• Best Early Returns from Draft Classes

An earlier article (*Best Draft Classes*) evaluated draft classes based on the play of their drafted players in the six seasons after the draft. I chose six seasons as the time frame because most teams control their draftees for at least six seasons.

As a result of the six-season time frame, only the classes of 2007 through 2016 were rated. I have been curious about how well the more recent drafts have shaped up, so I decided to evaluate all draft classes on their early returns.

The unit of measurement for evaluating draft classes is Return From Play (RFP). I will first explain RFP in a non-technical way, then review the ranking of the draft classes after six seasons, then rate all draft classes based on their first three post-draft seasons. Finally, I'll take a quick look at the players who did the most in their first three post-draft seasons.

Return From Play: RFP

You've just returned home from watching a movie at the theatre (you were fully masked for the entire movie, of course), and you start chatting with your spouse about the cast.

"They paid Bobby Bigstar $12,000,000 for that movie. I can't believe it. He's normally a good actor, but he was terrible in this movie. He was massively overpaid."

Your spouse says, "And Petra Planetoid carried every scene she was in. They only paid her $2,500,000! She should have gotten the $12,000,000!"

"And Bobby would have been overpaid at $2,500,000", you add.

This entirely fictional conversation explains the concept of RFP. RFP is a dollar value that reflects what he did in a season, loosely based on the NHL salary cap, and with no regard for what his contract actually pays him. If a guy with a $3,000,000 contract plays like a star, his RFP might be $7,500,000. If a guy with a big contract misses half a season, his RFP might be $4,000,000.

A more detailed explanation for RFP is found in the article *Value of a Draft Pick*. A paragraph from that document follows.

"The range for RFP for a season is between $800,000 and $12,500,000, a range that is a fair approximation of the 2021/2022 NHL salary rules. A player that played no games in a season provided no return from his play, so his RFP for that season would be $0. Players who were in the PR-CallUp category will have their RFP based on the minimum and the number of games they played. All other players' RFP will be based solely on their PR and will be in the range $1,250,000 to $12,500,000."

The following table shows the 2021/2022 RFP for selected players from the 2013 draft class. RFP values are in millions: Tyler Bertuzzi had a Return From Play of $5,100,000.

RFP From 2021/2022 Season of Selected 2013 Draftees									
Player	Team	POS	The Big Five Stats					PR Cat	2021 RFP
			GP	TOI/GP	G	A	Pts		
Aleksander Barkov	FLA	F	67	20.3	39	49	88	Star	$8.12
MacKenzie Weegar	FLA	D	80	23.4	8	36	44	Star	$7.52
Pavel Buchnevich	STL	F	73	18.3	30	46	76	Star	$6.44
Josh Morrissey	WPG	D	79	23.7	12	25	37	First5	$6.09
Andrew Copp	NYR, WPG	F	72	19.2	21	32	53	First5	$5.54
Tyler Bertuzzi	DET	F	68	19.9	30	32	62	First5	$5.10
Artturi Lehkonen	COL, MTL	F	74	15.1	19	19	38	Regular	$3.80
Ryan Pulock	NYI	D	56	21.1	5	16	21	Regular	$3.03
Dominik Kubalik	CHI	F	78	14.5	15	17	32	Regular	$2.35
Zach Sanford	OTT, WPG	F	80	14.3	9	12	21	Fringe	$2.10
Curtis Lazar	BOS	F	70	12.0	8	8	16	Fringe	$1.95
Jonathan Drouin	MTL	F	34	17.1	6	14	20	Fringe	$1.35
John Hayden	BUF	F	55	10.8	2	2	4	CallUp	$0.54
Jonny Brodzinski	NYR	F	22	10.9	1	1	2	CallUp	$0.21
Frederik Gauthier	N.J	F	8	11.1	0	0	0	CallUp	$0.08

RFP may not represent the value of a player (Barkov's RFP is low compared to his value as a player), but it does represent the value of his play (Barkov missed 15 games).

