

COMMENTARY

# 49ers stubbornly betting 2026 season on Kittle's Achilles

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Bay Area News Group

The 2026 NFL draft is in the books, and the San Francisco 49ers made one thing abundantly clear: Kyle Shanahan and John Lynch do not care what the rest of the league is doing or thinking.

They never really have, but they're really reveling in their counterculture these days.

And so they spent this past weekend staring at a glaring, blinking-red-light need - tight end - and decided to treat it like a "check engine" light on a 1998 Camry.

They put a piece of tape over the notification and just kept treading their own path.

Maybe they'll get away with it.

Maybe a piston will come shooting through the hood.

I guess we're going to find out in a spectacular way.

Amid a draft class in which tight ends were the belle of the ball, Shanahan and Lynch decided to exit the proceedings having completely ignored the position.

Yes, they brought in Khalil Dinkins out of Penn State as an undrafted free agent. He's a development project who caught a few touchdowns in the Big Ten. He might block a few guys in August. Brayden Willis needs to worry about his roster spot.

But let's be real: As it stands, the Niners are essentially going to roll back the exact same tight



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San Francisco 49ers tight end George Kittle is carted off the field during the second quarter in an NFC Wild Card Playoff game against the Philadelphia Eagles at Lincoln Financial Field on Jan. 11 in Philadelphia.

end crew that proved woefully inadequate in 2025.

They are doing this in a season that will be, league-wide, defined by the tight end position.

Everyone with a headset is rushing to proliferate Sean McVay's 13-personnel attack. It is the ultimate, heavy-handed counterpunch to the league's new obsession with dynamic, athlete-filled "positionless" defenses. You want to play a 210-pound safety at linebacker? Cool. We are going to run three massive tight ends onto the field and bury you.

Shanahan? He's going his own way. He's making a bet.

The Niners are pushing

their chips to the center of the table and betting their entire 2026 season on the repaired Achilles tendon of a 32-year-old.

They are putting it all on George Kittle.

Don't get it twisted. Kittle is an absolute legend. One of the greatest Niners to ever strap on a gold helmet. He defies expectations on principle. He plays with his hair on fire. There is a bronze bust waiting for him in Canton one day, and writing off his career right now would be a fool's errand.

But are we all ignoring the fact that the man ruptured his Achilles tendon in January?

Historically, that's a career-ending injury.

Nowadays, it's a brutal, grueling rehab that robs a player of their explosiveness for at least a year, if not forever.

Yet Kittle is out here aggressively eyeing a return for Week 1.

Oh, and Week 1 is in Australia.

(What's a 15-hour pressurized flight across the Pacific Ocean going to do to a surgically repaired Achilles tendon? My goodness.)

And even if he manages to safely deplane and trot out onto the field in Melbourne, do the Niners really think he's going to be George Kittle? The best tight end in football?

There might be a guy wearing No. 85 in uni-

form. But how could anyone logically expect him to be the same game-wrecking player in the exact same calendar year his Achilles popped?

You kind of need a fully functional Achilles tendon to play tight end. It's a non-negotiable.

Blocking well is all about generating ground force. Receiving is all about sudden, sharp movements in space. You can't fake either of those things.

Kittle remains endlessly optimistic that this is all going to work out just fine. That's who he is.

"Surgery went really, really good," Kittle said during locker-room cleanout in January. "(Dr. Neal El Attrache) said the best-case scenario when you tear it up high by your soleus, which is what I did. I had a clean tear. They didn't have to drill into my heel."

A "clean" Achilles tear. It's the best you could possibly have, supposedly.

To a non-doctor like me, that whole concept sounds wildly oxymoronic. It's like having a "good" divorce or a "fun" insurance dispute.

Hey, it's Kittle. Who's anyone to tell him no? He deserves the benefit of the doubt, right?

But you know what is even more moronic? The utter lack of a hedge on this bet.

If the Niners' front office truly believes Kittle's optimistic timeframe, that's a-OK.

But not upgrading from Luke Farrell (abysmal in

his first season) or Jake Tonges (a nice pass catcher who can't block) feels like malpractice.

It might be a money issue: Kittle is expensive, and Farrell set the market for move tight ends. That's a valid reason to sit out free agency at the position.

But the draft? Those kids are cheap.

Is this a politics thing? The Niners have been noticeably reluctant to draft heirs apparent for their future Hall of Famers under Shanahan and Lynch.

Look at Christian McCaffrey. The front office walks on eggshells around him. As Shanahan himself has admitted to the media, they don't want to put in someone who could even theoretically take his job, because what kind of message would that send to CMC?

Feathers would be ruffled.

Are they simply doing the exact same thing with Kittle?

It's entirely possible Kittle defies medical logic - that he's the exception to these known expectations. What's another "told you so" for George?

At the same time, it's not at all ridiculous to consider his 2026 campaign a wash. Even if Kittle physically makes it onto the field, preparing for him to not look like himself is the conservative, prudent play.

The Niners? Apparently, they don't do conservative.

Or, in other words, they are assuming everything will just magically work out.

But if they hold that form through the summer, and the stark reality that a 32-year-old coming off a ruptured Achilles sets in, I'm not sure there will be any way to change course come the fall.

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