# The 49ers see something special in De'Zhaun Stribling. So does this little-known test



A test De'Zhaun Stribling took at Ole Miss suggests he likes tough coaching and will excel under pressure. Petre Thomas / Imagn Images

By **Matt Barrows**
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Is rookie wide receiver De'Zhaun Stribling an exceptional, "gold helmet" prospect like the San Francisco 49ers claim? Ken Smithmier thinks so, and he says he has the data to back it up.

Smithmier, 71, has been administering something called a Judgment Index to Ole Miss players for the past three years. It's not a personality test like Myers-Briggs or an intelligence test like the Wonderlic. Instead, it seeks to get inside a person's head to shed light on things like their decision-making skills, their

values and — here's where it's useful for football teams — any unrecognized weaknesses that might be holding them back.

"There's something about a human that we tend to do better figuring out everything else than we are figuring out ourselves," Smithmier said. "That's often where the stumbling block is."

Smithmier tested Stribling when he transferred to Ole Miss a year ago and was blown away by the results. A good Judgment Index score is considered anywhere from 875 to 950. On one portion of the test, Stribling (who agreed to share his results with *The Athletic*) scored a 968, the best Smithmier had ever seen.

According to Smithmier, the results suggest Stribling has high self-confidence, likes to be coached hard and won't crack under pressure.

"And it's likely that when (those with a score like Stribling's) are under pressure — à la a wide receiver and it's fourth-and-10, and we've got to have a first down — their performance will accelerate," he said. "They tend to do better.

"This is a person that is probably not going to blow you away in an interview," he continued. "This is not his nature. He has a very good inner sense of who he is and how he fits in the world. And he intends to show it to you and will not try to impress you with his talk. With Strib, it's what you see is what you get. There's no bulls— about him."

The 49ers had a similar impression of the wide receiver.



Each year, they give a handful of draft prospects “gold helmet” designations, which means the team believes they are exemplary in an array of areas, including leadership and football intelligence. Their previous gold helmet players have included standouts like Colton McKivitz (fifth round) and Talanoa Hufanga (fifth round), as well as others who haven’t made as big a splash like Trey Lance (first round) and Ji’Ayir Brown (third round).

“Gold helmet is everything,” vice president of player personnel Tariq Ahmad said after the team took Stribling with the 33rd pick last month. “He’s kind of a unique guy. When he transferred in, I’m not certain Ole Miss knew the quality and caliber of person and player they had early on. Our scouts loved him right away. Our coach loved him right away. Leadership. Goal-oriented.

“The passion the guy has, the work ethic, the toughness, the durability. He checks all those boxes at a high level.”

The Judgment Index test isn’t complicated and takes about 15 minutes to complete. It asks the taker to rank two sets of 18 words or phrases from best to worst. On one end of the spectrum are things like “a baby,” “a love of nature” and “marriage vows.” On the other end are nefarious concepts: “a madman,” “purposely causing someone anguish,” and “sending an innocent person to prison.” The results are extrapolated from how an individual ranks the concepts, and there are millions of ways they can be ranked.

“You’ve got to put one at No. 1. And you’ve got to put one at No. 2,” Smithmier said. “So you have to decide what you value more, even though you value both. … The questions don’t ask directly about things like self-criticism or how they deal with people. But the algorithms pull it out of them.”

Smithmier began administering the test in 2017 with clients that included businesses, law firms, a medical school and a trucking company. Most were interested in pre-hire assessments.

Later that year, he stepped into the world of big-time college sports when he wrote an item in the Nashville Business Journal that was critical of Nick Saban. A month earlier, the then-Alabama head coach had stunningly parted ways with offensive coordinator Lane Kiffin a week before the national championship game, and Smithmier questioned Saban’s judgment. Then he printed out the item and sent it to Saban.

“I thought, ‘Saban seems like the kind of guy you could provoke, maybe,’” Smithmier recalled. “And I sent it to him cold.”

Six weeks later, he got a phone call from a Tuscaloosa, Ala., area code. Soon, he was testing Alabama players. In 2023, it was Kiffin, now at Ole Miss, who came calling. He wanted Smithmier to test incoming freshmen, players arriving from the transfer portal (Stribling spent two years each at Washington State and Oklahoma State before arriving in Oxford, Miss., in 2025) and even members of the coaching staff.

