



NFL Draft 2019 Scouting Report: WR Diontae Johnson, Toledo

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

**WR-B stands for "Big-WR," a classification we use to separate the more physical, downfield/over-the-top, heavy-red-zone-threat-type WRs. Our WR-S/"Small-WRs" are profiled by our computer more as slot and/or possession-type WRs who are typically less physical and rely more on speed/agility to operate underneath the defense and/or use big speed to get open deep...they are not used as weapons in the red zone as much.*

First things first, our computer scouting model grades on **Diontae Johnson**, pre-NFL Draft were not flattering. An 'F' grade WR via our analytics. I'll get to why that was in a moment.

I needed to start with that opener to then let you know after a deeper study of his 'tape', I'm completely changing course on Johnson's scouting – no longer an 'also ran' type wide receiver prospect, but now a possible 'best in class' WR prospect. How can we have such a wide divergence to be course-corrected? I'll explain that in a moment too.

I also need to mention – I completely missed it on Johnson pre-Draft. Missed this opportunity and I hate that. I feel dumb. All kudos to the Pittsburgh Steelers scouting department because I did not see Johnson rated among the top 40 WR prospects anywhere. Certainly not for us. I make fun of NFL personnel scouting and decision-making, so I need to eat it when they win. The Steelers 'reached' for Johnson while everyone else ignored him. While I ignored him. I'm an idiot on this one in retrospect.

I hate any time I'm a scouting idiot, but it happens. It seems every year there is one WR prospect who we find that defies the measurables and/or college performance metrics in our system...a player who needs to be found by the tape, a player hidden from analytics because of circumstances. It takes a trained eye to see it. Usually, I'm the leader in finding these guys but not this year.

Last year, I didn't get a guy right away either until I really slowed everything down and isolated a day of study on them...and discovered their superpower. Last season, I was late in realizing that **Dante Pettis** was as good a route-runner/getting open wide receiver as there was in the draft. He wasn't just a great punt returner who could play some wide receiver – when you really watched him, I could see the 'it' factor with his feet. Some receivers are so gifted in the way they move off the snap that they break ankles of defenders...and they might have so-so three-cone and shuttle times from their pre-Draft workouts, but there is just something magical about a guy who can bang-bang crossover his steps so quickly that the defender gets tangled up/lost in an instant. Last year, that was **Dante Pettis**. It took me a third look to really catch it.



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...and WR prospects with amazing feet off the snap...they can fly under the radar because they play with college/bad quarterbacks who don't work progressions from the pocket. A guy with great feet can get open every play but many times the QB isn't even looking in their direction because he has the throw pre-made in his mind, and if it isn't there they run, not look for a 2nd or 3rd option. It's a nuanced...and there is no real metric to point to in order to prove it.

This year, the wide receiver who has that gift of 'feet' on high -- it's **Diontae Johnson**. The best I've seen this year, and I might argue one of the best off the snap I've ever seen.

I didn't see it at first. I watched a few minutes of his tape, pre-Combine, to see what I might discover...and I just didn't perceive anything very exciting. I didn't see breakaway speed or radical size or massive vertical, etc. I saw 'good hands', but he just seemed like another 'good' college/MAC wide receiver who did well in his little mid-major conference but that's the story of a million WR prospects over the years. I then saw his weak Combine numbers (by historical comparison for his size and production) and thus the lower grade of him for our scouting model calculations – everything pointed to 'don't bother'.

When the Steelers picked him #66 overall it blew my mind. What are they doing? How dumb!? But I also kept thinking, the Steelers are not that dumb when it comes to WR prospects. I wondered 'what they saw?' But I didn't rush to look deeper because I was sure I was right. The Steelers have been telling us **Eli Rogers** and **Demarcus Ayers** were "next **Antonio Brown's**" as well, and that wasn't true. So, I assumed they were just barking at the moon a bit here with Diontae hype.

Finally, I took a day to walk through Johnson's career to confirm my initial impressions – but when I saw the 'it', I was excited, and mad, and embarrassed. How did I miss this?

What I missed is one of the most gifted 'technical' wide receivers of the 2019 class or of the past few years. You can't teach what Johnson has. His foot movement off the snap is sublime. He can basically get open on any corner. It's like he's floating on air and changes direction supernaturally. In the open field he's not the fastest guy (4.53) nor is he crossing the field around everyone with weird/freaky open-field agility. He has this gift that's almost hard to explain...it's just a quick, short burst foot movement that happens so fast you wouldn't really catch it unless you focused on it. Johnson can change direction in an instant. Over 20-40 yards, his measurables are not glowing, and defenders catch him from behind no problem -- but if the NFL tested one-yard, one-step movement he'd break the measuring device.

