



NFL PREVIEW 2014

NET BBEATEM 50TH

MOST VITAL POSITION

A group of young, versatile signal-callers are showing why having an elite quarterback is now essential for NFL success.

By Andrew Lawrence

Becoming an NFL player is like winning a cereal-box contest — only the odds might be even tougher. More than 100,000 seniors will try upon finishing high school, says the NFL Players Association, but only 215 will score the ultimate prize: the privilege to play on Sundays. Those who aspire to start at quarterback are almost pushing their luck. The NFL only has 32 positions to offer, and vacancies don't come along often.

There's good reason for that. Like most employers, NFL teams are looking for good people with experience. For the longest time that meant older, more mature passers with years' worth of snaps under their belts. Nowadays, however, young quarterbacks are coming into the pros more prepared to take charge than ever.

Photograph by JONATHAN FERREY/GETTY IMAGES

Look at all the kids who will be leading NFL teams in 2014. Of the league's 32 projected starters, 15 are 26 years old or younger. Nine have been out of college for less than three years.

This revolution comes at a time when the position has never been more important (*see box, below*). As a quarterback goes, so goes his team. Of last season's top 18 quarterbacks, 12 went to the playoffs and four of the other six led their teams to .500 records or better. The message is simple: Good QBs get results. And it's all but impossible to win without one.

Teams used to place an emphasis on building a strong ground attack around a star running back. But not a single running back was taken in the first round of the 2014 draft. (Four QBs went before the first back.) And last year teams called fewer rushing plays per game than ever before. The NFL has become a quarterbacks' league. Specifically, a young quarterbacks' league.

Generation Next

Andrew Luck (age 24) guides the Indianapolis Colts deeper into the postseason each year and promises to go ever further after being reunited with Pep Hamilton, who was his

coordinator when he was in college at Stanford. Robert Griffin III (age 24), who carried the Washington Redskins to their first playoff appearance in five seasons in 2012, should be back to his old game-breaking self now that he is fully recovered from tearing two ligaments in his right knee. Meanwhile, Russell Wilson (age 25) will attempt to lead the Seattle Seahawks to a second consecutive Super Bowl title with a team that is virtually unchanged from last year's dominating unit.

These are the first, second, and 75th picks in the 2012 draft we're talking about here. Guys this young aren't supposed to take over. They're supposed to take a seat on the bench.

But neither Indianapolis nor Washington had the luxury of time on its side. The Colts were desperate to replace Peyton Manning, whom they let go in March 2012 after he suffered a career-threatening neck injury. Washington was ready to take a flier on a young, charismatic leader out of Baylor.

The Seahawks, though, seemed as if they might bring Wilson along slowly. Weeks before selecting Wilson, they signed Packers backup Matt Flynn to a three-year

contract worth \$26 million. It was a contract that suggested Flynn was being paid to be Seattle's starter.

Coming out of Wisconsin, Wilson was written off as too short (5'11") by NFL scouts. But the Seahawks nonetheless saw something in him. "All the credit for that really goes to [general manager] John Schneider," owner Paul Allen said last February, in the midst of a jubilant Seahawks locker room after the Super Bowl. "He basically took me aside and said, 'There's a quarterback I really like, and I think he's going to be there in the third round. Obviously his height [is a flag], but he has everything else you would look for.'"



PEYTON MANNING'S 2013 AV RANK: 1ST in NFL

ANDREW LUCK'S 2013 AV RANK: 10TH in NFL

reinstating Smith violated a sacred football code: A starter can't lose his job to injury.

Still, it seemed like less of an injustice when Kaepernick went on to lead the Niners to the Super Bowl, where they narrowly lost to the Baltimore Ravens. Smith was traded to the Kansas City Chiefs before the 2013 season, during which Kaepernick took the 49ers to the NFC championship game. He was rewarded in the off-season with a six-year, \$126 million raise. That's a lot of money for a player with barely a year-and-a-half's worth of seasoning. But in today's game, that's a bargain for an elite QB.

Quarterback Class

Why are so many passers arriving in the NFL ready to make an instant impact? It's thanks largely to intensive training during their high school years.

High school football is a very different game now than it was 20 years ago, when a quarterback would take the bulk of his reps between August and December. Now, the season never seems to end.

Coaches spend half the spring teaching QBs the playbook and breaking down film and the other half walking them through concepts that are every bit as sophisticated as any you'll find in the pros.

The revolution dates back to 1997, when Flower Mound Marcus, a Dallas-Fort Worth area

“The best athletes are playing quarterback,” says Allen. “What you’re seeing are guys who can play a lot of the other positions but can run and throw.”

school, won a state championship in football-mad Texas by throwing out of a shotgun spread formation. “Back in the early days, the talented teams were the running teams,” explains Highland Park High coach Randy Allen, who lost to Marcus in those '97 playoffs but went on to groom Matthew Stafford, the Detroit Lions' 26-year-old franchise QB. “Some teams who considered themselves underdogs thought of passing as the equalizer. If you could throw the football well enough, you could beat a team with a little bit more talent.”

To keep pace with the increased demand, young quarterbacks scatter to passing camps all over the country, like the Manning Passing Academy in Thibodaux, Louisiana. There, QBs sharpen their mental game and refine their mechanics.

Some quarterbacks spend their summers playing in seven-on-seven leagues, where passers test their ability to operate spread offenses on 50-yard fields without any linemen or linebackers obstructing their view. Luck, Griffin, and Stafford all played seven-on-seven when they were in high school in Texas. So did the

JOHN BIEVER FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (MANNING); DAVID BERGMAN FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (LUCK)

On the Move

Gone are the days when a quarterback's job was to hang out in the pocket and look downfield. QBs have become more mobile, as the number of rushing attempts and rushing yards per game shows.

