

# 2022 NFL Draft: Former Wisconsin DL Matt Henningsen selected by the Denver Broncos

By Matt Belz

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Defensive end Matt Henningsen became the latest in a long line of former walk-ons from inside the state of Wisconsin to become impact players at the college level and later hear their name in the NFL Draft.

On Saturday, the former Wisconsin defensive lineman was selected in the 2022 NFL Draft during the sixth round by the Denver Broncos with pick No. 206.

A native of Menomonee Falls (Wis.), Henningsen is the fourth Wisconsin player picked overall of the weekend, joining Leo Chenal (Kansas City Chiefs), Logan Bruss (LA Rams), and Jake Ferguson (Dallas Cowboys).

Henningsen finished his time in Madison with 92 total tackles, 13.5 tackles for loss, and 8.5 sacks in 37 games played with the Badgers.

In addition to being a standout on the football field, Henningsen had a perfect 4.0 GPA during his college career and was a finalist for the William V. Campbell Trophy, which is widely regarded as the academic Heisman Trophy.

Congratulations to Matt, and all of the Badgers who wind up hearing their name called over the course of the rest of the draft.

Bio

Name: Matt Henningsen

Position: Defensive end

Jersey number: No. 92

Hometown: Menomonee Falls, Wisconsin

High school: Menomonee Falls High School

Recruiting information: walk-on

College major: Master's in Electrical & Computer Engineering

Measurables

Height: 6-foot-3

Weight: 291 pounds

Pro Day numbers

20-yard shuttle: 4.07

3-cone: 7.02

Broad jump: 119"

Vertical jump: 37.5"

Bench press: 22 reps

# Matt Henningsen, Wisconsin DT | NFL Draft Scouting Report

By Ian Cummings  
Pro Football Network  
April 7, 2022

He opened eyes at the Shrine Bowl and only opened them further with his pro day. Now having officially arrived on the 2022 NFL Draft stage, how does the scouting report of Wisconsin DT Matt Henningsen stack up?

## Matt Henningsen's NFL Draft Profile

Position: Defensive Tackle  
School: Wisconsin  
Current Year: Redshirt Senior  
Height: 6'3 3/8"  
Weight: 289 pounds  
Wingspan: 82 1/8"  
Length: 33 1/8"  
Hand: 9 3/8"

## Matt Henningsen's Scouting Report

Say what you will about stereotypical Wisconsin football. Yes, their average score in victories is 7-3. Yes, their style would be considered retro in the 1990s. But Wisconsin knows how to develop football players — especially on the defensive side of the ball. The Badgers have a few highly rated NFL Draft prospects this year, and Henningsen is on that list.

Henningsen was perhaps a late emergence on the NFL Draft stage. But now, everyone knows who the burly Badgers defender is. He blew up the Wisconsin Pro Day with excellent numbers — among them a 37.5" vertical, a 119" broad jump, a 7.15 three-cone, and 22 bench reps. Do the numbers translate on tape, and what else does Henningsen offer that might be appealing to an NFL team?

## Henningsen's athletic profile

Henningsen's 37.5" vertical would have been the best at the NFL Combine among defensive tackles. Unsurprisingly, that explosiveness shows up on tape. Henningsen has great burst off the line. With that sheer burst, he accelerates quickly through gaps and invades the backfield.

Beyond his burst, Henningsen also has decent size and length. His frame affords him a solid combination of natural leverage and proportional length. With his burst and 33 1/8" arms, he can generate massive amounts of power at the point of attack. His power can shock off-balance linemen and force open paths to the QB.

Henningsen is also very strong, and his athleticism and strength go hand in hand. He uses this combination like an ice pick. With his quick burst, he'll surge into gaps, where he has the raw strength to wrench open

lanes in pursuit of the QB. And in the running game, with his explosiveness and wide frame, he swallows up RBs in the backfield.

#### Execution beyond the physical traits

Henningsen's game revolves entirely around his motor. He's a high-motor player who chases plays to the sideline in pursuit with good speed. That relentless motor also shows up on pass-rushing reps. The Wisconsin DT doesn't fade when his path is obstructed and can use his strength to fight through congestion.