You might remember old **Allen Iverson** crossover basketball moves where he pop-pop his feet so quickly/adeptly that the defender would fall on his ass as Iverson just stood there mocking the fallen soldier...it's kinda that principal. If everyone could do this they would, but it's special and memorable and attributed to Iverson because it's very rare: <https://youtu.be/ORkZ8HRSHTg>



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It's hard to explain with words, so let me try to show you on tape with Diontae. It's not easy to see on standard video tape of a game because receivers get out of camera shot quickly. It's not easy to see on highlight reels because they usually just show the end product of a play. You need to watch the feet here. Don't look anything else on the following five plays but stare at Johnson and just watch his feet...don't worry about where the pass goes. Play it back a few times to get a feel...

This is 2018 **Diontae Johnson** versus Miami, Florida...the toughest opponent he faced – and it was his best receiving game of 2018 (6 rec. for 119 yards and 2 TDs).

Watch the plays at the following time marks:

3:42

4:04

4:20...and then watch the slow-mo replay. Johnson is held or he gets a TD, but again we're just watching his feet.

5:12...this is how fast feet creates a step and that's all great QBs need (in this case a bad QB timed it just right)

6:08...what a play

Johnson v. Miami/2018: https://youtu.be/rS2zl-KJb_Y

Johnson's feet move so fast, so smooth off the snap that it's barely noticeable.

I could tell you about his feet all day, but I have to mention his hands...he has great hands. Some guys can get open but have all kinds of problems after that. Johnson has wonderful concentration on passes thrown his way and is ready and willing to make catches over-the-middle or go through traffic on a bubble screen and very willing to beat you off the snap and go deep.

If Johnson's feet and hands are so great, why did he only have two 100+ yard games in 2018? Why did he have four games with less than 30 yards in the game?

I remember when I discovered, and then promoted **Tyrell Williams** (and everyone thought I was too aggressive/unrealistic). One of the biggest things that stood out was that Williams was too good for his team/QB/offense. Had he played with a real team that wanted to throw (and to him) a lot, Williams could've put up crazy numbers in college and been a top draft pick. Instead, he had muted numbers and was undrafted. He was a top 3-5 graded WR prospect for us that draft year (and went undrafted) because I saw how stunning he was in getting open deep and what he could do after the catch. A lot of



his college tape was marveling at his movements but never getting the ball thrown to him/the QB not even looking. Similar with Diontae...

With **Diontae Johnson**, especially in 2018, he's playing with limited and/or garbage QBs...typical college QBs who are staring down receivers and likely had decided where they were throwing before the ball was snapped. They certainly weren't hanging in the pocket and reading progressions and playing pitch and catch with Johnson. Diontae was playing chess and his QBs were playing checkers or tic-tac-toe. Diontae was too good for his situation. He could get open at will off the snap all he wanted – but the QBs were typically looking for easy throws or no-read bombs away. The gift Johnson brought to the table mattered little to Toledo's 2018 quarterbacks.

Toledo's 2017 quarterback was a bit better, and Johnson caught 74 passes for 1,278 yards and 13 TDs in 14 games. Johnson 2017 looked a lot better than Johnson 2018...it wasn't Johnson's fault it was the QB play, and the 2017 play still wasn't good enough to really work Johnson to the fullest.

So, once I really saw what Johnson was capable of, I had to do a dangerous thing for analytics – override some of the numbers (production and Combine) in our system to even more account for this 'issue' of QB play and Johnson's ability that's almost too good for college and is better suited for the pros. I'm not letting pure numbers fly the plane on this one. I have to account for the visual/the abstract/that what was possible for the gifts Johnson has that are impossible to fully capture. And this deteriorates 'analytics', but I gotta make that call using my experience.

In addition to being a gifted receiver, Johnson is a good human for an NFL team (from all accounts). He seems humble and hard-working in my investigations. There's no cockiness here...yet (**Antonio Brown** used to be 'aw shucks' too). The Steelers' WR coach talks glowingly of his meeting with him. My observations of his interviews and background checks – all positive

The Steelers think they found the next **Antonio Brown**, and I'm starting to think they just might have.

Diontae Johnson, Through the Lens of Our WR Scouting Algorithm:

Johnson wasn't just a great receiver for Toledo, but he was also a work horse return-man – which is a good sign of toughness/grit in a receiver. 78 career kick returns and 17 punt returns, and Johnson returned 2 kicks and 2 punts for TDs in his career. He was the MAC 2018 Special Teams Player of the Year. He was #1 in the MAC and #3 in the NCAA with 18.5 yards per punt return average in 2018.

