

ALL-NFC NORTH TEAM

The best of the NFC North Division

Dec. 27, 2014

Last week, executives in personnel for NFC teams were asked by the Journal Sentinel's Bob McGinn to rank the top players in the division at each position. They were not permitted to vote for their own players. They also couldn't comment about their own players.

A first-place vote was worth 3 points, a second-place vote was worth 2 and a third-place vote was worth 1. An asterisk denotes a unanimous (9 points) selection.

OFFENSE

NO. 1 WIDE RECEIVER: Jordy Nelson* (GB), 9 points. Others: Calvin Johnson (Det), 7; Brandon Marshall (Chi), 5; Greg Jennings (Minn), 3.

A unanimous selection each of the last three years, Johnson missed three games because of an ankle injury and was eclipsed by Nelson. "Look at the stats," one scout said. "Look at the health. This was the most productive (Nelson) has been. The quarterback helps. You'd rather have Calvin but you can't argue with how Jordy's produced." The same players constituted this field in 2013 and Nelson finished third; he was unanimous at No. 2 WR in 2011 and '12. "From the beginning to the end he was a model of consistency," another scout said of Nelson. "He made big plays throughout the season." Johnson had been the choice since 2010, and the last three years were unanimous. "He's so big and so athletic," a third scout said. "He really can tilt the field." Marshall was limited to 13 games by injury. "He doesn't separate from a speed standpoint but knows how to use his body," a fourth scout said. Jennings, 31, led the Vikings in receiving. "You saw some games where he looked like the Greg Jennings from Green Bay," one scout said. "He runs good routes, can separate on the break and catches the ball nice and easy. As the quarterback play gets better you'll see him have more production."

LEFT TACKLE: David Bakhtiari (GB) and Riley Reiff (Det), 8. Others: Jermon Bushrod (Chi), 5; Matt Kalil (Minn), 3.

Bakhtiari, a last-place choice with 3 points as a rookie, becomes the Packers' first selection here since Chad Clifton in '09. "If you really look at him it's not pretty, but he gets the job done," one scout said. "He has good hands, strength and control. Plays with good passion, toughness and aggressiveness. That's what helps him mask his athletic deficiencies." Reiff, a starter since mid-2012, was third last year behind Bushrod and Kalil. "He's not physically imposing but he's really sound technically," a second scout said. "He does a nice job setting the edge. Once he's on a guy he maintains contact." Bushrod, 30, had an off year but nothing like Kalil, who went from a unanimous pick as a rookie in '12 to unanimous last place. "He'd get beat early (in games) and it was like a snowball effect on him," a third scout said. "Mentally, he kind of went in the tank. His hand placement went down the drain in a couple games. He looked like a shell of his former self."

LEFT GUARD: Josh Sitton* (GB), 9. Others: Rob Sims (Det), 7; Charlie Johnson (Minn) and Michael Ola (Chi), 4.

After tying Chicago's Roberto Garza for the top spot as a first-year starter in '09, Sitton has been the unanimous choice five straight seasons. "It's good to see him finally get his due," one scout said. "Very good run blocker and good pass blocker. You look at Sitton's body, you're like, 'How does this guy get it done?' But every week he's consistent. Very good pro, very good player." Sims, a three-time choice, had to settle for second the past two years after Sitton switched from the right side to the left. Johnson, 30, and Ola, a rookie who started at four positions, might be replaced. "Ola fared a little better in pass pro than Johnson," said one scout.

CENTER: Corey Linsley (GB) and John Sullivan (Minn), 8. Others: Roberto Garza (Chi), 5; Dominic Raiola (Det), 3.

Linsley became the first rookie pick at center in the 21-year history of the team. "This guy is strong, plays with good base, athletic to get out in space or climb to the second level on pulls," one scout said. "He's a very good up-and-coming center. It's got to be for Green Bay a pleasant surprise." Sullivan was a first-team pick for the fourth year in a row. "The anchor of that offensive line," said a second scout. "Very good understanding of leverage and angles. Very smart." Last week, Garza, 35, re-signed for 2015. "He can't do things in space," a third scout said. "You've got to be right in front of him. Now he is still smart, but athletically he's declined." Raiola, a starter since 2002, still hasn't finished second let alone first. He has finished fourth five times, third four times and tied for third four times. "He's really on borrowed time," said one scout. "He wins on body position. Doesn't drive any guys off the ball. Some of the after-the-play stuff, he's kind of a dirtbag. That's his play style and it's always been his play style."

