Lato's Lens:

FOUR PLAYERS WHOSE DRAFT STOCKS SOARED AFTER THE 2026 COLLEGE FOOTBALL PLAYOFFS

by Tyler Lato
STAFF WRITER
HE/HIM/HIS
tyler.lato@uconn.edu

On Monday night, the college football season came to a close as the top-seeded Indiana Hoosiers took down the No. 10 Miami Hurricanes, 27–21, in the 2026 College Football Playoff National Championship Game, completing an undefeated 16–0 season.

While I can't help but reminisce about how amazing the season was, all good things must come to an end. However, that end signals a new beginning for many players: The National Football League.

The College Football Playoff is truly a make-or-break event for those chasing their dreams of being drafted and playing professionally. While some players have seen their draft stock plummet, others have experienced the opposite — something exemplified by several athletes in this year's playoffs.

Without further ado, here are four of those players whose draft stock soared after this year's postseason.

Fernando Mendoza, Quarterback (Indiana)

Fernando Mendoza was, without a doubt, one of the most electrifying players of this college football season. After a solid career at Cal Berkeley and transferring to Indiana, he proved thousands of naysayers wrong by winning the 2025 Heisman Trophy and leading the Hoosiers to their first national title in program history.

But going into the playoffs, I admittedly thought that the whole "Heismendoza" persona he developed was all a fluke due to facing relatively weak competition compared to those competing in the SEC. That was until he led the Hoosiers to a crushing 38–3 triumph over Alabama in the Rose Bowl, a 56–22 victory over Oregon in the Peach Bowl and a 27–21 win against Miami in the national championship game.

Mendoza finished the season completing 273 of his 379 passes for 3,535 yards, 41 touchdowns, and only six interceptions. His 72% completion rate was complemented by another seven rushing touchdowns, including his gritty 12-yard touchdown run on fourth down against the Hurricanes in the season finale.

With that, Mendoza is slated on many draft boards to be the top pick in the 2026 NFL Draft. If there was ever any doubt that Mendoza would be a top draft pick, those feelings are sure to vanish after his heroics in the playoffs.

Mark Fletcher Jr., Running Back (Miami)

The runner-up Miami Hurricanes were a team that I never really paid much attention to until the postseason. However, after watching a few games, it's safe to say that they have a star in their backfield coming back for the 2026 season.

Mark Fletcher Jr., the 6-foot-2, 225-pound running back from South Florida, was spectacular in the final four games for the Hurricanes. Throughout the playoffs, he averaged 127 rushing yards per game, including 6.9 yards per carry. His monstrous frame made it nearly impossible for opposing defenses to tackle him, as displayed by his 112-yard, two-touchdown performance against Indiana.

Though he isn't ready for the NFL just yet, it's scary to think about what Fletcher will become after one more season playing for head coach Mario Cristobal in Coral Gables. Without a doubt, Fletcher could be seeing his name called in the first round of the 2027 draft after his stellar playoff performances.

Trinidad Chambliss, Quarterback (Ole Miss)

Trinidad Chambliss has defied all odds.

He transferred to Ole Miss this season after winning a national championship with Division II Ferris State, but sat the bench early in the year behind starting quarterback Austin Simmons.

After Simmons left the Rebels' Week Two matchup against Kentucky early with an apparent injury, Chambliss stepped into the starting role and shined. He led the Rebels to an 11–1 regular season record and their first College Football Playoff berth in program history.

It wasn't until after the departure of head coach Lane Kiffin that Chambliss fully caught the nation's attention.

In just three games, Chambliss threw for 985 yards, six touchdowns and zero interceptions. His ability to scramble and move in the pocket was spectacular, put on full display in the Rebels' stunning 39–34 upset win in the College Football Playoff quarterfinals against No. 3 Georgia.

Although the Rebels' national championship aspirations were shattered by Miami in the semifinal, Chambliss' draft stock soared as a result of his performances. He's opted to return to Ole Miss for a final season in 2026 but is currently in a legal battle with the NCAA over his eligibility.

Should the court rule against him, he won't have a problem being drafted due to his terrific upside and elusiveness in the pocket. Chambliss is just another prime example of the College Football Playoff benefiting future NFL talent.

Charlie Becker, Wide Receiver (Indiana)

In my opinion, Charlie Becker is the most underrated wide receiver in all of college football. It was easy this year to get dragged into the hype train of Ohio State's Jeremiah Smith and USC's Makai Lemon, but I'd argue that Becker needs to be regarded as equal caliber to those two.

While Becker's stats weren't as impressive as Smith's or Lemon's, he became one of Fernando Mendoza's top targets toward the end of the season and was a focal point in the Hoosiers' aerial attack.

