

2022 NFL Draft Preview: Wisconsin cornerback Faion Hicks

By Matt Belz

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With the NFL Draft set to occur April 28-30, some of Wisconsin's top players from last year's team are prepping for what could be a defining moment in their lives.

Some Badgers will ultimately hear their name called during one of the seven rounds worth of draft selections, while others will sign on as preferred free agents. Others may begin their careers in the XFL or move on from their professional football dreams altogether.

With that in mind, we at All Badgers will profile some former Badgers who have a chance at being selected in the NFL Draft over the next two weeks. For each player, we will profile who they are, their statistics and athletic testing numbers, where they could be selected, and some of the teams that could make sense.

Up next, is senior cornerback Faion Hicks.

Bio

Name: Faion Hicks

Position: cornerback

Jersey number: No. 1

Hometown: Miami, Florida

High school: Flanagan High School

Recruiting information: 3-star prospect

College major: Life Sciences Communication

Measurables

Height: 5-foot-10

Weight: 192 pounds

Pro Day numbers

40-yard dash: 4.37

20-yard shuttle: 3.94

3-cone: 6.78

Broad jump: 123"

Vertical jump: 37.5"

Bench press: 13 reps

Mock draft projections

Faion Hicks mentioned to media members during Pro Day that he was told by scouts that he could be a day three pick. Given the vast number of prospects in this year's draft due to the COVID exception, landing on a team via free agency is also a very real possibility for the multi-year starter.

Possible teams of interest

Hicks has reportedly met and worked out for the Green Bay Packers and Miami Dolphins leading up to the draft.

All 32 NFL teams were also in attendance for Wisconsin's Pro Day back on March 9.

Wisconsin Pro Day 2022: Faion Hicks becomes the talk of the town

By Tony Pauline
Pro Football Network
March 9, 2022

More than two dozen NFL teams were on hand in Madison for the 2022 Wisconsin Pro Day. Despite the media circus that is the 2022 NFL Draft, a little-known cornerback, who was not invited to the 2022 NFL Scouting Combine, became the talk of the workout.

Wisconsin Pro Day 2022: Faion Hicks stands out

Cornerback Faion Hicks, who draws a variety of opinions in the scouting community, looked terrific from start to finish. His 40-yard dash time was a swift 4.37 seconds with a 10-yard split of 1.48. That number would have been fifth-best at the NFL Combine behind two record-breaking performances at the position.

His other numbers included 3.94 seconds in the short shuttle, 6.78 seconds in the three-cone, and 37.5 inches in the vertical jump. Hicks also completed 13 reps on the bench press of 225 pounds.

Making matters even better, Hicks was terrific in position drills as he looked fluid and smooth. The feeling from scouts was the need to go back and rewatch the film on Hicks to see what they may have missed the first time around.

Other Badgers take advantage of Wisconsin Pro Day

As I tweeted out earlier, the Badgers' other defensive back — safety Scott Nelson — performed well beyond expectations. His 40 time came in at 4.38 seconds, while his short shuttle clocked just 3.92 seconds and his three-cone at a blistering 6.62 seconds. His vertical jump was 39.5 inches with a broad jump of 10'6".

Ironically, it was Nelson's athleticism that was questioned as he's a hard-nosed defensive back with great instincts. Nelson will not go unnoticed and is a potential late-round pick.

On the other side of the ball, wide receiver Kendrick Pryor was fast, timing 4.38 seconds in the 40 and with a 6.77 in the three-cone. His jumps were outstanding, with a vertical of 38.5 inches and a broad jump of 10'11".

Fullback John Chenal timed 4.75 seconds in the 40, touched 37 inches in the vertical jump, and caught the ball well in drills. His brother — linebacker Leo Chenal — timed 4.18 seconds in the short shuttle and 6.84 in the three-cone.