RIGHT GUARD: T.J. Lang* (GB), 9. Others: Kyle Long (Chi), 7; Larry Warford (Det), 5; Joe Berger (Minn), 3.

Lang was unanimous after tying for third in '11, a second-place finish in '12 and a third-place finish in '13. "Like him," one scout said. "He's just a tough guy. He's strong. He's got size. He's not on the ground. Not a great athlete but good enough to work for position. Plays really well." Long, a second-year man, tied for the top spot with Warford last year as a rookie. "He's OK," said a second scout. "He's big, tough, strong, athletic. But he's still raw and out of control at times." Warford missed three starts with a bad knee. "When he's healthy he's a big road-grader that can block one-on-one," said another scout. Berger, 32, started from Game 8 on after Brandon Fusco was injured and Vladimir Ducasse flopped. "Classic mauler," said one scout. "Can play center and guard. He's a throwback-type blocker."

RIGHT TACKLE: Bryan Bulaga (GB), 8. Others: Phil Loadholt (Minn), 6; Jordan Mills (Chi) and LaAdrian Waddle (Det), 5.

Bulaga came back from a season lost to reconstructive knee surgery and reclaimed the berth he held in 2011 (unanimous pick) and '12. "He's somewhat stiff but he's strong, he absorbs," one scout said. "He's got good enough length. He's tough, that's the biggest thing about him. Somewhat inconsistent. His athletic ability leaves a little bit to be (desired) but he gets by at right tackle because he's tough." Loadholt, a first-team choice in '09, '12 and '13, suffered a season-ending pectoral injury in Game 11. "He's a big ol' top-heavy kind of guy," said another scout. "He's a serviceable starter." Mills and Waddle battled injuries as second-year starters. "Mills got exposed," a third scout said. "He's not a quick-footed player. He has to be in perfect position to play." He struggles in redirect, change of direction. He's big and long and strong. As an athlete he struggles."

TIGHT END: Martellus Bennett* (Chi), 9. Others: Kyle Rudolph (Minn), 7; Brandon Pettigrew (Det) and Andrew Quarless (GB), 4.

Bennett, who tied with Rudolph a year ago, had his finest receiving season in a seven-year career. "He's just a physical freak," one scout said. "He blocks well. Can be an extra tackle when he wants to. Whatever he feels like doing." Rudolph sat out Games 4-9 with a sports hernia. "He's a complete tight end," another scout said. "He presents matchup problems up the seam and in the red zone. Even his blocking has improved." Pettigrew fell out of a favor as a receiver but still gave it up blocking. Quarless overhauled rookie Richard Rodgers as Jermichael Finley's lead replacement. "He's a backup to me," a third scout said. "Some way, somehow, he finds a way to make a big play or a key chain-moving catch."

NO. 2 WIDE RECEIVER: Randall Cobb* (GB), 9. Others: Golden Tate (Det), 7; Alshon Jeffery (Chi), 5; Charles Johnson (Minn), 3.

Cobb, who finished last at No. 1 WR in 2012 before a leg injury struck in '13, edged Tate, who had enormous impact after departing Seattle for Detroit in March. "Tate had a great year but so did Cobb," one scout said. "It's a tough call. Cobb is just a football player and has great chemistry with the quarterback. He can separate. Not as big as you want but he's tough. He'll get over \$8 million (per year)." Jeffery won at this position last year. "He doesn't run great routes but he's got such a large catching radius and he can make those acrobatic catches," another scout said. "He's a vertical threat with his size." Johnson, the Packers' seventh-round pick in '13 from Grand Valley

State, came from nowhere to be an unexpected producer in Games 10-15 (23-393-17.1). "He's done a nice job," one scout said. "Maturing as a player. There's still some lulls in his game where it looks like he's not giving a full effort. But he's big, he can run and he has some upside."