“It was really eye-opening to see how closely it lined up with how we felt the player or the staff member actually operated,” said Billy Glasscock, Ole Miss’s former general manager who now has the same role at LSU. “And sometimes it wasn’t even about eliminating guys. It was understanding how they operate so we could teach them the right way. It was a very vital tool for us for sure.”

Glasscock said he’s taken the test twice.

“I thought it was very accurate,” he said. “(Smithmier) made a couple of statements early on in the conversation about the results, and I was like, ‘Wow!’ Because it was things that you carry with you that you know you struggle with. And he was able to walk me through all that. And I think it was a big help, honestly.”

Smithmier hasn’t studied yet whether high scores like Stribling’s are predictive of NFL success. But he said low scores can certainly be linked to players, even those drafted early, who struggle in the NFL or fail to meet their potential.

“A low score means that person is not making sense of the world around them,” Smithmier said. “That person is not making sense of the inside of their own head. And what you get is inconsistent performance and behavior on and off the field. There are guys I have awful reports on that were first-round draft picks, and they were disasters.”

By far the most common weakness he finds — no matter the person’s age, gender or occupation — is self-criticism. Athletes and coaches who strive for perfection are often tripped up by that pursuit.

“You’ve heard the old line: Don’t let the same mistake beat you twice?” Smithmier said. “Well, the harshly self-critical guys get beat by the same mistake twice. They’ll blow a tackle. And now they’ve got to get up, get back to the huddle and listen to the next play. And the guys who are really weak on

that score, they're still beating themselves up over the mistake they just made. Now they're not concentrating, and — boom! — they get beaten again."

He said there are ways to improve that.

"That's one of the things Saban said to me," Smithmier recalled. "He said, 'You know, I get all these damn personality tests back and then say, now what?'"

An athlete with a poor self-criticism score can take a 90-day course that helps rewire his brain. He said players are accustomed to addressing weaknesses — an offensive guard working on timing his inside punches, a tight end increasing how much he squat-lifts — and are receptive to doing the same with their behavior. He said he's retested players and coaches who have shown improvement.

"These guys like measurements, and they like targets," Smithmier said.

Other sports have caught on. An NCAA basketball program recently hired him to test players before they're signed to NIL deals. He also works with the University of Maryland football team and the Alabama women's basketball team.

The NFL, however, remains elusive.

Smithmier lives in Nashville and says he's written numerous letters offering his services to the Tennessee Titans, who haven't had a winning season since 2021. He said he's gotten so frustrated with the home team that he'd test them for free, but he's never gotten a response.

"It was probably read by some assistant somewhere, and he just threw it in the trash," he said. "It's so hard to penetrate (the NFL's) consciousness. I've gotten nowhere with it. I am convinced if nothing else, I could help them avoid a multi-, multimillion-dollar disaster."

## Addendum from Matt Barrows

I took the test this week. I completed it in under 15 minutes, and my score on the personal side — the portion on which Stribling had a 968 — was 888. I thought the conclusions Smithmier relayed to me were, well, pretty spot on.

Like a lot of people, he said I tended to be self-critical (I hate when I'm like that), I was perhaps a bit disorganized (you should see my desk) and that I was slightly low in the self-esteem category (I'm 5-5, 120 pounds, so that tracks).

The result said I tend to view myself as unique, which Smithmier said pops up in about 10 percent of test takers.

"It's a plus," he said. "It's not an ego or an arrogance thing. What it suggests is that you're a guy who has a good inner sense of who he is and where he fits in the world. You probably tend to be more of a 'walk the walk' than 'talk the talk' type.

"Your mindset is something like, 'I'm gonna go in, do what I do and be who I am, and hopefully people will see that in me and appreciate it.' And probably people like being around you because of that. So if it's a company or a sports team, I'll tell whoever might be interviewing you, 'Hey, this guy might not blow you away in the first round because he's not gonna try to. It's not his nature to come out and toot his own horn.'

"So if you were an athlete," he concluded, "I'd tell the coach, 'Absolutely. No red flags on this guy. Take him in and coach him up.'"

You hear that, Kyle Shanahan? You won't regret it.

**(Kyle Shanahan is the head coach for the San Francisco 49ers of the National Football League.)**

**Matt Barrows** is a senior writer for The Athletic covering the 49ers. He joined The Athletic in 2018 and has covered the 49ers since 2003. He was a reporter with The Sacramento Bee for 19 years, four of them as a Metro reporter. Before that he spent two years in South Carolina with The Hilton Head Island Packet.

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