving corps in the NFL. Nabers is many teams' #1 overall receiver and while DJ Moore is ultra-durable, Nabers would be a fantastic insurance plan for the often-injured Allen. Bowers would be another incredible offensive add here but with current TE Cole Kmet already playing very well and secured to a long-term deal, the Bears stand pat and hope Nabers plays like another LSU wide receiver in the NFC North.

**\*THE EXTRA POINT\*** – SSS was a little hard on GM Ryan Pace earlier for not bringing in an offensive mind at head coach to work with a new QB and newly remodeled offense. And while he may have passed on getting an offensive guru to run his team, he didn't pass on adding offensive pieces to make life for Williams a whole lot easier. Trading a 4<sup>th</sup> Round pick for Keenan Allen was a thing of beauty and regardless of what the Bears do at #9, Williams will have two tried and true veteran receivers and quality leaders in Moore and Allen to provide him with even more confidence than he already has.

**10. New York Jets Brock Bowers TE Georgia**

Don't screw this up Jets. You have an elite QB who has one more gunfight in him with Aaron Rodgers. Make sure when he looks down at that six shooter of his that you haven't left him with blanks. If you look back recently at the top QBs to have played our game, you know what you find? Elite tight ends. Brady & Gronk. Mahomes and Kelce. Manning and Dallas Clark. Brees and Jimmy Graham. When you stop causing paralysis by overanalysis and just keep things simple, it's amazing how clear things become. And Bowers is "him" as the kids like to say. We talk each year about this guy is going to be a great tight end and that guy is going to be a great tight end, but none of note in the last five years even hold a candle to what Bowers is going to do. You think Detroit found lightning in a bottle with Iowa TE Sam LaPorta last year? They absolutely did and guess what -

Bowers has a chance to make LaPorta's contributions look meager. He is that good. Teams that pass on Bowers will regret it and if you want to milk the last few drops of whatever Rodgers has left, then take a TE who runs routes like an elite receiver and blocks like a left tackle.

**\*THE EXTRA POINT\*** – One of the reasons that Bowers makes sense here for New York is that they actually did a nice job adding core pieces to their offensive line in the offseason with offensive tackles Tyron Smith (formerly of the Cowboys) and Morgan Moses (formerly of the Ravens). It is easy to see that the Jets brass understands the importance of the 2024 season and while many were surprised that head coach Robert Saleh was able to return, let's be honest, he wasn't winning with Zach Wilson. Give Saleh a healthy Rodgers, even at his current age of 40, and SSS believes you will see how much of a difference one or two players can make.

**\*TRADE\* (Minnesota trades with LA Chargers, giving up Pick #11, #23, a 2025 1<sup>st</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> to acquire Pick #5)**

**11. L.A. Chargers                      JC Latham                      OT                      Alabama**

You know what SSS loves more than anything in the draft? Seeing what Jim Harbaugh does. There may not be another coach in the league who thinks he can win with any player more than Jimmy H. Austin Ekeler. Nah, don't need him. Keenan Allen? Give me a 4<sup>th</sup> Rounder and he's yours. Trading down in the draft from Pick #5 to Picks #11 and #23? Jim thinks he will find just as good of a player at Pick 11 and 23 as he will at #5. And SSS believes he will too. The first order of business is to build the lines. Nobody places a higher value on offensive line play than Harbaugh and he goes right to work selecting Alabama OT JC Latham. What does Latham excel at? Mauling folks in the run game. If you watched even one quarter of Michigan football last season, you will see that plan in action. SSS believes the two most pro-ready tackles are Alt and Latham and the Chargers get tremendous bang for their buck at #11. Latham will have Harbaugh jumping out of his khakis with the way he drive blocks and this bulldozer will make life for Charger running backs much easier than it was for Ekeler last year.

