



**DAILY CLIPS**

**SATURDAY,  
OCTOBER 24, 2020**

**LOCAL NEWS: Saturday, October 24, 2020**

**Pioneer Press**

**Dane Mizutani: All aboard Rick Spielman's train of excuses for 1-5 Vikings**

By Dane Mizutani

<https://www.twincities.com/2020/10/23/dane-mizutani-all-aboard-rick-spielmans-train-of-excuses-for-1-5-vikings/>

**SKOR North**

**Who will be the Vikings' next quarterback? That depends on who's in the general manager's chair**

By Judd Zulgad

<https://www.skornorth.com/who-will-be-the-vikings-next-quarterback-that-depends-on-whos-in-the-general-managers-chair/>

**Purple Insider**

**Ngakoue trade is another example of the Vikings always paying the highest price**

By Matthew Coller

<https://purpleinsider.substack.com/p/ngakoue-trade-is-another-example>

**NATIONAL NEWS: Saturday, October 24, 2020**

**ESPN**

**Minnesota Vikings great Matt Blair dies at age 70**

By Associated Press

[https://www.espn.com/nfl/story/\\_/id/30173067/minnesota-vikings-great-matt-blair-dies-age-70](https://www.espn.com/nfl/story/_/id/30173067/minnesota-vikings-great-matt-blair-dies-age-70)

**Maven Media**

**Rookie D.J. Wonnum Could See Major Role With Yannick Ngakoue Gone**

By Will Ragatz

<https://www.si.com/nfl/vikings/news/vikings-future-de-dj-wonnum-jordan-brailford-yannick-ngakoue>

**Justin Jefferson Named NFL Rookie of the Week for Week 6**

By Will Ragatz

<https://www.si.com/nfl/vikings/news/justin-jefferson-pepsi-nfl-rookie-of-the-week-6-lsu>

**VIKINGS ENTERTAINMENT NETWORK: Saturday, October 24, 2020**

**6 Takeaways from 2020 Vikings Approaching the Bye Week**

By Eric Smith, Craig Peters and Lindsey Young

<https://www.vikings.com/news/2020-bye-week-6-takeaways>

**Lunchbreak: Reactions to Vikings Trading Ngakoue to Ravens**

By Craig Peters

<https://www.vikings.com/news/yannick-ngakoue-trade-reactions-vikings-to-ravens>



**PUBLICATION: Pioneer Press DATE: 10/24/20**

## **Dane Mizutani: All aboard Rick Spielman's train of excuses for 1-5 Vikings**

**By Dane Mizutani**

Vikings general manager Rick Spielman talked to reporters for nearly 30 minutes Thursday, stumbling his way through multiple excuses to explain how his team has gone from Super Bowl contender to NFL laughing stock in no time flat.

He started off talking about how devastating it was to lose defensive end Danielle Hunter and linebacker Anthony Barr, a point that would have been far more impactful had he not immediately followed it up with lumping those losses in with second-string linebacker Ben Gedeon's injury and third-string linebacker Cam Smith's heart surgery.

The train of excuses had left the station at that point, then Spielman made stops at the coronavirus pandemic, the lack of preseason games and the inexperienced secondary along the way, as he tried to rationalize a 1-5 start that has the Vikings in a race with the New York Jets for the worst record in the league.

At no point did Spielman bring up the most obvious reason for the struggles: the fact that he severely misjudged the roster this offseason.

While most outsiders could see the Vikings were going to be a team in transition in 2020 — especially after losing star receiver Stefon Diggs, veteran defensive end Everson Griffen, hulking nose tackle Linval Joseph and longtime cornerback Xavier Rhodes, among others — Spielman tried to rebuild the roster on the fly.

Instead of taking his medicine and realizing the Vikings might have to take a step back to make a leap forward, Spielman convinced himself they could still contend at a high level. That was his biggest mistake to date.

He extended quarterback Kirk Cousins' contract to create enough salary cap space to give running back Dalvin Cook a big-bucks extension. He then traded a second-round draft pick and a fifth-round pick for defensive end Yannick Ngakoue in the preseason.

It was a series of win-now moves for a team that was no longer in position to do that.

Whether that was done out of individual stubbornness or organizational hubris, it has backfired immensely, and the Vikings are now staring at what looks to be a lengthy rebuild that probably could have been avoided.

Like the aging defense continues to show on a weekly basis, Spielman, too, appears to be past his prime.

Perhaps finally realizing the Vikings are in no position to contend this season, he suddenly traded Ngakoue to the Baltimore Ravens on Thursday for a third-round draft pick and a fifth-round pick. That helped the Vikings recoup some draft capital, though not even close to all of it. They will have to live with trading a pick that likely will end up in the late 30s or early 40s of the draft for a pick that very well could be in the 80s. All to get six games out of Ngakoue.

