Fields In Focus

Written by Johnathan Wood, published on Da Bears Blog

Justin Fields' rookie season is over, which means it's time to evaluate how he did, as well as what it could mean for his career going forward.

Let's start with a look at the basic stats, which are shown in the table below. In order to give these some more context, I looked at all 33 NFL QBs who had 200 or more pass attempts this year, gave you a feel for the spread of those 33 QBs in each category, and provided Fields' rank. Cells highlighted in green indicate Fields was in the top 10 for that category, while those highlighted in red indicate Fields was in the bottom 10.

Stat	Fields (rank)	NFL Best	NFL Median	NFL Worst
Completion %	58.9% (32nd)	70.4%	66.3%	55.6%
Yards/Attempt	6.9 (20th)	8.9	7.2	5.7
TD %	2.6% (29th)	7.0%	4.1%	2.0%
INT %	3.7% (32nd)	0.8%	2.2%	3.8%
Passer Rating	73.2 (30th)	111.9	91.5	69.7
Sack %	11.8% (33rd)	3.0%	6.1%	11.8%

As you can see, this isn't pretty. Fields ranked in the bottom 5 in every category except yards per passing attempt. It's definitely a good thing that a quarterback is among the worst in the NFL at completing passes, throwing touchdowns, avoiding interceptions, and avoiding sacks, right? RIGHT?

If you followed the Bears at all closely this year - which I assume applies to most people who read this website - this shouldn't come as a surprise to you. Fields definitely had his rookie struggles, and we very much see that reflected in the big-picture statistics here.

All in all, I think it's hard to paint a picture that Fields' rookie season was anything other than a disappointment. If you had asked me in August if I'd be happy with Fields posting a rookie stat line of 159/270, 1870 yards, 7 TD, 10 INT, 36 sacks, and 12 fumbles, I would have said "no" without even having to think about it. If you're being honest with yourself, you would have said the same.

But that doesn't mean Fields' rookie season was a complete loss. Though the overall results were abysmal, there were some flashes of good present as well, and there are plenty of signs of promise to be found if you're willing to look. QB play is complicated, and sometimes raw statistics don't tell the entire story.

That's where this series comes in. Using a combination of advanced statistics from Next Gen Stats, Pro Football Focus, and Pro Football Reference, I'm going to take a deep dive into Fields' rookie performance, pointing out the good, the bad, and the ugly. I want to know what he did well, what he needs to do better, and what this might mean for his future.

Rather than make this two or three really long and hard to follow articles, I'm going to break it up into seven sections, each focusing on one specific topic. The general flow will go as follows:

- Part 1: Where (and how effectively) Fields threw the ball
- Part 2: How Fields did on different types of plays (play action, quick vs. slow-developing, etc.)
- Part 3: How Fields performed under pressure
- Part 4: How Fields progressed throughout the season
- Part 5: How efficiently Fields produced explosive plays
- Part 6: How much the rest of Chicago's offense may have hurt Fields
- Part 7: How Fields' performance compared to other recent rookie QBs

So that's where this is headed. I've already done most of the research, so I know there are plenty of useful insights to be found. I hope you'll join me on the journey as we discover what there is to learn about the man we all hope is the future of the Chicago Bears.

Part One: Where He Threw

Target Frequency

Let's start with how frequently Fields threw the ball to different areas of the field, sorted by depth. The table below shows this information splitting the field into 4 areas, which I will refer to as behind the line, short (0-9 yards), medium (10-19 yards), and deep (20+ yards) from here on out. Fields' pass frequency to each area is given, as well as the spread of other NFL QBs who had at least 20% of the pass attempts of the NFL leader. This is how PFF split the data, and it gave a sample size of 39 QBs. Cells highlighted in green indicate Fields was among the top 10 QBs in this region, while those in red indicate Fields was in the bottom 10 QBs.

Target Depth	% of Throws to that Depth			
	Fields (rank)	NFL High	NFL Median	NFL Low
Behind Line of Scrimmage	8% (39th)	22%	15%	8%
0 - 9 yards	47% (17th)	52%	47%	37%
10 - 19 yards	24% (4th)	26%	20%	15%
20+ yards	16% (3rd)	19%	11%	7%

A few thoughts:

- Unsurprisingly, Fields threw to the medium and deep zones more often than most QBs, at the expense of passes behind the line of scrimmage. Anybody who watched him play this year would have guessed as much, and the data bears that out.
- Interestingly, this does not exactly match his college profile, when he targeted the medium range quite frequently but didn't look deep as often as most of his peers.
- Fields was a very accurate deep passer in college, so it's good to see him taking those shots. This is a bit of a spoiler to a future article, but deep passes lead to explosive plays, which are hugely important for an offense's overall success.

Completion %

Now that we know where Fields threw the ball, let's take a look at how effective he was throwing to these various depths. We'll start by examining completion percentage. Like the 1st table above, the table below shows Fields' completion percentage to each area, compared to the NFL spread of 39 total QBs. Cells highlighted in green indicate Fields was among the top 10 QBs in this region, while those in red indicate Fields was in the bottom 10 QBs.

Target Depth	Completion %			
	Fields (rank)	NFL High	NFL Median	NFL Low
Behind Line of Scrimmage	82% (37th)	97%	91%	79%
0 - 9 yards	68% (37th)	83%	77%	66%
10 - 19 yards	57% (19th)	75%	57%	45%
20+ yards	42% (12th)	49%	40%	19%

A few thoughts:

- Here we start to see some of Fields' struggles show up, especially in the shorter zones, where Fields completed fewer passes than the majority of his peers.
- The short region (0-9 yards) is especially painful. Fields is 9% below the median QB in completion % here, and this accounted for nearly half of his pass attempts. He needs to get better at the short stuff to help the offense become more consistent.
- Fields was right around average in the medium and deep zones, which is very good to see. Deep passing is typically more difficult, so if he's doing well there, it's reasonable to think the short stuff will figure itself out over time.
- Of course, it takes 2 people to complete a pass - the QB and the pass catcher. It's possible that Fields' low completion percentage is due to drops by his pass targets. Pro Football Focus says that 7.6% of Fields' pass attempts were dropped, compared to an NFL average of 6.2%, which means Fields' pass catchers cost him 1.4% completions compared to a typical supporting cast. Pro Football Reference tracks drops independently, and they had Fields at 6.9% drops compared to an average of 4.5%, good for a difference of 2.4%. Similar numbers from two different sources provides credibility to the hypothesis that Fields' supporting cast contributed to his low completion percentage.

Accuracy

In an effort to try and remove drops from the equation, I next looked at how many of Fields' passes were deemed accurate by PFF. This is admittedly a subjective stat, so there might be a little bit of noise in the data, but the same people are assigning accuracy to all the QBs, so it should be fairly consistent across all of those in the sample.

Once again, the table below shows Fields' stats at each depth compared to his NFL peers, with cells highlighted in green indicating Fields was in the top 10 (of the 39 QB sample) and cells highlighted in red showing Fields was in the bottom 10.

Target Depth	Accuracy %			
	Fields (rank)	NFL High	NFL Median	NFL Low
Behind Line of Scrimmage	91% (30th)	100%	94%	86%
0 - 9 yards	75% (37th)	88%	83%	75%
10 - 19 yards	59% (29th)	81%	62%	49%
20+ yards	44% (13th)	55%	42%	19%

A few thoughts:

- Well that's not good. Fields was in the bottom 10 of accuracy to 2 of the 4 depth ranges, and just missed on a 3rd. This is actually really surprising, as Fields was graded as one of the most accurate passers to come out of college in the last several drafts.
- Once again, we see the short range (0-9 yards) standing out as particularly bad. Fields was the least accurate QB in the NFL to throws in this region. Again, 47% of Fields' throws went to this depth, so this is a major problem that needs to be sorted out.
- Overall, Fields is about 4.4% less accurate than the median QB when you weight his accuracy by % of throws to each region. This makes him one of the least accurate QBs in the NFL (only 2 in the 39 QB sample were worse).

- One stat we can compare this to is completion percentage over expectation (CPOE), which looks at how many passes Fields completed compared to how many an average QB would be expected to complete given the location and movement of all offensive and defensive players at the time of each pass. Fields had a CPOE of -2.0%, meaning he completed 2% fewer passes than an average QB would be expected to. This is better than the -4.4% in expected accuracy, and points to perhaps Fields' pass catchers not hurting him excessively with drops (CPOE stats from RBSDM).
- I think it's fair to question how much of an impact not getting to practice at all with the WRs he'd be throwing to in training camp hindered Fields, especially early in the season. I don't want to say more for now, because I'll have a separate article later in this series specifically focusing on how Fields' production changed throughout the season.

