

2026 NFL Draft summer scouting: Notre Dame's Jeremiyah Love clear RB1 heading into season



By **Dane Brugler**

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Editor's note: This is the second installment of Dane Brugler's 2026 Summer Scouting series.

Previous rankings: [Edge rusher](#)

Aside from having an obvious RB1, I was somewhat underwhelmed during my early peek at this year's running back crop — which might be a consequence of how deep this last draft class was at the position.

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Notre Dame’s Jeremiyah Love is one of college football’s most fun-to-watch players and will be highly coveted in next year’s draft. But I struggled to find another 2026 draft-eligible running back who looks like a slam dunk top-75 prospect. That absolutely could change this upcoming season, and I hope it does.

Regardless, I expect these running back rankings to be very fluid over the next eight months.

(Note: Asterisk represents draft-eligible underclassmen. Heights and weights are what NFL teams have on file for each player with a “v” representing verified measurements and “e” for estimated measurements.)

1. Jeremiyah Love, Notre Dame (6-0e, 210e)*

What he does best: Instinctive athleticism

It doesn’t take a trained eye to spot Love’s exceptional talent. A springy athlete, he has the lateral agility to bounce between gaps and the immediate acceleration to burst through holes at full speed. He ties it all together with innate patience and reactionary movements — those traits plus his balance through contact make him a nightmare to tackle.

This 76-yard run on the Virginia tape is a great example of Love’s instinctive athleticism:

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As he gets the hand off, he hits the turbo button towards the C gap, which is then covered up as he arrives at the line. Instead of slamming on the brakes or running into the block, Love puts his foot in the ground and impulsively bursts inside towards the vacated lane. Once he reaches the second level, he quickly reads the safety and eliminates the pursuit angle with speed. Love's unique abilities turn this into an explosive play.

Must improve: Become more of a receiving presence

This is more nitpicking than anything because Love has been productive catching the football. But all 28 of his receptions last season came in the screen game, according to TruMedia, with most of his targets coming behind the line of scrimmage — he has a natural feel for space in that area. However, given his dynamic athleticism, I would love to see him get more opportunities as a route runner or slot option beyond five yards.

2026 NFL Draft outlook

At this time a year ago, Ashton Jeanty was the slam-dunk RB1 prospect. Same thing with Bijan Robinson going into the 2022 season. And this year feels similar with Love, who is the 2026 NFL

10; Love has the talent to join them.

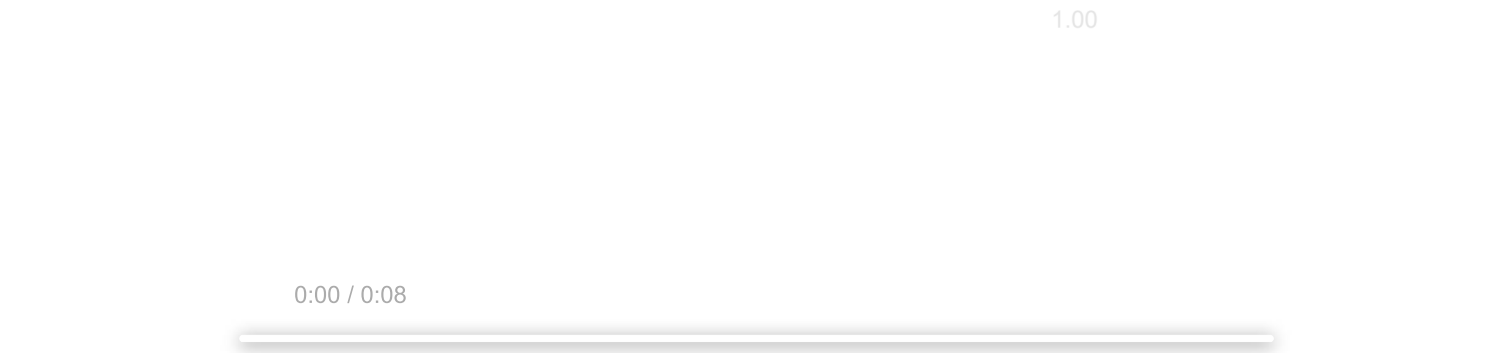
Last season, only two backs averaged at least 6.9 yards per carry and surpassed 14 rushing touchdowns: Jeanty and Love. With Jeanty now playing for the Raiders, Love is college football’s clear top running back, and it will be interesting to see how the Irish balance the priority of getting him the football while also keeping him fresh. Were it not for Love’s knee injury in last year’s College Football Playoff, the Irish might have won the national title. Regardless of Notre Dame’s team success, Love has the talent to be the top playmaker in the 2026 NFL Draft class.

