

Nick Chubb, Georgia (5-11, 227)

Depth of Talent Score: 89.5 = Starter: Starting immediately with large role and learning on the go. (Borderline Franchise Talent)

The popular Nick Chubb narrative entering the 2018 NFL Combine was that once upon a time, Chubb was a freshman phenomenon—a four-star recruit who replaced the suspended Todd Gurley and rushed for 1,547 yards in 8 games. His performance prompted fellow SEC freshman stud Leonard Fournette to remark that [Chubb was better than him](#).

After tying Herschel Walker's consecutive 100-yard game streak at 13, Chubb tore the MCL, LCL, and PCL in his left knee against Tennessee as a sophomore. Chubb rehabbed his knee but didn't look the same when he returned in 2016. Heading into the 2018 Draft, Chubb is regarded as a good prospect who before his injury, might have been mentioned in the same company as Saquon Barkley. Now, Chubb is a case of "what might have been."

Earning one of the final spots as one of the top 5-7 running backs in this star-studded class is not a bad thing. Earning it because of future concerns about an unusual injury is fair. However, earning it for reasons that are based more on narrative than analysis is a different matter.

In terms of strength, explosion, and speed, Chubb was a freakish athlete in high school. Chubb squatted 700 pounds, power cleaned 390 pounds, and bench pressed 365 pounds. At the 2013 Nike Camp Combine, Chubb ran a 4.47-second 40; a 4.10-second 20-Shuttle; and had a 40-inch vertical at 5'11", 216 pounds.

In comparison, Barkley was a 193-pound runner at the 2014 Nike Combine, who ran a 4.66-second 40; 4.5-second 20 Shuttle; and earned a 36.2-inch vertical. Barkley has added 40-pounds to his frame and increased his strength, speed and explosion to elite levels.

Barkley's 2018 Combine metrics are considered freakish. However, Chubb is two years removed from his knee injury and only five pounds lighter than Barkley with results extremely close to the Penn State runner and significantly different than his Nike workout.

The point isn't to say Chubb is a bigger athletic freak than Barkley. Once players perform at certain tiers of athletic ability, the differences between them in strength, speed, and agility have diminishing returns if not applying this raw material to the refined processes of football knowledge and technique.

Lamenting what Chubb could have been as an athlete is missing the point that he's still within the top two tiers in every metric. It means comparing athletic ability among the backs in the highest tiers of athletic feats is not as important as judging how decision-making, ball security, leverage, and pass protection channel raw athletic talents into refined football skills.

Barkley's (4.4-second 40) long speed is likely 1-2 steps faster than Chubb's (4.52). It means that Barkley will gain a step that Chubb doesn't around 25-35 yards downfield. Considering that only a handful of gains all year begin and end as straight-line shots up the middle for 25-35 yards without contact from a defender, the 40-yard dash remains an overrated metric to the public.

The shuttle, the three-cone, the vertical jump, and other measures of short-area explosion are better judges of athletic ability most appropriate to the position. From a metrics standpoint, Chubb was a close second to Barkley and it's another layer of information that indicates concerns about Chubb's health shouldn't be nearly as serious as they were.

While I was waiting on the NFL Combine to receive another layer of confirmation that Chubb's athletic ability was back, I've spent the past three years on various podcasts and social media telling those who asked about Ezekiel Elliott, Todd Gurley, and Leonard Fournette that Nick Chubb might be the best back I've seen in recent years. The film has been that promising.

This includes the 2016 opener where Chubb carried the ball 32 times for 222 yards against North Carolina just nine months removed from the knee injury. He looked like the old Chubb to me.

The next two weeks of totals weren't as strong. If there's a supporting argument that Chubb didn't look right after the injury, it was these two games after that 32-touch debut following his 9-month rehab. I could see how a huge workload like that as the first performance after this injury might have been difficult to recover as quickly.

Chubb then sprained his ankle in Week 4 and didn't earn much time for the next 5 games. However, that first game belies some of the analysis I've seen that he didn't look as good. The slow recovery from a 32-touch game and ankle sprain further embedded the narrative entering 2017 that Chubb wasn't the same.

I studied Chubb's three healthy seasons and I find it difficult to see a significant difference between the three. Before I share what I observed, I think it's important to broach the subject of bias.

