

Draft Battle: Jason Witten vs. Jermichael Finley

Contributed by John Locklear vs. Bud Stafford
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It seems like the TE class in fantasy football is getting deeper and deeper each year and players like Jermichael Finley are a testament to the situation. Now, would you go as far as drafting him ahead of Jason Witten? Bud Stafford is going to try to persuade you.

Jason Witten, TE, Dallas Cowboys
Written by John Locklear
It's funny how much things can change in a year. Last year, Jason Witten went from the unquestioned no.1 tight end in fantasy football, to now being as low as no.5 in fantasy circles. I guess 94 receptions and 1,030 yards receiving isn't quite what it used to be, because to even have him compared to someone who isn't near him in production, in Jermichael Finley, shows you Witten's stock has taken a hit. I just don't understand why. Few tight ends have had the kind of consistent success that Jason Witten has enjoyed since 2004. Since that time he has had at least 64 receptions every year, averaging over 90 the last three. Aside from Witten's rookie year, his worst season statistics are better than that of either of Jermichael Finley's two seasons in the NFL. Now it is true, Jermichael Finley is just scratching the surface of what he can ultimately end up being. Last year, the Packer tight end showed flashes of brilliance, including a 128-yard, one touchdown performance week four against the Vikings. But, it is quite a reach to say he has gotten to Jason Witten's plateau in fantasy football. Finley has only one 100-yard regular season game to his NFL resume, Jason Witten had three last year alone. With the amount of receptions Witten sees every year, he is the proven no.1 option on the Cowboys -- ahead of the likes of Miles Austin, Roy Williams and unproven rookie, Dez Bryant. Finley is, at best, the no. 3 option in the Packer offense behind perennial 1,000-yard receivers, Donald Driver and Greg Jennings. The offense also features solid slot receivers in Jordy Nelson and James Jones, who will also take receptions away from Finley. The big knock on Witten, and perhaps the only reason why he is not ranked no. 1 at his position again, is his lack of touchdowns the last two seasons. Two touchdowns in '09 and four in '08 are a far cry from the touchdown totals he was getting in 2007, 2005 and 2004. If you listen to coach Wade Phillips, however, those low touchdown totals appear to be in the rear-view mirror. Early into the offseason workouts, Phillips told the Texas media that more of an emphasis would be placed on targeting the Cowboy tight end in the red zone -- music to any Witten owner's ears and perhaps an answer to his touchdown woes. While an increase in touchdowns certainly would be welcomed, it certainly shouldn't be the determining factor when picking between Jason Witten and Jermichael Finley. No, what it should ultimately come down to is which one is the closest to a sure thing? Which tight end has the least risk? Who's proven to not only produce, but produce at the highest level possible for fantasy owners year in and year out? Not only is Jason Witten the answer to every single one of these questions, he's also the answer to the question of this debate. When draft day is finally here and you're picking between Jason Witten and Jermichael Finley, pick the no.1 option for his team's passing offense, pick the guy who is a lock for 80-90 receptions and 900 -1,000 yards receiving, pick the proven output over "potential" -- pick Jason Witten. Jermichael Finley, TE, Green Bay Packers
by Bud Stafford
I have a problem. When I draft my fantasy football team, I do it with the perspective of being in a long time dynasty league – a league that allows a small number of keepers from year to year. With that in mind, I do tend towards younger players that have yet to take that leap, who have not yet established themselves as NFL elites, both in real life as well as fantasy. Sometimes that means I'm drafting these younger players before I take the obvious choices at a position. My theory is that the elites were once younger players who were given a chance, through talent and opportunity, and that those who break through to truly elite status may never be available again. And because I draft with this in mind, I lean heavily towards the younger players who, I believe, are ready to become "the next big thing". Last year, before the season, Jermichael Finley was a favorite "sleeper" pick. I bit. Drafted him early, perhaps too early. Then was disappointed when he played the first of the season coming off the bench behind starter Donald Lee – and followed that up by missing three weeks in November due to injury. But you know, what? I saw enough to convince me that he is the epitome of post-sleeper optimism. Finley's performance down the stretch as the season ended, plus his captivating numbers in the NFC Wild Card Week, have me fearless in having Finley high on my lists as the 2010 draft nears. I have him higher than many higher profile tight ends, including Jason Witten. Despite not being a starter (and healthy) until Week 11, Finley still ended up with 55 catches for 676 yards and 5 touchdowns. Oh, and in Wild Card shootout with Arizona, Finley added another 6 catches for 159 yards. With the 2010 season ready to start, Finley will be able to apply that considerable talent in an even better opportunity – he is the unchallenged starter on a team that loves to throw the ball (especially given Aaron Rodgers at QB and a host of nothing specials at running back) that has only one other no-doubt pass catcher in Greg Jennings. Consider too that despite not being a starter until late in the season and the fact that he missed those three weeks, he still was fourth among NFL tight ends in end zone targets. In this offense, and with his skills, Finley is likely to be among the NFL bests at tight end in 2010. It would not surprise me to see his receptions number approach 100, his yardage to be over 1000 yards and his touchdown numbers to be double digit. He's that good, on the verge of being great. And while Jason Witten has the track record and is also part of a high-octane offense (that is when Tony Romo isn't turning the ball over to the opponent), there are some warning signs. The biggest thing that jumps out is Witten's alarming aversion to the end zone. OK, maybe it isn't his personal aversion, but it's amazing that in the last two seasons he has only scored a total of 6 touchdowns, only 2 in 2009. For a guy who has been a starter for many years, and makes as many catches as he does, to only have 2 touchdowns (and indeed, only 7 targets) on the whole season, is worrisome. Worrisome, but understandable. The Cowboys do have a lot of other end zone options, with their three-headed running back committee, the emergent Miles Austin and other reliable wide receivers. And with Tony Romo's sometimes curious way with the ball, it's

not been unusual for Witten to remain in the blocking scheme when the 'Boys get near the goal line. And about that three-headed running back community and deep receiving corps (which this year includes rookie Dez Bryant) — that's a lot of ball-hungry teammates with which Witten will have to share touches. That could pose a challenge to Witten, who may revert back to his 60-70 catch numbers of 2005-2006 rather than his 80-90 catch campaigns on the last couple of years. Witten's good, no doubt. He'll be a fine contributor to a fantasy team in 2010 for one-year leagues and a modest contributor to dynasty teams for the next 2-3 years. But he won't be as good as Jermichael Finley. Not this year, and not for the next few years. Do you have questions about your team? Want to get some opinions on a particular player? Looking for a competitive league? Come check out our Fantasy Sports Forums for any and all of your fantasy sports needs: <http://www.fantasyloungesports.com/forums>