

DBB POSTSEASON POSITIONAL ANALYSIS 2015 ALL POSITIONS

THE OFFENSE

QB

Jay Cutler did everything possible in 2015 to earn the starting quarterback job in 2016. He showed a command of the offense, assumed a serious, vocal leadership role, limited his risk/reward tosses and overcame a myriad of injuries at the skill spots and offensive line to provide Bears fans a season far more entertaining than was expected from their shaky roster.

He's the guy. Indisputably.

But behind Cutler, what are the Bears doing at the position? Nothing.

Chicago determined David Fales was worth protecting from pilferage, I guess. But the decision was less a vote of confidence in Fales' ability and more an extreme willingness to allow James Clausen a one way ticket to Anywhere, USA. And while Matt Blanchard continues to taxi on the Bears runway, the chances of him ever finding Gate 53 are slim.

The quarterbacks room in 2016 MUST include one of the following (and preferably both):

- A veteran capable of holding down the fort for the weeks Cutler will inevitably be sidelined. If Mike Glennon could be shaken free from the Tampa tree or Josh McCown becomes available, those would be quarterbacks intelligent enough to run this system and talented enough to win games.
- A young, developmental type who is either a potential starter or long-term answer as backup. This could very well be Fales but is more likely to be drafted somewhere around the fourth round.

The Bears have done the hard part. They have what nearly half the teams in the league don't have: a top starter. But if the team is serious about making a playoff run in 2016 - and they should be - they can not be a blindside hit on Cutler away from a top five pick in the draft. That means improving the quarterbacks room.

RB

Ryan Pace went out of his way to salute the Bears running backs room in his postseason presser and why wouldn't he? Matt Forte, Jeremy Langford and Ka'Deem Carey were arguably the most versatile and dynamic backfield in the league.

Forte can do everything. Langford looks like he'll be able to do everything. Carey was the ideal third back, most useful in short yardage and down around the goal line. (He also contributed on specials.)

Six weeks ago I would have said the Bears were crazy to re-sign Forte at his age and somewhat declining skills but my tune has changed significantly. Why? A few reasons.

(1) Bears are building a power run offensive line and having two top of the line backs was how John Fox found success in Carolina.

(2) Short passing game is essential to this offense and Bears may not be ready to allow Langford to exclusively assume that role as he's been far too inconsistent catching the ball in big spots.

(3) Forte is still really good and there's no reason to believe he's going to fall off the cliff in 2016. Bears shouldn't break the bank and bring him in on a long-term deal but two years at \$5M per is reasonable and fair.

I've heard the arguments against it, including from myself. With the Bears having so many needs to fill, why put any money into a position of strength? Because WITHOUT Forte in the fold, the Bears would be an awkward cut by Jeremy Langford away from relying upon either (a) Carey to become an every down back or (b) another mid-to-late round rookie to pick up the system in his first year and make a large contribution.

With Forte back at a reasonable rate in 2016 the Bears may enter the season with the greatest collection of skill guys in the organization's history. Without him, the Bears will be looking again to the draft.

WR *(By Andrew Dannehy)*

If the Bears can ever get — and stay — healthy at the wide receiver position, their offense should really take off. Their top four receivers missed a combined 36 games, with the only one playing over half their snaps being Marquess Wilson. Younger players stepped up and made plays but the position, expected to be a strength, ended up being a weakness.

ALSHON

If you took the numbers Alshon Jeffery put up in 8 1/2 games this season and calculated them out to a 16-game total, you see a star. The numbers are roughly 102 catches, 1,520 yards and eight touchdowns. Looks great, but you can't give him credit for 16 games when he doesn't play 16 games. **Injuries are his biggest problem** and there's no reason to think they will go away. So how do the Bears assign him a value? By not signing Jeffery before the season, the Bears made it clear they didn't view him as an elite receiver. As good as he was at times, it's hard to say he did anything to increase his value. The Bears can't let Jeffery hit the open market, however, because someone else will offer him top-tier receiver money and Chicago doesn't have a replacement. Whether it be with the Franchise Tag or a long-term contract, the Bears need to bring Jeffery back.