Full Breakdown

Finally, I want to break up each depth into left, center, and right in order to get a feel for whether Fields' struggles were focused on any part of the field horizontally in addition to vertically. This gives us 12 zones (4 depths x 3 zones for the left, center, and right of each depth). The table below shows how frequently Fields targeted each zone, as well as how effectively he threw it there, as measured in accuracy rate and yards/attempt. All data is compared to other NFL QBs, with green cells indicating Fields ranked in the top 10 and red showing Fields was in the bottom 10 (out of 39 QBs).

		Left				Middle				Right	
	Stat	Fields	NFL High/Median/Low		Stat	Fields	NFL High/Median/Low		Stat	Fields	NFL High/Median/Low
20 yards	% of Throws	5%	11% / 4% / 1%		% of Throws	4%	5% / 3% / 1%		% of Throws	7%	9% / 5% / 3%
	Accuracy	43%	63% / 46% / 0%		Accuracy	64%	77% / 49% / 0%		Accuracy	33%	70% / 39% / 20%
	Yards/Attempt	7.4	23.8 / 12.1 / 0.0		Yards/Attempt	18.7	28.2 / 14.3 / 0.0		Yards/Attempt	11.1	17.7 / 12.6 / 6.0
10 yards	% of Throws	9%	9% / 5% / 3%		% of Throws	10%	19% / 11% / 5%		% of Throws	7%	11% / 6% / 4%
	Accuracy	73%	80% / 59% / 33%		Accuracy	42%	81% / 68% / 42%		Accuracy	65%	82% / 54% / 33%
	Yards/Attempt	9.6	16.2 / 8.8 / 4.0		Yards/Attempt	6.4	14.4 / 10.5 / 6.4		Yards/Attempt	9.4	13.1 / 7.7 / 2.7
Line of Scrimmage	% of Throws	12%	16% / 12% / 7%		% of Throws	24%	35% / 26% / 17%		% of Throws	14%	18% / 13% / 8%
	Accuracy	70%	92% / 82% / 67%		Accuracy	73%	91% / 83% / 73%		Accuracy	83%	93% / 82% / 69%
	Yards/Attempt	4.7	7.7 / 6.0 / 3.6		Yards/Attempt	5.7	8.5 / 6.7 / 5.3		Yards/Attempt	5.7	7.5 / 5.8 / 4.7
	% of Throws	1%	7% / 4% / 1%		% of Throws	7%	14% / 9% / 3%		% of Throws	1%	6% / 4% / 1%
	Accuracy	100%	100% / 93% / 73%		Accuracy	94%	100% / 96% / 86%		Accuracy	67%	100% / 95% / 67%
	Yards/Attempt	1.5	8.6 / 4.5 / 1.5		Yards/Attempt	7.5	8.9 / 5.6 / 3.0		Yards/Attempt	2.7	8.7 / 4.1 / 2.7

A few thoughts:

- Some of the zones here have sample sizes that are too small to think much about. For instance, Fields had 2 targets to the left side behind the line of scrimmage, and 3 targets to the right. I don't put much weight in that data.
- The short middle of the field is the most targeted, accounting for 1/4 of Fields throws (which is on the low end for NFL QBs). It's also where Fields was at his worst, finishing last in the NFL in accuracy and near the bottom in yards/attempt. He needs to be able to throw efficiently here given how many throws are headed into this region.

- Fields also struggled down the middle of the field in the medium range (10-19 yards). It's not unusual for a young QB to struggle in the middle of the field, where there is more traffic and the adjustment to the speed of NFL defenders is greater. Rookie QBs show the most improvement from year 1 to year 2 throwing in the middle of the field, and the Bears will very much need Fields to make a big jump in that area.
- If you remove the middle of the field, Fields was actually above average throwing to the medium zone. So it really is all about that middle of the field section. Besides that middle-medium zone, Fields was good throwing deep and medium pretty much across the board, which is really good to see.

Lessons Learned

I'm now 1800 words in, with 5 tables full of data. Let's take a step back and summarize the the main takeaways from this article:

- Field's tendency to throw deep and medium both frequently and accurately mostly translated from college to the NFL.
- Fields really struggled throwing it short, and also struggled mightily throwing to the middle of the field. Those are areas that need to show drastic improvement going forward if Fields is going to be a reliable starting QB in Chicago.
- In general, this explains why Fields' rookie season was so high variance. He was good at a lot of the hard stuff (deep passes), but struggled with the short stuff, which is supposed to be easier. That's a big part of why Chicago's offense was so inconsistent. You need to be able to get the consistent small gains in addition to hitting on the chunk plays. Fields has the chunk plays down, but now must become more consistent underneath.

Part Two: Play Action

Today is the second of seven articles taking a closer look at Justin Fields' rookie season, looking at how his performance fared in play action vs. standard dropbacks and also how he performed throwing quick passes as opposed to slow-developing plays. All stats are from Pro Football Focus (PFF) unless otherwise noted.

Play Action

Let's start by looking at how Justin Fields did on play-action dropbacks compared to standard passing plays. Before I present the full data, I want to briefly explain two PFF stats that will be used:

- **Big Time Throw**: these are best described as a pass with excellent ball location and timing, generally thrown further down the field and/or into a tighter window. In other words, these are really good, difficult passes that should result in highly valuable big plays. A higher % here is better.
- **Turnover Worthy Play**: These include fumbles in the pocket, interceptions thrown, and interceptable passes that were not caught. A lower % here is better.

Both of these stats will admittedly have some subjectivity inherent, but they provide a useful glimpse into how frequently a QB makes a really good play vs. a really bad one.

The table below shows how Fields performed in a wide variety of statistics in play action (blue) vs. other dropbacks (orange), and also includes Fields' rank out of 39 total NFL QBs who had at least 20% of the pass attempts of the NFL leader. Information on the spread of all NFL QBs is also provided for each stat. Cells highlighted in green indicate Fields was among the top 10 QBs in this category, while those in red indicate Fields was in the bottom 10 QBs.

Stat	Play Action		Not Play Action	
	Fields (rank)	NFL best/median/worst	Fields (rank)	NFL best/median/worst
Accuracy	68% (34th)	83% / 77% / 62%	67% (38th)	81% / 74% / 66%
CMP %	61% (32nd)	75% / 68% / 46%	58% (33rd)	71% / 65% / 53%
YDS/ATT	8.9 (13th)	10.4 / 8.0 / 4.0	6.4 (19th)	8.6 / 6.3 / 4.9
Average Target Depth	13.3 (1st)	13.3 / 9.0 / 5.8	9.3 (3rd)	10.2 / 8.1 / 6.5
Big Time Throw %	13% (1st)	13% / 4% / 0%	4% (15th)	9% / 4% / 1%
Turnover Worthy Play %	1% (3rd)	0% /4% / 12%	5% (34th)	1% / 3% / 9%
Sack %	17% (38th)	1% / 5% / 19%	8% (33rd)	3% / 6% / 10%

A few thoughts:

- Fields' accuracy and completion percentage were very poor in both samples, but that is to be expected given his accuracy issues, which we looked at in part one of this series. Relatively speaking, he was a little better in play action than out of play action here.
- We also see consistency in Fields pushing the ball down the field regardless of the play time. His average pass was the 3rd deepest in regular passes and the deepest on play action. This is also expected given what we've already looked at. Fields likes to go deep.
- In general, play action passes lead to deeper throws (median target depth of 9.0 yards vs. 8.1), and deeper passes are where Fields shined as a rookie, so it makes sense that he would do better here.

- Fields really shined in play action when you look at big time throw rate compared to turnover worthy plays. He was one of the best QBs in the NFL in both marks, which is what you want to see. While turnover worthy plays in general see an uptick on play action passes, Fields' fell dramatically, indicating how much more comfortable he was in these settings.
- Fields took a high rate of sacks on both play action and standard dropbacks, but almost 2x the rate of sacks on play action. This is really the only negative.
- In general, play action leads to more big plays (deeper throws, higher yards/attempt, higher big time throw rate for NFL as a whole), but also more bad ones (sacks, turnovers, incompletions). Thus, it makes sense why Fields shined in play action. He's good at the big play stuff, but bad at the short, consistent stuff that comes more in non-play action settings.

Considering Fields was better at completing passes, gaining yards, making big time throws, and avoiding turnover-worthy plays in play action, you might expect that an offense featuring Fields would heavily feature play action. But this happened on only 24% of Fields' dropbacks, which was the 28th highest rate out of the 39 QBs (median mark was 26%). There is no way to describe this as anything other than coaching malpractice. Fields was used in play action at virtually the same rate as Andy Dalton, or Nick Foles in 2020 and Mitchell Trubisky in 2019. Matt Nagy refused to change his offense to suit his personnel, and here we see an example of it very clearly hurting Fields in his rookie season. There is no reason that 10-20% more of Fields' dropbacks couldn't have utilized play action, putting him in line with the most frequent play action rates in the NFL and better setting him up for success.

