

# Running Against the Score

By Bob Gill

Not too long ago I was discussing with a friend the likelihood of a running back gaining 100 yards when his team loses. We both agreed that it must be fairly hard to do, considering that a team has to throw more when it's behind. In fact, my buddy wondered whether anyone had ever gained 100 yards or more in a game his team lost by more than a touchdown.

Inspired by the recent *Coffin Corner* article about quarterbacks' passing records in wins and losses, I decided to take a stab at answering the questions we'd posed. I took out my most recent NFL Guide (covering the 1975 season), went through all the regular-season games, and noted each time anyone gained 100 yards on the ground. As it turned out, that happened 81 times in 1975, and 65 times the 100-yard rushers represented the winning team. Conversely, there were only 15 100-yard "losers."

Let me bring up here that oft-cited Tony Dorsett record – you know, the Cowboyos are something like 37-2 when he gains 100 yards. I'd been suspicious that all teams had similar records when their runners reached that plateau; but since the overall percentage seems to be around .800, apparently Dorsett and the Cowboys do have something special there. On the other hand, though, don't forget that the Cowboys win a lot more often than most teams. Shouldn't they also win more often, then, when one of their backs gains 100 yards?

It makes sense to me – sort of.

Anyway, after I'd run that around in my mind a few times, it occurred to me that there was more information available from my samples. So I totaled the attempts and yards from the 65 winning 100-yard games, then did the same for the 16 losing games. The results: the 65 100-yard "winners" averaged 22.7 carries and 125 yards per game, while the 16 "losers" averaged 19 and 117.4

What's the point? Well, that breaks down to a 5.5 average per carry for winning-team rushers, and a 6.2 average for the others. Which indicates, to put it simply, that to gain 100 yards for a losing team, a runner has to average about .7 more per carry than he would if he were on a winner. And that makes perfect sense, since we all know that losing teams tend to run the ball less, so that their backs get less chance to pile up that yardage.

In fact, the difference may be even greater. There were four 100-yard "losers" that year whose teams led nearly all the way, only to be overtaken in the fourth quarter. The backs for those teams actually enjoyed the same benefits we've associated with the winners; so I deleted the totals of those games from the "losers" group. And voila! the revised averages for the losers were 16.7 carries, 117 yards, or a 7.0 average per attempt. The reason was simple: the four runners I'd deleted had all compiled typical "winner" statistics because of the unusual games involved, and removing those numbers caused the significant change.

Conclusions? I'd say that in order to gain 100 yards in a losing effort, a runner needs to average one yard per carry (more or less) better than a comparable runner on a winning team.

But after all, I only covered a small sample for those results – one season. What would we find if the study was extended?

With that thought in mind, I managed to get ahold of the guide covering the 1982 season, and again went through the same process for that strike-shortened year. Since the season was abbreviated, I included playoff games as well. And still the figures were fairly consistent. Teams with 100-yarders won 46 and lost 10, slightly better than 80 percent this time around. 100-yard rushers in winning games averaged 25.4 carries, 127.8 yards, or 5.0 per attempt; in losing games, 20.6 carries, 125 yards, 6.1 average.

Those figures do not include two losing 100-yard efforts I deleted as before, because the losing teams in question led most of the way. But even including those games, the average gain for the "losers" was 5.7,

## **THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 6, Nos. 9 & 10 (1984)**

---

still .7 above the “winners” average – and, it might be pointed out, exactly the same difference as occurred using the raw, unmodified 1975 figures.

Notice, by the way, that in general the average per carry seemed to decline significantly between 1975 and 1982 (about half a yard, at least in 100-yard games), but the relationship between winning and losing averages remained about the same. That suggests that there may indeed be some legitimacy to the figures.

It remains, then, for someone to perform the same calculations for other seasons, to see whether the results remain consistent. I also suggest applying this measure to 1,000-yard seasons – is there a similar break in average gain between runners on winning teams and those with losing seasons? I can assure you that the whole project won't take very long; it involves a lot of basic arithmetic and little else.

One final note: I did discover, contrary to my comrade's theory, and my expectations, that it's not really uncommon for runners to gain 100 yards in losses by more than 10 points. It happened a few times each in 1975 and 1982. In particular, some sort of recognition should go to Mike Adamle of the Chicago Bears, who in 1975 gained 110 yards (17 carries) in a 34-3 loss to Pittsburgh – without the benefit of a long touchdown run, as you might guess. On top of that, his teammate Roland Harper piled up 86 yards (13 carries) in the same game. The Bears outrushed the Steelers 196-157 that day, and still got wiped out, largely because Gary Huff managed to complete only 8 of 22 passes for 46 yards.

Establishing the run is fine, as the figures do tend to show, but if you can't do anything else, you may still find yourself in deep trouble.