As a pass rusher, Henningsen flashes with his hand usage. He can use violent hands off the line to club and stun linemen. He's also shown to replace his anchor while maintaining leg drive on bull-rush reps. He establishes anchors with the same violence referenced earlier and can clog lanes with his frame. Moreover, the Wisconsin DT has some measured twitch in his movement, although he can channel it more effectively.

In run defense, Henningsen shows flashes as well. The Wisconsin DT has the play strength to establish and maintain anchors, as well as shift gaps. Additionally, he can run with blocks and patrol gaps all the way to the sideline. Henningsen owns the strength to two-gap moving linemen, as well as enough lateral agility to divert course.

Lastly, Henningsen has a lot of alignment versatility. He may be best settling between 1-technique and 4i at the next level, but he took reps everywhere from 0-tech to 5-tech at Wisconsin.

#### Areas for improvement

While Henningsen's upside is exciting, he's very much a work in progress at this point, particularly with his hand usage and leverage. Henningsen is high-hipped and often bends at the waist. Thus, he isn't always able to lower his pads enough. He often comes off the snap too upright, sapping away at his leverage and the pace of his first step.

Going further, Henningsen is more of an upright, linear rusher, and can be stiff when changing directions. He can get locked up by anchors and sometimes struggles to free himself. With his inconsistent leverage and stiffness, Henningsen can be easily redirected on his pass-rushing reps, and he too often lacks control after his initial burst.

That brings us to his hand usage. While he flashes violent hands, Henningsen can be a bit uncontrolled and aimless at times. He relies heavily on his explosiveness and strength and doesn't always come with a pass-rush plan. The Wisconsin DT can do a better job keeping his elbows tucked and loading his hands on pass-rushing reps. He can also be quicker making contact, as his hands aren't precise or efficient.

Among other things, Henningsen's hips aren't overly flexible, and he also lacks the ankle flexion to stunt outside and work around the edge. He can give up surface area easily and is also at times a hair late timing the snap.

Henningsen's 2022 NFL Draft scouting report overview

Henningsen is well worth a draft pick and should hear his name called in the 2022 NFL Draft. The main appeal of the Wisconsin DT rests with his upside. Henningsen is extremely explosive and generates ample straight-line power with his burst and length. He's also strong and possesses the ability to anchor and rip down extensions.

Henningsen's combination of explosiveness and power-generation capacity is further magnified by his motor. The Wisconsin DT plays with a relentless attitude and can acquire second-effort sacks and tackles for loss. That urgency as a playmaker will no doubt win over some scouts.

Having said all this, Henningsen has some operational limitations that may render him a Day 3 pick. He struggles mightily with leverage, stiffness, and pad level at this point. He also lacks consistent hand usage and is mainly reliant on his physical traits. He'll have to improve his application at the next level.

Nevertheless, Henningsen has many building blocks in place. He's explosive, tenacious, strong, and powerful. He's also alignment-versatile and brings all-out effort on every snap. Henningsen is worth an early-to-mid Day 3 pick as a rotational defensive tackle in multiple schemes, with potential starting upside.

### Henningsen's Player Profile

If you think Henningsen is built like an offensive tackle, it's because he is. The Wisconsin DT was actually an offensive lineman coming out of high school. He played in the trenches on both sides of the ball for Menomonee Falls, but he was officially listed as a tackle on the recruiting trail.

Labeled a two-star recruit in the 2017 class, scholarship offers were scarce for Henningsen. He received several from smaller schools, including Western Illinois. But he passed up those opportunities to instead walk-on for the in-state powerhouse Wisconsin Badgers.

### Henningsen's career at Wisconsin

The two-star Henningsen had to adjust to the Big Ten, but he'd soon surpass expectations at Wisconsin. He'd not only develop into a full-time starter on defense, but he'd also earn a scholarship and make his mark on the Badgers' roster.

Henningsen redshirted in 2017 but came back as a redshirt freshman in 2018 and made an impact. He earned a sack and 2.5 tackles for loss in 10 starts, and his role only expanded in 2019. That year, Henningsen amassed 5 tackles for loss, 4 sacks, 2 pass deflections, and 2 fumble recoveries — both returned for touchdowns.