Additionally, as I tweeted out earlier, tight end Jack Ferguson improved his 40 time to 4.71 seconds from 4.77 at the Combine while he touched 34.5 inches in the vertical jump. Ferguson did not run the shuttles or three-cone. Jack Sanborn did run both of those, timing 4.05 seconds in the short shuttle and 6.81 in the three-cone.

'I'm definitely thinking about coming back': Faion Hicks' return in 2022 would be a boon for UW

By Colten Bartholomew
Milwaukee Journal Sentinel
November 15, 2021

Senior cornerbacks Caesar Williams and Faion Hicks are both in the midst of their best seasons at Wisconsin.

Williams, who has a team-high three interceptions, is a sixth-year senior whose eligibility will be exhausted after this season.

Hicks, who has a team-high nine passes broken up, is a fifth-year senior who could return for the 2022 season as last season, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, did not cost players a year of eligibility.

UW (7-3, 5-2 Big Ten) is set to play its 2021 home finale Saturday against Nebraska (3-7, 1-6) but Hicks revealed Monday he has talked to cornerbacks coach Hank Poteat about returning next season.

"I was thinking about it last night," Hicks said. "I'm kind of getting cold feet ... that this could be my last home game.

"I'm definitely thinking about coming back. Definitely have a decision to make, but I don't think I am ready to go yet."

That would be a boon to Poteat and defensive coordinator Jim Leonhard because they would have to replace only one veteran cornerback rather than two.

Dean Engram and Alexander Smith generally have been the third and fourth cornerbacks this season, respectively.

Engram, the team's nickel back, has started four games and played in all 10 this season. He had a key pass breakup on fourth down to set up a touchdown late in the first half at Rutgers and last week intercepted a pass to set up another touchdown in the victory over Northwestern.

"I think Dean has had back-to-back his best weeks, his most consistent weeks," Leonhard said.

UW has a commitment from Kalon Gervin, who announced last month he plans to transfer to UW from Michigan State. Gervin is a redshirt junior who has started nine games and played in 23. He should have two seasons of eligibility remaining.

Hicks said he will weigh his options after the season and after he receives feedback from the NFL.

"I try not to think too much about that during the season," Hicks said. "I'll think about it once the last game hits.

"Do I stay? Is it beneficial? Or do I hang it up and go?"

Hicks is among 24 players set to be honored Saturday on Senior Day. But Hicks and several other players do have the option to return in 2022.

Those players include safety Scott Nelson, left tackle Tyler Beach, right tackle Logan Bruss, tight end Jake Ferguson, fullback John Chenal and nose tackle Bryson Williams. Defensive end Matt Henningsen is in his fifth year, but he is already in graduate school working on his master's degree.

Two players not on the list to be honored Saturday are kicker Collin Larsh and punter Andy Vujnovich.

“Let’s face it,” Chryst said. “Some of these guys have an option to come back. We’re going to choose to celebrate them while we can.”

Braelon Allen honored by Big Ten

Freshman tailback Braelon Allen was named the Big Ten co-offensive player of the week Monday.

Allen rushed 25 times for 173 yards and three touchdowns — all college highs — in UW’s 35-7 victory over Northwestern.

Extra points

Outside linebacker Spencer Lytle, inside linebacker Mike Maskalunas and cornerback Semar Melvin are listed as questionable this week. Wide receiver A.J. Abbott and tight end Hayden Rucci are out.

Tristan Monday, a 6-foot-4, 240-pound defensive end/linebacker from Scottsdale, has decommitted from Arizona and now plans to play for UW. He also had offers from Baylor, Colorado and Florida State. UW now has 12 oral commitments for the 2022 class.

How Faion Hicks went from quiet, nervous freshman to confident Badgers' senior leader

By Colten Bartholomew
Wisconsin State Journal
September 4, 2021

Faion Hicks could feel the tension throughout his body as his mind raced, rifling through everything he'd learned to get himself to that moment.

"I remember my very first play, like my legs just felt really heavy," he said about his first game as a University of Wisconsin football player. "I was so nervous."

