The 'Feeling a Draft' series stays in the defensive backfield for now as I talk about the safety position. Cleveland had a solid secondary in 2011 led by CB Joe Haden but the safety position seemed to lack a true difference maker. Sure, T.J. Ward can make tackles and Mike Adams managed to make a few plays, but there was no difference maker in the passing game.

What the Browns lacked was a true ball hawk. Usama Young, a 2011 offseason acquisition, filled in nicely for Ward since Ward was only able to start 8 games because of injury but it only proved to me that Young is better suited for strong safety in the NFL. If that is true, and if the Browns don't add another safety in the draft, losing veteran safety Mike Adams could be a bigger loss than anyone realizes right now. Having 13 in the bag will allow Cleveland to pick a safety at some point.

With as much man coverage as Cleveland used last year, starting two guys better suited for playing a person instead of playing space could be a setup for disaster. I know it sounds like I contradicted myself but it really helps a secondary if you have a free safety that plays the centerfield role well because that safety can really alter the passing lanes. Ideally the Browns need to come out of the draft with a safety that can play a single high safety look and be a true center fielder on the back end of the defense.

The Browns did draft a safety in the 7th round last year (Eric Hagg) who has potential and looked good covering some TEs in sub packages but I am not convinced Hagg's upside screams 'ball hawk' and I don't want to put all my eggs in the basket of a 2011 developmental pick.

James Dockery played some safety when numbers got thin and he also spent some time at the position in games during some sub-defenses, but I think his skill set is best suited for another

role on the team that I discussed during the CB article. I do however believe in Dockery as a talent and his length and ball skills could make him a viable option at the position, so we will have to wait and see what role the team has in store for him.

CB Sheldon Brown is another internal candidate many have said will move to safety but it is really not a foregone conclusion that he will switch spots. Changing positions isn't always an automatic move when a CB starts losing his abilities to Father Time, so until I actually see him change or hear from the organization that he is changing positions I am approaching the draft like he isn't switching positions.

As far as the position profile I want to primarily focus on for the article, players that I think play the ball well and can operate in space will be top priority. Cleveland has two players I consider good strong safeties so unless I really feel like the guy can play in open space and as a center fielder he probably won't be on my list.

The thing that makes analyzing safeties from a distance difficult is judging the mental aspects of the game. There is more to being a good free safety than simply physical traits and it is obviously hard to judge those traits without a little more information. One example of the mental traits I am talking about is judging a DB's understanding of route concepts. Another important aspect you need to evaluate is how important football is to a player. That will help you understand if they will put in the necessary film study time needed to intimately know your opponent.

Although there is some natural instinct involved with the type of jumps Ed Reed gets on balls, studying opponents is also a big factor. Anyone who knows Ed Reed would also tell you that he puts in the time learning QB tendencies as well as the coordinator's tendencies and that work allows him to make educated guesses instead of taking reckless gambles. My list will predominantly be based on physical traits because I am not in the "know" on most of the mental sides of the game, but keep that aspect fresh in your mind when forming decisions on NFL safeties.

Let's get into the guys I want to preview for the safety position:

Early Rounds (1-2)

Mark Barron Alabama **(6-2, 218lbs)**

Barron is a gifted safety that many say is an 'in the box player' and although I agree with the idea Barron will make a difference supporting the run, I don't think he is limited in his ability to play the pass. I think Barron has good ball skills and plays the deep half of the field really well. He may not be the most instinctive single high safety prospect but he does make plays on the ball and he plays better in space than most people think. He may be better suited for a cover 2 scheme but regardless, he is one of my favorite overall players in the draft and I would have no problem with him being a Cleveland Brown.

Harrison Smith Notre Dame (**6-2, 213lbs)**

Smith is a player that has natural instincts that can't be taught. Some may also have him pegged as an in the box safety also but if you go back and watch him play the middle of the field on his junior tape you will come away with a much different opinion. Smith is a physical player that has good flexibility and makes plays on the ball all over the field. You can tell from the different roles he plays in the secondary that he understands the big picture when it comes to defensive scheme and he will be a good QB of the secondary in the NFL.

If a team is looking for a safety Smith is a good fit no matter what scheme you play because of his speed, power, length, and intelligence. If Smith continues to develop and puts in the time studying film I think he will be an impact player in the NFL fairly quickly.

Mid Rounds (3-5)

Trumaine Johnson Montana **(6-2, 205)**

I already said Johnson was going to be on both my CB and S list because I personally think he can be a better safety than CB in the NFL. He can and will probably get his shot at playing CB and in a cover 2 scheme he might even be considered a high ceiling player there, but I think his

ball skills, size, and instincts can make a him a great NFL safety. It may take him some time to understand the NFL passing game but if he puts in the time he has the instincts and ball skills to make a difference as a free safety.

