

FIRST PERSON STEPHEN WU

Draft strategy has penalized players

In the early rounds of the NFL draft, teams often pass over prospects who have a history of criminal charges or have been suspended for team or university violations. Is that the best strategy? Hamilton (N.Y.) College economics professor Stephen Wu helped student Kendall Weir complete his senior thesis on this question, and their research will be published in the Journal of Sports Economics.

We collected data for all 1,273 players drafted into the NFL between 2005 and 2009. Compared to players without "character concerns," these prospects fell between 16 and 22 spots in the draft. We studied how well they performed by measuring the numbers of NFL games played and started.

The other players drafted in the same round were our control group, and we also looked at variables such as whether drafted players came from teams in the AP Top 25 rankings. Like in the movie "Moneyball," we wanted to use statistics to think about ways to evaluate talent. More teams are employing mathematicians and statisticians to crunch numbers like this for a competitive edge.

We found that the players who have a history of criminal charges were penalized too much in their draft position. On average, having an encounter with law enforcement does not negatively predict performance. A recent example of this is Tyrann Mathieu, who was arrested for marijuana possession. That knocked him way down in the draft, but he outperformed others chosen in that round.

The players who were suspended for team or university violations weren't penalized enough. They did not perform as well as players drafted in the same round. We don't know the exact nature of team suspensions, but these are often for clashes with a coach or teammate.

In a nutshell, what this means is that if a team is on the fence about drafting a player who had been suspended for clashing with his college coach or violating team rules, the team might not want to take that gamble. But it might be less risky to draft a player with a criminal record.

We think teams could benefit by taking more risks, on a case-by-case basis, to draft players with criminal histories. A run-in with the law may or may not reflect on long-term character; teams could use this research to enhance their decision-making.



Hamilton College professor Stephen Wu (left) and student Kendall Weir argue that NFL teams can afford to take more 'character' risks in the draft.

Another factor in draft position is the strategy and personality of NFL teams. Some organizations do not want to deal with the potential distractions posed by a player with a checkered past. Philosophies differ, and they may have nothing to do with wins and losses. These teams would rather take the safe option.

As told to Michelle Hiskey
for the AJC

'We think teams could benefit by taking more risks, on a case-by-case basis, to draft players with a criminal history. A run-in with the law may or may not reflect on long-term character; teams could use this research to enhance their decision-making.'

Stephen Wu
Economics professor, Hamilton College