WHITE

We don't know what Kevin White is. We think he's a stud and when we hear Ryan Pace say he can't wait to "unleash" him, it makes us believe that even more. Still, he's going to be raw and nobody has a clue what kind of long-term effects the leg injury might have on him.

EDDIE & FRIENDS

The plan for Eddie Royal was to have him destroy teams underneath while Jeffery and White stretched the field. Instead, Royal ended up being the best wide receiver on the team in most of the games he played. We only got to see what Royal could do in a couple of games (Oakland, Detroit) then injuries limited his explosiveness and availability. With Royal's entire salary guaranteed for next year, he's almost a lock to make the team. Although miscast as a second receiver, Marquess Wilson did some good things this year, leading the team with 16.6 yards per catch. He seemed to get open deep quite a few times too but he and Cutler just couldn't connect. Wilson's problem? He's been unavailable nearly as much as he's been available in his career. Even at 23, next year could be a make or break year.

It can be argued that no Bears receiver made more key catches than Marc Mariani with 19 of his 22 catches going for first downs. When plays broke down, Mariani found open spots and Cutler hit him for big gains. He came into this season with 5 catches. In 2015 he caught 22 for 300 yards.

The problem with keeping both Wilson and Mariani is that the fourth and fifth receivers are expected to play special teams and neither are particularly strong contributors in that phase. Wilson doesn't have much experience and he lacks the strength to block or tackle. Mariani has been a return specialist in his career but hasn't been a very good one for the Bears, averaging just 6.6 yards per punt return. He lost his job as a kick returner to Deonte Thompson.

THE REST (OR, BUT...)

Thompson was one of the league leaders in kick return average but doesn't return punts and doesn't offer much offensively. Josh Bellamy was a special teams stud but a bad receiver. He's big and athletic, but raw. Cameron Meredith was a college quarterback with excellent size and physical skills but he's got a long way to go as a receiver. Receivers coach Mike Groh is considered to be a good coach and did a nice job preparing his players this year but it will be interesting to see how much he can develop Bellamy and Meredith.

MOVING FORWARD...

...this should be a position of strength.

While the injuries hurt the team in 2015, they should help them in 2016 as players like Wilson, Mariani, Bellamy and Meredith got experience against good defenses. The Bears won't be able to keep all of them, but as long as they keep Jeffery, they won't need to invest a lot of money or a high draft pick in the position.

TE

Right now the Bears have three tight ends on the roster worth discussing. Without further adieu, the least exciting of our postseason positional analysis columns.

KHARI LEE

The strangest move of the Ryan Pace era was dealing a sixth-round pick to the Texans for Lee, a tight end who is an exclusive blocker. (His attempts to catch Cutler passes have been comical.) If you're looking for cutting edge analysis of Lee's work as an additional member of the offensive line, you might want to look elsewhere. In the meantime, let's assume Lee will be back in 2016 to validate surrendering the draft pick for the acquisition.

ZACH MILLER

34 catches, 439 yards and 5 touchdowns.

Miller has been one of the best stories of the season and from the way both he and the Bears have spoken it would be a surprise to not see him back in 2016. The only question now is how the Bears create a fair contract to compensate Miller for his production while considering his injury history. 2 years, \$6-8M.

MARTELLUS BENNETT

53 catches, 439 yards and 3 touchdowns.

Everyone has heard the talk and Ryan Pace's silence all-but cemented the fact that Bennett has worn out his welcome in the Bears locker room. Pace and Fox are trying to establish a culture and Bennett clearly does not fit within that culture.

You know what? I don't care.