**\*THE EXTRA POINT\*** – No ownership group outside of the Bengals has faced more scrutiny for being cheap and not invested enough in supporting their team properly than the Spanos family. You know it must be bad when you have the first NFL team to move away team from a city (San Diego) not because they couldn't keep you, but because they no longer even wanted you. That talk has simmered a little since owner Dean Spanos opened his pocketbook and actually won the Jim Harbaugh sweepstakes. Spanos had a tremendous advantage in the fact that new coaches want to go to destinations where there are already great quarterbacks and the Chargers definitely had that in place with Justin Herbert. If Jim Harbaugh can succeed with Alex Smith and Colin Kaepernick, I can't wait to see what he does with a top-10 QB like Herbert. This team is going to compete right away regardless of their salary cap restrictions and docile fan base. Some say that Harbaugh wears out his welcome rather quickly, but I can't think of one team who wouldn't trade going to three straight conference championships like he was able to do in San Francisco for a worn-out welcome anytime.

| 12. Denver | Michael Penix Jr. | QB | Washington |
|------------|-------------------|----|------------|
|------------|-------------------|----|------------|

*Broncos head coach Sean Payton has been linked to several QBs, most notable J.J. McCarthy, but when you consider the amount of ammunition you are going to need to move up in this draft for a top-tier QB, SSS isn't sure the Broncos can get there. Fortunately, they still end up with a QB that SSS believes could have the biggest upside for the lowest risk in the 1<sup>st</sup> Round. If you followed Washington QB Michael Penix last season, you saw a player who did his best Mortal Kombat impersonation with several flawless victories. He defeated a very good Oregon team twice, beat Texas in the CFP semifinal and then looked a little lackluster against Michigan. You know who else looked lackluster against Michigan. Everybody. That Wolverine defense was a blitzkrieg and docking Penix's overall grade due to the Michigan game is just being shortsighted. Penix has the "it" factor and swag that you want under center, and while he may not be Denver's top choice, Payton knows he can work with Penix and bring out his best. "But Penix has had injury problems S'feld!" Yeah, he has. You know who else had injury problems. Drew Brees. And when Nick Saban passed on Brees as a free agent when he was coaching the Dolphins, Payton didn't. How'd that work out?*

**\*THE EXTRA POINT\*** – *it's crazy to think at this point that Sean Payton headed to Denver with the chance to work with a Super Bowl winning QB in Russell Wilson and a year later his QB room features Jarrett Stidham, Zach Wilson and something called Ben DiNucci. Payton has his work cut out for him, not only in finding a QB that can move this team forward but also in dealing with this division. He now finds himself staring down the barrel of the world champion Kansas City Chiefs, a legitimate coach with the Chargers in Jim Harbaugh, and a Las Vegas team that hasn't lost to the Broncos since 2019 and has won 8 straight against them. If Payton truly is a QB whisperer, he may want to check that the QBs he is whispering to aren't using sign language.*

| 13. Las Vegas | Olumuyiwa Fashanu | OT | Penn State |
|---------------|-------------------|----|------------|
|---------------|-------------------|----|------------|

*In a game of musical chairs, the Raiders seem to be the team that is left standing after five quarterbacks come off the board in the first 12 picks. While not being able to find a future gunslinger may get some Vegas fans down, the run on QBs has a silver lining with that being several other prominent positions have not had multiple selections, including offensive tackle. In a normal year, Olumuyiwa Fashanu of Penn State would be long gone. But in the 2024 draft, the picks in the teens are going to play out like picks normally taken between 6-10 due to the amount of quality QBs and WRs. The Raiders need to focus on offense in this draft and fortifying their offensive line should be at the forefront of their decisions this early. New GM Tom Telesco leaves one AFC West team (Chargers) to join another one in the Raiders and he had a history of hitting on most of his 1<sup>st</sup> Round picks while working with the Chargers. The upside on Fashanu is extremely high and he possesses the ideal height and length you would want in a prototypical tackle. If he gets his hands on an oncoming pass rusher he almost always wins the 1-on-1 battle, and he has a great base while using his leverage better than most.*

**\*THE EXTRA POINT\*** – *Owner Marc Davis has a shaky track record since taking over for his father, but he is proving that he finally learned his lesson. Davis replaced Jon Gruden during the middle of the 2021 season with Rich Bisaccia as the interim head coach, who turned a struggling Raiders team around by winning seven of the final 12 games. Instead of rewarding Bisaccia with the head job*

permanently, Davis let go of Bisaccia and hired life-long head coaching failure Josh McDaniels. Mr. Wizard himself couldn't save that experiment and McDaniels was replaced mid-2023 with interim head coach Antonio Pierce. Pierce filled the role very well including a victory at Kansas City and Davis gave him the head job moving forward. Its obvious the players responded to Pierce much better than they did to McDaniels and it will be interesting to see if Las Vegas can continue to roll 7s with Pierce in 2024.

| 14. New Orleans | Taliese Fuaga | OT | Oregon State |
|-----------------|---------------|----|--------------|
|-----------------|---------------|----|--------------|

