

Draft Productivity: A Study

By Gary Keller

The present competition between the NFL and the USFL is just another skirmish in the history of the NFL. This year, for instance, very few college seniors signed contracts with the new league. While many businesspersons were optimistic about the USFL's future when it began in 1983, that optimism was based largely on marketing analysis, tax incentive projections and other financial hopes.

However, as the World Football League learned upon its demise in 1976, one indicator that any rival league must consider is the amount of draft choices it must sign to survive and ultimately merge with the NFL. The only rival leagues that were able to merge with the NFL, the All-America Football Conference (AAFC) and the American Football League (AFL) were successful, in part, because they virtually matched in quality and quantity the draft choices signed by the NFL. Computer aided data analysis has determined the indicators that enabled the AAFC and AFL to succeed.

An analysis comparing the pre-AAFC era (1936-45) with the AAFC era (1946-49) shows the AAFC achieved two significant accomplishments. First, during its four years the AAFC successfully attracted a significant quantity of premier draft choices – which both gave credibility to the new league and at the same time denied the NFL of many quality players. Second, by 1949, the AAFC virtually pulled even with the NFL in signing college seniors.

Prior to 1946, the NFL enjoyed an essential monopoly over professional football. From time to time a college senior would sign with one of the other American Football Leagues – there was one in 1936-37 and another in 1940-41 – or with some independent team. However, the NFL did not have any serious, well-financed competition.

Table One shows several key indicators for the pre-AAFC era.

TABLE ONE: DRAFT PRODUCTIVITY AVERAGES 1936-45

Team	No. Draft Choices	Made Team	Signed AFL	Traded
Bkn Dodgers	20	5 (25%)	2 (10%)	0
Chi Bears	20	6 (30%)	2 (10%)	0
Chi Cards	20	6 (30%)	3 (15%)	0
Det Lions	20	6 (30%)	1 (5%)	0
GB Packers	20	5 (25%)	1 (5%)	0
Cle Rams	21	7 (33%)	2 (10%)	0
NY Giants	20	5 (25%)	1 (5%)	0
Phi Eagles	20	5 (25%)	2 (10%)	0
Pit Steelers	20	5 (25%)	1 (5%)	0
Was Redskins	20	6 (30%)	2 (10%)	0
TOTAL	201	56 (28%)	17 (8%)	0
AVERAGES	20	56 (28%)	2 (11%)	0

AVERAGES

1. NFL teams averaged 20 draft picks per team.
2. 6 (28%) annually made teams. The Cleveland Rams led the league in most rookies making their team with 7 or 33%.
3. 2 or 11% of those drafted by the NFL did not sign with the NFL.

Table Two reveals a dramatic turnaround in draft productivity after the inception of the AAFC.

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TABLE TWO: DRAFT PRODUCTIVITY AVERAGES 1946-49

Team	No. Draft Choices	Made Team	Signed AAFC	Traded
Bos Yanks	30	6 (20%)	6 (20%)	0
Chi Bears	29	4 (14%)	4 (14%)	0
Chi Cards	29	5 (17%)	5 (17%)	2
Det Lions	29	4 (15%)	3 (10%)	2
GB Packers	29	5 (17%)	3 (10%)	1
LA Rams	29	3 (10%)	5 (17%)	0
NY Bulldogs	25	3 (12%)	3 (12%)	0
NY Giants	29	5 (17%)	5 (17%)	0
Phi Eagles	29	3 (10%)	5 (17%)	1
Pit Steelers	29	5 (17%)	4 (14%)	0
Was Redskins	29	4 (14%)	3 (10%)	0
TOTAL	316	47 (15%)	46 (15%)	6(2%)
AVERAGES	29	4 (14%)	4 (14%)	1(3%)

AVERAGES

1. While the average number of draft choices increased from 20 to 29 (+31%), on average, fewer rookies, 4, made NFL rosters, a decrease of 25% from 1936-45.
2. More players signed with the NFL's rival, average of 4 per NFL team, an increase of 50% from '36-'45.
3. The AAFC had reached a standoff with the NFL in terms of players signed, an average of 4 per team.
4. The L.A. Rams and Philadelphia Eagles actually had a NEGATIVE balance in their battle to sign college seniors. Both teams averaged 3 college seniors making their teams per year while losing 5 per year to the AAFC. The Green Bay Packers had the BEST record against the AAFC, signing 17% of their picks while losing 10% to the AAFC.

Table Three depicts the Key Indicators between the pre and post AAFC era. As mentioned the AAFC, on the whole, successfully achieved parity with the NFL in regard to signing draft choices.

TABLE THREE: COMPARISONS-AVERAGES IN ERAS

Team	Made Team			Signed AFL/AAFC		
	36-45	46-49	+/-	36-45	46-49	+/-
Bos Yanks	-	6	+6	-	6	+6
Bkn Dodgers	5	-	+5	-	-	-
Chi Bears	6	4	-2	2	4	+2
Chi Cards	6	5	-1	3	5	+2
Det Lions	6	4	-2	1	3	+2
GB Packers	5	5	NC	1	3	+2
L.A. Rams	7	3	-4	2	5	+3
NY Bulldogs	-	3	+3	-	3	+3
NY Giants	5	5	NC	1	5	+4
Phi Eagles	5	3	-2	2	5	+3
Pit Steelers	5	5	NC	1	4	+3
Was Redskins	6	4	-2	2	3	+1
TOTAL	61	47	-14	15	46	31
AVERAGES	5	4	-1	1	4	3