QUARTERBACK: Aaron Rodgers* (GB), 9. Others: Matthew Stafford (Det), 7; Teddy Bridgewater (Minn), 5; Jay Cutler (Chi), 3.

Since assuming the job from Brett Favre in '08, Rodgers has been unanimous six times in addition to sharing the top spot with Favre in '09. "He makes it look easy every Sunday," one scout said. "It's like he's toying with opponents. He's accurate from all different angles. It's uncanny. He should be the league MVP." Fourth in '09 and injured for all but three games in '10, Stafford was second for the fourth year in a row. "The last two years he was more of a high production-high turnover type player," another scout said. "Bonehead-type plays at times. He still has remnants of that but he's done a better job protecting the ball this year. Obviously, with his arm talent, he can make all the throws. That arm is something you really can't coach. You're born with it. You got it or you don't." Bridgewater took over for an injured Matt Cassel in Game 3 and steadily improved. "Some good and some bad," a scout said. "Athletic kid. Can throw the ball. Can get out of trouble. His next step is processing things and going to second and third reads. He'll get that." After finishing third twice and second three times, Cutler was last. "He's a mess," said one scout. "Turnovers, turnovers, turnovers. Didn't play with much rhythm. He can make the big-time throws but there's something missing."

RUNNING BACK: Matt Forte (Chi) and Eddie Lacy (GB), 8. Others: Joique Bell (Det), 5; Matt Asiata (Minn), 3.

This position had been dominated by Adrian Peterson for all seven of his seasons (unanimous pick except for '11, when he shared with Forte). But with Peterson suspended, Forte moved up. "Forte is a good back, not a great back," one scout said. "He has a similar running style to DeMarco Murray, but Forte goes down a lot easier. Forte can make you miss better than DeMarco, but Murray is better in pass pro. Forte runs tall. Ball security is an issue, too." Lacy surpassed 1,000 for the second year in a row. "You know what you're going to get from Lacy," another scout said. "He will run downhill and run hard. He can make you miss in a short area, which is surprising for his size. Catches the ball OK. Good in pass protection because of his size." Bell was described by another scout as a poor man's Lacy. Asiata, said a third scout, was a "serviceable backup. Runs hard. Nothing special about him."

FULLBACK: Jerome Felton (Minn) and John Kuhn (GB), 8. Others: Jed Collins (Det), 5; Eben Britton (Chi), 3.

Felton, a first-team pick with the Lions in '10, was a unanimous choice the past two years. "He's the best blocker," said one scout. "Very explosive at the point of attack. Very good physical aggression. He's a good finisher once engaged." Kuhn, a unanimous choice in '11, made it again. "Some of his Pro Bowl is because of the winning record and the fans," another scout said. "Felton is the best pure blocker. But you can put Kuhn in on third down, and you know he can scan the protection and pick up a blitz."

NO. 3 WIDE RECEIVER: Davante Adams* (GB), 9. Others: Cordarrelle Patterson (Minn), 6; Jeremy Ross (Det), 5; Marquess Wilson (Chi), 4.

Patterson, a first-round pick in '13, saw his playing time and production diminish. "He disappeared," one scout said. "I don't think he can get the playbook. You have to find ways to get him the ball. Then he can be dangerous. But if you've got to run a route and read coverage that's the issue, I guess." Adams beat out Jarrett Boykin and played 69% of the snaps. "He had a decent year," one scout said. "He's OK. Again, you can put you in that offense and catch 40 balls. He's a big body and he can catch OK."

NO. 4 WIDE RECEIVER: Jarius Wright* (Minn), 9. Others: Corey Fuller (Det), 6; Josh Morgan (Chi), 5; Jarrett Boykin (GB), 4.

Wright, a fourth-round pick in '12, was the pick of this litter. "He's a good third receiver," one scout said. "He's got very good speed. They do a good job getting him a free release and running him on crossing routes where he's very good after the catch. That's where he makes his hay at." Of Boykin, one scout said: "He got lost in a rotation because Davante came on."

NO. 2 TIGHT END: Eric Ebron* (Det), 9. Others: Rhett Ellison (Minn) and Richard Rodgers (GB), 6; Dante Rosario (Chi), 3.

