

WHERE DID ALL THE VETERANS GO?

by Steve Somma

Without question, the past few years in the NFL have seen the dawning of a new era, as free agency, expansion, and the addition of Fox and TNT to the list of NFL television outlets have led to significant changes in the game and the way it presents itself. One complaint being heard with more frequency is that player loyalty is dead, that free agency has given birth to a mercenary mentality among the players. In the past few months, no less than eight commentators in the media have either written columns about or sounded off on national television about the shrinking number of players who are spending long careers in one place, usually within a screed complaining about the effect enhanced player movement is having on the league. While player movement is certainly more visible these days, it has been a constant at any period of change in NFL history that many people have been saying what is being said now -- player loyalty is declining, the league is losing its identity, etc. With that in mind, I wondered whether the hue and cry today was justified, or whether it was typical of the exaggeration that often accompanies the railings of traditionalists during any turbulent era.

It is, and it isn't. The number of players that have been in the league for ten or more years and have played for only one team -- "ten-and-tens" -- has shrunk by two-thirds since the free agency era began in 1993. Those commenting on the trend were not imagining it. In 1992, there were 98 players in the league that had been around since 1983 or before and had only played with one team; there were 30 in 1995, and the numbers won't be much different in 1996 when the season is completed. But there are other factors at work that make the dramatic drop explainable by more than just free agency and player greed.

First, the 98 ten-and-tens in 1992 was a historic high by a huge margin. I counted both the ten-and-tens and all the ten-year-plus players in the league that had been on more than one team for every year since 1960 to the present. The numbers for both headed up nearly every year. In 1960, there were only 24 players in pro football that had been playing for ten years, 9 of whom had been on the same team for their entire career. In 1970, the total number of ten-year vets was 96, with 40 ten-and-tens. In 1980, there were 124 ten-year vets, with 52 ten-and-tens. The largest number of ten-and-tens in any one year before 1992 was 70, in 1986. For the ten years prior to 1992, the number of ten- and-tens in the league was between 62 and 70 nine times. So rather than considering the 98 a normal total, it should be noted that the number of veteran players who had spent their career in one place was aberrantly high just before Judge Doty made his ruling and the auction began.

The biggest reason that the total number of ten-and-tens was so high in 1992, though, was that the draft class of 1983 reached the decade level of service in that year. Much has been made of the quarterback bonanza in the 1983 draft class, but from top to bottom, at every position, it was the best class in history by a margin that isn't close. A list of players who entered the NFL in 1983 would take several pages, but those that made, and in some cases are still making, Pro Bowls include Mark Tuinei, Wes Hopkins, Charles Mann, Darrell Green, Leonard Marshall, Carl Lee, Richard Dent, Henry Ellard, Dan Marino, Mark Clayton, Reggie Roby, Darryl Talley, Bruce Matthews, Don Mosebar, John Elway, Karl Mecklenberg, Albert Lewis, and Tim Krumrie -- just among the players who became ten-and-tens during 1992. Other 1983 alumni include Roger Craig, Joey Browner, Chris Hinton, Mike Cofer, and Eric Dickerson. All told, 32 players became ten-and-tens in 1992, and the number would have been higher if one counted the players like Jim Kelly, Anthony Carter, and Sam Mills that played in the USFL from 1983-85. The number of veteran players went up dramatically in the early 1990's because the number of quality players in the league increased greatly in the early 1980's. There were other factors at work, but they paled in significance compared to the impact of the class of 1983.

The totals shot downward in 1993 and have continued to fall in the intervening years, and I think it's beyond dispute that the new economic climate is a prime reason why. Without going into details too much, the creation of a more or less free market for players has led to a lot of veterans changing teams and, for some, losing employment altogether. The number of ten-and tens has dropped by two-thirds, but there has not been a corresponding increase in the number of ten year-plus players; total numbers are about 20% higher than in 1992. The increase was largely a result of expansion; the percentage of ten-plus players has increased every time the league has expanded since 1961, by largely the same

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 18, No. 6 (1996)

proportion. Carolina and Jacksonville had a number of ten-plus players on their rosters (Reich, Mills, etc.), and obviously those two squads will not have any ten-and-tens for the next nine years.

