

THE BEST DEFENSE IN NFL HISTORY

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CRITERIA

With the success of the Baltimore Ravens defense this season the question of who is the best defense of all-time has once again come to the forefront. If we try to decide who is best then what is the criteria to be used? Championships? Touchdowns allowed defensively? Takeaways? Sacks? Yards allowed rushing? Yards allowed per pass? ... is it a combination of all of these factors?

Lets begin by going back to the decade of the 1940's and examine four teams that have earned their place in defensive football history. The 1942 Chicago Bears achieved their place by accomplishing the following ... allowing only 519 yards rushing in 11 games (47 yards a game), and 1179 passing (107 a game); for an average of only 154 yards a game. This is the fewest yards allowed per game for the last 60 years. The Bears allowed only 10 offensive touchdowns, and led the league in takeaways with 51. They set an NFL record that still stands for the best pass defense efficiency mark with 11.9 in the defensive passer rating system. By allowing only 84 points they led the league in this department also. After the Packers scored 28 points opening day against the Bears; Chicago responded by allowing only 56 points in the next 10 games. Chicago had the opportunity to be the first undefeated team, but lost to the Redskins in Washington in the Championship 14 to 6.

The same year, 1942, Washington also allowed only 10 offensive touchdowns in 11 games, while finishing second to the Bears in yards allowed rushing. The Redskins outstanding season reached a climax by keeping the high scoring Bears offense (396 regular season points) out of the endzone in the title game.

The third outstanding defensive team of the 1940's was the 1944 New York Giants. Philadelphia scored 45 points against the Giants in their two games, but New York still allowed only 75 points all season (fewest points allowed in last 60 years). The Giants allowed only 9 offensive touchdowns in 10 games, and established a pass defense mark that still stands by giving up only 3 td passes. New York also led the league in takeaways with 45. The Packers managed to score 14 points in the title game denying New York the Championship.

The Philadelphia Eagles are the fourth and final great defensive team of the 1940's. During their 24 games in 1948 and 1949 the Eagles allowed only 35 offensive touchdowns. Philadelphia opponents averaged only 5.55 yards per pass against the Eagles for the combined seasons of '48 and '49. The Eagles were the only team "under" 6 yards per pass for this two year time period. Though weather played a part in their two Championship game shut-outs ... the Eagles

are the only team in history to accomplish this impressive feat. Their victims; the Cardinals and Rams averaged over 31 points a game in the regular season; yet could not score a single point!

1950's

As the free substitution rule came into play in 1950 teams now looked to substitute to help their defense. Though the Giants of 1950 and 51 are not one of the best overall defenses of all time ... special mention of their defense against the run for those two years must be given. Though they led the league in takeaways with 53 in 1951 the Giants could not overtake the Browns in the Eastern Conference.

The Cleveland Browns of 1954 and 1955 are the best defensive team of the 1950's. They led the league in rushing defense both seasons; allowing only 93 yards a game. Cleveland allowed opponents only 5.71 yards per pass; the league's best for this two year period. The Browns also led the league by allowing only 46 offensive touchdowns in 24 games. In contrast to the Giants; Cleveland won back to back titles, and allowed only 3 offensive touchdowns in those Championship games, while taking the ball away 17 times. As the 1950's came to a close the New York Giants were back again establishing themselves as the best defensive team at the end of the decade, but their statistics, while impressive, cannot compare with the Browns of '54 and '55.

1960-1977

By 1961 we have two leagues and 22 teams playing a 14 game schedule. During the 1960's there was a sameness in the defenses and coverages in the NFL; while in the AFL though variation was tried, they too utilized the base 4-3 and some form of man to man and zone coverage.

The 1962 Green Bay Packers were the first outstanding defensive team of this era. Green Bay allowed only 3277 total yards in '62 (234 a game), and only 14 offensive touchdowns. They led the league with 50 takeaways. The Packers did not allow an offensive touchdown in the Championship game victory over the Giants (who scored 398 points in the regular season).

When a team leads the league in 10 defensive categories, and is second in 7 others their place is secure in history. In only his second year as defensive coordinator George Allen won a game ball from the Bear players as they held an excellent Giant pass offense to 1 touchdown in the title game (New York had thrown 39 td passes in the regular season). During the regular season Chicago allowed only 17 offensive touchdowns and led the league with 54 takeaways.

The Bears are the only team during the 9 year Lombardi era to hold the Packers to 1 offensive touchdown in 2 games in the same season.

Though the Buffalo Bills of the mid-sixties are not one of the best overall defenses of all time ... special mention of their defense against the run must be given. During the 3 year time span of 1964-1966 the Bills allowed only 15 rushing touchdowns in 42 games. From October 24th, 1964, through October 31st, 1965, the Bills did not allow a rushing touchdown (a streak of 16 consecutive games)! In 1004 rushing attempts the Bills allowed 3078 yards (3.06 a carry for 3 years).

