NFL Offseason Grades

By: Austin Ragland

      With the conclusion of the 2019 NFL Draft last week as well as the height of free agency, rosters are starting to shake out entering the summer months of the offseason. After the wildest start to free agency in league history, all eyes shifted towards Nashville in hopes that the draft would continue the pandemonium. However, this draft could not live up to the hype, earning the label as one of the most uneventful in recent memory. Throughout the nerve racking 3-day span every player grew up dreaming about, each team addressed (or failed to address) their biggest roster needs in class loaded with talent on the defensive side of the ball. Barring any unexpected trades or signings, the majority of offseason movement is in the past as teams prepare for their upcoming minicamps. That being said, I will take a look at how each team's front office fared throughout the course of free agency and last week's draft. These ratings are by no means a forecast for the respective team's performance or record next season. Instead, I will focus on how well each team has progressed since the conclusion of the 2018 season and Super Bowl LIII. It should also be noted that big-contract free agents and early round draft picks hold more weight in a team's rating than lesser paid role players or late round draft selections. After providing each team's letter grade, I will then analyze the biggest winners and losers since the start of the new league year in March.

Team Grades

Arizona Cardinals: **B-**
Atlanta Falcons: **C+**
Baltimore Ravens: **C**
Buffalo Bills: **B-**
Carolina Panthers: **C+**
Chicago Bears: **B**
Cincinnati Bengals: **B-**
Cleveland Browns: **B**
Dallas Cowboys: **B**
Denver Broncos: **B+**
Detroit Lions: **D**
Green Bay Packers: **B+**
Houston Texans: **C-**
Indianapolis Colts: **A-**
Jacksonville Jaguars: **B-**
Kansas City Chiefs: **D+**
Los Angeles Chargers: **C+**
Los Angeles Rams: **C**
Miami Dolphins: **A-**
Minnesota Vikings: **B-**
New England Patriots: **B**
New Orleans Saints: **B+**
New York Giants: **F-**
New York Jets: **A**
Oakland Raiders: **C-**
Philadelphia Eagles: **B+**
Pittsburgh Steelers: **C-**
San Francisco 49ers: **A**
Seattle Seahawks: **C**
Tampa Bay Buccaneers: **B-**
Tennessee Titans: **B**
Washington Redskins: **C+**

Winners and Losers

      As with any competitive institution or atmosphere, there will inevitably be some who succeed and others who fail in reaching for a common goal. More often than not, especially in the NFL, the good teams continually get better and the weaker teams look for 'innovative' shortcuts to try to cut corners in their climb to the top. Unfortunately, these foolish ideas pushed by the brass of the laughing stock franchises don't usually get them very far, as most of them jostle for which of the first five draft slots they will be claiming year after year. Free agency is an amazing display of each team's true colors, as each organization's culture can be more or less summed up by their respective actions (or lack thereof) in the frenzy of player signings and lucrative contracts. Personally, I am a huge fan of the teams who open their checkbooks in order to ink the guys they feel will fill the voids in their roster. This is not because I believe overpaying for players that teams let walk away is an effective strategy, but because I can enjoy the conversation and buzz of the contract details as an avid fan of the game. In fact, I would go as far as to say that this is the most exciting time of the year for the fans of five or six teams who are blinded by the indiscretion of their team's front office. In an age where technology is far more advanced than we know how to handle, it is baffling that the bottom feeder franchises refuse to learn from past failures, and more importantly ignore the methods of the consistent winners in the sport. Below, I will lay out my winners and losers of this offseason as a culmination of their free agency and draft grades. To no surprise, the teams who win and lose the offseason also tend to fare the same in the regular season. It should also be remembered that the team who lands the biggest name talent by no means earns the label of a winner. Instead, I provide grades based on value, a measure that is commonplace amongst the savants of the industry.

Winner: San Francisco 49ers- In one of the toughest divisions in football, GM John Lynch somehow found a way to fly under the radar and vastly improve this team each of the last two offseasons. After laying the foundation on the offensive side of the ball in 2018, the team went all in on defense between free agency and the draft last week. With the 2nd pick of the draft, they landed the most elite pass rusher in Nick Bosa, and strengthened their secondary by re-signing Jimmie Ward on a team friendly deal and bringing in veteran CB Jason Verrett. Additionally, they landed one of the best playmakers in the draft with WR Deebo Samuel. Though I admit this is partially a carryover grade from last offseason, it seems that every move this team makes is a step towards contention in the NFC West for the first time since departure of Jim Harbaugh.

