

Life of a Stud Running Back

by Mike Herman, exclusive to Footballguys.com

Study Questions

What does the career path of a fantasy football stud running back look like? When does studliness begin, and when does it end? Are there any not-so-stud-like gaps in the middle? The same types of questions surface every year about the current batch of top fantasy players. A wide variety of factors will determine the answer for each individual player. What follows is a graphic comparison of numerous studs' careers, in hopes of finding any trends or parallels.

What exactly is a fantasy stud running back? That question could have numerous answers, and could be an entire article in and of itself. For the purpose of this study, I started by looking at all players who had at least one year end fantasy rank in the top five, going back to 1980. To make the final cut, they had to have an additional top five finish, or the top five plus two top ten finishes. Some quality players probably missed the cut. Some two-year-wonders that may not belong probably made the list, however a player coming off of two strong years will be a candidate for a top pick in fantasy drafts, and thus worth studying.

Table of Studs

The table starting on the following page indicates the results for running backs, showing the fantasy rank for each year of their NFL career. Top five finishes are highlighted in yellow and top tens finishes in green. Active players and their upcoming year (2009) are shown in blue. Players with significant legal issues are highlighted in red.

The 34 players listed on the next page begins with early starters and continues through late bloomers, so that players with similar career paths are grouped together. The group of nine players on the subsequent page is the super-stud lifetime achievers. My apologies to any of the players (or their fans) that just missed the arbitrary cut.

Studs: Then and Now



During his nine year NFL career from 1957 to 1965, **Jim Brown** led the league in rushing yards eight years and rushing TDs five years. He still owns the record for average rushing yards per game.



Matt Brown / Icon SMI

During his eight years in the NFL so far, **LaDainian Tomlinson** has led the league in rushing yards twice and rushing TDs three times. In the fantasy era, he is the only RB to rank in the top ten every year of his career.

Name	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
Peterson, Adrian	3	3														
Simms, Billy	1	1	10	15	25											
Cribbs, Joe	3	10	17	7	61	27	66	131								
Bettis, Jerome	2	13	41	7	4	20	16	19	21	31	26	18	36			
Taylor, Fred	4	28	6	103	11	8	20	33	18	18	55					
Warner, Curt	4	131	17	3	4	10	33	101								
George, Eddie	8	12	11	3	3	19	10	22	41							
Portis, Clinton	4	5	11	6	36	4	8									
Martin, Curtis	2	4	14	7	8	10	18	18	4	29						
James, Edgerrin	1	2	32	24	10	6	5	20	10	52						
Campbell, Earl	2	1	2	12	25	8	55	52								
Anderson, Ottis	4	5	9	21	10	6	45	69	153	51	6	16	88	117		
Allen, Marcus	1	6	3	1	17	10	15	60	13	60	46	5	19	24	15	27
Walker, Herschel	4	2	3	11	14	8	10	12	21	67	91	86				
Davis, Terrell	12	2	2	1	77	58	46									
Allen, Terry	43	4	11	7	1	29	31	17	71	38						
Andrews, William	21	8	2	3	2	97										
Alexander, Shaun	54	4	5	6	1	1	28	35	133							
Johnson, Larry	104	26	2	2	40	28										
Anderson, Jamal	146	87	10	10	2	120	22	65								
Williams, Ricky	27	18	8	2	9	R	27									
Riggs, Gerald	26	42	5	5	8	20	52	26	41	37						
Green, Ahman	82	113	5	3	13	3	13	69	15	62	65					
Anderson, Neal	100	11	5	3	3	7	13	29								
Westbrook, Brian	70	20	10	18	6	2	10									
Craig, Roger	16	11	2	11	7	2	10	48	44	41	70					
Muncie, Chuck	31	14	30	8	20	3	5	11	120							
Byner, Earnest	60	11	41	6	22	13	4	6	12	72	64	27	27	67		
Morris, Joe	91	101	44	3	2	32	18	64								
Warren, Chris	115	131	17	13	3	4	18	23	45	41	38					
Holmes, Priest	157	15	44	34	2	2	1	12	32		99					
Tyler, Wendell	69	133	12	126	5	2	24	9	27	116						
Riggins, John	25	14	37	15	5	35	79	16	11	21	27	3	7	38		
Barber, Tiki	34	44	32	13	15	7	15	2	4	7						