Ebron, the 10th pick in the '14 draft, was a mild disappointment. "Liked him coming out," one scout said. "He's got all the tools. But he's not a natural hands catcher and not a good blocker." Rodgers played 45.4% of the downs as a rookie drafted in the third round. "He was OK," another scout said. "Better as a receiver but raw as a route runner. Big target. Not real explosive. Gradual speed. Has the size to be a blocker but was just ordinary in the games playing on the line of scrimmage and wasn't great on the move. Plays high. No pop."

NO. 6 OFFENSIVE LINEMAN: C-G Brian de la Puente (Chi) and C-T JC Tretter (GB), 7. Others: G Vladimir Ducasse (Minn) and T Cornelius Lucas (Det), 5.

De la Puente, a former Saint, started Games 2-5 at center and Games 10-11 at LG before going on injured reserve. "Thing I admire about him is his versatility," one scout said. "He's steady." Tretter was set to start at center before suffering a knee injury Aug. 22 that knocked him out until midseason. "He's a serviceable guy who can get you through a game," said another scout.

NO. 2 QUARTERBACK: Matt Cassel (Minn), 8. Others: Jimmy Clausen (Chi), 7; Matt Flynn (GB), 6; Dan Orlovsky (Det), 3.

Cassel started the first three games before suffering a season-ending foot injury. "He's good in spurts," said one scout. "He's smart enough, has enough talent, still a good enough athlete. He can get out of trouble a little bit and manage a game plan." Clausen started for Cutler in Game 15 and was adequate. "He's not going to make too many dumb mistakes," said another scout. "Played better than I thought he would against the Lions, but he played pretty good in preseason, too." Flynn mopped up in six games. "He's good for the Packers," a third scout said. "He knows the offense, he knows the drill. He won't kill you."

NO. 2 RUNNING BACK: Reggie Bush (Det) and James Starks (GB), 8. Others: Jerick McKinnon (Minn), 5; Ka'Deem Carey (Chi), 3.

Bush, 29, sat out five games with a knee injury. "He still runs well," one scout said. "You definitely have to worry about him in the screen game." Statistically, Starks didn't play back to his '13 level. "He's 'Mr. December' for Green Bay," another scout said. "He's running hard, running with violence that you usually see in him." McKinnon probably will lead the Vikings in rushing (538 yards) despite playing just 11 games. "He's a smaller guy but he's shown quickness and change of direction," a third scout said. "He's not your lead guy but he is a good player."

DEFENSE

LEFT END: Jason Jones* (Det), 9. Others: Lamarr Houston (Chi), 7; Josh Boyd (GB) and Brian Robison (Minn), 4.

Jones, a former Titan-Seahawk, bounced back from major knee surgery in October 2013. "Plays with passion, urgency and motor," one scout said. "He rushes well inside. He's got some violence to his game as well." Houston, a big-money signee (\$14.9 million guaranteed) from Oakland in March, blew out his knee in Game 8 celebrating a late sack. "He can rush the passer," another scout said. "He's not built that way but he plays with natural leverage, has some quickness and some bend, and understands how to rush." Boyd beat out Datone Jones as the LE in the 3-4. "Can stack the point," one scout said. "Doesn't have great body control but he plays hard. He can push the pocket as a rusher. Not a creator." Robison, a first-team choice last year, crashed to last place at age 31.

NOSE TACKLE: Linval Joseph (Minn), 8. Others: Nick Fairley (Det), 7; Stephen Paea (Chi), 6; Letroy Guion (GB), 3.

Fairley was off to a terrific start when he suffered a knee injury in Game 8 and has yet to return. He was unanimous the past two years. "Only reason he's No. 2 is because of the injury," one scout said. "He's a dual threat. He started out the year playing the run really well and getting a feel as a pass rusher." The Vikings replaced Guion with Joseph. "Big man and strong as an ox," said another scout. "He's done a good job controlling the line of scrimmage and displacing blockers. More of a pocket pusher as a rusher than a guy who can win a one-on-one edge." Paea, in a contract year, played well, too. "Solid player," one scout said. "He doesn't fit everybody because of his dimensions (6-1, 300) but he plays with natural leverage and has some quickness." Guion replaced

injured B.J. Raji. He tied for second at NT in '12 but also was last in '13. "I still see the same guy," one scout said. "He flashes every now and then but then he just disappears. He's sufficient against double teams. But his pad level is too high at times and that's why he can get rooted out."

