

Why is freshman Jayden Daniels in the QB1 mix? Ask those who coached against him

By Doug Haller, The Athletic (July 18, 2019)

The truth on incoming freshmen can be hard to find. Hype often trumps substance. Fans celebrate nearly every commitment. A player's high school coach speaks glowingly. Highlight videos can be misleading. With that in mind, I decided to try something different with Arizona State's Jayden Daniels. I contacted six coaches who had to game plan against the talented quarterback last season. I explained to each that Daniels was one of four competing for the starter's job in Tempe, and that some believed the former San Bernardino (Calif.) Cajon product had the inside track.

Their collective reaction: not a surprise.

"Not at all," Paloma Valley coach Tom Tello said. "I took this phone call because I'm glad we don't have to prepare for him again. His junior year, that was my first game as a head coach and I was like, 'Man, who scheduled this?'"

"We faced him last year, and since we open against (Cajon) again this year, we've spent a lot of time watching him the past month," Helix coach Robbie Owens said. "It was kind of ironic that you called because we've been talking about how great it is that we don't have to face him this time."

During his time at Cajon, Daniels threw for a CIF-Southern Section record 14,007 yards and 170 touchdowns. A four-year starter, he added 3,645 rushing yards and 41 rushing touchdowns. During his senior season, 247 Sports ranked him as the nation's No. 2 dual-threat quarterback and as a national Top 100 prospect. Daniels (6 feet 3, 180 pounds) chose the Sun Devils over UCLA, California and Utah.

"I've coached against kids in the NFL and everywhere in-between," said Chatsworth Sierra Canyon coach Jon Ellinghouse, whose team outlasted Daniels and Cajon in last season's CIF Southern Section Division 3 championship, "and he's probably the best I've gone against. It was a great find for Arizona State."

In addition to Tello, Owens and Ellinghouse, I talked with Romoland Heritage's Kraig Broach, Redlands East Valley's Rich Lunsford and Redlands' Mike McFarland about what made Daniels special. Here's what they told me:

On Daniels' overall skills

Tello: I actually coached against him his freshman year when he started. I was the (defensive coordinator) at another school in the area and we played him in the semifinals, and he was good then. You could tell he had a ton of ability. In Southern California football, there are only a handful of guys who can start at that level as a freshman and get their team all the way to semifinals.

Broach: The best thing I can say about Jayden is everything seems to come easy to him. When he's running, it looks like he's in slo-mo — except for he's faster than everybody. His presence back in the pocket — nothing seems to bother him.

Lunsford: At the high school level, there was nothing that he couldn't do. Yeah, he's a slender kid, but he's so elusive and so fast and so smart he never takes big hits or big shots. He has a cannon for an arm. He reads defenses well, gets the ball out of his hand quickly. In all honesty, in all the film I watched and then watching him live, I didn't see a single flaw.

McFarland: The best way I can describe it is he can win a game any way that a quarterback can win a game. He has a very unique combination of being a polished passer. He can drop back in the pocket and he has the size and the poise, the arm strength. He can make all the throws. He knows where the ball needs to go. He's a very refined, polished passing quarterback and then he has lethal legs. He can bust out and take it the distance.

On game-planning against him

Owens: We knew he was going to be able to run and throw, but you always go into a game kind of thinking you can take something away — and he still dominated us. When you look at the game, there were certain things that we did really well, it's just he was the difference-maker. You put 99 percent of the other quarterbacks in the country in that situation, and they're not successful. He's just so dynamic.

Lunsford: Obviously, against any quarterback that's good, you want to try and get him off his point, try and make him move and try to get hits on him as much as possible, but that was almost impossible for us to do against him. It kind of seems like he plays with a chip on his shoulder for whatever reason. We got a couple hits on him, but he's a tough kid. I think we kind of twisted his leg up a little bit and we thought we might be able to get after him and then the next series he breaks a 75-yard touchdown run. We're like, "Obviously, there's nothing wrong with his leg."

Ellinghouse: I'm not a big fan of having a spy for a quarterback; I just think it opens so much for them. We were a pretty good team as well so we just kind of did what we do and we held him pretty good in the first half. And then he went wild on us in the second half and we barely held on.

Tello: They were in a spread and he definitely would sling it around a bunch. But he was the type of talent that if you put him in any offense — he's the best player on the field, period. It wasn't just a system thing.

On his play-extension talent

Broach: A lot of these high school quarterbacks — I don't want to say they're looking for things to break down, but maybe they're ready to scramble around. That's not Jayden. He's composed and he's going through his progression first and foremost. For a high school quarterback to do that, that's not very common.

Owens: I think he knows he can take off running, but he's always looking to get the ball downfield. If you watch, there's a lot of plays that break down with them up front that he's able to gain some extra time and still be able to throw the ball.

Lunsford: To tell you the truth, I don't recall any time when he was behind the line of scrimmage when the ball got tucked away. It's always up around his chest level and he's always heads up, looking down the field, looking to throw as he's moving.

Tello: And when he does take off, he's just as dangerous.

Lunsford: I had a linebacker that committed to go to Army. He was about 6-2, 215, runs a 4.6. He's an athletic D-I type player. And Jayden made him come up whiffing air two different times when it was just the two of them in the open field.

On Daniels starting at ASU as a true freshman

Owens: When I heard he was going to Arizona State, I thought, "It's going to be hard to keep that guy off the field."

Lunsford: I talked to their recruiting guy — I think it was their defensive backs coach who recruits out here — and I asked him: "Hey, what's it look like for Jayden?" And he said, "Right now, he's splitting reps with the 1s." And this was last spring and I said, "I will not be surprised a single bit if he's your starter going into day one."

Broach: We went against Orange Lutheran and Ryan Hilinski, who ended up at South Carolina. Nothing against Hilinski — he's great — but Jayden's the best one I've seen.

McFarland: I'll just be blunt with you: I have more experience coaching college football than high school, but in my limited experience at the high school level, I've not been around a quarterback that good. I don't have a frame of reference for knowing what a freshman who starts in a Power 5 conference looks like in high school, but to me, his only area for growth was just physically — you know, getting stronger and thicker. As far as playing the position, there was no question he'd be ready to play.