Already as a rookie, Justin Fields was one of the best play action passers in the NFL. This is a clear strength that new offensive coordinator Luke Getsy has to build on. Chicago's offense should be extremely play-action heavy. Getsy comes to Chicago from Green Bay, where he was the QB coach and passing game coordinator from 2019-21. It's impossible to say for sure how involved he was in designing the offense, but Aaron Rodgers didn't use play action much more than Fields last year (26%, 19th of 39 QBs. Rodgers ranged from 26% to 29% from 2019-21). Of course, it's possible Getsy will design this offense differently since Fields is a different QB than Rodgers. We don't really know, but we can only hope Getsy will take note of Fields' play action abilities and respond appropriately.

New GM Ryan Poles said his goal was to "[find what (Fields) does well and do that a lot.](#)" If the Bears actually mean that, they will use a whole lot of play action in 2022.

Time To Throw

Let's look now at a different way to parse a QB's pass attempts, based on how long it took him to throw the ball. PFF splits into less than 2.5 seconds and more than 2.5 seconds.

The table below shows the same stats as the play action one above except for sacks, which are not included in the sample. Once again, Fields' data is shown ranked out of the 39 QB sample, information is provided about the spread of the 39 QBs, and cells for Fields' stats in green or red represent Fields ranking in the top ten or bottom ten, respectively.

Stat	Under 2.5 seconds to throw		Over 2.5 seconds to throw	
	Fields (rank)	NFL best/median/worst	Fields (rank)	NFL best/median/worst
Accuracy	71% (38th)	87% / 81% / 69%	63% (35th)	76% / 68% / 54%
CMP %	63% (37th)	80% / 72% / 61%	55% (25th)	65% / 58% / 40%
YDS/ATT	6.0 (25th)	8.6 / 6.3 / 4.5	8.0 (16th)	10.3 / 7.6 / 4.8
Average Target Depth	6.3 (2nd)	6.4 / 5.2 / 2.6	14.3 (4th)	16.9 / 11.6 / 8.4
Big Time Throw %	2% (21st)	7% / 2% / 0%	10% (1st)	10% / 6% / 1%
Turnover Worthy Play %	3% (37th)	0% / 2% / 5%	4% (12th)	2% / 5% / 14%

A few thoughts:

- There's going to be some overlap with the play action stats above here. The average play action pass took 3.08 seconds to throw for qualified NFL QBs this year (3.53 seconds for Fields), while the average non-play action pass took 2.64 seconds for all QBs (2.92 seconds for Fields). Thus, it stands to reason that the majority of play action passes will feature in the >2.5 second sample, but this includes the rest of passes too

- Let's start with the average target depth, where the median passer is more than twice as far down the field on the slow developing plays. This makes sense: the quick game is all about short passes, as there's not time to get guys downfield.

- Therefore, it should come as no surprise to see that Fields struggled more in the quick game, where he ranks worse than the slow-developing plays compared to his peers in every category except average target depth. Fields likes to push the ball down the field, and he's better at that than the short stuff.

- Again, we see that Fields excelled in big time throws and was pretty good at limiting turnovers in the category that favors deeper passes. This accentuated his strengths, while the quick game - where he really struggled with turnovers - played into his weaknesses.

- The quick game is supposed to limit turnover risk - the median NFL QB was about 2.5x less likely to have a turnover worthy play when the ball was out in under 2.5 seconds - but Fields did not see that effect. His turnover-worthy play rate barely changed. This highlights how much he struggled with decision making on fast plays, while the slower ones let him see it and rip it, which he was more comfortable with.

- One area that doesn't show up here is sacks, because this only counts plays that end with a passing attempt. Pretty much all sacks will fall in the greater than 2.5 second category though. According to Next Gen Stats, only 14 of the 1244 sacks in the NFL this year came in less than 2.5 seconds.

- So that boom or bust potential is here for slow-developing plays too, just like for play action passes. Longer times to pass result in deeper passes and more big-time throws, but also more sacks and turnovers. Fields was relatively better in these high variance areas as a rookie but needs to greatly improve in the quick game to improve the offense's consistency.

- Overall, only 41% of Fields' passes came in less than 2.5 seconds. This was the 8th lowest mark of the 39 QB sample and was appreciably lower than the NFL median of 48%.

Lessons Learned

Here are the main takeaways from this article:

- Chicago's new offense needs to utilize play action heavily, because Justin Fields was a borderline elite play action QB as a rookie.
- For as positive as that is, Fields really needs to improve in non-play action situations, because he was awful in those.
- Likewise, Fields needs to get much better at the quick passing game (which goes hand in hand with the short passing game highlighted in the last article), where he was one of the worst passers in the NFL.
- In particular, Fields needs to get better at limiting turnovers in the quick game, which is supposed to be fairly risk averse. He was pretty good at avoiding turnovers on play action and slow-developing plays, where more turnovers are expected, but pretty bad at avoiding turnovers on the "safe" quick plays.

Part Three: Under Pressure

This piece will examine how frequently Fields was pressured, who was to blame for that pressure, and how Fields performed when under pressure. All stats are from Pro Football Focus (PFF) unless otherwise noted.

Pressure Frequency

Fields was one of the most heavily pressured QBs in the NFL as a rookie. PFF had him pressured on 43% of dropbacks, the 3rd highest rate of 39 qualifying NFL QBs (34% median, 45% worst). Pro Football Reference, which is more selective with what they consider a pressure, had him at a 27% pressure rate, the 5th highest mark in the NFL (23% median, 31% worst).

The table below shows how much of the pressure for each QB PFF blamed on each position. Fields' stat is provided, and his rank compared to the other 39 QBs, as well as the range of the other qualifying QBs. Cells where Fields ranked in the top 10 are highlighted in green, while cells where Fields ranked in the bottom 10 are highlighted in red.

Position	Fields (rank)	NFL best/median/worst
QB	13% (20th)	4% / 13% / 42%
LT	23% (24th)	11% / 20% / 36%
LG	19% (25th)	7% / 18% / 30%
C	17% (32nd)	1% / 13% / 20%
RG	17% (12th)	7% / 20% / 27%
RT	24% (20th)	11% / 24% / 37%
TE	5% (31st)	0% / 3% / 7%
Other	2% (2nd)	1% / 4% / 10%

A few thoughts:

- By and large, Fields was not particularly to blame for the pressure he faced. PFF only credited him with being responsible for 13% of his pressures, which was the literal middle of the pack for the 39 QB sample.
- Pressures may not have been his fault, but many sacks were. Fields allowed 24% of his pressures to turn into sacks, which was the 6th worst mark in the NFL (median 17%). This matches Lester Wiltfong's Sackwatch series, which blamed Fields for 9 of the 36 sacks he took in 2021. If you go back and look at the film breakdown for those (which Lester does for all of them), the majority came when the initial pressure was not his fault, but then Fields could have gotten the ball out or escaped and didn't.
- In general, the pass blocking from the offensive line ranged from average to below average (again, 20th is the middle of a 39 QB sample). Two spots stood out from that: right guard was pretty good (it's worth noting RG James Daniels is a free agent) and center was pretty bad. Sam Mustipher has to be upgraded this offseason.
- It's a small sample size, but the tight ends allowed a high rate of pressure compared to other QBs. When looking at tight ends, PFF had Cole Kmet ranked 43rd and Jesse James 30th in rate of pressures allowed out of 68 total qualified tight ends, which is around average for both, so I'm not sure what happened here. Maybe it's a small sample size thing, where the tight ends gave up most of their pressures when Fields was in at QB (as opposed to Dalton or Foles).

- I think sample size with running backs (the majority of the other) was probably an issue too. PFF had David Montgomery and Khalil Herbert 25th and 23rd, respectively, in rate of pressures allowed out of 64 qualified running backs, which is a little above average but nothing spectacular.

Performance Under Pressure

We've already seen that Fields was under pressure very frequently, so how did he hold up when that happened?

The table below shows how Fields performed in a wide variety of statistics when kept clean (blue) vs. pressured (orange), and also includes Fields' rank out of 39 total NFL QBs who had at least 20% of the pass attempts of the NFL leader.

Information on the spread of all NFL QBs is also provided for each stat. Cells highlighted in green indicate Fields was among the top 10 QBs in this category, while those in red indicate Fields was in the bottom 10 QBs. A further explanation of big time throws and turnover worthy plays was given in the play action article; generally, more big-time throws is good, and more turnover-worthy plays is bad.

