

The Joy of Avoiding Sacks

By Bob Gill

Week after week in the NFL, defensive coaches put their highest priority on rushing the opposing passer, and offensive coaches preach the importance of protecting their quarterback. The annual defensive leaders in sacks are guaranteed spots on the all-pro team. But at the same time, a quarterback's ability to avoid a sack remains the most underestimated and misunderstood talent in the game.

If you watch a game featuring Donovan McNabb or some other elusive runner at quarterback, it's a pretty sure bet that at least one of the announcers will say something about how you have to have a mobile QB, because a slow-footed pocket passer will kill a team with sacks.

The trouble with this line of thinking is that it's not true – at least a good portion of the time. To check it out, though, you need to see stats on how often different quarterbacks are sacked; and though these stats are kept by the NFL, and have been for years, they're not well circulated. So let's take a look at the sack rates for 15 or 20 QBs and see what the record shows.

One instructive case in recent history involves the Buffalo Bills, where for three years (1998-2000) the quarterback job was divided between Doug Flutie and Rob Johnson. In that time Flutie threw 1,063 passes and was sacked 48 times, or one sack per 22 passes. In those same three seasons, playing behind the same offensive line, Johnson threw 447 passes and was sacked a whopping 79 times, or once per 5.66 passes. Thus Johnson was about four times more likely to be dropped for a loss, which is a heck of a big difference.

Of course, Flutie is known as a scrambler who frustrates defensive linemen with his quick feet; but Johnson's not exactly immobile either. In their last year together, Flutie carried the ball 36 times and averaged 4.5 yards per carry, but Johnson ran 42 times and averaged 7.3 per carry. Judging from those numbers, you'd be hard pressed to show that Flutie is a better runner. So how come Johnson is such an easy target for pass rushers?

Well, if you watch ESPN's excellent show "NFL Matchup," you'll learn (among a lot of other things) that one of a quarterback's main tasks on each play is to recognize where a blitz might come from, so he won't be surprised by a rush from the blind side. Sometimes, when you see a passer drilled in the back by an unblocked linebacker, the fault lies with the quarterback, not his offensive line. So maybe Johnson doesn't spot these potential blitzers well.

A good comparison in this regard is Peyton Manning, who you'll notice is always pointing to his linemen before the snap count, indicating trouble spots in the opposing defense. Not surprisingly, in his first three years with the Colts Manning was sacked a mere 56 times while throwing 1,679 passes. That's one sack per 30 passes, an even better rate than Flutie's.

But Manning's clearly not as mobile as Johnson, let alone Flutie or McNabb, so even granting his skill at recognizing blitzes, how can he get away from the pass rush so well? The answer is that he doesn't actually have to "get away" from anyone.

Despite what you commonly hear about the need for a mobile quarterback, the best way to avoid a sack has always been to get rid of the ball before the rush gets to you. The ability to hold the ball until the last split second, then make a quick decision and zip it to a receiver – or simply throw it away – is probably much more effective at preventing sacks than the ability to run out of the pocket. Running quarterbacks are more exciting to watch, but the pocket passers with the quick release are harder to sack.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 24, No. 1 (2002)

The poster boy for nimble-footed quarterbacks, Randall Cunningham, provides the best evidence in this regard. Despite his celebrated running ability, Cunningham has been one of the most sack-prone passers in NFL history.

From 1986 through 1992 with Philadelphia, omitting the 1991 season when he was injured in the Eagles' first game, Cunningham rushed for more than 500 yards every year, reaching a high of 942 yards in 1990. But he was also sacked more than any other quarterback in each season except 1989, when he went down "only" 45 times. For his whole 11-year stay with the Eagles (1985-95), he threw 3,362 passes and was sacked a whopping 422 times, once for every eight passes.

Well, you're probably thinking, the Eagles' offensive line must've been pretty bad. Maybe it was; but in 1986 Cunningham split playing time with 35-year-old Ron Jaworski, who by that time was about as mobile as a tree stump. Jaworski threw 245 passes and was sacked 22 times; Cunningham threw 209 passes and was sacked an NFL-record 72 times! A year earlier, in Cunningham's rookie season, Jaworski suffered 34 sacks while throwing 484 passes, but Cunningham, throwing only 81 times, was the victim of 20 sacks.

As you can see, though Randall's running ability certainly helped him to avoid the rush on some occasions, it also caused a good number of sacks when he gave up on the play prematurely and tried to run.

