**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 don’t think the sophomore slump is super common, but I think it happens to one or two players every season. Most guys show us who they are their rookie year, and sometimes they don’t build off that momentum or the league figures them out. So while I feel like we usually hear about one or two players who are not building off success from the previous season, the sophomore slump affects a small minority of players.

**Prompt 2: Overarching Question.**

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

* The sophomore slump probably does exist, because we wouldn’t know what it was if it doesn’t exist on some level. We mostly hear about it with quarterbacks, running backs, wide receivers because it is more noticeable with them. You don’t hear about it as much with a lineman or a defensive player because they don’t put up points.

**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’ve been following the NFL for about twenty years, maybe a little more
  + If not extensively, are there other sports that you actively follow or participate in?
    - I also follow major league baseball, the NBA, premier league soccer, Champions League soccer, la Liga, and I tune in for playoff hockey.
* 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?
  + Ugh, how could you do this to me. You know I hate data. However, I do like sports statistics.
* Are you familiar with the term “Sophomore Slump”? If so, can you describe it?
  + A sophomore slump occurs when a player has a strong rookie showing and then digress in their 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?

Slumps mostly manifested in not starting/playing and making mistakes that affected playing time.

* Tell me more about example slumps you may have seen during your college career, for either yourself or others on your team.
  + I don’t really remember seeing any sophomore slumps in college. I feel like what happened more was players started their freshman year and then got benched for a more talented player. I can’t really recall seeing actual regression.
* What do you believe contributed to these slumps?
  + New talent comes in and they are fresh. Coaching changes could happen as well and the new players coming in are the new coach’s players. I think injuries really contribute as well. When the game becomes more physical and faster more injuries can happen and obviously an injury can really set back a promising, young player.
* Were there internal or external factors at play?
  + I think a sophomore slump is mostly external unless the player themselves is actually not doing the work. The player’s commitment is obviously internal, but stuff like injuries, new talent, new coaches, new schemes, and adjustments around leagues are not something a player can control. All they can hope to do is adjust, which is an internal factor.
* Did performance improve following this second year or did it begin a downward spiral from the rookie/freshman season?
  + People usually recover by their junior year, once they’re entrenched in the system and the team or they quit in my experience. And once you’re in the system you’re in the system, especially in a sport like soccer where the team is relatively small and team chemistry is important. They may not necessarily go back to starting, but they’ll come off the bench or they’ll become a locker room staple that’s critical to the team.

1. 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?

I guess in fantasy?

* What specifically did you do with the data (Fantasy Football draft preparation, etc.)?
  + I use data for fantasy football and fantasy hockey every week. So I guess the most recent time I used it was yesterday morning.
* What were you hoping to find or understand?
  + Whether I should start Romeo Doubs or Devonta Smith.
* What trends and/or information were you looking for when assessing a player?
  + This was for fantasy, so I wanted to see who was going to put up the most points. So point projections, previous performances, assessments of the defenses they were playing.

1. \*\*\* 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?

No idea, maybe something about points? How do you quantify defensive sophomore slumps?

* Where does that hunch come from? Why do you suspect that?
  + My suspicion is that there is a media bias for sophomore slumps based on offensive players because that is so easy to quantify for one player, so I suspect it’s going to be more about offensive players and yards and touchdowns.
* Do you think there might be instances of Sophomore Slumps in the NFL data? If so, why?
  + I expect so. Phenomena like a sophomore slump don’t become a common discussion in the media with some evidence of it.
* Is there any demographic information that could be useful in identifying players more susceptible to a slump (draft position, small or large university, etc.)?
  + Draft position for sure, whether the player was a first round draft pick, for example, solely because that makes them more noticeable to us and the media and fans pay more attention to them.

1. 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?

Devonta Smith right now. Record breaking rookie season, candidate for offensive rookie of the year and this year has screwed me over in fantasy multiple weeks.

* Tell me more about the player and the slump they had.
  + Devonta Smith is a Heisman winner who had a spectacular rookie year. And now I like in a permanent state of angry with him because he has not had a touchdown in weeks.
* Why do you believe this slump happened?
  + It is AJ Brown’s fault. He is getting all the touches that Devonta used to get.
* 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 blame AJ Brown 100%

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

I don’t know. I feel like we don’t usually hear when someone has recovered because that’s not interesting news.