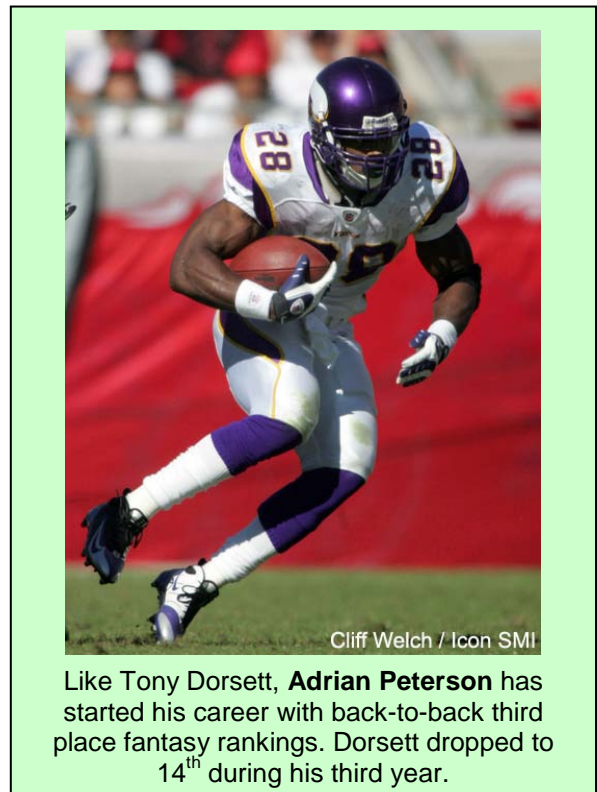
Name	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
Thomas, Thurman	29	2	2	2	2	3	7	17	11	40	40	88	69			
Dickerson, Eric	1	2	10	1	3	1	9	32	33	32	103					
Faulk, Marshall	4	6	17	7	3	2	1	1	14	16	29	53				
Dorsett, Tony	3	3	14	7	8	9	9	8	6	25	45	31				
Tomlinson, LaDainian	7	3	3	3	3	1	1	7								
Watters, Ricky	8	4	6	5	3	9	9	9	8	60						
Smith, Emmitt	7	3	1	1	1	1	6	18	6	5	20	25	26	64	23	
Sanders, Barry	4	1	1	7	16	2	3	5	1	10						
Payton, Walter	17	2	1	1	2	4	13	16	5	4	4	5	27			

Assorted observations and thoughts based on the running back “picture” above:

- Who’s not on the list? Thirty players had a top five finish, but didn’t make the cut. The first nine on this list are still active, so they still have a chance to join.

Jamal Lewis	George Rogers	Dalton Hilliard	Dorsey Levens
Matt Forte	Napoleon Kaufman	Christian Okoye	Garrison Hearst
Thomas Jones	Natrone Means	Greg Bell	Derrick Fenner
Willie Parker	Barry Foster	Charles White	Robert Delpino
Stephen Jackson	Lorenzo White	Albert Bentley	Freeman McNeil
Frank Gore	Stephen Davis	Rodney Hampton	James Wilder
DeAngelo Williams	Dominic Davis	Mike Anderson	Tiki Barber
Michael Turner			
Joseph Addai			

- Joe Morris and Chris Warren were the only two-year wonders. Both did so in back-to-back years in the middle of their career.
- Adrian Peterson could join Morris and Warren, if he never has another top ten finish. History suggests however that he will succeed again. Like Peterson, ten other running backs finished in the top five each of their first two years. Three of them remained in the top five during their third year. Three dropped down to the six to ten range. Four dropped out of the top ten in their third year, but returned in their fourth or fifth year.
- Larry Johnson is better positioned to join Morris and Warren as a two-year wonder.
- The most common number of top ten finishes is three years (13 out of the 34 that are done playing). Second place is four years (7 out of 34).



6. The most top ten finishes: Emmitt Smith, Walter Payton, Barry Sanders, and Ricky Watters all have nine. The closest active player is LaDainian Tomlinson who is not far behind with eight.
7. Many of the players took a break from the top 10 and then returned (21 out of the 34 that are done playing).
8. The most common slump year for early starters is the third year. Seven of the eight returned to the top 10 in their fourth year (Edgerrin James being the exception).
9. Many running backs disappear from the top ten in their seventh or eighth season. Larry Johnson is entering his seventh year. Clinton Portis and Brian Westbrook are entering their eighth year.
10. The late-bloomers did not have sustained success, i.e. more than three top ten finishes, except for Tiki Barber who had four.
11. All the lifetime achievers hit the top ten in either their first or their second year.
12. Only three players returned to the top ten late in their careers. Ottis Anderson did so after a four year absence, Marcus Allen after five years, and John Riggins after six years. Fred Taylor and Ahman Green (if he lands a job) are hoping to overcome the odds and join that list this year.
13. Any review of lifetime achievement usually concludes with imagining what could have been if Barry Sanders hadn't retired early?



Aaron M. Sprecher / Icon SMI

Clinton Portis contemplates the lack of top ten finishes by prior stud running backs in their eighth seasons.

Other Life of a Stud articles:

[Quarterbacks](#)

Wide Receivers: coming soon

Tight Ends: coming soon

