**Prompt 1:** **Data Set Description and Broad Question**

The data set contains basic demographic information about all NFL players, past and present, such as name, birth date, college, position, years played, etc. In addition to demographic information, there are additional tabs that track the relevant NFL season stats for each of these players for their position. Quarterbacks, for example, have data tracking their passing yards, touchdowns, interceptions, passer rating, etc., while defensive safeties have data tracking tackles, interceptions, and sacks. Together, this information easily would allow a data user to trend player performance throughout their NFL career. With this dataset in mind, across all positions, how extensive is the “Sophomore Slump” or lack thereof on NFL players following their rookie season?

**Prompt 2: Overarching Question.**

Does a “Sophomore Slump” exist and can its impact be felt more heavily in specific NFL positions?

**Prompt 3: Introduction.**

Hi, my name is Adam Bakopolus, and I’m here to understand what trends we might find about NFL players following their rookie seasons. This interview will take between 30 and 60 minutes, during which time we’ll go through several questions. Throughout, I’d like you to treat me as if you’re describing your thoughts on this matter to someone who isn’t that familiar with the NFL. I’m here to learn from you.

A couple of things before we start. I will take your comments to be confidential. I will never associate your name with any comments you might make, I will aggregate comments from several interviews I’m conducting so that your comments are not easily traced to you. Though I’m conducting this interview mostly for the benefit of my own data analysis, if I were to quote you in any report, I would only do so without identifying your name or specific role. If there’s anything you really don’t want on the record, even if it’s anonymized, please let me know that, too. Also, this interview is entirely voluntary on your part, so if at any time you’d like to stop, or you’d like me to remove information you’ve already provided, please let me know. Doing so will have no adverse impact on you.

Do you have any questions for me? All right, then, let’s proceed.

**Prompt 4: Questions**

**Background / warm-up questions**

* How long have you been following the NFL?
  + I do not follow the NFL very closely
  + If not extensively, are there other sports that you actively follow or participate in?
    - I follow professional track and field, road racing, and cross country running, and college track and field and cross country very closely. In the past, I have followed Major League Baseball pretty closely.
* I have a data set I plan to analyze that is based on historical NFL data and player’s demographic information as well as season statistics across all positions. How familiar or comfortable would you be with this kind of dataset?
  + I am very comfortable with that sort of data, though I have not look at football specific datasets in great detail.
* Are you familiar with the term “Sophomore Slump”? If so, can you describe it?
  + I am familiar with the term. I describe it as a bad or disappointing second year/season after a successful first year.

**Main questions**

1. \*\*\* Since you played sports at a high-level in college, you have likely heard the term “Sophomore Slump” regarding athletic performance. Can you tell me how a slump may have manifested within your sport?

* Tell me more about example slumps you may have seen during your college career, for either yourself or others on your team.
  + My biggest personal slump was during my junior year of college. Other teammates had slumps in sophomore, junior or senior year (and freshman year, though I would not consider a first year a slump, just a slow start). There were a variety of causes (including those listed below). Most improved but not all (addressed three points below).
* What do you believe contributed to these slumps?
  + The biggest contributor was injury, followed by complacency/lack of motivation.
* Were there internal or external factors at play?
  + There were both internal and external factors – the main external factor was injury, the main internal factor was complacency.
* Did performance improve following this second year or did it begin a downward spiral from the rookie/freshman season?
  + In many cases, these slumps were not during sophomore year. However, performance did typically improve after the slump year. In cases where the downward spiral continued another year, there the athlete usually would not continue their career and choose to pursue other interests.

2. Think back to the last time you interacted with the data I mentioned earlier – NFL player statistics. Can you tell me about any prior interactions with a comparable dataset?

* What specifically did you do with the data (Fantasy Football draft preparation, etc.)?
  + I did recruiting for college runners and looked did opposition research on other teams.
* What were you hoping to find or understand?
  + I was hoping to predict the entries for track and field championship meets and project the expected team scores for the meet.
* What trends and/or information were you looking for when assessing a player?
  + Consistency, scoring potential.

3. \*\*\* Next, I’m going to ask you to speculate a bit about what might be in the data set. What kinds of trends do you expect might be in the data that we haven’t discussed yet?

* Where does that hunch come from? Why do you suspect that?
  + I would expect a lot of players go up and down year to year. It’s just the law of randomness that some years will be better than others and some changes will be extreme enough to count as a slump or as a “breakout” year.
* Do you think there might be instances of Sophomore Slumps in the NFL data? If so, why?
  + Yes, I would think that there are instances of sophomore slumps.
* Is there any demographic information that could be useful in identifying players more susceptible to a slump (draft position, small or large university, etc.)?
  + I think the position would make a big difference, as well as how successful the player was in college prior to playing in the NFL.

