**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?

*I personally feel there is definitely a sophomore slump that many players experience. As with all things in life, it is not universal, but I’d guess >60% experience a substantial sophomore slump.*

**Prompt 2: Overarching Question.**

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

*Position heavily influences sophomore slump in the NFL (and all sports). A lot of the slump is dependent on how OTHER players study you, so thus positions with more film evidence and that are of greater focus are going to be more heavily affected (e.g. QB).*

**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?
  + If not extensively, are there other sports that you actively follow or participate in?
  + *I follow many sports, but NFL is one of the ones I follow more closely. I’ve watched the NFL since I was a kid, followed multiple teams/the league itself closely since I was ~17 (currently 28).*
* 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?
  + *Very familiar.*
* Are you familiar with the term “Sophomore Slump”? If so, can you describe it?
  + *Very familiar. I would define sophomore slump as a phenomena that the majority of promising rookie players in most sports experience at the professional (or elite collegiate) level. After an exciting and promising rookie season, players either do not progress/improve at all, or get worse for the sophomore season.*

**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.
  + *In track/XC, the etiology of sophomore slumps is different than many other sports, but is remains common here too. The most common reason for a sophomore slump, in my experience in track, is due to over training combined with a mental block because of the excitement and promise of the rookie season. For example, a long jumper on our team came close to a school record his freshman year. He then jumped almost a full foot shorter during the entire sophomore campaign and faced multiple injuries throughout the year.*
* What do you believe contributed to these slumps?
  + *As sort of alluded to above, in track, slumps are usually caused by a mental block and overtraining – often with injuries involved*
* Were there internal or external factors at play?
  + *These are mostly internal factors for track*
* Did performance improve following this second year or did it begin a downward spiral from the rookie/freshman season?
  + *It depends! The example above was improved upon. Others are frequently not.*

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 definitely use similar datasets during fantasy football draft prep and am key to avoid players with breakout performances in the first 1-3 rounds because of this risk. A key example is Dak Prescott, who during his sophomore season I avoided drafting because of this reason despite loving his performance during his rookies year.*
* What were you hoping to find or understand?
  + *I’d love to know if my moves are founded and rational given the data*
* What trends and/or information were you looking for when assessing a player?
  + *Teasing out luck vs skill (think batting average vs expected average on batted balls in play for baseball)*

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 do not know the specific football stats that would be akin to the baseball analogy above, but that in most exciting rookie campaigns the headliner stat is superior (due to some element of luck) than the more detailed stats. This is due to media coverage and just overall trends of what could make an otherwise inexperienced player exceed the performance of seasoned and talented veterans*
* Do you think there might be instances of Sophomore Slumps in the NFL data? If so, why?
  + *Definitely. Beyond the mental and training/injury reasons described in track (which certainly apply here too), NFL also has the problem of substantial team preparation against opposing players. Thus, for a QB, teams can figure out that the player responds poorly to blitzes, or is easy to flush from the pocket, or for a WR maybe a player deals poorly with an aggressive press from a DB. As most young players have flaws, a well prepped opposing team, as virtually all NFL teams are, will accentuate the flaws and make a slump very likely.*
* Is there any demographic information that could be useful in identifying players more susceptible to a slump (draft position, small or large university, etc.)?
  + *Definitely the less that is known about a player before their rookie year, the more likely the sophomore slump will occur for both the luck reasons for a successful rookie season AND due to lack of team knowledge about a player.*

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.
  + *Dak Prescott had a very good rookie season a few years ago with the Cowboys, with a surprising 13-3 record (bolstered by a particularly strong performance from rookie RB Elliott too), minimal interceptions, and >3500 yards passing and >20 touchdowns. His sophomore season, Elliott was suspended for 1/3 of the season, but Dak notably threw many more interceptions while throwing for fewer yards despite more attempts and a playbook designed for him.*
* Why do you believe this slump happened?
  + *Combination of factors – there were injuries and suspensions that affected the offense overall, but the majority of the slump I personally feel to have been due to better team preparation against Dak and a struggle to integrate a more advanced offensive attack (i.e. he may have tried to take too big a step forward bolstered with confidence from a rookie season that led to increased errors in his second season).*
* 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?
  + *Mostly external, but likely internal.*

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?
  + *Totally depends!*
* What factors were at play that led to a year over year improvement?
  + *Sustainable player growth requires luck, the right attitude, and strong team support.*
* Was the slump and/or subsequent improvement likely driven by internal (preparation, attitude) or external factors (coaching decisions, greater focus on stopping the player)?
  + *I think most slumps are caused by external factors and most improvement is caused by external factors too – but bolstered by good internal factors*
* If a downward trajectory continues, why was there only one season (the rookie season) of strong performance before a sharp decline?
  + *Combination of factors, but luck and minimal prep by opposing teams has a lot to do with it! Injuries too (e.g. David Johnson)*

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?
  + *WR, QB, CB1 – due to better team prep*
  + *RB – due somewhat to team prep, but also due to increased predilection for injuries after a full NFL Season (e.g. David Johnson)*
* Are there any positions that you believe should be slump-proof? If so, why?
  + *Not slump-PROOF but safeties, kickers, and linemen*
* What factors do you believe contribute to some positions being more prone to slumps than others?
  + *The positions that receive lots of preparation and team strategizing around (classically QB) will be at higher risk due to higher burden of external factors*

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?
  + *Certainly QBs will be the highest profile for every team. Thus, slumps will be more likely to be predicted and reported upon.*
* Is media bias towards “star” positions making it difficult to determine which positions truly are most susceptible?
  + *Absolutely! My Dak example above is very flawed – there were injuries, he was without Elliott for many games that year, and the defense was different. The biggest indicator of his slump was the poor record (plus like 3x more INT), and a team’s record is much more than 1 player yet I firmly blame dak for a lot of it.*
* Does the media disproportionately report on slumps versus continued success, leading to a perception that slumps are far more prevalent than they truly are?
  + *Of course.*

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?
  + *Maybe kickers? Otherwise not really in the NFL.*
* How would you adjust for factors beyond a player’s control (poor surrounding team, coaching, etc.)?
  + *On a global scale, eliminating teams with injuries or suspensions in other star players, teams with big turnover year to year, etc. For an individual player, look at stats that are slightly more individual (e.g. % completion to an individual player or catches/target for a WR rather than total yards).*

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)?
  + *Of course. Looking at game winning drives, game losing drives, first quarter stats, etc.*
* Should off the field issues or character concerns also be considered part of a slump?
  + *YES!!! Being a successful professional athlete is HARD. Year to year success is luck, but as the saying goes, luck is most common among the most prepared!*
* Should there be leeway for those with an “unexpectedly great” rookie season from a low draft position or small school?
  + *No – regression to the mean is common. If you are unexpectedly great, your next season is more likely to slump because of regression to the mean and better team prep. This is a slump and, IMO, one of the best examples of a rationale for why they happen.*

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?
  + *Luck, good team support (i.e. the sole rookie star is more likely to slump than a rookie added to a great team), high profile before pro career, history of long success*
* Do external factors such as coaching and the organization the player is associated with play a significant role in future performance?
  + *10,000%. This is most important in my opinion*
* Are there any other trends you would be interested in looking for in the dataset?
  + *Not really!*

**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!

* Please always follow up with questions for me! Would love to see the data analysis.

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