



10 THINGS WE LEARNED IN 2015

Sigmund Bloom takes a look back at the lessons of the 2015 fantasy season.

by Sigmund Bloom, May 13

Photo: Kyle Terada, US Presswire

Before we dive head-first into 2016 draft preparation, we should take advantage of having enough distance from 2015 to glean some key takeaways and ask how we can apply those lessons this year. Fantasy football is always a moving target, which brings us back every year while frustrating and teasing us with its cryptic and wide-ranging set of outcomes.

1. Even sure thing QB1s can be colossal draft busts - [Aaron Rodgers](#) and [Andrew Luck](#) were the two consensus stud QB1 picks, going in the third or even fourth round at times in some drafts. This seemed absurd in light of their recent histories and the value of a top three quarterback. When the dust settled, Luck wasn't even on the field, and Rodgers wasn't allowed near our lineups. Luck was finally betrayed by all the hits he took (and he wasn't all that impressive before going down for the second time in 2015 with a lacerated kidney among other injuries), and Rodgers' season was ruined by the loss of [Jordy Nelson](#) in the preseason. Even though stud QB1s sputtered down the stretch in 2014, they still gave solid return on investment during the season. In 2015, the earliest quarterback picks were liabilities.

Plan for 2016: Before you say "Watch preseason injuries closely" remember that [Cam Newton](#) lost [Kelvin Benjamin](#) and went on to run away from the pack and put up more fantasy points than any other quarterback by a large margin. Before you say "Avoid quarterbacks with shaky offensive lines", remember that [Russell Wilson](#) took off after a slow start and put up more points than any quarterback between Weeks 10 and 16, delivering titles for many. Streaming quarterbacks and waiting until QB15 to take a starter is still there for us, but if a Newton/Luck/Rodgers/Wilson falls too far in your draft, they could still be a league-winner come December.

2. A backup running back can be a league-winner - We can't say we weren't warned. Le'Veon Bell was a league-winner in 2014, so he was going early in drafts despite being suspended for the first two games of the season. After two weeks, his replacement, [DeAngelo Williams](#), was the #1 running back in fantasy football. After Le'Veon Bell went down with an injury in Week 8, Williams was over five points per game better than any other running back. That's the same kind of VBD motherlode Bell created down the stretch in 2014. "Pittsburgh RB" was a league-winner for the second year in a row.

Plan for 2016: Don't avoid Bell in the first, but overpay for Williams by a round or two to be sure to lock up the position. If the Bell drafter is running strong, considering sniping Williams from them. Heck, consider sniping Williams regardless once you get to the 12th or 13th round.

3. Bill Belichick might have found a back he can rely on - Belichick took us for one last long walk down a short pier in 2014 when [Jonas Gray](#) disappeared after putting up the best fantasy game by any running back that year. While we can forgive the fantasy community for not wanting to trust Lucy to hold that football one more time while we try to kick it, they were slow to see that [Dion Lewis](#) was different. He was in on a diverse set of plays that was larger than [Shane Vereen](#)'s role, he was more elusive and productive than Vereen, Kevin Faulk, or any other "passing down back" in the Brady/Belichick era, and the team signed him to an extension during the season. Then he went down with a torn ACL in October. The postscript to this story is that Belichick might have found two running backs he wants to stick with, as [LeGarrette Blount](#) was re-signed again, and the team did not make any significant running back moves in the draft or free agency.

Plan for 2016: Lewis is lasting til the fourth round of PPR drafts. He's only 25 and was playing at a very high level. The Patriots didn't add anyone that would indicate a huge worry about Lewis's recovery. He's a risky RB1 in PPR, but one you can get after you take your "core" players. Lewis will be a target of mine as long as his risk is more prominent in his draft stock than his production.

4. Rookie running backs are still a potential key to your drafts and season if you look deeper - [Melvin Gordon](#), [Ameer Abdullah](#), [T.J. Yeldon](#), and [Tevin Coleman](#) all went in the top five running backs taken in the NFL Draft and redraft leagues in 2015. Their NFL and fantasy teams got little of the production expected, and a lot of frustration for their trouble. Does that mean rookies were bad picks across the board? No. [Todd Gurley](#) was going off of the board after only Gordon and ended up being a strong RB1 for the rest of the season. [David Johnson](#) and [Thomas Rawls](#) were strong RB1s after they took over their backfields during the season. [Jeremy](#)

[Langford](#), [Javorius Allen](#), and [Karl Williams](#) all contributed to their fantasy teams during hot streaks.

