

SPORTS ILLUSTRATED'S 2003 PRO FOOTBALL PREDICTIONS

By Bob Irving

SPORTS ILLUSTRATED'S September 1 issue (2003) provided an immense amount of speculative data about the forthcoming season in professional football. Under the banner, Scouting Reports, Dr. Z (Paul Zimmerman) fearlessly stepped onto the 'tightwire' by rank-ordering all 32 teams of the NFC / AFC as to their season-end standings. Simultaneously David Sabino rank-ordered 500 players in the NFL under the title Player Value Ratings (PVR) composed of those who, as of the beginning of the season, were projected to exert the greatest influence offensively for their respective teams, with rank # 1 being considered the most valuable player. Three criteria composed of tackling, quarterback sacks and interceptions accounted for defensive effort. Both these predictions required a great amount of energy to produce, lots of calculation based upon indisputable criteria familiar to any football fan. As seen by this observer, a rank-ordering of all the teams on the one hand (Dr. Z), supported by individual player PVR's on the other hand, offered a statistical challenge not often encountered.

The reasoning process bolstering this challenge went something like this: It seemed reasonable that the number one team picked by Dr. Z should have the lowest total PVR rating, which in turn was composed of nine offensive positions. These were: running back, quarterback, fullback, two wide receivers, tight end, a kicker, a punt returner and a kickoff returner for each team. To the extent that team rank-order coincided with individual Player Value Rating, the team position could be said to mirror the nine offensive players making up PVR. Since each of these sequences of team and player was by definition a rank-order, use of a rank-order correlation coefficient seemed appropriate. Player Value Ratings were summed for each team and correlated with the sequence number assigned by Dr. Z for that team. This rank-order correlation was .647 for Dr. Z versus offensive PVR, not bad, but not really all that encouraging either since that's less than 24% better than a pure guess. The corresponding rank-order correlation for Dr. Z versus the sum of the three defensive criteria was a very dismal -.007, thus worthless.

I also wondered whether there was any significant difference between the teams' Player Value Ratings – or were they simply too similar to show any real differences. This required analysis of variance enabling me to analyze all 32 teams simultaneously on this trait. Sure enough, the F ratio was 2.23, high enough to indicate that significant difference was present between the best of the 32 teams and the worst. Further analysis showed that Kansas City, the best overall PVR team, was significantly better than Chicago, Baltimore, Houston and Arizona, ONLY. All other comparisons were indicated as being simply chance-related!!

One final thing: I wondered how highly correlated PVR team by team was against the three defensive criteria, team by team. This was somewhat perplexing since the value was -.259. Offense and defense shouldn't necessarily be expected to be highly related but such a negative value seemed incomprehensible, sort of uninterpretable.

Both Zimmerman and Sabino are entitled to their individual opinions regarding this subject, which they've given us. Both did yeoman work in compiling the information. However, it still remains that one should expect that the position of a team in a rank-order sequence would be a reasonably direct reflection of the value of the team members who make up that team, or so it seems to this observer. The fact that only four of the 32 teams was shown to be significantly different from the number 1 team in PVR demonstrates two things: first, maybe the draft and wily trading really does virtually equate teams in offensive ability and second, an examination of the PVR values shows how wildly variable they really are!!

Where does all this leave us? I'll see you at the nearest bar stool so we can debate it which is just as good as all this mathematical exercise!!

THANKS, BUT

When Reggie White died, we received many notices of the event from members who know that we try to list all deaths of former footballers (see list on pages 22-23) in the preceding year. While we appreciate the thought, you can assume that we are already aware of any passings that make the network news.

What we need, and what we really need help on, is obits or death notices on those players of lesser fame – those who played three games for the Cardinals in 1942 and such. Please, if the passing doesn't make the network news, don't assume that we have seen it. Mail or e-mail the news and, if possible, the entire obituary. As an option, instead of sending it to the Coffin Corner, you might post the obit on our website Forum at www.footballresearch.com .