The Saints feel like such an incomplete work that this may be the hardest team to figure out among the 32 1<sup>st</sup> Round selections. The need for an offensive tackle is there and Oregon State OT Taliese Fuaga is climbing draft boards as we near Thursday night. You can never go wrong selecting a tackle here and Fuaga plays with an unpleasant disposition. His strengths lie more in pass blocking than run blocking but he is very versatile and could be pushed inside to play guard if needed. Defensive end could also be on the menu here but SSS doesn't have the appetite to give the Saints a helping of a beefy defensive tackle or end as the value for those positions this high in the draft definitely wouldn't earn a chef's kiss.

**\*THE EXTRA POINT\*** – The Saints strike SSS as the team in the NFL that seems to have least sense of direction in what they want to do. This no man's land team has the feel of a unit stuck on an island with a lonely volleyball named Wilson and we don't get a sense that is changing anytime soon. This once proud franchise heads into another season with a quarterback they know they can't legitimately win with (David Carr), a defense that has seemed to age poorly overnight, and a coach who may be the most forgettable in all of the NFL. Seriously, head coach Dennis Allen is that guy that always goes 7-10 or 9-8. He's never completely terrible and he's never going to win you playoff games. He's just.....mediocre.

| 15. Indianapolis | Terrion Arnold | CB | Alabama |
|------------------|----------------|----|---------|
|------------------|----------------|----|---------|

Terrion Arnold isn't a player that you are hearing enough about in the lead up to the 2024 draft but let SSS tell you this – he's going to be a guy you hear a lot about this fall. Indianapolis and GM Chris Ballard make the wise decision to pass up the eye candy at wide receiver and draft a plug-and-play cornerback who will quickly become a fan favorite at Lucas Oil Stadium. Arnold's ball production is elite as he recorded 5 interceptions and 13 PBUs last season. More importantly, he held opposing receivers to just 11 yards per catch and was among the best run defenders in all of college football. In this day and age, being able to get a trusted tackler who also can cover is the exception, not the rule, and Arnold will soon prove why he is the Ricky Henderson of this draft, as getting a player of his immense skillset at #15 is an outright steal.

**\*THE EXTRA POINT\*** – One of the best ways to gain an advantage on opposing GMs is to figure out who former Alabama coach Nick Saban likes best and draft that guy regardless of your need. Last season while discussing his draft eligible players, he continually highlighted safety Brian Branch. Branch fell to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Round of last year's draft but ended up playing like a 1<sup>st</sup> rounder for the Detroit Lions. Do you want to take a guess who Saban can't stop gushing about this season? Terrion Arnold.

**\*TRADE\* (Seattle trades with Buffalo, giving up Pick #16 to acquire Picks #28, #144 and a 2025 1<sup>st</sup> Rd Pick)**

**16. Buffalo Brian Thomas WR LSU**

*Bills General Manager Brandon Beane realizes that after trading star wide receiver Stefon Diggs to the Texans during the offseason that he desperately needs to bulk up his vastly depleted receiver room and makes a trade with Seattle to move to #16 ahead of other receiver hungry teams like Jacksonville at Pick #17 and Cincinnati at Pick #18. The selection of Brian Thomas of LSU may not be the LSU receiver most talked about in this draft, but Thomas is no less talented than his teammate Malik Nabers. Thomas has the size, speed and production that makes him a perfect fit for the Buffalo offense. The Bills send Pick #28, #144 and a future 1<sup>st</sup> rounder to get to #16, but this team is still in the win-now mode of QB Josh Allen's prime and they need to act swiftly to get a new #1 receiver after losing not only Diggs, but Gabe Davis as well. While some say the Bills are approaching a crossroads, SSS likes to think they are more so reinventing themselves or even reshuffling the deck in the quest to finally figure out what it takes to get past their playoff nemesis Kansas City, who has continually thwarted their past playoff runs.*

**\*THE EXTRA POINT\*** – Beane has said he is his own worst enemy when it comes to patience on draft day as in four of his six years of running the Bills' drafts he has traded out of his original 1<sup>st</sup> Round pick - three times to move up and once for wide receiver Stefon Diggs. Another reason why SSS sees the Bills as a true target for a trade up in this year's draft is if they wait for a WR until Pick #28, they are going to potentially be getting the leftovers whereas if they get to #16 as SSS is projecting, they can still have the main course.

