

GOING LONG

Perhaps NFL offensive coordinators never listened to their mothers as youngsters when told, “Chew your food and eat slowly.”

In 2004, they hurriedly chomped large chunks of yardage in one bite.

The number of 20- and 30-yard pass plays in 2004 was higher than in any other season for the past 10 years while pass plays of 40 yards or more crested to its tallest level in five seasons.

“It’s very hard to drive the field and it is very hard to go 14, 15, or 16 continuous plays,” says Philadelphia Eagles offensive coordinator **BRAD CHILDRESS**. “Somewhere, something big has to happen for you. If you are not swinging that bat or looking down the field or calling a play that has the chance to go down the field, you have no chance.”

Even a Pro Football Hall of Famer notices the “long-ball” change. “From a football standpoint, people have devised ways to get the ball downfield,” says Pro Football Hall of Famer and former San Francisco 49ers head coach **BILL WALSH**. “Teams are not as conservative as they once were.”

Another view, offered by Tennessee Titans defensive coordinator **JIM SCHWARTZ**, attributes increased protection in the pocket for the influx in downfield strikes.

“I think offenses have become very protection-conscious on first down because they can’t afford to get in long yardage situations for second and third down,” says Schwartz. “I think that may explain some of the big pass plays. With teams protecting with seven or even eight players they can get time to take long shots down the field.”

A look at long pass plays over the past 10 seasons:

YEAR	20-YARD PASS PLAYS	30-YARD PASS PLAYS	40-YARD PASS PLAYS
2004	1,477	579	267
2003	1,333	486	229
2002	1,370	526	237
2001	1,399	479	242
2000	1,340	495	231
1999	1,430	566	275
1998	1,310	535	276
1997	1,319	493	227
1996	1,244	464	216
1995	1,351	513	226



GOOD SACK DIFFERENTIAL = PLAYOFFS

Don’t give up sacks, and make them seems like a surefire recipe for success. Coaches around the league preach the importance of protecting the quarterback on offense and attacking that same position on defense.

The higher the differential between sacks made, and surrendered, the more likely a team is to be successful.

The numbers seem to prove that out. Last season, the top five teams in the NFL in sack differential combined for a .738 winning mark, four of five won their divisions, and all went to the playoffs.

The rundown:

TEAM/RECORD	OWN SACKS	OPP SACKS	DIFFERENTIAL
Indianapolis (12-4)*	45	14	+ 31
Green Bay (10-6)*	40	14	+ 26
Denver (10-6)	38	15	+ 23
New England (14-2)*	45	26	+ 19
Philadelphia (13-3)*	47	37	+ 10

*Won division

TURNOVERS ARE VITAL!

“You can’t overstate it,” says **TOM COUGHLIN**, head coach of the New York Giants. “Turnovers are probably the most critical statistic in winning and losing. It’s been proven.”

He’s right! The six clubs in 2004 with the top turnover ratio posted a **65-31 (.677)** record with four of those teams advancing to the playoffs.

Although the Carolina Panthers did not make the playoffs in 2004, their success at the end of the season can be attributed to the creation of turnovers. Eight games into the season the Panthers only forced nine turnovers in their 1-7 start. But they finished the season 7-9, going 6-2 in their last eight games. During that period, the Panthers forced 29 turnovers to end the season with a league-leading 38 takeaways. Teams with the best turnover margins in 2004 and how they finished:

TEAM	RECORD	TURNOVER RATIO	2004 FINISH
Indianapolis	12-4	+19	Reached AFC Divisional Round
New York Jets	10-6	+17	Reached AFC Divisional Round
San Diego	12-4	+15	Reached AFC Wild Card
Carolina	7-9	+12	Did not make playoffs
Baltimore	9-7	+11	Did not make playoffs
Pittsburgh	15-1	+11	Reached AFC Championship

