

THE SUPER BOWL SPECIAL

Return of the Back

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SPORTS EDITOR

In the 2023 NFL offseason, a trending sentiment began to emerge: the running back is dead.

These feelings had been brewing for several years, but in 2023 they exploded into a national debate. Major media outlets such as the Associated Press (AP) and The New York Times declared that in a league that is becoming more and more pass-oriented: the quarterback is king and the running back is expendable.

“Running backs— despite their overall value, versatility and responsibilities— are getting left behind,” Rob Maadi said in an article for AP. This sentiment was

apparently shared by many NFL franchises. A common belief circulating in the NFL community is that once a running back turns 27, his production level begins to fall off. The Tennessee Titans were clearly a team that believed this when they allowed their star player Derrick Henry (who was pushing 30 at the time) to walk instead of giving him a new contract.

In the 2023 season, Henry had the most rushing yards in the American Football Conference, and since his first year as a starter in 2018 he has held the league rushing title twice and even won Offensive Player of the Year in 2020.

So why let him walk? Well the Titans hired a new

coach that season, and did not want to pay Henry the money he would expect. So he signed with the Baltimore Ravens instead.

Henry was not a fan of running backs getting less valuable.

“At this point, just take the RB position out the game then,” Henry said on X, formerly Twitter. “The ones that want to be great and work as hard as they can to give their all to an organization, just seems like it don’t even matter. I’m with every RB that’s fighting to get what they deserve.”

Then-New York Giants RB Saquon Barkley voiced his agreement to this sentiment and was subsequently given the cold shoulder by his own organization.

Since he was drafted second overall by the Giants in 2018, Barkley was the face of a struggling organization. Barkley won just about every award a rookie player can get and made two Pro Bowl appearances. His only problem was injury.

Barkley tore his ACL in 2020 and struggled to return in 2021. Barkley started to get better again in the following seasons, carrying the Giants to their first playoff appearance since 2016 in the 2022 season.

The Giants then decided to make what could be their worst decision in a decade. They gave quarterback Daniel Jones, a quarterback who (outside of one decent season) had been struggling heavily, a \$160 million deal.



PHOTO COURTESY OF ASSOCIATED PRESS

Eagles RB Saquon Barkley performs the first “Reverse Hurdle” against Jaguars cornerback Jarrion Jones.

They gave Barkley the franchise tag to put off his contract until the next season. Jones played only six games, going 1-5 in those games. In the 2024 offseason, the Giants negotiations with Barkley fell through.

Barkley said the Giants were disrespectful in their negotiations.

“It felt like the only way the Giants wanted me (was) if I was able to go show my worth to someone,” Barkley said. “Like, I had to go prove that a team would want to pay me, so then, maybe, they (the Giants) would want to pay me.”

As it turned out, the Giants divisional rival, the Philadelphia

Eagles did want to pay him. The Eagles offered Barkley a three-year, \$37.5 million contract, with \$26 million guaranteed.

Henry, Barkley and a plethora of other running backs have proven this season that the running back is still one of the most important positions in football.

In his first season with the Baltimore Ravens, Henry rushed for 1,921 yards and scored 18 touchdowns. The Ravens went 12-5, won their division, and advanced to the Divisional Round of the playoffs. Henry’s rush yardage was second in the NFL, only trailing one man: Saquon Barkley.

Barkley’s 2024 campaign

was one for the ages. Behind an Eagles offensive line that consistently ranks as one of the best in the league, Barkley was able to demolish defenses as he carried the Eagles to a Super Bowl appearance.

Barkley rushed for 2,005 yards in 2024, only trailing Eric Dickerson’s single season rushing record by 101 yards. Barkley also scored 25 touchdowns, including three in his first game as an Eagle. He is projected to finish in the top three in MVP voting.

Other running backs experienced a similar renaissance in 2024. RB Josh Jacobs was signed to the Green Bay Packers after the Las Vegas Raiders decided not to pay their best offensive player. Jacobs became the best player on a talented Packers offense, accumulating 1,329 rush yards and 16 touchdowns.

RB J.K. Dobbins, a player more known for his bad knees and constant appearances on the injured reserve list, left the Baltimore Ravens for the Los Angeles Chargers. With the Chargers, Dobbins found an offensive scheme that fit his style better, and had his greatest season to date.