Stat	Kept Clean		Under Pressure	
	Fields (rank)	NFL best/median/worst	Fields (rank)	NFL best/median/worst
Accuracy	71% (38th)	84% / 79% / 66%	58% (35th)	76% / 63% / 46%
CMP %	65% (37th)	77% / 71% / 57%	46% (25th)	61% / 49% / 29%
YDS/ATT	7.7 (14th)	9.0 / 7.4 / 4.6	5.3 (29th)	8.6 / 5.9 / 3.3
Average Target Depth	9.0 (2nd)	9.2 / 7.5 / 5.7	12.7 (6th)	16.2 / 10.5 / 7.8
Big Time Throw %	7% (3rd)	8% / 4% / 0%	5% (20th)	10% / 5% / 0%
Turnover Worthy Play %	1% (5th)	1% / 3% / 8%	7% (33rd)	0% / 5% / 11%

A few thoughts:

- The accuracy and completion percentage are bad in both categories. This has been true no matter how we parse the data, because Fields struggled with accuracy in 2021 (as we saw in the 1st article of this series).
- When he was kept clean, Justin Fields was really good. He was among the best QBs in the NFL in both big time throws and turnover worthy plays, which is the exact combination you want to see out of a high-level quarterback.
- When he was pressured, however, Fields morphed into a pretty bad QB. His big-time throws dropped, but more concerningly his turnover-worthy play rate skyrocketed. Part of this is likely his 12 fumbles, which by definition must come when he is under pressure.
- Given that Fields' astronomical sack rate is also entirely dependent on him being under pressure, he might have been the most OL-dependent QB in the NFL last year. When kept clean, he was really good. When pressured, he was really bad. Fixing the offensive line has to be a priority this offseason for Chicago's new decision makers (and new GM Ryan Poles has already said it will be).

Blitz

Finally, I want to look specifically at how Fields performed when teams sent extra rushers at him on a blitz.

Much like the table above in the performance under pressure section, the table below shows how he fared in a variety of stats when blitzed (orange) and not blitzed (blue), and also gives context for how he ranked relative to the 39 qualifying NFL QBs. Cells highlighted in green indicate Fields was among the top 10 QBs in this category, while those in red indicate Fields was in the bottom 10 QBs.

Stat	Not Blitzed		Blitzed	
	Fields (rank)	NFL best/median/worst	Fields (rank)	NFL best/median/worst
Accuracy	66% (39th)	80% / 76% / 64%	70% (26th)	85% / 73% / 47%
CMP %	57% (37th)	72% / 65% / 55%	63% (19th)	75% / 62% / 37%
YDS/ATT	6.8 (25th)	8.3 / 7.0 / 4.9	7.3 (21st)	10.8 / 7.4 / 4.2
Target Depth	10.5 (3rd)	10.9 / 8.1 / 6.0	9.2 (8th)	11.1 / 8.1 / 5.9
Time to Throw	3.17 (37th)	2.33 / 2.80 / 3.30	2.80 (37th)	2.00 / 2.52 / 2.99
Big Time Throw Rate	6% (5th)	8% / 4% / 1%	6% (12th)	11% / 4% / 0%
Turnover Worthy Play %	3% (20th)	2% / 3% / 9%	4% (33rd)	0% / 3% / 14%
Sack %	9% (38th)	3% / 5% / 10%	12% (38th)	2% / 7% / 13%

A few thoughts:

- Fields was blitzed on 30% of dropbacks, the 13th highest rate in the NFL. The median blitz rate was 27%, so he was blitzed slightly more than normal.
- Notice how things change, on average, for NFL QBs when blitzed. They get the ball out more quickly and aim throws shorter, but this results in more completions and a higher yards/attempt. The reason defenses are still willing to blitz, then, is because it leads to more sacks and turnovers. It's a risk/reward proposition.
- Compared to his peers, Fields actually held up decently well against the blitz, at least in terms of completing passes and gaining yards. He did better in both of those areas when blitzed than not blitzed.
- The negative plays, however, were not good, as he was near the bottom in both turnover worthy play % and sack %. Part of the reason there is that Fields didn't get the ball out all that quickly, though he never really gets the ball out quickly. Still, Fields needs to improve at recognizing the blitz and getting the ball out before it can get home.

Lessons Learned

- Justin Fields was under pressure a ton, but it was mostly the fault of a poor offensive line, with center Sam Mustipher particularly sticking out as a problem.
- Fields let a high rate of those pressures turn into sacks, which was largely his fault. He needs to get better at either taking off running or getting the ball out when under pressure.
- Fields was a near elite level passer when kept clean, but that swung to him being very bad when under pressure. This puts a lot of stress on the offensive line, as he doesn't like to throw quickly, so they need to hold up and keep him clean for an extended period of time.
- Opposing teams blitzed Fields at a slightly higher than average rate, and this led to a high rate of sacks and turnovers. He needs to get better at recognizing the blitz and getting the ball out quickly.

Part Four: Rookie Progression

This piece looks at how Fields' performance changed as his rookie season wore on. All stats are from Pro Football Focus (PFF) unless otherwise noted.

General Overview

Let's start with a general look at Fields' stats over the course of the year. A few quick notes:

- They are split into three groupings (Weeks 2-5, 6-8, and 9-15), because each group showed some clear distinctions compared to earlier games that I'll point out below.
- The first and third groups were considered to be 3.5 games for the per-game stats, because Fields played about half of the Cincinnati (Week 2) and Baltimore (Week 11) games.
- Basic passing statistics are shown in blue, basic running statistics in orange, and advanced passing style statistics in green. Basic stats are from Pro Football Reference; advanced stats are from Next Gen Stats.

Weeks	Dropbacks/ Game	CMP %	YDS/ Pass	Runs/ Game	Yards/ Run	Sack %	Time to Throw	Air Yards/ Pass	Aggressive Throw %
2 - 5	29	50%	6.4	5.4	2.9	17%	2.71	9.4	28.1%
6 - 8	41	66%	6.2	8.0	7.7	12%	2.77	8.4	15.1%
9 - 15	43	58%	7.8	8.0	6.3	8%	3.15	9.9	13.9%

A few thoughts:

- Those first 3.5 games of Fields' career were rough. He only completed 50% of his passes, got sacked on 17% of dropbacks, and threw into tight coverage (aggressive throw) over 25% of the time. Basically, he didn't really know what he was doing. **It's fair to think that being thrown into the fire after the coaches went out of their way to NOT PREPARE him to play during training camp and the preseason hurt him in that regard.**
- Starting in Week 6, there are three drastic changes in how Fields operated that made me group these games differently.
    - The first is that the Bears started relying on him a lot more, which you can see by the big jump in dropbacks/game (includes all pass attempts, sacks, and Fields runs, which were mostly scrambles).
    - In the midst of this heavier usage, you can see Fields running the ball far more often and more effectively, which resulted in his sack rate dropping a bit (though it was still high, the league average was 6%).
    - You can also see Fields' throws into tight coverage drop significantly, which indicates he was doing a better job of finding open players to throw the ball to.

- All three of those Week 6 changes continued throughout the rest of the year, but two more significant factors changed starting in Week 9, which caused me to group those final games separately.
  - First, Fields' yards/attempt mark made a significant jump. It had been fairly steady in the first two samples but was drastically different in Weeks 9 and beyond. This wasn't driven by just one game, either; three of Fields' four outings in weeks 9+ featured a yards/attempt greater than 7, a feat which he had only accomplished once in his first 7 games.
    - For a little more context, Fields' 6.3 yards/attempt mark through Week 8 would have been 28th of 33 QBs with 200+ pass attempts in 2021, while that 7.8 mark would rank 5th.
  - Second, Fields' time to throw took a massive jump as well. Through Week 8, he was around league average in that 2.75 second range, while the 3.15 seconds he averaged from Week 9 on would have been the highest in the NFL in 2021.
    - Holding the ball too long can be a problem, as it opens you up to sacks, but Fields' sack rate dropped here. He even threw it into tight coverage less frequently.
    - Coming out of college, Fields was known as a guy who holds the ball and likes to push it deep. In those final few games of his rookie year, we see him figuring out how to make that style work. That bodes very well for the future.

Accuracy Issues

Given how drastically Fields improved over the course of the season, I want to look back at the specific areas where Fields struggled - identified in the last three articles - and see how those changed.

In Part I, we found Fields struggled with accuracy to several different zones in the field. The table below splits Fields' accuracy stats to those zones into Weeks 2-5 and 6+ and provides some context in how he ranked compared to 39 qualifying QBs from PFF. Areas where Fields was in the bottom 10 are highlighted in red, while those in the top 10 are green.

(Quick note: I didn't do the Week 6-8 and Weeks 9-15 split because sample sizes were too small. That would have left many of these with fewer than 10 throws.)

