

**FOOTBALL PLAYERS ARE BETTER THAN EVER,  
RIGHT?**

By David Shapiro, PhD

It certainly sounds like it every Sunday afternoon and evening, every Monday night, and on occasional Thursday nights from July to January, as sportscasters, their color men, and their statisticians hype the big-money game with paeans about new records, near-records, threatened records, superstars, and superseasons.

Not only does it give the hard-pressed broadcast crew something to talk about during lulls in the game, which is at least two-thirds of the time, but it also makes the pro game sound bigger, better, more exciting, and more entertaining. That's a major factor when you consider that television time on pro games is among the most expensive advertising buys in the business and that time on the Super Bowl broadcast is the most expensive -- \$468,000 a minute this year on Super Bowl XIV.

One of their favorite ways to compare players is by season performances -- the number of carries, yards gained, touchdowns scores, and so forth by a player (or team, for that matter) over an entire season.

To hear the TV jocks tell it, it seems like Jim Brown set season rushing records, then O. J. Simpson broke them, then Walter Payton came along to break them, and now Earl Campbell sets new ones for Ottis Anderson to shoot at after Anderson's own record-breaking year, and so on.

Is there no end to this record-breaking?

No.

And there won't be any end to it because of the way season performance records are kept, published and hyped by the NFL and its supporters in the media and in the advertising time-sales business.

Because, either by design or by oversight, they are dealing from a stacked deck when they talk about season records.

The truth is that season records are incorrectly kept and that many great football players (and teams) have seen their names dropped from the record books unfairly for nearly forty years because of it.

Since 1936, the first year in which all NFL teams played the same number of games per season, the season was varied in length from:

12 games in 1936 to  
11 games in 1937 to  
10 games in 1943 to  
11 games in 1946 to  
12 games in 1947 to  
14 games in 1961 to  
16 games in 1978.

But the NFL's official measurement of season performance has never been corrected for the different number of games in the seasons being compared. This is no different than

## THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 2, No. 10 (1980)

---

keeping track records without regard to whether the distances run are measured in feet, yards, or meters.

Pro football records are officially compiled by the NFL Public Relations Department, meticulously kept on computers by Elias Sports Bureau, Inc. (this is the same kind of meticulousness as measuring for a first down to a fraction of an inch after the ball's forwardmost position is eyeballed by officials while the pigskin is being buried in a morass of 10-15 very large bodies), and published by NFI Properties, Inc. Everyone, even the prestigious Pro Football Hall of Fame in Canton, Ohio, buys them, reads them, believes them, and uses them.

As a result, everyone using Elias/NFL seasonal statistics is using data that can best be described as "no-think".

When you deal from the Elias/NFL stacked deck and look at 25 major categories of season records (both individual and team), it appears that football players are indeed better than ever. Of these 25 standards, Elias/NFL would have you believe that:

2 were set in the 40's,  
2 in the 50's,  
14 in the 60's, and  
7 in the 70's, 6 during the last three seasons.

But they're wrong and anyone with a \$2.50 NFL Record Manual and a \$4.98 pocket calculator can prove it.

To get the real season statistics, you must first correct for the number of games in the seasons you're looking at, compared to a 16-game season.

If it was a 10-game season, you have to add 60% to get a true comparison. If it was an 11-game season, add 45.46%. If it was 12, add 33.33% and for 14 add 14.29%.

The results are startling and should be welcome to all those old pros who think they've been forgotten. Applying these formulas to the same 25 season records, we find that, in reality:

9 were set in the 40's,  
5 in the 50's,  
9 in the 60's, and  
only 2 in the 70's, 1 in '73 and 1 in '79!

At least in baseball, they have the class to insert a polite asterisk when they hit an anomaly like that, to wit:

\*60 home runs, Babe Ruth, New York Yankees, 1927 (154-game season)  
\*\*61 home runs, Roger Maris, New York Yankees, 1961 (162-game season)

Baseball's record-keepers at least give you a chance to reflect on the fact that, given his pace of about one home run in every two and one-half games, Ruth would probably have hit 63 out of the park in a 162-game season. If he had had 246 games in which to bat -- the same as going from 10 games to 16 games in football -- it is reasonable to assume that the Babe would have produced 96 roundtrippers in a single season. Who says that the number of games you play in a season isn't important?

However, in pro football, you either use the Elias/NFL deck or you don't sit in.

Let's look at some of those new/old season records. For clarity, I have labeled the official records as "\_\_\_NFL". The figures corrected for the 16-game season, I have modestly

## **THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 2, No. 10 (1980)**

---

---

labeled as "\_\_\_Shapiro". What the hell, Volta, Watt and all those guys named their units of measurement after themselves, didn't they? Why not Shapiro?

Individual records first. [Note: as of 1980 season]

### Rushing Attempts

Official record: Earl Campbell, 1979 Houston Oilers, 368 NFL  
Real record: Jim Brown, 1959 Cleveland Browns, 290 NFL (387 Shapiro)  
Walter Payton, 1977 Chicago Bears, 339 NFL (387 Shapiro)

### Touchdowns Rushing

Official record: Jim Taylor, 1962 Green Bay Packers, 19 NFL (22 Shapiro)  
Earl Campbell, 1979 Houston Oilers, 19 NFL  
Real record: Steve Van Buren, 1945 Philadelphia Eagles, 15 NFL (24 Shapiro)

### Passing Attempts

Official record: Steve DeBerg, 1979 San Francisco 49ers, 577 NFL  
Real record: Sonny Jurgensen, 1967 Wash. Redskins, 508 NFL (581 Shapiro)

### Passing Yards

Official record: Dan Fouts, 1979 San Diego Chargers, 4,082 NFL  
Real record: Joe Namath, 1967 New York Jets, 4,007 NFL (4,579 Shapiro)

### Touchdown Passes

Official record: George Blanda, 1961 Houston Oilers, 36 NFL (41 Shapiro)  
Y.A. Tittle, 1963 New York Giants 36 NFL (41 Shapiro)  
Real record: Sid Luckman, 1943 Chicago Bears, 28 NFL (45 Shapiro)

### Total Touchdowns

Official record: O. J. Simpson, 1975 Buffalo Bills, 23 NFL (26 Shapiro)  
Real record: Steve Van Buren, 1945 Philadelphia Eagles, 18 NFL (29 Shapiro)

Recasting team data is also most fruitful.

