

LEEMANS & ROGERS

by Bob Carroll

I've always liked the story of the little old lady who scornfully toured a Picasso exhibit and then sniffed, "If Rembrandt were alive today, he wouldn't paint this way!" To which a bystander replied, "Ah, but if Rembrandt were alive today, he wouldn't be Rembrandt."

The bystander knew the truth that genius is unique to its own time and place. He knew better than to compare two artists from different times and places because different circumstances produce different results, even with genius. Nowhere is this common-sense rule disobeyed more often than in the world of sports. This year in baseball there's Rose and Cobb or Ryan and Johnson. It's more fun to talk about the numbers than about night games, jet lag, rabbit balls, Astro turf, and a million other factors that make Now different from Then.

Turning to football, it's the same "good-old-days" versus "good new days" argument, and I should know better than to get into it. But, then, at my age I should know better than to do a lot of things. So here goes.

The subjects for my comparison will be two league-leading rushers, 45 years apart. In 1936, Hall of Famer Tuffy Leemans, fresh off the George Washington campus, led the NFL with 830 yards. In 1981 (the last "full" season), rookie George Rogers gained 1,674 yards to lead the league. Both played for losing teams. Leemans' Giants were uncharacteristically under .500 at 5-6-1. Rogers' Saints were characteristically 4-12-0.

At first glance, Rogers' 1,674 which is twice Leemans' 830 looks like a clear-cut win for the Saint. If all we had to do was total the yards, we could all go back to watching *All My Children*. I'm going to play around with the figures and "prove" that Leemans was the better runner.

But first here are some ground rules. I won't say Leemans was a better runner because he played defense and Rogers didn't. The rules are different and Rogers didn't make them. Maybe Rogers would be great on defense if they'd let him try. Maybe Leemans would look like a duck trying to cover James Lofton. None of it has anything to do with running the ball.

The same thing applies to Leemans as a passer, kicker, play-caller, or any of the other things backs used to do. Doing other things doesn't make Leemans a better runner. All Caruso could do was sing; I understand he was a lousy pool player. Should I listen to Minnesota Fats sing *Pagliacci*?

I won't say Leemans was better because he blocked better, although I see some relationship between blocking and running. If somebody doesn't do one nobody does the other. But I don't really know that Leemans blocked better. If anyone out there can compare blockers across a 45-year gap, he should be named mystic of the year. At least with running they measure yards; with blocking they measure bruises.

And, I won't say that Tuffy had more "heart." If you want to argue things like that, go read a Harlequin romance.

Let's look at what's measurable:

	GM	ATT	YDS	AVG
Leemans	12	206	830	4.0
Rogers	16	378	1674	4.4

The first check we should try is the "Shapiro," a simple process of projecting Tuffy's figures over a 16-game season.

Leemans	16	275	1107	4.0
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That brings them closer together but the vote is still to Rogers. George's extra 103 rushing attempts are obviously part of the difference. Figuring how to handle them takes a little juggling if I'm going to prove Leemans the top man.

For starters, Leemans played in a backfield with three runners: a tailback, a wingback, and Tuffy at full. The Saints usually set up with only two runners: Rogers and the answer to a trivia question. But, in the New York scheme, the fullback handled 63% of his team's rushes. But, wait a minute! Leemans was on the field for only about two-thirds of each of his team's games. His sub, Kink Richards, was the second-busiest New York runner with 114 attempts. Tuffy himself ran 40.5 of New York's attempts.

So what would have happened had Tuffy handled 69% of his team's rushes? Well, his figures would be:

Leemans	16	468	1872	4.0
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What a season!

Some people might quibble over "real" yards and "projected" yards. Would they let me subtract four real games from Rogers' totals? Would they let me choose the games?

Ya say yer not satisfied? Ya say ya want more for yer money? Tell ya wot I'm gonna do....

I'll prove Leemans had a better season by a different route.

Teams didn't pass as often in Leemans' day. Whereas Rogers' Saints passed 45% of the time, Leemans' Giants threw only 28%. Therefore, opponents could set against the run. The result was that the whole NFL averaged only 3.5 yards per rushing attempt in 1936. In 1981, the NFL averaged 4.0 per attempt. You will note that Rogers outgained the league by .4 per attempt. But Leemans outgained the 1936 NFL by .5! So, every 100 attempts, Tuffy would pick up ten more yards.

Leemans was better!.

For some strange reason my nose has grown so long in the last few minutes that I can now type with the tip.

All right, the truth! As most of you know, anything can be proved with statistics so long as only certain statistics are used. (For my next number I'll prove that Jack Lambert is a better passer than Ken Anderson.)

What this little exercise proves really is that there are too many variables to compare a great star from one era with an equal star of a different era. What about Astroturf? What about indoor stadiums? How often did each play against a headwind? What about bio-rhythms?

Try this: Rogers ran against bigger defenders. But his blockers were also bigger. And so is Rogers. But, if Leemans was 23 today, he'd be bigger too. He'd also be stronger and faster. But that also applies to defenders. And the blockers.

AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAArgh!!!

We can't "if" our way to an answer, but we're left with the imponderable: the difference between a 1936 yard and a 1981 yard is a million miles.

We'll close by rephrasing what we started with: If Tuffy Leemans were running today, he wouldn't be Tuffy Leemans.

But he just might be George Rogers.