THREE-TECHNIQUE TACKLE: Ndamukong Suh* (Det), 9. Others: Mike Daniels (GB), 6; Jeremiah Ratliff (Chi), 5; Sharrif Floyd (Minn), 4.

Suh, in a contract year, had another superior season. "He's just a different dude," one scout said. "Very dominant. It will be interesting to see how that plays out this off-season. I think Suh will set a new standard (monetarily) for that position." Daniels had another strong season. "He's their best D-lineman," another scout said. "Splash player. He's quick and very disruptive. Quick into gaps. Plays low. Strong hand. Has a burst to close. Gets covered up some due to his size but is very athletic and plays on his feet. He's relentless." Ratliff missed five games with injuries but still was competitive at 33. Floyd, a first-round pick in '13, got better. "They got him to play at a higher level," one scout said. "He looked quicker and more explosive. He really doesn't have a plan as a rusher but you can see his power. He has a relentless motor."

RIGHT END: Everson Griffen* (Minn), 9. Others: Ziggy Ansah (Det), 7; Jared Allen (Chi) and Nick Perry (GB), 4.

Griffen and Ansah, 25, made it a tough call for voters. A first-team pick at No. 3 DE from 2011-'13, Griffen had a monster year after re-signing March 10 for \$19.8 million guaranteed. He replaced Allen. "They definitely got the bang for their buck," one scout said. "You thought he would struggle in the run game but he played well against the run. As a rusher, the guy has the speed, the burst, the bend, the finish coming off the edge. That was on a consistent basis." Ansah kept improving in Year 2. "He's really taken off," another scout said. "He doesn't have gaudy stats but he's very disruptive. You've got to have a plan for him." Allen, 32, had 5 1/2 sacks for his new team and almost three times as many pressures (36) as anyone on the Bears' lousy defense. He was a unanimous pick in 2008-'09, and a first-teamer in '11. "He's not what they wanted probably," one scout said. "He's slowing down." Perry, the Packers' No. 4 OLB until midseason, played more down the stretch. "Little stiff and straight-line," one scout said. "Not a great run defender. Gets overpowered some. Good back-side chase. Flashes pass rush but doesn't have much of an arsenal."

STRONG-SIDE LINEBACKER: Julius Peppers* (GB), 9. Others: Anthony Barr (Minn), 7; Josh Byner (Det) and Shea McClellin (Chi), 4.

For the Bears, Peppers finished an alarming last at RE in '13 after having been first team from 2010-'12. "He played better than Jared (Allen)," one scout said. "He still flashes special skills. Better pass rusher than run defender. Doesn't consistently bring it. Will play high and get stuck on blocks. Gets cut. Best winning with speed, length and pursuit." Barr, the ninth pick in '14, had a solid year. "He had to learn the off-the-ball stuff," another scout said. "He's so tall, he had an issue there. Athletic enough to cover people even without knowing what he was supposed to be doing. There's a pretty big up side there." Byner, a physical former Raven, helped compensate for the Week 3 loss of MLB Stephen Tulloch (knee). McClellin, a first-round pick in '12, remains "just a guy," according to one scout.

MIDDLE LINEBACKER: Tahir Whitehead (Det), 8. Others: Jasper Brinkley (Minn), 7; Jonathan Bostic (Chi), 6; Sam Barrington (GB), 3.

Tulloch's departure forced Whitehead to move from the strong side and play almost every down. "They didn't lose a whole lot," one scout said. "Decent athlete. Pretty good with his (run) fits. Gets stuck on some blocks. Improved in the pass game but still slow to process. He can run, he can close. Solid backup." Brinkley played the interior run adequately before departing on passing downs. Bostic played 63% subbing for injured D.J. Williams and Lance Briggs. Of Bostic, one scout said: "I think they want to upgrade there." Barrington started playing in Game 7. "Just a guy, really," one scout said. "Decent instincts. Best in space. He can run OK but doesn't have great acceleration. Tends to make a lot of plays downfield. Not a take-on guy." Will run around. Gets swallowed. OK in underneath coverage."