**17. Jacksonville Troy Fautanu OG Washington**

*General Manager Trent Baalke worked hand-in-hand with Jim Harbaugh during his 49ers years and he saw the success that follows when you invest in your offensive line. So while Jacksonville may want to look at receiver options that are available since they will need to replace the production of the departed Calvin Ridley, they hold the line and draft Husky offensive guard Troy Fautanu. Fautanu is one of the most physically imposing players in this draft class and has the rare blend of mauler and technician. His skillset of being able to dominate at the line of scrimmage while also getting to the second level is a trait that matches what the Jags other linemen do well leading S'feld to like the fit here. The Jags currently have Cam Robinson and Walker Little on the final year of their contracts while Brando Scherff and Mitch Morse are both aging out at 32 years old. Corner is a bigger need here and it will be tempting to take one with some good ones still remaining, but your priority has to be QB Trevor Lawrence and doing whatever it takes to protect him.*

**\*THE EXTRA POINT\*** – Do you want to know who is having a really good draft at this point? The Washington Huskies. Fautanu makes the third player taken from Washington among the first 17 picks and there is a good chance that there are at least four more Huskies who come off the board by the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Round. If you don't think that former Washington, current Alabama head coach Kalen DeBoer can develop talent, then you probably don't like football....or puppies.

**18. Cincinnati****Amarius Mims****OT****Georgia**

*Cincinnati could be a trade out prospect as their needs unfortunately don't match up very well with where they are on the board and how the selections have fallen. From their view, the best wide receivers are gone, you can grab a defensive tackle in Byron Murphy, but he is really more of a late 1<sup>st</sup> round kind of player, and so the best option remaining is to take Amarius Mims, who fills a major need and who is probably in line to be taken in this area. The good news for Bengals fans is that the knock on Mims is that he is inexperienced, as he only started eight games at Georgia. When inexperience is one of the biggest knocks on you, that is actually a positive. The ceiling is as high as the Sistine Chapel on Mims and while he didn't start a lot, he faced the best of the best when he did and held his own. Size will not be an issue for him as he looks the part and Cincinnati selects the last of Sfeld's upper echelon offensive tackles, as the drop off in talent after Mims comes off the board is significant enough to cause concern about grabbing any other tackle in the 1<sup>st</sup> Round. At 6-foot-7 and 340 pounds, Mims could be considered raw, but he is an impressive pass blocker, allowing just one pressure on 168 such snaps last year.*

**\*THE EXTRA POINT\*** – *Bengals head coach Zac Taylor got a lot of credit when he helped lead the Bengals to the Super Bowl three years ago in 2021. But SSS believes his 9-8 finish last season was nothing to sneeze at either. QB Joe Burrow got injured and Taylor found a way to hold the team together and keep them competitive even during what you could say was an off year for the Bengals. When you are forced to compete with backup Jake Browning and you still manage to pull off a winning record in a division where every other team had at least 10 wins, you are doing something right.*

**19. L.A. Rams****Laiatu Latu****OLB****UCLA**

*The Rams need pass rush help badly and UCLA OLB Laiatu Latu is one of the top edge rushers in the class. Now there could be some concerns about his injury history but he's a Day 1 starter on a Rams defense that could use an upgrade with the retirement of all-world DT Aaron Donald. Latu is one of the best edge rushers in this draft, but he's also coming into the league with a history of neck injuries that caused him to medically retire in the past and may shorten his career. For that reason, a player who normally would be a top 10 pick slips to #19, but even for an injury-plagued player like Latu, this value is too good for the Rams to turn down at this point. SSS believed this Rams team was due for a crash scenario in 2023 but some incredibly shrewd drafting by GM Les Snead has kept this team on par with its division rivals and prevented a full blown rebuild.*

**\*THE EXTRA POINT\*** – *SSS wasn't really sure how to evaluate the Rams 1<sup>st</sup> Round possibilities for the 2024 draft. Why? Because this is foreign soil for GM Les Snead and head coach Sean McVay. L.A. hasn't had a first-round pick since 2016, yep you read that right – 2016!!! Following their Super Bowl victory that capped off the 2021 season Les Snead famously wore a shirt to the victory parade that said "F\*\*\* Them Picks." Not sure we have ever met a GM in our history of providing analysis that ever felt that way about the 1<sup>st</sup> Round of the NFL draft.*