Similar to Buffalo, the Dallas Cowboys became a play-off team by the mid-sixties and though their pass defense was always ranked in the top half of the league they never led the league in the defensive passer rating system. However from 1964 through 1973 the Cowboys allowed only 71 rushing touchdowns in 140 games.

When a team leads the league in the defensive passer rating system their chances of winning a Championship increase dramatically. Only two teams in history have led the league in the defensive passer rating system 3 consecutive seasons; from 1965 through 1967 the Packers led the league and won the Championship every year. The most remarkable pass defense statistic Green Bay achieved was allowing only 5.65 yards per pass for those 3 years. The rest of the league (minus the Packers) allowed an average of 7.18 yards per pass.

Without a doubt the best defensive team in AFL history was the 1969 Kansas City Chiefs. Kansas City allowed the fewest total yards in AFL history with only 3163 (225 a game) yards. They led the league in takeaways with 47, sacks with 48, and allowed only 16 offensive touchdowns. By not allowing a single touchdown pass in the play-offs out of the 113 passes attempted against them the Chiefs went on to win the Super Bowl. The Jets, Raiders, and Vikings had thrown a total of 8 touchdown passes in the regular season; yet could not dent the Kansas City secondary. The Chiefs place in defensive history is also secure.

The Chiefs opponents in that New Orleans Super Bowl also came to the "big game" by establishing defensive superiority. The Vikings were able to maintain their defensive superiority for 3 years. During a 42 game span (1969-1971) the Vikings allowed only 212 total yards per game. Minnesota also recorded 98 sacks in 28 games (1969-70), and took the ball away from the opposition 131 times in 42 games.

From 1972 through 1976 the Pittsburgh Steelers defense completely dominated the opposition. One wonders whether it was the scheme utilized or the players in that scheme that achieved that domination. Inventine "fronts", "Cover 2", plus a huddle loaded with Pro Bowl and Hall of Fame players. Pittsburgh set a new standard to be measured by during a 70 game span (1972-1976). The Steelers allowed only 241 total yards per game, they allowed only 86 offensive touchdowns, while recording 176 sacks, and an

amazing total of 229 takeaways. Pittsburgh led the league in the defensive passer rating system for 3 consecutive years (1972-1974), while finishing second in both 1975 and 1976. Their pass defense in 1973 still ranks as the best since the Chicago Cardinals of 1956.

1978-2000

With rule changes in the area of pass blocking, and pass defense; along with a 16 game season ... 1978 began a new era. When the 1978 Steelers allowed only 21 offensive touchdowns they set the standard for this new era. Occasionally a team would have a strong season defensively in one or two areas mentioned previously but could not sustain their success for any length of time. Till the mid '80's.

Enter the Chicago Bears ... during a 48-game span (1984-86) the Bears recorded 198 sacks, and took the ball away 135 times. Chicago allowed only 252 total yards a game, and only 62 offensive touchdowns. The Bears defensive passer rating of 53.36 for this 3 year time span was an incredible 20 points better than the league average! In allowing only 577 total yards and 1 touchdown in 3 play-off games the Bears place in dominant defensive history is secure. The Bears success again brings about that fateful question ... does success come from the scheme or the players?

A decade would pass before a team would again put together a season of dominant defense in all areas. The 1996 Green Bay Packers led the league in defensive passer rating, fewest total yards allowed, and fewest offensive touchdowns allowed. But 1 year was all they could sustain.

Then came a new millenium, and a team that would set records ... the Baltimore Ravens. The Ravens of 2000 were the first team to allow only 16 offensive touchdowns in a 16 game season. No one for 22 years could stop the opposition from gaining 1000 yards rushing in a season till Baltimore limited opponents to 970. They led the league in takeaways with 49, and finished 3rd in the defensive passer rating system. But, the best was yet to come ... all

future play-off teams will be measured against the Raven pass defense. Opponents attempted 162 passes in 4 play-off games against Baltimore and did not throw a single touchdown pass; plus they allowed only 1 catch of over 20 yards by a wide receiver. One final statistic to measure the Ravens by ... in their last 13 regular season games, and the 4 play-off games; 17 combined the Raven defense allowed a total of only 19 4th quarter points. When will a team ever put a streak like this together again?

Simply put ... there have been a handful of dominant defensive teams in history ... each setting standards for others to match ... each grudgingly holding on to their territory ... each denying the opponents offense the endzone ... and finally taking the ball away. Will the Ravens sustain their place in history, and join the others?