TABLE FOUR: DRAFT PRODUCTIVITY 1936-49

Team	Made Signed Team/ AFL		Made Signed Team/ AAFC	
	1936-45	Diff.	1946-49	Diff.
Bos Yanks	-:-	0	6:6	0
Chi Bears	6:2	4	4:4	0
Chi Cards	6:3	3	5:5	0
Det Lions	6:1	5	4:3	1
GB Packers	5:1	4	5:3	2
Cle/LA Rams	7:2	5	3:5	2
NY Bulldogs	-:-	-	3:3	0
NY Giants	5:1	4	5:5	0
Phi Eagles	5:2	3	3:5	-2
Pit Steelers	5:1	4	5:4	1
Was Redskins	6:2	4	4:3	1
TOTAL	51:15	36	47:46	1
AVERAGES	5:1	4	4:4	0

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Finally, a final statistic analysis that indicates the “parity” the AAFC achieved with the NFL is reflected in Table Five. This shows another key indicator by outlining the comparison between the number of NFL draftees who had careers and the number of players chosen by NFL teams who played in the AAFC.

TABLE FIVE: NFL CHOICES WHO HAD CAREERS/NFL CHOICES SIGNED BY THE AAFC - 1946-49

Round	1946		1947		1948		1949		TOTAL	
	NFL: AAC	AAC: NFL	NFL: AAC	AAC: NFL	NFL: AAC	AAC: NFL	NFL: AAC	AAC: NFL	NFL: AAC	AAC: NFL
1	4:2	2:4	6:3	3:6	7:4	4:7	8:1	1:8	25:10	10:25
2	4:3	3:4	6:3	3:6	5:3	3:5	6:3	3:6	21:12	12:21
3	5:2	2:5	5:2	2:5	4:2	2:4	6:1	1:6	20:7	7:20
4	1:2	2:1	3:5	5:3	6:0	0:6	4:1	1:4	14:8	8:14
5	2:3	3:2	5:1	1:5	2:2	2:2	5:1	1:5	14:7	7:14

KEY INDICATORS:

1. NFL picks in premium rounds who had NFL careers, 55%
2. NFL picks who signed with the AAFC, 45%

The only other NFL rival that forced a merger was the American Football League. That league began in 1960 and waged a successful “draft war” with the NFL. A merger was completed in 1966 between the NFL and the upstart junior league. Unlike the AAFC where only the Cleveland Browns, San Francisco 49ers, and (for one year) Baltimore Colts were brought into the NFL, the AFL was so successful that the entire nine-team league was merged into the NFL.

Among the reasons for the AFL’s success was its ability to successfully compete with the NFL in signing college seniors. Table Six shows the outcome of the AFL-NFL draft war.

TABLE SIX: EFFECT OF AFL ON NFL DRAFT 1960-66

Team	DRAFT CHOICES		MADE TEAM			SIGNED AFL			TRADE		
	No	Avg	Avg	No	%	Avg	No	%	Avg	No	%
Atlanta	25	25	9	36		0	0	0	0	0	0
Baltimore	154	22	4	30	19	4	29	19	1	7	3
Chi Bears	160	23	6	41	26	3	24	15	2	13	8
Cleveland	162	23	6	40	25	4	27	17	2	15	9
Dallas	128	21	5	29	23	3	15	12	4	22	17
Detroit	156	22	6	43	28	4	25	16	2	12	7
Green Bay	164	23	5	36	22	3	24	15	1	9	5
L.A. Rams	161	23	3	20	12	3	24	15	1	8	5
Minnesota	126	21	6	35	28	4	23	18	3	17	13
NY Giants	154	22	7	49	32	3	19	12	3	20	13
Philadelphia	151	22	6	41	27	4	26	7	2	16	11
Pittsburgh	145	21	4	29	20	2	15	10	3	18	12
St. Louis	153	22	7	49	32	4	26	17	0	3	2
San Francisco	163	23	8	53	33	3	19	12	1	5	3
Washington	147	21	5	35	24	3	21	14	4	25	17
TOTAL	2149	20	6	539	26	3	317	21	2	190	13

Key facts:

- Average number of Draft Choices per NFL team: 20
- Average number of DCs making NFL teams: 6 (26%)
- Average number of DCs signing with AFL: 3 (14%)
- Average number of DCs traded: 2 (8%)

CONCLUSIONS

The AFL’s ability to force a merger with the NFL was due to a number of factors. However, like the AAFC, the AFL was able to sign at least 45% (it actually signed 50%) of college seniors drafted by the NFL. This statistic stands the test of time. The primary examples of leagues that failed to repeat the example of this key indicator were the World Football League (1974-75) and most recently the USFL. Both attempted to alter the 2:1 draft choice axiom by signing established NFL stars to give their leagues credibility. However, this tactic only enlarged salaries, taxing the budgets of all teams, and did not establish a stable base of players internally developed. This situation prevented the new leagues from developing unique identities. Worse, the cost to field a team composed of ex-NFL players was more expensive than developing a team built around college seniors.

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One of the secrets to the NFL's astounding success as well as that of the AAFC and the AFL has been the ability to sign 45% of college seniors drafted. While market analysis and television contracts must be considered before taking on the NFL, one significant question owners must ask is this: Do I have the time, money, and patience to sign at least 45% of the NFL's draft choices? If the response is no, raiding NFL rosters, market analysis, and television contracts will not be enough to insure survival.