Stat	Weeks 2-5 Fields (rank)	Weeks 6+ Fields (rank)	NFL Best/Median/Worst
Accuracy Behind Line	80% (39th)	94% (20th)	100% / 94% / 86%
Accuracy 0-9 yards	55% (39th)	82% (21st)	88% / 83% / 75%
Accuracy 10-19 yards	53% (38th)	60% (23rd)	81% / 62% / 49%
Accuracy short middle	47% (39th)	82% (23rd)	91% / 83% / 73%
Accuracy Medium Middle	50% (38th)	41% (39th)	81% / 68% / 42%

A few thoughts:

- In most of the areas where Fields struggled with accuracy, we see him go from being the literal worst in the NFL (or really close to it) to an average to slightly below average passer. This is a 39 QB sample, so 20th would be the literal middle. That would seem to indicate most of the inaccuracy issues were due to Fields being uncomfortable throwing to WRs he had never been allowed to practice with during the first few games he played, and they went away a bit as he got more familiar with them.

- o With that said, Fields was billed as a QB with elite accuracy coming out of college, so average to below average is still not what we'd like to see. This is an area that still needs to be better for Fields in 2022.
- One zone where Fields did not improve was throwing to the middle of the field in the medium distance (10-19 yards). This has actually been highlighted as an area where QBs typically improve the most from year 1 to year 2, so hopefully we see that from Fields in 2022.

Non-Play Action and Quick Pass Struggles

In Part II, I found that Fields struggled mightily in non-play action (NPA) situations, as well as with quick passes that were thrown in under 2.5 seconds (U2.5). The table below shows how Fields did in those categories compared to the 39 qualifying NFL QBs. This time, the sample sizes were large enough that I could split into the three weekly groups. Once again, areas where Fields ranked in the bottom 10 were highlighted in red, while those in the top 10 were highlighted in green.

Stat	Weeks 2-5 Fields (rank)	Weeks 6-8 Fields (rank)	Weeks 9+ Fields (rank)	NFL Best/Median/Worst
NPA Accuracy %	50% (39th)	75% (16th)	69% (34th)	81% / 74% / 66%
NPA Turnover Worthy Play %	3% (17th)	7% (38th)	3% (17th)	1% / 3% / 9%
NPA Sack %	14% (39th)	10% (39th)	3% (1st)	3% / 6% / 10%
U2.5 Accuracy %	61% (39th)	80% (22nd)	67% (39th)	87% / 81% / 69%
U2.5 YDS/ATT	5.5 (37th)	6.5 (14th)	6.1 (23rd)	8.6 / 6.3 / 4.5
U 2.5 Big Time Throw %	2% (20th)	2% (20th)	2% (20th)	7% / 2% / 0%
U 2.5 Turnover Worthy Play %	2% (20th)	4% (38th)	4% (38th)	0% / 2% / 5%

A few thoughts:

- In the non-play action situations (top half of the table), Fields had three main areas of weakness identified earlier: accuracy, turnovers, and sacks.
  - o Accuracy clearly improved after the first few games, but still was not all that good. He went from terrible to bad here.
  - o Turnovers, it turns out, were actually only a huge deal in the middle sample, and that was really driven by one game, against Tampa Bay in Week 7. That game was responsible for 4 of the 13 turnover-worthy plays Fields was credited with in non-play action situations on the season. Removing that game drops Fields from 5th worst to just a little below average. We'd still like it to be better, but it doesn't seem to be as much of a consistent problem as originally thought.
  - o The area where we see clear improvement comes in sacks. Fields was the most sacked QB in non-play action situations through Week 8, and then the least sacked QB in those situations after that. I'm sure the truth lies somewhere in the middle, but he clearly figured out how to better avoid sacks late in the season.
- There were also several areas of concern identified in the quick passing game (bottom half of the table).
  - o Accuracy on these quick passes remained an issue for Fields throughout his rookie season. It did improve a bit after those initial few weeks, but still remained generally bad (averaging the last two samples together would leave Fields at 74%, still towards the bottom among NFL QBs).
  - o Fields did see his yards/attempt mark go from abysmal to around average, however, which indicates he at least got more efficient in these quick passes.
  - o Fields did not improve in making quick big-time throws (generally high accuracy passes that result in big gains), and he actually got worse at risking turnovers in these quick spots.

o All in all, I would say Fields' struggles in the quick game based on year-long stats were valid. This is an area of weakness that he needs to work on. And this makes sense, as Fields' main growth late in the year came from being able to hold the ball longer. He's a big game hunter, and he figured out how to do that in the NFL, but he also needs to figure out how to do the quick stuff less badly.

Pressure and Blitz Concerns

Part III in this series found that [Fields had difficulty holding up under pressure and when blitzed](#). The table below shows how that changed as his rookie season progressed. Once again, Fields' stats are shown relative to 39 qualified NFL QBs, with top 10 highlighted in green and bottom 10 highlighted in red.

Stat	Weeks 2-5 Fields (rank)	Weeks 6-8 Fields (rank)	Weeks 9+ Fields (rank)	NFL Best/Median/Worst
Pressured Accuracy	35% (39th)	61% (27th)	64% (18th)	76% / 63% / 46%
Pressured Turnover Worthy Play %	8% (36th)	11% (39th)	4% (16th)	0% / 5% / 11%
Pressure to Sack Rate	39% (39th)	27% (39th)	15% (12th)	11% / 17% / 29%
Blitzed Time to throw	2.75 (34th)	2.68 (32nd)	3.05 (39th)	2.00 / 2.52 / 2.99
Blitzed Turnover Worthy Play %	6% (37th)	8% (38th)	0% (1st)	0% / 3% / 14%
Blitzed Sack %	24% (39th)	5% (8th)	9% (29th)	2% / 7% / 13%

A few thoughts:

- Let's start with Fields when pressured (top half of the table), where we initially identified three areas of weakness. Let's see how they changed.
    o Accuracy: Wow, was that terrible those first few weeks Fields played. But it got steadily better as the season progressed, to the point that Fields was average in this measure for the later part of his rookie season.
    o Turnovers: these were really bad for the first two samples, but above average in the final one. Again, we see clear growth from Fields.
    o Sacks: we've already seen that Fields took fewer and fewer sacks as his rookie season progressed, and that shows up here when we look at how many of his pressures turned into sacks. He was unconscionably bad in the first few weeks, better but still terrible midseason, and then above average late.
    o Add it all up, and we see a QB who figured out how to play under pressure as his rookie season wore on. By the end of the year, Fields was an average to above average passer under pressure.
- Now, let's look at how Fields did when blitzed (bottom half of the table), where we also found three stats that stood out.
    o Time to throw + sacks: Fields actually took longer to throw against the blitz late in the season, which surprised me. His sack percentage when blitzed creeped back up compared to a pretty solid showing in the middle of the season, which probably goes hand in hand with holding the ball longer. Fields needs to improve getting the ball out quickly when the blitz is coming, but the high sack numbers were mostly driven by those awful first few weeks.
    o Turnovers: one thing Fields clearly improved late in the year was not turning it over when blitzed. He was really, really bad at this through week 8, and then really good at it starting in week 9. Let's hope that can continue going forward.

Lessons Learned

Fields clearly improved throughout his rookie season, and we can see that some of the apparent weaknesses found in his year-long data were no longer weaknesses late in the year. I wish he could have stayed healthy to give us a larger sample size in those last few games and confirm that those improvements were real. If we look only at Fields' later season performance, we have a rookie QB who was:

- Overall efficient moving the ball through the air, an elite running QB, and somebody who gets sacked at an above average (but not astronomical) rate.
- An excellent deep ball passer who is below average (but not terrible) in the short game.
- An elite passer in a clean pocket who is average to above average under pressure.
- An elite passer in play action who is below average-to-bad in non-play action situations.
- Bad in the quick game.
- Average to below average facing the blitz.

There are clearly still areas for improvement, but that's a much more promising profile than you would expect given Fields' abysmal rookie statistics. I think that provides plenty of reason for optimism around Fields heading into 2022.

Part Five: Explosive Plays

This piece looks at how efficiently Fields helped the offense produce explosive plays. All stats are from Pro Football Reference, with many of them compiled using their Game Play Finder tool.

Setting up the Study

I've been tracking explosive plays for several years now because I found they have a strong correlation to total points scored by the offense. Therefore, they're an important indicator of offensive success; by and large, good offenses produce more explosive plays.

The exact criteria I use for explosive plays are runs that gain 15 or more yards and passes that gain 20 or more yards. This is borrowed from ESPN Stats.