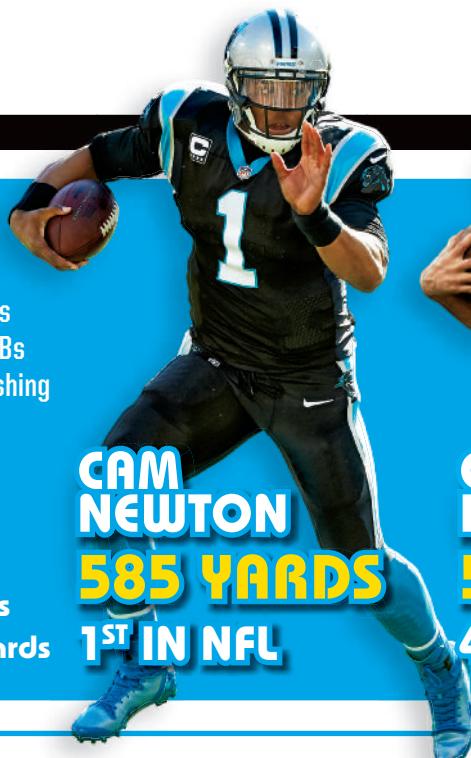
1973: 4.7 attempts, 19.6 yards

1983: 4.8 attempts, 18.5 yards

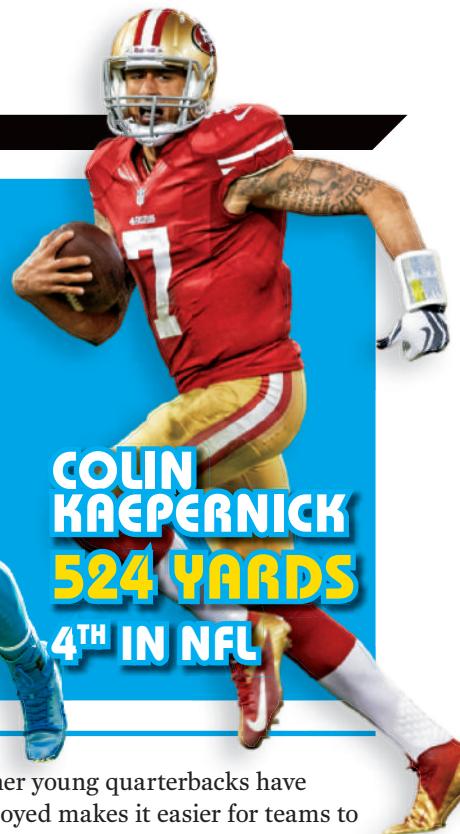
1993: 5.6 attempts, 19.1 yards

2003: 5.4 attempts, 19.1 yards

2013: 6.7 attempts, 28.8 yards



**CAM
NEWTON**
585 YARDS
1ST IN NFL



**COLIN
KAEPERNICK**
524 YARDS
4TH IN NFL

Philadelphia Eagles' Nick Foles (age 25), who last season led the NFL in QB rating (119.2) and set a league record by throwing 27 touchdowns against just two interceptions. Miami Dolphins starter Ryan Tannehill (age 26), who has thrown for more than 3,000 yards in each season since he was selected eighth in 2012, is another seven-on-seven success story.

Interestingly, all this drilling isn't turning passers into robots. As young athletes learn the game, high school coaches get to see what they do well and tailor their playbook to suit certain strengths. By the time QBs reach the pros, they not only know the ins and outs of the core concepts that make up spread-based football, but they are also able to execute them in their own style.

Men in Motion

The new generation of NFL passers doesn't play the way the guys before them have, stiff and still in the pocket. (Though that certainly doesn't mean pocket passers are a thing of the past. Manning of the Denver Broncos and Drew Brees of the New Orleans Saints have shown that.) Wilson, Kaepernick, Griffin, and 25-year-old Cam Newton of the Carolina Panthers are as deadily on

the run as they are through the air — and quick to improvise if a play breaks down. The same is true for Luck, Stafford, and Tannehill, although they prefer to stay in the pocket.

It just proves Randy Allen's point that "the best athletes are playing quarterback. What you're seeing are guys who can play a lot of the other positions but can run and throw. And they are smart enough and has enough experience in the passing game where he can execute."

That's what makes the temptation so great in Cleveland to start 21-year-old rookie Johnny Manziel. At Texas A&M, where he won the Heisman Trophy as a freshman and led the Aggies to consecutive bowl-game victories, he showed a knack for making plays by any means necessary: with his arm, with his legs, out of thin air — whatever it took. And even though the Browns have a perfectly capable and experienced passer in Brian Hoyer (who missed the bulk of last season with an ACL injury), there's just something about Manziel that screams "Start me!"

It's the same thing that Schneider saw in Wilson: a combination of charisma, work ethic, and skill. And the success that Wilson and the

other young quarterbacks have enjoyed makes it easier for teams to feel comfortable turning their teams over to young QBs. "I don't think it's real hard to go with someone who you see is eventually your best option," says first-year Tampa Bay Buccaneers coach Lovie Smith. Nonetheless, he faces a tough choice of whom to start under center. There's Mike Glennon, the 24-year-old who played well in 13 starts last season. And then there's Josh McCown, the 35-year-old who played like he was 10 years younger in eight relief appearances for Chicago Bears starter Jay Cutler.

It's a huge decision, and Smith will take into account many variables. Age, however, won't be one of them. "I've had no problem playing a young player once he's shown enough," Smith continues. "You go with it and you don't look back." ■

QB POSTERS!

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