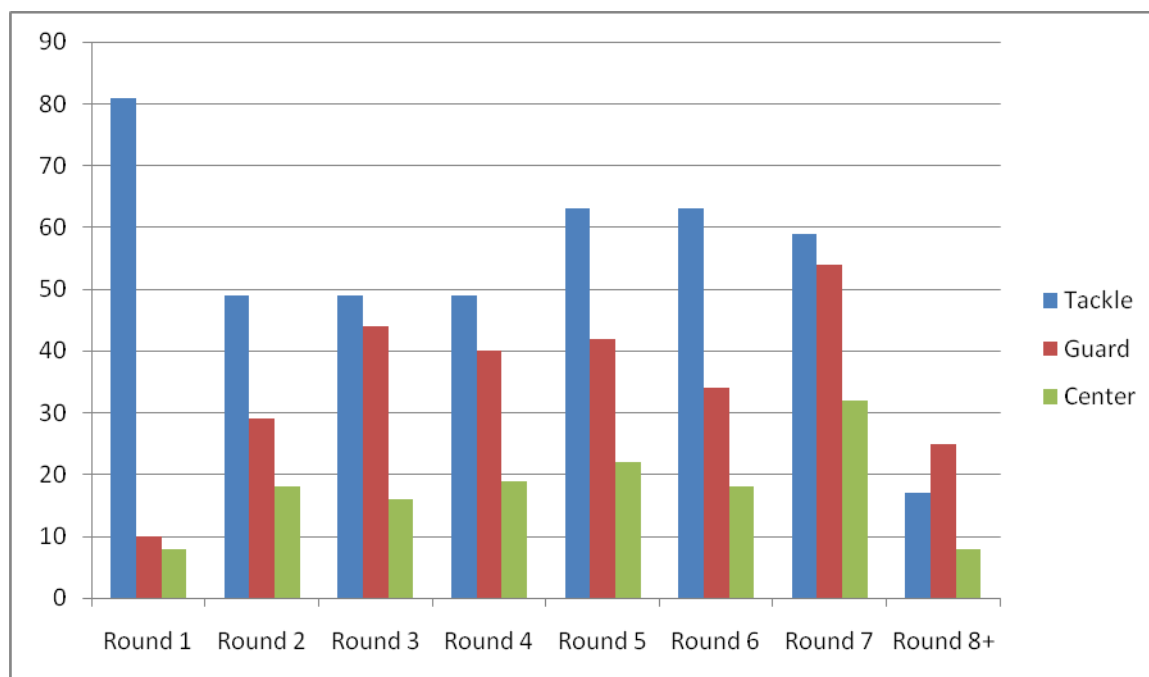


## DISSECTING THE OFFENSIVE LINE by Tony Villiotti

**DRAFTMETRICS** recently expanded its draft data base for the period from 1991 through 2010 to allow it to do such things as break offensive linemen down by position. It was not possible to go beyond the center, guard, tackle breakdown due to the information available so we couldn't, for example, break out left tackles.

The **DRAFTMETRICS** analysis pretty much confirms the popular perception - - tackles are the most valuable offensive line commodity. There are more tackles drafted than centers and guards combined and this bias is most prevalent early in the draft as shown in the following chart.



Of course, players don't always end up at the position for which they were drafted. The above chart shows their "draft position" not where they played most of their NFL career. Jeff Hartings, for example, was drafted as a guard but spent most (though not all) of his NFL career as a center. The following table summarizes the movement of players from their drafted positions to their ultimate NFL positions.

Drafted Position	Predominant NFL Position			Total
	Center	Guard	Tackle	
Center	115	23	3	141
Guard	12	248	18	278
Tackle	11	54	365	430
All	138	325	386	849

This table indicates that 430 drafted players were announced as offensive tackles, but ultimately only 365 of them were predominantly tackles in their NFL careers. An additional 21 players who were drafted as centers or guards, though, spent most of their careers as offensive tackles. To summarize and hopefully make this table clear:

- 430 offensive tackles were drafted
  - 365 remained at tackle
  - 54 were moved to guard and 11 were moved to center
- 3 centers and 18 guards were moved to tackle
- That results in a total of 386 NFL tackles (365 + 3+ 18)

The next issue **DRAFTMETRICS** addressed is whether tackles are “over drafted”. In other words, is their value so much greater than guards and tackles that there is a tendency to reach for a tackle earlier in the draft.