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The more pressing issue here is that the Vikings are saddled with Cousins for the foreseeable future. While Spielman was able to partially right his wrong by offloading Ngakoue this week, he is in no position to do that with Cousins.

It would cost the Vikings \$41 million against the salary cap next season to cut Cousins. Which means they are stuck with him until after the 2022 season when his contract finally runs out.

Spielman tried Thursday to shift the focus to the rest of this season, reminding us the Vikings can get back on track next Sunday by beating the rival Green Bay Packers. It was a tone-deaf statement from Spielman amid the worst start in nearly a decade and a glaring example of how the Vikings got to this point in the first place.

With this season already in the tank, Spielman should be taking ownership for his previous missteps and laying out a plan for the future. Not talking about how a special-teams player having heart surgery somehow played a role in this 1-5 start.



**PUBLICATION: Skor North DATE: 10/24/20**

## Who will be the Vikings' next quarterback? That depends on who's in the general manager's chair

**By Judd Zulgad**

Former NFL quarterback and now NFL Network analyst David Carr wrote a column for the league's website this week in which he identified offensive players who could be moved before the Nov. 3 trade deadline. Carr's first suggestion included three teams that might be good fits for Jets quarterback Sam Darnold. The Jets are the only winless team left in the NFL and the expectation is, if they finish with the worst record in the league, they will grab Clemson quarterback Trevor Lawrence with the top pick in the draft.

Carr suggests the Jets might be wise to move Darnold as soon as possible and that New England, San Francisco and, yes, the 1-5 Vikings could be potential landing places. This is an interesting path to explore, considering how mismanaged Darnold has been since he was the third pick in the 2018 draft. How Jets coach Adam Gase still has a job is a mystery. Darnold has started 30 games in three seasons and the Jets are 11-19. He has thrown 39 touchdowns and 32 interceptions with a 59.8 completion percentage.

Here's what Carr wrote about the Darnold-Vikings connection:

The Vikings are in a world of hurt financially when it comes to their rapidly declining quarterback. Kirk Cousins signed a two-year, \$66 million contract extension in March, but it seems highly unlikely that the team would part ways with him this offseason, given that doing so would result in \$41 million in dead money counting against Minnesota's salary cap in 2021, according to Over the Cap. Might the Vikings trade for a QB with a high ceiling who's still playing on his rookie contract? They're going to have to do something, because Cousins isn't getting it done, and backup Sean Mannion hardly seems like the answer.

This is an intriguing idea — one that was broached shortly before this article appeared on the Mackey & Judd podcast — and should not be dismissed. Darnold is only 23 years old and likely needs to get into a functional situation as soon as possible, or his career will be ruined. He is in the third year of his rookie contract, making \$3.2 million this season and \$4.6 million next year before the fifth-year option becomes an issue.

Cousins will make \$21 million guaranteed next season and carry a \$31 million cap hit, but, as Carr points out, Darnold's contract is reasonable enough that adding him to the Vikings' roster is a possibility that could give the team its quarterback of the future. So should the Vikings do it? Absolutely, not. At least not yet.

The decision by general manager Rick Spielman to trade defensive end Yannick Ngakoue to Baltimore for two draft picks on Thursday was met with applause from this corner, along with the suggestion that that deal should only be the start before the trade deadline arrives. A response from some on social media has been that Spielman shouldn't be making trades, if there's a chance he's going to be fired at the end of the season by owners Zygi and Mark Wilf.

Despite the fact Spielman got a contract extension this summer, there is a chance ownership will look at a disappointing season, along with the decision to give Cousins an extension, and decide to go in a different direction. Even if this happens, there is no downside to trading away veterans such as Ngakoue, Kyle Rudolph, Anthony Harris and Riley Reiff. Harris is playing on the one-year franchise tag and is almost certainly going to sign elsewhere in March. Rudolph and Reiff have time left on their contracts, but are almost certainly not going to return to Minnesota.

So if Spielman can get draft picks for these players now, ownership should encourage it. What the Wilfs can't support is allowing Spielman to make a decision on the Vikings' next quarterback, especially if they are thinking about making a change. Spielman joined the Vikings in 2006 and became GM in 2012. His quarterback track record has been spotty at best. It was Spielman's decision to take Christian Ponder with the 12th pick in the 2011 draft. The Vikings' starting QBs since that time have included Matt Cassel, Josh Freeman, Teddy Bridgewater, Sam Bradford, Case Keenum and Cousins.

Bridgewater, the final pick in the first round of the 2014 draft, might have been a hit but a devastating leg injury derailed his career. Bradford, acquired to replace Bridgewater, also couldn't overcome injury issues, and Keenum,

who got the Vikings to the 2017 NFC title game under coach Mike Zimmer, was a back up before that season and has returned to that role in Cleveland.