Sometimes, no ALL times, winning in the NFL requires having a few pieces of shit in your locker room. And Bennett, as far as NFL pieces of shit go, is quite tame. He doesn't beat women. He doesn't drive drunk. He wants more money and makes dumb animations he thinks are profound. Sit him down. Talk to him. Make him feel good. Throw him a few extra dollars if that's what he needs to give 100% every Sunday.

OL

This is, by far, the hardest position group to evaluate within an organization because it is not only an evaluation of individual performance but also of the collective whole.

THE GUARANTEES

- **Kyle Long** is playing somewhere along the offensive line in 2016, most likely where he played the 2015 season. While the world has panicked at Long's struggles at times this season, the organization - and more importantly the player - have not. Long will be on the Bears for the foreseeable future.
- **Matt Slauson** would rank just behind Jay Cutler as my Bears MVP for 2015. Slauson excelled at two positions, rescuing the Bears from multiple moments of desperation at center. His versatility is developing into his finest asset as the former Jet can now line up at three positions along the line.

COMING BACK

- **Hroniss Grasu** will most likely be the starting center in 2016 after the Bears put him through an extensive offseason of work. He needs to get bigger. He needs to get stronger. And it will be one of the major priorities for the offensive coaching staff this spring and summer.
- **Charles Leno Jr.** received praise at the Pace/Fox postseason press conference so there is no reason to believe the organization wouldn't be comfortable with him returning at left tackle in 2016. But Leno's left tackle, while above average in

2015, is a position the Bears can upgrade. If the Bears identify an elite tackle at the eleventh pick in the draft, nobody would question their making that selection.

SHOULD COME BACK/DEPTH

- **Will Montgomery** was adding fight and grit to the offensive line before succumbing to a season-ending injury after only four games. Montgomery returning on a one-year deal would make a lot of sense for an offense determined to run the ball down the throats of opponents.
- **Patrick Omameh** can play both guard positions, with varying degrees of success, and will still only be twenty-six years old come the start of the 2016 season. Is he a necessity next season? Of course not. Does he provide valuable depth? Absolutely.
- **Tayo Fabuluje** is [an interesting guy](#) and a player, from all reports, the Bears like. Where does he fit? Who the hell knows? But clues should start trickling in come the start of the offseason program.

ADIOS!

- **Vlad Ducasse** can't play. Never could. And every snap he played for the Bears at guard in 2015 hindered long-term development at the position.
- **Jermon Bushrod** may have a bit of gas in the tank [but not for the price the Bears would have to pay in 2016](#). If Bushrod's career continues it'll be on a one-year deal for a team looking for a final piece along the offensive line.

NEW BLOOD

They need a guard and can upgrade at tackle.

THE OFFENSE

DL *(BY ANDREW DANNEHY)*

BIG EDDIE

The development and production of Eddie Goldman was one of the best things to happen to the Bears this year. Goldman was billed as a run-plugging nose tackle and a two down player. He proved to be much more. He had 4.5 sacks and was third on the team with nineteen quarterback pressures, according to the official statistics released by the team.

He's technically listed as a nose tackle, but he's just as much an end in the Bears defense, lining up over the guard as often as he lined up over the center. Outside of what is considered their base defense, Vic Fangio used Goldman similarly to how he used Justin Smith. Forget about what positions they're listed at, Smith was Fangio's anchor in San Francisco and Goldman may be his anchor in Chicago.

THE REST OF THE GUYS...

The Bears have a few players who could be rotational but no other lockdown starters. **Jarvis Jenkins** won fans over with a 10-tackle, two-sack performance against Seattle in Week Three but really didn't do much the rest of the season. He was fourth on the team with 17 pressures, but a major liability against the run.

Will Sutton didn't seem to make an impact this season, but was voted second at three-technique tackle by the NFC North scouts polled by Bob McGinn, finishing ahead of Sharrif Floyd in what I can only figure was a clerical error. Sutton was OK against the run but managed just three pressures.

