

PASS MASTERS

by Bob Gill

This story starts with an article called "Bucking the System" from a Coffin Corner of about three years ago (Vol. VIII, No.9). In it, Bob Carroll proposed a relativistic approach to NFL passer ratings to allow for the fact that the system now in use has a strong bias toward modern passers.

His idea was a simple one: Since the NFL system defines a rating of 66.7 as "average," all we have to do is calculate the actual average rating for a given season (for instance, 56.2 in 1950), subtract that from 66.7, and add the difference (in this case, 10.5) to each passer's rating for that year. Since the averages in the old days were consistently below 66.7, and those of the '80s are consistently above, the effect of this juggling is to normalize passing records to the context of their own times.

After reading the article, I said to myself, "Somebody ought to go back and calculate the records of the great passers from before 1950 with this system." Moving with my usual dispatch, I finally got around to it last spring.

I figured passing ratings for the years 1937-52, for a simple reason: Those are the dates of Sammy Baugh's career, and obviously any study of this kind has to include him.

The ratings say Baugh had some great years, too: 106.1 in 1940, 94.7 in '43, 117.2 in '45, 98.0 in '47, and 95.3 in '49. (He was over 90 in 1947 and over 100 in '45 even without the adjustments.) Interestingly enough, though, Baugh had only the third-best lifetime rating for that period, at 84.8 (unadjusted it's 71.9).

The top rating, 91.5, belongs to Sid Luckman, who had some great years of his own: 115.6 in 1941 and 122.5 in '43, plus 108.0 in a limited role in 1939. (Without adjustments, he was over 90 in 1939 and '41, over 100 in '43, and 79.4 lifetime.) Luckman came out ahead because he was more consistent from year to year than Baugh, who had a few disappointing campaigns, like 1944 and '46.

Slipping into the second spot ahead of Baugh was Cecil Isbell of the Packers, who posted a mark of 88.6 (72.7 unadjusted) in an abbreviated career, highlighted by a 101.9 in 1941 and a 93.9 in '42. This is not, however, to say that Isbell was a better passer than Baugh. First, he benefited from the presence of Don Hutson; and second, he retired while at his peak and avoided the low ratings that probably would have accompanied his declining years. Still, Isbell was obviously a top-notch passer.

In fact, this is not to say that Luckman was a better passer than Baugh, either. He was a great passer, though, and he played on better teams. As a result, his ratings were better. It's a real good bet that if we had adjusted figures for all passers (which would pull down modern stars like Marino and Montana), Luckman would have the best career mark of all time.

I did career records for two other star passers of the period as well: Bob Waterfield and Tommy Thompson. Waterfield posted a 72.8 mark (61.8 unadjusted), and Thompson, the Eagles' signal-caller in the Van Buren years, finished at 76.9 (unadjusted he's dead "average" at 66.7). In 1948 and '49 Thompson put together back-to-back seasons of 98.0 and 98.6. For 1948, in fact, his unadjusted rating was 98.1--the league as a whole was actually a smidgen above average that year (the only time that happened during the whole period I covered).

The most interesting players in this study are two of my favorites from those days, guys who are little-known today. As such, they deserve an introduction.

Chosen by Pittsburgh in the first round of the 1938 draft, Frankie Filchock was one of an outstanding group of passers who came into the NFL in the years 1937-39 and helped move the game into a new era. Traded to Washington in his rookie year, he spent the next seven years--with two out for the war--playing behind Baugh. Though nowhere near Baugh's level as a punter or defensive back, Filchock was a much better runner, and no slouch of a passer in his own right. (For corroborating evidence, see the article on the 1945 championship game in this issue.) He won the NFL passing title in 1944 (adjusted rating 102.0),

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and in 1939 he turned in the highest rating for the whole period, and probably of all time, at 127.6 (111.5 unadjusted).

Filchock was also the first passer to complete 60- percent of his passes (61.8,also in 1939). Considering the pattern of his career, it's fitting that Baugh topped that mark only a year later.

In 1946 Filchock finally got out from under Baugh's shadow when the Redskins traded him to New York, and he promptly led the Giants to the title game (his second straight), where they fell to the Bears, 24-14. Subsequently kicked out of the NFL for failing to report his knowledge of an attempt to fix the championship game, he returned in 1950 to complete one final pass for the Baltimore Colts. But from 1938-46 he posted an adjusted rating of 80.2, fourth-best for the whole period I covered.

Bob Monnett's career with the Packers bears some resemblance to Filchock's with the Redskins. A good runner, passer and kicker, he was a backup to Arnie Herber, and later Cecil Isbell, from 1933-38. I covered only the last two years of that span, but in 1937 Monnett had an adjusted rating of 97.5, and in 1938 it was 112.5 (92.0 unadjusted). Those were his two best passing years- -but then again, how many players have had two years better than that?

Conclusions? The top guys from the old days were a good bit better than a quick glance at their records might lead you to believe. I bet that if somebody did these same calculations for the '50s and '60s, we'd find that Graham, Unitas, Tittle, Van Brocklin and maybe a couple of others would also have marks in the 80s or even the low 90s. And don't forget, the marks of current passers would be reduced a bit by the same process. Then we'd have a real basis for comparing the top passers of yesteryear with those of today.