Normally I just track total explosive plays over an entire season, but that's a little harder to do here since Fields only played in 12 of 17 games, and only started 10 of them. **So, I'm going to take a slightly different approach and look at explosive plays per game and per play.** I'm going to split the Bears' season into three groups, and consider each group separately:

- Games Fields started and finished. There were nine.
- Games Dalton or Foles started and finished. There were six.
- Games split between Fields and Dalton. There were two: Cincy (Week 2) and Baltimore (Week 11). These are getting ignored, since I can't easily figure out who was on the field when explosive plays happened.

This will allow me to compare Fields' explosive play production to the NFL as a whole, but also to how the exact same offense functioned with a different QB.

Explosive Passes

I want to start with a graph for visual effect, because I think it's hilarious.

I'll get to a more typical table with concrete numbers in a second, but for now the graph below shows how many dropbacks (pass attempts + sacks) were needed to produce an explosive pass for all 33 QBs with 200+ passing attempts in 2021. The two Bears samples (Fields and the Dalton/Foles combo) have their dots shown in orange.
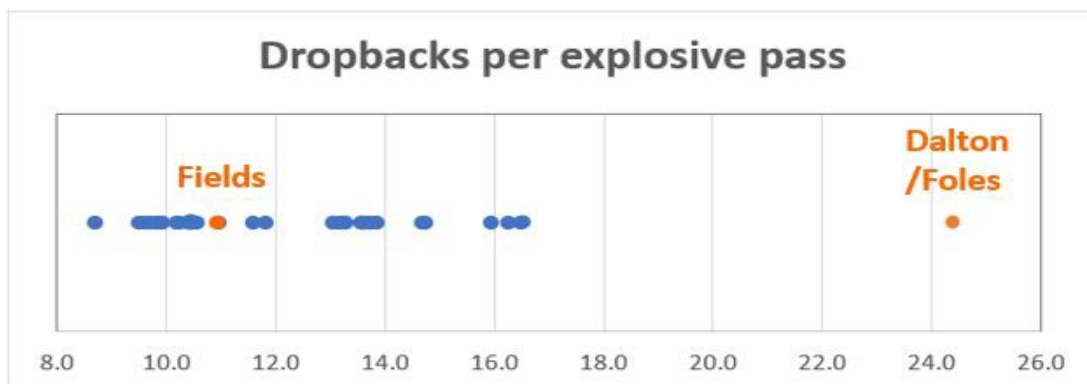
As you can see, Fields is right about in the middle of the pack, but look at the Dalton and Foles sample sitting way out to the right by itself! They're farther away from 32nd place than 32nd is from 1st. Those QBs are truly in a league of their own.

OK, enough making fun of the crappy veteran QBs that Chicago's last regime somehow thought were the answer to their problems the last 2 off-seasons. Now for some actual numbers. The table below shows this same data as the graph above, but also includes the Bears from 2020 and 2019, so you can see that this is not a new problem for Chicago.

Sample	Dropbacks/Explosive Pass
Bears 2019	16.0
Bears 2020	15.5
Dalton/Foles 2021	24.4
Fields 2021	10.9
NFL average 2021	11.9

A few thoughts:

- Chicago's passing game has been among the least explosive in the NFL for years. I'm not sure if that's due to bad scheme or bad quarterback play, but in reality, it's probably a combination of both.
- Look at Fields though - he produced explosive passes at an above average rate! That's not surprising considering we've already seen he throws it deep often and effectively, but it's still excellent news. Explosive plays lead to scoring points.

Explosive Runs

Now, Fields is going to skew this data quite a bit because he produced plenty of explosive runs on his own this year, but I first want to look at the non-Fields running game to see if Fields' presence impacted that at all. The table below shows some explosive running statistics for non-QB carries in games when Fields was the QB compared to games when Dalton or Foles were the QB. This looks at explosive runs on a per-carry basis (blue) and per-game basis (orange) and compares to the average for the defenses faced in each sample.

	Dalton/Foles	Fields
Games	6	9
Carries/Game	24.2	22.2
Explosive Carries/Game	0.5	1.1
Opponent Average	1.1	1.3
Carries/Explosive Carry	48.3	20.0
Opponent Average	26.5	19.8

A few thoughts:

- Here we see quite clearly how Fields' presence on the field changed what defenses had to worry about. Just the threat of him running opened things up for the running backs quite a bit, as they produced more than 2x the explosive runs on both a per-carry, and per-game basis compared to when the immobile Dalton or Foles was in the game.
- Chicago's running backs were laughably non-explosive when Dalton or Foles was the QB, but they did produce explosive carries at an average rate when Fields was there taking up defensive attention. If you're looking for reasons for optimism with David Montgomery going forward, he had five explosive runs on only 74 carries in games where Fields was the primary starter. For a little more context, this makes up five of Montgomery's 18 career explosive plays on only 74 of his 714 career carries. It's a small sample size (Montgomery missed 4 of the 9 games in Fields' sample) but would certainly help improve Montgomery's biggest issue - a lack of explosive production - if it continues into 2022.

Total Explosive Plays

Finally, let's examine total explosive plays. Here I extrapolated the nine-game Fields sample and six-game Dalton/Foles sample to a full 17-game season to get the easiest comparison to the rest of the NFL. Like we've seen throughout much of this series, categories ranking in the top 10 are highlighted in green, while those that rank in the bottom 10 are highlighted in red.

Stat	Fields Extrapolation (rank)	Dalton/Foles extrapolation (rank)	NFL High/Median/Low
Explosive Passes	46 (20th)	22 (32nd)	76 / 51 / 31
Explosive Runs	36 (1st)	9 (31st)	33 / 19.5 / 2
Total Explosive Plays	82 (11th)	31 (32nd)	92 / 75 / 44

A few thoughts:

- Again, I can't believe Ryan Pace and Matt Nagy thought Dalton and Foles were good moves the last two off-seasons. The offense with those two under center was laughably bad. Their performance extrapolated to 31 explosive plays over a full season, a full 13 below the actual worst team in the NFL.
- Look at those Fields numbers, though. With Fields on the field, the Bears had the 11th most explosive plays in the NFL, largely driven by the most explosive rushing attack in the NFL.
    - That run game explosion is in no small part due to Fields' explosive rushing ability. He was responsible for 9 of the 22 explosive rushes when he was the QB.
- The total explosive passing plays rank with Fields is slightly below average, but that's a bit misleading. Fields produced explosive passes at an above-average frequency on a per-dropback basis, but his passing volume per game was low, which hurts him here.
- This bodes extremely well for Chicago's offense going forward. From 2016-21, there were 31 teams who finished +/- 2 explosive plays from the Bears' season-long pace with Fields at QB. 16 of those 31 - more than half - finished in the top 10 in points scored, while only three finished in the bottom 10. 16 of them - again more than half - scored 26 or more points/game, while only two scored less than 20. The Bears averaged 17.2 points/game in Fields' nine game sample last year, but there is reason to believe that number should increase substantially if he continues to produce explosive plays at a similar per-game basis.

Lessons Learned

With any QB other than Justin Fields, the Bears have been one of the NFL's least explosive offenses over the last three seasons. When Justin Fields was playing, he was able to overcome a poor scheme and weak supporting cast to lead the NFL's most explosive rushing attack and produce explosive passing plays at an above-average rate on a per-play basis.

Given the strong relationship between explosive plays and points scored, the foundation is there for a Fields-led offense to be one of the better units in the NFL. For that to happen, the consistency between the explosive plays will need to improve, which tracks with much of what we've seen in this series so far.

Part Six: Offensive Hindrance

This piece examines if we can quantify how much the offense around him may have hurt Fields' production.

Dalton Dropoff?

My initial idea was to look at Andy Dalton's stats in Chicago compared to his previous seasons. Dalton has been on three different teams over the last three years - Cincinnati in 2019, Dallas in 2020, and Chicago in 2021 - so if his performance took a drastic drop in 2021 compared to the previous stops, that would be supporting evidence for the theory that Fields was hurt by the offense around him.

The table below examines Dalton's efficiency (blue) and playing style (orange) across his last three seasons. Deep throw % is from Pro Football Reference's Game Play Finder, while all other playing style stats are from Next Gen Stats.

Year	Team	CMP %	YDS/ ATT	Sack Rate	Time to Throw	% Deep Throws	Air Yards/ ATT	Aggressive Throw Rate
2019	CIN	59%	6.6	6.5%	2.51	15%	8.1	21%
2020	DAL	65%	6.5	6.7%	2.50	13%	7.0	15%
2021	CHI	63%	6.4	7.1%	2.64	15%	7.2	12%

As you can see, there doesn't actually appear to be much of a change across seasons. Dalton's sack rate rose a little in Chicago, but he also held the ball a little longer. Besides that, he was pretty much the same bad quarterback in all three years. You can argue Dalton had a similarly bad supporting cast in Cincinnati in 2019, but he played in a really good Dallas offense in 2020, and there is no evidence that going from that to Chicago hindered his performance.