His main attribute was making catches in traffic. Throughout the entirety of the playoffs, Becker was seen coming down with almost every 50–50 ball, giving his team critical success in third-down situations.

The great thing about Becker is that he's only a sophomore. That means he'll have a whole extra year to benefit from offensive coordinator Mike Shanahan's offense and build off the success that he's already had. Like Fletcher, his draft stock has risen and will only continue to grow because of the Hoosiers' national championship run.

SPORTS SPECTRUM:

Season-in-review: the Tampa Bay Buccaneers

by Seth Wallen
CAMPUS CORRESPONDENT
HE/HIM/HIS
savannah.wallen@uconn.edu

Tampa Bay, for the better part of NFL history, has been one of the lower notes in the NFL. They play in the NFC South, a division with low winning percentages. The highest regular-season win-loss percentage in the division belongs to the New Orleans Saints, at .463.

Each team in this division is notorious for its longstanding or varied poor performances. The Atlanta Falcons infamously lost a Super Bowl to the New England Patriots despite a 28-point lead in the fourth quarter. The Panthers have made NFL history—becoming the first team to win their division twice with a losing record (7-8-1 in 2014 and 8-9 in 2025). The Saints did not have a winning season from 1967 to 1986, and they have had eight starting quarterbacks since Drew Brees retired in March of 2021, not including rookie quarterback Tyler Shough.

How do the Buccaneers fit into this quadrant? As of the end of the 2025 regular season, they have the worst win-loss percentage (.412).

Things took a turn for them, though, when famous quarterback Tom Brady joined the Buccaneers and led them to the 2021 Super Bowl title. Since then, the team has been considered the best in the NFC South, with little divisional competition.

To bring it back to the present, the NFC South participated in a weird statistical event, in which every team in the division finished the season with a negative point differential, meaning they gave up more points than they scored.

In Week 7 of the season, the Buccaneers were 5-1 and atop the NFL's power rankings. Positioned to dominate and win the division. However, at the end of the season, they were 8-9 and missed the playoffs for the first time since 2019, all because they lost the three-way tiebreaker to the Panthers.

Let's start at the beginning of the season - they became the first team to win four games with game-winning scores in the final minute, 5-0 in games decided by 3 points or fewer by Week 13. Because of the fourth-quarter surges, Baker Mayfield was being called a legitimate MVP candidate by midseason.

But magic vanishes—that performance has rarely, if ever, held up for a season in professional sports. They suddenly started losing those games by the same margins—three games in a row dropped by one and three points (twice) respectively.

In the critical Week 15 game against the Falcons, Mayfield threw a late interception and outright missed a deep pass that would've iced the game, later admitting that the clutch plays had dried up. The offense had failed to score 13 points in two of their last three games, proving that they couldn't just clutch out of a bad performance anymore.

Despite Head Coach Tom Bowles being a former safety and praised as a defensive mastermind, the defense suffered a staggering downfall. The Bucs secondary finished the season ranked dead last in passing yards allowed, giving up 257 per game. Since Week 9, the defense allowed 28.4 points per game, bottom 5 in the league.

They started well, though. Over the first three weeks, the defense was third in efficiency but had dropped to 29th by the end of the season.

At the end of the season, their offense was around average (17th to 21st in major categories) while their defense was average except for the passing (27th). When other teams were in the Red Zone, they allowed their opponent to score near 70% of the time, dead last in the league.

In the craze of firings and resignations—Mike Tomlin of the Steelers, John Harbaugh of the Ravens and (now Giants), Kevin Stefanski of the Browns (now Falcons), Kevin Patullo of the Eagles, Sean McDermott of the Bills—Bowles remains, much to the surprise of Tampa fans.

Bowles fired their offensive coordinator, Josh Grizzard, their fourth in four years, as part of the coaching staff overhaul. But with a negative point differential staring them in the face, major changes may be needed. But as we enter the conference championships, things may stay like this for a while. Given the best era the team has experienced, they may not want to fire the coach with the fourth-most combined playoff and regular-season wins in franchise history.

They now enter a turning point, one that can dictate the future of their franchise. Their next priority is to re-sign wide receiver Mike Evans, the franchise's leading scorer, whose contract expires on the last day of the 2025 league year (March of this year). With that looming deadline, the Bucs have a choice to make: to pivot or continue and try to work up this era of football.



Baker Mayfield runs out of the tunnel before an afternoon game. He is an integral part of the Buccaneers' offensive play making.
PHOTO COURTESY OF @BUCCANEERS ON INSTAGRAM