Carolina Panthers

2011 NFL Mock Draft: Cam Newton, Jake Locker Now Top 10 Locks?

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By
Daniel Lewis
(Contributor) on April 11, 2011

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Although the 2010 Heisman Trophy winner is the true wild card of the 2011 NFL Draft, there is little doubt that Auburn star QB Cam Newton will be selected among the top 10 picks.

Newton's talent and potential alone propel him to the very top of the draft. There are absolutely no questions about his athleticism or raw talent.

Indeed, Newton has a rare mobility and a cannon arm that reminds many draft experts of a young Steve McNair.

NFL Network analyst Mike Mayock claims that Newton has "a big arm and better mechanics" than Tim Tebow or Vince Young, who both faced similar scrutiny leading up to the draft.

Newton's elusiveness in the pocket is especially valuable considering the current landscape of the NFL, which featured dual threat QB Michael Vick having a career season with the Eagles in 2010.

Indeed, the new norm of NFL quarterbacks is a player who can avoid pass rushers in the pocket and pick up first downs with his legs when necessary.

Most importantly, though, Newton is a winner. Besides winning the Heisman, he led Auburn to a

BCS National Championship in January, and has seen nothing but success at the college level.

He is easily the most dominant talent in the draft at the most important position in all of sports, and he appears to have the makeup required to develop into a top-flight NFL quarterback.

Only his unique style of play and his character issues are holding him back.

Mayock wonders if Newton's skill set will translate to the NFL: "He comes out of a very simple (spread) pass offense at Auburn. It's basically one look and either the ball comes out or he comes out," Mayock said.

"Can he process and assimilate from a football IQ perspective a complicated NFL pass offense?"

Analysts such as Mayock worry that Newton could represent yet another example of the unpredictable nature of NFL prospects. For example, NFL flops such as Alex Smith and Troy Smith were other highly rated quarterbacks during draft season, with the former hoisting the Heisman Trophy just like Newton.

Not only do front offices worry about Newton's ability to adapt to a pro-style offense, but they also feel that he lacks some maturity.

In an interview with *Sports Illustrated*'s Peter King, for example, Newton claimed that he wanted to be known "not only as a football player, but as an entertainer and an icon," an attitude eerily similar to that of longtime loudmouth WR Chad Ochocinco.

Where do you have Cam Newton coming off the board?

- ○ Pick No. 1 - Carolina Panthers ○ Pick No. 3 - Buffalo Bills ○ Pick No. 4 - Cincinnati Bengals
- ○ Pick No. 5 - Arizona Cardinals ○ Below Pick No. 5 Submit Vote vote to see results

Despite these two flaws, all signs are pointing to Newton as the No. 1 overall selection, stepping in for the quarterback-needy Carolina Panthers.

ESPN's Adam Schefter, for instance, firmly believes that Newton will be this April's top overall selection: "The more I hear, the more it sounds like Newton is the player to beat for the No. 1 pick."

In addition to Carolina's quarterback need, Schefter reasons that the Panthers "need to create buzz to sell some tickets." A controversial prospect with a sensational style of play, Newton gives Jerry Richardson's organization the best chance to do just that.

Though he has character concerns and could end up a monumental bust despite his physical tools, with Jimmy Clausen flopping in his first year and receiving little endorsement from incoming coach

Ron Rivera's staff, the Panthers will likely a shot on Newton at No. 1.

Whereas Newton appears to be this year's consensus first overall pick, Washington QB Jake Locker could have been in Newton's shoes last year. Locker would have competed with current Rams QB Sam Bradford for the top spot in the draft had he declared a year earlier.

However, even after a underwhelming year with the Huskies, he remains in play to come off the board in the top 10 picks.

Mike Florio of ProFootballTalk, for example, reasons that Jake Locker is the perfect fit for the Washington Redskins at the No. 10 spot.

"Rex Grossman is a free agent and Donovan McNabb won't see a dime of his $10 million roster bonus after flopping in his first year under Mike Shanahan. Shanahan's system requires an athletic quarterback, and Locker is at his best throwing outside the pocket. He could 'develop' for a year behind Grossman."

Unlike Florio, though, draftniks have teams plucking Locker off the board in the bottom of the first round or even the second round.

FOX Sports' Adam Caplan, for one, views Locker's accuracy as a "major problem" that may not outweigh Locker's strengths such as athleticism and arm strength.

In his final year at Washington, Locker completed merely 55.4 percent of his passes as a senior and never mustered a completion percentage exceeding 58.2 percent in his career.

These accuracy numbers appear to be a huge red flag for Locker, especially considering that college quarterbacks typically have the same throwing problems at the professional level.

Locker's collegiate numbers may not be eye-popping, but statistics hardly ever paint the entire picture.

Where do you have Jake Locker coming off the board?

 ○ Pick No. 8 - Tennessee Titans ○ Pick No. 10 - Washington Redskins ○ Pick No. 12 - Minnesota Vikings ○ Pick No. 15 - Miami Dolphins ○ Below Pick No. 15 Submit Vote vote to see results

Though his completion percentage is worryingly low, Locker has been plagued with a terrible supporting cast every single year at Washington. His offensive line rarely formed a nice pocket for him, leading to many throws out of bounds, and his receivers consistently dropped on-target passes.

More importantly, though, Locker has demonstrated a commitment to working to refine his accuracy in order to give himself a stronger chance to excel in the NFL.

"He's such a tough football player," according to an NFC executive, who attributes Locker's poor accuracy numbers to his "throwing motion" being "off."

"Now, it's pretty good," he added. "He worked on it, fixed it in the offseason."

Even more, Locker possesses the necessary intangible qualities of a NFL franchise quarterback.

Indeed, scouts and media analysts alike have raved about Locker's competitiveness and leadership.

ESPN's Todd McShay, for example, explains, "Love, love Jake Locker the competitor. Love the physical tools. Tremendous athlete, obviously. He wants it. He makes accurate throws at times. He just hasn't put it together."

SEATTLE - SEPTEMBER 11: Quarterback Jake Locker #10 of the Washington Huskies passes against the Syracuse Orange on September 11, 2010 at Husky Stadium in Seattle, Washington. (Photo by Otto Greule Jr/Getty Images)

Like Newton, Locker is an outstanding athlete who will be a legitimate dual-threat QB in the NFL. He has excellent quickness for a quarterback and he is not afraid to lower his shoulder for extra yards after escaping the pocket.

And at a time when many scouts are frustrated with the proliferation of the college spread offense, Locker made more throws from under center than his fellow highly rated QBs Newton, Blaine Gabbert and Ryan Mallett.

Overall, there are worries about each quarterback, but it only takes one team to be sold on one of them to have their name announced by commissioner Roger Goodell.

Teams throughout the top ten have to consider making either of them their top pick because they both appear more than capable of calling the signals in the NFL.

Whereas the tea leaves read Newton coming off the board at No. 1, Locker could be selected by the Tennessee Titans at No. 8 or, more likely, by the Skins at No. 10.

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