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Brian Shuman

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Rookie Contracts in the NFL

Abstract

One of the most analyzed and crucial aspects of the National Football League is the annual draft held every April. The contracts received by rookies each year has been steadily increasing, and the hopes of a franchise can sometimes lie in the success these rookies have, making the draft process increasingly difficult for franchises. The aim of this paper was to discover what factors teams use in drafting a player and determining their starting rookie salary. Factors that were analyzed include race, market size, player specialization and even attendance. The analysis of the research done attempted to find trends that work and ones that don't work. With the uncertainty of how players coming out of college will perform at the professional level, finding out which factors are more successful certainly has its merit in the sports world.

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Rookie Contracts in the NFL

Brian Shuman

St John Fisher College

April 27th, 2012

Abstract

One of the most analyzed and crucial aspects of the National Football League is the annual draft held every April. The contracts received by rookies each year has been steadily increasing, and the hopes of a franchise can sometimes lie in the success these rookies have, making the draft process increasingly difficult for franchises. The aim of this paper was to discover what factors teams use in drafting a player and determining their starting rookie salary. Factors that were analyzed include race, market size, player specialization and even attendance. The analysis of the research done attempted to find trends that work and ones that don't work. With the uncertainty of how players coming out of college will perform at the professional level, finding out which factors are more successful certainly has its merit in the sports world.

Rookie Contracts in the NFL

Before 2011, there was concern across the NFL regarding escalating contract values for unproven rookies. Ndamukong Suh was selected by the Detroit Lions with the 2nd pick, and was rewarded with a five year, \$68 million contract with \$40 million of it being guaranteed (Bachman, 2010). The problem the owners have is how quickly these contracts have increased, looking at the contract on Chris Long two years earlier. Long received a 6 year, \$56.5 million contract in 2008, 11.5 million less than Suh (National Football League, 2008). The newest NFL Collective Bargaining Agreement (agreed upon in July 2011) has addressed the escalation of rookie salaries with the introduction of a rookie wage scale. There have been a number of restrictions put in place that have made the signing process easier for teams. However, the issue that remains is the high expectations placed on rookies to be successful, and although contract dollars have decreased dramatically, rookies will always be scrutinized based on their contracts. There are a number of influences that can affect where a rookie is drafted, which is the main factor that determines a rookies starting salary. Performance in the NFL Combine is one of these influences, being one of the only true tools teams have to judge a rookie prospect. Ultimately football is a business, and the draft process is an unknown element that can be difficult to master. This paper takes a closer look at topics such as player specialization, race and market size and explains how they are related to the position they are drafted and the salary these rookies receive.

Literature Review

Every year, one of the biggest spectacles of the NFL calendar is the draft. It's a wonder that so much attention is given to something that involves no physical activity or action at all, but fans place a high emphasis on the draft in hopes their franchise will find their next star. When it comes to the people in charge, such as the general managers and coaches of teams, they need to

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understand that picking the right prospect is a calculated risk. Jobs can be lost, millions of dollars could be wasted, and years of losing could result from a team having a poor draft. This is why there is such significance on picking the right player you'll surely be required to hand millions of guaranteed money to. A position that is often looked at and scrutinized most is the quarterback. Quarterbacks annually receive the highest salaries in the draft, however they often times can fail to live up to expectations. Quarterbacks are expected to be the face of the franchise and turn the fates of bad teams around Berri and Simmons (2011) point to this as a major issue, stating "At the root of player over-valuation was an inability on the part of team managers to successfully predict the performance of players in the NFL"(p. 38). Because of the expected value franchises expect to receive from rookies, combined with the unknown nature of selecting players, all parties involved seem to walk away unhappy. The draft in many ways forces teams to gamble their money away. Other than trading out of a high draft pick, teams that finish poorly seem to have no way of getting out of paying big dollars to a rookie. The hope is that the gamble pays off and a player like Peyton Manning comes and helps a team win for decades. Pointed out by Hendricks, "When teams are choosing between two star athletes at the top of the draft, they seem to act in a risk adverse manner and select the athlete from the more visible football program" (2003, p # 883). This shows how there is such little to base a draft choice on when teams must choose a player based solely on where he played college football. The thing that most franchises struggle with, however, is not just finding a player that will be great for years, but finding a player that will perform up to the many expectations they have. This could mean bringing up attendance, staying healthy and have a solid amount of playing time, or simply being a player that adds value in any way they can. There are a number of unique instances in the NFL where a team selects a player

and pays a player good money to specialize in only certain areas, without the added pressure of becoming a full fledged “star” on the team.