Cousins was supposed to be the answer, but the Vikings failed to make the playoffs in 2018, were eliminated in the second round last season and are headed nowhere this year. So if Spielman is going to be shown the door, or if that remains a possibility, why force the next GM, and maybe the next coach, to take on a quarterback they might not want?

There are many directions a new GM could take the Vikings, including looking to make a move so the team can grab Lawrence or Justin Fields at the top of the draft. What could help accomplish that is for Spielman to continue acquiring draft picks before the trade deadline. But as far as the quarterback position goes, the man known as Trader Rick should be told to put his phone down for now.



**PUBLICATION: Purple Insider DATE: 10/24/20**

## **Ngakoue trade is another example of the Vikings always paying the highest price**

**By Matthew Coller**

We all have a friend who does exactly what the Minnesota Vikings have done over the past three years.

That pal who spends extra on the impractical car that's out of their price range. They don't just re-do the floors in their house, they add an entire new wing. Everyone knows someone who takes everyone out for steak when ordering pizza would have done the trick. They buy their kids brand new hockey skates instead of going to Play It Again Sports.

Since 2017, the Vikings have always paid top dollar for everything. While it's a credit to their ownership, it's not a sign of a savvy shopper. And just like the overly-generous friend, the bill eventually comes and then they have to scramble to pay it.

The Vikings' trade of Yannick Ngakoue to the Baltimore Ravens was the team paying the latest bill to come.

When they acquired for Ngakoue in August, he was sitting out of Jacksonville training camp. He was coming off a season in which he produced a solid eight sacks and PFF graded him as the 25th best defensive end in the NFL.

Now they didn't exactly move heaven and earth to get him like Chicago did when they sent two first-round picks to the Raiders for Khalil Mack but it wasn't a bargain either. The Ravens acquired fellow Jag D-linemen Calais Campbell for a fifth-round pick.

Just six games later, the Vikings clearly decided that Ngakoue wasn't going to be worth signing a long-term mega deal and they moved him to Baltimore for a third-round pick.

They paid the bill with interest in the form of dropping approximately 50 spots in the draft and — as Jason Fitzgerald of OverTheCap wrote — potentially alienating the locker room by forcing Riley Reiff to take a pay cut for a deal that blew up before the clocks changed.

While GM Rick Spielman said on Thursday that the team envisioned Ngakoue being paired with Danielle Hunter — who is on injured reserve and will have season-ending surgery per NFL Network — the trade for Ngakoue was either knee-jerk reaction to his injury or they expected Ngakoue to be better and eventually sign him long term.

If the Ngakoue trade was the only time the Vikings recently overpaid for something that didn't return its value, maybe you shrug your shoulders. Everyone splurges sometimes. But recent history has seen the Vikings pay a premium mark for everyone and it's put them in a difficult cap situation and left plenty of holes to be filled with hopes and dreams of rookies or developing players rising to the occasion (which has rarely happened this year outside of Justin Jefferson).

Everyone believes Dalvin Cook is a top running back in the NFL but a team that was realistic about rebuilding probably trades him before the season rather than signing him to a contract that carries a \$12 million cap hit in 2022 and \$6 million in dead money if they cut him after that. Cook has been marvelous and the Vikings are 1-5, which speaks to the overall impact of the position.

Rather than going into the season with future flexibility at quarterback, the Vikings signed Kirk Cousins to a massive contract extension that carries a \$31 million cap hit next year and \$45 million hit in 2022. In fact, Cousins has a higher cap hit in 2020, 2021 and 2022 than Patrick Mahomes. And it's a deal that's very difficult to get out from under if they aren't pleased with the results.

Why did they pay him on the first day of free agency? To sign an expensive nose tackle when nose tackles often come on the cheap.

“Kirk coming off what he did last year, he had his best year in the NFL, and coming back in the same system and us being able to renegotiate and extend that contract gave us some flexibility from a cap standpoint to go out and get a Mike Pierce, to do an extension with a Dalvin Cook and some of the other things we were able to do in the offseason,” Spielman said.

In 2018, it was understandable to sign the shiny thing in Cousins. They were coming off an NFC Championship appearance and felt that an upgrade at quarterback was needed to get back. But they paid literally the largest contract in NFL history in guaranteed money to get a QB with zero previous playoff wins. The price was, as we discovered via a Cousins documentary, jacked up by the New York Jets.

Savvy cap management helped the Vikings keep signing expensive things but Cousins’s initial \$84 million deal forced them to paper over some holes that came back to bite them — a la the No. 3 receiver and guard positions in 2018 and 2019.