**20. Pittsburgh****Graham Barton****C****Duke**

*SSS is aware of the recent steam that indicates the Steelers may be looking at not only drafting a cornerback, but even trading up to get one and that is not something we subscribe to. When you check out a team's needs and you write down OT, OG and C, that really should be an indication of what needs to be done. Duke center Graham Barton is the Swiss Army Knife that more teams than just the Steelers covet. SSS has heard from multiple sources that the player that teams who are drafting in the 16-26 area believe is moving up draft boards most rapidly is Graham Barton. While the running back position has seen its importance slip the past 10-15 years in the draft, the center position has seen a complete resurgence and revival the likes of which we haven't seen since John Travolta in Pulp Fiction. Really good teams aren't trying to just get by with the center position any longer. They want dominance and Barton will provide it. With the ability to play all three positions on the line, Barton is a guy who seems like a Steel City fit and could give Pittsburgh their next Maurkice Pouncey.*

***\*THE EXTRA POINT\*** – SSS was really worried that the Steelers and Mike Tomlin may be parting ways after the 2023 season. Fortunately, cooler heads prevailed and Tomlin and the Steelers brass put their sabres down and decided to continue on. It would be hard to imagine that a team that has gone 20 straight seasons without a losing record would get rid of Tomlin, but the seven straight seasons without a playoff win figured into ownership's frustrations. The Steelers have turned the team upside down getting rid of 2022 1<sup>st</sup> Round pick Kenny Pickett and trading a bag of chips, a doughnut and a 6<sup>th</sup> round pick to kick the tires on former Bear QB Justin Fields, while also signing on Russell Wilson for essentially nothing since Denver is still on the hook for his guaranteed money. SSS believes that one of those two QBs is going to figure it out in Pittsburgh as Wilson brings past production and Fields brings promise to a team that will not force them to win games single-handedly.*

**21. Miami****Jared Verse****DE****Florida State**

*The Dolphins were probably considering Barton if he fell one more spot to them at Pick #21 but they aren't going to file any complaints on getting FSU DE Jared Verse. SSS always likes to look at projections in January and measure them against what we are hearing in April, and Verse was considered a top 10 pick four months ago. The only thing changing his positioning is merely the needs of the teams in the top 15 don't include a defensive end like Verse. With uncertainty surrounding when defensive contributors Jared Phillips and Bradley Chubb will return after rehabbing their injuries, Verse would immediately inject life into this patchwork defensive line. At 6'4" and 260 lbs, Verse is a wrecking ball, and this becomes an area where General Manager Chris Grier drafts best player available and throws caution to the wind in worrying about the offensive line as he can address that in later rounds. You can't pass up on Verse here. New defensive coordinator Anthony Weaver comes to Miami from Baltimore where they know a little something about applying pressure to the quarterback. SSS believes Grier and head coach Mike McDaniel throw Weaver a bone here with a star-studded playmaker in Verse.*



*Mitchell could be a darkhorse candidate to finish his rookie season with more yards than any other rookie receiver in this draft class. If you ask scouts about his potential you see the widest gap among greatness and potential bust. There are many who don't have Mitchell ranked in their top 10 receivers in the entire draft. SSS has him ranked 4<sup>th</sup>. Can attitude and intensity be a problem? Yep, not going to deny it. Can he thrive if placed in the right system? He can more than thrive. He can dominate. Mitchell scored 2 TDs against Alabama last year and we all know the best corners in college football year in and year out play at Alabama. Mitchell won't have to make an NFL adjustment to beating press coverage as that is one of his strengths and he has sneaky speed to take the top off the defense. The fit here to L.A. is perfect as Justin Herbert will give Mitchell all the chances in the world to produce big numbers if he commits to being great. And we think under Harbaugh, he will.*

***\*THE EXTRA POINT\*** – Not a bad 1<sup>st</sup> Round for the Chargers at all. A road grader in J.C. Latham and a dynamic receiver in Adonai Mitchell. But don't think the Chargers are done quite yet. SSS would be willing to bet that the Chargers hit on more than 70% of their picks for the entire draft and find contributors on every level. Harbaugh has proven he has a keen eye for players that will serve his system well. Don't be surprised if he finds a way to add some of his former players from Michigan in later rounds of this draft.*

**\*\*\*TRADE\*\*\* (Dallas trades with Detroit, giving up Pick #24 to acquire Picks #29, #164 and a 2025 3<sup>rd</sup>)**