Theoretical Framework

When trying to understand the connection between rookies and their contracts, two theories help us understand better. These theories are known as Expectancy Theory and Equity Theory. Equity Theory suggests players will “tank” and underperform once they have a guaranteed contract, while Expectancy Theory suggests players will perform well and live up to the expectations placed on them. These theories are applied to a player’s second contract as opposed to their rookie contract; however there is relevance in evaluating rookies using these theories. The article by Ahlstrom and Kennelly (1999) notices the escalation of salaries in the MLB, which has also occurred in the NFL as well. The issue associated with player contracts and their effort is it is impossible to measure how hard a player is trying. Stiroh (2007) has determined an absolute equation that measures performance. His article more or less associates performance in years before and after contract years to longer contracts and lucrative contracts. When putting his research into a college perspective, it is clear that most college athletes have goals of receiving big contracts. This is why players who have superior junior years tend to enter the draft immediately, whereas players who stumble tend to stay in school and hope for a better senior year. Jake Locker could have been chosen first overall in the 2010 draft, but decided to stay his senior year (Booth, 2009). This decision backfired on Locker, as his performance dropped and his stock fell. With the record contracts that rookies have received in recent years, looking at both theories could determine the general attitudes of college players. It is hypothesized that Equity theory may be the theory that better explains how college athletes turned professional view guaranteed contracts.

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The Process of Acquiring New Players

Another consideration that teams face when drafting is choosing the right position that fits their needs. When comparing different players at positions such as offensive line and non-skill positions, it is difficult to evaluate them because of the lack of stats associated with those positions. This is reiterated by Leeds and Kowalewski, pointing out that "...football lacks any overall performance measure. As a result, one cannot directly compare the performance of a quarterback with that of a defensive lineman" (2001). This may mean that teams generally feel more comfortable selecting players that have statistics to look at. Before 1994, there is research that suggests players were paid for making the team at a specific position, and players often were paid because of seniority rather than performance (Leeds & Kowalewski, 2001). This paper also suggests that a player has more bargaining power after a good year if they are underpaid, which means that rookies who receive big contracts have a harder time getting big contracts the second time around. In today's NFL world, there is a significant amount of specialization that occurs, which makes the draft process even more complicated. For instance, many teams have players that have purpose solely as a kick returner. Also, teams have running backs that are used for passing situations and running screens. There is research that analyzes how salaries can be affected by being an athlete that's versatile or an athlete that specializes in one area. Looking specifically at running backs the researcher states that "Our production function analysis reveals that running backs who gain pass reception yards generate higher productivity for their teams, as measured by offensive points, than do similar running backs who gain the same number of extra rushing yards." (Simmons & Berri, 2009, p.95). With that being said, the end results state that specialization has been the better route for running backs. One example in the paper of a running

back that specializes catching the ball is Chester Taylor. Explained by Simmons and Berri (2009):

“In 2005, he had 184 rush yards and 825 pass reception yards. According to our simulation, his marginal returns to 100 extra receiving and 100 extra rush yards, respectively, would have been 11.83% and -0.43%, suggesting an incentive for greater specialization in pass receptions.”

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The trend in the NFL as of late seems to be that more players are being drafted to specialize, and these players are actually being rewarded with being drafted high.

After analyzing the ways teams pick players and determine the right player for their team, the next step is to get them a contract. The hope is that a player who is drafted in the first round becomes a franchise player, someone who can contribute to the team's success for years, and someone who is well worth the first round dollars spent on them. A word that's thrown around often during the draft is value. Quite often the teams that pick last in the draft (the better teams) are the ones that can find a player who will provide value, while paying them significantly less than the teams that pick first and take risks on players that may fail. Research done by Massey and Thaler looks at how it is more of a curse than a blessing to have a high draft choice (2005). Explaining this, Massey states “Indeed, if (hypothetically) early picks had to be paid more than later picks, and performance predictability were zero, then early picks would be less valuable than late picks.” (Massey & Thaler, 2005, p.3). Obviously, teams have had some success at predicting performance, however the examples of players that failed to meet expectations would seem to outnumber the opposite. The pressure to make a solid investment and choose the right guy in the top ten is something some teams do well, while others do not.