Markelle Martin Oklahoma St. **(6-1, 208lbs)**

Martin is a player you will find some differing opinions on when it comes to value as a NFL prospect. I am one of the people that have watched him over the years and think he is a solid pro prospect. When you watch his team play you always seem to find him around the ball and involved in the action. It may be a stretch to think he can be a ball hawking free safety because he doesn't have the best ball skills or production to back it up, but I think he has the type of work ethic that will make him a starting safety in the NFL and, although he may struggle to actually make the interception, he does a good job of getting there to stop the completions and that is the ultimate goal. I think Martin will continue to develop and he has a good chance to be a good NFL safety.

Janzen Jackson McNeese St. **(5-11, 188lbs)**

Jackson might be the most explosive and natural athlete of any safety available in the draft. He is a player that started in the SEC (Tennessee) as a true freshman after just two weeks into the season. He is the type of player your eyes always seem to gravitate towards because he moves so suddenly and is always around the action.

Jackson is another player who let immaturity get the best of him as he got released from the Tennessee football team and transferred to McNeese St. Jackson is off the charts when it comes to athletic ability and he is a natural playmaker with a high ceiling, but his past also means he could be a kid who never grows up. If the background check comes back with a green light, some NFL team will be getting an impact safety later in the draft that could pay big dividends down the road.

Aaron Henry Wisconsin **(6-0, 208lbs)**

Henry is a player that is still getting better and it was quite clear that he got better as this past season progressed. You can see the potential in Henry on film because you can literally see when he understands a route concept and explodes to the ball. He is a converted CB who is still learning how to anticipate plays in front of him so that is why I said he is still improving. His length, speed (4.52) and leaping ability (39" vertical), make him an intriguing prospect. He seemed to get better and better with every rep and he should continue to improve as a pro.

Late Rounds (6-7)

Justin Bethel Presbyterian **(6-0, 200lbs)**

Bethel is a small school CB who was best when using his physical presence in college, but his speed and size leads many to believe he will be a better safety than CB in the NFL. As is always the case with some of the bigger, slower (4.58) CBs Bethel could play in a cover 2 scheme, but his athletic ability, good ball skills, and superior tackling ability tell me that his best position will be at safety. He will also help a team immediately as a special team player because Bethel has a long history of blocking kicks as he finished his career as the Big South's career leader in the category.

Kelcie McCray Arkansas St. **(6-2, 195lbs)**

McCray is an excellent late round and small school prospect who has great length, good speed (4.54), and solid route recognition skills. He has 10 career interceptions and was a former high school QB which probably explains his ability to read plays. McCray needs to get stronger to survive in the NFL but he is the prototype late round pick that has a high ceiling.

Brandon Hardin Oregon St. **(6-3, 220lbs)**

Some may have Hardin rated higher than a late round prospect but he missed the entire 2011 season with a shoulder injury and only has 15 career starts, so I am not sure he will get drafted in the 4th round like some think. Hardin is a freak athlete with 4.40 speed and great strength (24 reps) for a safety. He also has good short area quickness and he showed solid explosiveness to

the ball in his only season as a full time starter. He will also be a top special team player in the NFL if his college special teams resume holds true. Hardin has all the physical ability needed to last in the NFL and will get a shot in the league because of it.

Sleeper

Eddie Whitley Virginia Tech **(6-0, 191lbs)**

Whitley is a player that waited too long to figure out football was important to him. It seemed like early in his career he was going through the motions and surviving off of talent, then this year came and he realized it was quickly coming to an end. As the season progressed his play improved and he started to make many more plays on the football. Whitley is a fast (4.42) player with natural cover ability. I think he will be a 7th round pick or priority UDFA but he should get a shot to go to training camp with a NFL team. It will be up to him as to how much urgency he plays with once he gets there, but there is no question he has the physical ability to make a NFL roster.

Projected Pick

Of all the players previewed, Trumaine Johnson is the player I would like to see in a Brown's uniform but I think Cleveland will target the safety position later in the draft and Johnson will probably be gone by then.

Justin Bethel is the player I am picking to end up a Cleveland Brown. I can see the Browns taking a chance on Bethel in the later rounds of the draft because he has all the raw ability to be a starting safety in the NFL. Bethel has the physical ability but played at a small school, so he should be around in the later stages when the Browns will be trying to add depth to the roster. Bethel has a physical mindset that would be perfect for the type of secondary the Browns are creating, and since he already has a special team background that should make him even more attractive to them.

I think Bethel would be a good asset to the team and at a minimum would compete for a roster spot on special teams. If Cleveland picks a safety a bit earlier and they are looking for huge upside I wouldn't be surprised if they took McNeese St. safety Janzen Jackson.

Well Browns fans, that completes the defensive backfield previews. For the next part of the series I will swing back over to the offense and get into some of the TD-makers Cleveland could be looking at. If you're looking for more profiles and draft thoughts you can check out the new blog Brian McPeek and started to get some more depth and info on some guys you may be familiar with but would like to know more about. Until next time…….Go Browns!

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