Today the 'Feeling a Draft' series takes us back to the defense as I preview some of my favorite LBs in the 2012 NFL draft. The LB preview was much easier than last year because prior to the 2011 draft Cleveland was switching defenses from a 3-4 to a 4-3 and I didn't have a clear understanding of the type of 4-3 the Browns would run.

After watching Dick Jauron's defense for an entire season it is much easier to determine the type of LBs the team is looking for, and after locking up MLB D'Qwell Jackson up to a long term contract it is pretty clear that, barring injury, the MLB position is pretty much set for the next 5 years.

After watching LB Chris Gocong flourish and become an impact player once he was switched to strong side LB to fill in for injured Scott Fujita it is pretty clear to me that he should start the season at that position instead of the weakside LB position where he began last season. Plus, with the possibility that Fujita may be suspended for a portion of the year in the wake of 'Bounty Gate', it is probably best to try and move on from him in general. Jackson is the clear leader of that group on and off the field so the veteran presence Fujita brought isn't needed like it may have been needed in the past.

Watching the weakside LB play over the course of the season it became clear that the LB playing the position needs to be a solid mix of fast and physical to thrive in the type of 4-3 that Cleveland runs. The position is asked to fill fast with power on plays that are power or lead plays to its side, and the position also calls for that LB to have backside cutback responsibilities that make having a player with good speed important for the position.

I actually think MLB D'Qwell Jackson is ideal for the position, but they way he played at MLB I doubt they move him to another position. It probably makes more sense to draft a player who has similar skills as Jackson to play the position so they are not affecting two positions by

moving Jackson and starting a new player.

When you look at Cleveland's roster you will see the 3 veterans I have already mentioned plus Kaluka Maiava who is in his last year of his rookie deal, but the rest of the roster is filled with untested first or second year players so I actually expect the Browns to come out of the draft with more than one LB…..especially if they use all or most of their 13 picks on drafting players this year. Just as a quick roster side note about the position, if I had to pick one young player I like most at the position it would be Quinton Spears from the tiny Prairie Valley A&M. He is a player who played DE in college and he has natural pass rush ability and really good speed. If he can transition to standing up as a 4-3 LB he could be one to watch at the position.

When I evaluate the LB position for this defense I am looking at a prospect's size, strength, and agility combined with production. One of the most important aspects of the position are instincts and the ability to filter through "trash" which is something you have to see on film, so I really try putting guys on the list that I have seen play, not just names from a list. Some of the smaller school players can be hard to see but the internet has really allowed video editing experts the opportunity to create some game tape for people like me to watch, which helps tremendously when trying gain an opinion on a player.

Early Rounds (1-2)

Luke Kuechly Boston College **(6-2, 242lbs)**

I won't spend a ton of time on Kuechly because I am pretty sure he will be gone by the time Cleveland makes the 22nd pick, but if you want to watch a player who plays the position like your dad said it is supposed to be played check this guy out. He is a great LB in all phases of the game. He combines his athletic ability with impeccable character and a high level of leadership. Kuechly is a MLB by trade but if you get the chance to draft the guy and you have a MLB you should do it anyways. Kuechly will either be better than you current MLB or he will be fine playing on the weakside making tackles all over the field.

Lavonte David Nebraska **(6-0, 233lbs)**

David is one of the players climbing up fake draft boards, but the reality of this player is he has long been pretty high on real NFL draft boards for some time. Honestly, it is only the people who are just starting to watch him on film that didn't know about him because he is a flat out playmaker. When you watch him play he is making plays all over the field and ever since he transferred to Nebraska from junior college that is what he has done. This guy has over 300 tackles and 30 tackles for loss in two years as a starter.

Lavonte David is one of those rare players that have a sixth sense. He has the ability to diagnose and find the football extremely fast and, although he doesn't have great bulk as a LB and isn't a knock you out hitter, he is a sound tackler who is fundamentally strong. David may give some LB coaches grey hair or agita because he is a bit unconventional in his approach to dealing with blockers on occasion, but he is the best LB I have seen in a long time at slipping blocks. The end result is a tackle when he does it, so there may be some early battles with position coaches, but if he is effective at executing in the pros like he did in college he will be a pro bowl caliber player for a long time.

Mychal Kendricks Cal **(5-11, 240lbs)**

Kendricks is another LB you will grow to like if you get a chance to see him play. If he were a few inches taller I am convinced he would be a first round player. He was the PAC-12 defensive player of the year because he plays fast, powerful, and his motor is revved up real high. He spent most of his time playing OLB in the 3-4 that Cal runs but he switched to the inside his senior year and excelled in a big way. I think he has the skill set to flourish as a 4-3 WLB. If I had to pick one thing I like the most about his play it would be the way he explodes into ball carriers when he has time to gather himself before he makes a tackle. Kendricks will have to answer some questions about being suspended from the team twice for violating team rules, but if the answers are right he can be a steal in the 2012 draft.

Mid Rounds (3-5)

Bobby Wagner Utah St. **(6-0, 241lbs)**

Wagner is a player who played in a smaller conference but showed at the Senior Bowl he can play in the NFL. He has the perfect, thick muscular build for a NFL LB and he was timed at 4.46

at his pro day. He is a player that reminds me of Mason Foster, who came out in the 2011 draft, because of his build and speed. When I saw him compete at the Senior Bowl the way he did during coverage drills, and after seeing the performance he put on in the game, I think he can probably play all 3 LB positions in our defense. Wagner had almost 150 tackles, with 67 being solo tackles during his senior year, which is great production no matter what conference you play in. Wagner would be an extremely good value pick if he lasts until the 3rd round.