Player Characteristics Impacting the Draft

One aspect of the draft that is easily identifiable and can influence a player's draft status (unfortunately) is race. Race is a subject that is hard to ignore, and is most often talked about when comparing quarterbacks. With tests that measure intelligence during the NFL Combine (Sierer & Battaglini, 2008) the debate of athletic ability versus football IQ seemingly never ends. When a quarterback runs more than they pass, something black quarterbacks do significantly more than the white quarterbacks, and this could be interpreted as him being not smart enough to read the defense. However, the IQ measure is not used in calculating the QB rating of any given player, meaning black quarterbacks aren't given much credit for their athletic ability and are discriminated against (Berri & Simmons, 2009). There even has been a study done to see whether or not discrimination occurs in different aspects of the NFL. Results of the study done by Conlin and Emerson show "that white players have a 0.13 lower probability of having an active contract and start 1.56 games less than nonwhite players" (2006). The study takes into account decisions made during the draft, and contains evidence that race certainly affects the overall employment of players. The research does suggest, however, that there is a cost associated with discriminating, and that is performance (Conlin & Emerson, 2006). Whereas teams may in fact be discriminating against nonwhite athletes, these athletes are the same ones who will perform better in games overall. A relatively outdated study that may be useful to explore further today is done by Lawrence Kahn in 1992. Kahn finds a 4% salary differences in favor of white athletes, and states that a similar result was found 19 years earlier in a study done by Mogull. An issue that is talked about is the preference of fans to their own race, and how that has influenced how teams pay players. Recent debates about how "football smart" quarterbacks are include this past year with Cam Newton and Blaine Gabbert, as well as in 2006, when Matt Leinart and Vince Young were both drafted (NFL, 2006). There was talk that both Cam Newton

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and Vince Young were both physically gifted but lacked the intelligence to operate the quarterback position. This stereotype is one that would seem to hurt African Americans when being selected in the draft, however both quarterbacks, along with Michael Vick were selected in the top 3 of their respective drafts (NFL, 2001). It is clear, however, there are undertones of prejudice present in the NFL draft and how teams judge whether or not a given player is worth paying money.

Team Factors that Impact the Draft

As mentioned before, there are many unique ways that teams select players in the draft and pay them. Different teams have different strategies for evaluating players, and there are also trends that can affect how teams strategize about the draft. Each year, it seems as though the privilege of picking in the top 5 of the draft has rather turned into more of a burden, as the contracts have become way out of hand. An interesting factor that influences the draft is the idea of the market size of the franchise. Simmons and Berri acknowledge this as an important factor, stating how it could be argued that larger market teams are able to afford to pay higher salaries than smaller markets such as Green Bay and Kansas City (2009). A great example to illustrate this difference is the trade between New York and San Diego in 2004. New York is the market where a draftee would have the most potential for exposure and a big contract, but also brings the added pressure to succeed; San Diego is quite the opposite, leading to an interesting situation, explained by Berri and Simmons (2011):

“In 2004, the New York Giants and the San Diego Chargers completed a trade where the Giants were given the first pick in the draft and the rights to sign quarterback Eli Manning (who later became Most Valuable Player in the 2008 Super Bowl). In exchange, the Chargers acquired the fourth pick, or the rights to quarterback Philip Rivers. In addition to the rights to Rivers, the Chargers were also given a third round pick in 2004 and one-first round and one-fifth round pick in 2005.”

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The trade was essentially forced by Eli Manning, who was unhappy with his selection by San Diego, as he rather would have played in New York. This example shows the added dimension that teams must realize when selecting a draft choice in that the needs of the player needs to be similar to the needs of the team.