Loser: Detroit Lions- With the signings of Danny Amendola, Justin Coleman, and Trey Flowers, it looks like the Lions game plan moving forward is to copy the blueprint of the New England Patriots. On top of signing three former Pats to their roster for 2019, the team poached former New England DC Matt Patricia as their head coach in 2018. Although they picked the right team's model to follow for success, the team is falling victim to the inflated fees at which it usually takes to sign one of Belichick's former players. As a team with more than a few roster holes on both sides of the ball, making a B-plus DE in Trey Flowers the highest paid defensive player at the time of his signing is both irrational and laughable. This holds especially true given that the team has failed to provide Matt Stafford with a reliable running game in his entire career.

Winner: Miami Dolphins- One year removed from appearing to have no identity and heading in all the wrong directions, I believe the Dolphins have finally found themselves on track. To be clear, they are still at least a couple of seasons away from posting a winning record, however they made major strides in laying the foundation for the future. Playing a key role in this was the steal of last year's 10th overall draft pick in exchange for a late 2nd round and 5th round draft pick. In a 'down-year' QB draft prospects (if there is one?), the Fins landed a guy most teams would grade higher than any of this year's prospects with 4 years left on his rookie deal. In other news, the team made many impressive smaller moves with the termination of Danny Amendola's poor contract and the trade of Robert Quinn to Dallas. On top of this, they signed a big and physical cornerback Eric Rowe for virtually nothing in order to bolster their depleted secondary.

Loser: Kansas City Chiefs- Coming off an AFC Championship berth and a spectacular 2018 season, the offseason has been an absolute calamity for the Chiefs. To be fair, not all of the disastrous events have been self-inflicted, yet the team has done nothing to help their case. After releasing Kareem Hunt and likely facing a Tyreek Hill suspension in the near future, the team did little to reload the arsenal of Mahomes weapons' in the draft. Furthermore, the team lost key defensive veterans Dee Ford and Justin Houston, refusing to pay them their worth. Instead, the team opened their checkbooks to overpay for an aging Tyrann Mathieu and traded away their first round pick to the Seahawks in order to ink Frank Clark as the highest paid defensive player in the league… Yikes!

Winner: New York Jets- Looking strictly at talent, I'm not sure if any team did a better job this offseason collecting star power on both sides of the ball without making any brash moves. By that, I mean the Jets landed arguably the best running back in the league and the best player in the draft without breaking the bank in free agency or trading away all their assets to climb in the draft. There is no question in my mind that the additions of Le'Veon Bell and Quinnen Williams will boost the output on each side of the ball and cement this roster as the 2nd best in the division to the Patriots. I also loved their 3rd round draft selection of DE Jachai Polite out of Florida, who can instantly plug in and immediately serve as an explosive pass rusher and possibly a double-digit sack as soon as next season. Other offseason additions such as C.J. Mosley and Jamison Crowder will provide necessary veteran experience and leadership that should help foster the development of a young core of potential stars.

Loser: New York Giants- Unlike their stadium mates, the Giants have done anything but set a solid direction for their short term and long term futures. The team's reluctance to move on from Eli Manning combined with their baffling reach in the draft for an unproven and raw Daniel Jones goes to show how clueless GM Dave Gettleman in building a roster. To make matters worse, the team traded away one of the league's premier talents in Odell Beckham Jr., who masked many deficiencies of an already dysfunctional passing game. Though I did really like three of their next four draft picks including Dexter Lawrence, Deandre Baker, and Julian Love, these young talents only fill a few of the many roster holes the team has suffered for years. Despite these formidable draftees, I think the short-fused GM Dave Gettleman is driving this franchise in the ground and has no true plan for the future of the team.

Winner: Indianapolis Colts- This may come as a surprise to distinguish this team as a winner with how quiet the Colts were this offseason considering the massive pile of money they had to spend this offseason. That being said, I have the utmost respect for the frugality and discipline of their GM Chris Ballard, who passed on many enticing and potentially detrimental signings that present themselves throughout the course of free agency. The team didn't create many headlines with their draft, however I think their late 2nd round pick Parris Campbell can be a game changer, and a great, speedy complimentary piece alongside T.Y. Hilton. I also love the additions of Justin Houston, Devin Funchess, and Spencer Ware in free agency all on team friendly deals.

Loser: Oakland Raiders- I've never been high on the Raiders management before this offseason, yet they've proven the mantra that some people just don't learn from past mistakes. Unsurprisingly, the team threw their hat in the ring early and often in free agency, making WR Antonio Brown and OT Trent Brown the highest paid players at their position in the league. They followed up this act by making the 2nd biggest reach on draft night to grab Clelin Ferrell with the 4th overall pick despite his late 1st round grade. On the bright side, this team will definitely have higher morale as they prepare to move into their new city and stadium in 2020, but it appears this team is making it up as they go instead of buying into any plan.