

PRO FOOTBALL'S MOST CONSISTENT CONTENDERS

By Richard Hack

One of the phenomenal attributes of the San Francisco 49ers has been their great consistency. We know about their sixteen consecutive campaigns with 10 or more wins. When we look a little deeper, we see that if they had not started 1999 with a 3-4 record, they would be on the verge of setting a new record, one that has not made it into the books yet: the most years in a row contending for a playoff spot and a chance to go all the way. Measuring streaks of contention is an original concept not yet mentioned by the record keepers, but it is perfectly quantifiable once you define contention.

For the last eighteen years, 1981-98, the 49ers have been deep in the hunt, threatening to get to the final game of the championship season -- and when they've gone to the Super Bowl, they've always won it.

Only five other clubs have been contenders for a full decade or more without a break, and only one team has ever shown more consistency than the 49ers at such a high level of competition. The Dallas Cowboys of 1966-85 were serious contenders for 20 years in a row, followed by the current San Francisco team at 18 years. In third place are the Oakland-L.A. Raiders, who contended for 16 consecutive years, 1965-80, and 20 of 21 years from 1965 to 1985, with just one losing season in 1981 knocking them out of the annual race to the top. To be fair to Oakland, the 49ers' streak is second only if we give them credit for the quirky season of 1982 (see *Anomalies* below).

But what exactly qualifies a team as a contender? I wound up using a simple standard to identify streaks of contention. League champions, division leaders, and wild cards were in, as well as other teams who had a chance for first place right into the next-to-last week of the season. That means that a good team finishing two or three games behind could still be a real contender.

Reading the annual standings will show who had the best won-lost records and where they finished. For example, it looks like the Chicago Bears contended for 21 out of their first 25 years and 26 of their first 32. The Green Bay Packers seem to be in it for 18 out of their first 24, and the Cleveland Browns for 23 out of 27. To be absolutely sure what teams were in the running in certain years, the week-by-week scores and game stories have to be examined to see who was really keeping up with whom, and this I did for a number of teams and seasons.

With two NFL divisions created in 1933, two more added with the coming of the AFL in 1960, and a total of six after the AFL-NFL merger of 1970, pro football has sported some division leaders with records at or near .500, precious few of whom would ever get far in the playoffs. When you look down into second and third place, the picture gets murkier. A pretty good-looking record may mask a not-so-great team, and a runner-up or third-place team just around .500 may be a contender right down to the wire.

Overall, top quality showed through. Few teams with a 9-7 record were seriously considered, although for good cause one .500 team is included, as well as one losing team (see *Anomalies* below).

No paper tigers made my list of six professional teams with ten or more consecutive years of contention. This is a truly phenomenal feat when you consider that most champions have a run at the top for three to five years, then suffer a losing season, and either come back fast or go into a rebuilding mode, sometimes for decades. Very few teams have been able to consistently and thoroughly rebuild as they went along; this has been a strength of the 49ers and other consistent powers in league history.

Being a top contender depends on having the right personnel in every area, as well as great intangibles, but top quarterbacking is essential. Consider the Chicago Bears when they had Gale Sayers and Dick Butkus, but never the quarterback they needed to contend. Likewise when they had Walter Payton, they could not win consistently until near the end of his long-running career, when Jim McMahon stepped up behind center.

Dallas had three league-leading quarterbacks during their record streak: Don Meredith, Roger Staubach, and Danny White. The 49ers have also had two of the greats in Joe Montana and Steve Young, who are

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the all-time leaders in career passer rating and completion percentage. All these names are prominent in the record books.

A close look at the history of pro football since 1920 shows only six teams contending for 10 or more consecutive seasons:

Dallas Cowboys, 1966-85	20 years
San Francisco 49ers, 1981-98	18 years
Oakland Raiders, 1965-80	16 years
Chicago Bears, 1932-44	13 years
Washington Redskins, 1937-46	10 years
Cleveland Browns, 1946-55	10 years

Some of the great legends of the game did not achieve this unbroken pattern of contention. The Miami Dolphins, unbeaten in 1972, were definite contenders for 14 out of 16 years from 1970 to 1985, but they had losing seasons in 1976 and 1980.

The Pittsburgh Steelers, one of Miami's great rivals, are still unequalled in their great run of four Super Bowl wins in six years. (The 49ers won four in nine years, the Cowboys three out of four in the '90s. Green Bay won five championships in seven years, and only the Packers have ever won 3 titles in a row: 1929-31 and 1965-67.)