Henningsen experienced adversity in 2020. Just two games in, he tore his bicep and was out for the season. But the Wisconsin DT returned stronger in 2021, putting up 6 tackles for loss and 3.5 sacks alongside defenders like Leo Chenal, Jack Sanborn, and 2023 NFL Draft prospect Keanu Benton.

### Henningsen's NFL Draft ascension

Henningsen likely won't crack the early rounds, but it's not out of the realm of possibility. Teams love to bank on traits and will surprise onlookers with reaches aimed at adding high-upside prospects. Henningsen is one of those high-upside prospects. While his limitations might relegate him to Day 3 range, his combination of explosiveness and power is well worth the investment at the right spot.

# UW-Madison engineer, football standout Henningsen is “Academic Heisman” finalist

By John Graham  
Engineering.wisc.edu  
December 8, 2021

A University of Wisconsin-Madison engineering master’s student and starting defensive end for the Wisconsin Badgers football team was a finalist for the nation’s top honor for academic excellence.

Matt Henningsen, a student in the Machine Learning and Signal Processing accelerated master’s program in the UW-Madison College of Engineering, was recently selected as a National Football Foundation National Scholar-Athlete and one of 13 finalists for the 2021 William V. Campbell Trophy, often referred to as the “Academic Heisman.” The honors recognize the best football players in the nation for combined academic success, on-field performance and exemplary leadership.

Henningsen, a Menomonee Falls, Wisconsin native, has excelled both on the field and in the classroom, graduating with a bachelor’s degree in electrical and computer engineering in 2020 and continuing on with his master’s-level studies in 2021. During his entire academic career, he maintained a 4.0 undergraduate average, the only 2021 Campbell Trophy finalist to do so.

Over his 41 career games with Wisconsin, where he started as a walk-on, Henningsen has recorded 89 total tackles (13 for losses), eight quarterback sacks, and has produced three fumble recoveries, two for touchdowns. In 2021, he was named to the All-Big Ten third team.

He is a four-time Academic All-Big Ten honoree, a two-time Big Ten Distinguished Scholar and was named a first-team Academic All-American by the College Sports Information Directors of America.

Henningsen plans to complete his master’s degree in December 2021, just 12 months after beginning the challenging program that takes most students 16 months. During his time at UW-Madison, Henningsen also has worked on several research projects, including one with Biomedical Engineering Professor Walter Block and colleagues to develop a convolutional neural network to detect cerebral hemorrhaging on MRIs. The group has submitted the findings from its study to the Journal of Neurosurgery.

“It’s no easy feat to earn a 4.0 from a highly ranked electrical engineering program, but to do it while also performing at such a high level in a high-caliber football program is a testament to Matt’s dedication to all he pursues,” says Susan Hagness, chair of the Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering at UW-Madison. “To say that Matt has made the most of his time at UW-Madison is an understatement!”

Henningsen is just the seventh UW-Madison football player named an NFF National Scholar- Athlete since 1966. Notable winners of the Campbell Trophy include NFL Hall of Fame quarterback Peyton Manning and former NFL quarterback Tim Tebow.

# Wisconsin's 'mad scientist': How DE Matt Henningsen's passion for academics has him succeeding on and off the field

By Jesse Temple  
The Athletic  
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One-hundred nineteen Wisconsin football players crammed into the Camp Randall Stadium bleachers on August 5 for the annual team photo. Dressed in red Badgers jerseys and white pants, they sat customarily from front to back in order of their year in school. But in the middle of the front row between senior inside linebacker Jack Sanborn and senior tight end Jake Ferguson was an unmistakable empty space, a single missing piece that prevented Wisconsin from completing the full team puzzle.

Fifth-year senior defensive end Matt Henningsen had somewhere else to be. And he had a pretty good excuse for his absence.

Henningsen was across campus in the midst of giving his final presentation to peers and faculty members for a summer project that analyzed the potential pathways between brain waves using a machine-learning algorithm (he was eventually Photoshopped into the team picture).

