

THE GREATEST EVER!

By Bob Carroll

John Madden said something pretty funny a couple of weeks ago, and I laughed. But then I realized he was serious. What he said was that Barry Sanders was “the greatest runner of all time.” Maybe he said “greatest ever.” I was yukking too much to get every nuance. But I’m sure he added an *est* on to *great*.

Well, as anyone over the age of 40 (except John Madden) knows, there’s been at least one -- and arguably, several -- greater than Sanders. Not that Barry isn’t one of the best. I don’t think anyone will complain if he goes into the Pro Football Hall of Fame the first year he’s eligible. But the greatest? Get real!

Even this season, when Sanders is having a career year, some coaches might prefer having Terrell Davis or Jerome Bettis in their backfield. A couple of years ago, I’m sure a lot of them would have preferred Emmitt Smith. Neither Davis, Bettis, nor Smith can dodge or weave with Sanders, and I think he might win a straightaway dash too. But what they can do better than the Lion star is keep drives going. They are big and burly, and when they cradle a football in their well-muscled arms you can be reasonably certain they will gain some yards -- on average, nearly five.

Sanders may go seven to a dozen downs mixing three-yard gains with three-yard losses. That means that three or four Lions’ drives could go three-and-out. So, you say, on the fifth drive, he goes 65 yards for a touchdown. What’s the big deal?

The big deal is that all yards are not created equal. When you get them, where you get them, and how reliably you get them during the course of a game makes a huge difference. Davis and Bettis don’t have to gain more yards than Sanders to be more valuable because they gain more valuable yards.

The big deal is that we should recognize the potential points lost by Detroit on those stalled drives where Barry gains two yards on three attempts. That doesn’t happen all the time, of course, anymore than Davis and Bettis always keep drives going. But if you start at your 25 with a competitive quarterback and Terrell Davis in your backfield, you are more likely to negotiate 75 yards or a large part of it than than you are if you have Sanders in the situation. Betting on which one might collect all 75 in one fell swoop is a very different matter.

What really hurts is the potential points the Lions’ opponents get because they tend to to start with better field position. And we might also toss in a little sympathy for the Lions’ defense which gets precious little time to catch its breath. By the fourth quarter, that can make a heck of a difference. Last year, the Lions’ time of possession averaged almost six minutes less than their opponents’ time with the ball.

Even Sanders’ strength -- his wondrous ability to go all the way -- works against the Lions because it puts their defense back on the field quickly. I’m sure the Lions’ defense is happy to see the Detroit touchdown, but I’ll bet in their hearts they would have preferred it came after a seven-minute drive.

Of course, it’s hard to argue against Sanders as the best when he has one of those games where he scores four touchdowns with a couple of them coming on whirling, twirling, impossible runs. He is capable of magnificent games. But the Lions seldom finish over .500 for the season.

Wait a minute, you say, don’t put all that on Sanders. Football is a team game. There are forty-something other Detroit players contributing to a losing season. True enough. Barry has not always had the best or healthiest offensive line, and he’s never had John Elway as his quarterback.

It would be interesting for Sanders and Davis to switch teams for a season. Sanders might gain more yards and Davis might gain fewer. Or, Mike Strahan might decide that he wanted a bigger, more reliable ground-gainer in there most of the time and spot Sanders’ appearances. And Davis might keep right on chuggin’. Let’s not go too far into speculation.

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Besides, it's too early in his career to begin touting Terrell Davis as "the greatest ever." You probably won't hear that until 2003. But John Madden and a few others expect to be taken seriously when they suggest that Sanders fits that profile.

Personally, I'd take Walter Payton, Gale Sayers, Earl Campbell, Steve Van Buren, or Bronko Nagurski, if all other factors were equal. There are a couple of others who I might think hard about. But let's not waste any more time. We'll go right to the top.

THE VERY BEST-EST

Jim Brown was the greatest runner ever.

Period.

That is so obvious to anyone who ever saw him play a number of games that one can be taken aback when asked to prove it. It's like someone said, "Prove the sky is blue."

Frankly, I don't know how to prove the sky is even up there, but I think I can make a good case for Jim Brown.

Actually, I'm sure I can make a better case than Brown himself. Jim steadfastly refuses to compare different running backs from different eras, arguing that each one is unique. He's right. Not only does each runner bring his own strengths to the field, but game situations may favor one runner over another.

The runner you'd most like to have in your backfield if you're two touchdowns behind at the beginning of the fourth quarter is probably very different from the one you'd want if you were leading by one with three minutes left.

Nevertheless, the gauntlet was slammed down when Madden made that "greatest" comment. Somebody has to say something!

Let me start by getting a quibble out of the way. The only knock on Brown you ever hear is that he didn't block much. Like hardly ever. Of course, he wasn't hired to block and was usually sent out in the flat as a receiver on pass plays anyway, but if you're going to rate running backs on their blocking, you can give the crown to John Henry Johnson and go home. We're talking running here. Not blocking. Not pass receiving. Not deportment in the huddle. Running!

Sanders doesn't do much blocking either. Nor should he. Imagine, "Wow! Sanders threw his whole body into blocking that 300-pounder so Whosis could gain an extra yard. Wait a minute! Is that Sanders who's not getting up?"

So limiting ourselves to running only, let's look at the numbers.