Other money was spent on re-signing Anthony Barr to a deal worth \$13.5 million per year. Again, a good player but they didn’t him on the cheap. Over the last two years, Barr has ranked 24th and 30th of 50 linebackers by PFF. Even if his value to the defense is greater than that as Zimmer often argues, Barr has a \$12.7 million cap hit this year and over \$15 million next year. It was not exactly a Moneyball decision.

In no particular order — the Vikings could have traded Anthony Harris but instead elected to pay him on the franchise tag, a cost of \$11.4 million this year, fifth most in the NFL this year. They gave a contract extension to Kyle Rudolph worth the seventh highest cap number this year. They kept Everson Griffen before 2019 on a deal that carried a \$8 million cap hit. More good players at high prices.

Another way to look at the Ngakoue trade is that the bill came last offseason when they saw Griffen, Xavier Rhodes, Trae Waynes, Mackensie Alexander and Linval Joseph exit and Ngakoue was your friend trying one more swipe on a maxed out credit card. They made the move while carrying \$21 million in dead cap space.

If we go back through all the moves one by one, there are reasonable justifications for all of them — the same way your friend has good reason to get the big truck that can carry their outdoor gear in the back. But the accumulation of always paying top dollar for everything in a sports world that is focusing heavily on efficiency has put the Vikings in a position to take a big hit when one of their big buys doesn’t pan out.

One of the issues in terms of team building philosophy is that things like defense and offensive line play are more about the holes than they are the shiny toys. You are only as good as your weakest link and when you can’t afford to renovate the weak links, the holes cause the entire thing to fall apart.

And when you miss on the players considered the “one last piece to the puzzle,” you end up at the bottom of the division, looking up.

The coincidence here is that the Vikings didn’t build the NFC Championship team this way. When Zimmer arrived, they built it on the back of draft picks and found a handful of really good small-time buys on the free agent market like Linval Joseph, Captain Munnerlyn and Terence Newman. They had some really nice bargain-bin finds like Nick Easton in a trade with San Francisco, Joe Berger in free agency, even reasonably-priced right tackle Mike Remmers was solid in 2017. The plan at quarterback was initially Teddy Bridgewater on a rookie deal.

Now that they have acknowledged with the Ngakoue trade (though they have not said it out loud) that rebuilding in some capacity needs to happen, the Vikings have an opportunity to shop wisely in the future. The question is whether the current administration will get the chance to make the shopping list again after maxing out the credit cards with little to show for it.



**PUBLICATION: ESPN DATE: 10/24/20**

## **Minnesota Vikings great Matt Blair dies at age 70**

**By Associated Press**

MINNEAPOLIS -- Matt Blair, one of the greatest linebackers in Minnesota Vikings history and a six-time Pro Bowler who played in two Super Bowls, has died. He was 70 years old.

His death was announced by the team. Blair, who had been suffering from dementia, died Thursday after an extended period in hospice care, according to the Star Tribune.

"He'd been suffering for a while, so I guess maybe it's a blessing in disguise," former teammate Scott Studwell told the newspaper. "But it's still too young. It's a sad day."

Vikings owner Mark Wilf said in a statement: "Matt Blair was a great presence at Vikings events and a tremendous teammate long after playing. He embodied the best of what it means to be a Viking. Matt is a Ring of Honor player whose legacy will live on forever with the franchise and in the community he loved."

Drafted in the second round out of Iowa State, Blair played all 12 of his NFL seasons for the Vikings, from 1974 to 1985. He started 130 of the 160 regular-season games he played, racking up 1,452 tackles, the second most in team history.

He finished his career with 16 interceptions, 20 fumble recoveries and 20 blocked punts, extra points and field goals.

In a 2015 interview with the Star Tribune, then-64-year-old Blair began crying, saying a neurologist told him and his wife, Mary Beth, that his early signs of dementia were likely the result of chronic traumatic encephalopathy, or CTE, a degenerative brain disease linked to concussions. CTE cannot be diagnosed until after death.



**PUBLICATION: Maven Media DATE: 10/24/20**

## **Rookie D.J. Wonnum Could See Major Role With Yannick Ngakoue Gone**

**By Will Ragatz**

The Vikings traded Yannick Ngakoue to the Ravens on Thursday morning, salvaging a third-round pick in what amounts to a failed investment. They acquired Ngakoue from the Jaguars in late August with the idea that he would help lead them to contention in 2020, but then pulled the plug on the experiment after a 1-5 start, knowing that the star pass-rusher would cost a great deal to retain next season and beyond.

From a big-picture perspective, the move signals the beginning of a potential rebuilding phase in Minnesota, even if GM Rick Spielman won't admit it.

But when looking at the short-term outlook, it means a struggling Vikings pass rush has gotten even worse. With Ngakoue in Baltimore and Danielle Hunter out for the season, Mike Zimmer and Andre Patterson will be forced to turn to an uninspiring group of defensive ends: Ifeadi Odenigbo, Jalyn Holmes, D.J. Wonnum, and Jordan Brailford.