He was on the field as a redshirt freshman cornerback in the team's opener against Western Kentucky in 2018, and he tallied three tackles and an interception at the goal line in that game. He admits now, as a fifth-year senior entering his fourth year in the starting lineup, that it took him the better part of two years to truly shake those jitters.

He says he's as relaxed and confident as he's ever felt as he steps onto the field now. No. 12 UW will need him to play his best game Saturday as it hosts No. 19 Penn State in a Big Ten Conference matchup to open the season at Camp Randall Stadium. Hicks will face one of the toughest tests of his career against the Nittany Lions, helping guard their talented duo of receivers, Jahan Dotson and Parker Washington.

The Badgers will rely on Hicks, who celebrated his 23rd birthday Thursday, to slow down whichever dynamic pass catcher he lines up against.

But relying on Hicks isn't new for UW, and that goes for on- and off-the-field matters. Much has changed for Hicks, growing from a nervous freshman and someone who kept to himself to being one of the most respected voices in the UW locker room.

He's out to show more of his skills as a cornerback, both on the outside and in the slot, this season. That was a major factor in his decision to forgo a chance at the NFL and return to UW. Some of the skills he's honed throughout his Badgers career include just being himself and giving more of himself each day he steps in the Badgers' facility.

"I think he's truly confident in so many aspects — confident as a player, confident as a leader of this team," UW coach Paul Chryst said. "It's come by, I think, a lot of work that he's put into it. But while doing that, he's always been a great teammate."

"His voice is heard. And I think it's heard and valued because of the way that he goes about his day-to-day business. He's a guy that's consistent. And I think the actions that he does, or the words that he uses, it's coming from someone that lives it and lives it every day."

Coming out of his shell

Gathering together on Friday nights at a hotel is a special time for the Badgers, one of the many things to return this year that was sacrificed in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

A player often addresses the team with some remarks to get them going before the game. The responsibility fell to linebacker Chris Orr in 2019. The Badgers have some options for who will lead those meetings this season, but sixth-year senior receiver Kendric Pryor believes Hicks is a leading candidate.

“It’s respect to him because he’s done a lot of stuff on film, so when he’s up there voicing his opinion, you don’t have guys trying to say, ‘Who are you?’” Pryor said. “That’s somebody who has put that time in, put that work in on the field, put it on tape, has equity enough to where guys respect him and just listen to his opinion.”

Hicks’ ascent to a leadership role started on the field. He’s only missed one game since 2018 and started almost every game of the past two seasons. He has 80 career tackles and nine passes defended, including four in seven games last season.

His play on the field and knowledge of the game is a tent pole of his leadership. His personality — more reserved, quiet, but intense about the game — also plays a role.

“Faion’s the guy where if he’s talking, nobody else is talking,” senior linebacker Jack Sanborn said. “Whenever he’s going to come out and say something and get in front of the team, you know it’s going to mean something and you better be listening.”

Hicks’ voice grew beyond football over the past 18 months. He’s made public comments encouraging people to get the COVID-19 vaccine and talked about his views regarding a college players’ association in the wake of players earning money off their name, image and likeness. He was also one of the program’s leading player voices last summer during demonstrations against racial inequality.

Being someone who’s looked up to, whether for advice about coverages or inspiration off the field, is something Hicks takes seriously. He remembers how former Badgers like Orr, D’Cota Dixon, Natrell Jamerson, Nick Nelson and Derrick Tindal guided him during his career and wants to be the same kind of influence.

“I want to hold dear to that, just giving my wisdom to younger guys and letting them know how to go through things or do things differently than I did,” Hicks said. “You don’t want to let them down.”

Biggest cheerleader

Hicks’ mother, Schevette Glinton, laughs a bit when she hears about his post as one of the team’s leaders.

“When I see him on the field and visit him in school, he’s like this big grown person. But then when he comes home, he turns into a baby,” she said with a laugh.

