

THE MAGNIFICENT SEVEN

by Coach TJ Troup

The day after Christmas in 1954 the Cleveland Browns hosted the Detroit Lions for the NFL title. It was the third consecutive year these two teams would decide the championship. The Browns had lost three consecutive championship games, including the last two to the Lions.

Browns QB Otto Graham had not played particularly well in those three losses, and since he was the “trigger” man in the Cleveland offense, and a man of intense pride, this was the “crossroads” game of his career. Graham responded to the challenge by contributing five touchdowns in a 56 to 10 victory. Otto completed 9 of 12 passes for 163 yards and 2 touchdowns, and scored 3 himself on short runs from scrimmage.

Though he announced his retirement, Otto eventually returned for one final season in 1955. Graham again led the Browns to the title, this time defeating the Rams in the Los Angeles Coliseum 38 to 14.

When assessing a quarterback’s career how much emphasis should be placed on his passing statistics? Long after Otto Graham retired, the NFL began to use the passer rating system to evaluate the passing efficiency of each individual quarterback. Using that system how efficient was Graham, and where does he rank in comparison with other champion quarterbacks?

The passer rating system is divided into four equal categories; completion percentage per pass attempt, yards gained per pass attempt, touchdown percentage per pass attempt, and interception percentage per pass attempt. Is there a simpler way of stating this? We want our team to complete as many long passes for as many touchdowns as possible in as few attempts as possible, without throwing an interception.

Evolution in the passing game has caused the passer rating to consistently rise with each decade. Each quarterback wants to be remembered for winning, and not statistics, but what was each quarterback’s passer rating in victory?

Otto Graham’s achievement in one of the four passer rating categories is a mark that all quarterbacks can strive for, since if equaled or surpassed would probably bring a championship to his team. Graham in his six year NFL career averaged 9.04 yards per pass in Cleveland victories! The significance is that he is the only quarterback in league history to average better than nine yards per pass in victory over their entire career. Added to that is the differential in Graham’s passer rating when the Browns won or lost. Otto’s passer rating in victory was 86.53, while in defeat or tie; 43.93.

No one man is entirely responsible for victory in a team game, and Otto Graham would have been the first to tell you that he was coached by a Hall of Famer, had an outstanding offensive line, a stable of quality running backs, and excellent receivers. The Browns also played excellent defense during his six year NFL career, but Graham, like many other quarterbacks, was the focal point of the team. When the Browns lost or tied during his six year career, Otto’s passer rating was only 43.93 (a differential of 42.60).

For comparison sake let’s examine the six other quarterbacks of our magnificent seven. They are Sammy Baugh, Bart Starr, John Unitas, Terry Bradshaw, Joe Montana, and Bret Favre. The passer rating for each quarterback will be based upon a ten year segment of their career, which includes at least one regular season that eventually led to a championship.

Sammy Baugh’s ten year segment is the decade of the 1940’s, an era in which Slingin’ Sam went from single wing tailback to t-formation quarterback. In an era in which the

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passer rating ranged from 40.79 in 1940 to 53.83 in 1949, Sam's passer rating in victory leaps off the page. Sam's passer rating in victory over a ten year period was 95.85!

Baugh's most impressive category is in the area of touchdown percentage in victory; 8.84 (the highest of our seven). Sammy Baugh's season of 1945 still ranks as one of the best individual seasons for a quarterback in history, and for those of you who actually care about historical accuracy; Baugh DID play in all 10 Washington Redskin regular season games that season.

Either the Baltimore Colts or Green Bay Packers represented the western conference in the title game for every season from 1958 through 1967 except one (the Bears in 1963). Amazingly Unitas & Starr both had a passer rating of over 95 in victory for this 10-year time span. Their numbers in loss/tie are also comparable. For Unitas, it was his deep ball accuracy that set him apart as he averaged 8.64 yards per pass in victory. For Starr the fact he threw only 16 touchdown passes in 10 years when Green Bay lost or tied is eye-catching.

When you are the number one choice in the entire draft and the team that drafts you has never won a play-off game, the pressure to succeed is immense. Terry Bradshaw had memorable struggles in games the Steelers lost in his 10 year segment (1971-1980), and his rating was only 50.94. When Bradshaw was on target and Pittsburgh won his rating was 82.46 (the league average during the decade of the 1970's usually was in the mid 60's).

At the close of Bradshaw's career a young man from Pennsylvania was just beginning to assert himself in running Bill Walsh's offense. We all marveled at Joe Montana's performance in key play-off games, but how did Joe do when the 49ers won in the regular season from 1981 through 1990?

Montana's passer rating in victory for this 10 year segment was 100.96. The league average during this time period usually ranged from the low to mid 70's. Though excellent in all four categories, the fact that Joe had only 70 passes intercepted in 10 years when San Francisco won demonstrates the key factor that if you do not intercept Joe, you do not beat the 49ers.

Someday Brett Favre will have his bust in the Hall of Fame, and since he also has exhibited the same traits as the men listed above let's take a look at the other Green Bay "maverick" brother (we looked at Bart, now Brett). From 1993 through 2002 Brett Favre's passer rating in victory is 95.22. Favre is +135 in touchdowns to interceptions in victory from 1993-2002 (the best of the magnificent seven). During the 2004 season and future seasons, which quarterback will demonstrate the passing efficiency in victory that these men did?
