

ELUSIVE

A Chronological History of the Long Run

By T.J. Troup

Since 1941 (the last 62 seasons), there have been 623,213 running plays from scrimmage; sweeps, dives, traps, powers, bootlegs, reverses, and even kneel downs. In these 623,213 running plays how many runs have there been of 50 yards or longer? Does 1,189 seem like a substantial number? In reality ... it is not. Percentage wise it is .0019%. A simpler way of stating this fact is ...for every 1000 running plays ...twice someone will go 50 yards or longer.

Random House dictionary defines elude as to "avoid or escape by speed, cleverness, trickery, etc: to elude pursuers. To slip away from; evade. Syn. To shun, dodge. By choosing to use strength or power as the etc. ...as we close our eyes we can envision many of the great running backs in league history "breaking away".

Any discussion of the men who were able to "break away" must start with the pioneers of elusivity. NFL Films has captured and maintained film of many great long distance runs in history. Hugh "The King" McElhenny, Joe "The Jet" Perry, Lenny Moore, and Ollie Matson of the 1950's defined the "long run". But who had the most "long runs" in league history before the merger? Jim Brown had established a standard that would remain until the late 1990's as Brown 15 times went 50 yards or longer. His greatest competition would probably have been the "Kansas Comet", but due to the severity of his knee injury Gale Sayers never had a run of over 50 yards after his surgery. At one point in his career, though, Sayers had a run of 50 yards or longer 9 times in a span of only 39 games; again a standard that would remain until the late 1990's.

Being elusive does not dictate greatness, many men for one play in their career were able to go 50 yards or longer. Greatness in a runner can be defined in consistent production as well as the long run. The best example of this is the career of Lawrence McCutcheon of the Rams who gained 5,523 yards on 1,244 carries (4.43) over the course of 5 seasons (1973-77) and never had a run of over 50 yards. Many of the all-time yardage leaders though, at some point, were able to "break" the long run. Before the 2002 season began, there had been only 4 men since 1949 who could claim the title as the All-Time rushing yardage leader ...Van Buren, Perry, Brown, and Payton. The rushing Gods smiled on Emmitt

Smith during the 2002 season as he passed Sir Walter and joined the men listed above. In gaining those yards was Emmitt able to be elusive enough to "break" the long run and join that elite group of men who had at least 9 runs of 50 yards or longer in a career?

We can look at many statistics to see why a team has won or lost. Yards per pass and yards per catch have been valuable

in determining the winning team. By returning an interception for a touchdown a team has a 79% chance of winning. However when a team has a run of 50 yards or longer how often do they win? During the last 62 years, when a team has a run of 50 yards or longer they win 69% of the time.

Which team has had the most long runs? Which team consistently stopped the long run? Finally, which team had the most long runs in a single season? Many different Rams contributed to the record of 70 runs of 50 yards or longer during the last 62 years. The two teams that have stopped the long run defensively for the longest stretches of time are the San Francisco 49ers and Dallas Cowboys. From October 17th, 1972 through November 29th, 1987 (227 games) the 49ers allowed only 1 run over 50 yards. The Dallas Cowboy flex from October 25th, 1964 through October 2nd, 1977 (179 games) allowed only 1 run over 50 yards.

The most impressive team offensive accomplishment in league history occurred in 1950 as the New York Football Giants set a record that still stands 52 years later; 9 times during the season (all in a five game win streak to close the season and tie for the division title) the Giants "broke" a long run.

The most impressive individual accomplishments belong to Barry Sanders of the Detroit Lions. 20 times in his career Sanders has had a run of 50 yards or longer in a game (including a record of 6 against the Buccaneers)! In 1994 Barry had 5 of the league's 11 runs of 50 yards or longer. In 1997 he tied Jim Brown's 1963 record of the most long runs in a season with 6. Sanders broke Sayers aforementioned record of the most long runs in the shortest time span when he "broke" 9 long runs in only 23 games (December 23rd, 1996 through October 15th, 1998).

Let us close this essay by again visualizing McElhenny weaving his way through a defense, Jim Brown powering his way through tacklers at the line of scrimmage, and then bursting away. Sayers with his gift of vision cutting at top speed past defenders, and finally Dorsett and Sanders shifting into overdrive and pulling away.

THE LIST

Barry Sanders 20	O.J. Simpson 10
Jim Brown 15	Tony Dorsett 10
Robert Smith 12	Corey Dillon 10
Napoleon Kaufman 11	Gale Sayers 9
Walter Payton 10	Terrell Davis 9
Ollie Matson 10	Emmitt Smith 9
Lenny Moore 10	