OK, but he was inexperienced then; so let's shift our focus to a few years later. In 1991, with Cunningham out, the Eagles' replacement QBs threw 509 times and suffered 43 sacks – a none-too-good rate of one sack per 11.8 passes. When he returned to the lineup in 1992, Cunningham threw 384 passes but was sacked 60 times, or once per 6.4 passes.

In fact, Cunningham never really improved his sack frequency until he joined the Vikings in 1997, by which time he was no longer the elusive runner we remember from highlight films.

Meanwhile, Dan Marino, with lead feet but a lightning-quick release, was sacked only 271 times in his career despite throwing 8,358 passes. That's once per 31 passes, which means he was about one-fourth as likely to be sacked as Cunningham. His most amazing season in this regard was 1988, when he threw 606 times and suffered only six sacks. That's right, SIX.

OK, Marino was an extraordinary talent, so maybe it's not fair to compare Cunningham with him. But then let's consider Mark Rypien, another exceptionally immobile quarterback of recent vintage. As you may recall, Rypien was sacked seven times in the Redskins' Super Bowl season of 1991 while throwing 421 passes; TV announcers used to mention it occasionally, but as a tribute to the Redskins' offensive line, not to their quarterback.

During Rypien's six years as a starter (1988-93) he threw 2,207 passes and suffered 82 sacks, or one per 27 passes. All right, the Redskins were known for their offensive line. But what about 1994, when he played with Cleveland and was sacked only twice while throwing 128 times? Did the Browns have a great line too? You have to conclude that Rypien had a lot to do with those low sack totals – just as Cunningham had a lot to do with his own astronomical totals.

This isn't a recent phenomenon, either. Individual quarterbacks' sack totals have been counted since back in the 1960s, and the lower totals have always belonged to the passers with quick arms rather than quick feet.

Consider these four long-term starters, each of whom won at least one MVP award: John Elway, Boomer Esiason, Joe Montana and Steve Young. If you rank their mobility, using rushing yardage as a guide, you'll get this order (with career yardage totals in parentheses): Young (4,182), Elway (3,407), Montana (1,676) and Esiason (1,598). But if you rank them by sack rate, the order is almost exactly reversed: Montana (one sack per 17.2 passes), Esiason (one per 16.1), Elway (one per 14) and Young (one per 11.6).

Here, just so you can check for yourself, I'll give each one's totals of passes thrown and sacks: Elway, 7,250 passes, 516 sacks; Esiason, 5,019 passes, 311 sacks; Montana, 5,391 passes, 313 sacks; Young, 4,149 passes, 358 sacks.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 24, No. 1 (2002)

With that background, let's look at some well-known scramblers from the past.

Roger Staubach, for one, was exceptionally nimble – after all, they didn't call him Roger the Dodger because he had season tickets at Chavez Ravine. Early in his career his sack rates are as bad as Cunningham's, or worse. Through 1974 he threw 1,006 times and suffered 150 sacks, which is one for every 6.7 passes. You may recall that Tom Landry was always after Staubach to stay in the pocket to let the play develop instead of giving up prematurely and trying to run; I think it's safe to say Landry knew a little something about football. Anyway, Staubach did better from 1975 on, averaging one sack per 12 passes, but that's still nothing to brag about, especially considering the quality of the team he was playing for.

And what about the original scrambler, Fran Tarkenton? He was sacked 572 times in an 18-year career, which works out to one sack for every 11.3 passes. His sack total is apparently a record, although the NFL doesn't list it because some numbers from the 1960s aren't considered official. To be fair, though, it's true that he started his career with an expansion team, and the offensive line may deserve most of the blame for the terrible sack rates of his first four years; from 1961-64 he was dropped 177 times, or once per 6.8 passes. In fact, Tarkenton may have developed his unique style simply as a result of playing behind what was essentially a makeshift line in his formative years.

Oddly enough, Tarkenton's best sack rate came in his final season, 1978, when he was recovering from a broken leg and ran the ball for a total of minus six yards. But he threw 572 passes that year and suffered 27 sacks, or one for every 21 passes.

No consideration of scrambling quarterbacks would be complete without Bobby Douglass, who set a QB record in 1972 when he ran for 968 yards with the Bears. That same season, he was sacked 32 times while throwing 198 passes, or once per 6.2 throws. In Douglass's case, though, there's another consideration: Since he completed only 38 percent of his passes anyway, maybe pulling the ball down and running was a good option for him.