Bruce Gaston showed flashes as a pass-rusher, even destroying Evan Mathis to sack Brock Osweiler this season, but he couldn't hold up against the run. **Mitch Unrein** was the opposite, stout against the run, but offered nothing on passing downs.

Two young players the Bears were relying upon, **Ego Ferguson** and **Cornelius Washington**, missed most of the season with injuries. Ferguson held up well against the run before being injured against Kansas City. Washington was going to be a pass-rush specialist but played just one snap.

MOVING FORWARD...

If Goldman is the Bears version of Smith, they need to find their version of Ray McDonald. Fangio plays more of a 2-4 than a 3-4 and to be at their best they need two defensive linemen who command extra attention against the run and provide pass rush.

This is a good time to be in the market for that kind of defensive linemen. There are expected to be quite a few available in free agency. Assuming he's given a clean bill of health, *Muhammad Wilkerson* would be a home run and should be their top target in free agency. If they don't want to spend so much money, they could go after former Fox draft pick *Malik Jackson*, who will only be 26 when next year begins. There are also considered to be a number of players that would fit the bill in the draft, even if they don't use the 11th pick at the position.

The Bears defensive line ranked as the worst in the league by the metrics used by Football Outsiders. They were 23rd against the run and 26th in yards per attempt. They have one rock in Goldman. They need another. It wouldn't be a surprise to see the Bears bring in a free agent and spend a high draft pick at the position.

LB

We start on the inside.

The Bears had five inside linebackers this season but only three are worthy of discussion. **LaRoy Reynolds** & **Jonathan Anderson** are the type of bottom-roster boys an organization needs but there's also about 125 players like them circulating across the league. Whether they return or not in 2016 won't make the teapot whistle.

Three questions about the others.

How Much Do the Coaches Really Like Shea McClellin?

Shea is a smart player and the coaches went out of their way throughout 2015 to applaud his impact on the defense. He also, once again, struggled to remain healthy for any substantial period of time and his level of play dropped precipitously once returning to the field.

Here's how I'd summarize McClellin. He is constantly in position to make plays but rarely makes them. Is that a lack of physical ability? Maybe. Is that a lack of instincts? Definitely. Were his struggles this season more the result of a change to ANOTHER new position? Possibly.

Unlike many who'd like to see the Bears cut the Shea line, I'd like to see him return and continue to develop at middle linebacker. He won't be expensive or require a lengthy deal so why not? At worst he's a third linebacker off the bench who can also call signals.

How Much Stake Do the Coaches Put Into John Timu's Finish?

Adrian Peterson had 18 rushes for 63 yards. Doug Martin had 17 carries for 49 yards. Ameer Abdullah had a more respectable 10 carries for 44 yards. This was a poor rush defense all season long that turned into a solid unit once Timu ascended into the starting lineup. Does this mean the Bears should move forward with Timu cemented in the middle? Of course not. But barring a big splurge in free agency, Timu should come to Bourbonnais with confidence.

Is Christian Jones Really That Bad?

So I'm sitting in a nice seat at Soldier Field for the finale. And, annoying though it may be to my friends, I like to point out mismatches when I see them before the snap. In the fourth quarter, on a second down I believe, the Lions put Theo Riddick in motion. Christian Jones followed him outside. I turn to my buddy Brian and say, "Jones on Riddick. Not good." Stafford sees it. Snap. No hesitation. Throws to Riddick. A dozen yards. Jones never had a chance.

This proved to me two things. (1) Jones just isn't good enough to cover backs at this level and (2) the Lions knew that from looking at film. That play was designed by Jim Bob Cooter to isolate Jones on a back and exploit the mismatch. Jones isn't good enough to start in this league.

Verdict: Defensive line lacks talent but middle linebacker may be the team's biggest positional need this offseason. But if you're taking one with the eleventh pick, he better be special.

We move to the outside.

In two sentences...

Pernell McPhee, Willie Young and Lamarr Houston are all valuable playmakers and should be part of this team in 2016. Sam Acho is a middle of the road player whose highest value this season came on specials.

