

**LITTLE KNOWN AND LITTLE UNDERSTOOD FACTS ABOUT
THE NFL RUSHING RECORDS FOR RUNNING BACKS**

by Brian D. Marshall

A question that has been asked many times is, Who's the best running back to ever play in the NFL? The fact that the literature record is complete with many papers over the years that have asked that very question and have attempted to compare various running backs is proof that authors have tried to answer the question. This author has considered this question many times and has even gone so far as to try and devise a truly unbiased scheme where running backs may be evaluated but has found it difficult to do so without considering many parameters. The scheme that this author has developed is the topic for another discussion and is not the main topic of discussion for this paper.

The NFL record book deals strictly with the magnitude of a performance and does not make any attempt to establish the quality of one performance with respect to another. As a student of the game of football, with a soft spot for the running back position, this author has studied the performances of running backs and in particular the career of Jim Brown has been studied in considerable depth. Since Jim Brown retired after the 1965 season no other running back has dominated the position like Jim Brown did and in so doing literally rewrote the NFL record book. The legacy of Jim Brown lives on to this day and it is his career performance, made possible by a unique blend of speed, balance, size and power, that represents the yardstick by which all running backs are measured against. To this day no other running back has been able to do what Jim Brown did in the way that he did it.

Jim Brown is the only running back in the history of the NFL that can boast career numbers for the three benchmarks most commonly associated with the performance of a running back, those being; 5 yards per carry, 100 yards per game and a 1,000 yards per season. Jim Brown managed to establish the following career numbers; 5.22 rushing yards per carry, 104.34 rushing yards per game and 1,368.00 rushing yards per season. The NFL record book does not recognize yards per game or yards per season but it does recognize the number of 100 yard games, the number of 1,000 yard seasons and the yards per carry. As matter of fact, the career yards per season value for the nine season career of Jim Brown is somewhat misleading since four were twelve game seasons and five were fourteen game seasons, Mr. Brown averaged 1,263.75 and 1,1451.40 yards per season respectively. By comparison and as a point of reference, Walter Payton had a career 4.36 rushing yards per carry, 88.03 rushing yards per game and 1,286.62 rushing yards per season average.

It is a well known fact that Walter Payton holds the single game rushing yardage record of 275 yards, on 40 carries, but it is not well known that until last season Jim Brown held the single game rushing yardage record for a rookie of 237 yards on 31 carries. At the time, November 1957, the 237 yards was also the NFL single game rushing yardage record. Until last season, the best rooke performance, next to that of Jim Brown, is 223 yards by Tom Wilson in 1956 which, by the way, was the former NFL single game rushing yardage record and also the rookie single game rushing yardage record.

In the game today, with sixteen game seasons, a 1,000 yard rushing season by a running back does not mean as much as it once did, especially since twelve game seasons were the norm from 1947 to 1960. Prior to 1957, when Jim Brown came into the league, there had only been seven 1,000 rushing performances and only Steve Van Buren and Joe Perry had rushed for 1,000 yards twice each during that period. Just to put the period in NFL history and the accomplishment of rushing for 1,000 yards in a season into perspective, Jim Brown is the only running back in NFL history to rush for 1,000 yards three times in a twelve game season. To put icing on the cake, the three seasons were consecutive seasons (1958, 1959 and 1960), Jim Brown led the NFL in rushing all three seasons and oh, by the way, the 1958 season was the season that Mr. Brown broke the single season rushing yardage record set by Steve Van Buren in 1949. In fact, only two running backs in the history of the NFL have set the single season rushing yardage record twice during their careers. Those two running backs are Steve Van Buren, who set the single season rushing yardage record in 1947 (1,008 yards) and again in 1949 (1,146 yards), and Jim Brown, who set the single season rushing yardage record in 1958 (1,527 yards) and again in 1963 (1,863

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 20, No. 1 (1998)

yards). The NFL record book lists all the 1,000 yard rushing performances recorded in a season and who recorded them, but the NFL record book does not mention anything about the fastest to a 1,000 yards and who performed the feat. The interest in the fastest to 1,000 yards statistic is that it has only been accomplished three times by two different running backs. The record for the fastest to 1,000 rushing yards for the season is seven games and it was first accomplished by Jim Brown who managed to rush for 1,011 yards, on 152 carries, in the first seven games of the 1958. O.J. Simpson accomplished the feat twice, first in 1973 when he recorded 1,025 yards on 177 carries, and again in 1975 when he recorded 1,005 yards on 192 carries.

An interesting fact about the NFL record book is that it does not mention the single game rushing yardage high for each season or the number of times a running back led the league in the number of 100 yard rushing games in a season. Jim Brown led the NFL with the most 100 yard rushing games in eight of the nine seasons he played and Mr. Brown also managed to record the single game rushing yardage high in four of the nine seasons that he played. A little known fact is that Jim Brown, in 1963, and O.J. Simpson, in 1975, are the only running backs in NFL history to lead the NFL in all seven major rushing categories for a single season, those categories are; 1) rushing yardage, 2) rushing carries, 3) yards per carry, 4) rushing touchdowns, 5) longest run from scrimmage, 6) number of 100 yard games and 7) single game rushing yardage.

Today, as the pages of the NFL record book are perused it becomes very evident that many of the NFL records that Jim Brown set have been surpassed, from a magnitude point of view, but his performances have not been improved upon. For example, O.J. Simpson rushed for 2,003 yards on 332 carries in 1973 to break the single season record of 1,863 yards on 291 carries set in 1963 by Jim Brown. Both the 1963 and the 1973 seasons were fourteen game seasons but by the end of the thirteenth game O.J. Simpson had carried the ball 298 times for 1,803 yards, which was seven carries more than Jim Brown had carried the ball in all fourteen games during the 1963 season and for sixty less yards. The real question that has to be asked is, How many yards could Jim Brown have rushed for had he carried the ball 332 times in 1963? Another example for consideration is the fact that during the 1989 season Eric Dickerson managed to record his 58th 100 yard rushing game in 104 career games played which to that point in his career, Eric had rushed for 11,172 yards on 2,434 carries. Jim Brown had set the NFL standard for the most 100 yard rushing games in a career with 58 and recorded his 58th career 100 yard rushing game in the 116th game of his career. After the 116th game, Jim Brown had rushed for 12,218 yards on 2,334 carries to that point in his career. To put into perspective the career accomplishment of rushing for 100 yards 58 times in 118 career regular season games, keep in mind that prior to the 1957 season the NFL record for career 100 yard rushing games was 18 and was set by Steve Van Buren during his eight season career from 1944 to 1951.

The NFL record book has, over the years, provided a means for the past to slowly be forgotten by considering only the magnitude of a performance and treating all performances on an equal basis irrespective of the number of carries or the number of games in a season or a career. This author is of the opinion that the performances of the past may be more fairly equated to the performances of today, if the NFL also included separate statistical records for twelve, fourteen and sixteen game season performances in addition to the overall records that the NFL presently publishes. The net effect will be a greatly expanded record book which will be more meaningful to readers in this, the information age.

The author welcomes any comments that readers may have and invites readers to send them to the author at 9002 Sheridan Road, Lot #180, Kenosha, WI 53143.

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