The Steelers were top contenders for nine straight years (1972-80), finishing first in the division seven times and tying for first once. In 1980, the last year of that streak, they had a nip-and-tuck battle with two rivals, Cleveland and Houston. After five weeks, they led the AFC Central with a record of 4-1, while the Oilers were 3-2 and the Browns 2-3. However, Pittsburgh won only 5 of their last 11 games, while Cleveland took 9 and Houston 8 to tie for first at 11-5. Going into the last week, the 9-6 Steelers still had a chance to join the 10-5 Browns and Oilers at the top if they both lost, which they didn't. The Steelers then had a losing year in 1981, the same season the Raiders suffered a misstep.

What about the Green Bay Packers, who lead all teams with twelve league championships? They had many great periods under coaches Curly Lambeau (1921-49), Vince Lombardi (1959-67), and Mike Holmgren (1992-1998); but so far they have never been able to contend for an entire decade without a stumble.

The Lombardi Packers, with quarterback Bart Starr and many other immortals, came close to a nine-year run of contention from 1959-67. They made it to the NFL title game in 1960-62, but in the two-year interregnum that followed, Chicago edged them by half a game in 1963, and they lost close game after close game struggling to a distant second-place tie with Minnesota in 1964. The Baltimore Colts under Johnny Unitas were then resurgent five years after their consecutive championship wins over the Giants. With Lenny Moore leading the league with 20 touchdowns, a record total at that time, and Unitas having his best year in yards per passing attempt, the Colts outscored every other team overall as they notched eleven straight wins to finish 12-2 ahead of 8-5-1 Green Bay and Minnesota, who were mathematically eliminated with three weeks to go.

The Packers quickly recovered, however, and went on to win the NFL championship the next three years in a row, giving them six visits to the title game in nine years, and they won the last five of them.

Let's look at our six top teams and some of their other rivals.

The immediate success of the Cleveland Browns is unparalleled. They reached the championship game in each of their first 10 seasons and won 7 (1946-49 in the AAFC, 1950-55 in the NFL; the Cleveland Rams, who were playing in Los Angeles the year the Browns started, also won the NFL championship in 1945 with rookie quarterback Bob Waterfield). The innovations of coach Paul Brown have had a big influence on the modern game. His first great quarterback, Otto Graham, still leads all passers in yards gained per attempt, while Marion Motley, a fast and powerful fullback, made the draw play a weapon to reckon with. Running back Jim Brown (1957-65) leads all rushers with 5.22 yards per carry, and later Leroy Kelly also achieved a high rank among the great runners.

Washington also contended for each of their first ten years, although the Redskins were not a new team but one that had moved down from Boston with players like Cliff Battles, who won the rushing title in

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1932. Their first year in Washington, 1937, they won the championship. Battles led the league in rushing again, and rookie quarterback Sammy Baugh was the leading passer. During their 10-year run, they finished second twice and third three times but always stayed in the race for first place right to the last or next-to-last game. They went to five title games in nine years, beating the Bears twice.

Completion leader five times, Sammy Baugh (1937-52) led the league in percentage seven times in the forties. Only he and Steve Young have led the league in passing six times. In addition, Baugh leads all punters with a 45.1- yard average on his 338 kicks. After 1952, the Redskins had a run at the top in 1955, but never again until 1969 and the early '70s. Dogging Dallas, they came back strong with Theismann and Williams and soon were contenders for 9 out of 10 years (1982-91), winning three Super Bowls.

The Redskins had some rough times with the mighty New York Giants in 1938, 1941, and 1944. The Giants won six division titles in nine years, a total of eight during 1933-46. In fact they lead all teams with 19 first-place finishes (1927 to 1997). They reached five title games in 1933-39, winning and losing against the Bears, Packers, and Lions, then three more 1941-46. They have had many great clubs since the '20s, but have never contended for more than five years running.

The Chicago Staleys finished ahead of the league in 1921 and became the Bears in 1922. The college game was still the dominant football of that early period, and "Papa Bear" George Halas (the Chicago coach from 1920-67, taking three or four years off every ten) learned initially from his old coach Bob Zuppke of the University of Illinois, the man who allegedly instituted the huddle, the screen pass, the flea flicker, and the hook-and-ladder play you've seen in old films, where a pass receiver runs with the ball until a tackler is close, then laterals to a trailing teammate, which contributed to some long gains in the open field. Halas later employed Clark Shaughnessy, a college coach at Chicago and Stanford, who helped him adapt the T-formation to the pros. Twenty years before it became standard, Shaughnessy gave the offense a tight end and two wide receivers by putting a back in motion and splitting one end. The West Coast offense of today has roots in the Shaughnessy system, wrote Bill Walsh of the 49ers, who learned from Paul Brown in Cincinnati, from Sid Gillman of the Chargers (along with fellow assistant Chuck Noll, who later coached the Steelers during their greatest years), and especially at Oakland under Al Davis, with its complex playbook and diligent study habits.