She still remembers the “hell-raiser,” as she called him. The boy who broke his leg around the age of 5 and stubbornly refused to use crutches, so he hopped along everywhere he went with his cast. The young man whose school had to call her in to discipline Hicks after he went to the top of a staircase and did backflips the whole way down.

But she also knows that despite her son’s loner nature, people gravitate toward him.

Faion Hicks and mom

Badgers senior cornerback Faion Hicks, right, and his mother Schevette Ginton pose after a Wisconsin football game.

“Faion doesn’t talk much, but everybody loves Faion,” she said. “I don’t know if they just love the mystery of him, because he doesn’t say much, but his presence — when he walks in the room, you know he’s there.

“It makes me feel as though I did a good job. I love to hear that he’s doing well.”

Ginton will be in the stands Saturday, the first game Badgers fans have been allowed to attend since November 2019. Hicks is from Miami, Florida, where Ginton and the family still live. She comes to as many games as she can, at least a couple both at home and on the road, and she surprised him by being at the team’s open practice during training camp Aug. 21.

The games she can’t attend, she gathers Hicks’ siblings, uncles and family members at her house — decked out in Badgers memorabilia — for watch parties. She’ll text Hicks throughout the game congratulating him for good plays and questioning what went wrong on others. She said he’ll often call after games to figure out on which plays she thinks he needs to be better.

“Saturdays, no matter if it’s in season or not, every Saturday is Badger day,” Ginton said. “During season and offseason, we are Wisconsin Badger’d down every Saturday. So we go to the grocery store or even if we’re just at home, we’re in Badger gear.”

Hicks is on track to graduate in December and will have the opportunity to test the NFL waters this winter. Those accomplishments down the road will be even sweeter if Hicks has the season his coaches, teammates and mother think he can.

“This year, where he can have like a full season,” Ginton said, “I feel like he’s just going to be a beast.”

Wisconsin CB Faion Hicks' play has spoken volumes, now he's emerging as a vocal leader

By Jesse Temple

The Athletic

August 2, 2021

Wisconsin cornerback Faion Hicks finished last season with 13 tackles and four pass breakups, numbers that may not exactly jump off the stat sheet when attempting to evaluate his play. Only upon closer inspection does it become clear that Hicks was the Badgers' best cover corner and one of the most reliable defenders on the team.

No one on Wisconsin's defense was targeted more than Hicks (29 pass attempts), according to Pro Football Focus. Yet none of the 10 Badgers who were targeted at least 10 times allowed a lower percentage of completions. Receivers came up with a catch against Hicks 12 times, or on 41.4 percent of throws. Hicks led the team in pass breakups and had the top coverage grade on the defense outside of safety Titus Toler, who played just 13 snaps.

Hicks' contributions have perhaps gone underappreciated outside the program. But considering he has appeared in 33 career games with 28 starts and is in line to play a big role again as a senior, his value to Wisconsin continues to be immense.

"I think it just shows the type of lockdown corners we have," Hicks said. "You can't really pay too much attention to stats. It's mostly the film, how the corner plays their technique and being a good cover guy. I think that's what I am."

Hicks demonstrated his versatility last season after top slot corner Rachad Wildgoose sustained a season-ending shoulder injury against Northwestern. Hicks didn't play a single snap in the slot during Wisconsin's first two games against Illinois and Michigan. After Wildgoose's injury, Hicks played 209 snaps as the slot corner and 81 snaps elsewhere on defense. Hicks was so good that defensive coordinator Jim Leonhard said during the spring that he was "the guy to beat out" for the top nickel role entering this season.

"I don't think he got near enough credit as that season went on, what he was able to do in the slot for us," Leonhard said. "The plan last year was to get him in there a lot more. He ended up getting hurt in fall camp, so he didn't necessarily get a ton of experience. But as he worked back into the fold with Rachad being healthy, the plan all year was to move him all over the place matchup-wise, where we wanted him, whether it was inside or outside. Well, with that, other guys are going to have to move."

