Team Building Update by Tony Villiotti

The issue of team building was addressed by **DRAFTMETRICS** in an earlier article (*Team Building: A Primer*) that is available on the website. Now that the 2010 season is over **DRAFTMETRICS** has updated its data bases to include the 2010 season (and eliminated 1990 to provide a new 20-year study period). Not much has changed from the original analysis but there are some trends and additional angles that will be explored in this article.

The Process

The process used in this study was the same as in *Team Building: A Primer.* The study covered the period from 1991 through 2010 and used the following steps:

- Identify the players who started each of the 16 games for each team in each of the 20 seasons (352 starts per season per team - - 16 regular season games times 22 starting positions)
- Determine how each of the starters was acquired (draft, free agency, etc.)
- Accumulate and analyze that information.

Using starts as the "measuring stick" for the study has the advantage of being an objective metric that is (with some effort) readily available. The use of starts as a metric is not perfect, but is a useful and verifiable barometer. A variety of information sources were used by **DRAFTMETRICS** to identify and classify starters, including the *National Football League Record & Fact Book* (each year from 1991 through 2010), *Footballdb.com, NFL.com,* team media guides and various newspaper and internet reports identified through Google.

The Results

Although player acquisition philosophies vary from team, every NFL team has the same alternatives available to it in acquiring talent:

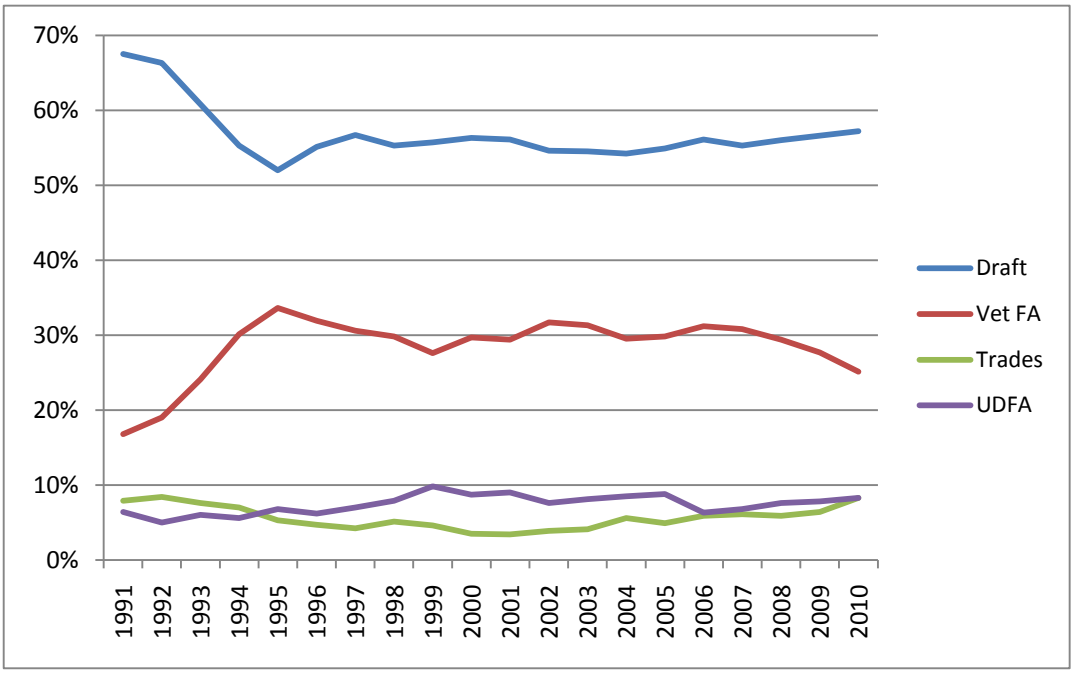
- Drafting college players;
- Signing veteran free agents;
- Signing undrafted free agents;
- Trading for players;
- Claiming players through the waiver process

Each player who started an NFL game from 1991 through 2010 was placed into one of these categories for each team for which he started a game. (The same player can be a drafted player for his first team, a veteran free agent for his second team and a trade acquisition for his third team). A summary of the percentage of starts attributable to each means of player acquisition is shown in the following table. The information presented excludes expansion teams during the study period (Jaguars, Panthers, Browns, Texans) because of the distortion in acquisition activities that occurs when a team "starts up". The information also included only 1995 through 2010, as earlier years precede the institution of the salary cap which had a great impact on player acquisition activities.

	Low Year	High Year	Average Year
Drafted Players	52.0%	57.2%	55.4%
Veteran Free Agents	25.1%	33.6%	29.9%
Rookie Free Agents	6.2%	9.8%	7.8%
Trades	3.4%	8.3%	5.1%
Waivers	0.6%	2.3%	1.7%

It is not surprising that the draft and veteran free agent signings are the two predominant means of acquiring players, accounting for about 85% of started games. The differences among NFL teams will be discussed later in this article, but while there are considerable differences among the components, no NFL team varies too far from the 85% mark. On the low end the Colts and Packers had 80% of their starts from draftees and veteran free agents and on the high end the Steelers had 93% of their starts from draftees and veteran free agents.

The following graph shows the percentage of games started by year for drafted players, veteran free agents, players acquired via trade and undrafted free agents. Only data for the 28 non-expansion teams is included.



There are three interesting, and seemingly related, observations regarding recent trends. First, the percentage of starts from drafted players in 2010 was the highest since 1993 and increased for the third

consecutive year of increase. Second, the percentage of starts from veteran free agents is the lowest since 1993 and is the fourth consecutive year of decline. Finally, the percentage of starts from players acquired via trade is the highest since 1992 and has increased from 5.9% in 2008 to 8.3% in 2010.