Despite what the media outlets and the franchises have thought, the running back is far from obsolete. If anything, the running back is fully back, and better than ever.

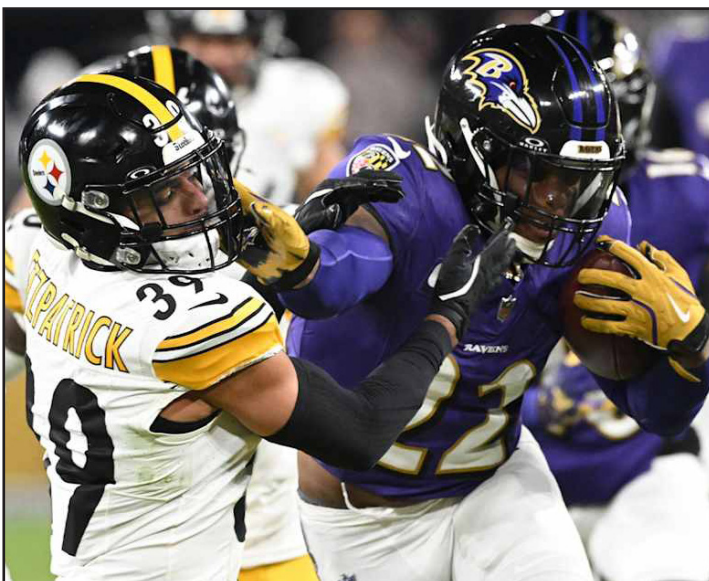


PHOTO COURTESY OF BALTIMORE RAVENS

Ravens RB Derrick Henry delivers a stiff arm to Steelers safety Minkah Fitzpatrick in the AFC Wild Card game.

NFL GREATS THAT SHOULD BE IN CANTON

These players were the best in the game, but are not enshrined in the Pro Football Hall of Fame



Roger Craig, Running Back

Craig was the first player to get 1,000 yards rushing and receiving in a season. Craig was a 4-time Pro Bowler and was key to the 49ers winning 3 Super Bowls in the 1980s. He also gained 13,100 all-purpose yards in his career.



Jim Marshall, Defensive End

Never has one play influenced a player’s entire legacy like Marshall. Marshall was a staple of the Minnesota Vikings’ feared “Purple People Eaters” defense that went to four Super Bowl appearances. He holds the record for most consecutive games started for a defensive player and most recovered opponent fumbles. Marshall is unfortunately more remembered for his infamous “Wrong Way Run” gaffe, but he was one of the all-time greats.



Joe Jacoby, Guard

It’s near criminal that of all the members of “the Hogs”, the famous offensive line of the Washington Redskins of the 1980s, only one is in the Hall. Jacoby was a mainstay for the “Skins line, and made 4 Pro Bowls, won three Super Bowls, as well as making First Team All-Pro 3 times.



Clay Matthews Jr.

Matthews Jr. is a member of one of the most famous families in football, and he was one of the best linebackers of his era. Matthews is currently third all-time in tackles with a whopping 1,595 tackles and had 69.5 sacks with 16 interceptions. Matthews led the Cleveland Browns defense to three AFC title appearances, and made four Pro Bowls.



Hines Ward, Wide Receiver

Ward was practically the face of the Pittsburgh Steelers in the early 2000s. Ward is one of only 11 men to reach 1,000 receptions, and got over 12,000 receiving yards in his storied career. Ward was the MVP of Super Bowl XL, and made four Pro Bowls.



Charles Tillman, cornerback

No player had a talent for forcing turnovers like Charles “Peanut” Tillman. Tillman forced 44 fumbles in his career (including a record 4 in a single game) with his signature move, the “Peanut Punch.” Tillman also got 38 interceptions. The Peanut Punch is now taught as a concept of American football.

Graphic by Will Livingston | Sports Editor

HERALD EDITOR'S SUPER BOWL PICKS

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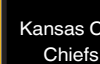


Philadelphia Eagles

31-28

Kansas City Chiefs

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30-25

Philadelphia Eagles



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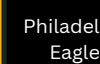


Philadelphia Eagles

32-29

Kansas City Chiefs

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Philadelphia Eagles

35-24

Kansas City Chiefs



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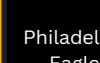


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34-31

Philadelphia Eagles

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28-24

Kansas City Chiefs



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