

The "Trump" Method of Measuring Coaching Greatness

by Greg Thomas

Who are the greatest coaches of all time? Are they the innovators, the creators of new formations and systems, or are they instead the men of the sidelines who got right results?

Well, if you've ever watched "The Apprentice," according to the Donald, the bottom line is the bottom line. Efficiency and productivity take the day. Otherwise, "you're fired!"

What if we took his philosophy in rating the greatest coaches in NFL history. Who would be the last man standing?

To help us decide, we will use a statistic called percentile. Here are the career percentile rankings for some of the greatest offensive coaches (in alphabetical order) in football history:

<u>Name</u>	<u>Seasons</u>	<u>Percentile</u>
Don Coryell	14	78
George Halas	40	73
Curly Lambeau	33	67
Tom Landry	29	72
John Madden	10	86
George Seifert	11	81
Don Shula	33	74
Bill Walsh	10	78

In Madden's 10 seasons of coaching, he had an average percentile of 86. This means that his teams scored as many points or more points than 86 percent of the other teams in an average season. It also means that in an average season 14 percent of all teams scored more than Madden's Raiders.

Percentile scores say John Madden is the greatest offensive coach of all-time? But not so fast!

The "Trump" method of measuring coaching dominance would allow Madden to be trumped if another coach has a higher percentile over a consecutive number of seasons as long as Madden's entire career. In other words, Madden can be "trumped" if any other coach can put together 10 consecutive years with an average percentile higher than 86.

In George Seifert's first 10 seasons as a head coach, his offenses had an average percentile of 88. Thus, he trumps Madden.

For Seifert to be trumped, another coach must better Seifert's career percentile of 81 in 11 seasons.

From 1968 to 1978, Tom Landry had an offensive percentile of 84. He trumps Seifert and his career totals are now on the line.

Don Shula, during the 29 seasons of 1967 through 1995 had a percentile of 74, trumping Landry.

However, the final trump belongs to George Halas, as he compiled an offensive percentile of 78 in his first 33 seasons, bettering Shula's mark. By the "trump" method, Halas is the greatest offensive coach of all-time.

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What about on the other side of the ball? Who coached the meanest defenses. An alphabetical look at the candidates produces these names:

<u>Name</u>	<u>Seasons</u>	<u>Percentile</u>
George Allen	12	84
Paul Brown	21	76
Mike Ditka	14	64
Bud Grant	18	66
George Halas	40	63
Vince Lombardi	10	84
Chuck Noll	23	62
Don Shula	33	70

Lombardi and Allen tied for the top in percentile with 84, but Allen did it longer so he trumps Lombardi.

In Paul Brown's first 12 NFL seasons (1950-1961), his defenses averaged a percentile of 91, trumping Allen.

Shula's percentile score of 85 in his first 21 seasons (1963-1981) trumps Brown as he takes the title as best defensive coach.

Brown would have still won defensive honors if we had considered his first 4 seasons of pro coaching which were in the All-American Football Conference. More on that later.

What about all-around coaching? Great coaches are not simply single-minded sages. They know a lot about both sides of the line of scrimmage. Here are the finalists with their percentiles:

<u>Name</u>	<u>Seasons</u>	<u>Offense</u>	<u>Defense</u>	<u>Total</u>
George Allen	12	69	84	153
Paul Brown	21	66	76	142
Joe Gibbs	13	69	66	135
George Halas	40	73	63	136
Tom Landry	29	72	61	133
Vince Lombardi	10	73	84	157
John Madden	10	86	65	151
George Seifert	11	81	70	151
Don Shula	33	70	74	144
Bill Walsh	10	78	67	145

Vince Lombardi's 10-year percentile rank of 157 is the highest ever. However, in George Seifert's first 10 years of head coaching, he posted a percentile rank of 164, trumping Lombardi.

During the twelve seasons between 1950 and 1961, Paul Brown posted a 168 percentile, sliding by Seifert.

Brown's career percentile of 142 in 25 seasons, not including his 4 years in the All-American Football Conference (which are not recognized by the official NFL statistics) was bested by the 155 of Don Shula's first 25 seasons of head coaching.

When looking at Shula's entire 33-year career, his percentile of 144 even outdistances the first 33 seasons of George Halas' coaching. Thus, we award Shula with the best overall coach award.

But wait a minute! Was Shula really the best? Maybe for regular season purposes, but I thought the whole idea of coaching was to win titles. Who was the king at that?

A great way to measure a coach's ability to win championships is to compare his number

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of titles to the expected number of championships that his teams would win simply by chance.

We define an "ultimate title" as winning the final championship game of the season. By this definition, if you won the AFL championship but lost the Super Bowl, as did Hank Stram's 1966 Kansas City Chiefs, you did not win an ultimate title!

Here's a list of the coaches with their titles and expected titles through the February, 2005 Super Bowl:

<u>Name</u>	<u>Ultimate Titles</u>	<u>Expected Titles</u>	<u>Difference</u>
Bill Belichick	3	0.33	2.67
Paul Brown (a)	3	1.35	1.65
Paul Brown (b)	7	1.87	5.13
Joe Gibbs	3	0.46	2.54
Curly Lambeau	6	3.45	2.55
Vince Lombardi	5	0.64	4.36
Chuck Noll	4	0.84	3.16
Don Shula	2	1.32	0.68
Bill Walsh	3	0.36	2.64

Notice that Vince Lombardi's 4.36 leads the way except for the listing referred to as Paul Brown (b). This listing not only includes Brown's 3 NFL championships but also the 4 AAFC championships Brown won between 1946 and 1949.

The NFL statisticians do not count these titles. Should we? The answer is "no" and here's why.

The quarterback for all of Brown's seven championships was Otto Graham. During Graham's NFL career he threw for 88 touchdowns and 94 interceptions with a quarterback rating of 78.2. During his time in the AAFC, Graham threw for 86 touchdowns and 41 interceptions and a 99.1 quarterback rating.

Brown was a great coach but the AAFC was a triple-A minor league. Thus it's Lombardi who's truly "invincible."

While analyzing this data, I was startled more the once. The first time concerned the irony of Lombardi and Landry.

When Jim Lee Howell coach the New York Giants during the 1950s, he had Lombardi was his offensive coordinator and Landry in charge of his defense. Yet during their tenures as head coaches, Lombardi's Packers were better on defense than they were on offense, while Landry's Cowboys had better offenses than defenses.

The second surprise centered around the relative importance of great coaching versus great talent. In Brad Adler's book, "Coaching Matters: Leadership and Tactics of the NFL's 10 Greatest Coaches," he claims "great coaches will ultimately win regardless of the talent or conditions that surround them."

On the other hand, Joe Theisman wrote on ESPN.com on December 29, 2004 that "coaches are important, but unless you have players....it's tough to win."

The data indicates that Theisman wins this debate. In their worst seasons, even great offenses coaches put up subpar offensive percentiles:

<u>Coach</u>	<u>Season</u>	<u>Offensive Percentile</u>
Tom Landry	1960&61	0
Joe Gibbs	2004	3
George Halas	1966	14
Don Shula	1980	15

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The same can be said for defensive masterminds:

<u>Coach</u>	<u>Season</u>	<u>Defensive Percentile</u>
Paul Brown	1969	0
Don Shula	1986	7
Vince Lombardi	1969	33

Such results inspire the poet to proclaim:

Lombardi, Landry
Though great they be
Would never know a victory
If forced to suit up you or me