

NFL DRAFT | QUARTERBACKS

After airing it out at Western Kentucky, quarterback Bailey Zappe hopes to land in NFL

By [Jim McBride](#) Globe Staff, Updated April 26, 2022, 4:08 p.m.



Bailey Zappe chucked the ball 686 times last season and connected for 62 touchdowns. MICHAEL REAVES/GETTY

The offer came from a friendly face with a familiar voice.

And for Bailey Zappe, it was one he couldn't refuse.

Fresh off a memorable four-year run as the quarterback for Houston Baptist, where he'd thrown for more than 10,000 yards, Zappe was looking to take advantage of the NCAA's COVID-19 extra year of eligibility. He fielded lots of calls from some heavy hitters, including Notre Dame, Southern Cal, and Tennessee.

The first call, however, had come from Zach Kittley, a family friend who'd been Zappe's offensive coordinator at Houston Baptist and had just been named to the same position at Western Kentucky.

The offer, in a nutshell, was to come run the Hilltoppers offense and throw the ball to your heart's content.

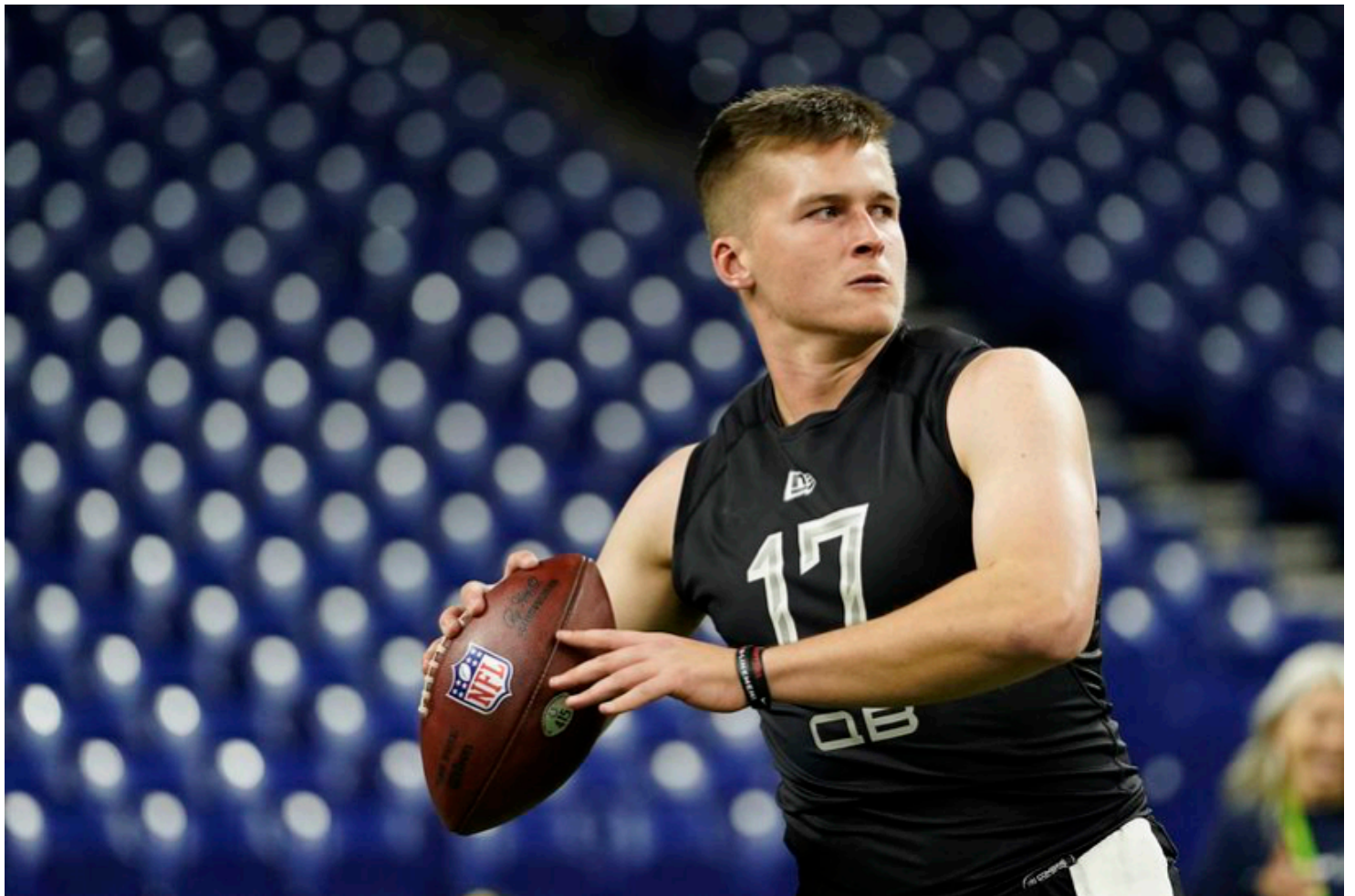
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Again, it was an offer Zappe couldn't refuse.

With two of his top Baptist receivers also transferring to Western Kentucky, Zappe ran Kittley's hybrid Air Raid offense to near-perfection, completing 475 of 686 passes for 5,967 yards and 62 touchdowns in 2021.

He set FBS season marks for yards (previously held by B.J. Symonds) and TDs (once owned by Joe Burrow) and now awaits the NFL Draft.