As the chart earlier in the article shows, there were 81 tackles drafted in the first round versus 10 guards and 8 centers. So how did these draft choices fare?

- First round centers have been money in the bank
  - All 8 became starters and as a group have started 40 of their 44 years in the NFL
  - All but one started as a rookie and that player became a starter his second year
  - The earliest center drafted was Steve Everitt with the 14<sup>th</sup> pick in 1993
- First round guards have also been universally successful
  - All 10 were starters and as a group started 77 of their 81 years in the NFL
  - As with centers, all but one started as a rookie and that player became a starter in this second season
  - The earliest guard drafted was Chris Naeole with the 10<sup>th</sup> pick in 1997
- Tackles have been successful but are not as much of a sure thing as centers and guards
  - 55 (or 68%) of the 81 first round tackles started as rookies
  - 4 of the first round picks never became starters (or in one case, haven’t so far)
    - Stan Thomas (Bears, 1991)
    - Trezelle Jenkins (Chiefs, 1995)
    - Andre Johnson (Redskins, 1996)
    - Andre Smith (Bengals, 2009) - - still hope
  - As a group, started 436 of their 538 years in the NFL
  - Two tackles (Orlando Pace in 1997 and Jake Long in 2008) were taken with the first overall pick

It does appear that NFL teams are more selective when choosing centers and guards in the first round, which supports the argument that tackles are a higher value position.

The following table summarizes draft results for each position by round. The table shows four pieces of information for each position by round:

- Number of players drafted
- Number of rookie starters
- Percentage of players who start for at least one season
- Percentage of players who play at least one NFL season

Round	Tackles				Guards				Centers			
	# Drafted	Rookie Starters	Start 1 yr +	Play 1 yr +	# Drafted	Rookie Starters	Start 1 yr +	Play 1 yr +	# Drafted	Rookie Starters	Start 1 yr +	Play 1 yr +
1 <sup>st</sup>	81	68%	95%	100%	10	90%	100%	100%	8	88%	100%	100%
2 <sup>nd</sup>	49	53%	90%	100%	29	59%	86%	97%	18	33%	89%	100%
3 <sup>rd</sup>	49	16%	59%	96%	44	18%	64%	84%	16	19%	81%	94%
4 <sup>th</sup>	49	6%	45%	86%	40	18%	58%	93%	19	16%	63%	100%
5 <sup>th</sup>	63	8%	35%	73%	42	5%	40%	86%	22	5%	45%	91%
6 <sup>th</sup>	63	5%	30%	65%	34	3%	35%	74%	18	11%	28%	39%
7 <sup>th</sup>	59	10%	39%	68%	54	4%	22%	57%	32	3%	34%	66%
8 <sup>th</sup> +	17	0%	6%	53%	25	0%	8%	24%	8	0%	25%	25%

Some observations regarding the 2<sup>nd</sup> round and beyond:

- For all three positions, there was about a 90% chance that a player drafted in the second round will start at least one season in the NFL and all but one player (Shane Hannah in 1995) played at least one season in the NFL
  - A starter is defined as someone who starts at least 8 games in a season
- There was a better than 50/50 chance that a guard or tackle drafted in the second round will start as a rookie
- Chance of a rookie starting at any of the three positions drops substantially after the second round
- While there are variations for rounds 3 through 7, there is no wide difference in the overall performance of draftees by position
  - The performance of drafted tackles was worse than that of centers and guards in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> rounds but significantly better in the 7<sup>th</sup> round
  - The performance of drafted guards was pretty consistent throughout and was the best of the three positions in the 6<sup>th</sup> round
  - Only three centers drafted in the first five rounds failed to make NFL rosters
    - Centers also had the highest percentage of draftees who started at least one season in each of the 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> rounds