

Dane Brugler's 2026 NFL Draft summer positional rankings: Tight ends



By **Dane Brugler**
July 24, 2025

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

Previous rankings: [Edge rushers](#) | [Running backs](#) | [Defensive tackles](#)

In seven of the past nine drafts, there has been at least one tight end selected, including a handful of top-15 picks (two in last year's draft alone).

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The 2026 draft class doesn’t look as top-heavy at tight end, lacking a Brock Bowers or Colston Loveland at the top. However, it can still be a solid class, with several interesting Day 2 projections at the position.

(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. [Kenyon Sadiq](#), Oregon (6-3e, 245e)*

Best trait: Ability to create after the catch

Although Sadiq wasn’t a high-volume pass catcher last season, good things happened when [Dillon Gabriel](#) threw his way (25 catches on 27 targets). He is quick off the line, loose at the top of routes and strong to the football. However, the No. 1 takeaway is his nifty athleticism and balance to be a threat after the catch — Sadiq was the only FBS tight end last season to average more than 10 yards after catch (YAC) per reception.

Sadiq saw only two targets in the Big Ten Championship Game, but he made them count with a pair of touchdown grabs. In the clip below, [Penn State](#) is late to react to the tight end wheel, and Sadiq does the rest. His quick transition to pluck, collect himself and leapfrog the defensive back without gearing down is special stuff.

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Must improve: Prove himself as TE1

Sadiq enters his junior season with just 30 career catches and three touchdowns — numbers he should surpass before Halloween this season. The talent and opportunity are there for him to be the top tight end in college football, and in next year's draft class, but time will tell if he can turn that projection into production.

2026 NFL Draft outlook

Sadiq is in position for a true breakout season, especially with Oregon offensive play caller Will Stein describing him as “one of the best players in college football.” With [Terrance Ferguson](#) now in the NFL, Sadiq will be the go-to tight end for [Oregon](#)'s offense, and an integral part of the passing game, even more so with wide receiver [Evan Stewart](#) expected to miss the season with a knee injury.

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Given his talent as both a receiver and blocker, Sadiq (the only tight end to appear in [my way-too-early 2026 mock draft](#) from April) has the potential to earn the TE1 crown.

2. [Max Klare](#), [Ohio State](#) (6-4e, 240e)*

A talented joker tight end, Klare is a smooth athlete in the passing game, with a talent for creating space both before and after the catch. He is an outstanding zone route runner and knows where the holes are. Against man, he can cross up defenders in space with the start-stop quickness to be elusive (averaged 6.6 YAC per reception in 2024).

Klare is quick to snatch the football and put it away. Using his body fluidity, he can adjust to the catch mid-stride and quickly transition to being a runner to make the first tackler miss — he doesn't need to gear down to read and cut away from pursuit.

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Must improve: Blocking sustain

Klare split about 50-50 between playing inline and in the slot last season for [Purdue](#), but he was inconsistent when asked to be a sustained blocker. He can be physically manhandled when attempting to seal powerful defensive ends and needs to be more assertive with his hands to keep his target engaged as a run blocker. [Will Kacmarek](#) will be the Buckeyes' "blocking" tight end, but scouts are hoping to see more development from Klare in that area.

2026 NFL Draft outlook

Ohio State produces more NFL talent than almost every other program, including having three tight ends drafted over the last five years. However, the Buckeyes haven't had a tight end selected in the first two rounds in 30 years (Rickey Dudley, No. 9 in 1996). Klare has the talent to change that and become a top-60 pick in the 2026 class.

Everyone is familiar with [Jeremiah Smith](#) and the potential of the receivers in Columbus. Still, Klare might be the key to unlocking Ohio State's offense, especially with a first-year starter at quarterback. Klare led the Boilermakers in receiving last season (by a large margin), and there was still a lot of meat left on the bone in that offense. There will be more mouths to feed in the Buckeyes' offense, but Klare will be in a better situation to allow his talent to shine.

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3. [Joe Royer](#), [Cincinnati](#) (6-4 5/8v, 252v)

Best trait: Catch-point athleticism

Royer is a good-looking athlete for his size and illustrates his movement skills in different ways on the football field, including at the catch point. His ability to track, adjust and frame throws, regardless of placement, is where his athletic skill shines.

Just six FBS tight ends registered at least 50 catches with two or fewer drops last season, and Royer was in that group. He can do a better job creating space and pacing his routes, but he looks very natural attacking the football mid-air.

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Must improve: Explosive plays

Given Royer's athletic gifts, I expected to see a variety of explosive plays as I studied his 2024 video, but they were tough to find. Though he ranked 11th among FBS tight ends in receptions (50) last season, he was 41st at his position with just five catches of 20-plus yards (none over the final seven games).

The blame doesn't fall just on Royer, who can only run the routes he is asked to and catch the passes thrown to him. However, scouts are hoping to see him be more of a playmaker in the [Bearcats'](#) offense in 2025.

2026 NFL Draft outlook

A former four-star recruit, Royer was the top-ranked tight end in Ohio State's loaded 2020 class, which also included future first-rounders [C.J. Stroud](#), [Paris Johnson Jr.](#) and [Jaxon Smith-Njigba](#). After seeing a combined seven targets over three years in Columbus, Royer entered the transfer portal and headed to his hometown school. He registered 50 catches for 522 yards and three touchdowns last season, his first with the Bearcats.

Royer considered declaring for the 2025 NFL Draft and is currently graded by NFL teams as a potential Day 2 pick in the 2026 class. With [Brendan Sorsby](#) returning at quarterback for Cincinnati, Royer has the goods to become one of the top tight ends in college football.