Anecdotal Evidence

Of course, you could make the claim that Dalton is simply a bad QB, and that doesn't change no matter how good or bad the offense is around him. But that doesn't help us if we are trying to identify how (or how much) the supporting cast impacted Fields in 2021.

On the surface, it's reasonable to think that Fields' stats took a hit due to factors that are outside of his control. Consider the following:

- Two different sources said the Bears were able to get WRs open at the lowest rate of any team in the NFL.
- Related to that, there were plenty of complaints about the offensive scheme and play calling, which features a comically high rate of hitch routes for WRs, and, as we saw earlier this series, not as much play action as was warranted considering how well Fields did on play action.
- Somebody attempting to quantify how much help a QB received ranked Fields 28th of 32 NFL QBs, meaning only 4 other QBs got less help from the rest of their offense than Fields did as a rookie.

Clearly, it's fair to say that Fields wasn't operating in ideal circumstances as a rookie, but how much did that actually hurt his performance? I want to briefly look at three specific areas where Fields appeared to be impacted more than Dalton.

Drops

As we saw earlier in this series, Fields was hurt by drops more than most NFL QBs were. Pro Football Focus (PFF) said 7.6% of Fields' pass attempts were dropped, the 11th highest drop rate in the NFL and 1.4% above average. Pro Football Reference, which tracks drops separately, said Fields had 6.9% of his passes dropped, the 2nd highest rate in the NFL and 2.4% above average.

Given this, you would expect that Andy Dalton had an abnormally high drop rate as well. After all, he was throwing to the same targets. That does not prove to be the case, however. PFF had Dalton at a 5.1% drop rate, the 6th best mark in the NFL, while Pro Football Reference had it at 4.0%, the 8th best mark in the league.

I have no idea what to make of this data. Maybe it's just a fluke with a fairly small sample size of less than 300 pass attempts for both QBs. Maybe it's because Dalton throws shorter passes, which probably makes for easier catches. Maybe it's because Dalton's passes come in more softly due to a lack of arm strength, or maybe Fields needs to take a little off of some of his passes to make them more catchable. Whatever the reason, Justin Fields was hurt by drops far more than Andy Dalton was.

Pressure

Another area that varied greatly for both quarterbacks was pressure. We saw earlier in the series that Fields was under heavy pressure; PFF had him with the 3rd highest pressure rate, 8% above average, while Pro Football Reference had him with the 5th highest pressure rate, 4% above average. PFF also said that this pressure was not really his fault, but mostly due to an offensive line that ranged from below average-to-bad.

Dalton, by comparison, was not pressured nearly as frequently. PFF had him pressured 5% below league average (13% below Fields), while Pro Football Reference had him pressured 3% less than league average (7% less than Fields). The reason here is likely due to getting the ball out quickly. Dalton's average pass took 2.64 seconds, the 6th shortest time in the NFL, while Fields' took 2.91 seconds, the 7th longest time in the NFL (according to Next Gen Stats).

Given that Fields held the ball longer, you might be tempted to blame him for facing so much pressure, but it's worth noting that PFF blames both Fields (13.2%) and Dalton (13.6%) for equal amounts of the pressure they faced, and both are right around league average in this regard. So, it wasn't Fields' fault that he got pressured so frequently. Rather, Chicago's offensive line was simply not able to hold up for that extra quarter of a second that Fields held the ball compared to Dalton. Chicago's offense was designed to get the ball out quickly, which we have seen is not what Fields excels at, and they were unable to adequately adjust their scheme to account for Fields' playing style.

You might expect to see Chicago adjust their pass protection to buy Fields more time, but there is no evidence that happened. Chicago used an average of 5.3 pass blockers/snap in games where Dalton or Foles played the whole time compared to 5.4 pass blockers/snap in games where Fields played the whole time (hat tip to Quinten Krzysko, aka Butkus Stats, for helping me parse through PFF's data to figure out this information). Here we see

clear evidence that Chicago's coaching staff refused to adjust what they wanted to do in order to maximize their QB's strengths.

And that high pressure rate had an enormous impact on Fields. PFF stats indicated Fields was one of the NFL's best passers in a clean pocket, and one of the NFL's worst when pressured. He was 5x more likely to turn it over when pressured vs. kept clean, which was the 2nd biggest swing in the NFL. He also averaged 2.4 yards per attempt more when kept clean than pressured, the 6th highest swing in the NFL. Dalton did not see that same dropoff when unpressured; in fact, he was more likely to turn it over out of a clean pocket than when facing pressure.

Play Action

Finally, let's take a look at how play action impacted both Fields and Dalton. For starters, they used play action roughly equally; Fields utilized play action on 24% of dropbacks, while Dalton was at 21%. These values ranked 28th and 30th, respectively, out of 39 qualified QBs, and were both slightly below the NFL average of 26%.

But Dalton and Fields were impacted by play action far differently. PFF stats also indicated Fields was one of the NFL's best passers when using play action, and one of the worst when not using play action. He was more than 4x as likely to turn the ball over when not using play action, the largest swing in the NFL, and averaged 2.5 yards/attempt more when using play action, the 6th highest swing in the NFL. Dalton, meanwhile, was more likely to turn the ball over on play action.

Here again we see the coaches not tailoring their scheme to their talent. It makes sense to keep play action rates low for Dalton, as it didn't seem to help his performance, but Fields was one of the most play-action dependent QBs in the NFL, and the Bears didn't really change how often they used it when he was in the game. The most frequent play action using QBs in the NFL utilized it on 35-40% of their pass attempts, while Fields was at 24%. How much more effective would he have been with an extra 10-15% of his passes featuring play action?

Lessons Learned

So how much did the offense around Fields hurt him in his rookie season? It's impossible to say for sure, especially since there's no evidence that Andy Dalton's production dropped off in Chicago from his time in a good offense in Dallas in 2020. We do know that Fields was far more hurt by drops than Dalton was in 2021.

In general, it seems that Chicago's coaches designed an offense around Dalton's playing style, which focused on traditional dropbacks that allow the QB to get the ball out quickly. When Dalton got hurt and Fields took over as QB, they suddenly had a QB who excelled in play action and needed additional protection to buy him extra time to find shots down the field. But the Bears didn't change their play calling at all from when Dalton was in the game, which resulted in them asking Fields to play to his weaknesses instead of trying to maximize his strengths.

To be fair, it is on Justin Fields to improve when under pressure and not using play action. New GM Ryan Poles said as much. But it's also on the coaching staff to maximize Fields' strengths (which Poles also said), and the Bears very clearly didn't do that in 2021.

Part Seven: Rookie Comparison

So far, this series has focused on what Fields did well and where he struggled during his rookie season. Now I want to broaden this to think a bit about what it could mean for his future. In order to accomplish that, I'm going to compare Fields' stats in a wide variety of categories to those of every other rookie QB with at least 250 pass attempts in the last decade. All data will come from Pro Football Focus (PFF) unless otherwise noted.

Overall Comparison

Including Fields, there have been 37 QBs who attempted at least 250 passes during their rookie season over the last 10 years. The data below shows how Fields compared to the rest of the sample in a variety of wide-ranging metrics. Places where Fields ranked in the top 10 are highlighted in green, while those where he ranked in the bottom 10 are highlighted in red.

Stat	Fields (rank)	37 rookies with 250+ attempts		
		Best	Median	Worst
Completion %	59% (24th)	68%	61%	53%
Accuracy %	67% (35th)	80%	72%	65%
Yards/Attempt	6.9 (15th)	8.3	6.8	5.5
Target Depth	10.1 (5th)	11.5	8.6	7.4
Time to Throw	3.06 (36th)	2.51	2.81	3.35
Big Time Throw %	6.1% (4th)	7.9%	3.9%	1.9%
Turnover Worthy Play %	3.7% (15th)	1.8%	3.9%	6.6%

A few thoughts:

- Overall, this matches what we saw with Fields when compared to all 2021 QBs. He holds the ball a long time, pushes it down the field, doesn't complete a lot of passes, but is generally decent in yards/attempt, big time throws, and turnover worthy plays. He generally ranks a bit better in most areas when compared to other rookies than he did compared to all 2021 QBs, but that makes sense; most rookie QBs are bad.
- What do these stats mean going forward? I tried to look at a few of them to see if they could project anything.
  - If you do a simple big time throw - turnover worthy play analysis, Fields ranks 5th, and the guys around him are a pretty good list, with Ryan Tannehill, Justin Herbert, Andrew Luck, Robert Griffin III, and Mac Jones. That's certainly not a guarantee, but it's encouraging.
  - Of course, Fields having the 3rd worst accuracy is not good. Others near him in that category include DeShone Kizer, Geno Smith, Case Keenum, Josh Rosen, and EJ Manuel, which is blech, but Josh Allen and Andrew Luck are right there too, so it's not necessarily a death sentence on his career.