Where will Bailey Zappe be chosen this week? STEVE LUCIANO/ASSOCIATED PRESS

"I haven't been able to kind of reminisce on that," said Zappe. "It's kind of been a fast process. When I get back to Western Kentucky with the guys, with the coaches, I'm sure we'll sit down and kind of just reminisce a little bit.

“But this is something that I’ve been dreaming of since I can remember being 5 years old playing football.

“I don’t think there’s a single quarterback in history that wouldn’t want to throw 680 times in a season. It’s amazing. Coach Kittley gave me, like he said, keys to a Lamborghini.”

Zappe had Kittley’s trust and was given the freedom to make split-second decisions, and that experience will come in handy in the NFL.

“I was able to check in and out of plays, whatever I saw fit, whatever I saw the defense was doing,” Zappe said. “And I think how that translates to the NFL is just a knowledge of the game, in part. Being able to read defenses, be able to see what the defense sees, what the defense is in pre-snap.

“And I think that will continue to help me throughout my career in the NFL and just recognizing what the defense is doing against us.”

Zappe is well aware of those who believe the Air Raid attack doesn’t translate well to the NFL. He disagrees.

“There’s kind of a misconception about the Air Raid and the Air Raid that we ran with Coach Kittley,” he said. “We did a lot of stuff a lot of people do in the NFL and other offenses in college. We did a lot of peer progression stuff.

“He gave me a lot of opportunities, checking out plays on read defenses, peer progressions, you know, some of the stuff that would carry over to the NFL.”



Bailey Zappe completed 64 percent of his passes over the course of his college career. MICHAEL REAVES/GETTY

Though the 6-foot, 215-pound Zappe doesn't possess a sizzling fastball, the Air Raid played to his cerebral strengths. He has excellent recognition skills and throws a very catchable ball. He adjusts arm slots and can fit balls into precise windows without needing a ton of velocity.

For his career, he hit on 1,375 of 2,163 passes, good for a 63.6 completion percentage. In 2021, he was just shy of 70 percent.

“Ball placement can be anything from you got a [defensive back] on your inside shoulder for your receiver to run a fade. You got a DB inside, you want to put it on his outside shoulder, putting your player in between the ball and the defender so you can make it to where only your guy can catch it,” said Zappe, explaining his biggest

strength. “And throw a good enough ball to where he can catch it.

“It goes to every bit of throwing it low, and away, away from DBs, away from anybody that can affect the ball and deflect the ball. Just kind of those little things; putting the ball where it needs to be. And not necessarily always putting it in the chest.

“Everybody thinks it has to be in the chest or the head. It can be 1 foot from the numbers is kind of how we said it at Western Kentucky. So that’s kind of how I would describe it.”

The Patriots appear set at quarterback, but they do like to draft the position and are armed with six Day 3 picks. Having Zappe’s live arm around for what promises to be an intense summer receiving competition could be a benefit.

Top quarterbacks

The top quarterbacks available in the April 28-30 NFL Draft, with name, college, height, weight, and projected round.

Desmond Ridder, Cincinnati, 6-3, 211, 1-2

Coming off an impressive two-year run in which he threw for more than 5,600 yards and 49 touchdowns and ran for another 18. Well-built athlete with a strong arm, Ridder plays with confidence. Led Bearcats to the BCS playoffs last season. Leadership skills also shined through during Senior Bowl week. Will need to work on his timing and mechanics — his accuracy comes and goes — but could end up as the best pro in this class.

Malik Willis, Liberty, 6-0, 219, 1-2

After serving as Jarrett Stidham's understudy for two seasons at Auburn, Willis transferred to Liberty and threw for 5,000 yards and 48 TDs in 23 games. He also rushed for 2,131 yards and another 29 scores. A dynamic athlete with a powerful arm, he makes up for his comparative lack of height with mobility as he can stretch the pocket and make accurate throws on the run. Might need a year of seasoning (though he could contribute in some packages) before he makes a big impact.

Kenny Pickett, Pittsburgh, 6-3, 217, 1-2



Kenny Pickett tossed 81 touchdowns in his career at Pitt. BUTCH DILL/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Four-year starter threw for 12,303 yards and 81 TDs for the Panthers. Comes from an athletic family; his father was a linebacker at Shippensburg and his mother played soccer at Kutztown. Shows poise in the pocket with nice footwork and a strong,

accurate arm. Wore gloves on both hands, and his comparatively small hands (8.5 inches) were a bugaboo for some scouts, but it didn't seem to affect his throws during the season or during Senior Bowl week. Might be the most NFL-ready field general of this class.

Matt Corral, Mississippi, 6-2, 215, 2-3

Highly competitive leader who would run through a brick wall for his teammates — and they'd follow him. Underrated athlete with a live arm and excellent instincts. Threw for 8,287 yards and 57 touchdowns in 37 games (27 starts) for Lane Kiffin's offensive juggernauts. Also rushed for 1,338 yards and 18 TDs. Suffered an ankle injury early in the Sugar Bowl but should be good to go for minicamp.

Carson Strong, Nevada, 6-3, 226, 3-4

Tall, strong pocket passer with a live arm. Can zip passes into the tightest windows but also puts a nice touch on the ball when he has to. Threw a school-record 299 consecutive passes without an interception. Finished his career with more than 9,000 yards passing and 74 TDs in 31 games. Not a threat to run at all; he has minus-305 yards in that category.

Best of the rest: Bailey Zappe, Western Kentucky (6-0, 215); Sam Howell, North Carolina (6-0, 218); Jack Coan, Notre Dame (6-3, 218); E.J. Perry, Brown (6-2, 211); Brock Purdy, Iowa State (6-1, 212).

Here's a look at the other positions profiled

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