The Bears recorded only thirty-five sacks this year and their lack of consistent pressure left the secondary exposed. (Both the low interception total and high opposing pass rating can be attributed to this lack of pressure.) In the type of defense Fox and Fangio run, outside linebacker is the position where they should have their most explosive players. McPhee is one. Bears desperately need to add another.

DB

Here are a few sentences I never thought I'd write, or think, in 2015:

- The Bears really struggled covering the slot without Bryce Callahan.
- Tracy Porter is playing like a corner who wants a contract extension.
- The secondary has been the best level of the Bears defense several games this season.

My predictions were (1) the Bears would field the worst secondary in the league and (2) perhaps one of the worst secondaries in the organization's history. Neither of those predictions were accurate. Neither was even close.

WHO IS BACK

Kyle Fuller and *Adrian Amos* both had up-and-down 2015s but both will be prominent members of the Bears secondary next season.

Tracy Porter isn't a top tier corner but his ability to close on the football is somewhat astounding. If Calvin Johnson does actually retire this offseason, does Porter's value increase?

Antrel Rolle doesn't actually cost the Bears much in 2016 so it wouldn't make sense for them to cut bait before Bourbonnais. Even if the Bears target safety in free agency or the draft, Rolle could provide cheap depth off the bench.

Bryce Callahan was arguably the defense's most pleasant surprise and a player the Bears coaching staff will surely want to continue developing.

WHO IS NOT BACK

Sherrick McManis may have value on specials but he's not a professional corner.

WHO CARES

Stack 'em up. *Harold Jones-Quartey* had some nice moments. So did ***Chris Prosinski***. But seeing their success coupled with some awful moments leads me to believe Vic Fangio and Ed Donatell can get a lot of juice out of some lemons. Wouldn't surprise me if these two are in Bourbonnais. Wouldn't surprise me if they're not. Wouldn't care either way.

Demontre Hurst, Sherrod Martin, Alan Ball and Jacoby Glenn were just bodies.

NEEDS (AND HOW TO FILL THEM)

Three things:

- **Avoid the first round.** The rules simply don't permit the existence of a shut down corner anymore and the strike out record in the first round is alarming.
- **Avoid the big money.** The strength of the Bears coaching staff is at the backend of their defense. If they're going to spend this offseason, spend on quarterback disrupters up front.
- **Attack rounds 4-6.** If the Bears can find another secondary starter in these rounds (as they did a year ago) this personnel regime will be off to a flying start.

SPECIALS

I liked the progression of Pat O'Donnell as the season moved along and Deonte Thompson provided a much-needed spark in the return game in December. POD will return. Thompson should.

Which brings us to Robbie Gould.

Element One of the Gould Dilemma: The "Shot" Factor

No, I don't think Robbie Gould is shot.

After his back-to-back nightmare efforts against San Francisco and Washington, Gould finished the season 5-for-5 on field goals, including a few kicks of 50+. Gould was not missing kicks physically (if that makes any sense). Gould was shanking balls ten yards left of the upright. He had what golfers refer to as "the yips". As quickly as an athlete encounters this disease is as quickly as he can become disease free.

Element Two of the Gould Dilemma: The Kickoff Factor

Robbie and the Bears have been among the league's worst touchback units for years. They ranked 27th in 2015. All four of the teams remaining in the postseason are ranked in the top ten. Why is the stat important? Because it's HARD to consistently drive 80 yards for touchdowns! And that's exactly what the good teams make opponents do. And next season the Bears offense should be expected – if only based on health – to improve dramatically. You know what that means? Many, many more kickoffs. They can't continue settling for those kickoffs landing at the five.

Element Three of the Gould Dilemma: Time for Competition

It is time for the Bears to open a serious competition for the starting kicker gig. Robbie will more than likely win it (and fans should root for that outcome) but he must be tested this summer.