Data Split By Depth

Like I did earlier in this series, I want to take a little bit closer look at accuracy by splitting it up by depth. It's harder to throw an accurate pass when it's further down the field, but those passes carry more value because they gain more yards. Since Fields had a higher average target depth than most, maybe his seeming accuracy issues were really just him throwing deep more often.

The table below shows how Fields compared to the 37 QB sample of rookies with 250+ pass attempts in both frequency and accuracy of passes to different depths of the field. Once again, places where Fields ranked in the top 10 are highlighted in green, while those where he ranked in the bottom 10 are highlighted in red.

Zone	Stat	Fields (rank)	37 rookies with 250+ attempts		
			High	Median	Low
Behind LOS	Frequency	9% (35th)	23%	15%	7%
	Accuracy	91% (31st)	100%	94%	85%
0 - 9 yards	Frequency	49% (19th)	57%	49%	34%
	Accuracy	75 (32nd)	88%	79%	66%
10 - 19 yards	Frequency	25% (9th)	36%	23%	17%
	Accuracy	59% (26th)	80%	60%	40%
20+ yards	Frequency	17% (4th)	22%	13%	8%
	Accuracy	44% (13th)	53%	42%	20%

A few thoughts:

- Again, this is generally the same pattern that we saw when comparing to all QBs in 2021. In terms of frequency, Fields rarely threw it behind the line of scrimmage, and threw it pretty often to the medium and deep parts of the field. In terms of accuracy, he struggled in this area pretty much everywhere but throwing it deep.
- Looking at QBs with similar targeting patterns, others who targeted the medium and deep routes at a similar rate to Fields include Sam Darnold, Marcus Mariota, Baker Mayfield, and Russell Wilson. I think that says more about a QB's style than their effectiveness.
- I'm not too concerned about the accuracy behind the line of scrimmage, because that's a pretty small sample size for Fields, but the short field inaccuracy - which includes nearly half his pass attempts - is troublesome. Players with similar accuracy on short passes in their rookie season were Zach Wilson, Josh Rosen, Nick Foles, Andrew Luck, Blake Bortles, and Mitchell Trubisky. Apart from Andrew Luck, that's a whole lot of yikes.
    - If you want to feel slightly better, remember that Fields' short field accuracy improved dramatically after his first few weeks. In weeks 2-5, he was accurate on 55% of his short passes, which would be the worst in this sample by over 10%. From week 6 on, his short field accuracy was 82%, which nearly puts him into the top 10 (though it's comparing to other QB's full season data). There, the comparable list would be Carson Wentz, Dak Prescott, Justin Herbert, Kyler Murray, and Teddy Bridgewater.
- Overall, I think that's a good caution to reading too much into this data. It's not fair to say with absolutes that Fields is going to be good or is a bust; instead, I like to think of it as reasons for optimism and causes for concern that will be worth monitoring in 2022.

Under Pressure

We also saw earlier in the series that Fields' performance varied tremendously when he had a clean pocket compared to when he was pressured, so I want to look at how those stats compared to the rookie sample. The table below shows both how often Fields was pressured and how he performed under pressure compared to other rookies. Once again, places where Fields ranked in the top 10 are highlighted in green, while those where he ranked in the bottom 10 are highlighted in red.

Stat		Fields (rank)	37 rookies with 250+ attempts		
			Best	Median	Worst
Pressure Rate		43% (33rd)	28%	36%	47%
Pressure to Sack Rate		24% (31st)	11%	18%	29%
Not Pressured	Yards/Attempt	7.7 (11th)	9.5	7.3	5.9
	Big Time Throw %	7% (3rd)	9%	4%	1%
	Turnover Worthy Play %	1% (2nd)	1%	3%	6%
Pressured	Yards/Attempt	5.3 (18th)	7.8	5.3	3.7
	Big Time Throw %	5% (12th)	10%	4%	0%
	Turnover Worthy Play %	7% (33rd)	2%	6%	9%

- Again, we see similar trends as when we looked at this compared to all 2021 QBs. Fields was really, really good in a clean pocket, and not nearly as good relative to his peers when under pressure. He also was under pressure way too often, which we have already seen was not his fault, and let too many pressures turn into sacks, which was his fault but got significantly better as the season wore on.
- Looking at QBs comparable to Fields from a clean pocket gives a short list, as the only remotely comparable passers in terms of big time throws and turnover worthy plays were Russell Wilson and Baker Mayfield.
- If you do the same comparison when under pressure, however, the list is much less fun: Blake Bortles, Gardner Minshew, Joe Burrow, Mike Glennon, Austin Davis, Sam Darnold, Josh Rosen, and Geno Smith. Joe Burrow's presence there says that is not a death knell, but otherwise that list is a big yikes. Again, I wouldn't look at this as proof Fields is a bust, but rather a cause for concern that should be monitored going forward.
- A major contributing factor to Fields' turnover worthy play rate here is fumbles, as he finished 4th in the NFL with 12 fumbles in 2021. I was curious how common fumble issues are for QBs, and found that there have been 68 instances in the last 10 NFL seasons where a QB had at least 10 fumbles in a year (found using Pro Football Reference's Player Season Finder). QBs who appear on that list include Aaron Rodgers, Lamar Jackson (2x), Russell Wilson (4x), Peyton Manning, Andrew Luck (2x), Cam Newton, Deshaun Watson, Dak Prescott (2x), Matt Stafford, Derek Carr (5x), Josh Allen, Ryan Tannehill (2x), and Matt Ryan (3x). Five of those QBs won an MVP during that decade, so this isn't something to be super concerned about.
- The only other QB with 10+ fumbles and fewer than 300 pass attempts in a season was Lamar Jackson as a rookie. Like Fields, he only started for part of the year, and he had 12 fumbles in 7 starts. He's had 21 fumbles in 3 seasons (42 starts) since, so fumbling has remained something of an issue but gotten a lot better (that includes 9 fumbles during his 2019 MVP season). It seems likely something similar happens with Fields, where fumbles will always remain something of an issue but will probably not be as bad as they were in his rookie season.

Lessons Learned

Reasons for optimism and causes for concern to be found, depending on what you want to look at, but overall I don't think there's anything in this study that really tells us where Fields is headed in his career.

PFF also did a study looking at all of the 2021 rookie QBs and trying to forecast their possible career outcomes. Some of it is behind a paywall, but there are a few things I found interesting and want to pull out.

First, PFF has identified a number of their metrics that stay the most stable from a QB's rookie season to future years. The table below shows how Fields performed relative to other rookies (since 2006 in their study) in those metrics.

Metric	Percentile				
	Jones	Fields	Lawrence	Mills	Wilson
Success rate (EPA > 0)	97	59	77	53	13
PFF grade	84	64	31	25	14
Positively graded play %	63	69	27	14	23
Negatively graded play %	87	23	50	64	6
Turnover-worthy play % (High = fewer turnovers)	84	66	67	55	69
Scramble rate	17	98	55	36	41
Avg. depth of target	31	86	34	25	36
% of throws beyond the sticks	70	55	34	31	22
Time to throw (High = shorter)	80	9	33	81	14

Generally speaking, Fields did pretty well. The only metric where he was below average was negatively graded plays (and taking a long time to throw, but that's more of a stylistic thing than being good/bad). It should be noted, however, that each of these have a pretty low year-to-year correlation, so this doesn't mean for sure that Fields will be a good QB.

PFF also did a really interesting clustering, where they grouped QBs across the years who are really similar. Fields' rookie season ended up getting him placed in the "risk-taking" group of QBs who are willing to take chances in order to make big plays. The three names they mention him being similar to are Lamar Jackson, Josh Allen, and Jalen Hurts, which is not a bad list, and they said QBs like this typically make a larger than average jump between their 1st and 2nd seasons.

Finally, if you're looking for some concrete numbers on Fields' career outlook, PFF did some advanced forecasting to say what the % chances are that he ends up in a variety of categories compared to all NFL starting QBs. This only looks at those who get at least 1500 career pass attempts, so basically cuts off anybody worse than the Mitchell Trubisky's and Nick Foles' of the world. PFF's algorithm predicted Fields still has about a 1 in 3 chance of being better than average among that group, with about 7% odds of becoming an elite QB. That certainly doesn't seem very encouraging to me, but they did note that several QBs in a similar spot to Fields after their rookie season have ultimately turned out quite well.

Overall, PFF has found that we don't really know what a QB will be in NFL after rookie season, which is why their forecasting is so murky. We do, however, have a good idea what they will be by the end of year 2. 2022 will be a big season for Fields, and I can't wait to see what it looks like.