The trend seems to be that front offices, with increasing frequency, are trading for players already under contract and also retaining their own players. This shift is not monumental but it will be interesting to see if it continues and to try to figure out why it is occurring. Could it be related to the upcoming expiration of the Collective Bargaining Agreement, or is it just an aversion by the owners to paying big free agent contracts? Hopefully, time will tell.

Is There a Formula for Success?

The $64 question is whether there is a "right" way to build a winning football team. **DRAFTMETRICS** looked at this issue a couple of different ways. Again, the analysis excluded the expansion teams and covered only the period from 1995 through 2010 so as to ignore the pre-salary cap years.

First, the issue was studied from the perspective of whether teams with at least .500 records had any common player acquisition strategies. The following table indicates that teams that are more successful or more reliant on the draft do tend to better records, though only slightly so, than those with a heavier use of free agents.

		Average Number of Annual Starts by Category				
Annual Wins	**Number of Teams**	**Own Draftees**	**Veteran Free Agents**	**Rookie Free Agents**	**All Other**	**Total**
12+	64	200	93	33	26	352
8 to 11	200	199	104	26	24	352
4 to 7	157	190	111	28	24	352
<4	27	184	118	28	22	352
All	448	195	105	28	24	352

Differences due to rounding

DRAFTMETRICS also compared the player acquisition activities of "successful" franchises with those of the remaining franchises. For this purpose a successful franchise during the period from 1995 through 2010 was defined as one that had either(1) four seasons with 12 or more wins and at least eight seasons (out of 16) with eight or more wins or (2) 12 seasons with at least eight wins. The Broncos, Colts, Eagles, Packers, Patriots, Steelers, Titans and Vikings fit this definition. If you repeat the above table and only include the eight most successful franchises during the 20-year study period it looks like this.

		Average Number of Annual Starts by Category				
Annual Wins	**Number of Teams**	**Own Draftees**	**Veteran Free Agents**	**Rookie Free Agents**	**All Other**	**Total**
12+	35	215	77	32	28	352
8 to 11	67	212	92	27	21	352
4 to 7	23	206	101	25	21	352
<4	3	172	124	33	23	352
All	128	211	90	28	23	352

Differences due to rounding

And the table for the remaining 20 teams looks like this:

		Average Number of Annual Starts by Category				
Annual Wins	**Number of Teams**	**Own Draftees**	**Veteran Free Agents**	**Rookie Free Agents**	**All Other**	**Total**
12+	29	182	112	33	25	352
8 to 11	133	192	109	25	25	352
4 to 7	134	188	112	28	24	352
<4	24	186	117	27	22	352
All	304	189	111	27	24	352

Differences due to rounding

The difference in player acquisition activities between the eight successful franchises and the others is fairly significant, with the successful franchises having more success with the draft. Even this is somewhat deceiving, though, as you can really divide the successful franchises into three subgroups:

- Five franchises (Colts, Packers, Patriots, Steelers, Titans) were heavily draft-reliant/successful
- Two franchises (Eagles, Vikings) had player acquisition activities fairly typical of the league
- One franchise (Broncos) was second only to the Redskins in being least reliant on the draft

So what's the bottom line? There is no single path to constructing a successful franchise. In general, though, success in the draft is the clearest road to success.

Differences Among NFL Teams

As touched on in the preceding section, there are clear differences among NFL teams in either player acquisition strategies or the execution of those strategies. On average, a team's 22 starters come from the following sources:

- Drafted Players 12
- Veteran Free Agents 6-7
- Rookie Free Agents 1-2
- Players Acquired Through Trades 1
- Players Acquired Through Waivers 0-1

As an example of the extremes, the following table compares the 1995 Falcons and the 1999 Bills.

	1995 Falcons	**1999 Bills**
Drafted Players	6	18
Veteran Free Agents	10	4
Rookie Free Agents	2	0
Players From Trades	4	0

An annual breakdown of player acquisition activities by team is contained in the document entitled *Updated Team Acquisition Profiles* which may already be on the website by the time you read this.

So What's Up With All These Trades?

Earlier it was pointed out that the number of games started in 2010 by players acquired in trades was at its highest level in the past 18 years and was 30% higher in 2010 as compared to 2009. To put this in perspective, **DRAFTMETRICS** first determined the number of "equivalent players" acquired in traded. An equivalent player is number of games started by players acquired in trades divided by 16 (the number of games in a season). So if two players were acquired in trades and started eight games each, that would be the acquisition of one equivalent player.

The following table shows the number of equivalent players for each year since 1995 for the 28 non-expansion teams.

Year	**Equivalent Players**	**Year**	**Equivalent Players**
2010	50.9	**2002**	24.1
2009	39.5	**2001**	20.9
2008	36.3	**2000**	21.3
2007	37.6	**1999**	28.5
2006	36.5	**1998**	31.2
2005	30.1	**1997**	25.7
2004	34.8	**1996**	29.2
2003	25.5	**1995**	32.8

As pointed out earlier, it certainly appears that the use of trades somewhat offsets the decline in the signing of veteran free agents in 2010. Several teams had the most significant increase in trading activity:

- Seahawks
    - Acquired Marshawn Lynch, Kentwan Balmer, Stacey Andrews, Chris Clemmons and Tyler Polumbus)
- Lions
    - Acquired Chris Houston, Rob Sims, Corey Williams and Shaun Hill
- Redskins
    - Acquired Donovan McNabb, Jammal Brown and Adam Carriker