To: MIKE BOSTOCK, SHAN CARTER, KEVIN QUEALY and JOE WARD

I’m writing this letter as a critique of the visualization you present in your April 25, 2013 article, ("N.F.L. Draft: How Good Are Teams at Picking the Best?").

Positives
While most sports fans recognize that quality players are drafted in the first round with a high probability, the odds of drafting a “bust” aren’t so clear, and this visualization does a good job highlighting how many players taken in the first round don’t live up to the hype. I spent a good amount of time mousing over each year’s chart to check out the ranks of my favorite players, which is by no means a negative - the visualization is a very immersive experience for both hardcore and casual NFL fans, of which I consider myself the latter. Also, I thought it was awesome how playing around with the threshold slider changed what inferences I drew from the charts. For example, when I set the threshold to show only the single best player per year, I found myself thinking that it is very hard for a team with a top 3 draft pick to screw up. However, when I set the threshold to show the top 50 players in each year, it became more apparent that quality does not always correlate with pick order, which is authors’ thesis. Finally, the visualization is aesthetically flawless - the color scheme makes it clear which players are under the threshold, and the grey bars that indicate which round I’m mousing over are a nice touch.

Intended Audience Discrepancy
My biggest issue with this visualization is the discrepancy between its intended audience (football fans) and the way in which it ranks players. Statistics that purport to represent the “overall value” of a player are controversial in any sport, but such stats are especially misleading in football because of the clear differences between defensive, offensive, and special teams players. The visualization sacrifices a finer-grained comparison between different positions for the aesthetic (and short-term memory) benefit of showing all drafted players on the same chart, but in this case more information is better. The authors offer a barely-noticeable (small, dark blue font) link to an external website that emphatically states that the statistic in question should not be used to rank players. You have to click yet another link and scroll down to finally look at the equation, which makes it seem like the authors are trying to hide the flawed premise that their visualization is based upon. If even a casual fan such as myself picks up on this point, one might imagine that most other users would as well. The visualization would be much more plausible for its intended audience if each season were separated into three charts (offense, defense, special teams) and the ranking methodology for each chart were fully explained - the authors wouldn’t be able to show as many years on a single page, but each year’s charts would at least make sense. A “best-of-both-worlds” scenario might give the user the option of expanding each of the current charts into the three positional charts.

Tooltips
Another criticism I had was with how little information was presented on the player tooltips (we don’t even get to see what team they played on!). All we see is a player’s position, draft number, and rank - I think it would be much more helpful to show a popup (instead of text) similar to how ESPN does it such that when you click on a player, you see all of this information in addition to a picture, season and career stats, and recent news. In this way users can at least identify reasons why a particular player might be ranked the way he is.

Small Issues
It seems to me that the pictures below the year-by-year charts were an effort to alleviate some of the tooltip concerns I mentioned above. Unfortunately, since there are only seven players pictured, it strikes me as useless.
and causes some disconnect between the text below and the charts above. Also, when the threshold is set to a high value (>30), the names below each chart are scattered around fairly randomly - it would be easier on the eyes if after some threshold value is reached, names are only shown on tooltips. Finally, it would be great to have a search bar so that if a user was unaware what year one of their favorite players was drafted in, they could simply look up that player to have him highlighted in the visualization.

Best,
Mohit Iyyer