### Rushing Attempts

Official record: 1977 Oakland Raiders, 681 NFL (778 Shapiro)  
Real record: 1949 Philadelphia Eagles, 632 NFL (843)

### Rushing Yardage

Official record: 1978 New England Patriots, 3,165 NFL  
Real record: 1948 San Francisco 49ers, 3,663 AAFC (4,186 Shapiro)

If the purists balk at this one because the 1948 49ers played in the AAFC, no problem. Just substitute any one of eleven other teams that had total rushing yardage in a single season in excess of 3,165 Shapiro -- say, the 1936 Detroit Lions with 3,844 Shapiro.

### Touchdowns Rushing

Official record: 1962 Green Bay Packers, 36 NFL (41 Shapiro)  
Real record: 1941 Chicago Bears, 30 NFL (44 Shapiro)

### Total Touchdowns

Official record: 1961 Houston Oilers, 66 NFL (75 Shapiro)  
Real record: 1950 Los Angeles Rams, 64 NFL (85 Shapiro)

### Total Points

Official record: 1961 Houston Oilers, 513 NFL (586 Shapiro)  
Real record: 1950 Los Angeles Rams, 466 NFL (621 Shapiro)

## THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 2, No. 10 (1980)

---

---

### Pass Interceptions

Official record: 1961 San Diego Chargers, 49 NFL (56 Shapiro)

Real record: 1943 Green Bay Packers, 42 NFL (67 Shapiro)

There you are, 12 "new" NFL season records, courtesy of logic and a pocket calculator, and 7 of them unbroken since the 40's, buried all these years by the strange statistical methods of Elias/NFL and perpetuated by a shallow sports philosophy that doesn't bother to look beyond what it says in this year's Official Record Manual.

Even some of the existing record performances take on a new luster when you convert them by the same formula.

Paul Hornung's 176-point record for the 12-game 1960 season becomes 235 points.

Dick "Night Train" Lane's 14 interceptions in the 12-game 1952 season becomes 19 interceptions.

Charlie Hennigan's 1,746 yards gained on pass receptions in the 14-game 1961 season goes up to nearly 2,000 yards. His 101 catches in 1964 become 115.

O.J. Simpson's 1973 standard of 2,003 yards gained rushing becomes 2,279 yards.

Don Hutson's 1942 mark of 17 pass-reception TD's becomes 25 TD's.

Some old familiar names deservedly come back out of the past when you look at their performances in terms of true comparisons.

And when you remember that the pre-1950 stars played on both offense and defense, their records become even more impressive.

Now what about the greatest season ever played by a professional footballer, setting aside for the moment the philosophical truth that there is never a greatest anything? Did it take place in the 70's now that the pro players are better than ever?

There have been many outstanding season-length performances in the past five decades or so, anyone of which could justifiably be advanced as the greatest. Go over the last page or so and you'll find more than enough likely candidates.

But all things considered, I have to go back about thirty-five years and opt for Bill Dudley's all-around play in 1946 for the Pittsburgh Steelers as the most remarkable individual season-length performance ever in the NFL.

His stats for that year are stunning!

During the eleven scheduled games, Bill Dudley had (converted to 16-game seasonal equivalents):

\*212 rushing attempts, first in the NFL

\*879 yards rushing, first in the NFL

\*47 pass completions in 131 attempts for 657 yards and 3 TD's

\*6 pass receptions for 159 yards and 1 TD

\*15 pass interceptions, first in the NFL

\*352 yards on pass interceptions, first in the NFL

\*39 punt returns, first in the NFL

\*560 yards gained on punt returns, first in the NFL

\*14.26 yard average on punt returns, first in the NFL

\*20 kickoff returns for 407 yards and an average of 20 yards per return

## THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 2, No. 10 (1980)

---

- \*87 punts for a 40-yard average
- \*17 extra points in 20 attempts
- \*3 field goals in 10 attempts

Mr. Dudley did virtually all the Steelers' punting, punt returning, kickoff returning, extra-point and field goal kicking, and pass intercepting as well as a preponderant majority of his team's rushing and passing, leading the league in 7 categories while doing so.

One wonders where even the articulate Howard Cosell would find the superlatives necessary to describe such a season were Dudley playing today. After all, with "great", "remarkable", "extraordinary", "fantastic", "super", and so on used so loosely these days by our sports media brethren to cover just about anything that takes place on the gridiron, what's left to describe performances of Dudley's caliber?

One final note for those who are prone to accept the opinion that football players are better than ever today because they are bigger, faster, and stronger.

In 1946, Bill Dudley stood 5'-10" tall and weighed 172 pounds.

Of course, if you consider that 1946 was an 11-game season and convert Dudley's measurements into Shapiros by adding 45.46%, he comes out to be 8'-6" tall and weighing 250 pounds. I guess that proves that players do get better as they get bigger, right?