"Just trying to find if there are different connections between different parts of the brain, I suppose is the way to put it in layman's terms," Henningsen said. "When you have a brain wave, a signal, it can travel through the brain. We're trying to figure out if we can find those connections, which is actually very difficult because the brain is a pretty random system."

Henningsen has a habit of making difficult things seem easy, both on and off the field. He became the first Wisconsin walk-on since at least 1990 to start a season opener as a freshman in 2018 and earned third team All-Big Ten honors for his play this season on one of the top defenses in the country. During offseason workouts, he back squatted 675 pounds, power cleaned 410 pounds and clocked in at 19.34 miles per hour on the GPS — incredible top-end speed for a football player with a 6-foot-3 and 291-pound frame.

But it's his academic pursuits that leave teammates and coaches truly in awe. Henningsen graduated summa cum laude (an honorary title used to signify the highest distinction) last December with a bachelor's degree in electrical engineering and a 4.0 grade-point average. He is obtaining his master's degree in electrical and computer engineering — with an emphasis on machine learning and signal processing — and will officially graduate Dec. 19.

Last season, Henningsen earned the Big Ten Distinguished Scholar honor for a second consecutive year. He also captured a spot on the CoSIDA Academic All-America first team. This fall, Henningsen is one of 13 finalists for the William V. Campbell Trophy, known in college football circles as the academic Heisman Trophy. The award annually recognizes the best in the country for combined academic success, football performance and exemplary leadership.

Henningsen was selected from a list of 176 semifinalists nationwide that included all NCAA divisions and the NAIA. He is the only member of this year's class to boast a perfect undergraduate grade-point average. Henningsen will fly to Las Vegas next week for the ceremony, which takes place Tuesday. It's no wonder why Badgers defensive line coach Ross Kolodziej referred to Henningsen this spring as "a genius academically and a freak show athletically" and has nicknamed him "The Mad Scientist."

"Off the field, it's off the charts," Wisconsin defensive coordinator Jim Leonhard said. "It's very rare that you have a guy that can be that focused and detailed on and off the field. He's intelligent. I feel like I've got to shy away every time I talk to him. He's above my level."

"I joked with him the other day. I go, 'You know the saying if you're the smartest guy in the room, you're in the wrong room? That sucks to be you. You're in the wrong room a lot.' But it's impressive. He's great to have on the team."

Henningsen grew up in a household with three older brothers, each of whom earned some form of all-conference football honors while playing at Menomonee Falls High School, located roughly 90 minutes east of Madison. Their success athletically and academically created a natural form of competition for Henningsen, who credits them for pushing him in both areas.

His mom, Helen, recalls that, when Matt was a high school freshman and one of his older brothers earned an all-conference award, Matt casually claimed that he would not only earn all-state honors one day but that he would do it on both offense and defense. In his senior season, that's exactly what he accomplished as an offensive and defensive lineman.

Henningsen's oldest brother, Pete, is an actuary with an insurance company. His second-oldest brother, Joe, is an orthopedic surgeon in Dayton, Ohio, who earned his undergraduate degree in biomedical engineering and then added a master's degree. His third brother, Adam, is pursuing his master's degree in business. All of them earned degrees from Wisconsin. Helen earned her undergraduate degree and her law degree from UW-Madison, while Matt's dad, Peter, earned his law degree from the school as well.

When Joe received a 3.95 grade-point average for his undergraduate degree (he registered an A-B in Spanish), Matt told his parents that he would someday compile a 4.0. Peter said he figured Matt — whose last B grade before college was in the fifth grade — might have at least a B in some undergraduate course along the way. Instead, Matt earned all A's and made good on his word.

"We kind of used to laugh at his goals a little bit, which I suppose we shouldn't say that," Helen said. "He says these ridiculous things or things that just sound ridiculous and then he goes ahead and does them because maybe he's got a chip (on his shoulder) because we're like, 'OK, yeah, right, Matt.'"

Henningsen showed promise with his knowledge of advanced math and science concepts even before he arrived at Wisconsin. Once, during his senior year in high school, his AP Statistics teacher didn't show up for a couple of classes and his school didn't have a plan for a substitute teacher. The lesson plan was ready, so Henningsen taught the class.