Along with market size, there seems to be times when teams use attendance as an evaluation of a draft choice. While this doesn't seem to be a regular occurrence in the NFL, there is justification for a team drafting the "sexy" choice to enhance season ticket sales and create a certain buzz about the team. Players such as Reggie Bush and Tim Tebow were highly criticized coming out of college, but both were selected in the first round of the draft, with this information available on the National Football League website. A study done on attendance has shown that fans don't necessarily base their decision to attend a game on the uncertainty of the game, but rather prefer to attend games they expect to see their team win (Coates & Humphreys, 2010). The study doesn't touch upon fans attending because of a specific player, but evidence exists that proves a single player can draw attendance. This evidence comes in the example from the 2011 NFL season, when Miami actually promoted that Tim Tebow was coming to town and celebrated the national championship that Florida won with Tebow ("Tim Tebow may help," 2011, ESPN). More than 10,000 tickets were sold after Tebow was named the Broncos starter, proof that one player can make all the difference.

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Method

Participants

For this research, an analysis of the drafts from 2008 through 2010 was conducted. Only these three years were available on the NFL Website. All rookies that were drafted in the first

round of each draft were included in the study, meaning a sample size of 95 players. Including only first round draft choices narrows the study down, and because first rounder's are often the most scrutinized selections, seeing how successful or unsuccessful these players are relative to their contracts is the purpose of the research.

Materials and Procedure

With the many various angles that can be scrutinized involving the NFL draft, it is appropriate to cut down the number of factors to use. To appropriately judge the rookie contracts, the number of factors reviewed was limited to nine. The name of the athlete, along with the size of the market will be collected. Other factors included were the pick number of the athlete, the initial salary they were given, Attendance of the team, Market size, race, their position played, as well as they're specific stats from college to rookie year. Information on rookie salaries is available on the NFL website, and the reviewed literature has provided many unique ways to look at the salaries. For example, asking if attendance was affected by the selection of a popular collegiate athlete such as Tim Tebow is something that was done very easily. With rookie salaries truly starting to become a problem for owners of NFL franchises throughout the 2000's, looking at factors like market size and how it correlated with the value of contracts. Race is also an easily identifiable trait that was looked at to see how pay has been influenced. The goal of the research is to identify trends in both selecting players and paying them, and identifying whether or not these trends have been successful or if they have failed.

The first step in separating the data and figuring out how to measure the data was to create a spreadsheet with data from all the drafts being included (see Appendix A) Using contract info provided on the NFL website, along with searching the archives of USA Today and

ESPN, each participant in the study will be associated with their contract. For each position analyzed, a different form of measuring that player's success was applied. The reason for this is because every position has different stats that determine how successful they are, and each position is looked at differently through the eyes of talent evaluators across the NFL. For quarterbacks, their Quarterback Rating as well as touchdowns and interceptions were evaluated. Running backs were judged by the yards they compile as well as touchdowns. For offensive lineman, it is difficult to measure overall success, however looking at the starts they make can gauge how long they last on a certain team or if they're considered a bust. Every other position was looked at as well, and specific examples of player's stats were looked at further. For example, how did the stats of a rookie QB chosen 1st overall compare to that of one chosen 17th?

After breaking down the players and salaries, the next step was to take a closer look at the factors to be analyzed. Market size is one issue that must be defined clearly. All 32 teams will be broken down into one of three categories: Large, small, and medium sized markets. Seeing if there is a correlation between market size and draft success was the main goal of this step in the research process.

Race is another topic that was looked at deeper. Taking a look at the drafts of the past, a certain theme seemed to dominate most years, and that is the debate of African American quarterbacks vs. white quarterbacks. Dividing these players up, questions to be asked include: 1) Draft position (are white QB's drafted higher?), 2) How do these players perform relative to the contract they receive? 3) Does racism appear prevalent in the NFL in terms of contracts? The reason for not including other positions was the overwhelming comparison of white players to black players.

The last thing looked at more in depth was attendance figures and the influence rookies have. The year before a rookie is drafted and the year after will be looked at from a position standpoint, comparing quarterbacks and other skill positions, as well as market and if drafting a “name” player such as Tim Tebow has any affect. The aim of all the research is to see what methods work and if there are trends that can be followed and utilized by teams to improve their drafting success from now forward.