WEAK-SIDE LINEBACKER: DeAndre Levy (Det) and Clay Matthews (GB), 8. Others: Chad Greenway (Minn), 5; Lance Briggs (Chi), 3.

Levy, the Milwaukee Vincent grad, also was first team last year. "Difference-maker," said one scout. "Can cover ground. Very good in coverage. Good at slipping blocks and getting to the ball. He's an athlete that in the past wasn't as physical. He's corrected that. He's been more aggressive and assertive in the run game." Matthews shifted outside to inside in Game 8 against the Bears. "I was kind of surprised how he hit the ground running," another scout said. "He's done well. It tells you what type of football player he is." A first-team pick from 2010-'13, he was unanimous three times. "It doesn't matter where you play him," said a third scout. Greenway, a unanimous choice on the strong side the past two years, might be descending at 31. "Looked average," one scout said. "Age is starting to catch up with him." The biggest drop was experienced by Briggs, an absolute fixture at WLB with 10 straight picks (five unanimous) from 2003-'12. He was second a year ago before finishing last this time. "He probably can (play) another year," one scout said. "He's lost some stuff athletically. It showed up more than in the past."

LEFT CORNERBACK: Darius Slay* (Det), 9. Others: Tramon Williams (GB), 7; Tim Jennings (Chi), 5; Captain Munnerlyn (Minn), 3.

Slay is the Lions' first pick at CB since Dre' Bly in '06 and their first unanimous choice since Bly in '03. As a rookie, he finished third. "He got a lot better," one scout said. "You could see his confidence was up. He showed better eye discipline. He'll give up some plays here or there. It helped them that they could sit back and squat on routes knowing that the rush would get there." Williams, a first-team pick from 2010-'13 and the first-team nickel from 2008-'09, settled for second. "There are little signs of age in terms of his ability to turn and run," one scout said. "You could see that. But he's smart, instinctive. He knows how to protect himself, for the most part. He'll give up his share of plays because his eyes will be in the backfield." Jennings, who tied Williams the past two years, was OK. "We thought he slipped," a scout said.

RIGHT CORNERBACK: Kyle Fuller (Chi), Xavier Rhodes (Minn) and Sam Shields (GB), 7. Other: Rashean Mathis (Det), 3.

The season-ending triceps injury suffered by Chicago's Charles Tillman in Week 2 opened the door to what became a three-way tie. Shields moved up after two straight seconds. "He's a good player," one scout said. "Size is an issue. He'll gamble a little bit. He's an average starter." Rhodes came on in Year 2. "He looked better," another scout said. "His size allows him to be better than he is. He showed a little bit more physicality. The thing that gets him is the grab and hold. He's able to match up with the bigger receivers because of his size." Fuller, the 14th pick in '14, replaced Tillman. "He was pretty good there for a stretch," a third scout said. "He's got a little 'Peanut' (Tillman) in him because he can create turnovers. He's going to be a good player. You can't ask him to play a lot of man because you wonder how well he runs, but he's an instinctive player." Mathis, 34, held up once again. "Smart veteran who understands schemes, angles, how to cover guys," another scout said.

STRONG SAFETY: Morgan Burnett (GB) and James Ihedigbo (Det), 8. Others: Ryan Mundy (Chi), 5; Robert Blanton (Minn), 3.

Burnett was back on top, a position he shared with Chicago's Major Wright in '12. "I've always kind of liked him," one scout said. "He can play in the box. Can cover ground. Instincts have improved. Doesn't let many balls get behind him. Doesn't have the interception production." Ihedigbo, a former Patriot-Raven starter, made Motor City fans forget Louis Delmas. "Tough guy," another scout said. "Good physical aggression when he's working deep to short. He has a physical presence with receivers coming over the middle. Then the guy makes plays. They're not just gimme interceptions. He's actually jumping routes." Mundy and Blanton will have to improve in order to start in '15.

FREE SAFETY: Glover Quin* (Det), 9. Others: Harrison Smith (Minn), 7; Ha Ha Clinton-Dix (GB), 5; Chris Conte (Chi), 3.