I can imagine readers who know a little about my background believe it's a major influence on my higher than average valuation of Chubb. While understandable, I'll share a little more background to counter that assumption.

I graduated from the University of Georgia. About 12 years later, I took a job at its college of business as a writer and editor. With the exception of a year in Jamaica, I lived in Athens, Georgia for nearly 25 years. I also covered the football team's practices for the student newspaper for a season in the early 1990s.

Even so, I am not a Georgia fan. I have never been to a Georgia game. With the exception of coordinating a photo shoot on the field with former coach Vince Dooley as a subject, I have never been in the stadium.

My former editor told me the university press was looking for someone to write a book about the history of Georgia football and thought I'd be a good fit but I turned down the idea of pitching myself because the likelihood I'd have to do book signings and appearances at Georgia events would interfere with my film evaluation time.

I'm not even a fan of college football. Because of the number of games I have to study for this publication, I don't have the luxury of following the season narrative. I didn't know Lamar Jackson won the 2016 Heisman Trophy until July of 2017—after I watched three games of Jackson's and decided to look at his team bio.

The first two games I've watched casually in three years were the Rose Bowl and National Championship Final. I wanted Georgia to win so my friends and colleagues would be happy, but I haven't experienced the highs and lows of college football since I was at the University of Miami in the late 1980s.

Watching college football is strictly a job. Watching the NFL is a job that also happens to be a joy.

If I have a bias, it's for running backs that demonstrate excellent vision, contact balance, quickness, and agility. I've built the RSP's default grading system to value running backs that can change direction with excellent footwork, balance, and run to open space with skill and wisdom. It's why I think Nick Chubb has the goods to be the best running back prospect of the past five years.

When using a well-defined evaluation process, Chubb's 2017 film tells the story as well as any healthy season he's had. The first thing most will notice about him is his play strength and balance.

Whether his opposition is a defensive lineman, linebacker, or defensive back, Chubb pushes piles, breaks through reaches and wraps, and bounces off direct and indirect contact. He knows how to keep his knees high and feed wide through contact and his stiff-arm would require a permit to carry in public.

He often breaks multiple tackles of these types within the same run. Of the backs I've watched during the past few years, there are few who approach Chubb's frequency of breaking multiple tackles per run.

This may not show up on yards after contact statistics because that data is not selective enough to judge power and balance in an accurate context. If a defensive back dives for a running back working past him at full speed and the defender's arm fly swats the shin of the runner, every yard gained before that runner leaves the boundary, scores, or encounters different contact, is counted as yards after contact.

I'd prefer to see a separate statistic that measures yards through contact, because judging power and balance from yards after contact is inaccurate. We're giving the fly swatter reach that preceded a back's 75-yard run greater credence than the carry where an RB has to work off the contact of 3 defenders for a 7-yard gain on a 3rd and 2.

Yards through contact would be a better judge of power and finishing skill. Chubb's yards through contact stats would be impressive. He routinely takes linebackers for rides of 3-5 yards due to his pad level and leg strength.

It would also be a better way to isolate these skills regardless of whether the back runs from shotgun versus spread-out defenses or heavy power sets facing stacked boxes.

When Chubb was a freshman, he eventually faced his share of stacked boxes once opponents figured out how good Chubb was. However, he wasn't splitting time with Sony Michel and the offense wasn't as predictable with its personnel.

Last year, Chubb and Michel had specific roles that made them more scheme-predictable. When Chubb came into the game, defenses loaded up to stop Chubb. With the exception of two games—Alabama and its superior defensive front, and the first matchup with Auburn (the one team that beat Alabama)—Chubb was productive every week.

In addition to contact balance and power, the reason Chubb thrives is his decision-making, quickness, and agility. Chubb is a scheme-versatile runner who is as good at gap runs as he is on zone runs. Although Isaiah Wynn wouldn't answer Football Outsiders writer Charles McDonald's question at the Combine: Which Georgia back was the best inside zone runner, the answer is definitely Chubb.

He excels at pressing creases deep into the line with smooth footwork and by sliding to the crease he set up. He knows how to manipulate the second level of the defense from the moment he takes the exchange until he reaches the entrance of the desired crease.

