About 40 million people play fantasy football in the United States each year.[[1]](#footnote-1) Assuming the average league has about 12 players, about 3.3 million people had McCaffrey on their fantasy teams last year. Upon contemplating the overall loss in utility even something as seemingly trivial as losing your first-round fantasy pick can cause serious harm when multiplied by 3.3 million. It becomes clear then we have a moral imperative to ensure such scenarios are prevented.

Fortunately for us morally concerned citizens, there exists a proposed solution that goes by the name of the “Zero Running Back” draft strategy. Under this strategy, the fantasy owner abstains from drafting a running back in the first few to several rounds of the draft and tries to find fill their running back slots in the later rounds and from the waiver wire. The theory goes that since running backs frequently get injured, NFL teams have adopted mainly running back by committee strategy, and good backs often emerge on the waiver wire throughout the season due to injuries to the starters, fantasy owners are better off using the first few rounds to load up on top tier talent at less injury-prone positions like receiver, tight end, and even quarterback.

The theory sounds somewhat convincing, but has it worked in practice?

**The Experiment**

To test the strategy, I compare the performance of 25,000 hypothetical rosters drafted with the “Zero Running Back” strategy to 25,000 rosters drafted using a “Standard” Strategy. The draft and therefore rosters are spread evenly throughout the past five NFL seasons (2017-2021). The rules for my simulated drafts are as follows:

* Ten teams, each with 16-man rosters (1 QB, 2 RBs, 2 WRs, 1TE, 1 Flex(RB, TE, or WR), 1 K, 1 DST, 7 Bench)
* [Standard scoring](https://fantasydata.com/api/fantasy-scoring-system/nfl)
* [Snake draft](https://www.nbcsports.com/boston/fantasy-football/fantasy-football-auction-vs-snake-drafts-explained)

Under the “Standard” strategy, teams draft the best or near best available players according to that year’s **average draft position (ADP)** until their rosters are filled at all positions. Teams using this strategy fill each position in their starting roster (except for kickers and defense/special teams) before moving on to drafting bench players.[[2]](#footnote-2) Under the “Zero Running Back” strategy, teams behave similarly but do not draft a running back in the first four rounds. Those interested in the particulars of how these rosters were simulated can visit the following GitHub Repository.

**Results**

In practice, teams using the “Standard” tend to load up on top-tier RBs, WRs, and the occasional TE or QB in the first few rounds. Teams using the “Zero RB” strategy, on the other hand, load up on top-tier WRs in the first four rounds. They also more frequently draft TEs and QBs in these early rounds. The distribution of draft picks by position and round for each strategy can be seen in fig. 1 below.

Chart, bar chart, treemap chart

Description automatically generated

So, does this strategy work happens? As demonstrated by the fig. 2 below, “Zero RB” rosters have gotten similar average points scored in the beginning and end of the draft, but struggle between picks 40 and 80.

Chart

Description automatically generated

The issue plaguing the “Zero RB” rosters in these picks is that they need to draft running backs to fill out their rosters, but the quality of running backs in these rounds is not good. The teams using the “Standard” strategy, on the other hand, have more freedom to draw on a deeper pool of solid wideouts and QBs (see fig 1). This is exactly why the traditional wisdom suggests you should draft a running back in the early rounds. Fig. 3 below demonstrates the superior performance of teams drafted using the “Standard” strategy across draft positions.

Chart, bar chart

Description automatically generated

As we see above, the gains at the WR, TE, and QB positions do not offset the dearth of RB talent on the Zero RB rosters. These results are statistically significant at a 95% confidence interval.

Chart, box and whisker chart

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**Does the “Zero RB” Strategy Ever work?**

I would be remiss if you were to come away from this dispatch with the impression that I have some sort of bias against the “Zero RB” strategy. In fact, I have used a variation of it in my last few drafts and ended up with decent teams. So, my prior heading into this exercise was that the Zero RB probably worked, but that I was unlikely to observe a significant difference from the “Standard” due to the amount of variation in Fantasy Football. This turns out not to be the case, but there is one notable exception: the year 2018.

Calendar

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What happened in 2018?

Chart, bar chart

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Receivers in the top 40 of ADP had a spectacular year in 2018. Tyreek Hill, Antonio Brown, Devante Adams, DeAndre Hopkins, Julio Jones, and Mike Evans all scored over 200 points (12.5ppg) in standard scoring that year, and the only real underperformer in the first three rounds was AJ Green, who still mustered over 100 points.

**What Should I do?**

These results make me feel confident in recommending that **you should take at one running back** in the first four rounds. You might want to ignore this recommendation if you believe wideouts or some other positions are primed for a banner year and running backs are not (as in 2018), or you are highly confident in your ability to pick up back off the waiver wire or through trades. I personally do not see any reason to believe the former. I also find the latter unconvincing, as all your competitors are going to be scouring the waiver wire, and finding a 2020 Antonio Gibson type it is not easy. As for trades, you are going to have to give up a premium WR, TE, or QB to get a premium running back, so at that point why not just draft one?

I’m not going to write off some variation of the “Zero RB” strategy – perhaps a version where you lean towards other positions in the early rounds but still draft premium RBs if they fall to you would work – but I’m certainly not going to pursue the purists’ version.

1. https://www.espn.com/nfl/story/\_/id/32056790/nfl-fantasy-football-goes-global-nigeria-philippines [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The algorithm also allows teams to draft up to two players from flex positions (RB, TE, WR) to the bench before taking a QB, though this rarely occurs [↑](#footnote-ref-2)