Quin has been worth every nickel since arriving from Houston in March 2013. "He just finds a way to be around the ball," one scout said. "There's something to that. He's a leader for their team. He's played well." Smith, a first-team pick in his first two seasons, took second. "He's a dynamic playmaker," another scout said. "I don't think I've seen it as much this year as in the past. He's still a guy that's rangy, can play the run and cover." Clinton-Dix has 85.2% playing time as a rookie. "Up and down," one scout said. "Makes some plays on athleticism but he's slow to diagnose. Lot of missed tackles. Good range. Long, fluid. Question his instincts deep. Will bite on double moves and takes inconsistent angles. Question his toughs at times. He has all the tools but he still has a ways to go." Conte, a four-year starter, has 47.2% playing time. "I wouldn't say he's worthless," one scout said. "He gives effort. He's a corner playing safety." They try to get the safety down in the box being physical, but he's not built that way. You see him getting run over by big backs. He does have ball skills."

NO. 3 DEFENSIVE END: George Johnson (Det) and Willie Young (Chi), 8. Others: Mike Neal (GB), 5; Corey Wootton (Minn), 3.

It took three teams but Johnson finally became a player. "He had a lot of pressures coming from the left or right side," one scout said. "He has good speed, uses his hands and has good bend coming around the edge. He shows deceptive speed to power to press a tackle back into the pocket." Young registered 10 sacks after coming over from Detroit. "He's got some holes in the run game, but he's long and athletic and disruptive," said another scout. Neal moved effortlessly between OLB and DL. "He flashes," one scout said. "He's a straight-line power rusher. Has some speed to the edge but stiff. Doesn't have a counter."

NO. 3 DEFENSIVE TACKLE: C.J. Mosley* (Det), 9. Others: Will Sutton (Chi), 6; Mike Pennel (GB), 5; Shamar Stephen (Minn), 4.

When Fairley went down Mosley, a 10-year veteran, stepped in nicely. "He's got some twitch," one scout said. "Can get up the field. He provides some juice to the front. He's not as heavy in the run game. He has to play with leverage. He does cause some disruption." Sutton, a third-round pick in '14, occasionally played back to his '12 form at Arizona State. "There were a few snaps where you see it," another scout said. "But you also see inconsistency." A teammate of Sutton's in '12, Pennel played sparingly. "He's never going to be a good rusher," a third scout said. "But for a big guy he moves well and plays hard."

UTILITY DEFENSIVE LINEMAN: Tom Johnson (Minn), 7. Others: Ego Ferguson (Chi) and Datone Jones (GB), 6; Darryl Tapp (Det), 5.

Johnson, a former Saint, was useful. "Undersized guy but he's athletic, very quick and has good get-off," one scout said. "He can get overwhelmed against some double-teams." Ferguson, a second-round pick in '14, played 30.2%. "Not a great athlete, not a great rusher," another scout said. "He can hold the point and play the run." Jones basically tread water in Year 2. "There are flashes," a third scout said. "He can do some things athletically. But he's a little stiff and plays with high pad level. Instinctively, I don't know."

NO. 4 LINEBACKER: A.J. Hawk (GB), 7. Others: Gerald Hodges (Minn) and Christian Jones (Chi), 6; Ashlee Palmer (Det), 5.

Hawk tied with Tulloch at MLB the past two years before seeing a sharp decline in his playing time down the stretch. "A.J.'s A.J.," one scout said. "Best in the box. Limited range. Struggles in space. Smart, instinctive." Hodges and Jones showed some run-and-chase ability. "Hard to say with this guy," another scout said, referring to Jones. "He can run. Good, not a special athlete. Struggles in traffic. Plays really high. Still raw in coverage. He's got some tools to be a player."

NO. 3 CORNERBACK: Davon House* (GB), 9. Others: Josh Robinson (Minn), 7; Demontre Hurst (Chi) and Cassius Vaughn (Det), 4.

House and Casey Hayward went back and forth as the No. 3 CB. "House has a lot of tools you like," one scout said. "Big press corner. He can run. He can close on the deep ball. He just struggles to mirror any type of quickness. His warts show up the more he plays. Competitive in the run game but misses tackles in space." Robinson, a third-round pick in '12, played LC in nickel. "Has to finish better, but he has the skill set to be an ascending player," another scout said.