Recap: Draft Classes and Their Six-Year Return From Play

Draft Class	6-Year RFP
2015	$ 731.0
2008	$ 616.5
2009	$ 555.1
2011	$ 553.0
2013	$ 544.8
2016	$ 534.6
2012	$ 519.7
2014	$ 513.6
2010	$ 459.1
2007	$ 421.5

2015 was clearly the best class and 2008 was clearly second best. While the valedictorian of the 2015 class was Connor McDavid, 2015 would rank first if you removed McDavid from it. And if you also removed Mitchell Marner from it. It was an extremely strong class.

2009 and 2011 are very closely rated: I look on it as a tie. Classes ranked 3rd through 8th (2009 was 3rd, 2014 was 8th) are separated by less than 10% in terms of RFP.

2010 and 2007 were not good draft classes. They had some good players, of course, but they had no depth. It was a shallow draft pool in those years.

- ## Best Early Returns from Draft Classes

Rated and Ranked: Draft Classes After One Season

One Season		
Rank	Class	RFP
1	2008	$ 22.32
2	2009	$ 21.58
3	2013	$ 19.34
4	2016	$ 17.95
5	2011	$ 16.98
6	2010	$ 16.35
7	2018	$ 14.91
8	2015	$ 10.83
9	2007	$ 10.46
10	2014	$ 7.92
11	2017	$ 7.47
12	2012	$ 6.91
13	2020	$ 6.32
14	2019	$ 6.18
15	2021	$ 4.98

The first season that a draftee can play is the season he was drafted. Mason McTavish was drafted in 2021, and he played in the first season possible for him: 2021/2022. He was one of seven 2021 draftees who played that first season.

Three classes stand out as having had the best first seasons: 2008, 2009 and 2013.

The least productive draft classes in their first year of play are the last three draft classes.

Rated and Ranked: Draft Classes After Two Seasons

Two Seasons		
Rank	Class	RFP
1	2008	$ 69.38
2	2016	$ 65.60
3	2015	$ 65.07
4	2013	$ 61.23
5	2009	$ 60.46
6	2011	$ 53.34
7	2010	$ 48.89
8	2018	$ 44.72
9	2014	$ 41.49
10	2012	$ 38.02
11	2020	$ 35.58
12	2017	$ 35.15
13	2007	$ 32.42
14	2019	$ 24.64

The 2021 draft class has been dropped from consideration, given they have only played one season.

It is interesting that the top six classes after six seasons are also the top six classes after two seasons, albeit in a different order. This may indicate that it doesn't take long to see whether a draft class was deep or shallow. If that is true, it is not a good omen for the last three draft classes.

The 2019 class is the lowest rated class after two seasons, lower than the talent-sparse class of 2007. While it is true that 2007 had a marvelous player in it (Patrick Kane), classes are being judged on their entirety rather than on their top few players.

Rated and Ranked: Draft Classes After Three Seasons

Three Seasons		
Rank	**Class**	**RFP**
1	2015	$166.26
2	2008	$161.11
3	2009	$137.41
4	2016	$129.96
5	2013	$129.46
6	2011	$114.39
7	2014	$107.23
8	2018	$102.87
9	2010	$100.32
10	2012	$ 87.90
11	2017	$ 85.95
12	2019	$ 76.73
13	2007	$ 72.65

The two best classes since 2007 are at the top of the three-season rankings, in their eventual order.

As to the most recent draft class, 2019 edges out the worst class by a slim margin.

Rated and Ranked: Draftees After One Season

Finally, I'll take a quick look at the draftees. The next table shows the top RFP players based on their play in the season immediately after their draft.

