

RATING THE RECEIVERS

By Bob Carroll

Every once in a while, I get angry telephone calls from folks who wonder when I'm going to do something about the NFL Passer Rating System. "Hey!" they say, "when are you going to do something about the NFL Passer Rating System?" Then they hang up.

I think I wouldn't mind if they didn't call collect.

In the first place, I can't "do" anything about the System. I have less pull with the NFL than one of those dots does with Pac-Man. They completely ignored my last suggestion -- that Howard do his commentaries in sign language for the non-hearing- impaired -- even though I wrote it in a very nice letter with most of the words spelled right.

But, in the second place, I like the NFL's Passer Rating System, particularly at this time of year when I can peruse the the little booklet the NFL puts out on rating passers and then turn for some light reading to the little booklet put out by the IRS on raping purses. One year I got them mixed up and paid the government two interceptions and a sack.

They were not amused.

However, the NFL's System is not really as difficult to comprehend as some people like to make out. To rate a passer, just take his completion percentage, average gain per toss, interception percentage, and touchdown percentage. Divide each figure by the square root of Pete Rozelle's home telephone number. Add in Frank Tripucka's chronological age at the time of his first communion, and multiply by George Halas' social security number. Stir thoroughly and boil for 45 minutes. Serves eight.

I think that's a great improvement over the old simple way of rating passers -- divide the QB's helmet size by his in-seam. You can rest assured that if you make a mistake in figuring a passer with the new system, no one will catch it until the fellow is retired and enshrined in the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

If we could only find enough percentages and averages, maybe we could do something just as nice for rushers and punters.

But don't do it for receivers. They are a special case.

Whereas runners and passers and kickers are subject to the tyranny of numerous numbers, great receivers are the product of fans' imaginations.

On any given Sunday (or Monday or Thursday or Saturday), you plunk yourself down in front of your TV to watch a game. By the fourth quarter -- according to the numbers flashed on the screen -- the quarterback has thrown 40 passes and completed 25 for 273 yards (if you are watching San Diego, these same figures may appear midway through the first quarter). The flashed numbers also tell you that your favorite runner has gained 104 yards on 27 carries. Now you know what kind of days these guys are having.

What about receivers? The numbers seem so insignificant! Three for 46? What's that? The Daily Lottery Number?

And to know statistically that a receiver is having a good season, you have to keep track of all those little numbers week after week. That's like rating a restaurant by counting the peas on your plate.

I doubt if many fans pay much attention to all those little receiver numbers, yet they'll tell you as gospel that so-and-so is a better wide receiver than such-and-such. Since they don't keep track of the numbers, how do they reach such decisions?

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 4, No. 4 (1982)

By the ring of the receiver's name! That's it. Receivers are rated (in the fans' minds) by the psychological impact of their monickers.

Think about it. Who ever heard of a famous receiver named John Doe? No one. But what about John Jefferson? Sure, you remember him! Why? Because his name recalls our great third President and his initials look like a pair of buttonhook patterns. With that kind of impact Jefferson would be high-rated even if he had the hands of a hod carrier.

I happen to live in Steeler country where Lynn Swann (=graceful leap) and John Stallworth (=home of thoroughbred+high value) are the popular catchers. However, for the last two years the team's third wide receiver has been every bit as effective. Alas! his name is Smith (=blah). I think his first name is Jim. It matters not how many clutch catches Whats-Iz-Name Smith makes, he'll never be ranked with Lynn Stylishdive.

Consider the subliminal effects of these names:

Winslow (=eventual victory)

Largent (=big fellow)

Joiner (=keeps us together)

Butler (=he did it!)

Lofton (=high-flying heavyweight)

The list goes on. And it's always been so. Would Tom Fears have made the Hall of Fame as Tom Scaredycat? Who would have cheered for Elroy "Crazyelbows" Hirsch? Would Cleveland have loved Mac Slowpoke? Tommy McDonald would not have got past training camp as Tommy Pizzahut.

Had not Don Hutson's name reminded fans of a popular motorcar of the day, I'm certain Green Bay's greatest end would have been Harry Jacunski. And why do we not honor the only men other than Hutson to lead the NFL in receiving between 1936 and 1945? Because they both had "turn-off" names! Gaynell Tinsley (41 catches in 1938) sounds like an effete riverboat gambler, and only folks on the funny farm could cotton to a name like Don Looney (58 receptions in 1940).

This correlation of names and stardom does not seem to affect other positions. You can be a great quarterback whether your name is Starr or Tittle. A great defensive end can be robust (as in Robustelli) or just plain Jones (as in Deacon). But to make it as a receiver, you need a suitable name.

NFL teams should think about it at their next draft. If they see a guy who can do a hundred quicker than your wife can spot a blonde hair on your lapel, can catch anything thrown in the same state, and is so gung-ho he makes Pete Rose look like a slacker, they may have a good ballplayer.

But, if his name is something like Lance Klutchcatcher, they have a superstar!