The Bears once had Bronko Nagurski and Red Grange in the same backfield. In 1932, a Nagurski-to-Grange pass scored the only TD in a playoff for the title, while in 1934 rookie Beattie Feathers became the first 1,000-yard runner, with an average gain of 8.4. They also put up interior linemen like George Musso and Clyde (Bulldog) Turner. Quarterback Sid Luckman (1939-50) had some record-setting years in the '40s.

Their western rivals, the Green Bay Packers, joined the league in 1921 and ran nose-to-nose with the Bears right through World War II. Both teams achieved immediate success. The Bears won seven league titles from 1921 to 1946, while the Packers won six between 1929 and 1944.

The Packers had league-leading passers Arnie Herber and Cecil Isbell. They had a strong, fast fullback in Clarke Hinkle (1932-41), who at various times led the league in touchdowns, field goals, and overall scoring; the famous runner-receiver Johnny Blood; and Don Hutson, the fabulous end (1935-45), who led the league in pass receiving and TDs eight times, and remained the career touchdown and reception leader for decades after retirement.

I was sure at first that Green Bay in 1935-46 had a very long streak of contention, but 1942 knocks them down to 7 straight. They had an excellent record of 8-2-1 in 1942, but the Bears went 11-0. After eight games, the Pack was 6-2, two games back with three to go. The next week they fought to a 21- 21 tie in New York, while Chicago rolled to its 9th win and eliminated Green Bay with two games yet to play. In 1946 they also hung in for quite a while, but were out of it before they could play their final two games as the Bears again clinched in week 9 of an 11-game season.

San Francisco's East Bay counterpart, the Oakland Raiders, ran off 16 straight years as a contender between 1965 and 1980, the first 5 of them as an AFL team. They had outstanding quarterbacks during that period: Tom Flores, Daryle Lamonica, and of course Ken Stabler, one of the all-time greats. They had a star-studded defense, great offensive linemen, and receivers like Cliff Branch, Fred Biletnikoff, Art Powell, and Dave Casper, not to mention hard runners like Clem Daniels, Marv Hubbard, Hewritt Dixon, Pete Banaszak, and Mark van Eeghen. They were in first place for 9 out of 10 years from '67 to '76, and

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in '65 they finished a close second to the Chargers. In '66 they put on a late rush to crowd the Kansas City Chiefs, who did not clinch the division until the next-to-last week of the season. In '78 they finished 9-7, but only one game behind the first-place Denver Broncos. The following year they started 1-3, then won 7 out of 10. With two games to play, they were 8-6 behind 10-4 San Diego and Denver. The Chargers won their last two games, Denver lost theirs, and Oakland split to finish 9-7 in a tie for third and fourth with Seattle. Then in 1980 they went 11-5 and became the first of two wild-card teams ever to win a Super Bowl. They had more firsts in them when they moved to Los Angeles. Between 1965 and 1985, they had just one losing season (1981) and contended for 20 of those 21 years.

Dallas with its all-around power, excitement, and machine-like dominance, with its Flex and Doomsday Defenses, had writers reaching for superlatives like "America's Team" to describe them.

The Cowboys came to the NFL in 1960, and after five losing seasons and a 7-7 finish in '65, they were first in the East at 10-3-1 in 1966. Dallas won 13 division titles and made the playoffs 18 times during their 20-year run, but in 1974 they struggled to 8-6 to stay close to the 10-4 Cardinals and Redskins right into the final game. In 1984, the 19th year of the streak, the Cowboys scored 308 points and gave up the same number as they tied with the Giants and Cardinals at 9-7 behind 11-5 Washington.

However, the Redskins could not shake Dallas until the next-to-last game, when they had their hands full with the St. Louis Cardinals. Quarterback Neil Lomax hit 37 of 46 passes for 468 yards and two touchdowns, the most completions ever against a Redskins team. But Redskin quarterback Joe Theismann connected with Art Monk 11 times in the game, allowing the great pass-receiver to catch 106 for the season, enough to break Charley Hennigan's 20-year-old record. Washington finally won the contest 29-27 on a Mark Moseley field goal with 1:33 left.

The struggling Cowboys still had a chance for the wild card in their final game, but Miami was just too much as Dan Marino set the record for most passing yards and TDs in a season. The two teams traded touchdowns in the last two minutes of a 28-21 Dolphin victory.

Nearing the end of a great 20-year run of contention, Coach Tom Landry said, "I'm sure that people feel that they can beat us nowadays. They didn't feel that way before." The 1985 Cowboys tied at 10-6 with New York and Washington to make the playoffs, but after that, the Cowboys went through a passel of defeats and rebuilding moves. Six years later they began a new streak of contention (1991-96), giving them 26 out of 31 from 1966 to 1996.