One Season			
Rank	**Player**	**Drafted**	**RFP**
1	Auston Matthews	2016	$6.44
2	Gabriel Landeskog	2011	$5.87
3	Aaron Ekblad	2014	$5.54
4	Drew Doughty	2008	$5.43
4	Patrick Kane	2007	$5.43
6	Jeff Skinner	2010	$5.21
7	Rasmus Dahlin	2018	$5.10
8	Nathan MacKinnon	2013	$4.99
9	Matt Duchene	2009	$4.88
10	Jack Eichel	2015	$4.66

Connor McDavid's first season has him in 24th place. He missed 37 games due to a broken clavicle: if a player misses games, his Return From Play will be smaller than if he had played every game.

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Rated and Ranked: Draftees After Two Seasons

Two Seasons			
Rank	Player	Drafted	RFP
1	Drew Doughty	2008	$13.19
2	Connor McDavid	2015	$12.31
3	Steven Stamkos	2008	$11.80
4	Auston Matthews	2016	$11.32
5	Matt Duchene	2009	$10.64
6	Aaron Ekblad	2014	$10.53
6	John Tavares	2009	$10.53
8	Patrick Kane	2007	$10.20
9	Patrik Laine	2016	$9.54
10	Sean Monahan	2013	$9.33

Five players who were in the top ten after their first season dropped out of the top ten when looking two-season totals, but they didn't drop far. They were all in the top 20. The rankings in the top 20 are quite close, as the difference between Sean Monahan (10th) and Nathan MacKinnon (20th) is less than $1,000,000 RFP.

Rated and Ranked: Draftees After Three Seasons

Three Seasons			
Rank	Player	Drafted	RFP
1	Connor McDavid	2015	$22.72
2	Drew Doughty	2008	$19.87
3	Steven Stamkos	2008	$19.56
4	John Tavares	2009	$18.29
5	Auston Matthews	2016	$17.19
6	Patrick Kane	2007	$16.88
7	Sean Monahan	2013	$15.42
8	Gabriel Landeskog	2011	$15.15
9	Ryan O'Reilly	2009	$14.40
10	Seth Jones	2013	$14.31

Taylor Hall was 11th and the Tkachuk brothers were 12th and 13th (Brady then Matthew). MacKinnon was 20th on this list, less than $1,500,000 out of 10th.

MacKinnon had a bad second season, missing 18 games. While he is a great player, he didn't get back into the top ten until his fifth season. That's because his provided other very good players with a lead over MacKinnon, and it took him three years to catch up.

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Summary

The last three draft classes (2019, 2020, 2021) have produced the smallest returns of all classes since 2007 after one season. 2019 and 2020 were 11th and 14th out of fourteen classes that have played at least two seasons. 2019 was 12th out of thirteen classes that have played three seasons. The draft pool has been pretty shallow these last three years.

Was the low return caused by the pandemic? No, not if you are thinking that they have lower returns because the seasons were shorter. RFP is based on Productivity Rating (PR), and PR has an adjustment for shortened seasons. Those classes are rated low because the players from those classes have produced the least in their first seasons, <u>even allowing for the fact that their seasons were shorter</u>.

Was there something else about the pandemic that might have affected these classes? 2020 and 2021 draftees might have been affected because they didn't play as many games in junior as they otherwise would have. They didn't get to play as many pre-draft games as players in other draft classes.

Have teams changed the way they develop newly drafted players? Maybe. The 2020/2021 season, in particular, could have led to changes in the way young players were brought into the league: it was a 56-game schedule and their were border-crossing issues. It is also possible that teams decided to give their draftees more time to develop. That is a little less likely, as it looks like all 32 teams decided that at the same time.

The last three draft classes are the least-productive classes in their early play, and they did have to play through a pandemic. When an unusual result happens in unusual times, human nature wants to blame the results on the times. But my slight knowledge of statistics warns me that correlation is not causation.

The fact that two things happened at the same time does not mean that one caused the other. The pandemic might not have caused these players to start their careers slowly, and these players certainly did not cause the pandemic.

I don't know how to "prove it", but I think that the pandemic has adversely affected the players in the last three draft classes. The players played fewer games than normal: they are "more" rookie than normal.

It will be interesting to see if these last three classes improve with age, as does fine wine.