

OPINION: SACK RACE

By Bob Carroll

Those of you who surf the Internet waves may be aware that the Dick Butkus Football Network has been trumpeting an NFL All-Time Career QB Sack List they obtained from researcher John Turney. Deacon Jones, the man who coined the term "sack," has said "'All-Time' didn't begin in 1982 [the year sacks became an official stat]. It began, for the NFL, seventy-seven years ago. Each and every man who played deserves his place in NFL history. Thank you DBFN ... Now let's have the league statisticians acknowledge these efforts."

Curiously enough, Mr. Jones' name appears at the top of the list with 173.5 unofficial sacks, but his advocacy of making Turney's unofficial sack list official is no doubt based on a sincere desire to see former teammates and opponents lauded. Unfortunately, despite his nod to seventy-seven years of history, the list he embraces, running all the way down to 60.5 sacks, seems to be missing a few people like Gino Marchetti, Len Ford, Ed Sprinkle, Willie Davis, Doug Atkins, and Norm Willey. As I recall him, Willey must have got sixty point-five sacks in one season. Of course, I could be wrong, but I know he had 17 in one game. Or maybe it was twelve.

So maybe this list isn't as complete as Mr. Jones would have us believe.

Now, don't get me wrong. I have the greatest respect for John Turney as an excellent researcher. And, I think compiling unofficial stats where none exist is a wonderful and worthwhile project. Such numbers give us a clearer view of the way things really were. Great!

But we must remember it is an approximate view. For example, by checking newspaper play-by-plays from the 1920s, David Neft has taught us a great deal about the way football was played in that era. But he has never suggested that the figures he's recovered be made official. After all, the play-by-plays were compiled by newspaper men or club officials -- not league statisticians. So, if a play-by-play says Lewellen ran for three yards for Green Bay, there's always the chance that he gained only two and the compiler simply misread the gain from his seat in the stands. And maybe that mud-covered ball carrier was actually Joe Dunn.

When I read in the "unofficial" sack list that Jim Marshall had 127 sacks, I figure someone on the Vikings kept count and maybe looked at film. But what criteria did he/she use in awarding the sack? When sacks became an official stat, they also received a very specific and limiting definition. For example, if a quarterback is flushed out of the pocket and gets one inch past the line of scrimmage, it's no sack.

So Marshall probably accomplished 120-to-135 sacks over his 21 seasons. Now we know -- as if we didn't already -- that Jim was a heckuva defender. But 120-to-135 can't be an "official" stat.

It's perfectly possible that at this moment in time, Deacon Jones has more sacks to his credit than any other person ever. We just can't be 100% certain how many that is. Or if they all should count.

Seymour Siwoff of the Elias Sports Bureau says that in checking films of Jones in action, some of his "unofficial" sacks didn't measure up to the official criteria.

Personally, I don't care. Even if every single so-called sack by Jones could be reviewed and verified by Elias, I would be against accepting his total as official. Unless every down of every game ever played in the NFL is available and is reviewed by official NFL statisticians, forget it. Start at 1982.

I think Bill Hewitt had 184.5 sacks in his career. Unofficially.

Prove me wrong!