4. Next, I’d now like to focus on Sophomore Slumps at the professional level. With the historical NFL dataset shaping this conversation, do you recall a high-performing rookie season followed by a disappointing sophomore campaign?

* Tell me more about the player and the slump they had.
  + Cole Hocker, an Olympic competitor in the 1500m. He had an amazing freshman year and turned professional. His “sophomore” year was his first professional year and it was not very successful.
* Why do you believe this slump happened?
  + Changes in training and lifestyle and other adjustments stemming from changing from a college runner to a professional runner.
* Was it likely driven by internal (preparation, attitude) or external factors (coaching decisions, greater focus on stopping the player)? What generally is the cause for slumps?
  + I would expect the external factors made a bigger difference, especially training and coaching as Hocker made the change to a professional runner.

5. In your experience, are Sophomore Slumps typically overcome? And, if so, how?

* Does the player continue a downward trajectory or are future years more in line with the rookie performance?
  + The future years more often improve, sometimes approaching the sensational rookie season and sometimes surpassing it after a few years.
* What factors were at play that led to a year over year improvement?
  + Consistency in training.
* Was the slump and/or subsequent improvement likely driven by internal (preparation, attitude) or external factors (coaching decisions, greater focus on stopping the player)?
  + Both the slump and improvement were more driven by internal factors.
* If a downward trajectory continues, why was there only one season (the rookie season) of strong performance before a sharp decline?
  + Many of the things that allowed for the original success were adjusted following the that success and those adjustments lead to a decline.

6. \*\*\* Now that we have a strong foundational base around Sophomore slumps, in general, I’d like to shift to a focus on slumps within NFL positions. Without the benefit of reviewing the datafile, what positions do you believe would be most prone to a slump?

* Where does that hunch come from? Why do you suspect that?
  + I think sprinters suffer more often from slumps than other event groups.
* Are there any positions that you believe should be slump-proof? If so, why?
  + I do not think any events would be slump-proof. However, the throwing events should be the least likely to slump; they are less reliant on health and peaking and more to do with strength and especially technique.
* What factors do you believe contribute to some positions being more prone to slumps than others?
  + I think big contributors are events with a strong mental component (such as high jump and pole vault) and events where properly managing training load and peaking correctly are vital (such as distance running)

7. Is there any bias in media that may sway public perception around slumps?

* How does reporting differ for a quarterback compared to a running back or wide receiver?
* Is media bias towards “star” positions making it difficult to determine which positions truly are most susceptible?
  + Probably, yes!
* Does the media disproportionately report on slumps versus continued success, leading to a perception that slumps are far more prevalent than they truly are?
  + Yes, I believe that is the case.

8. What are some key statistics you would focus on to assess whether performance may be tied to a slump?

* Are there any positions that can be viewed truly within a silo to assess performance?
  + In running, all events can be separated from the others.
* How would you adjust for factors beyond a player’s control (poor surrounding team, coaching, etc.)?
  + In track and field, you cannot control for who you race against. If you end up consistently being matched up against the best, you will not place as well as you would have if the competition were weaker. However, times can often be compared year to year.

9. When evaluating a slump, is there anything beyond just statistics that you would look for?

* Is there a need to evaluate based on an “eye-test” as well as opposed to just statistics (if statistics are coming only during “garbage time” when the game is out of hand or already lost)?
  + An eye-test can be important to contextualize statistics, but relying too much on an eye-test is not a robust measure to determine real change year to year.
* Should off the field issues or character concerns also be considered part of a slump?
  + I define a slump to be athletic, so I would not count those as part of the slump. However, I think “character concerns” or “off the field issues” could lead to an athletic slump.
* Should there be leeway for those with an “unexpectedly great” rookie season from a low draft position or small school?
  + No, I believe once an athlete achieves a certain level, that level should be considered their new baseline/expectation.

10. One last question that I wanted to discuss is whether or not you would expect to see a trend with the number of slumps associated with a player from a particular college or on a particular professional team?

* What prevents a player from slumping?
  + If we knew that, nobody would slump again! But overall, I would say that a coaching focus on consistent and deliberate growth, injury avoidance, and continued athlete motivation would all limit the chance of slumping.
* Do external factors such as coaching and the organization the player is associated with play a significant role in future performance?
  + Yes, coaching and structure have a large impact on how successful an athlete is in the short and long term.
* Are there any other trends you would be interested in looking for in the dataset?
  + The longevity of one’s career.

**Prompt 5: Conclusion** Thank you. Those are all the questions I have for you. If anything else occurs to you after I leave, please don’t hesitate to let me know by email. I may be in touch with you again to ask a few follow-up questions. If I ever complete the actual data analysis, would you like me to send you a copy of the report? Do you have any questions? Thanks again!

**Prompt 6: Marked Questions** See questions above with 3 asterisks.