

THE POUNDERS ABOUND!

With quarterbacks firing laser-like passes to a bevy of aesthetically gifted wide receivers, it’s no surprise that the NFL’s aerial attack has captured the attention of fans from coast to coast.

But though the game in the air may be at a fever pitch of excitement, the league’s talented corps of running backs has more than made its presence felt in the modern-day NFL. And according to some, their contributions have never been more important.

“I’ll never back off the belief that the running game is crucial to success,” says ESPN’s **MERRIL HOGE**, who spent 1987-94 as a running back with the Pittsburgh Steelers and Chicago Bears. “The running game and running backs are crucial. Being able to run the football and to stop the run are the foundations of the game.”

Consider the 2003 season, which was a resounding success for the guys who unmercifully pounded the ball and helped their teams win the old-fashioned way – on the ground.

Last year, there were 151 100-yard individual rushing games, the most all-time. There were six 1,500-yard rushers and four 1,600-yard rushers – the most ever in a single season. And for only the second time in history (1998), two players – Baltimore’s **JAMAL LEWIS** and Green Bay’s **AHMAN GREEN** – rushed for 1,800 yards. Plus, five players went over 2,000 scrimmage yards, the most ever.

“I felt that at the end of last year we may have been watching the best group of NFL running backs to ever play the game at one time,” Hoge says. “There are a lot of dominant backs out there, guys that can play in every down and every situation.”

Hoge’s take on some of the NFL’s top backs:

- **AHMAN GREEN**, Green Bay – “He has a certain smoothness about him. A very, very versatile player.”
- **PRIEST HOLMES**, Kansas City – “Unbelievably in control. A guy that probably does not get as much credit as he deserves.”
- **JAMAL LEWIS**, Baltimore – “His brute strength is amazing.”
- **CLINTON PORTIS**, Washington – “He has a huge upside. He’s not as tall, but the way he runs reminds me of an Eric Dickerson.”
- **LA DAINIAN TOMLINSON**, San Diego – “The spitting image of Walter Payton. He reminds me so much of Walter with regards to size, agility, athleticism and the ability to catch the ball.”

HISTORY’S 1,800-YARD SEASON RUSHERS

YEAR	RUNNING BACK	YARDS	YEAR	RUNNING BACK	YARDS
1963	Jim Brown, Cleveland	1,863	1994	Barry Sanders, Detroit	1,883
1973	O.J. Simpson, Buffalo	2,003	1997	Barry Sanders, Detroit	2,053
1975	O.J. Simpson, Buffalo	1,817	1998	Terrell Davis, Denver	2,008
1977	Walter Payton, Chicago	1,852	1998	Jamal Anderson, Atlanta	1,846
1980	Earl Campbell, Houston	1,934	2002	Ricky Williams, Miami	1,853
1983	Eric Dickerson, LA Rams	1,808	2003	Jamal Lewis, Baltimore	2,066
1984	Eric Dickerson, LA Rams	2,105	2003	Ahman Green, Green Bay	1,883
1986	Eric Dickerson, LA Rams	1,821			

RAVENS’ LEWIS SOARS WITH ELITE RUSHERS

An animal of the air adorns his helmet, but the Baltimore Ravens’ **JAMAL LEWIS** accumulates his staggering mileage on the ground.

In 84 NFL seasons, only one man – Pro Football Hall of Famer **ERIC DICKERSON** (2,105) – rushed for more yards in one season than Lewis did last year (2,066) for AFC North Division champion Baltimore. No player in NFL history ran for more yards in one game than Lewis did last September 14 when the 5-11, 231-pound dynamo ran through division rival Cleveland for 295 yards (for a 9.8-yard average).

Sharing the Ravens’ roost with linebacker **RAY LEWIS**, the fifth-year running back may not be the first “Lewis” fans think of when pondering Baltimore, but No. 31 in purple lacks no attention from opposing defenders.

“Jamal’s the kind of running back where, if you let him get rolling and he gets his pads down, he can just rip your arms out of their sockets,” says Bengals linebacker **KEVIN HARDY**. “He’s a big guy with power, but he’s got some speed, too. Plus, he’s shifty. When he has momentum, and he’s running downhill, look out! Man, he’s tough to tackle.”

Only **BARRY SANDERS**, now a member of the Pro Football Hall of Fame, notched more 100-yard games in one season (14 in 1997) than Lewis did in 2003 (12). And only five players in league history had gained 1,000 yards in the first eight games of a season before Lewis joined that group a year ago.

“A game Jamal carries the ball 15 times is a game we are probably going to lose,” says Ravens head coach **BRIAN BILLICK**. “We are very conscious of it. That is something we can’t let happen. Jamal needs to get his hands on the ball.”

Lewis ranks fourth in most rushing yards in the first 48 games of a career (since 1970):

PLAYER	TEAM	RUSHING YARDS	PER GAME AVERAGE
Eric Dickerson	L.A. Rams	5,418	112.9
Earl Campbell	Houston Oilers	5,245	109.3
Terrell Davis	Denver Broncos	4,775	99.5
Jamal Lewis	Baltimore Ravens	4,757	99.1
Edgerrin James	Indianapolis Colts	4,702	98.0

Lewis ranks second all-time in single-season rushing yardage:

PLAYER	TEAM	SEASON	RUSHING YARDS	PER GAME AVG.
Eric Dickerson	L.A. Rams	1984	2,105	131.6
Jamal Lewis	Baltimore Ravens	2003	2,066	129.1
Barry Sanders	Detroit Lions	1997	2,053	128.3
Terrell Davis	Denver Broncos	1990	2,008	125.5
O.J. Simpson	Buffalo Bills	1973	2,003	143.1