

# How an NFL mistake five years ago helped prep Daniel Adler for the Twins



By Dan Hayes (/author/dan-hayes/) May 9, 2018

1

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In the Jacksonville Jaguars' 2013 season opener, Daniel Adler made a mistake he thought he'd never live down.

With 12:17 left in the second quarter, Jaguars quarterback Blaine Gabbert threw a deep pass down the sideline to Cecil Shorts on first-and-10 from their own 19. Kansas City cornerback Brandon Flowers broke up the play, but in Adler's estimation, it appeared Shorts had possession of the ball.

At the time, Adler was a 26-year-old in his second season in charge of the team's new research and development department that was created specifically for him. One of his duties was to wear a headset and assist the coaching staff with game-day management and replay

challenges. He pushed for the Jaguars to challenge the incompleteness, and Gus Bradley — in his first game as an NFL head coach — acquiesced.

About the same time the red challenge flag hit the ground, Adler realized his mistake. It was a 50-50 play and upon further examination, Jacksonville discovered the call could potentially be overturned with possession going to Kansas City.

Ultimately, replay referees determined the original call was correct and the Jaguars only lost a timeout as a result. Jacksonville went on to lose 28-2, the play having no bearing on the outcome.

Still, the mistake hit Adler hard.

“I was terrified,” Adler said. “There was a moment there I was sweating. ... It’s bad enough to waste a challenge. But to actually put your team at risk, I was humiliated.”

Nearly five years later, Daniel Adler has once again been tasked with building up a research and development program, though this one has a little less profile than the Jaguars.

The Twins hired Adler, now 31, last August as the director of baseball operations and asked him to strengthen an already-existing R&D department. His experience and willingness to fail for the greater good have the Twins of the belief that Adler is the right man to help them get up to speed analytically.

“This is very much a work in progress trying to figure out the right ways,” Adler said, noting they’re working under the concept “of failing quickly and trying to figure out what works and what doesn’t. We’re going to try out a lot of stuff. It’s really exciting.”

Adler compares the buildup of the Twins’ R&D department as being similar to working at a startup company. He was one of the first employees in the door after Derek Falvey and Thad Levine spent 2017 scouring baseball ops and looking for ways to augment the department.

What they discovered was a steady foundation, particularly in IT and development, but an organization that was overall thin on skillsets. They hired Adler, an economics major with an MBA from Harvard Business School and a JD from Harvard Law, to help complete the task.

While the Twins will acknowledge that they've bulked up baseball ops, including the addition of ex-Tampa Bay Rays pitching analyst Josh Kalk, they are protective of how many other hires they made and who they are. However, it's believed the team has made between 5-10 hires along with a number of minor-league additions, all in the name of integrating more information into the organization.

### **Beefing up the front office**

In addition to Daniel Adler, Derek Falvey and Thad Levine have made a handful of other additions to the Twins' front office in their time in Minnesota. We profiled a couple others earlier in the season. Read their stories here.

[Jeremy Zoll: The new farm director impressing every step of the way](https://theathletic.com/346751/2018/05/09/daniel-adler-twins-director-baseball-operations-jacksonville-jaguars-derek-falvey-thad-levine/) [https://theathleti

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At the top is Adler.

"He's extremely intelligent," Falvey said. "He cares very much about learning and growing and leading. Daniel has been a resource in every area. Research and development. Recent arbitration process. He's continuing to learn the baseball side. But I think the development principles he brings from another sport are the same."

Adler and Falvey were familiar from the Twins' chief baseball officer's days in Cleveland, where Adler had a connection to Mark Shapiro.

When he was an intern for the New England Patriots in the summer of 2005, Adler often drove around Shapiro's sister, who was married to defensive coordinator Eric Mangini, in a golf cart.

Sometime later, Adler reached out to Shapiro, then the GM of the Indians, who gave Adler a brief tour of Progressive Field before dumping him off on Mike Chernoff. Chernoff, the Indians' current GM, and Adler immediately connected. They realized they read a lot of the same books and thought similarly. Chernoff also realized Adler — then 18 and just out of high school — asked good questions.