"Faion was going to be the guy that was going to play inside, play outside depending on the matchups we liked. Once Rachad went down, and he really got comfortable in that nickel role, it suits his skill set really well and the type of receivers that we're covering in there, did a great job. We have a number of guys that I think push for that position as well to hopefully provide that flexibility again."

Despite the fact Hicks has been a starter for three seasons, he continues to look for ways to improve. The background image on his Twitter account is a sign that reads: "Complacency kills." Under first-year cornerbacks coach Hank Poteat, Hicks said he has emphasized playing the ball more and trying to create

takeaways for the defense. Hicks has recorded just one career interception and no forced fumbles. Poteat has preached the importance of mental toughness to his corners.

“Having a dog mentality every day,” Hicks said. “You can’t just have it on game day. You’ve got to have it every day in practice, every day in workouts, teaching us to be more aggressive. Using my hands more. Just being playmakers.”

Hicks is reserved by nature but said he began to assume more of a vocal leadership role last season after coaches pulled him aside and explained to him how respected he was by his teammates and how much they followed his example.

“It was like, ‘OK, now I have to have the opportunity to speak up, say how I feel.’” Hicks said. “Seeing how Chris Orr led when he was here, being so vocal and having that passion and sharing that passion with his teammates, I kind of want to do the same, kind of let them know how I feel with this being my last year and how I want the program to be. I want them to feel that same passion. I don’t want them to wait until it’s too late to feel that. You’ve got to feel that right now.”

Added linebacker Jack Sanborn: “When Faion is talking, you listen up. And everyone has the utmost respect for him. He’s been on the team for a few years now starting, so he knows what it’s like to have a great defense, to be on those great teams. He brings that passion to the game, that love of the game and he’s a great player.”

Hicks has used his Twitter platform recently to outwardly speak up to defend coach Paul Chryst who wasn’t among a list of the top 50 head coaches with the most swagger, as well as a Pro Football Focus ranking that left Wisconsin off the top 10 best defenses entering the 2021 season. Hicks tweeted “LOL” and later called the slight “laughable.”

“I don’t really tweet much,” Hicks said. “But when I do, I’m usually trying to make a statement.”

Hicks was one of Wisconsin’s three player representatives at Big Ten media days in Indianapolis, along with Sanborn and tight end Jake Ferguson, and Chryst raved about him at the event.

“I’ve loved seeing Faion’s progression and growth,” Chryst said. “Early, (he was) not always going to say a lot. But when he did, it resonated. We were coming down here, I was just seeing if JT (Jonathan Taylor) was going to be in town. He said, ‘Who you coming down with?’ I told him about Faion and he’s like, ‘Man, I love Faion. He would speak, it had everyone’s attention.’ That’s younger Faion.

“I’m excited for him for this year and kind of where he’s at and what he’s done to prepare himself for it. As you know, if we’re going to be a good secondary, we’ve got some guys that have played and have some experience. Faion and Caesar (Williams) and Scott (Nelson) and Collin (Wilder). We’ve still got other guys that can contribute. But those four, they’ve been around. If we’re going to be a good secondary, I think it’s got to come from them.”

Hicks and Williams return as multiyear starters at cornerback for Wisconsin. Given that Wisconsin played 68 percent of its defensive snaps in the nickel last season, the Badgers have been working to find more help at cornerback. Alexander Smith and Dean Engram emerged as contenders during spring practice for significant roles. Deron Harrell, Donte Burton and Semar Melvin, each of whom has started games for the

Badgers, also are options. But, as was the case last season, Hicks' underrated combination of toughness, talent and leadership will go a long way toward allowing the secondary to succeed.

"He's breaking the huddle down, giving great messages after practices, after workouts and stuff like that," Ferguson said. "I'd follow him through a dark alley. Him and Sanborn for sure. I always tell people if you could pick one guy to go in a dark alley with, it would be one of those two guys. It would be a long night in the alley, but it would be fun."