**24. Detroit**

**Cooper DeJean**

**CB**

**Iowa**

*Here they go again! If it ain't broke, don't fix it. The Lions sense that Iowa star cornerback Cooper DeJean is just the sort of player that their division rival Green Bay Packers would love to take so the Lions move in front of the Packers by trading with Dallas to secure DeJean. While many have said DeJean feels like a Packer, SSS believes he is more like a Lion, but definitely not a lamb. If you know anything about the Lions, they draft football guys. Maybe not the most talented players and maybe not the most acclaimed, but guys that live, breath, eat and sleep football 24/7. They proved that last year in drafting two Bama guys and two Iowa guys in the first two rounds and they will run that strategy back this year by taking DeJean at Pick #24. The Lions heard from former Bama coach Nick Saban and Iowa football coach Kirk Ferentz how much the guys they took last year were game changers not just on the field but in the locker room and they got the same report this year from Ferentz on DeJean. Much like Devin Hester was a difference maker in multiple ways for the Bears back in his prime, you can count no less than 2 games last year (and a 3<sup>rd</sup> if you include the robbery against Minnesota) that DeJean swung in the favor of the Hawkeyes with clutch plays on defense or as a punt returner. DeJean broke his leg midway through the season last year and his injury was a concern for many until he showed up at his Pro Day and posted a 4.42 40 time and looked amazing in his drills. The rich get richer, as Detroit continues to stock studs on defense with the addition of DeJean.*

***\*THE EXTRA POINT\*** – Did anybody have a better draft than the Detroit Lions last year? Did anybody have a better draft than the Lions over the last 5, 10 years? SSS was one of many who was skeptical of the Lions 1<sup>st</sup> Round last year when they drafted RB Jahmyr Gibbs at #12 and LB Jack*

Campbell at #18. S'feld wasn't against the players taken, just how early the Lions took them. But let us be the first to say we were wrong and the Lions and GM Brad Holmes were right. If you like a player and you think he will contribute, just grab him because you may not get another chance and that is exactly what Detroit did much to their benefit. Those players along with TE Sam LaPorta and safety Brian Branch played a tremendous role in the Lions reaching the NFC Championship.

|                      |                        |           |              |
|----------------------|------------------------|-----------|--------------|
| <b>25. Green Bay</b> | <b>Byron Murphy II</b> | <b>DT</b> | <b>Texas</b> |
|----------------------|------------------------|-----------|--------------|

If you aren't slotting a defensive player to the Green Bay Packers in the 1<sup>st</sup> Round of the draft than we will just assume that you failed your history lessons in school. The three certainties in life are death, taxes and the Packers selecting a defensive player in the initial round of the draft. Since 2012 Green Bay has taken a defensive player with 12 of their 13 picks during that time. The one offensive player? Jordan Love in 2020. The Packers have a script and they follow it to a tee. So queue up defensive tackle Byron Murphy for this year's defensive player as the Texas standout is just what the doctor ordered to shore up the Packers leaky run defense that finished 29<sup>th</sup> in the league. Murphy was the heart and soul of the Longhorns defense last year and was a game wrecker in the middle for the Texas defense line. Much like we said DeJean would thrive in the Lions system, Murphy couldn't be more of a Packer pick. Powerful and with raw athleticism, Murphy can plug holes while also moving with great fluidity along the line to make plays. The Packers get the top rated interior defensive lineman in the draft and they do so all the way down at Pick #25.

**\*THE EXTRA POINT\*** – Are any other teams paying attention to what the Packers do with their quarterbacks? It is to be commended. Draft a QB you believe in. Let him sit for three years behind a legend. Let the legendary QB go. Play the new guy. Watch him dominate. Wash. Rinse. Repeat. The Packers have the patience of Job with their QBs and while other teams keep wandering through the desert trying to find the right QB, the Packers have proven they already have the blueprint. Jordan Love's progression last year was nothing short of incredible. SSS wasn't convinced the Packers could pull off what they did with Aaron Rodgers once again with Jordan Love, but by gosh, Love looked really, really good after sitting for three seasons. While every other team in the NFL seems to rush rookie QBs into action, the Packers age their QBs like fine wine.

|                      |                      |             |                   |
|----------------------|----------------------|-------------|-------------------|
| <b>26. Tampa Bay</b> | <b>Chop Robinson</b> | <b>EDGE</b> | <b>Penn State</b> |
|----------------------|----------------------|-------------|-------------------|

