

WHO BE THE BADDEST?

by Greg Thomas

Is that not the question we are always asking? Who was the greatest quarterback, greatest running back, greatest wide receiver, greatest tight end?

The toughest task is agreeing on a definition of greatness. Is greatness an accumulation of career numbers that no one can reach like Dan Marino's passing or Jerry Rice's receiving statistics? Is it a snapshot in time when a player at his peak is better than anyone else could possibly be as was Marshall Faulk last year or vintage O.J. Simpson? Or is neither?

Let me give you an example. Let's say you have been married for 25 years. Do you love your wife according to the total number of nice things she has done for you in the last quarter century years? Probably not.

If she has done 100 nice things for you in the last 25 years, it is not satisfactory. Do you love her because at her peak, she was the queen of passion and did 10 nice things for you a day. No, because that may no longer apply.

Or do you love her because on an average day, she is the greatest woman God ever created? Being a happily married man, I pick option number three. As a psychologist, I've found that we tend to love others according to the "average way" they treat us, not the accumulation of their good treatment or a peak experience with them.

Thus, it stands that if we are to rate players according to their greatness, we should for example, take a typical Joe Montana performance and rate it against a typical Dan Marino performance. We should take an average Sunday from Jim Brown and compare it with one from Walter Payton. While we are at it, let's compare a game in the life of Jerry Rice with one of Don Hutson.

But how do we do this? Keep in mind two concepts. For a player to have a great game, he must be both productive and efficient. Traditional statistical methods emphasize either productivity and efficiency. But by ignoring either productivity or efficiency, we lose an important element in evaluation.

Let's start with running backs. What do we expect of a great runner?

For starters, we expect him to gain a lot of yards per game. He can gain those yards either running the ball or catching passes. We also expect him to score touchdowns. In addition, we expect him to have a high yards per carry average.

We can calculate running back's player's average game score (AGS) by multiplying the following three numbers: (1) his total yards per game from rushing and receiving (2) his touchdowns per game by rushing or receiving and (3) his yards per carry.

Because it is a multiplicative formula, AGS tends to exaggerate the difference between players. Instead AGS effectively sorts players into levels of dominance, which is exactly what you want to do when you are measuring greatness. Thus a player with a 700 AGS score is not twice as good as a player with a 350 AGS score but he is without doubt a level or two better. Also, keep in mind that AGS compares players within a single position. A 700 score for a running back does not correspond with a 700 score for a quarterback, wide receiver, or tight end.

Let's look at some of the contenders for greatest running back ever.

Running Back	G	YDs/Game	TD/G	YDS/Rush	AGS
Steve Van Buren	83	76.9	.86	4.44	293.6
Jim Brown	118	125.5	1.07	5.22	701.0
Gale Sayers	68	92.1	.60	5.00	276.3
O.J. Simpson	135	99.1	.56	4.67	259.2

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Walter Payton	190	111.8	.66	4.36	322.0
Earl Campbell	115	88.8	.64	4.30	244.4
Marcus Allen	221	79.9	.65	4.05	210.3
Barry Sanders	153	118.9	.71	4.99	421.3
Emmitt Smith	185	103.3	.85	4.26	378.4
Marshall Faulk	121	123.0	.91	4.38	490.3
Edgerrin James	38	139.4	1.00	4.33	603.6

On an average day, Jim Brown is by far the most productive running back in history. No one even comes close.

But why? Because he did everything extremely well. Some runners, like Marshall Faulk and Edgerrin James can give you yardage and touchdowns but not a great yards per carry average. Others like Barry Sanders have a high rushing average and a lot of yards per game, but don't reach paydirt enough. But Jim Brown was without a soft spot in his statistics. It would be safe to say, that even in these days of feature backs, his level of dominance will never again be achieved.

How should we rate quarterbacks? A large deficiency of the current quarterback rating system used by the NFL is that although it based on efficiency, it pays no attention to productivity. For example, if yards per game is important in evaluating a running back, then it certainly should also be important in judging a quarterback.

Not only is a quarterback's passing yardage and touchdowns important, but the yards and scores he generates from running are also meaningful.

The AGS formula for rating quarterbacks considers all of these things and is calculated by multiplying the following three factors: (1) a quarterback's total yards per game (passing and rushing combined), (2) a quarterback's average yards per passing attempt, (3) a quarterback's total touchdowns produced by passing and rushing divided by his number of interceptions.

