

Regardless of the era, statistics can only tell part of the story

Written by Jerry Byrd

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My older brother, Ronny, sent me an e-mail about a recent story in the New York Times about former Neville High football coach Charlie Brown.

The story was written by Jere Longman, who contacted me about eight years ago regarding a story on Ebarb's Greg Procell, who held (and probably still holds) the national high school basketball career scoring record. I met Longman at a game played in Pleasant Hill.

I met Brown in the late 1950s, when he was an assistant coach on Bill Ruple's Neville staff. Their teams won Class 2A state football championships in 1955, 1959, 1961 and 1962. The 1961 and 1962 teams had perfect records. Halfback Jimmy Howard and end Herschel Walker were All-Staters on the 1961 team, while Howard, guard Nick White and tackle John Segars made All-State in 1962. (That was before offensive and defensive units were selected on All-State teams.)

One thing hasn't changed through the years. There have been plenty of players who excelled in high school football, but didn't have the size, speed or strength to do so at higher levels.

Another thing that hasn't changed: statistics can be very misleading. Many coaches never bothered to keep up with them. For those who did, the numbers varied greatly — not necessarily because of the difference in talent, but because of the difference in the number of times they ran or passed.

Terry Bradshaw's statistics in his senior year at Woodlawn High (1965) didn't come close to matching those posted by Joe Ferguson in the next three years because Bradshaw attempted only 13 passes per game — which was typical for most high school quarterbacks at that time. Ferguson was the first quarterback in this area to throw a lot more than that, and even his statistics (which were national records at that time) paled in comparison to those compiled by Evangel quarterbacks in the 1990s, starting with Josh Booty and Phillip Deas.

When I covered a game between Ferguson's Buffalo Bills and the Houston Oilers in the Astrodome, during the postgame interview he told me he was just trying to become a good quarterback.

"What makes a good quarterback?" I asked him.

"A good team makes a good quarterback," he replied.

So the numbers reflect more than the talent of the quarterback on the throwing end or the receivers on the other end.

When I attended the Grambling State football banquet following Doug Williams' senior season, Williams received a couple of awards. But he also presented awards — beautiful plaques, with Grambling helmets mounted on them — to each of the offensive linemen who had protected him while he passed for more than 3,000 yards to lead the nation in total offense. The cost must have been several hundred dollars, but Williams figured it was a bargain. Without their help, he wouldn't have been a first round selection in the National Football League draft.

Although he grew up in Chaneyville, just 15 miles from Baton Rouge, Williams didn't have a football scholarship offer from LSU after his high school career. After he finished his freshman year at Grambling, he did receive an offer of a baseball scholarship from LSU from a coach who was him pitch in an American Legion tournament in Baton Rouge — and didn't know he had already spent a year at Grambling. But by that time, Doug was a Grambling Tiger. After he passed for 8,411 yards and 89 touchdowns in four years at Grambling, Gil Brandt of the Dallas Cowboys said Williams "has a Bradshaw-type arm."

Whether Williams had a Bradshaw-type arm or vice versa, both had outstanding pro careers.

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But Bradshaw was the one whose teams won four Super Bowls.

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