Odenigbo is the clear best player among that group. He actually leads the Vikings with 21 pressures this season, five more than Ngakoue's 16. Odenigbo only has 2.5 sacks to show for it compared to Ngakoue's five, but that can be a fairly random stat in small sample sizes. Also notable is that Odenigbo – who is a restricted free agent after this season – is the Vikings' best run defender at DE and is one of the best in the NFL in that department, according to ESPN analytics.

Screen Shot 2020-10-22 at 7.59.14 PM

Holmes has had a couple good games this season but is a fourth-year player who has basically been a replacement-level defensive lineman during his NFL career.

### ADVERTISING

Perhaps the most exciting player in the Vikings' new quartet of DEs is rookie D.J. Wonnum, who they selected in the fourth round out of South Carolina this year. He was inactive in the season opener but has played at least 18 snaps in each of the past five games, including a career-high 33 last week against the Falcons.

Through five games, Wonnum has four pressures, three hurries, and a sack. He has looked like a raw 22-year-old most of the time, but has showed some very intriguing flashes. Wonnum turned his career-high in playing time last weekend into his best performance, with two run stops, a QB hurry, and a 73.2 grade from PFF against Atlanta.

Wonnum's calling cards coming out of South Carolina were his athleticism, length, and the upside that those traits give him. He had just 14 sacks and 29.5 tackles for loss during his college career, but Patterson was enamored with his tape. The Vikings' veteran defensive line coach and co-DC pounded the table for Wonnum during the draft process, and Spielman granted those wishes by selecting him 117th overall.

All of the traits are there for Wonnum: he's 6'5" with long arms and good speed, explosiveness, and agility.

The physical tools and lack of elite college production drew easy comparisons to Danielle Hunter, another hand-picked choice of Patterson who has developed into one of the most dominant edge rushers in football. Wonnum has a long ways to go – refining his technique, getting stronger, adding pass rushing moves to his arsenal, becoming a more complete defender – just to become a starting-caliber DE, much less a player like Hunter.

### ADVERTISING

Over the next ten games, the Vikings will be able to get a long look at what Wonnum can do as he hopefully improves with more and more reps. I'd expect that Odenigbo and Holmes will be listed as the team's starting DEs, but Wonnum should see a ton of work in that rotation and could wind up starting over Holmes before too long.

Another player who could get some run is Brailford, who the Vikings poached from Washington's practice squad earlier this month. The Oklahoma State product was a seventh-round pick in 2019 and fits the Vikings' mold in terms of raw athleticism. He's a bit undersized, with a build similar to Ngakoue's, but has great burst. The Vikings will likely give Brailford some snaps down the stretch to see if he has a chance to develop into an interesting player.

With Ngakoue gone and Hunter out, Patterson and the Vikings can use these final ten games to evaluate their four defensive ends and see who fits into the puzzle in 2021 and beyond.



**PUBLICATION: Maven Media DATE: 10/24/20**

## **Justin Jefferson Named NFL Rookie of the Week for Week 6**

**By Will Ragatz**

Vikings receiver Justin Jefferson was named the Pepsi NFL Rookie of the Week for his nine-catch, 166-yard, two-touchdown performance in Minnesota's loss to the Falcons last weekend.

The weekly award is based on fans voting for one of five different candidates. With 42 percent of the vote, Jefferson beat out Lions RB D'Andre Swift, Giants LB Tae Crowder, Chiefs RB Clyde Edwards-Helaire, and Falcons CB A.J. Terrell.

Somehow, this is only the first ROTW honor for Jefferson during his electrifying start to the 2020 season. His big breakout game was back in Week 3 against the Titans, when the LSU product caught seven passes for 175 yards and a touchdown. However, he lost the voting to 49ers receiver Brandon Aiyuk that week, despite Aiyuk having just 101 yards from scrimmage and a score.

### ADVERTISING

Chargers quarterback Justin Herbert is the only player to win the award multiple times, taking it in Weeks 2, 4, and 5. Jaguars cornerback C.J. Henderson claimed it back in Week 1.

This is some nice recognition for Jefferson, who is off to a historic start to his NFL career with 537 receiving yards through six weeks. He's currently fifth in the league in receiving, though he'll fall in that category with the Vikings being off this week. Jefferson will look to have another big game in his Lambeau Field debut in Week 8.

After opening the year with +2200 odds to win Offensive Rookie of the Year, Jefferson now has the third-best odds at +750. Only QBs Herbert (-125) and Joe Burrow (+260) are ahead of him in that department. It'll be hard to beat out Herbert, but it's possible if Jefferson stays on such a lofty pace in terms of yardage and touchdowns.

