

**NFL DRAFT**

Why record-setting QB Bailey Zappe smiles when clearing up 'misconception' ahead of NFL draft

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INDIANAPOLIS — The questions arise in team interviews, scouts and coaches alike asking Western Kentucky quarterback Bailey Zappe: How will your production translate at the pro level?

Zappe views the questions as stemming from a place of “curiosity,” the Victoria, Texas, native eager to explain why he believes his FBS-record 5,987 yards and 62 touchdowns in one season aren’t a mirage.

Sure, he understands how an Air Raid offense won’t wholly parallel the pro-style systems to which an NFL team would ask him to acclimate. The competition level will jump, just as Zappe adjusted from Houston Baptist’s FCS opponents his first three seasons to Western Kentucky’s more-competitive Conference USA.

But Zappe is ready for the questions. His response when asked?

“I smile, like I am right now,” Zappe said Wednesday from the NFL scouting combine. “It was kind of a misconception about the Air Raid and the Air Raid tree we ran with (offensive coordinator Zach) Kittley. A lot of stuff that a lot of people knew in the NFL and other offenses in college. We did a lot pure progression stuff, lot of opportunities to check in and out of plays, read defenses’ pure progressions.

“Some of the stuff that will carry over to the NFL.”

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Zappe’s production wowed. He wasn’t just prolific in a system emphasizing the deep threat; his knack for moving the chains did not come at the expense of ball-security red flags.

Zappe finished the 2021 season completing 475 of a monstrous 686 pass attempts, tossing just 11 interceptions in his 62-touchdown campaign. His 5,987 passing yards trumped an 18-year record previously held by Texas Tech’s B.J. Symons; Bengals quarterback Joe Burrow, in his LSU championship campaign, collected 60 touchdowns in 15 games to Zappe’s 62 in 14.

In three previous seasons at Houston Baptist under Kittley’s coordination, Zappe steadily improved his completion percentage from 57.8 to 63.8 to 65.6. In a 2020 season truncated by COVID-19, Zappe threw 15 touchdowns to just one interception.

Next up: schematic growth already launched as Zappe absorbed NFL concepts under the Lions coaching staff at the Senior Bowl last month.

“I think the main thing, you look at the greats, they had leadership – that’s the No. 1 thing,” Zappe said. “Decision-making, ball placement, limiting turnovers, knowledge of the game. There are about four or five things that are the most important stuff. I feel like I carry those in my game, but of course there’s a lot of room for improvement.”

Zappe considers ball placement globally, pointing to in-game scenarios when a teammate ran a fade with a defensive back draped over his inside shoulder. He cites moments when he needed to throw the ball low or away, striving to ensure defenders would neither deflect nor affect a pass in his season featuring 5.6 times as many touchdowns as interceptions.

“Put your player in between the ball and defender so your guy only can catch it—and throw a good enough ball where he can catch it,” Zappe said. “It doesn’t necessarily always need to be in the chest. Not always has to be in the chest or the head. It can be one foot in front of the numbers.”

Zappe plans to continue demonstrating to teams in meetings his comfort with pro-style verbiage, talent evaluators keen to determine the depth and breadth of his conceptual knowledge as well as how his Air Raid experience will translate to throwing in tight windows against variously disguised coverages. He’ll aim to show on follow-up Zoom interviews how his full-field reads inform his potential; to illustrate how Western Kentucky coaches empowered him to read defenses and adjust pre-snap.

“Coach Kittley gave me, like he said, the keys to the Lamborghini,” Zappe said. “I was able to check in and out of plays whatever I saw fit, whatever I saw the defense was doing (and) that will continue to help me throughout my career in the NFL, just recognizing what defenses are doing against us.

“I think how that translates to the NFL is kind of the knowledge-of-the-game part. ... That will continue to help me throughout my career in the NFL, just recognizing what defenses are doing against us.”

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