* Does the player continue a downward trajectory or are future years more in line with the rookie performance?
  + I hope they get better. If they’ve reached the NFL level they’re exception athletes who are coachable and adaptable and usually bounce back.
* What factors were at play that led to a year over year improvement?
  + A good off season, maybe a trade to a new team. I feel like you hear of a lot of guys who get traded and then end up having good careers. Sometimes you just need a coaching scheme that’s going to put you first.
* Was the slump and/or subsequent improvement likely driven by internal (preparation, attitude) or external factors (coaching decisions, greater focus on stopping the player)?
  + Not football, but I know with Andrew Wiggins it was a culture and work thing. He had been on a basketball team with a relaxed, losing culture, and then was traded to a perennial championship team and it was a massive culture change and he flourished. So it could be culture, it could be a trade for a running back or a wide receiver where they become the number one target again. It could be a coaching scheme that suits the player’s strengths. However, I am not sure that this would only apply to young players. The football players who I think of are rarely second year players. I feel like they’re in year five or six.
* If a downward trajectory continues, why was there only one season (the rookie season) of strong performance before a sharp decline?
  + I know Saquon Barkley had a tough few years and that was mostly due to injury. This year he is healthy, he is the number one option, and has a head coach who is a good coach, so I feel like those factors all really contribute. I think the reason there could have been a fast turnaround there is the lack of injuries and the new coach, so maybe if a player is going through a difficult stretch because of organizational issues it can be solved by either a new organization or their organization making necessary changes.

1. \*\*\* 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?

My immediate impression is quarterbacks, but I can’t think of a quarterback with a sophomore slump. They’re usually first year busts.

* Where does that hunch come from? Why do you suspect that?
  + Football focuses a ton on quarterbacks and I feel like it’s a big deal when a quarterback sucks.
* Are there any positions that you believe should be slump-proof? If so, why?
  + Nothing is slump proof. People can suck regardless of sport or position. All those factors I listed out above can happen to anyone regardless of what position they play in and no position can guard against those factors.
* What factors do you believe contribute to some positions being more prone to slumps than others?
  + Media attention, pressure, and having a target on your back from the rest of the league.

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

Wow what a great question! Probably.

* How does reporting differ for a quarterback compared to a running back or wide receiver?
  + In football the quarterback is everything. Everyone is hyper focused on them constantly, so sophomore slumps around quarterbacks are probably given more attention than anyone else, including a star RB or WR.
* Is media bias towards “star” positions making it difficult to determine which positions truly are most susceptible?
  + Yes definitely. When the media only focuses on certain stuff then that’s all you’re going to focus on too unless you dig into the data.
* Does the media disproportionately report on slumps versus continued success, leading to a perception that slumps are far more prevalent than they truly are?
  + Slumps after a lot of success are way more interesting for talking heads than saying “this guy is still performing at a high level” unless it is a record breaking level.

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

TDs.

* Are there any positions that can be viewed truly within a silo to assess performance?
  + No, at the end of the day, sports involve a lot of external factors. Maybe a running back or a safety or a cornerback could be decoupled a little.
* How would you adjust for factors beyond a player’s control (poor surrounding team, coaching, etc.)?
  + More data on the player, which would be hard for a sophomore slump and maybe an analysis of the O-line?

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)?
  + I’m big into the eye test because that’s what I’ve been going off of for twenty years.
* Should off the field issues or character concerns also be considered part of a slump?
  + Definitely. If a guy is going through it or is just not putting in the work that could totally change his performance. Additionally, too much pressure could cause problems.
* Should there be leeway for those with an “unexpectedly great” rookie season from a low draft position or small school?
  + Maybe, because in that case there might not be a ton of footage on the guy and then the league figured him out and now it’s on him to adjust back.

1. 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?

That LSU championship team from 2019 has been wildly successful in the NFL. And I feel like a lot of the Alabama guys doing okay. They’re not slump proof, but they have good careers.

* What prevents a player from slumping?
  + Hard work, good coaching, coachability, a smart GM, and people in his corner to help make a change and advocate for him (like a good agent)
* Do external factors such as coaching and the organization the player is associated with play a significant role in future performance?
  + I’m convinced that’s like 50 % of it.
* Are there any other trends you would be interested in looking for in the dataset?
  + Age. Did the guy redshirt? Did he stay a couple extra years? How have the extra covid years affected some of these guys entering the league at 25, 26 rather than 21, 22. Whether transferring impacts a player at all.

**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.