2. Nick Singleton, Penn State (6-0 3/8v, 218v)

Best trait: Size/speed freak

At his best as a one-cut runner, Singleton is a big play waiting to happen because of his unique combination of power and acceleration. When he has green grass in front of him, he will fly through the hole like a back 20 pounds lighter — but he also has thick quads and build to power through contact with a forward burst.

With a 40-yard dash speed that’s expected to be in the 4.3-second range at the combine, Singleton is a home run hitter every time he touches the football.



Must improve: Creativity

Though I think he displays instincts for the position, Singleton is more of a “point of entry” back — if his blockers lead him to the hole, he can take it the distance. But his vision tends to run hot and cold at the line of scrimmage, which hinders his ability to easily string moves together. NFL offenses that prioritize creativity at the position won’t be as high on Singleton.

2026 NFL Draft outlook

After receiving third-round feedback from NFL teams, Singleton was on the fence about declaring for the 2025 draft. Ultimately, he opted to return for his senior season in Happy Valley, [where he and Kaytron Allen](#) will make up arguably the best running back tandem in college football.

I struggle a little bit with Singleton's evaluation, however. On one hand, he is an absolute freak of an athlete (at 220 pounds) who can generate explosive plays (6.4 yards per carry in 2024). But I also put a premium on running backs who know how to navigate and create. Singleton is a strong zone runner and can maneuver congestion at times, but his anticipation and tempo lack consistency, and he is clearly at his best with defined blocking. It does help his evaluation that he is an effective pass catcher and kick returner.

3. Makhi Hughes, Oregon (6-0e, 215e)*

Best trait: Contact balance

When his eyes and feet are synced up, Hughes anticipates contact, protects the football and stays afloat to bounce off defenders. There are some similarities between Hughes and Devin Neal of last year's draft class — they're both balanced, decisive and physical finishers.

It isn't exactly Ray Lewis delivering the hit on this rep against UAB, but Hughes brushes off the contact with ease and doesn't slow down.

0:00 / 0:16

Must improve: Passing down consistency

Hughes had 31 total targets over his first two college seasons, a number he should surpass in 2025. He made some plays on last year’s tape catching the football, but also had too many drops (four). As a pass blocker, Hughes was a roller coaster with some strong moments but also some rough patches — he needs to improve upon the latter.

2026 NFL Draft outlook

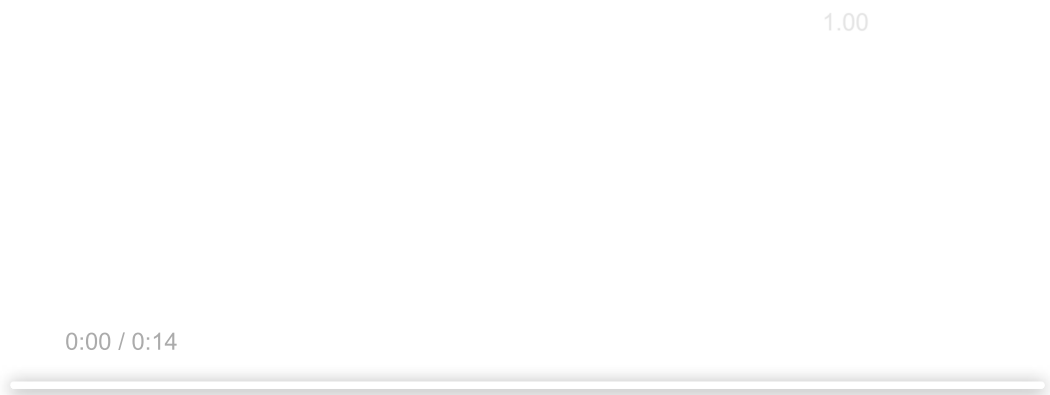
Nine FBS running backs eclipsed 1,400 rushing yards in 2024, but only Hughes returns to college football (seven of the other eight were selected in the 2025 NFL Draft). In two seasons at Tulane, he combined for 2,776 rushing yards, 22 touchdowns and zero fumbles. He was a key portal add this offseason by the Ducks.

Jordan James was one of my favorite running backs in the 2025 draft, but the Oregon backfield won’t miss a beat with Hughes stepping into James’ role. He has a knack for maximizing every touch and opportunity.

Best trait: Violent cuts

With his darting moves, Claiborne is almost unpredictable in his lateral cuts, which allows him to make defenders miss in a phone booth. Though eager, he runs with patience at the line of scrimmage to reel in pursuit before abruptly cutting away from trouble with his hyper short-area quickness.

Settle, plant, burst, repeat — Claiborne is the type of runner who annoys the hell out of defenders.



