



## WHY YOU SHOULD DRAFT RASHAD JENNINGS WITH CONFIDENCE

Rashad Jennings is the starter in New York, but can you draft him with confidence?

by Alessandro Miglio, August 5

*Photo: Andrew Weber, US Presswire*

It has been a long six months wandering through the football desert, but we made it.

Football has returned with the completion of the 2014 Hall of Fame Game. Though there is typically little of consequence to see in the first preseason game of the year, the matchup briefly sated our thirst for game action.

With it came jokes, non-sequitrial asides and fantasy debate.

One particular debate seemed to catch fire in the Twitterverse, and it surrounded the fantasy prospects of New York Giants running backs [Rashad Jennings](#) and [Andre Williams](#). The prevailing arguments of either side boiled down to this:

- Jennings is a 29-year-old with no significant upside who will be overtaken by the younger, more explosive Williams sooner than later.
- Williams is a fourth-round rookie with zero pass-catching upside whose best bet to overtake Jennings for significant playing time is an injury to the latter.

My participation in the debate fell on the side of Jennings stiff-arming all comers for the lead back job in that Giants backfield.

Why? Glad you asked. Let me show you.

### THE TALENT GAP CONUNDRUM

In the simplest terms, Jennings has an insurmountable lead on Williams for the starting job. The Giants signed the veteran to a three-year, \$10 million deal this past offseasn, and his main competition—David Wilson—[just retired](#) due to the sad circumstances surrounding his injured neck. For all the talent Williams might possess, it will be difficult to overtake Jennings this preseason without an injury involved.

There are merits to the other side of this debate, namely his ability to keep said starting job for long once the season starts. So let's explore them.

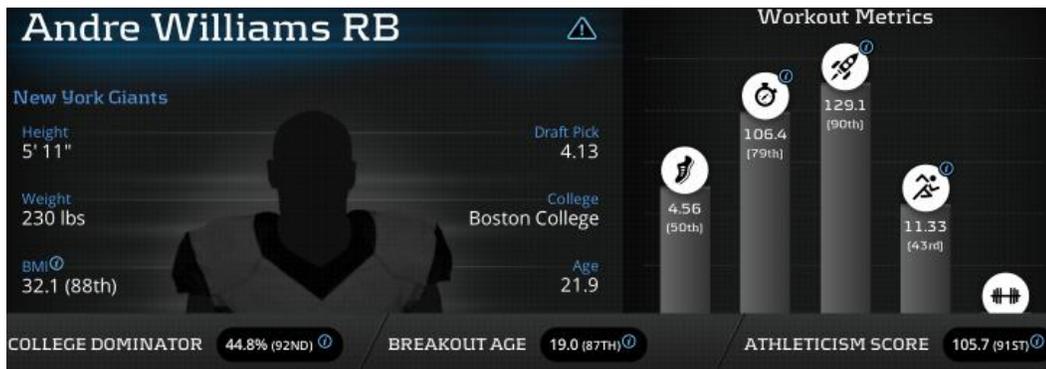
For starters, here is an [excerpt](#) from the excellent look that Shawn Siegele gave Williams over at Rotoviz during the draft process:

I have to admit a little surprise at the lack of momentum Williams seems to be generating after the Combine. While similar players like Carlos Hyde and Jeremy Hill put up what could be kindly characterized as disappointing results, Williams acquitted himself nicely. His Speed Score of 106 falls short of the soft threshold I suggested for fitting into Profile 1, but his numbers don't remove him from the conversation, especially when you consider impressive marks in the agility and leaping drills for a player of his size.

...

Williams is a relatively rare player. None of the individual comps is an exact twin, but the group as a whole paints a fairly accurate portrait. [Adrian] Peterson features in the headline for the article both because he's the poster child for Profile 1 and because he would count as the most optimistic comp for Williams.

That Peterson comparison is quite a lofty one, and it wouldn't be the last one. Salfino brought up Williams' [athleticism score](#) as calculated by playerprofler.com—courtesy of [Michael Salfino](#) of Meadowlands Media Group—noting he was in the 91st percentile at running back. His rank in in "dominator percentage" was even higher because Williams was the Boston College offense for the past four seasons.