Just for the sake of completeness, in Douglass's six years with the Bears (1969-74) he threw 875 passes and was sacked 142 times – exactly the same sack rate as in 1972 alone.

Of course, the mobile QBs aren't the only ones who get sacked a lot. When you have a relatively immobile passer who also lacks a quick release, that's a pass rusher's bonanza. Three of the most sack-prone passers of the 1980s fit that description:

1. Phil Simms of the Giants suffered 477 sacks in his career, for a sack rate of one per 9.7 passes. His season highs were 55 sacks in 1984, 52 in 1984 and 53 in 1988.

2. Ken O'Brien, who spent several years as the Jets' starter while Simms was running the Giants, threw 3,602 passes in his career and was sacked 353 times, or one per 10.2 passes. O'Brien was dropped 50 times apiece in 1987 and '89, and a record 62 times in 1985 – a record Cunningham shattered a year later while throwing less than half as many passes.

3. The Cardinals' Neil Lomax was even worse at evading the rush, being sacked 362 times in his career, or once per 8.7 passes – a very poor rate, but still better than Cunningham's and about the same as Staubach's. Oddly enough, Lomax's highest sack total also came in 1985, when he was dropped 61 times, one fewer than O'Brien's record-setting total that same year.

On the other end of the spectrum, let's look at some other immobile quarterbacks who more than made up for their lack of speed afoot with a quick release and a knack for making split-second decisions.

Remember Jim Hart, Lomax's predecessor and star of the "Cardiac Cards" back in the '70s? He couldn't run at all, but in his long career (1966-84) he threw 5,076 passes and was sacked 281 times -- once per 18 passes. That's not great, but it's a far cry from Cunningham's rate. Hart's best season in this regard came in 1975, when he was sacked only six times while throwing 345 passes. (For the 1981 Cardinals, Hart split time with Lomax, who was in his rookie year. Hart threw 241 passes and was sacked 16 times; Lomax went down 32 times while throwing 236 passes.)

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 24, No. 1 (2002)

Dan Fouts, another Air Coryell alumnus, qualified as a "sitting duck" in the pocket, but in 1981 he threw 609 passes and was dropped for a loss only 19 times. In a 15-year career, he suffered 319 sacks while throwing 5,604 times – once for every 17.6 passes.

Going a little further back, let's look at John Brodie, the 49ers' outstanding quarterback of the 1960s. I don't have sack totals for his first few years, but that's OK, because early in his career he had pretty good mobility – enough to make him suitable to run the 49ers' shotgun offense. From 1960-63 Brodie rushed for 582 yards, almost exactly half his career total; by 1964, when his sack totals start, he had become a stationary passer. But in his era, he was the NFL's best at avoiding a sack.

Brodie threw 3,379 passes in his last ten years (1964-73) and was sacked a mere 141 times – once per 24 passes. His sack rate was remarkably consistent from season to season, but just for the record, his best year for sacks was 1970, when he was dropped only eight times while throwing 378 passes.

And what about the poster boy for immobile quarterbacks, Joe Namath? Namath, as everyone knows, had knees so bad that he ran like C3PO in "Star Wars," but in his prime, from 1967-72, he was sacked only 71 times while throwing 1,794 passes. That's one sack for each 25 passes, an even better rate than Brodie's. Score another for the virtue of a quick release.

Just so you don't think I'm stacking the deck in Namath's favor, I omitted his first two seasons only because I don't have the numbers, and in his declining years (1973-77), with his knees getting even worse, his sack rate was still decent – better than Elway's, for instance – at one per 14.6 passes (79 sacks, 1,157 passes).

One final note, returning to the present day: Of the seven quarterbacks who were sacked 40 or more times in 2000, four – Rob Johnson, Donovan McNabb, Mark Brunell and Charlie Batch – are among the most mobile passers in the NFL. The two hardest to sack were Manning and Vinny Testaverde, another classic pocket passer with a quick release. Testaverde, in fact, was even tougher to sack than Manning that season, going down only 13 times while throwing 590 passes.

So next time you see a quarterback scamper out of the pocket and deftly evade one tackler before being dropped behind the line of scrimmage, think twice before you blame the poor offensive linemen. Maybe if the passer had hung in there for a split second longer he could've found an open receiver, or at least avoided the loss by throwing the ball away.

It might not be as exciting, but most of the time it's probably a better play.