Must improve: Unnecessary cuts

The bouncy approach that Claiborne runs with at the line of scrimmage is part of what makes him dangerous, but it can also lead to excess moves, especially when he looks to force cuts to the outside in his search for daylight.

2026 NFL Draft outlook

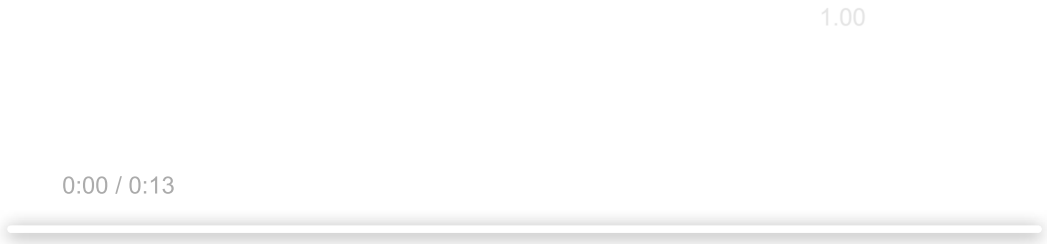
Wake Forest hasn’t had a running back drafted over the last 35 years (the program *has* produced two drafted fullbacks). Claiborne has the talent to snap that streak and become a productive part of an NFL backfield.

What he lacks in size, Claiborne makes up for with terrific speed, burst and complete skills. He has a little stiffness in his hips, but his explosive cutting ability makes him elusive both in small spaces and out in space. His toughness in pass pro and promise as a pass catcher will smooth his transition to the pros.

5. Bryson Washington, Baylor (6-0e, 205e)*

Best trait: Ability to press, sort and go

accelerate through the hole. He shows instinctive run qualities and makes it a chore for defenders to get him on the ground, especially once he clears the first wave.



Must improve: Pad level

Washington will pick up his knees and run through contact to finish runs, but he can do a better job dropping his pads to make himself a smaller target. Though there is no question about his competitiveness, improved pad level will help fuel his power and balance when working through contact.

2026 NFL Draft outlook

After earning the starting job last fall, Washington burst onto the scene with a freshman school-record 1,028 rushing yards in 2024. He was one of the best backs in the country in November, with 624 yards (6.2 per carry average) and nine rushing touchdowns over the final four regular-season games.

BROOKS, DJ GIDDENS, NEAL and others. Most of that production is on to the NFL — but not Washington, who will have a chance to build on a promising year. NFL scouts expect him to go pro if he has another productive season.

Preseason top 25 seniors (all measurements are NFL-verified)

- Singleton
- Claiborne
- Jam Miller, Alabama (5-9 5/8, 214)
- Le’Veon Moss, Texas A&M (5-10 3/4, 206)
- Rahsul Faison, South Carolina (5-10 7/8, 217)
- Jonah Coleman, Washington (5-8, 227)
- Jaydn Ott, Oklahoma (5-10 5/8, 208)
- Kaytron Allen, Penn State (5-11 3/8, 216)
- CJ Campbell Jr., Rutgers (5-9, 196)
- Mel Brown, UConn (5-8, 173)
- CJ Donaldson Jr., Ohio State (6-1 1/8, 226)
- Logan Diggs, Ole Miss (5-11 7/8, 217)
- Jamal Haynes, Georgia Tech (5-6 5/8, 184)
- Terion Stewart, Virginia Tech (5-9, 220)
- Noah Whittington, Oregon (5-7 5/8, 202)
- Desmond Reid, Pittsburgh (5-5 3/4, 169)
- Al-Jay Henderson, Buffalo (5-9 1/2, 206)
- Eli Heidenreich, Navy (5-11 1/4, 205)
- Devin Mockobee, Purdue (5-10 7/8, 192)
- Roydell Williams, Florida State (5-9 3/4, 216)
- Anthony Hankerson, Oregon State (5-7 5/8, 205)
- Angel Johnson, Washington State (5-9, 193)
- Davon Booth, Mississippi State (5-8 1/2, 202)
- Jaquez Moore, Duke (5-9, 203)
- Cash Jones, Georgia (5-10 5/8, 183)

Preseason top 12 draft-eligible underclassmen (all measurements are estimates)

- Love
- Hughes
- Washington
- CJ Baxter, Texas (6-1, 230)
- Darius Taylor, Minnesota (6-0, 215)
- Quintrevion Wisner, Texas (6-0, 195)
- Justice Haynes, Michigan (5-11, 205)

9. Mark Fletcher Jr., Miami (6-2, 225)
10. Jahiem White, West Virginia (5-7, 195)
11. LJ Martin, BYU (6-2, 220)
12. Dylan Edwards, Kansas State (5-9, 170)

(Top photo of Jeremiyah Love: Michael Reaves / Getty Images)

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