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NFL DRAFT 2017 SCOUTING REPORT: RB

JAMES CONNER, PITT

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CONTENTS

NFL Draft 2017 Scouting Report: RB James Conner, Pitt.....	2
James Conner, through the lens of our “Power RB” Scouting Algorithm	3
2017 NFL Combine data... ..	4
The NFL “Power RB” that James Conner most compares with statistically in college, within our system:	4
Table 527.....	5
2017 NFL Draft outlook... ..	6
NFL Outlook:	7
Copyright Statement	7

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NFL DRAFT 2017 SCOUTING REPORT: RB JAMES CONNER, PITT

**Our RB grades can and will change as more information comes in from Pro Day workouts, leaked Wonderlic test results, etc. We will update ratings as new info becomes available.*

**We use the term "Power RB" to separate physically bigger, more between-the-tackles-capable RBs from our "Speed RBs" group. "Speed RBs" are physically smaller but much faster/quicker, and less likely to flourish between the tackles.*

You likely know the bullet points back around on **James Conner**. In 2014, Conner was a breakout star for the University of Pittsburgh – 1,765 yards rushing and 26 TDs (13 games). The Heisman Trophy was in his future.

Leading into the 2015 season, doctors find a spot of cancer inside Conner and he loses the 2015 season undergoing cancer treatment. With his football future in question, Conner fights his way back to the field in 2016 and has a pretty good season but nothing like his magical 2014 campaign. The dip is understandable because of what he fought through in 2015 – actually, it's pretty damn amazing.

Conner earns an NFL Combine invite in 2017 and runs an acceptable/OK 40 time (4.65) for his size (233 pounds) and a so-so three-cone (7.14 at his Pro Day) – NFL-worthy measurables but nothing spectacular. His draft rankings are all over the place because of his unusual backstory, but he becomes a late third-round draft pick of the Pittsburgh Steelers – in part because the university and pro teams work at the same practice facilities and thus the Steelers are very familiar with Conner.

After the heartwarming climb back from cancer to an NFL draftable commodity, everyone's next thought is – hey, wait...**Le'Veon Bell** is potentially going to be a free agent after 2017, plus he's had all those drug testing issues. Is **James Conner** the planned future for the Steelers backfield?

With that in mind, I set out to take a deeper look at Conner as an NFL prospect. Our grades on him are OK but nothing special. An acceptable, average athlete as measured at the Combine. Solid production numbers in college. There are some things to like here, but is he really the Le'Veon replacement?

The short answer is: No.

Another short answer is – I don't think he's a very good running back...sadly.

I was rooting for the guy. I just assumed I'd like him/his tape overall...maybe even discover that he's a little more special and that his 2014 season was foretelling of a future star derailed by the cancer of 2015. Nope. He's just a typical good college running back with NFL size and design athleticism, but overall below average skills for the NFL.

The main thing that jumped out at me, watching Conner's 2014, was that the Pitt Panthers had an amazing offensive line...because Conner has wide open holes blown open for him. You take a solid NFL athlete at 230+ pounds and giving him open space to take on college secondaries – he's going to produce. When I think of Conner's tape...I think of a guy running through wide open holes.

When the holes weren't wide open, Conner was an average big man running into traffic. Conner is noticeably slower when having to shift gears or when he tries to take an inside run and kick it to the outside...it's a dramatic, noticeable slowdown. It's not going to play well at the next level. In addition, his hands are so-so in the passing game.

In the end, you have a big guy who can use his size to grind for yards who's OK-not-great between the tackles and offers little else to the outside...as a runner or receiver.

Conner is a great guy and man, do I hope I am wrong. I wanted to be wrong. If I'm being honest – Conner just doesn't have the 'it' in his legs for the NFL. He can hang. He can play a small role. He's not likely to be a long-term workhorse for the NFL...unless he loses 10–15 pounds and he gets much quicker. I am not blaming or excusing his feet for the illness of 2015 because I used 2014 tape for most of the study.

JAMES CONNER, THROUGH THE LENS OF OUR “POWER RB” SCOUTING ALGORITHM

Caught 18 passes and scored 4 receiving TDs in 2017, but Pitt ran a little shuffle/shuttle pass a lot near the red zone and that boosted Conner's pass-game numbers.