Helen said her son has always been extremely goal-driven and enjoyed the challenge of solving difficult problems. As a child, Matt didn't like games that required little thinking and planning. That's why he gravitated to games such as Dungeons & Dragons, a fantasy role-playing game, as well as chess.

Henningsen said his interest in machine learning developed as an undergraduate when he realized it could be applied in a variety of ways across multiple industries, including targeted advertising, imaging, cryptography or stock markets to form a sort of predictive modeling. He said talking to Siri on an iPhone was an example of machine learning, as was the way Netflix offers viewers recommendations based on past viewings as part of an advanced statistics algorithm.

Henningsen chose to apply those concepts through medical imaging when he was approached by UW-Madison professor Wally Block, who specializes in biomedical engineering, medical physics and radiology, about a research opportunity. At the time, Henningsen was an undergraduate student and worked with Dr. Azam Ahmed, a neurosurgeon on campus, and graduate student Tom Lilieholm on the project. Together, they developed a machine learning algorithm that would autonomously segment a brain clot given the MRI of a subject's brain — research that has been submitted to the Journal of Neurosurgery.

"To put it in easier terms, I would look at an MRI and I would find where the blood clot is," Henningsen said. "I used software to point out exactly where that brain clot is in three dimensions in that image. That was used as training data for the model so that you'd have to put this data into the model to train it to learn what a clot looks like.

"So it'll take in the image of the brain and it'll look at every single pixel and every single segment of the pixel and it'd see how those are different from the other pixels. And it'll analyze that so given a new test image that we don't know where the clot is, we can input that into the model and it'll output the segmentation, where the brain clot is without any human interaction."

If what Henningsen says sounds like an earful, teammates, coaches and even his parents acknowledge they often don't know exactly what he is saying. Running back Brady Schipper, who is a biology major and a year behind Henningsen, is taking some of the same classes that Henningsen did. When he asks Henningsen questions about his physics class, he admits he occasionally struggles to comprehend Henningsen's responses.

"When he talks about his work, my eyes gloss over," Helen said. "I say 'OK, so you're making the Winter Soldier now, huh?'"

Henningsen's time each day is at a premium given his academic and football responsibilities. He doesn't have the same type of social life as other college students, but he said he also doesn't feel as though he is missing anything because he has intentionally prioritized the two aspects of his life that are most important to him.

"The best way I manage that is by getting into a routine of things by just making sure I can allocate the time effectively," Henningsen said. "I try not to ever have time where I just have nothing planned. If I want time where I can just relax, I'll set that aside as relaxation time. I won't just have a schedule where I have a big block that's just not accounted for."

Henningsen, who has also served as a lab assistant for nuclear diffusion bonding research on campus, said he isn't sure exactly what professional path he wants to take with his area of study. But he recognizes the skills he has acquired should afford him several opportunities.

“He’s different,” Badgers cornerback Faion Hicks said. “I don’t think I ever came across anybody that smart before. I look forward to 20 years down the line seeing what he’s doing and seeing if I can get a job with him.”

Henningsen’s parents, both of whom are recently retired lawyers, say they are proud of his academic success. They also say that, for the first time ever, they encouraged their son to put football first as he entered his fifth season in the program because they recognized the finite window that he had to pursue his dream of playing in the NFL.

When Henningsen began his master’s program in the spring semester — a rarity for anybody in his field to attempt at mid-year — he was forced to take much more difficult second semester classes rather than the typical first semester prerequisites (he has been taking those prerequisites in reverse order this fall). Henningsen earned his first B since the fifth grade during the spring semester while taking an especially challenging advanced machine learning class. He said he spent so much time working in the class that he also wound up with an A-B in a second course. Those marks were more than good enough to pass but not nearly at the standard Henningsen expects of himself.

“He doesn’t like it,” Peter said. “But our message to him was, ‘Listen, you’re playing football and right now, your focus is football comes first.’”