That is all fine and dandy, but there is one major problem with the comparison—why was Williams the 10th running back taken, drafted in the fourth round?

Scouts miss on prospects all the time, to be sure. There is reasonable hope to think they missed with Williams, whose numbers were clearly overlooked in an effort to quantify the immeasurable. But it's not as if Williams was some hidden gem at a small school—he was a Heisman Trophy finalist who led the FBS in rushing with 2,177 yards while averaging 6.1 yards per carry last season.

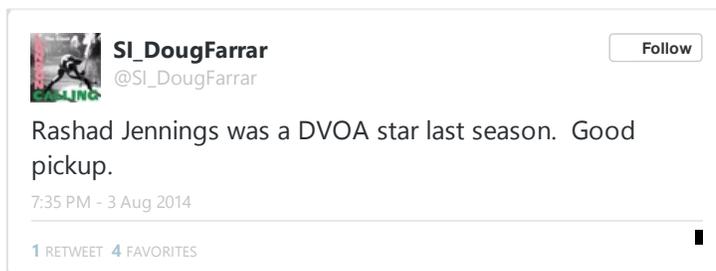
In other words, he was difficult to ignore, yet he still fell to the fourth round.

For the sake of argument, however, let's say Williams was severely underrated throughout the draft process, and the Giants got a steal when he fell to the fourth round. What are the chances he plays his way into a starting job or even a timeshare assuming health in that New York backfield?



The fact is Jennings' career efficiency is rather overlooked when it comes to evaluating his fantasy prospects. Excluding his post-ACL season—when he averaged a miserable 2.8 yards per carry as he made his way all the way back from injury—Jennings has averaged 4.9 yards per carry in his career. He averages 4.3 YPC overall when including his recovery year. Add to that the fact he has only fumbled thrice in his career, all coming in his lost 2012 season.

Is Jennings more talented than Williams? No, at least in terms of raw talent and athleticism. But is he a more complete back ready to contribute in multiple ways? Absolutely.



### PASSING FANCY

That would be because Jennings can do something Williams has not been able to do thus far in his career—catch the ball.

The rookie caught a grand total of 10 passes in college, including a big fat zero in his Heisman-worthy senior campaign. Jennings caught 10 in one game last season. Granted, Peterson caught just 24 in his three seasons at Oklahoma, but he has proven to be a transcendent talent at his position.

Those two rookies that couldn't shake plodding veterans we talked about earlier—Bernard and Ellington—saw significant playing time in large part because they were pass-catching threats. Williams has reportedly been [working on](#) that facet of his game, but we got a glimpse of the difference Jennings brings to the table in the Hall of Fame game itself.

Though we should certainly take what we saw with a grain of salt, Jennings caught all three of his targets in the two-plus drives he was on the field, showing a natural pass-catching ability that Williams does not yet possess. I would be remiss in avoiding the fact Williams gained 48 yards at a 6.9 YPC clip and scored a touchdown, but much of that damage was done against the Bills second unit. His lack of targets and the fact Jennings saw 10 of the team's first 13 touches were the real nuggets of information to glean, assuming there was anything meaningful to cull from the preseason's first matchup.



The game also indicated what we might see out of the Giants offense—the aforementioned "dink-and-dunkland" offensive coordinator Bob McDoo's installed was on display early. Jennings figures to be a big part of such a passing attack, as he was in the first few series, more so than his rookie rival at this stage.

#### BEATING HISTORY

Jennings doesn't merely have a head start because he stood atop the depth chart as we rolled into training camp. His status as a veteran gives him cushion over the rookie out of Boston College, particularly with Coughlin at the helm. The last rookie to log significant playing time under Coughlin was Fred Taylor in 1998, when Coughlin coached the Jacksonville Jaguars. It turned out that Taylor was pretty good, and he probably had a season-ending injury to then-starter James Stewart to truly thank.

The last time a rookie running back won a timeshare in New York was Ron Dayne in 2000, when he teamed up with Tiki Barber to become the original "Thunder and Lightning." Even then, third-year Barber produced significantly more than his rookie counterpart despite Dayne receiving more carries. In fairness to Williams, he may well be far better than Dayne was coming out of college. History is not on his side on that roster, however.