In 2014, against the four toughest opponents he faced (Iowa, Va. Tech, Miami, Houston), Conner took 82 carries for 405 yards...a more moderate 4.9 yards per carry.

In 2014, Conner had four games rushing for 170+ yards...he took 30+ carries in each of those games. Some of Conner's nice tallies come from more heavy workloads.

2017 NFL COMBINE DATA...

6'1"/233, 9.9" hands, 31.3" arms

4.65 40-time (Combine)...4.40 shuttle and 7.14 three-cone (Pro Day)

20 bench reps, 29.0" vertical, 9'5" broad jump

THE NFL "POWER RB" THAT JAMES CONNER MOST COMPARES WITH STATISTICALLY IN COLLEGE, WITHIN OUR SYSTEM:

OK, Conner as a **Jeremy Hill**-like projection makes sense – big, straight-ahead runner that can work for a spell in the NFL...but isn't going to be a star. Hill eventually came back to earth after his nice rookie campaign in the NFL. Hill is no better than just a part of ensemble, not a long-term, main-carry star...same for Conner.

TABLE 527

Rating	RB-Re	RB-Ru	Name	Name	College	Yr	H	H	Weight	Speed	Agility	Power
4.397	0.36	4.50	Conner	James	Pitt	2017	6	1.4	233	-4.20	-4.36	8.16
6.385	0.54	5.57	Hill	Jeremy	LSU	2014	6	0.5	233	-2.78	-6.65	7.60
4.230	1.67	2.99	Torian	Ryan	Arizona State	2008	6	0.3	225	-0.46	0.76	7.43
4.629	-0.93	4.26	Dwyer	Jonathan	Georgia Tech	2010	5	11.2	228	-2.26	-6.79	5.26
1.524	-0.52	0.42	Coleman	Derrick	UCLA	2012	5	11.3	230	0.38	-4.24	7.26
2.533	2.35	1.26	Houston	Cedric	Tennessee	2005	5	10.6	225	-0.59	-0.79	6.61
1.045	1.07	0.01	Harris	Alonzo	La-Lafayette	2015	6	1.0	237	-3.74	-2.55	5.79

**A score of 8.50+ is where we see a stronger correlation of RBs going on to become NFL good/great/elite. A score of 10.00+ is more rarefied air in our system and indicates a greater probability of becoming an elite NFL RB.*

All of the RB ratings are based on a 0–10 scale, but a player can score negative, or above a 10.0 in certain instances.

Overall rating/score = A combination of several on-field performance measures, including refinement for the strength of opponents faced, mixed with all the physical measurement metrics – then compared/rated historically within our database and formulas. More of a traditional three-down search – runner, blocker, and receiver.

RB-Re score = **New/testing in 2017. Our new formula/rating that attempts to identify and quantify a prospect's receiving skills even deeper than in our original formulas. RB prospects can now make it/thrive in the NFL strictly based on their receiving skills – it is an individual attribute sought out for the NFL and no longer dismissed or overlooked. Our rating combines a study of their receiving numbers in college in relation to their offense and opponents, as well as profiling size-speed-agility along with hand-size measurables, etc.*

RB-Ru score = **New/testing in 2017. Our new formula/rating that attempts to classify and quantify an RB prospect's ability strictly as a runner of the ball. Our rating combines a study of their rushing numbers in college in relation to their offense and strength of opponents, as well as profiling size-speed-agility along with various size measurables, etc.*

Raw Speed Metric = A combination of several speed and size measurements from the NFL Combine, judged along with physical size profile, and then compared/rated historically within our database and scouting formulas. This is a rating strictly for RBs of a similar/bigger size profile.

Agility Metric = A combination of several speed and agility measurements from the NFL Combine, judged along with physical size profile, and then compared/rated historically within our database and scouting formulas. This is a rating strictly for RBs of a similar/bigger size profile.

2017 NFL DRAFT OUTLOOK...

I was a little surprised Conner went in the top 105 picks in the 2017 NFL Draft. I get he has size and has super-high character, but he's not **Le'Veon Bell**-like at