Henningsen has played in 41 career games with 28 starts on the defensive line, and his combination of athleticism and intelligence is one of the reasons why he has given himself a shot at the pros. Wisconsin left tackle Tyler Beach smiles when he talks about all the preseason practices in which the entire offensive line had to whisper their blocking calls before arriving at the line of scrimmage so Henningsen couldn’t hear them because he seemed to always know what they were going to do.

“That’s essentially my goal each week,” Henningsen said. “My goal each week is to honestly try and figure out what’s coming every single play that I’m on the field. And I can’t do that. It turns out to be kind of difficult because these offenses can get somewhat complicated. However, I’m usually able to narrow it down to two, maybe three plays per formation, per look. ‘OK, they like this. They ran this a couple times today and it’s hit us a couple times. So, why don’t I play this block slightly differently to adjust?’ Just stuff like that.”

Henningsen has 89 career tackles, 13 tackles for loss, eight sacks, three fumble recoveries and two fumbles returned for touchdowns. He was limited to two games last season because of a torn biceps tendon and has returned to set career highs this season in tackles (31) and tackles for loss (5.5). Henningsen is playing the most consistent football of his career while serving as an anchor up front for a unit that ranks No. 1 nationally in run defense and No. 2 in total defense.

“You just see his awareness on the field,” Leonhard said. “He’s a step ahead. He’s playing faster. I think it’s all come together for him this year as far as the importance of how that information can affect your technique and how aggressive that allows you to play. Not just to know the information but be more aggressive when you already know the answer to the test. I think you’re seeing that consistently, run and pass. He’s showed that all season long.”

Outside linebacker Noah Burks said he works with Henningsen often in practices and games in pass rush situations that require the front seven to be in sync. He is amazed each time with how well Henningsen executes his job.

“When you can look inside and you know that you’re working with Henny, you know, ‘Oh, this is about to be really clean because he knows the timing of it,’” Burks said. “He’s going to be there with his get-off, with his twitch and explosiveness.”

Henningsen has one more game remaining in his college career when Wisconsin plays in a bowl at a site that will be determined Sunday. As he winds toward the completion of his journey, he has taken time out to contemplate how far he has come. His scholarship offer list out of high school included a few Mid-American Conference schools, such as Northern Illinois and Buffalo, as well as FCS schools Illinois State and Western Illinois. Several Ivy League schools expressed interest, including Princeton.

But he always wanted to attend Wisconsin like the rest of his family. So he took a chance on himself as a non-scholarship player, even though he weighed just 260 pounds while playing nose guard his first season. He kept working, became a valuable defensive end, earned a scholarship after one year and has developed into one of the Badgers’ leaders, a shining example for his teammates.

“Who he is shows up in everything that he does,” Wisconsin coach Paul Chryst said. “A guy that, he puts in all the work. He will not cut a corner. He’ll do the extra. He’s ultra-competitive. He’s a tremendous teammate. I think he’s driven by how can he help this team and how can he help others? I think what he’s done on and off the field is impressive as heck. You talk about truly a student-athlete, a scholar-athlete, and doing it at the highest level.

“A lot of people talk about that. A lot of people shoot to do that. But he’s accomplishing that. He’s relentless in his pursuit of everything that he does. No one’s going to outwork him on the field, in the weight room, in the preparation. Certainly what he’s accomplishing, has already accomplished, undergraduate, and accomplishing with his graduate studies, he’s unique.”

Peter said he never had any doubts that Matt would excel in academics but acknowledges that Matt has overachieved in football relative to what he thought was possible. He noted that plenty of kids come into Wisconsin’s football program on scholarship and don’t play. What he is most proud of is the number of Badgers parents who have approached him to point out how much their sons value Matt’s desire to connect with them as teammates and friends. The dominance he has shown on the field is an added bonus.

It remains to be seen where Henningsen’s football career goes from here. But the plan over the next several months is to push himself as hard as he can to refine his craft, to showcase his speed, strength and smarts and give himself a realistic opportunity in the NFL. All he needs is for one team to take a chance on him. And if it doesn’t work out, well, he has a couple electrical engineering degrees to fall back on.

“Which is not a bad plan B,” Helen said.