Here are some highlights from Jefferson's start to the season, courtesy of the Vikings:



**PUBLICATION: Vikings Entertainment Network DATE: 10/24/20**

## **6 Takeaways from 2020 Vikings Approaching the Bye Week**

**By Eric Smith, Craig Peters and Lindsey Young**

EAGAN, Minn. — The Vikings are 1-5 at the bye, and find themselves in last place in both the NFC North and only above the 1-6 Giants in the conference.

Minnesota entered the 2020 season with playoff aspirations following a road postseason victory in New Orleans.

But through six games, the Vikings have had miscues in all three phases on the way to just a single win.

Vikings Head Coach Mike Zimmer recently summed up that state of his team thus far: "Got a lot of work to do, lot of things to clean up."

The Vikings have 10 games remaining, including five against NFC North opponents.

Burleson Shares His Thoughts on Vikings Struggles So Far This Season, What Makes Jefferson A Star In The Making and More

Here are six Vikings takeaways from the first six weeks of the 2020 season:

### 1. Too many turnovers | By Eric Smith

Entering Week 7, the Vikings rank near the bottom of the league in a handful of categories.

But perhaps the most concerning of those stats is Minnesota's turnover margin, as the Vikings rank 30th in the league with a turnover differential of minus-7. The Vikings have 12 turnovers and five takeaways thus far.

Offensively, Minnesota's 12 turnovers are the second-most in the league. Kirk Cousins has been involved with 11 of them, as the Vikings starting quarterback has a fumble lost, plus a league-high 10 interceptions.

After throwing just six interceptions in 15 games in 2019, Cousins has thrown at least one pick in five of six games and has three games with multiple interceptions in 2020. The Vikings other turnover was a Dalvin Cook fumble.

Defensively, Eric Wilson has a pair of interceptions and a fumble recovery for the Vikings. Harrison Smith has an interception, and Dan Chisena recovered a fumble on special teams.

Minnesota's penchant for committing turnovers has also hampered the Vikings time of possession, as the team ranks 29th in that stat with 27 minutes and 27 seconds per game.

The Vikings won the turnover margin in their only victory but have lost the battle in each of their losses this season.

Thielen Joins PA To Talk About Team's Tough Start, Jefferson's Impact and Much More

### 2. An up-and-down offensive line | By Eric Smith

It seems that there is a sharp focus on the Vikings offensive line every season.

That has been true again because of up-and-down performances in 2020.

Brian O'Neill and Riley Reiff have performed well at the tackle spots, as the bookends have been the clear strength of the offensive line. According to analytics website Pro Football Focus, O'Neill has the team's best grade for an offensive lineman at 77.3. Reiff's grade of 65.4 is the third-highest among all linemen.

Second-year center Garrett Bradbury has the Vikings second-highest grade among linemen, as the 2019 first-round pick has a PFF grade of 66.6.

But while the tackles have been solid and Bradbury has shown growth in his sophomore season, the play of Vikings guards has left a lot to be desired.

Dakota Dozier has started all six games at left guard and has produced a PFF grade of 50.5. Pat Elflein switched from left guard to right guard, but has played just one game due to an injury.

Dru Samia struggled while starting four games in place of Elflein, as he produced an overall PFF grade of 33.3 in 272 offensive snaps. Rookie second-rounder Ezra Cleveland started at right guard in Week 6 and had a so-so NFL debut.

"I think he had some good moments and some moments he'd like to have back," Zimmer said. "He did some impressive things and then he had some poor moments. For the first time out, it wasn't too bad."

### Justin Jefferson's 10 Longest Catches Through His First Six NFL Games

#### 3. Justin Jefferson is as-advertised | By Lindsey Young

No one questioned Justin Jefferson's talent when the Vikings drafted him 22nd overall in April.

They did ask, though, if the LSU standout would perform as well on the outside as in the slot, being that Vikings No. 1 receiver Adam Thielen often makes plays from the inside.

Six weeks in, it seems that question has been answered.

Jefferson has proven to be as-advertised (and more) for Minnesota in his first few NFL games. The youngster has made plays all over the field and on every route length. An intermediate catch to convert a fourth down at Seattle was every bit as impressive as his first career touchdown, a flashy 71-yard play against the Titans in Week 3.

At 21 years old, Jefferson has shown a maturity on and off the field.

He currently ranks fifth in the NFL in receiving with 537 total yards and a catch average of 19.2 yards.

Oh, yeah – he also has the second-most receiving yards through the first six games of a season by a rookie since 1970.

So while it's early in his NFL career, one thing seems pretty certain: Jefferson is the real deal.

### Vikings 2020 Roster in Photos

View photos of the Vikings 53-man roster as of October 22, 2020.