Results

After analyzing the several factors that were included in the study using the IBM SPSS Statistics program, there were some significant relationships found that you can see referencing Appendix B. There was a total of 20 Offensive Lineman chosen as opposed to only 7 Quarterbacks. A total of 77 Black athletes were included in the study, with only 15 total White athletes. Of the 95 selections analyzed, 34 selections were made by medium market teams, 31 by large market teams and 30 by small market teams. The average amount of guaranteed money received by draft choices in the three years included in the study was 57%. The average worth of player’s contracts was \$26.58 million. As expected there was a significant relationship between the percentage of guaranteed money received in players contracts and the position played on the field, with a p value of .041, with $R=.215$. There also were significant relationships between the contract value and the guaranteed percentage with significance at .004. When analyzing the relationship between the year drafted and the guaranteed percentage, there was found to be a significant relationship with a p value of .044. The last significant relationship that was found was between Race and the Contract Value, with a significance of .029.

Aside from using SPSS, Attendance was also a factor that was looked at individually. Although no relationships can be claimed without the use of SPSS, there were a total of 18 instances where the average attendance changed either positively or negatively by more than 3,000. Only 3 times did the attendance actually increase, compared to 15 instances of average attendance dropping.

Discussion

There are a number of factors that influence a rookie's contract and the spot in the draft they selected. This paper aimed to make connections and understand the many dynamics that general managers and coaches have to pay attention to in the drafting process. With the limited data provided on rookie contracts, it was a difficult process to pinpoint anything specifically relevant to the draft and the player's contract. However there were some relationships found that explain the drafting process for teams. The research conducted confirmed many beliefs found in the literature review that explain how teams have drafted in the past and provides evidence of why a change was needed. The new NFL CBA has changed the draft dramatically, and the research shows that there are factors that can be controlled by teams and some that cannot.

The issue that prompted research on the draft was the steady rise of contracts received by NFL Rookies, so it was important to see the relationships between the value of the contract and other factors. As expected, as the contract value increased, so did the percentage of guaranteed money these players received. Interestingly enough, there was no significance between the position played and the contract value, despite the fact that Quarterbacks drafted in 2008-2010 had an average contract of \$51 million, with the next highest average by position being \$31

million. More of an indication of contract value was the position in the draft they were chosen (see Appendix B). There also was a significant relationship found between the year drafted and the amount of guaranteed money received, illustrating the incredible rate that rookie contracts are inflated.

The thing that all NFL executives are hoping for when they hand over millions of dollars to rookies is production, and in today's NFL, almost all Quarterbacks select in the first round are expected to contribute immediately. Gone are the days of sitting QB's on the bench, as all but 1 of the 7 drafted QB's started their rookie season. With this in mind, an analysis of stats of QB's DE's and CB's was done. There are some key examples that illustrate how drafting later in the draft is more of an advantage, something discussed at length by Massey and Thaler in their 2005 study. Looking at the three quarterbacks selected in the first round in 2009, there's not much difference in the statistics department. Stafford threw for 13 TD's, Sanchez for 12 and Freeman for 10. All had similar INT's and yardage numbers, but the Buc's paid Freeman half the salary given to Matthew Stafford (\$72 million compared to \$36 mil.). While it's important to note that this is simply one season and teams draft for the future, this shows how having a lower pick can give you the advantage of paying much less for similar productivity. Another illustration of this can be seen while comparing Tyson Jackson, drafted 3rd overall and Larry English, drafted 16th overall. Jackson received \$57 million to record 27 tackles and have 0 sacks. English only received 17.8 million yet had only 1 less tackle along with 2 sacks. Again, teams must focus on the future, but the evidence of players selected in the bottom half outperforming players in the top half is shown in this research.

An overwhelming amount of Black players compared to White players in the study (77 to 15) means the data could be skewed. However, there were some significant relationships and observations that made looking at Race an important aspect. There actually was a significant relationship found between Race and the Contract Value. Although this may be skewed, it's important to note that the top 3 choices of the 2008 draft were all White, and the top overall picks for all 3 years included were White as well. Therefore, the average salary of the 15 White athletes included was brought up because of the high selections in the draft. It was believed before the research was conducted that Race wouldn't influence the draft much, however there's seems to be some underlying themes of racism still prevalent in the NFL.

