

IS DAN MARINO REALLY THE GREATEST PASSER?

by Greg Thomas

During the 1995 season, Jim Harbaugh had a passing rating of 100.8, while Brett Favre passed for 4,413 yards and 38 touchdowns. Who had the better year? It would make sense to say the passer who had the best year was the one who had the greatest positive impact as compared to the other passers in the league.

An excellent tool to use in comparing the positive impact of passers is the NEWS formula. The NEWS (new rating system) was introduced by Bob Carroll, Pete Palmer, and John Thorn in their classic 1988 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, Brett Favre threw for 4,413 yards on 570 attempts with 38 touchdown passes and 13 interceptions. His NEWS rating was 7.38. The NEWS rating for the entire league during 1995 was 5.81. Favre's rating was 1.57 higher than the league average.

This means that for every pass Favre threw, he had a net gain of 1.57 more yards than would the average passer. Favre threw the ball 570 times. This means that Favre threw for an extra 895 yards.

Favre's season was the best of 1995. Although Harbaugh had a higher NEWS, he did not throw often enough to have the positive impact of a Brett Favre.

Here is a look at the NFL's top 10 positive-impact passers of 1995:

<u>RANK</u>	<u>PASSER</u>	<u>NEWS</u>	<u>AVG</u>	<u>DIFF</u>	<u>ATT</u>	<u>EXTRA YDS</u>
1	BRETT FAVRE, Packers	7.38	5.81	1.57	570	895
2	SCOTT MITCHELL, Lions	7.06	5.81	1.25	583	729
3	JIM HARBAUGH, Colts	8.03	5.81	2.22	314	697
4	JEFF GEORGE, Falcons	6.98	5.81	1.17	557	652
5	ERIK KRAMER, Bears	7.05	5.81	1.24	522	647
6	TROY AIKMAN, Cowboys	7.29	5.81	1.48	432	639
7	JOHN ELWAY, Broncos	6.64	5.81	0.83	542	450
8	DAN MARINO, Dolphins	6.71	5.81	0.90	482	434
9	NEIL O'DONNELL, Steelers	6.79	5.81	0.98	416	408
10	VINNY TESTAVERDE, Browns	6.64	5.81	0.83	392	325

While Favre's season was exceptional, it was not one of the greatest ever. Many believe that Dan Marino's 1984 season in which he threw 48 touchdown passes was the greatest season. Others say it was Steve Young's 1994 season during which he had a record-high passing rating of 112.8.

In comparing passers across eras, it is important to project their statistics into 16-game seasons. A passer who throws for 1200 extra yards in a 12-game season has an equal impact with one who throws for 1600 yards in a 16-game season.

The greatest season of all time was recorded by the Bears' Sid Luckman in 1943. Luckman had a NEWS rating of 9.57 when the league average was 2.46. It was truly a season beyond belief. He gave the Bears an advantage in passing that season that will probably never again be matched.

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Here's a look at the NFL's top positive-impact passing seasons of all-time, plus Steve Young's 1994 season, which ranks eleventh:

RANK	PASSER	YEAR	NEWS	AVG	DIFF	ATT*	EXTRA	YDS*
1	SID LUCKMAN, Bears	1943	9.57	2.46	7.11	323	2297	
2	OTTO GRAHAM, Browns	1953	9.41	3.74	5.67	344	1950	
3	SAMMY BAUGH, Redskins	1945	8.79	3.21	5.58	291	1624	
4	DAN MARINO, Dolphins	1984	8.51	5.73	2.78	564	1568	
5	CECIL ISBELL, Packers	1942	6.09	2.15	3.94	390	1537	
6	MILT PLUM, Browns	1960	9.13	4.77	4.36	333	1452	
7	BERT JONES, Colts	1976	8.57	4.87	3.70	392	1450	
8	SAMMY BAUGH, Redskins	1947	7.10	4.11	2.99	472	1411	
9	DAN FOUTS, Chargers	1982	7.75	5.44	2.31	587	1356	
10	KEN ANDERSON, Bengals	1975	7.65	4.71	2.94	431	1267	
11	STEVE YOUNG, 49ers	1994	8.41	5.74	2.67	461	1231	

* -- PROJECTED TO 16-GAME SEASONS

During the 1995 season, Dan Marino shattered almost every important existing NFL passing record. Most importantly, he broke Fran Tarkenton's records for most passing yards and touchdown passes. Does this mean that Marino is the greatest passer of all time? Or maybe it is Steve Young who has the top career passing rating of any NFL quarterback?

It is not necessarily either man! Shortly after Marino surpassed Fran Tarkenton, Dan Dierdorf commented on Monday Night Football that it is much easier to throw today than it was during the days of Tarkenton. One of the major reasons is that there have been rule changes to benefit the passing game.

