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An Undervalued Free Agency Spot

Using Random Forest Regression, I am attempting to create a better draft model for NFL edge rushers. Using the past 7 years of 1st and 2nd round edge rushers, I created a model to predict a year 1 composite score (a combination of tackles, solo tackles, and most importantly sacks) based on college stats, combine measurements, age, and pre-draft rankings. I can't tell you that the model is perfect, and there is certainly a lot of variance in terms of landing spots and other random events after the players are drafted.

<u>But here is what I can tell you</u>

These are the top 10 players in the model, pre-draft:

1. Micah Parsons (2x all-pro, 3x pro-bowl)
2. Nick Bosa (all-pro, 4x pro-bowl)
3. Bradley Chubb (2x pro-bowl)
4. Josh Hines-Allen (2x pro-bowl)
5. Aidan Hutchinson (pro-bowl)
6. Chase Young (DROY, pro-bowl)
7. **Azeez Ojulari**
8. Montez Sweat (pro-bowl)
9. Jared Verse (DROY favorite)
10. Travon Walker (Top 5 in sacks at time of report)

So what is the problem with Azeez Ojulari, why hasn't he been more successful in the NFL?

The simple truth: he has. Let's look at each season of his career thus far.

Rookie Year: The day of the draft, Azeez was 20.86 years old, the 3rd youngest edge rusher drafted in the top 2 rounds in the last 7 years. As an extremely young rookie, the Giants

started him 13 out of 17 games. He recorded **10 sacks** in that season. For context, the year before (2020) the defensive rookie of the year was Chase Young. He registered 7.5 sacks in 15 starts.

2nd Year: A combination of injuries and a ridiculous decision by the Giants to play Oshane Ximines over him. His snap percentages and sacks per game this season:

47%: 0

48%: 1

58%: 1

60%: 2

81%: 0.5

31%: 1

He plays only 6 games all season in which he is above 31% snap count. In those 6 games (even with limited snaps), he records 6 sacks. He also forces 3 fumbles.

3rd Year: He plays 11 games, starting 7 of them. Only 3 sacks here. Looking a little deeper, however, it's not all bad. His rookie season, Azeez hurries the QB 3.46% of his snaps. His 2nd year, that number is 3.91%. His third year, 4.01%. His sacks may be down in this 3rd year, but the underlying metrics look better than expected.

4th Year. Fast forward to the present. Azeez is a backup for the first 5 games. He records 2 sacks in those 5 games. The Giants start him the next 5 games, and he records 5 sacks in 5 games.

Ojulari is currently 24.5 years old. In 30 career starts, he has recorded 23 sacks. For whatever reason, this is a Giants team that simply doesn't value him the way I believe his profile demands. Of my top 10 edge rusher prospects the past 7 years, he is the only one without significant accolades. Good young edge rushers don't hit free agency often. Adding together his elite draft profile and his ability to generate pressure when given real playing time, I could easily see Azeez take off if signed to the right situation.