THE GREATEST RUNNING BACK

By Raymond Lee

Who is the greatest running back of all time? The question has been asked since professional football began. I decided to tackle this question using computer simulations. Basically in the most simplistic terms imaginable, a football player is supposed to help you win. So, ideally if you took a team of totally average players and replaced their average running back with a superstar like Jim Brown, or O. J. Simpson, any amount of games won over .500 should be due to the X factor -- the superstar who replaced the average player. I decided to have the team play the exact same team in the simulation, in effect play itself, except we would have a superstar runner replace the average player on one of the teams. In theory, if we have two exact teams play each other over a long period of time, their records should be about. .500. So if the one team does **much** better than the other, the difference should be the X factor i.e. the superstar.

After some consideration I picked six backs. They are (1) Steve Van Buren, (2) Jim Brown, (3) Gale Sayers, (4) O. J. Simpson, (5) Walter Payton, and (6) Eric Dickerson. One omission is Tony Dorsett. I had to chose between him and Dickerson; it was very close and you could flip a coin, but I decided to chose Dickerson because of his greater rush average and lifetime rushing yardage total.

In inputing the data, I entered their average totals factored them in for the entire season. I entered the rushing attempts, yardage, pass receptions and reception average. The fumble percentage was also entered and if the back played on special teams, I factored that in also. This probably helped Gale Sayers in his team's W-L record. We are assuming the players are healthy and can play. We are attempting to find out how much a player helps a team **when** he plays.

With no more ado, here is how well they did. In a finish that should surprise no one, Jim Brown finished on top in every category, except pass receptions. We simulated play for ten seasons and only Walter Payton caught more passes than Brown.

In the most important category, which is W-L record, Brown's teams finished 102-50-8 for a percentage of .663. O. J. Simpson's teams finished second with a percentage of .603. Gale Sayers was a surprise with a finish of third with .597. This can be a bit deceptive since in real life Sayers was injured so much. Durability is very important and it is safe to say if you factored in the injuries, Sayers would have finished lower. The great Walter Payton was fourth, Steve Van Buren fifth and Eric Dickerson last.

The statistics say if you had Jim Brown in an average year with an average cast, he would help you win an average 2.6 wins above .500 a year in a 16 games schedule.

With any of these great backs, they figure to have a rush average higher than the average back which should give you much more yardage for the same amount of attempts. However, these backs also figure to get some extra first downs in each game which may continue drives. This gives the team extra passing attempts which obviously gives them more scoring opportunities.

All of these backs in this simulation have rushing averages higher than their lifetime career average with the exception of Brown. That can be expected since the control team has a weaker then average rushing defense.

Unfortunately, my records for fumbles by these great backs were lost. But statistically backs like Dickerson and Sayers should be among leaders in most fumbles lost and backs like Payton and 0. J. Simpson should have among the fewest fumbles. The effect of the passing games seems virtually negligible, yards per pass was virtually identical as was every other statistic considering the amount of passes thrown.

To summarize the most important statistic is winning percentage and Jim Brown winning percentage is +.059 higher than his nearest competitor, the O. J. Simpson. This is made more impressive in that I didn't factor in games lost due to injury in the simulation. If we did miss some games, Brown would even be further ahead because he never missed a game. It is clear that Jim Brown is the greatest back of all time and perhaps the greatest player.

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Advantage in
Rushing Yards
Versus Team                       Winning  Rushing
with Normal Back          W-L-T      %       Yds   Attempts  Average
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+5062  Jim Brown        102-50-8  .663    17638     3457      5.10
          Rec  Yds  Avg
          -------------
          278 2395 8.62  20033 -- Total Yds

+3475  O.J. Simpson      93-60-7  .603    16393     3257      5.03
          Rec  Yds  Avg
          -------------
          232 2207 9.51  18600 -- Total Yds

+1947  Gale Sayers       92-61-7  .597    14858     3068      4.84
          Rec  Yds  Avg
          -------------
          254 2380 9.37  14858 -- Total Yds

+1824  Walter Payton     86-64-10 .568    16644     3439      4.84
          Rec  Yds  Avg
          -------------
          328 2888 8.80  19532 -- Total Yds

+2872  Steve Van Buren   87-68-5  .560    14329     3077      4.66
          Rec  Yds  Avg
          -------------
          179 1730 9.66  16059 -- Total Yds

+2458  Eric Dickerson    82-71-7  .534    16039     3360      4.77
          Rec  Yds  Avg
          -------------
          202 1700 8.42  17238 -- Total Yds

Passing by Teams
with Great Backs                  Normal
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Yds --          170540         176342
Attempts --      26106          27014
Completions --   13792          14156
Yds per pass --  6.533          6.528
Percent --        52.8           52.4
Touchdowns --      982            963
Int. --            994            973
Int percent --     3.8            3.6
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