

RUSHING PROWESS AGAIN PROVES ITS VALUE

“All of these teams – Carolina, us – are running the ball,” says New Orleans Saints head coach **JIM HASLETT**. “People are running the ball against nickel defenses. They’re packing it in with three tight ends and running the ball.”

They’re running the ball because it translates into success. In 2004, six of the top 10 rushing teams made the playoffs. Or, looking at it in another way, five of the six clubs to rush more than pass went to the playoffs. And the Vikings – fourth overall in rushing – missed the playoffs only on the final play of their season!

Twelve-year NFL safety **COREY HARRIS** knows the bread-and-butter of most teams. “I don’t care if you’re Brett Favre, Dan Marino, or John Elway,” he says. “If your team can’t run, you’re in trouble.”

The biggest advantage to a sound running game is ball control; the longer an offense can maintain possession, the more strain it puts on an opposing defense. Also, ball control strategy lets a team rest its own defense for longer periods of time.

One way to protect your quarterback effectively is to keep more blockers in for maximum protection and use more three or “quick-five” drops in the passing game. The other way is to run the ball effectively and keep the defense off balance.

“Everyone is protecting the quarterback now,” says Haslett. “Nobody is seven-step dropping. They’re three-step, max-protecting and running the football.”

Though the advantages of a sound running game are quite tangible, there are residual intangible benefits that can work wonders for a team. Nothing gives an offense a bigger boost than a slow, steady 10-play drive for a touchdown. Conversely, an opposing offense can get frustrated the longer it has to wait for another possession.

The top 10 NFL 2003 rushing teams and six teams that ran more than they threw, and whether they made the playoffs:

TEAM	RUSHING YARDS	W	L	TEAM	RUN/PASS RATIO	W	L
1. *Baltimore Ravens	2,674	10	6	1. *Baltimore Ravens	1.33/1	10	6
2. *Denver Broncos	2,629	10	6	2. *Denver Broncos	1.13/1	10	6
3. *Green Bay Packers	2,558	10	6	3. *Carolina Panthers	1.13/1	11	5
4. Minnesota Vikings	2,343	9	7	4. Miami Dolphins	1.08/1	10	6
5. San Francisco 49ers	2,279	7	9	5. *Green Bay Packers	1.07/1	7	9
6. San Diego Chargers	2,146	4	12	6. *Dallas Cowboys	1.01/1	10	6
7. *Carolina Panthers	2,091	11	5	*Made playoffs in 2003			
8. Jacksonville Jaguars	2,073	5	11				
9. *Philadelphia Eagles	2,015	12	4				
10. *Seattle Seahawks	2,009	10	6				
*Made playoffs in 2003							

WANT TO GO TO SUPER BOWL? STOP THE 100-YARD RUSHER!

Last year, the Miami Dolphins were the lone team not to allow a 100-yard rusher in a game. And although the Dolphins, who won 10 games and finished second in the AFC East, did not go to the playoffs, three of the other four teams that performed the feat in the past five years not only made the playoffs, but proceeded on to the Super Bowl, with two winning it!

“When you stop the run, you can put more pressure on the quarterback,” says New England Patriots Pro Bowl defensive tackle **RICHARD SEYMOUR**. “You can then just play the ball and get to the passer. But if you can’t stop the run, they can do a lot of things to you.”

Following are the teams in the past five years to not allow an individual 100-yard rusher throughout a season:

TEAM	YEAR	RECORD	RESULT
Miami	2003	10-6	Second in AFC East
<i>St. Louis</i>	<i>2001</i>	<i>14-2</i>	<i>Advanced to Super Bowl XXXVI</i>
<i>Baltimore</i>	<i>2000</i>	<i>12-4</i>	<i>Won Super Bowl XXXV</i>
Baltimore	1999	8-8	Third in AFC Central
<i>St. Louis</i>	<i>1999</i>	<i>13-3</i>	<i>Won Super Bowl XXXIV</i>

BIG YARDS ON FIRST DOWN COULD MEAN PLAYOFFS

Add up the five teams of last season with the most yards gained on first down, and you’ve got five playoff teams – the Colts, Chiefs, Packers, Seahawks and Broncos. Obviously, gaining big yards on first down makes it easier to keep the ball and move down the field.

“The greatest situation for all quarterbacks is having success on first-down,” says Tampa Bay Buccaneers quarterback **BRAD JOHNSON**. “That’s the benchmark of a team right there. Whether it’s a four-yard run, or a six-yard completion, we really try for success on first down.”

Creating “third-and-manageable” situations are key to any offense. There is a tremendous difference between third-and-three versus a third-and-six, which limits your options offensively. Conversely, keeping your opponent in third-and-long situations is a solid recipe for success.

The top five teams in 2003 in total first-down yardage and their playoff advancement:

TEAM	TOTAL YARDS ON FIRST DOWN	W	L	PLAYOFF RESULT
Indianapolis Colts	3,018	12	4	AFC Championship
Kansas City Chiefs	2,993	13	3	AFC Divisional Round
Green Bay Packers	2,750	10	6	NFC Divisional Round
Seattle Seahawks	2,644	10	6	NFC Wild Card Round
Denver Broncos	2,600	10	6	AFC Wild Card Round