#### 4. Vikings LBs rolling with the punches | By Lindsey Young

The Vikings linebacker corps looks quite a bit different this season than it did last year.

Ben Gedeon remains on the Physically Unable to Perform list, and reserve linebacker Cam Smith underwent open heart surgery in August after a positive COVID-19 test led to the discovery of a previously undetected birth defect.

Minnesota lost one of its starting linebackers when Anthony Barr suffered a season-ending pectoral injury in Week 2, and rookie Troy Dye also landed on Injured Reserve after two weeks.

Eric Kendricks has continued to do Eric-Kendricks things, and the sixth-year starter's 66 tackles (league stats) led the NFL through Week 6.

Eric Wilson has stepped up and contributed in a big way in Barr's absence, having taken over not only the starting role but also wearing the "green dot" helmet to relay defensive calls from the sideline. Wilson leads the Vikings with

two interceptions through six games. His four tackles for loss lead the team after Minnesota traded Yannick Ngakoue on Thursday. Wilson's 2.0 sacks now trail only 2.5 by Ifeadi Odenigbo.

Other new faces for Minnesota who have contributed at linebacker include Hardy Nickerson, whom the Vikings signed during training camp, and most recently Todd Davis, who joined the team following the Colts game. Davis played 20 and 38 percent of Minnesota's defensive snaps in Weeks 5 and 6, respectively.

Pelissero With The Latest on Danielle Hunter's Status Moving Forward

5. Lack of consistent pressure and tight enough coverage a bad combo | By Craig Peters

The six quarterbacks the Vikings have opened the season against — Aaron Rodgers (8), Philip Rivers (8), Ryan Tannehill (1), Deshaun Watson (2), Russell Wilson (6) and Matt Ryan (4) — have 29 combined Pro Bowls over the course of 53 seasons that they've started at least 10 games.

That's quite the gauntlet, even for the most vaunted of defenses. Throw in the sizable roster turnover in a year without a full offseason program or preseason games, as well as injuries to a pair of Pro Bowlers (Danielle Hunter and Barr), and it's all the makings for a departure from what has been the standard for the Vikings under Zimmer.

Minnesota's defense has struggled to consistently pressure on opposing quarterbacks with pass rushers, and it's lack of tight enough coverage by young corners has sometimes forced both safeties to play deeper rather than going with a single-high look and blitzing Harrison Smith.

A low murmur of NFL-regulated artificial crowd noise struggles to fill voluminous U.S. Bank Stadium and pales in comparison to the raucous atmosphere that helped the Vikings lead the NFL in sacks in regular-season home games from 2016-19 with 104.

A strength in one can cover the other, with a pass rush affecting the quarterback into bad decisions or errant throws, or with defensive backs smothering receivers and allowing rushers to "get home."

Defenses are usually most successful when rush and coverage work hand-in-hand. The Vikings will emphasize finding that harmony on the other side of their bye.

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The Voyage

The Voyage delivers unprecedented access to fans, who will be able to step inside the office of Head Coach Mike Zimmer and have an insider's look and listen during his talks with the team. Viewers also will hear directly from current Vikings players who will be writing outcomes of games through their play on the field.

6. Quality of drives and misses in situational football | By Craig Peters

The item above has been a key factor as to why the Vikings defense has been unable to get off the field, but Minnesota's offense also has struggled to stay on it.

Opponents have had 66 possessions and committed five turnovers (7.6 % of possessions), scored 19 touchdowns (28.8 %) and 19 field goals (28.8 %). They've had just seven possessions — not including end-of-half or end-of-game clock run-outs — last three or fewer plays and result in a punt or turnover.

The Vikings have had 68 possessions and committed 12 turnovers (17.6 % of possessions), scored 19 touchdowns (27.9 %) and six field goals (8.8 %). They've had 25 possessions — not including end-of-half or end-of-game clock run-outs — last three or fewer plays and result in a punt or turnover.

Every week, it's amazing how many NFL games can come down to situations that swing momentum.

Giving up a safety can be one of those types of things. It's a function of bad field position and usually leads to good field position after the 2-point play and free kick. The Vikings had one against Green Bay and at Indianapolis, continuing a streak that began in Week 17 of the 2019 season.

Regarding field position, Vikings opponents have had the best average starting field position on drives (own 35.6-yard line, which is well above the league average of 28.7). The Seahawks (20.8), Colts (23.4) and Titans (23.7) are the three teams at making foes start with bad average field position.

The overall stat sheet shows that the Vikings are 6-for-8 on 2-point conversions after touchdowns, but Minnesota was unsuccessful on an attempt in each of the games that it has lost by 1 point this year.

The Vikings defense has done well on third downs, ranking third in the NFL in allowance rate (24 of 71 third downs for a rate of 33.8 %). Minnesota has fared much poorer on fourth downs, however, having allowed nine conversions on 11 attempts (rate of 81.8 % that ranks 26th in the NFL).

