



UNDERSTANDING THE 2020 FANTASY ROOKIE RUNNING BACK

For five consecutive seasons (2015-2019) there had been at least one running back selected with a top-24 pick in the NFL draft. That trend ended in 2020 when Clyde Edwards-Helaire was the first back taken by the Kansas City Chiefs at pick 32.

If you've been listening to The Fantasy Footballers Podcast this offseason, you know that running backs are statistically more likely to produce fantasy value in their rookie year compared to wide receivers and tight ends, but how meaningful is draft capital and preseason games in predicting the outcome of a rookie RB? First, let's look at the top-6 backs being drafted in fantasy right now and their NFL draft capital. All six players were drafted between picks 32 and 76 and have a fantasy ADP between 7 and 88.

Player – Team	NFL Draft Round – Pick	Fantasy ADP (PPR)
C. Edwards-Helaire – KC	1 – 32	7 (RB6)
J. Taylor – IND	2 – 42	38 (RB22)
D. Swift – DET	2 – 35	58 (RB28)
C. Akers – LAR	2 – 52	60 (RB29)
J. Dobbins – BAL	2 – 55	75 (RB33)
K. Vaughn – TB	3 – 76	88 (RB37)

From 2015 to 2019, there were 10 rookie running backs with the same NFL draft stock who also had a fantasy ADP of 88 or higher. That's only an average of 2 players per year. Despite the limited offseason and lack of preseason, there's a whopping 6 backs with the same profile in 2020. The fantasy community is unusually optimistic about this group being able to perform in their first pro year.

Player – Team	NFL Draft Round – Pick	Fantasy ADP (PPR)	Fantasy Finish (ADP)
M. Sanders – PHI	2 – 53 (2019)	59 (RB29)	RB15
D. Montgomery – CHI	3 – 73	31 (RB18)	RB24
D. Singletary – BUF	3 – 74	84 (RB37)	RB32
K. Johnson – DET	2 – 43 (2018)	63 (RB27)	RB34
R. Freeman – DEN	3 – 71	28 (RB15)	RB47
D. Cook – MIN	2 – 41 (2017)	28 (RB14)	RB72
J. Mixon – CIN	2 – 48	43 (RB20)	RB34
D. Henry – TEN	2 – 45 (2016)	79 (RB32)	RB45
T. Yeldon – JAC	2 – 36 (2015)	63 (RB28)	RB27
A. Abdullah – DET	2 – 54	42 (RB18)	RB43

Of these ten players, Miles Sanders, Devin Singletary, and T.J. Yeldon are the only running backs to return their fantasy ADP or better in their rookie season. Using this data alone, that's a hit-rate of just 30%. The 2019 group performed far above average with 67% returning value on ADP. The question has to be asked: Is the improved rate in 2019 causing the fantasy community to be overly optimistic about the 2020 rookie class?

To answer this question, let's compare how statistically effective we are at drafting running backs as a whole. In 2017, 2018, and 2019, the top-100 overall drafted fantasy RBs returned value equal or greater than their ADP 48%, 39%, and 44% of the time. In general, the fantasy community has been consistently below-average at identifying RB value. I believe that Singletary and Sanders outperforming ADP in 2019 was an outlier. The success rate of rookies between 2015 and 2018 is a more accurate metric, a scary-bad 14%.

The other factor to consider in trying to predict the value of rookie running backs this year is a lack of preseason games and whether or not this will impact regular season performance. Luckily, RBs in this pool traditionally see very little preseason opportunity, averaging 16 total touches. Our value group of Sanders, Singletary, and Yeldon was even lower, averaging just 12 preseason touches and still outperforming their regular season ADP. Ultimately, preseason experience doesn't appear relevant in trying to predict fantasy value for this group but a lack of traditional preparation may result in a higher injury risk for players without NFL experience.

Player – Team	Preseason Touches (Att + Rec) Rookie Season
M. Sanders – PHI	8
D. Montgomery – CHI	8
D. Singletary – BUF	18
K. Johnson – DET	20
R. Freeman – DEN	16
D. Cook – MIN	23
J. Mixon – CIN	23
D. Henry – TEN	26
T. Yeldon – JAC	9
A. Abdullah – DET	13

If we consider the range of outcomes for finding value in the 2020 rookie RB class to be between 14% (2015-2018) and 30% (2015-2019), the conclusion is that only 1 or 2 of this year's top rookie RBs will return value on their ADP. If the chance of winning on the position as a whole is 39-48%, I'm going to avoid rookies this season and look for veteran value instead. Here are some player recommendations to consider instead of selecting one of these rookies:

- Clyde Edwards-Helaire: **Dalvin Cook**
- Jonathan Taylor: **Mark Ingram**
- D'Andre Swift: **Kareem Hunt**
- Cam Akers: **Ronald Jones**
- J.K. Dobbins: **Latavius Murray**
- Ke'Shawn Vaughn: **Marlon Mack**