Free agency isn't the only reason for the lack of ten-and-tens, though. It stands to reason that if a good or great draft class can jack the number of ten-and-tens up, than a poor draft class will knock it down. And lo and behold, the 1986 and 1987 classes, which reached the decade level in 1995-96, were two of the worst classes since 1960. There are no first-round selections from the 1986 draft that are still with the team that drafted them. There are only three first-rounders from 1987 (Rod Woodson, Bruce Armstrong, and Harris Barton) still with the teams that drafted them. By contrast, there are four (Jim Kelly, Bruce Matthews, Dan Marino, Darrell Green) from the 1983 first round still with the team that selected them, and John Elway was immediately traded to Denver after the draft and remains there, as well. But two years from now, the number of ten-and-tens will be quite a bit higher, because the 1988 and 1989 draft crops were a lot stronger. Players who figure to become ten-and-tens next season include Michael Irvin, Neil Smith, Thurman Thomas, Randall McDaniel, Terry McDaniel, Tim Brown, Paul Gruber, and Bennie Blades; 1996 eight-year veterans who figure to be where they are now in two years include Barry Sanders, Troy Aikman, Derrick Thomas, Steve Atwater, and Wayne Martin. That's just skimming names off the top round; both classes had a lot of depth to them, too. So the shockingly low total of ten-and-tens presently is the result not only of economics, but also from the fact that there just aren't a lot of good players in the requisite age groups. In 1995, there were actually more ten-and-tens from 1983 (seven -- Green, Mark Tuinei, Jesse Sapolu, Marino, Elway, Matthews, and Bill Bates) than from 1986 (five -- Steve Wallace, Jim Dombrowski, Kent Hull, Leslie O'Neal, and Kelly, of whom Wallace and O'Neal are no longer ten-and-tens and Kelly and Hull were actually members of the draft class of 1983, but spent three years in the USFL), which is remarkable considering the normal ratio of ten-year to thirteen-year veterans in the league.

And looking back through NFL history, it seems that the draft class from a decade prior is, in fact, the major determinant in the number of ten-and-tens in the league at any one point. Since 1969, when the eight original AFL teams reached ten years of age, virtually any new high point in both the number of ten-and-tens and ten-year veterans reflects the class of ten years previous -- 1972, 1977, 1982, 1986, and of course 1992. The drafts of 1963, 1968, 1973, 1977, and 1983 were exceptionally strong and deep, and that is mirrored in the list of players becoming ten-and-tens for the first time a decade later:

1972 - Five Kansas City Chiefs (Ed Budde, Buck Buchanan, Bobby Bell, Dave Hill, and Jerrell Wilson), as well as marginal Hall of Fame candidates Dave Edwards, Lee Roy Jordan, Larry Stallings, Dave Robinson, Winston Hill, Andy Russell, and Walt Sweeney, plus Hall of Famer Jackie Smith.

1977 - Hall of Famer Art Shell, plus All-Pro fixtures Ron Yary, Bobby Bryant, Charlie Sanders, Fred Carr, Claude Humphrey, Woody Peoples, Dick Anderson, Bob Johnson, Bob Trumpy, Elvin Bethea, Don Cockroft, George Atkinson, and Russ Washington, plus 13 others. Other players reaching their tenth year this season were Larry Csonka, Forrest Blue, Garo Yepremian, Coy Bacon, Walter Johnson, Haven Moses, and MacArthur Lane.

1982 - The class of 1973 is one of the contenders for second-best of all-time. Ten-and-ten players for the first time in 1982 included Drew Pearson, Brad Van Pelt, John Hannah, Isaac Curtis, Ray Guy, Dan Fouts, Tom Jackson, and Harvey Martin in the Hall-of-Fame candidate category, while 18 other players also reaching a decade with the same team that season; traveled veterans included Dave Butz, Charlie Young, Bert Jones, Joe DeLamielleure, and Greg Pruitt.

1986 - The top-level talent had been thin in the 1977 draft -- probably the best players were two Patriot mainstays, Stanley Morgan and Raymond Clayborn, and longtime Jet standout Wesley Walker among the ten-and-tens, and Wendell Tyler from the ten-plus list. But there were 19 other ten-and-tens for the first time this season, players like Joe Klecko and Scott Studwell -- players who aren't going to go to Canton but are necessary for playing winning football.

So be advised that while the number of veteran players who have spent their career with one team is currently low, it is as much or more the result of factors other than free agency. Expansion has provided a way station for several veterans otherwise on their way out of the league, and the pool of players of the quality necessary to hold a job for ten years in one place is very shallow in this point in time. Two years from now, though, the number of such players will be back at normal historical levels. It will be interesting to see what explanation the media gives us, or whether they even notice.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 18, No. 6 (1996)

* * * *