NO. 3 SAFETY: Micah Hyde* (GB), 9. Others: Isa Abdul-Quddus (Det), 6; Brock Vereen (Chi), 5; Andrew Sendejo (Minn), 4.

Hyde began as the No. 1 FS before Clinton-Dix moved in. Then he contributed in nickel and dime roles. "More of a free (safety) that can come down," one scout said. "In a big nickel package he can play over a big tight end or bigger slot receiver. He's at least a good spot-starter." According to one scout, Abdul-Quddus has a chance to start. "Big, can tackle, understands the game and he runs well," he said. Vereen, a fourth-round pick in '14, has 45.1% playing time. "Not very good," one scout said. "He's smart. He can anticipate. He gets exposed on combo routes. OK burst. Questionable angles. Plays small but he is tough."

SPECIAL TEAMS

KICKER: Mason Crosby (GB), 8. Others: Blair Walsh (Minn), 7; Robbie Gould (Chi), 5; Matt Prater (Det), 4.

Crosby took the top spot outright for the first time; he shared the berth with Gould in '11. "He's steady," one scout said. "He's not great. Solid." A unanimous choice the past two seasons, Walsh slipped to 72.7% on field goals. "He wasn't as consistent as he was in years past," said a second scout. "He has a big leg. I just like the kid overall. In clutch situations he's good." A thigh injury limited Gould to 12 games. Prater made 80.8% after being run off by Denver.

PUNTER: Jeff Locke (Minn) and Sam Martin (Det), 8. Others: Tim Masthay (GB) and Patrick O'Donnell (Chi), 4.

Masthay, a first-team choice in '12 and '13, has slipped to 29th in net average (37.6) after having a light workload (46 attempts). Martin ranks sixth in net (41.1) whereas the left-footed Locke is tied for 19th (38.9). It's the second year on the job for each. "Locke is a difficult punter to get returns on," said one scout. "Martin is more productive but the dome helps his numbers." O'Donnell had a rough rookie season.

PUNT RETURNER: Micah Hyde (GB), 8. Others: Marcus Sherels (Minn), 7; Jeremy Ross (Det), 6; Marc Mariani (Chi), 3.

Hyde led the pack with a 12.8 average alternating returns with Randall Cobb. "He catches it and he's strong," said one scout. "He had the 75-yarder this year. He's got the big-play flair for a guy that's not all that fast. He's good." Departed Bear Devin Hester was the choice here seven of the last eight years (five unanimous).

KICKOFF RETURNER: Cordarrelle Patterson* (Minn), 9. Others: Jeremy Ross (Det), 6; Marc Mariani (Chi), 5; DuJuan Harris (GB), 4.

Patterson is tied for sixth at 25.6 in 34 returns after leading the league as a rookie at 32.4 in 43 returns. "You know at any time he can take it to the house," one scout said. "We're squibbing or sky-kicking. You can't kick to him." Ross, the former Packer, did all the returning for Detroit and averaged 25.4 "He's strong but he doesn't field it that great," another scout said. "Some questionable decisions." A one-time Pro Bowler ('10) for Tennessee, Mariani overcame injuries and was signed Nov. 18. "He's there more just to get them through the season," a third scout said. Harris had by the far lowest average at 20.7.

SPECIAL TEAMS ACE: CB Jarrett Bush (GB), LB Ashlee Palmer (Det), S Sean Richardson (GB), S Andrew Sendejo (Minn) and WR Adam Thielen (Minn), 3. Others: S Isa Abdul-Quddus (Det), CB Sherrick McManis (Chi), CB Marcus Sherels (Minn) and LB Tahir Whitehead (Det), 2; LB Jonathan Bostic (Chi), 1.

This ended in an unprecedented five-way tie. The logjam included Bush, the nine-year veteran who was first in '12 with 7 points. The Vikings, with the division's most effective special teams, based on a 10-category statistical breakdown, were led by Sendejo. "Oh, man, he's a special-teams demon," one scout said. "Very disruptive. He sets the tone for their special teams."