Plan for 2016: Ezekiel Elliott is a legitimate first-round pick, who can be Gurley without the wait to check the fitness of his knee and with a lot more receptions. You will ignore rookies until the second half of your draft, but Kenneth Dixon (Baltimore), and Devontae Booker (Denver) have the chance to be at least this year's Langford, if not this year's Rawls. Jordan Howard (Chicago) and Paul Perkins (New York Giants) are two more rookie names to add to your late-round target list because of the quality of their competition. Be open to rookies mattering when the in-house veterans aren't on solid ground - even if those rookies aren't much more impressive.

5. Top 25 running back draft picks were the worst deal in fantasy football - Here's the list of backs who went in the top 25 of drafts on average according to My Fantasy League:

LeVeon Bell, PIT (ADP: 3.71) - Season over in Week 8 (Knee)
[Adrian Peterson](#), MIN (ADP: 5.17) - Finished as a strong RB1, but dud in playoffs
[Eddie Lacy](#), GB (ADP: 5.88) - Untrustworthy, only sporadically productive
[Jamaal Charles](#), KC (ADP: 6.86) - Season over in Week 5 (Knee)
[Marshawn Lynch](#), SEA (ADP: 11.59) - Injuries, final season in league
[C.J. Anderson](#), DEN (ADP: 15.98) - Nagging injuries, never got more than 15 carries in a game
[Matt Forte](#), CHI (ADP: 16.90) - Missed three games (Knee), returned to an RBBC
[DeMarco Murray](#), PHI (ADP: 16.95) - Looked sluggish and struggled in Chip Kelly offense
[Jeremy Hill](#), CIN (ADP: 20.19) - Looked like Lendale White
[LeSean McCoy](#), BUF (ADP: 22.22) - Struggled with injuries all season, productive midseason

Some of these can be chalked up to injuries. Certainly Bell and Charles were giving good return on investment until they went down. The arrow pointing down for Peterson at season's end could be ominous considering how good Lynch was right up until he wasn't. Fickle coaches make us trust Lacy, Anderson, and Hill much less going forward. It's hard to know where to seek shelter from the storm at the top of the running back position.

Plan for 2016: [Todd Gurley](#) and Ezekiel Elliott have given us the return of player we seek at running back to build around: a young elite talent on the upside of his career in the middle of an offense that is built around them. They are worth first-round picks. [David Johnson](#) might qualify, but Bruce Arians has been inclined to turn to veterans when younger more productive backs are available, but less reliable. [Devonta Freeman](#) might be dealing with a committee, as Atlanta still wants to see what they have in [Tevin Coleman](#). LeVeon Bell is still a fine first-round pick as long as you take [DeAngelo Williams](#) later (see above). 2015 should probably be treated as an outlier with respect to early running back pick outcomes, but we'll all think a little harder about investing in cornerstone running backs in the first two rounds, and the fantasy football world will continue to trend towards upside down/do the opposite/zero RB drafting.

6. A second-year receiver playing in Florida was indeed ready to break out, but not the one going earliest in drafts - [Mike Evans](#) gained a young flamethrower when the Bucs took [Jameis Winston](#) first overall in the 2015 draft. The #7 overall pick was coming off of a strong second half of 2014 and appeared ready to take the leap in his second year... until a preseason hamstring injury kept him from hitting his stride. Evans' 74-1206-3 line was "disappointing" because his performance was up and down week-to-week and within games, leaving production on the table. Meanwhile just a few hours drive away in Jacksonville, [Allen Robinson](#) was reproducing Evans' 2014 second-half scoring binge with more consistency.

Plan for 2016: Robinson and Evans are both top 10 wide receivers in early drafts, with Robinson costing a late first and Evans a mid-second. It appears that owners are treating Evans just like they did in 2015 drafts, paying the price for a post-breakout receiver. Robinson could take a step back if the Jaguars are more competitive, so both are probably overpriced for the risk and reward they offer.

7. Brandon Marshall, Steve Smith, and Larry Fitzgerald still have game - None of this 30+ year old trio cost a top 50 pick in 2015, and only Marshall cost a top 75 pick. All three finished in the top 10 wide receivers in PPR leagues on a points per game basis, and Marshall finished in the top three. Smith and Fitzgerald will be strong Hall of Fame considerations, and at 32, Marshall still has time to get in the conversation, and their staying power is part of the reason why.