Nigel Bradham Florida St. **(6-2, 241lbs)**

I am extremely biased on Bradham. I think he is one of the most underrated players in the draft and I think if he is drafted by the Browns he can be an immediate starter. Bradham has the size and athleticism to be the perfect weakside LB in a Dick Jauron defense. He is aggressive and physical. As a matter of fact, some may have issue with his physicality and aggression. I once put in a post that he plays on a fine line between ferocious and felon but for me personally…. I think this defense can use a bit of that. Bradham does have some flaws in his game, like getting off blocks, but watching him play, I think it is more mental than anything. It almost looks like he forgets he is getting blocked as he moves towards the ball and forgets to dislodge himself before pursuit. If he focuses more on shedding I think he will be really good in the NFL. He can also play on 3rd down because he covers really well. In a defense like ours, where blocking Bradham won't be the offense's top priority, I think he can flourish.

Bruce Irvin West Virginia **(6-3, 245lbs)**

Irvin is a player I am putting on the list because I know the Browns have brought him in for a visit but he is also a player I thought would be considered more of a 3-4 OLB because of his pass rush ability. Maybe the Browns plan on using him like the Broncos use OLB Vonn Miller, which will allow him to rush the QB on passing situations. I am not saying Irvin is as much of an impact player as Miller but he can get to the QB in a hurry and we all know players that can do that are coveted in the NFL. As a pure LB Irvin struggles to diagnose and doesn't show the type of agility in space when attempting a tackle that you would expect from a guy who runs a 4.43 forty and has a 6.7 3-cone drill, but maybe it is just a matter of him getting more comfortable playing in space. Irvin will also have to answer some questions on maturity because he has had a few situations of trouble in his past.

Travis Lewis Oklahoma **(6-1, 246lbs)**

Lewis is a guy that probably won't fully earn his respect until he earns a starting job in the NFL but I think that will not only happen, I think it will happen a lot quicker than most expect. Lewis is player that has produced as a LB in the Big 12 every since his redshirt freshman year where he burst on the scene with 144 tackles. He went on total over 440 tackles in 4 years. He is big and strong with a solid 4.7 speed and plays passing lanes really well. Lewis managed 9 career interceptions and 12 pass break ups which is more than a lot of DBs coming out of college so that is great for a LB. He is a player that will add depth to a roster and challenge for a starting job once he understands the system.

Late Rounds (6-7)

Miles Burris San Diego St. **(6-2, 246lbs)**

Burris is a player that will immediately be an impact of special teams and can develop into a contributing LB in the NFL. I like his upside as a LB because he plays well in space and he really packs a punch when he tackles. He is a player that wins battles with lineman at the point of attack and although he doesn't make 'form' tackles all the time, he finds a way to get the offensive player down. He plays like he is a really competitive player who brings it all day. One thing he will have to work on is his ability to shed. If he doesn't win the physical battle he can sometimes struggle to get unlatched from blockers. He has a chance to develop into a good player.

Tyler Nielsen Iowa **(6-3, 238lbs)**

One thing you know about Iowa players is that they will be physical so Nielsen will probably compete and contribute immediately on special teams. He isn't great in coverage and may only be able to play 2 downs in the NFL but he is physical at the point of attack and is a natural leader who still has room to develop. Nielsen may not be starter material in the NFL but he will be good depth on a roster.

Tahir Whitehead Temple **(6-1, 233lbs)**

Whitehead is on the list because he has a lot of room to grow. He is one of those players that people say, “His best football is in front of him”. He has good leadership and has contributed in every game he has been on campus. Players like this that have solid athleticism and good speed (4.7) combined with a strong work ethic and good intelligence somehow find a way to make it in the NFL. If he dedicates himself to being the best special teams player he can possibly be, he can stick on a roster Whitehead can develop in a good depth player and solid contributor.

Sleeper

Demario Davis Arkansas St. **(6-2, 235lbs)**

When talking about the LB position my sleepers are usually players with great athleticism and a high production rate who are coming from a small school. Davis fits in all categories. He is fast and athletic enough (4.5/40) to cover backs and TEs and doesn’t shy away from contact. He plays fast (a little too fast at times) and is a big contributor on special teams. He is a well rounded player who can pass rush, make plays behind the line of scrimmage, and cover against the pass. Davis will probably come off the board sometime on the last day of the draft but can easily develop as a starting LB in the NFL.

Projected Pick

I know that Cleveland has brought Lavonte David in for a visit and I would be thrilled if they pick him. I also know that as a whole, this year’s LB group isn’t that strong, so the team may get one early but I am going with two other players for my projected picks. I am picking Nigel Bradham and Travis Lewis.

The Browns have plenty of picks so I think they will target the position in rounds 3-5. Between these two players the Browns should be able to come up with a young LB that can contribute to the defense right away and another player who offers good depth and can play on special teams.

In my book Lewis is the better player above the neck and Bradham has the better physical skill set. If Bradham doesn't have any struggles with the mental side of the game I would expect him to be the early candidate to start on the weakside with Lewis adding depth and backing up Jackson in the middle.

As a fan I think this is the year Cleveland will be in the market for some good young LB talent and this draft has a few players I think can start and produce right away. It may not be the two I picked but when it all shakes out I think they will walk away from the draft with multiple rookie LBs.

That's all for now, when the series continues we will probably switch back to offense, so until next time…….Go Browns!