Guilty as charged, assuming Williams is what he seems. However, there is merit to making a decision based on opportunity. You can't score fantasy points on the bench, and there is good reason to believe Williams will spend plenty of time there this season. While the intersection of great talent and gross opportunity is the holy grail—or at least the crystal skull—of fantasy football, guys like Jamaal Charles, LeSean McCoy and Adrian Peterson are few and far between. Talent disparity notwithstanding, Jennings has a leg up on Williams for playing time, and that is worth something in the fantasy realm.

Even throwing out his head coach's own history, Jennings has recent league history on his side.

Last season we saw a few rookies who were obviously or presumably more talented than their veteran running mates get mired in a timeshare or worse. Take Giovani Bernard and Andre Ellington, for example. They were obviously better than their veteran counterparts—BenJarvus Green-Ellis and Rashad Mendenhall—yet they did not see the field nearly as often as fantasy owners would have liked. The biggest reason for that was the fact their head coaches wanted to limit their workloads so they wouldn't wear down. Even if Williams were to garner a larger share of the workload than expected, it stands to reason his playing time will be stunted by way of preventative maintenance.

Incidentally, Mendenhall and Green-Ellis ranked 25th and 31st in standard fantasy scoring last season, proving opportunity has value in this realm. Jennings is a far better back than those two were last season.

Of course, recent history also says Zac Stacy and Alfred Morris were productive late-round NFL draft picks who came out of nowhere in the fantasy realm. That is a fair counterpoint, but context is key when discussing those two. Neither St. Louis nor Washington had anything resembling a quality backfield when Stacy and Morris joined their respective squads. Stacy got an opportunity due to injury and highly inefficient play from the likes of Isaiah Pead, Daryl Richardson and Benny Cunningham, and Mike Shanahan has been known to ride unknown commodities to big years.

At any rate, should we damn history? After all, history may not be on Jennings' side either.



As Salfino eloquently pointed out in the Twitterverse, the 29-year-old has quite the mountain to climb if we are to take him seriously as a fantasy option.

Of course, there is counterpoint to that argument. Namely, Jennings has 484 career touches to his name, far fewer than the typical number we see for a starting running back for his age. He was stuck behind ever-productive Maurice Jones-Drew in Jacksonville—where he tore his ACL, an injury that preceded his worst season as a pro—and only got a real shot at significant playing time in Oakland last season.

So, yes, I would take that bet. Jennings will surpass 200 carries if he can stay healthy for most of the season.

It was in Oakland that he proved he could handle a bigger workload and be productive in a bad offense. Jennings saw 162 touches over his final eight games of the season after Darren McFadden went down to injury. He averaged 4.7 yards per carry and scored six touchdowns in that span. McFadden 3.3 yards per carry last season in the same offense. It is worth noting that Jennings missed Week 13 last season due to a concussion, but he came back the following week to the tune of 91 yard and two touchdowns.

#### AN HONEST PREDICTION



All this appears to be painting Jennings as the second coming of LaDainian Tomlinson, but the reality is he is a solid RB2 heading into 2014. Predicting a starting job and a majority of the workload is one thing, but there are limits to credulity. To forecast 350-plus touches for Jennings would be silly, but anticipating 250-plus is a realistic expectation. At his career averages—even including his post-ACL season—that puts him over 1,200 total yards and 6.5 touchdowns. Those numbers would have ranked him 17th in the league in fantasy scoring last season.

It just so happens that I had Jennings ranked 18th for the 2014 season prior to running this article. The Hall of Fame game did nothing to change that ranking. He is currently being taken as the 26th running back and 58th overall player—at the tail end of the fifth round in 12-team leagues—per consensus average draft position (ADP). That makes him an early value pick, especially if you open up your draft taking receivers and, perhaps, a tight end early.

Fantasy football is a lot of things, and one of those is playing the best odds. In this case—given everything we have discussed—odds are Jennings will retain his value despite any challenge Williams might offer.

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