

## Patrick Mahomes, Texas Tech (6-2, 225)

Every team wants intuitive quarterback play from a technically sound passer with prototypical physical dimensions and top-shelf athletic ability. And everyone would like to win the lottery.

Teams have to prioritize what's most important to them when searching for a quarterback. The way most teams behave, they hope that if they pick a "safe" technically-sound athlete that checks the easy-to-define boxes, it can lead him down a path where his play becomes intuitive.

All too often, they wind up with a prospect that looks like he rolled off an assembly line, but without the programming necessary to develop into the player that meets the organization's expectations on the investment. If the decision is an utter failure, at least they can provide a list of qualities the player possessed that justified the choice.

If the decision is a limited success, they can proclaim hope for the player to eventually turn a corner and develop those elite-level skills, raise public expectations, and prolong their tenure in leadership. Buying that time allows them a shot of building enough talent around this quarterback so any plateau that takes place with his development doesn't doom the team's chances for contention.

But every so often, at the risk of earning derision from fans, media, and colleagues, an NFL organization will veer from the established template of robo-quarterbacks rolling off the NCAA assembly line and invest in a player whose on-field intuition is notable, but it's accompanied by unconventional technique, atypical physical dimensions, or decision-making that's feared as irredeemably reckless.

Because it's the road less traveled by organizations, the list of failed players that don't fit the robo-quarterback template are more prominent in the historical lexicon. Unfortunately, the root causes for these failures, which often have to do with factors that have nothing to do with intuitive play, physical dimensions, or technique, get conflated with these behaviors.

Johnny Manziel didn't fail because he was shorter and lighter than the prototype. He didn't fail because he threw off-platform and played the game with a creative, intuitive streak. Manziel didn't work, follow team rules, or apply himself with enough maturity to maximize his talent.

Ryan Leaf, Brandon Weeden, E.J. Manuel and Josh Freeman were robo-quarterbacks with the physical dimensions and technical specifications that an assembly line would have been proud to build. Their failures weren't inaccurately conflated with their style of play because conventional decision-making – even when incorrect earns a lesser punishment than creative decision-making that fails.

On that note, I'd argue in Weeden and Manuel's cases (the other two went the path of Manziel) that their failures to sustain starting jobs were due to a lack of productive creativity within a traditional passing strategy. Another way of saying it? They weren't aware, intuitive players.

If Mahomes becomes the first quarterback taken in this class, he's likely going to a team that not only has a GM or coach with a more flexible mentality than most of the league, but one that doesn't allow a CYA mentality to dictate important decisions. If Mahomes has long-term success it will only happen if the GM and coach both value Mahomes for how he plays right now.

Mahomes will not be a good choice for a team that has a coach or general manager that covets the safety of a passer that thinks, moves, and functions like one of thousands that could have rolled off an assembly line. It's not that Mahomes can't develop into a technically sound quarterback, it's that he needs an organization that will allow him to build on his strengths. And his strengths are not part of that straight and narrow path of traditional quarterback development.

Mahomes has the caliber of arm and accuracy that allows him to make pinpoint throws without the constant need of fundamentally sound footwork. A former shortstop and son of a major league baseball player, Mahomes throws the football with the accuracy, velocity, and acrobatics of an infielder.

The speed of his feet and Mahomes' wide range of arm angles and accurate delivery points are rare gifts. Identifying and addressing areas where Mahomes can make easy fixes on traditional drops, sets, and pocket movement is a reasonable expectation for his long-term development. But thinking that Mahomes needs to eliminate the baseball infielder from his game is misguided and dangerous.

Good developers of talent recognize gifts and focus on ways to build on the positives. They also possess the wisdom to ensure that the effort to correct the negatives doesn't bury the very things that make the individual special.

Learning proper three, five, and seven-step drops with a good setup won't be difficult long-term, and it will set him up for future success with on-platform throws. We see young passers develop these skills every year. What we don't see every year is a prospect with fast, fluid, flexible maneuverability, and extreme accuracy with unconventional footwork when forced off-script.

At this point of his career, Mahomes will always have moments where his footwork is sloppy because he's played long enough with these mechanics that some of his setups and release points will be difficult to change. But with the exception of Mahomes' opponents, there will be a lot of plays where no one will want him to eliminate these things from his game.