"He was just interested in the types of challenges we face as a baseball team and find a way to help people, support people," Chernoff said. "Problem solving and critical thinking."

They remained in touch and thought of each other as a good resource to bounce ideas off one another. Every time Adler returned home to Cleveland, he would drop in on the front offices of the team for which he grew up rooting. Chernoff said he always kept an eye out for a potential baseball job for Adler, who got to know Falvey, too.

Upon graduation from Harvard last year, Adler looked for teams that might be in need of his skillset. He thought the Twins could be a fit, and Chernoff suggested him to Falvey.

“I really believed in what they’re building and was really attracted to the challenge here,” Adler said.

Adler had similar thoughts about the Jaguars when he was hired in 2012, but was admittedly nervous. Whereas baseball has accepted analytics for a much longer time and is generally open to the concept, the NFL has only begun to adopt them in recent years. Adler’s role running a department of 2-4 in Jacksonville was met with some skepticism by the coaching staff.

It wasn’t his first time working in football or even the NFL. Adler worked as an assistant for the Harvard football program, as an operations intern for the Patriots and as an administration analyst for the Cleveland Browns from 2007-08.

But in this case, the added task of advising the coaching staff on the headset during games provided a more intense challenge.

“He was in a tough spot because the position had basically been created for him,” said then-Jaguars quarterback coach Frank Scelfo. “There was a lack of trust. Everybody was kind of skeptical.”

Adler prides himself on his sound decision-making, normally boasting strong data to back his decisions. That made his mistake in the 2013 opener that much tougher to take.

With minimal time to make the call, Adler went with his gut in ordering up the challenge and misfired. He said the disappointment and shame would have been on his mind for weeks if it weren’t for Scelfo.

Scelfo — who in January was hired as the head coach at Southeastern Louisiana — had taken an interest in Adler. He's intrigued by the use of analytics in football and appreciated the depth and detail of Adler's work.

The two lived in the same building and often discussed the role of analytics in football away from the field. Scelfo considers Adler a trail blazer for the way he thought about football game management and still employs some of the techniques they discussed. When he discovered how poorly Adler was handling the mistake, Scelfo took him aside.

"He missed on one and that just crushed him," Scelfo said. "Things happen so fast and sometimes you make a decision based on an educated choice. It wasn't the right one that time. I was just trying to tell him, you're going to make 98 percent of them. But those two percent, you can't just keep thinking about. You've got to move on."

Adler appreciates the compassion and empathy Scelfo showed him that afternoon.

He also has a new admiration for coaches who have to make judgment calls on the fly, understanding how difficult decisions become any time a clock is involved.

"Up until that point I had watched as a fan," Adler said. "You watch decisions you might take issue with and definitely think. 'I could do a better job.' When you're actually there and it's live and it's going down really quickly, you realize it's not like playing Madden where you press a button and it automatically happens."

Having less fear of making a mistake could pay huge dividends to Adler and the Twins as they push forward with research and development. They know how critical trial and error is going to be to the process as baseball continues to find new ways to measure the sport analytically. Being unafraid to make a mistake is the only way to operate.

"We're going to benefit greatly from these things," Adler said. "Whether it's new technology or a new (theory), there are a lot of unanswered questions and trial and error is a good way to find out. We shouldn't be random guessing. I think we can make some educated decisions and see how they play out."

*(Top image: Former Jaguars coach Gus Bradley and current Twins director of baseball operations Daniel Adler both had a rough start to the 2013 season in Jacksonville. Credit: Photo by Brian Bahr/Getty Images, left, and courtesy of the Minnesota Twins, right)*

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**Dan Hayes** (/author/dan-hayes/) is a staff writer for The Athletic covering the Minnesota Twins. Dan joined The Athletic after 5 1/2 years at NBC Sports Chicago and 8 years at The North County Times, where he covered the Chicago White Sox, San Diego Padres, four World Series, the NBA Finals, NHL Stanley Cup Final, NASCAR, UFC, Little League World Series, PGA and the NFL. Follow Dan on Twitter @DanHayesMLB (<https://twitter.com/DanHayesMLB>).

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