Let's now see where the careers of Marino and Young rank among the best positive-passers in NFL history:

RANK	PASSER	ERA	NEWS*	AVG*	DIFF	ATT*	EXTRA	YDS*
1	SAMMY BAUGH	1937-52	4.88	2.88	2.00	4283	8566	
2	SID LUCKMAN	1939-50	5.91	2.98	2.93	2549	7469	
3	FRAN TARKENTON	1961-78	5.97	4.98	0.99	7309	7236	
4	JOE MONTANA	1979-94	6.86	5.62	1.24	5687	7052	
5	JOHNNY UNITAS	1956-73	6.14	5.09	1.05	6215	6526	
6	DAN MARINO	1983-95	6.64	5.67	0.97	6561	6364	
7	NORM VAN BROCKLIN	1949-60	5.99	4.40	1.59	3860	6137	
8	KEN ANDERSON	1971-83	6.22	5.02	1.20	5019	6023	
9	ROGER STAUBACH	1969-79	6.52	4.72	1.80	3257	5863	
10	DAN FOUTS	1973-87	6.22	5.28	0.94	6042	5679	
11	STEVE YOUNG	1985-95	7.35	5.65	1.70	2881	4898	

*--PROJECTED TO 16-GAME SEASONS

The careers of both Marino and Young are superb. By any valid statistical system they should rate among the greatest passers of all time. But although they rate among the best, neither is the best.

OTHER MEN AND OTHER LEAGUES

While Dan Marino holds the NFL record for passing yardage, Warren Moon, due to his outstanding 6-year career in the Canadian Football League, has passed for more yards than anyone else in pro football history. Would Moon have made the top 10 if he had played those six seasons in the NFL?

Warren Moon's NFL career looks like this.

ERA	NEWS*	AVG*	DIFF	ATT*	EXTRA	YDS*
1984-95	6.20	5.68	0.52	5778	3005	

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*--PROJECTED TO 16-GAME SEASONS

This means that Moon has been worth 250 extra yards per year. If Moon had played those 6 Canadian Football seasons in the NFL, it is projected that he would have added 1500 extra yards, giving him a total of 4505. This is a high total, but one falling short of the top ten.

Jim Kelly was the premier passer of the USFL throwing for 9842 yards and 83 touchdowns in only two seasons. Kelly's NFL career numbers are as follows:

ERA	NEWS*	AVG*	DIFF	ATT*	EXTRA YDS*
1986-95	6.33	5.66	0.67	4428	2967

*--PROJECTED TO 16-GAME SEASONS

Kelly has been worth 297 extra yards for each year of his NFL career. If Kelly had played his two USFL seasons in the NFL, it is projected that he would have added 594 extra yards, giving him a healthy total of 3561 extra yards.

Len Dawson had an exceptional career for 8 seasons (1962-69) in the AFL and for 11 seasons (1957-61, 1970-75) in the NFL. He, not Joe Namath, was the best passer in AFL history.

Does Dawson belong in the top 10 of all time?

PLAYER	LEAGUE	NEWS*	AVG*	DIFF	ATT*	EXTRA YDS*
JOE NAMATH	AFL	5.76	4.69	1.07	2335	2335
LEN DAWSON	AFL	6.57	4.63	1.94	2669	5217
LEN DAWSON	NFL	5.32	4.66	0.66	1592	1051

*--PROJECTED TO 16-GAME SEASONS

If we simply take the 5217 extra yards Dawson accumulated in the AFL and add them to the 1051 he earned in the NFL, Dawson would have 6268 extra yards, easily putting him in the top 10.

But the AFL was never the equal of the NFL, even though AFL teams won the last 2 Super Bowls contested between the two leagues. For evidence of this fact, look at the 1970 season, the first season of interleague play. Competing against NFL teams for the first time in regular-season competition, the 10 AFL teams won 19, lost 39, and tied 2 for a .333 winning percentage.

Finally, there is the fascinating case of Otto Graham. During the four years (1946-49) of the existence of the All-American Football Conference (AAFC), Graham put together a series of seasons unparalleled in the annals of pro football. He then played an additional six seasons (1950-55) in the NFL, also at a superb level.

SEASONS	LEAGUE	NEWS*	AVG*	DIFF	ATT*	EXTRA YDS*
1946-49	AAFC	8.59	4.38	4.21	1267	5334
1950-55	NFL	6.25	3.96	2.29	2086	4777

*--PROJECTED TO 16-GAME SEASONS

Simply summing up Graham's totals in the two leagues would give him 10,111 extra yards and make him the top passer ever.

But as was the case with the AFL, the AAFC was not the equal of the NFL.

Graham averaged 796 extra yards during his 6 NFL seasons.

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If he had played his four AAFC seasons in the NFL, it could be estimated that he would have totalled 7960 extra yards for a 10-year career. This would place him second all-time to Sammy Baugh in positive impact.