

Matt Forte Face-off

In a Footballguys.com Face-off, two writers provide an in-depth look at a player by examining either his high side or his low side. Whose argument is stronger? That is left up to you. For dozens more Face-offs, visit Footballguys.com.

The High Side

by Jeff Haseley

Last year, Matt Forte took the league by storm gaining 1715 total yards with 12 total TDs. He was the first rookie RB to eclipse 300 carries since LaDainian Tomlinson turned the trick in 2001. Forte finished seventh in rushing yards, despite the Bears as a team finishing 24th in the same category. That statistic emphasizes the fact that Forte was the featured back and it wasn't even close. In fact, he had 282 more carries than the next closest Bears RB (Kevin Jones). Wrap your brain around that. There is no doubt who the feature back is in Chicago and from a fantasy standpoint, having a RB with that distinction is hard to find in the multi-back era.

Will Matt Forte exceed expectations in 2009? Considering he exceeded nearly all expectations last year, he's not sneaking up on anyone this time around. Forte will be drafted as a RB1 this year – that much we know. In order for him to be a success at that draft spot, he'll have to at least match what he did last year.

There are two factors to consider when looking ahead to the Bears 2009 season and how it affects Matt Forte's chances of success. Both involve the trade acquisition of QB Jay Cutler from Denver.

1. Will the running game improve with Jay Cutler under center?

Yards per carry average for all seven Denver RBs last year = 5.17

Yards per carry for Matt Forte last year = 3.9

Was Cutler's presence the reason for Denver's rushing success last year? He is a downfield passer and that means opposing defenses will have to honor and respect the deep ball, thus leaving less defenders in the box to stop the run. Advantage - running game.

2. Will Forte continue to see passes come his way with Jay Cutler at QB?

Forte led the team with 63 receptions last year. Will Forte's receiving numbers take a dip with Jay Cutler at QB? Probably so. The highest number of receptions by a Denver RB in the last two years combined is 38 by Selvin Young.

How effective can Matt Forte be this year? It's hard to imagine the offense won't improve with Jay Cutler at QB. This means more sustained drives, more plays in the red zone, which leads to an increase in scoring opportunities. It is fairly safe to say that Forte will probably not come close to 63 receptions again, but his yards per carry average should increase from 3.9 YPC. I haven't even mentioned the signing of Pro Bowl left tackle Orlando Pace. His presence will help an offensive line that is evolving. The increase in expected scoring opportunities, combined with being in a one-back system, really emphasizes his potential for success in 2009.

The Low Side

by Jeff Pasquino

There is an old saying in fantasy football that you can't win a fantasy draft in the first round, but you certainly can lose it. Is that a myth? Looking back at the past five years, less than 40 percent of all Top 12 running backs from the prior season repeat. Think about that – the odds are not just against Matt Forte, but every RB that was a Top 12 guy last year. So what in particular would make you shy away from taking him with your first pick?

Forte was a workhorse for the Bears, logging 316 carries (fourth most of any RB) along with 63 catches (first amongst RBs). He was such a big part of the Bears' offense last year that no other RB had over 109 yards rushing and Forte led all Bears in receptions. To put it in perspective, Forte was on the field for 850 out of a possible 1,012 offensive plays – or 84 percent of the time. No other Bear running back was over 7 percent. Talk about being a key part of a team's offense

– Forte WAS the Bears offense. The Bears' coaches recognize this issue, and they are already saying that a second back will emerge and give Forte some much needed relief. Kevin Jones is looking healthy and he has been a starter in the NFL, so he is the best candidate to give Forte some plays off.

There's another big reason to think that Forte won't be quite the offensive force that he was last year – and his name is Jay Cutler. The Bears invested heavily to improve their anemic passing attack with the trade to get Cutler, and then the front office went and drafted three wideouts in April. Chicago seems ready to commit harder toward a balanced offense, which should reduce Forte's carries. Forte racked up over 1,200 yards last year, but he failed to reach the league average of 4.0 yards per carry and needed over 300 carries to get there. While an improved passing game is likely to open up more space for Forte to run, his number should be called fewer times in 2009 due to a bigger commitment to the passing game.

Choosing your first fantasy RB is an important decision as it will heavily influence the strength of the entire team. Selecting someone with limited upside and good reasons to expect some downside is a risk I would advise against, so that is why I would let someone else in your league take Matt Forte.