27 games played the past two college seasons, and 25 total TDs scored by Johnson.



Johnson faced Miami, Florida each of the past two seasons (by far his toughest matchups in his career).
His numbers:

2018: 6 rec., 119 yards, 2 TDs

2017: 8 rec., 66 yards, 2 TDs

Average per game vs. Miami: 7.0 rec., 92.5 yards, and 2.0 TDs per game.

*2019 NFL Combine measurables... (and compared to **Antonio Brown**)*

5'10.4"/183, 9" hands, 30.8" arms

5'10'1"/186, 9" hands, 31.0" arms (Brown)

4.53 40-time, 2.63 2-yard, 1.59 10-yard

4.57 40-time, 2.64 20-yard, 1.58 10-yard (Brown)

4.45 short shuttle, 7.09 three-cone

4.18 short shuttle, 6.98 three-cone (Brown)

15 bench reps, 33.5" vertical, 10'3" broad jump

13 bench reps, 33.5" vertical, 8'9" broad jump (Brown)



The Historical WR Prospects to Whom Diontae Johnson Most Compares Within Our System:

A couple things here...

-- There are a lot of **Antonio Brown** trends in Johnson, and we didn't have top grades on Antonio either. The kind of prospects that fly below the radar because of their below-average measurables but they were just great college WR technicians.

-- **Lance Moore** was a very good, underrated WR in the pros. Amazing hands.

-- I left a 2018 prospect on here as a reminder of 'one to watch' – **Steven Sims**. I see some of that quick get up and go from Sims despite his weak Pro Day numbers, but he was a helluva WR in a terrible situation/on a terrible team.

-- Still not a 'passing' grade but I'm not forcing my system analysis too far. We still have poor grades for those measurables and his base-performance/output...historical correlation-wise. He's the type of WR prospect it's hard to find with my analytics alone.

WR Score	Draft Yr.	Last	First	College	H	H	W	Power Strngth Metric	Speed Agility Metric	Hands Metric
6.799	2019	Johnson	Diontae	Toledo	5	10.4	183	5.60	6.48	8.85
6.404	2010	Brown	Antonio	C. Michigan	5	10.1	186	5.75	6.93	9.71
5.351	2011	Cobb	Randall	Kentucky	5	10.3	192	7.90	6.35	8.20
5.925	2005	Moore	Lance	Toledo	5	9.0	190	8.97	3.16	9.86
7.048	2014	Lee	Marqise	USC	5	11.6	192	7.40	6.32	7.85
5.496	2019	Sims	Steven	Kansas	5	9.5	180	3.64	2.62	8.39
4.845	2014	Jones	T.J.	Notre Dame	5	11.5	188	5.79	8.66	8.88

**A score of 7.0+ is where we start to take a Small-WR prospect more seriously. A score of 8.50+ is where we see a stronger correlation of a Small-WR 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 Small-WR.*

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



Overall WR score = A combination of several on-field performance measures, including refinement for strength of opponents faced, mixed with all the physical measurement metrics, and rated historically in our database.

“Power-Strength” = A combination of unique metrics surrounding physical size profiling, bench press strength, etc. High scorers here project to be more physical, better blockers, and less injury-prone.

“Speed-Agility” = A combination of unique metrics surrounding speed, agility, physical size, mixed with some on-field performance metrics. High scorers here project to have a better YAC and show characteristics to be used as deep threats/to create separation.

“Hands” = A combination of unique metrics surrounding on-field performance in college, considering the strength of opponents played. Furthermore, this data considers some physical profiling for hand size, etc. High scorers here have a better track record of college statistical performance. Everything combining to project catch-abilities for the next level.

2019 NFL Draft Outlook:

I definitely didn't think Johnson would be drafted. Even with my newfound love, I would've thought him a 5th+ round option. Again, kudos to the Steelers.

If I were an NFL GM, I would've wanted Johnson (with my new eyes on him) but I still would've missed him because I wouldn't have figured him gone with pick #66.

NFL Outlook:

If **Diontae Johnson** was going to the Buffalo Bills or NY Jets...this would be a painful story to watch. Love unrequited. It would be like his Toledo 2018 all over – a master WR working with an offense/QB that could not help him achieve/succeed. However, going to play with Big Ben...the launcher of **Antonio Brown**...? Hopes have to be high...very high.

'Next Antonio Brown' is not crazy here...and he might be playing his very same spot on his very same (old) team running the same exact plays Week 1 of 2019 season...and ten years from now as well.



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