Cleveland (10 conversions allowed on 11 attempts for a rate of 90.9 %) is the only team that has allowed more fourth-down conversions.

The NFL average number of allowed conversions on fourth downs by a team through Week 6 was 4.2 on 7.1 attempts (59.2 %).



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## **Lunchbreak: Reactions to Vikings Trading Ngakoue to Ravens**

**By Craig Peters**

Whenever the Vikings bye week has fallen, General Manager Rick Spielman has made it a point to field questions from Twin Cities media members during a special session.

He did so again Thursday, about a half hour after trading Yannick Ngakoue to Baltimore for draft picks that were not disclosed by the Vikings.

The Ngakoue era in Minnesota lasted six games after he was acquired in an Aug. 31 trade with Jacksonville for picks. He recorded a team-leading 5.0 sacks and forced two fumbles, but opponents recovered the ball both times.

Spielman said the hope was to pair Ngakoue opposite Danielle Hunter, but the homegrown star hasn't practiced since Aug. 14. Spielman declined to elaborate on Hunter's status during the call.

The acquisition of Ngakoue is almost akin to the Vikings test-driving a convertible, but a 1-5 mark to open the season (how different would things be with one or two wins in Minnesota's one-point losses to Tennessee and at Seattle?) has changed the family transportation plan from the allure of a Mustang to the practicality of a minivan.

Burleson Shares His Thoughts on Vikings Struggles So Far This Season, What Makes Jefferson A Star In The Making and More

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Spielman After Ngakoue Trade: It's My Job to Look Short-Term & Long-Term

Vikings Trade DE Yannick Ngakoue To Ravens For Undisclosed Draft Picks

That's not intended to be a slight on younger, less-established players, or minivans for that matter. It reveals that the Vikings will enable fourth-round draft pick D.J. Wonnum and others to hop in for a developmental ride that includes expanded game experience.

Matthew Collier of Purple Insider weighed in on the Ngakoue trade, writing:

But in the case of Ngakoue, it was a far better move to cut losses and acquire a draft pick back than to double down and franchise tag or extend him in the offseason. Losing draft position is less harmful long term than a big, bad contract.

Spielman mentioned the "short and long term" benefits of moving Ngakoue. Translation: They want to see younger players at defensive end like fourth-round pick D.J. Wonnum. Last week was easily Wonnum's best-graded game by PFF. He played 33 snaps and made several key plays against the run and had one QB pressure. We can expect to see a lot more of him now.

Ben Goessling of the Star Tribune noted Spielman saying the trade doesn't mean the Vikings are entirely punting on 2020. Goessling pointed out only two teams that opened 1-5 from 1990-2019 recovered to earn playoff berths.

"I know the situation that came up today — the trade — gave us an opportunity to look long-term and to add more draft picks as we continue to build this roster," he said. "But also from the short-term standpoint, I'm excited to see where this team continues to grow and to see these young guys we're playing, especially on the defensive side, continue to get better."

Justin Jefferson and Adam Thielen Mic'd Up vs. Atlanta

The Athletic Assesses Rookies in NFC North

The Athletic's beat writers have been taking stock of the early starts by members of each NFL team's rookie class.

The assessments have been structured with three categories that include "standout," "wait and see" and "what's next?"

Give you 15 guesses — and the first 14 don't count — to name the player tabbed by Chad Graff as the "standout" for the Vikings.

Yep, receiver Justin Jefferson, whom Graff wrote is "the early favorite to win Offensive Rookie of the Year."

The first-round pick out of LSU is ranked fifth in the NFL with 537 receiving yards and has already turned in three 100-yard performances in six games.

The guy the Vikings drafted to replace Stefon Diggs has done it with ease, showing he's more than just the slot receiver he was at LSU. Little is certain about the Vikings, but it's clear they've got a stud in Jefferson. He's flirting with territory unseen by a Vikings rookie since Randy Moss.

Justin Jefferson's 10 Longest Catches Through His First Six NFL Games

As for "wait and see," Graff pointed to the development of cornerbacks.

The Vikings are starting two rookie cornerbacks, partly an indication of how dire things are in their secondary, but also a nod to the fact Mike Zimmer thinks first-round pick Jeff Gladney and third-round pick Cameron Dantzler will become good players.

And Graff postulated that Minnesota's 1-5 start may prompt the team to look to 2021 and further see what they have in second-round pick Ezra Cleveland, who made his first start at right guard Sunday.

The Vikings will have three consecutive division games after their bye (Nov. 1 at Green Bay, Nov. 8 vs. Detroit and Nov. 16 at Chicago), so check out the full report to get a scouting report on how those teams' draft picks are doing.