

Ready, Set, Fail

by MARK GREY

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Who wouldn't want to be the number one overall pick in an NFL draft? You get to be the big man in a new city, the future cornerstone of a NFL team, and that seven figure guarantee doesn't hurt either. Being selected number one overall means that a bad team is looking for you to lead them to brighter pastures. So how could being drafted number one ever be a bad thing? It happens when you're drafted by Al Davis and the Oakland Raiders. Once seen as a future franchise quarterback, Jamarcus Russell's Raiders career is all but over before it even started. There is no question that at age 24, Russell has played the biggest part in his own demise, but he has had plenty of help. While being drafted number one overall was the best thing to ever happen to his bank account, it was the worst thing to ever happen to his football career. Anyone who stopped and studied both Russell's and the Raiders' background should have known that it was a match made in hell.

After a few unsuccessful years of playing musical chairs with over-the-hill quarterbacks, Raiders owner Al Davis was determined to find a young quarterback to lead his team into the future. Thanks to another bad season, the Raiders owned the number one pick in the 2007 draft and there was Russell sitting there with all the bells and whistles that Davis loves. Russell was a dominating physical presence under center, and could throw the ball further from his knee than some quarterbacks could standing up. Although most draft experts agreed he was raw and far from the best player in the draft, good ol' Al made him the number one pick overall and from that point on, Russell was destined to fail.

The first problem in Russell's failures was that he should never have been drafted number 1. Being drafted first overall comes with extremely high expectations -- expectations that Russell wasn't gifted enough to meet. David Carr said it best, "When you're drafted number one, you're expected to be great." The problem is, Russell is never going to be great. If Russell was drafted in a later round and placed in the right environment with lower expectations, he had enough talent to be a solid starter a few years down the road. Russell, who was 21 at the time he was drafted, needed to sit a few years and learn the NFL game from an established veteran to earn the respect of his teammates and coaching staff. He needed to learn what it means to be a leader of men on and off the field. In short, he needed time to grow as a player and a person, which is not something the Raiders are known for.

After already being drafted way higher than he should have been, Russell made things worse with a hold-out that lasted into the regular season. At a time when Russell should have been at camp learning the offense and earning his teammates' respect, he was at home fighting about money he hadn't even earned yet. By the time Russell finally joined the team, he was so far behind that any hopes of him contributing to the season were all but lost. By his second season, the team had turned into a full zoo, with the owner and coach feuding and Russell stuck in the middle. The head coach was being forced to play Russell even though he didn't want to and was facing questions about his job weekly. One of the biggest things all young quarterbacks need is stability and the Raiders had become anything but that. The head coach was fired in the middle of the season and the Raiders became nothing more than a media circus. Despite all of that, Russell still had a decent sophomore season, but he still had a long way to go.

By the start of his third season, Russell had seen just about everything except the norm. His first coach had been fired and his current coach was facing assault charges for beating up another coach. If all of that wasn't enough, for some reason, the team drafted a receiver seventh overall who some draft experts didn't even expect to be drafted in the first round. In three seasons, Davis had surrounded Russell with more drama than talent. The only thing worse than the Raiders' off-the-field issues was Russell's play on it. When he wasn't struggling to make the right reads, Russell was over throwing open receivers by 10 yards. Once known as a somewhat mobile quarterback, he has gotten so big that he can no longer even get out of his own way and appears like he is running in sand while everyone else is on turf. He has proven to be anything but a leader with quotes like, "I'm not the problem," and his level of play has gone down while his weight has gone up.

By naming Charlie Frye this week's starter, it appears that the Raiders have seen enough of Russell right now to know that he is not their future. Al Davis is disappointed that Russell never progressed, but in hindsight, why would he? What lessons has he learned since turning pro? He showed up for the NFL combine 10 pounds over weight and is rewarded by being the number one pick. He misses all of training camp and the preseason and is rewarded with 68 million dollars and even starts before the season is over. The following year, his coach doesn't think he is good enough to play, so the owner fires the coach and tells the world Jamarcus is a great player. If Jamarcus was a child and Al Davis was his father, someone would call child services on him. Davis has done just about everything to assure that Russell does not grow into a great quarterback. Critics say he hasn't matured, but how could he? Who at the Raiders facility is he learning from? For every one reason you can name for why he should be great, you can name 15 reasons why he shouldn't be. For the last half of this decade, the Raiders have continued to draft players who never live up to their expectations and can't just be them. The problem with recent Raiders top draft pick is, they are all drafted higher than they should be, and then thrown into an environment that doesn't foster their growth. I have no idea who the Raiders' first pick will be next year, but all I can say is good luck...and save your money.