Quarterback	G	YDS/Game	YDS/Pass.	TD/Int	AGS
Sid Luckman	128	112.9	8.42	1.07	1017.6
Sammy Baugh	165	134.6	7.31	0.97	954.4
Otto Graham	126	194.2	8.98	1.61	2807.7
Bart Starr	198	131.4	7.85	1.21	1248.8
Johnny Unitas	211	199.1	7.76	1.20	1854.0
Fran Tarkenton	246	206.0	7.27	1.41	2111.6
Roger Staubach	131	190.6	7.67	1.59	2324.4
Joe Montana	192	219.9	7.52	2.11	3489.2
Dan Marino	242	253.9	7.34	1.70	3168.2
Steve Young	169	221.1	7.98	2.57	4534.5
Brett Favre	161	249.6	7.10	1.74	3083.6
Kurt Warner	44	291.4	9.02	1.83	4810.0
Jeff Garcia	45	250.0	7.19	2.58	4637.6
Dante Culpepper	29	256.6	7.80	2.03	4063.0

This table shows that we live in the age of the productive quarterback and that the most dangerous quarterback of this age or any age is Kurt Warner. Warner's 291 yards per game dwarfs the competition and his 9.02 yards per pass attempt lead the way as well. Take Unitas, Marino, Tarkenton or anyone else, no one has ever been more of a threat to a defense than Warner.

But Warner is not the only modern quarterback achieving in a Herculean manner. Jeff Garcia of the 49ers, believe it or not, has been even more dangerous than his predecessors Joe Montana and Steve Young. Notice also that the achievements of Dante Culpepper who on a per game basis have been much more destructive to the opposition than Brett Favre.

Now let's take a look at the great receivers. What makes a receiver great. A great receiver gains a lot of yards per game, and he score touchdowns. Sometimes he even runs the ball effectively and scores, as has Jerry Rice.

However, a receiver's yards per reception is not a valid indicator of his worth. A player may have a large

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yards per reception figure simply because he is a team's deep threat and not because he is a team's best receiver.

So let's leave that out and stick with the important two statistics: (1) Yards per game and (2) Touchdowns per game. Again, as with running backs, we combine both receiving and rushing numbers.

Now let's see how the greatest wide receivers stack up on AGS.

Wide Receiver	G	YDS/Game	TD/game	AGS
Don Hutson	116	71.3	.88	62.8
Raymond Berry	154	60.2	.44	26.4
Lance Alworth	136	76.4	.64	48.9
Paul Warfield	157	55.9	.54	30.2
Charley Taylor	165	64.2	.55	35.3
Bobby Mitchell	148	72.2	.56	40.4
Steve Largent	200	65.9	.51	33.6
James Lofton	233	61.2	.33	20.2
Jerry Rice	254	82.7	.77	63.8
Tim Brown	208	64.5	.46	29.7
Chris Carter	229	60.6	.56	33.9
Randy Moss	64	85.7	.83	71.1

When the NFL named their greatest all-time performers, they picked Don Hutson and Jerry Rice as their receivers.

However, in his short career, Randy Moss has so far outperformed that duo on a per game basis. Will he be able to continue his pace?

My guess is that it is very doubtful. Moss is the new version of the triple threat. He destroys defenses. He destroys coaches and teammates, and he destroys himself.

For tight ends, the same statistical rules apply but this time I didn't include rushing numbers to their receiving statistics as: (1) the data base I use didn't include these stats and (2) a tight end seldom runs the ball or scores rushing touchdowns anyway.

Here is a listing of the most acclaimed tight ends in NFL history. Keep in mind that 1962 was the first year that All-Pro teams differentiated between tight ends and wide receivers. Also, don't compare a wide receivers AGS to that of a tight end as their responsibilities and opportunities differ greatly.

Tight End	G	YDS/Game	TD/game	AGS
Mike Ditka	158	36.8	.27	9.9
John Mackey	139	37.7	.27	10.2
Jerry Smith	168	32.7	.37	11.8
Jackie Smith	210	37.7	.19	7.2
Dave Casper	147	35.5	.35	12.4
Russ Francis	167	31.5	.24	7.6
Mark Bavaro	126	37.6	.31	11.7
Kellen Winslow	109	61.8	.41	25.3
Todd Christensen	137	42.9	.30	12.9
Keith Jackson	129	41.0	.38	15.6
Shannon Sharp	175	49.2	.29	14.3
Ozzie Newsome	198	40.3	.24	9.8
Tony Gonzalez	78	50.7	.38	19.3

Unless the tight end position undergoes a major transformation, Kellen Winslow's per game numbers look tough to beat. He has a huge advantage over the competition both as a yardage gainer and touchdown maker with the best of today's current crop, Tony Gonzalez far behind.

So what have we learned. First of all, that on an average day, Kurt Warner Jim Brown, Randy Moss, and Kellen Winslow are the most dangerous performers ever to play their positions.

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Does that negate the achievements of the pros of the past? In no way. Perhaps with the 21st century Rams' ultra offense, John Unitas would be putting up Warner's numbers.

Players are prisoners of their eras. We are now living in the era of the feature back and quarterbacks who regularly throw for more than 250 yards per game. Thus, we can't say who was the baddest after all, only who's most dangerous.

Note: All figures as of 2001 season.