Plan for 2016: Marshall is going in the third round due to quarterback uncertainty, Fitzgerald in the 5th/6th because he shares with two younger and outstanding in their own right receivers, and Smith in the 10th or later because of his season-ending achilles tear. While these prices are discounted from their 2015 finishes, none stand out as screaming values. [Vincent Jackson](#) is the best late-round 30+ receiver to target this year, and [Jordy Nelson](#) could give you first-round production at a second-round price because he's coming back from a torn ACL.

8. DeAndre Hopkins is quarterback-proof, but Emmanuel Sanders and Demaryius Thomas are not - I'm fond of saying when you draft a wide receiver, you are also drafting his quarterback. That made me too hesitant to take Hopkins in the third last year because, well, [Ryan Mallett](#) and [Brian Hoyer](#). Hopkins finished in the top five and showed that he had the talent to match no matter who his quarterback is. Drafting [Peyton Manning](#) as part of the deal with [Emmanuel Sanders](#) and [Demaryius Thomas](#) didn't seem like a drawback in drafts, but it was clear early in the season that Manning was not going to fuel a high-powered offense again in 2015. That made [Brock Osweiler](#) the quarterback for about half of the season. Thomas was still a strong WR2 and Sanders a low WR2, but that amounted to a loss for people that spent a first on Thomas and a third or fourth on Sanders.

Plan for 2016: Hopkins is going off of the board in the mid-first. [Brock Osweiler](#) has some blood on his hands from Thomas/Sanders disappointing 2015. [Brian Hoyer](#) had actually fed [Josh Gordon](#) to top five results in the past, so perhaps we should give him more credit as a fantasy quarterback despite his failings as a "real" football field general. Osweiler will give Hopkins another chance to test the quarterback-proof designation. Sanders and Thomas will get [Mark Sanchez](#) or rookie Paxton Lynch and a conservative offense. Thomas is going around the 2-3 turn and Sanders the 5-6 turn, which reflects their 2015 value, and likely 2016 value. None of these players are particularly compelling, and Hopkins could be an avoid depending on your feelings about [Brock Osweiler](#).

9. The late rounds can still produce everyweek starting WRs - After 2014 failed to give us any late-round stud wide receivers (even the breakout rookies were going in the first 10 rounds), 2015's wide receiver end game produced solid WR2s [Allen Hurns](#), [Michael Crabtree](#), and the #1 wide receiver during the fantasy playoffs, [Doug Baldwin](#). All three played in pass offenses that took a step forward in 2015, and none were target hogs that shouldered the bulk of their team's passing offense.

Plan for 2016: It's all about upside when you consider late round wide receivers. [Sammie Coates](#) and [Jeff Janis](#) could seize big play roles with outstanding quarterbacks at the helm in training camp, and Saints second-round pick [Michael Thomas](#) has a chance to follow in [Marques Colston](#)'s footsteps to have a huge rookie year. Things will change as we progress through the summer, but be thinking about best case scenario when making your list of late-round wide receiver targets, especially if you end up thinner at the position than you'd like after ten rounds.

10. Tight ends can still pleasantly surprise with sheer number of targets in a bad passing offense or red zone attention in a good one - Our perennial ritual at

tight end every year is to get excited about a bunch of breakout candidates and wake to find that only 3-5 tight ends are reliable everyweek options that can make a difference for our fantasy teams. 2015 brought reason for optimism, as [Delanie Walker](#) and [Gary Barnidge](#) led their teams in catches with 1000-yard season and at least 6 scores on the back of at least 125 targets in wide receiver-challenged pass offense. [Jordan Reed](#) and [Tyler Eifert](#) were top five weekly options on the back of their heavy involvement in red zone and accompanying ability to put up the best week by a large margin with multiple scores. [Ben Watson](#) went from the waiver wire to our lineups with a TE10 PPG finish on the back of 110 targets in the Saints passing game. We can not feast on [Rob Gronkowski](#) alone, and in 2015, we didn't have to.

Plan for 2016: Gronkowski isn't quite as compelling in the first with a much wider range of TE1 options. Barnidge and Walker are still going outside of the top five tight ends. Reed and Eifert as TE2 and TE3 in most drafts, but Reed is available at least two rounds after Gronkowski, and Eifert three. If we really believe in the lesson of 2015, we might be bold enough to wait on tight end again and target potential red zone monsters ([Martellus Bennett](#) and [Dwayne Allen](#)). No one outside of maybe [Zach Miller](#) appears to have target hog potential, but Miller won't get there if [Alshon Jeffery](#) and [Kevin White](#) stay healthy this year.
