

GREAT RUSHING AND PASSING PERFORMANCES

by Greg Thomas

What was the greatest rushing season in pro football history? Who was the greatest runner ever? Is there any valid statistical method that can be used to end the debates over these questions? Yes!

In 1963, Jim Brown gained 1863 yards on 291 carries for a 6.40 average gain per carry. The league average that year was 4.05. Thus, an average runner would have gained only 1179 yards on the same number of carries.

This means that Jim Brown gained an extra 684 yards. Because his team, the Cleveland Browns, played 14 games that season, those 684 yards translated into 48.9 extra yards per game.

Only 10 times in the documented history of pro football have running backs averaged 30 extra yards per game over the course of a season:

YEAR	PLAYER	ATT	LG	AVG	AVG	EXTRA YARDS	TEAM	PER
							GAMES	GAME
1963	Jim Brown, Cleveland	291	6.40	4.05	684	14		48.9
1973	O.J. Simpson, Buffalo	332	6.03	4.06	654	14		46.7
1977	Walter Payton, Chicago	339	5.46	3.85	546	14		39.0
1958	Jim Brown, Cleveland	257	5.94	4.23	439	12		36.6
1984	Eric Dickerson, L.A. Rams	379	5.55	4.02	580	16		36.3
1945	Steve Van Buren, Phila.	143	5.82	3.39	347	10		34.7
1975	O.J. Simpson, Buffalo	329	5.52	4.01	464	14		33.1
1960	Jim Brown, Cleveland	215	5.85	4.08	381	12		31.8
1947	Spec Sanders, N.Y.Y.*	231	6.20	4.33	432	14		30.9
1954	Joe Perry, San Francisco	173	6.06	3.98	360	12		30.0

*--The New York Yankees played in the All-American Football Conference.

In 1934, Beattie Feathers gained 1004 yards for the Chicago Bears on only 117 carries. This might have ranked as the greatest season of them all except for the fact that no figures exist as to what the league's average gain per carry was for that year.

Only 9 runners have gained 1000 extra yards over the course of their careers. These are the amazing nine:

RANK	PLAYER	EXTRA YARDS	TEAM	PER
			GAMES	GAME
1	Jim Brown	2679	118	22.7
2	Joe Perry (total)	1843	200	9.2
	Joe Perry (AAFC)	507	26	19.5
	Joe Perry (NFL)	1336	174	7.7
3	O.J. Simpson (total)	1599	158	10.1
	O.J. Simpson (AFL)	-33	14	-2.4
	O.J. Simpson (NFL)	1632	144	11.3
4	Eric Dickerson	1439	111	13.0
5	Walter Payton	1395	178	7.8
6	Marion Motley (total)	1283	114	11.3
	Marion Motley (AAFC)	948	54	17.6
	Marion Motley (NFL)	335	60	5.6
7	Gale Sayers	1044	98	11.1
8	Randall Cunningham	1032	80	12.9

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9 Tony Dorsett

1030

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5.7

As you can see, the star that is Jim Brown far outshines any other in the galaxy of pro football's runners. Randall Cunningham's inclusion on this list is a testimony not so much to his running ability as it is to the silliness of the NFL's statistical policy that allows quarterbacks to be credited with rushing yards on successful scrambles but does not deduct from that total yards lost while attempting to pass.

An easy and valid way to compare passers is to use the NEWS formula. The NEWS (new rating system), was introduced by Bob Carroll, Pete Palmer and John Thorn in their book *The Hidden Game of Football*. By adding to a passer's total yardage 10 yards for each touchdown pass, subtracting 45 yards for each interception, and then dividing that total by the number of passes thrown, the NEWS gives you what is in effect a passer's net gain per attempt.

Here's the NEWS formula:

$$\text{NEWS} = (\text{yards} + \text{TD} \times 10 - \text{int} \times 45) / \text{att}$$

Last season, Joe Montana threw for 3521 yards on 386 attempts with 26 touchdown passes and 8 interceptions. His NEWS rating was 8.86. The NEWS rating for the entire league during 1989 was 5.80. Montana's rating was 3.06 higher than the league average.

This means that for every pass Montana threw, he had a net gain of 3.06 more yards than would an average passer. Boomer threw the ball 386 times. This means that Boomer Esiason threw for an extra 1181 yards.

Because Montana's team, the San Francisco 49ers, played 16 games during 1989, those 1181 yards translated into 73.8 extra yards per game. Montana was the best passer in the league last year. While Montana's season was superb, many have been superior.

Only 9 times in the documented history of pro football have passers thrown for an average of 90 extra yards over the course of a season:

YEAR	PLAYER	ATT	NEWS	LG NEWS	EXTRA YARDS	TEAM GAMES	PER GAME
1943	Sid Luckman, Chi Bears	202	9.57	2.46	1436	10	143.6
1953	Otto Graham, Cleveland	258	9.41	3.74	1463	12	121.9
1949	Otto Graham, Cleveland*	185	8.86	4.34	1288	12	107.3
1945	Sammy Baugh, Washington	182	8.79	3.21	1016	10	101.6
1984	Dan Marino, Miami	564	8.51	5.73	1568	16	98.0
1942	Cecil Isbell, Green Bay	268	6.09	2.15	1056	11	96.0
1960	Milt Plum, Cleveland	250	9.13	4.77	1090	12	90.8
1976	Bert Jones, Baltimore	343	8.57	4.87	1269	14	90.6
1947	Otto Graham, Cleveland*	269	9.32	4.62	1264	14	90.3

*--From 1946-49, the Cleveland Browns were members of the All- American Football Conference. The Browns were assimilated into the NFL in 1950 along with the Baltimore Colts, New York Yankees, and the San Francisco 49ers.

Only 12 men in pro football history have thrown for over 4000 extra yards:

RANK	PLAYER	EXTRA YARDS	TEAM GAMES	PER GAME
1	Otto Graham (total)	8404	126	66.7
	Otto Graham (AAFC)	4457	54	82.5
	Otto Graham (NFL)	3947	72	54.8
2	Fran Tarkenton	6727	254	24.7
3	Sammy Baugh	5933	179	33.1
4	Joe Montana	5715	168	34.0
5	Len Dawson (total)	5443	258	21.1

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	Len Dawson (NFL)	883	132	6.7
	Len Dawson (AFL)	4560	126	36.2
6	Roger Staubach	5353	158	33.9
7	Johnny Uitas	5255	242	21.7
8	Ken Anderson	5115	238	21.8
9	Dan Fouts	5052	222	22.8
10	Sid Luckman	4875	133	36.7
11	Norm Van Brocklin	4599	144	31.9
12	Sonny Jergensen	4206	244	17.2

Waiting in the wings is Dan Marino who had already gained 3848 extra yards in the 111 scheduled games that the Miami Dolphins have played during his first six seasons. That's an average of 34.7 extra yards per game.

A final note is that the rushing and passing statistics quoted in this article did not include the WFL or the USFL. My apologies to Herschel Walker.