Chubb is as adept as any back in this class at varying the length and pace of his stride to set up blockers. He also possesses a good sense of timing about the lifespan of a crease. He quickly senses when he can't wait on his linemen to open a hole and it's time to drop the pads and push them.

Although no back will frequently avoid multiple points of penetration or deep penetration to the exchange point of the backfield, Chubb has the strength, quickness and agility to layer moves that get him into open space. His lateral cuts, spins, and jukes are quick, violent, and well-timed.

Chubb flips his hips so fast that he can change direction with a quick bounce in tight confines. He also can drop his weight to a quick stop and restart with strong acceleration.

When Chubb needs to make his burst sudden, it's a breathtaking moment to see him hit that button on the controller and practically teleport five yards ahead. When he anticipates a crease opening, he can burst past the first two levels of defenders. He frequently sidesteps defensive backs when they're shooting for his legs as he's heading east-west and does it at the last-second.

Although considered a downhill guy, Chubb is far more agile than characterized. When he needs to turn the corner, he can beat most linebackers and defensive backs for positive yards up the sideline. He can jump cut and execute sharp lateral cuts with as little as one prep step. And just because he's a physical back doesn't mean he seeks contact. Chubb will eliminate direct angles or avoid contact in tight space altogether. When he has no choice, he'll drop the pads and work under or through collisions.

What sets Chubb apart from this class and most of the backs in other classes is the depth of his maturity as a decision-maker. Whether it's a gap or zone run, Chubb understands when to keep a run between the tackles but still have a plan to create in a tight window of space. When forced to take the short gain or loss over a foolish bounce-out based on the game script, Chubb rarely forces the play.

However, this doesn't solely make Chubb a grinder. Give him a lane or fail to have 2-3 defenders wrap him early, and his acceleration and long speed will generate explosive plays. He also has that stamina to work through multiple hits, change direction several times, and still have the energy to accelerate past defensive backs.

Although Chubb had an awkward rep or two in a passing drill during the Combine, he was a frequent target as a freshman. After Chubb got hurt, Sony Michel earned the role as the primary receiving back in this offense and Chubb's targets dwindled.

Even so, he catches the ball with his hands and he's a reliable option in the flats. He'll also do good work on screen plays although this was primarily Michel's role at Georgia. I think he'll be a mild surprise in the passing game as the years progress, but his eventual success depends on his landing spot and the philosophy the coaching staff has with running back usage.

Chubb is a decent pass protector with upside. His diagnosis and effort are consistently strong. When a teammate struggles and Chubb's pre-snap assignment doesn't attack, he'll change focus and help out.

He'll handle larger defenders with a good square, punch and hand position. His greatest weakness as a running back is cut blocks. He has some competent reps but he's inconsistent with his approach and gets caught in no-man's land when it's time to shoot. As a result some of his efforts appear awkward.

The cut-blocking, the injury history (see the Durability section for more), and the perception that he's no longer a top athlete at his position are his three greatest weaknesses. After watching his 2017 film and seeing the results of the Combine, I'm only concerned about the cut blocks and the event of a bad medical report.

Chubb reminds me of a bigger and faster Ray Rice combined with a wiser Doug Martin. He's an every-down back with similar short-area explosion as Barkley, but better decision-making and power between the tackles.

Barkley will likely find the best fit to use him often in space but, based on my default view of what's most frequently required of productive NFL running back, Chubb is just a little bit better.

Pre-NFL Draft Fantasy Advice: I've seen Chubb ranked in the 5-7 range by analysts I follow on Twitter. If my analysis proves correct, he'll be a relative bargain in draft year where fans are obsessed with Barkley and Derrius Guice. If you know this is true with your leagues, trading from the first or second pick to the third overall spot would, in theory, land you Chubb and earn more capital. At the same time, making this move is overthinking the differences I see in the first five backs on the board—especially Chubb and Barkley. The larger point is that Chubb is a bargain and must-have if he's truly valued in the 5-7 range of the first round. Instead of feeling the need to trade into 1.01-1.02, you could trade into 1.03-1.05 and have a great shot of getting one of the best values of the marquee talents in your fantasy draft.