Mahomes can deliver accurate intermediate and long-range passes with velocity and touch. Some of his touch passes, such as a 38-yard completion from the opposite hash thrown with pressure in his face, were calculated strokes of genius.

It's Mahomes' skill for delivering the ball with a wide range of velocity, touch, arm slots, and stances that make him dangerous. While he's not a significant breakaway threat, he's quick enough to buy time, big enough to shake off defenders, and has the arm talent to successfully target open receivers as the secondary breaks down. These are the skills that made Aaron Rodgers, Ben Roethlisberger, and Brett Favre stars in the league.

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But like this trio, the backyard, scrambling game is far from the only thing that Mahomes brings to a team. Despite playing in an Air-Raid system that lacks the intricacy of verbiage and strong ties between routes and footwork, Mahomes's decision-making and footwork are better than characterized by those rooted in the conventional West Coast tenets of the position.

My thoughts on Patrick Mahomes' footwork runs counter to the analysis of most who will want to re-tool it so he plays like a traditional drop back passer. The explanations they have span the following rationale:

- Mahomes was allowed to play without strong footwork because of the Air Raid System, so his accuracy will improve with better footwork.
- His stance is often too narrow after his drops and those passes are off-target.
- Better footwork will teach him better timing and feel for the pass rush and lead to better decision-making.

These are all great points for a young quarterback – if they were giving this advice to an 8-year-old beginning his journey as a young passer. It's not to say that Mahomes can't develop and benefit from these areas, but it must be done without sublimating the best of his game.

Because if we return to the idea of the 8-year-old beginning his journey as a quarterback, eventually that young player will reach a point where technique is only part of the battle. We'd have to wait and see like every other coach in the U.S. whether that player develops the intuitive side of the game:

- Play effectively off-script.
- Make big plays off tricky pre-snap/post-snap reads that didn't show up in pre-game homework.
- Possess no gap of time between identifying a target and releasing the ball

These are vital skills that many NFL veterans can't do well regardless of years' work. Because the feet provide an important part of the physical structure for a quarterback's mental processing, it's assumed that Mahomes' less structured execution of footwork is a big problem.

I argue that Mahomes is not only an exception, but in many respects his footwork is unconventionally exceptional. Mahomes has the quickest feet with drops and set ups for the short game that I've seen this year. He pivots fast and does a good job throwing with his feet under him.

This is notably effective in the quick passing game as well as the play action game. Despite operating mostly from pistol and shotgun, Mahomes performed a variety of play fakes, shovel fakes, and rollouts at Texas Tech and did it effectively. His ball fakes also include a full-motion pump fake that he can deliver with excellent velocity.

Because he doesn't require a perfect set-up to deliver an accurate ball, and he's shown the skill to accelerate the timing of his drop – or even cut it short – to deliver to an open receiver sooner than scheduled (Aaron Rodgers does this well), there are a wide range of ways teams can implement Mahomes' skills. This includes the quick game, zone-read, quick play-action, and slower-developing misdirection plays.

Mahomes has a strong feel for pressure and knows when to stand tall, get rid of the ball fast, maneuver with his eyes downfield, or break the pocket. When forced to take evasive action, he can hitch/climb, spin and flush, or roll out and deliver an accurate ball. His variety of shoulder and pump fakes also come into good use here.

Because Mahomes' creative style includes touch passes, jump passes, odd-angle throws on the run, and throws of tight-window daring, it is easier to make a wholesale characterization that he is reckless. While he becomes reckless and makes immature decisions, those instances are uncommon and he should not be painted as a reckless, immature quarterback.

Mahomes' skill for checking-down and throwing the ball away is among the best in this class. He routinely finds his second read and he looks off the defense in ways that aren't pre-determined parts of the play call. He also earned the responsibility to make calls at the line of scrimmage while at Texas Tech.

Because the catalog of routes and route lengths that Mahomes delivers accurately is wider than any passer in this class, he also makes decisions that seem like significant risks. Some of them are, but many of the choices he makes between the 20s are tight-window throws, where only the receiver has a shot to catch the ball. The tight window may appear risky, but the placement renders it safer than it appears.

But I'm not trying to tell you that Mahomes is dramatically more mature than his peers at the top of the class. He experiences similar bouts of hubris. I only want you to understand that it's not dramatically different – and in terms of throwing the ball away, greater maturity – than those not stuck with the reckless label.