An often overlooked factor that is equally as important as any other when it comes to drafting is market size. The importance of this is to distinguish the small markets from the large markets and determine its relevance to other factors. An interesting finding was that there was not a relationship found between the market size and the percentage of guaranteed money or the contract value. This further shows how drafting high in the draft is the main cause of paying large contracts to rookies. It's interesting to note that of the 7 QB's included in the study, only 1 team designated a small market team chose a QB early. While more evidence is needed to prove this, it goes to show how small market teams tend to avoid the large contracts demanded by QB's in the first round.

Average attendance figures were found for both the year before being drafted as well as the year after any given rookie was chosen. The difference was calculated and any change of 3,000 or more was stated as significant. Almost all significant changes were negative, making a case that attendance has little to no influence on the draft. It seems that more of an indication of a

change in attendance is the record of the team, as the Lions attendance decreased 5,102 the year after losing all 16 regular season games. There was too much inconsistency in analyzing the attendance figures to deem it as an important factor when drafting. For example, the year Tyson Alualu of Jacksonville was drafted, the team's average attendance increased 13,381 even though the team only went 8-8. The attendance of many teams stayed the same from year to year, with teams like the Jets and San Francisco consistently selling out their stadium. This made it virtually impossible to determine the influence a rookie had on attendance.

Conclusion

The research done on rookie contracts in the NFL has merit for several reasons, the most important of which is so NFL executives can make the right selection for the right price. At the end of the day, the only option to avoid paying such high salaries to unproven players is to trade away a draft pick to a spot in the draft where you'll pay much less. The ultimate conclusion of the research is that drafting high certainly can be a curse, that shades of racism are still apparent in the NFL, and that the rise of guaranteed money each year was vividly apparent, leading to the NFL changing the Collective Bargaining Agreement. There were several limitations that prevented further analysis of the data collected, one of which was the limited number of contract information available. The original plan was for ten years of drafts to be included in the study, starting with the 2001 NFL Draft. The NFL website only had the contracts of rookies for the 2008-2010 drafts. The reason that ten drafts was the goal was to further illustrate the rapid growth of rookie contracts in the NFL. Aside from this, there are several ideas of future research that has been manufactured by this paper. Looking at the drafts that were altered by the CBA (2011-present) and comparing them to drafts prior, it would be interesting to see the major

differences between the two for all the factors included in this study. Another idea is to look further into the actual language and performance clauses included in contracts to see how rookies perform relative to their contract. The possibilities are endless with the NFL Draft, but it is easy to forget how many different factors can go into it.

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Appendix A

Draft	Selection	Player	Contract Length	Contract Value (in millions)	Guaranteed %	Position	Race	Market Size
2010	1	Sam Bradford	6	78	64	QB	White	Medium
2010	2	Ndamukong Suh	5	68	59	DT	Black	Medium
2010	3	Gerald McCoy	5	63	56	DT	Black	Medium
2010	4	Trent Williams	6	60	61	OT	Black	Large
2010	5	Eric Berry	6	60	57	SS	Black	Small

Appendix B

Relationship	Pearson Correlation	Sig. (2 Tailed)	Significance?
Contract Value	-.303	.004	Yes
Guaranteed %			

Relationship	Pearson Correlation	Sig. (2 Tailed)	Significance?
Market Size	-.101	.340	No
Guaranteed %			

Relationship	Pearson Correlation	Sig. (2 Tailed)	Significance?
Position	-.142	.175	No
Contract Value			

Relationship	Pearson Correlation	Sig. (2 Tailed)	Significance?
Position	.215	.041	Yes
Guaranteed %			

Relationship	Pearson Correlation	Sig. (2 Tailed)	Significance?
Race	-.227	.029	Yes
Contract			

Appendix B (continued)

Relationship	Pearson Correlation	Sig. (2 Tailed)	Significance?
Selection in Draft	-.851	.000	Yes
Contract Value			

Relationship	Pearson Correlation	Sig. (2 Tailed)	Significance?
Year Drafted	-.212	.044	Yes
Guaranteed %			

Note: Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level