THE NUMBERS

As of this writing (after the final 1997 regular season game), Sanders has 2,719 career rushing attempts, 13,778 yards, a 5.1 average, and 95 touchdowns. Jim Brown had 2,359 attempts, 12,312 yards, a 5.2 average, and 106 TDs. Brown played nine seasons. Sanders is in his ninth.

But what we're not mentioning is how many games they played. Remember, Brown played four twelve-game seasons and five fourteen game seasons. All Sanders' seasons have been 16-gamers. He missed seven games, and Brown never missed one. With the games played, we can look at their per game statistics.

	<u>Gm</u>	<u>ATT</u>	<u>YDS</u>	<u>TD</u>
Brown	118	20.0	104.3	.89
Sanders	137	19.8	100.6	.69

It's not a BIG difference, but Brown wins on every count.

THE SIZES

The Sanders people always whine that the defenders are bigger today than they were in Brown's day. True, but so what? Wake up, people! It's not the size difference between the runner and the defensive line and linebackers. The difference that matters is the size between the offensive line and the defenders.

Let's look at that.

In 1964, when Jim Brown's team won the NFL Championship, his offensive linemen averaged 252 pounds. The Baltimore Colts, the team Cleveland defeated in the title game, had defensive linemen averaging 248.5 pounds and linebackers at 229.2. The Browns had three and a half pounds on the Colts' D-line and 22.8 pounds on the linebackers.

In 1994, when Sanders had his best season until this one, his offensive line averaged 288 pounds. San Francisco's Super Bowl winners averaged 267.5 pounds across their defensive line and 236.5 in their linebacking corps. Hmm. That gives Detroit a 20.5 weight advantage against the 49ers' line and a whopping 51.5 on the linebackers.

The size difference between the back and the defenders does make a difference as far as injuries are concerned but no big difference in the total yardage either Sanders or Brown could get. Sanders doesn't run over people the way Brown used to; he slip-slides-squirms past them. It comes out to the same thing. And injuries don't figure in the mix, Sanders, by missing only seven games in nine years, is remarkable. Brown's perfect attendance is other-worldly.

For what its worth, Sanders is no midgit. He weighs over 200 pounds. Brown usually went 235 which made him bigger than the average linebacker. Sure, it was an advantage. It's part of what made Brown the greatest. His size helped him get the tough yards, just as Bettis' size helps him today. Davis is a little bigger than Sanders. He gets tough yards too. Sanders doesn't get as many of the tough yards as Davis, though he certainly gets some. Sanders gains most of his yards with defensive backs chasing him from behind. Brown, Davis, Bettis, and Smith gained most of theirs with defenders still in front of them.

Sanders dodges around people better than anybody. Jim might not run over as many today, but he'd run over some. One-on-one with most of today's linebackers, my money's on Jim. Against defensive backs, it'd be no contest. I don't think Sanders would run around more people if he was playing thirty years ago. In fact, there are reasons he might dodge past fewer.

THE REASONS

First of all, Sanders plays on a more "runner-friendly" field today than Brown did. The hash marks have been moved in toward the center of the field. Sanders is never limited by a "short side" when he runs wide. Brown often was.

Even more important, Sanders plays most of his games on an artificial carpet. So long as a runner doesn't tear up a knee or bleed to death from a rug burn, fake grass gives him an advantage in making sharp cuts, the very thing that Sanders excels at. Brown had to contend with good old slippery, oops-there's-a-soft-spot, cow-dinner grass.

And, remember, Barry also plays more than half his games indoors. No slippy wet spots!

Ah, but Barry has an even bigger advantage -- one that dates back to the late 1970s when the rulemakers decided to make the game more air-dominated. They let the blockers extend their arms and use their hands. Brown's blockers had to get a shoulder into an opponent. And then the rulemakers, in their infinite wisdom, outlawed the bump-and-run, making the average game's most significant play a long pass interference. The net result was that defenses today, with a few exceptions, have to play the pass first and the run second.

But that's only part of it. Because of the emphasis on passing, teams used fewer hitters in their defensive backfield and began employing smaller, quicker "cover men." Besides speed and size, many of them had, and still have, something else in common -- they couldn't tackle worth a damn.

If anyone out there wants to tell me that today's players, particularly defensive backs, tackle better than the guys did thirty years ago, I'll call the fellows in the white coats and tell them to bring their net. For every blast laid on a receiver when he's unprotected over the middle, there are a dozen half-hearted arm tackles in the secondary.

SUMMING UP

Barry Sanders may be the greatest breakaway runner since Red Grange faced Michigan.

Bronko Nagurski may have been the best line smasher since the invention of the tank.

But Jim Brown was the greatest line-smashing, breakaway runner since ever.

It's a natural thing for people to compare the players they've seen with the ones they weren't born soon enough to see and then come down in favor of the ones they've seen. In Pittsburgh, it's a commonplace that Roberto Clemente was "the greatest player the Pirates ever had."

Like Honus Wagner played for the Yankees?

I can certainly forgive some kid just getting over acne for bestowing the title "Greatest Ever" on Barry Sanders. He doesn't understand that 130 yards from Jim Brown would put more points on the board than 130 yards by Barry Sanders. Reason: Brown's 130 would keep five or ten drives going until Cleveland had a touchdown or field goal. Barry's 130 would come mostly on a couple of long runs while he contributed little on the other Lions' possessions.

Our kid doesn't see the differences between 1960 and 1997 (except to be certain that people were dumber then). I'll forgive his ignorance.

But John Madden? Shame!