With a 3-4 start in 1999, Young out, and a lot of weakness showing, it appears that the 49ers will not quite match the record of old Dallas. In a way this is fitting. The bitter truth is that the Cowboys have long been a hurdle for the Niners, as they have been for New York, Washington, Pittsburgh, and a host of others. Dallas knocked San Francisco out of the playoffs following the seasons of 1970-72 and 1992-93. When the Cowboys set their all-time record of 52 points in a game, it was against a 6-10 San Francisco team in 1980, just before the current streak began. In order to get to their first and fifth Super Bowls, San Francisco had to beat Dallas in the semi-finals following 1981 and 1994.

Of course there were lingering doubts before this season began. People have knocked the Niners the last couple of years for having relatively easy schedules, and they have never had consistent competition in the NFC West. We were only too aware that the great Steve Young would turn 38 during the 1999 season, and that his successor had not yet been anointed. Now an early retirement for the 49ers' quarterback is possible.

Yet the 49ers had just been one of the most productive teams, with 6,800 net yards gained in 1998, the second-highest total ever _ not bad for a 12-4 wild card team which beat Green Bay in the playoffs on a Young to Owens pass with seconds to play, then suffered a disappointing 20-18 loss to Atlanta, which in turn lost the Super Bowl to Denver, a repeat champion whom the 49ers beat near the end of the 1997 season with a turnaround touchdown by Jerry Rice in his brief early comeback from knee surgery.

The 49ers had a .750 winning percentage from 1995-98 (tied for that top spot with Green Bay). In touchdown passes, Steve Young was second only to Brett Favre during 1997-98, and the 49ers continued to excel in many categories. They had Bill Walsh back as general manager -- the great mixer of talent who once rebuilt so continuously that only five individual players appeared in each of his three Super Bowls in the '80s. But now they may also need some of the advice he gave his first 49er teams, when he told them

not to slump and hang their heads late in a losing game, but to "keep moving, running, looking up, demonstrating our pride, dignity and defiance."

Anomalies

To avoid making a lot of judgment calls about the long streaks of contention, I rested on the principle that a contender must be in the race with two games to go, and discovered some oddities.

A .500 team, like the 1946 Redskins, can be a true contender. After five weeks of play in 1946, Washington was half a game behind the Giants and half a game ahead of the Philadelphia Eagles. The Redskins had finished first in the East three of the previous four years, and they ran neck-and-neck with their two rivals right down the line. On the final day, the Redskins came to New York with a chance to win and tie for first place. Instead they lost 31-0 before 60,337 fans, the fourth-biggest crowd of the season, and finished third at 5-5-1, two games behind the 7-3-1 Giants and half a game behind the 6-5 Eagles, who were to win the Eastern Division the next three years and emerge victorious in the NFL championship games of 1948 and 1949.

Surely it is impossible for a team to be a contender when they lose three more games than they win. But this was not true in the weird season of 1982, when almost half the games were shaved from the schedule by a players' strike and owners' lockout. In his history of the Super Bowl, Jerry Green called it "the Mickey Mouse season" with "Mickey Mouse playoffs" — though he heartily loved the finals, when Washington beat Miami.

The 49ers had won their first Super Bowl the previous January, but couldn't get untracked in 1982. After losing and winning and losing, the Niners had some flashes down the stretch. When the ninth and last week of the season loomed, seven teams at or below .500 were vying for two playoff spots.

San Francisco controlled its own destiny going into the finale against a weak Rams team, but late in the fourth quarter, the defending champions were down 21-20 when Ray Wersching approached a 24-yard field goal attempt that would put the 49ers back in the playoffs. One of history's leading scorers, Wersching had blown a PAT earlier in the game, and now the climactic field goal was missed, too, as Ivory Sully got a hand on the low kick. Holder Joe Montana swung his arm in disgust after the play, and could only watch as Vince Ferragamo consolidated the Rams' victory with 1:53 left in one of the weirdest seasons in history.

With a record of 4-5, equal to playoff entries Detroit and Cleveland, you might think the 49ers could have had a chance to go all the way, given the unbeatable momentum they regained two years later and six years later and beyond. It certainly wasn't their year -- going 3-6 after finishing 13-3 in 1981 -- but they were never entirely out of the running until the last ticks of the last game. I would call them a contender, given the overall oddness of 1982, when there were no division leaders or wild cards, just a list of eight playoff teams from both AFC and NFC, double the usual number. However, if we start the current San Francisco streak in 1983 instead of 1981, the Niners still emerge with sixteen consecutive years of contention, tied with the Raiders, and more than anyone but the Cowboys.