SSS is not sure that there is another 1<sup>st</sup> Round pick that has dropped more in his projections since last season than PSU EDGE rusher Chop Robinson. Robinson was basically considered an automatic top 10 pick around this same time a year ago but his production dropped off from 2022 to 2023. The thing you must consider about Penn State players that have been drafted during James Franklin's time at Penn State is that they seem to get better once they get to the NFL. You may call it mismanagement by Franklin or maybe the players become a victim of his system, but multiple Nittany Lions have restored their roar once they reach the next level. SSS feels that will be the case with Chop, especially playing under defensive guru Todd Bowles. Another reason this feels like the right place to find a home for Robinson is that Tampa GM Jason Licht loves to draft freakish athletes. He has been willing to draft measurables over production on multiple occasions and we see him following that path again with the PSU specimen.



high priority on balance and protecting the QB. Nix has great poise in the pocket, excels at hitting his targets in stride and he reads defenses as well as any QB in this draft.

**\*THE EXTRA POINT\*** – The Seahawks are entering a new era under new head coach Mike Macdonald. After years of consistent winning under Pete Carroll, it appears an ego clash between Carroll and GM John Schneider led to the separation. Schneider was hired as GM in Seattle a week after Carroll was hired in 2010 meaning that for the last 14 years, he had never made one head coaching hire in his entire time as GM with the Seahawks. SSS gets the impression that Schneider was ready to finally make a hire and do things his way regardless of how much winning the Seahawks had done up until that point. Will it work? Time will tell but it is another indication of how ego rules the NFL and the decisions made don't always reflect what you may think is in the best interest of the team but what is in the best interest of you.

**\*\*\*TRADE\*\*\* (Detroit trades with Dallas, giving up Picks #29, #164 and a 2025 3<sup>rd</sup> to acquire Pick #24)**

**29. Dallas Jackson Powers-Johnson C Oregon**

The Cowboys didn't exactly have the greatest offseason in the world as entrenched starters on the offensive line Tyler Biadasz and Tyron Smith left via free agency. While running back and linebacker may also be considered areas of need for the Cowboys, SSS doesn't see any way they can avoid the offensive line early in the draft. That's why SSS has the Cowboys taking Oregon center Jackson Powers-Johnson to fill the spot left by Biadasz. The Cowboys have a great track record with centers in the 1<sup>st</sup> Round as the last center they took in the 1<sup>st</sup> Round (Travis Frederick) was exceptional until an unexpected illness forced him into retirement. JPJ won the Rimington Award in 2023, which is given to the top center in college football and he plays like his hair is on fire with great tenacity and bad intentions. JPJ is not to be trifled with and Dallas does well, being able to trade back and still get one of the two centers that SSS has given a 1<sup>st</sup> Round grade.

**\*THE EXTRA POINT\*** – If you want an early prediction for 2025 than SSS has you covered. The coach leading the Cowboys onto the field in 2025 will be none other than Bill Belichick. Despite having only one losing season in the past 8 years, the Cowboys are never a real threat in the postseason and owner Jerry Jones knows it. Hope is not a strategy, and it feels as though the Cowboys are hoping, hoping, hoping each and every year. The pieces are there but the guy to lead them over that hump has eluded them since the 90's. SSS believes that the Cowboys fall off their 12-5 pace from last season, Jerry fires current head coach Mike McCarthy and finally runs out of patience trying to do it his way. He brings in a legend much like what he did back in the early 2000s with Bill Parcells to try to get the Boys back to the promised land.

**30. Baltimore Kool-Aid McKinstry CB Alabama**

SSS debated for a long time giving the Ravens Xavier Legette, the big bodied WR from South Carolina, but the fact that the Ravens selected a WR in the 1<sup>st</sup> Round last year (Zay Flowers) and have taken a receiver in three of their last five 1<sup>st</sup> Rounds (Rashod Bateman, 2021 & Marquise Brown, 2019) leads us to believe they aren't going to be willing to invest in that position again this early for the fourth time in six seasons. Therefore, the Ravens revert to their tried and true method of drafting Alabama

players and there is one staring them right in the face at a position of need in Bama CB Kool-Aid McKinstry. Is Kool-Aid the real deal? Ohhhhhh Yeahhhhhh! According to former head coach Nick Saban, McKinstry will run through a wall for you and his production was on par with the other Crimson Tide greats who have manned the secondary for Saban in past years. While McKinstry isn't the fastest corner you will find, he is patient and doesn't overplay and doesn't make mistakes. He mixes football smarts with athleticism and can play on an island in man-to-man. Kool-Aid is the flavor of the month for Baltimore and should make a salty defense a little bit sweeter.