Where Mahomes gets reckless is ignoring easy choices. He will forgo an easy short throw on an early down, only to be forced into riskier plays when the downfield play doesn't come open if he doesn't throw the ball away. His success as a scrambler leads to sacks, because he's more prone to test the limits of a defense.

Combine these two elements in the red zone, and it's the setting for some of Mahomes' worst decisions. His mistakes in the red zone contributed to his reputation as a reckless gunslinger more than any other.

Where Mahomes' game is most reckless regardless of field position is his ball security as he maneuvers the pocket. The quarterback's penchant for weaving through the pocket includes holding the ball with his arm extended from his frame. His tape is filled with plays where the ball is below his knee, waved in the face of the defender and in any number of dangerous positions that should lead to more turnovers than they have.

Where his footwork struggles most is pivoting his stance from one quadrant to another. This is actually a common issue with most quarterbacks when they turn and throw the late perimeter routes. In Mahomes' case, he straightens his front leg during the pivot, and the ball comes out high.

There are plays where Mahomes has time to set and throw from a stable position, but he chooses to wing it from an off-balance stance and overshoots the target. Mahomes' comfort with unconventional platforms can make him less conscientious about opportunities to use good technique.

His tape is filled with inconsistent drop footwork. There are plays on film where the steps and depth are there, but from snap-to-snap, you're just as liable to see Mahomes add a hop into his footwork or set up with his feet too close together.

Mahomes can also get too creative for his receivers. He'll attempt to throw his teammates open in difficult situations, placing the ball around or behind shallow coverage or at an angle away from the deep safety. NFL receivers will appreciate this skill, but some of the targets were beyond his current receivers' pay grades.

I'd prefer to see Mahomes sit, because it will give a team time to address his footwork and let him learn a new system. But with talk that he could be the first quarterback off the board, there's a higher likelihood that he'll see time this year, if not immediately.

A West Coast Offense would not be a good immediate fit, because as has been the case for many of the spread quarterbacks that recently entered the league (Jared Goff, Marcus Mariota, Paxton Lynch and Dak Prescott), the verbiage can be overwhelming during the first year. Goff wasn't the only rookie to struggle in the system.

Gary Kubiak's system in Denver is a WCO-based scheme. Cecil Lamme attends practice daily and reported that Lynch routinely looked better than Trevor Siemian, but the greatest obstacle that kept Lynch from earning the job was difficulty remembering the verbose play calls. Pairing Mahomes in an offense with a heavy Erhardt-Perkins influence and adding concepts that the rookie liked at Texas Tech is the most sensible course. It's what the Titans did year-one with Mariota.

Bears head coach John Fox has been known to employ coordinators that run this style of offense. Jaguars executive VP of football operations Tom Coughlin ran it as head coach of the Giants. Chan Gailey, Todd Haley, Bill O'Brien, and Mike McCoy have all been proponents of it with the Jets, Steelers, Texans, and Chargers, respectively. All four teams could use a starter or a quarterback of the future.

Going Pittsburgh or Los Angeles offer the opportunity to learn behind potential Hall of Famers and would offer the ideal situation. Then there's New England, who is most famous for using this offense. Bill Belichick may not trust the idea of Tom Brady playing well into his 40s. If he trades Jimmy Garoppolo, he might – as unlikely as it appears – have an eye on adding one of these quarterbacks.

If Mahomes lands in a variant of this system, I think he can earn playing time this year and gain positive experiences to build on – and without the concerns of setting back his development. But if there's one team that I'd love to see Mahomes (or the next player on this list, for that matter) paired with, it's Arizona, because Bruce Arians is good at molding scheme to player and he loves aggressive football.

**Pre-NFL Draft Fantasy Advice:** Mahomes' escapability, intuitive play style, and rare arm talent could give him a fighting chance for consistent production as a rookie. I wouldn't bet on it, and neither should you in re-draft leagues.

He's my top choice at the position in dynasty leagues before we see the team fit, because the best quarterbacks in football are routinely the most decisive and intuitive. With the exception of one other passer, Mahomes is the only one that fits this description.

If you stockpiled first round picks, Mahomes will be worth a late-first. Otherwise, it's likely he'll be around in the early-to-mid second round thanks to a strong RB class, the typical valuation of wide receivers, and the potential for fantasy owners to let their optimism run wild with a deep and talented group of tight ends.