

Stat Stuff

By Jack Clary

I say let Bill James and his baseball figure fanatics keep their franchise. Their game lends itself more to the minutiae of statistics than does ours by the very nature of the game itself – man vs. man, or pitcher vs. batter, with the others of a supporting cast which adds or subtracts from the eventual figures.

Football, by its nature, is a team game and the fact that the quarterback is the most prominent person in a game is strictly an accident of the style of play. Ranking passers has come to mean ranking quarterbacks, and that is wrong.

Granted, a pro quarterback must be able to throw the football accurately and be mentally nimble to pick out the correct receivers; physically adept at doing this within three or four seconds; and intelligent enough to correctly avoid the traps set for him by the sophisticated defenses which become better and better each year.

But I do not think it wise to begin entering other factors such as winning and losing records and making them part of a rating system. The nature of the game, in my estimation, precludes one from assessing a “blame” system on any one player and having it reflect in the rankings. Too many things – most of them errors – come into play in most losing games and I believe it is sufficient that everyone share in the blame by having their collective efforts recorded in the Lost column. Let the quarterback be judged simply by his won-lost record over a career, not a season, and allow his passing talents to be judged on the statistics which are recorded for each game.

In saying that, let me also add that I believe the NFL’s current rating system should be changed to reflect the true worth of what a quarterback/passers really attempts to do on the field and be more accurately marked and judged on his team’s philosophy rather than on his own talents.

In particular, I refer to the method of figuring average gain per pass attempt, which is a factor in setting the weekly and year-end rankings. Under the current system, the average is figured by the number of attempts and yards gained.

I always have felt it was more appropriate to figure the number of completions and yards gained, and for the following reasons:

(1) A passer whose offensive philosophy revolves around medium and longer-distance routes will have a harder time running up a good average than one who plays under a “bean bag” philosophy, where the ball is dumped off continually to running backs, or relies on the short hitches to tight ends. These are high percentage throws, all geared for a maximum number of completions and are a part of every passing system. Quarterbacks working under this system will run up impressive completion figures, hence their average per attempt often will be higher than the passer who is always looking downfield for a completion.

(2) At present, there is no way in which a quarterback can be exempted from an incompleting on a dropped pass. It is simply an incompleting and goes against his record, and the receiver is statistically left unscathed. (What his coach does to him is another matter.) If the ranking system was changed to figure the number of completions rather than the number of attempts – and this also would help to cover mistakes by receivers who run incorrect pass routes, who fall down in the open and who are stopped from catching the ball by great defensive plays – then the quarterback would be judged only on what he actually accomplished.

(3) The rankings under this system would truly reflect the passing system of the quarterback’s team and become a better indicator of what he was trying to achieve, hence a better barometer to his true worth as a passer.

Some examples, please:

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In 1983, Steve Bartkowski of Atlanta was ranked as the NFL's top passer. His average gain was 7.33 on 432 attempts and 3167 yards. Among all qualifiers, his yardage figures ranked ninth and his average gain ranked 15th.

Lynn Dickey of the Packers ranked eighth among all NFL passers, yet his average gain was first with 9.21 and so were his yards with 4458. Obviously, Dickey did more on each of his throws than did Bartkowski in this ranking system.

If the rankings were changed to reflect the completions and not the attempts, then some interesting things would result:

Dickey would have a 15.43 average per completion as compared to 11.56 for Bartkowski.

Danny White of the Cowboys, whose 334 completions led the NFL, would have an 11.92 average rather than 7.47.

Dave Krieg of Seattle, who had the fewest completions (147) among the top ten NFL passers, would have a 14.56 average rather than 8.80.

Joe Theismann of Washington, the No. 2 passer, would have a 13.46 average rather than 8.09, but yet lower than both Dickey and Krieg who under the current system were ranked below him.

In short, I say let's find a way of giving credit to the passers who are taking the most risks and still getting the job done. And at the same time, let's do away with the inequities which become unwarranted baggage because of someone else's mistakes. Then, I believe, you really can judge who the best passers are.

Career won-lost records and championships will be the ultimate gauge of who the best quarterbacks are, and should be saved for those days when their careers are ended and valid judgments can be rendered.

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