4. Lawson Luckie, Georgia (6-4e, 240e)*

Best trait: Athletic body control

It took only 20 minutes of watching film to get through all of Luckie's targets from last season, but the small sample size was still exciting. Luckie's speed and athletic ability stand out in everything he does on the football field, especially in the passing game.

As a route runner, he closes the cushion in a flash and makes it challenging for safeties or linebackers to match the burst out of his breaks. He also shows athletic body control at the catch point (see his sideline grab versus Texas).

Watch how abruptly Luckie sinks, transitions his weight and pivots on this route against [Clemson](#) and cornerback [Avieon Terrell](#). He sells the inside pattern and uses his athletic body control to cut back outside, giving the quarterback an easy target to throw to.

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Must improve: Game-to-game consistency

Turns out, it is tough to replace [Brock Bowers](#) — shocking, I know. Luckie was a significant part of filling that void last season and led [Georgia](#) tight ends in targets and receiving yards, but his overall impact was spotty from week to week. Although the flashes are worth betting on, Luckie needs to improve his preparation during the week and execution on game days, both as a blocker and receiver.

2026 NFL Draft outlook

between Luckie, [Oscar Delp](#) and [Ben Turosek](#). Delp returns in 2023 and is a potential draft pick in the 2026 class himself, giving the Bulldogs arguably the best tight end duo in the country. However, Luckie has the talent to be a much-needed weapon in Georgia’s scheme.

His early ranking is a bet more on potential than established production, but the talent is there for Luckie to push for top-100 status.

5. [Justin Joly](#), [NC State](#) (6-2 7/8v, 250v)

Best trait: Physicality as a pass catcher

When studying tight ends, I often gravitate toward the pass catchers who play like power forwards — tight ends who force their way through coverage, outrebound jump balls and sustain grabs through contact. That is the way Joly plays, and the numbers support it. According to PFF, Joly had the highest contested catch percentage (84.6) in 2024 among the 34 FBS tight ends who saw at least 10 contested targets.

On this clip, the Cal nickelback is grabbing, holding and doing just about everything he can to disrupt the route, but Joly powers through and finishes the contested catch.

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Must improve: Run blocking

Joly is more of a pass-catching flex option than a traditional inline tight end, but his on-the-move execution as a run blocker is an area in which scouts see improvement. With his athleticism and physical mindset, he can effectively hook a linebacker or dig out a safety. However, his technical consistency must continue to improve for Joly to become a more valuable asset in the run game.

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2026 NFL Draft outlook

A little-known, 215-pound wide receiver out of high school, Joly was a two-star recruit and signed with [UConn](#), one of his only Division I options. He added weight and had his breakout season as a sophomore in 2023, which led to his decision to enter the transfer portal and land at NC State last season. He led the Wolfpack in receiving yards (661) and was one of three FBS tight ends to average better than 15 yards per catch in 2024.

Joly (pronounced JOE-lee) just turned 21 this month and is one of the youngest senior prospects in the 2026 draft class. And if he builds off last season, I won't be surprised to see him make a strong case as a top-100 pick, similar to [Jonnu Smith](#)'s trajectory coming out of FIU to become a Day 2 pick in 2017.

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

1. Royer
2. Joly
3. [John Michael Gyllenborg](#), Wyoming (6-5 1/2, 251)
4. [Eli Stowers](#), Vanderbilt (6-3 1/2, 240)
5. [Michael Trigg](#), [Baylor](#) (6-3 3/8, 250)
6. RJ Maryland, [SMU](#) (6-3 1/4, 224)

- 8. [Tanner Kozlowski](#), Houston (6-6, 251)
- 9. [Miles Kitselman](#), Tennessee (6-4 5/8, 259)
- 10. [Sam Roush](#), Stanford (6-4 1/2, 250)
- 11. Oscar Delp, Georgia (6-4 3/8, 250)
- 12. [Josh Cuevas](#), Alabama (6-2 3/4, 251)
- 13. [Jeremiah Franklin](#), [Boston College](#) (6-3, 246)
- 14. [Seydou Traore](#), [Mississippi State](#) (6-3 1/2, 237)
- 15. Lake McRee, USC (6-3 3/4, 249)
- 16. [Bauer Sharp](#), [LSU](#) (6-3 3/4, 246)
- 17. [Tanner Arkin](#), Illinois (6-3 3/8, 268)
- 18. [Rohan Jones](#), Arkansas (6-1 3/4, 236)
- 19. [Dae'Quan Wright](#), Ole Miss (6-3, 251)
- 20. [Matthew Hibner](#), SMU (6-3 5/8, 244)
- 21. [Amari Niblack](#), Texas A&M (6-3, 240)
- 22. [Ethan Conner](#), Troy (6-2 3/4, 238)
- 23. [Chamon Metayer](#), [Arizona State](#) (6-3 7/8, 258)
- 24. [Matt Lauter](#), [Boise State](#) (6-3, 243)
- 25. Caleb Fauria, Delaware (6-4 1/4, 244)

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

- 1. Klare
- 2. Sadiq
- 3. Luckie
- 4. [Marlin Klein](#), Michigan (6-6, 245)
- 5. [Jack Endries](#), Texas (6-4, 240)
- 6. [Garrett Oakley](#), [Kansas State](#) (6-5, 235)
- 7. Terrance Carter Jr., [Texas Tech](#) (6-2, 245)
- 8. [Luke Hasz](#), Ole Miss (6-3, 240)

(Top photo of Kenyon Sadiq: Dylan Buell / Getty Images)

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Dane Brugler is a national NFL writer for The Athletic covering the NFL Draft. He previously covered the NFL Draft for NFL Draft Scout and CBS Sports. Follow Dane on Twitter [@DPBrugler](#)

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