**\*THE EXTRA POINT\*** – If you have followed SSS long enough you know that we revere how the Baltimore Ravens handle their business on draft day and the way that former GM Ozzie Newsome set the table for long-term stability through his yearly evaluations. Baltimore is one of those teams that lets the draft come to them and knows that they only need a handful of mistakes from teams in front of them to cash in on a few players falling to them that they love. Bill Parcells once famously told Bill Belichick when he first got into coaching that you don't have to be smarter than everybody, you only have to be smarter than about eight teams, because the remaining 24 have no idea what they are doing. Baltimore has clearly benefited from that thought process in the draft the past two decades.

|                          |                     |           |                 |
|--------------------------|---------------------|-----------|-----------------|
| <b>31. San Francisco</b> | <b>Tyler Guyton</b> | <b>OT</b> | <b>Oklahoma</b> |
|--------------------------|---------------------|-----------|-----------------|

We have now arrived at that portion of the program where we get the first of our two teams (SF & KC) that for all intents and purposes can make a luxury pick if they want. Yes, they have needs, all teams have needs, but they are in such better shape to go for the best player available if they want and worry about filling needs later in the draft. The 49ers don't necessarily take the best player available, but they take the player who is the biggest project in Tyler Guyton. Guyton has all the raw tools but may need time to develop. He didn't receive as many reps as his counterparts during his college career but showed some impressive tape when he did. He is a high-level pass protector who still has the ability to make even greater strides in that department. Everything that head coach Kyle Shanahan wants to accomplish on offense starts up front, so the addition of Guyton makes a lot of sense late in the 1<sup>st</sup> Round.

**\*THE EXTRA POINT\*** – Kyle Shanahan is revered as a coach by pretty much all his peers, but I'm not sure there are many who would want to trade places with him to endure the pain he has felt with his past postseason heartbreaks. Blowing a 28-3 lead in the Super Bowl to New England as offensive coordinator for the Falcons, blowing a 10-point lead in the Super Bowl to the Chiefs in 2019 and leading the Chiefs by 3 with under 2 minutes to go in last year's Super Bowl only to lose in overtime 25-22. Those are the sort of losses that can make it very difficult to recover from. Fortunately for Shanahan, he has a team that should be able to compete for years to come.

|                        |                      |           |              |
|------------------------|----------------------|-----------|--------------|
| <b>32. Kansas City</b> | <b>Xavier Worthy</b> | <b>WR</b> | <b>Texas</b> |
|------------------------|----------------------|-----------|--------------|

Will the Rashee Rice situation force the hand of Chiefs general manager Brett Veach and lead him to take a WR in the 1<sup>st</sup> Round? SSS believes so. We don't believe that you can make any assumptions that Rice is going to be available for 2024 and therefore the Chiefs protect themselves

*by taking Texas speedster Xavier Worthy with the final pick of the 1<sup>st</sup> Round. Worthy is the possessor of blazing speed as he set the NFL combine record for the fastest 40 with a time of 4.21. The best comparison to make is that in drafting Worthy the Chiefs may find their next Tyreek Hill. We all know how well Hill worked with QB Patrick Mahomes and the Chiefs haven't had a receiver who could leave a trail of smoke like Hill since he left KC for Miami. Defenses would have to account for Worthy's speed which even if he isn't drawing targets, would mean he is drawing coverage to help open things up for Travis Kelce and crew. The Chiefs won't be shy in investing in a position that has proven critical in allowing Mahomes to be Mahomes.*

***\*THE EXTRA POINT\**** – *For all the grief that Andy Reid faced in Philadelphia for not winning the big one, it is amazing how he is now on the cusp of being considered one of the all-time coaching greats after claiming his third Super Bowl championship in five years. Did Patrick Mahomes have something to do with that? Absolutely. But Reid has done as much to bring out the best in Mahomes as anyone and this is not an either/or conversation. There is greatness in both the player and the coach that may not have been realized if one didn't have the other. And to think that the Chiefs won't eventually be able to add a fourth title is ludicrous based on how they won last season when they were considered dead in the water late in the year and had to win road games in Buffalo and Baltimore to capture another crown.*