



NATIONAL FOOTBALL LEAGUE
280 Park Avenue, New York, NY 10017
(212) 450-2000 * FAX (212) 681-7573
WWW.NFLMedia.com

Joe Browne, Executive Vice President-Communications
Greg Aiello, Vice President-Public Relations

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FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION,
CONTACT: STEVE ALIC (212/450-2066)

FRESH QUARTERBACK FACES STARTING TO EXCEL

Faces look younger at a position growing stronger.

An early-season glance at the NFL's leading passers indicates that confidence among young quarterbacks is taking root.

Possessors of 11 NFL starts or less, Chicago's **REX GROSSMAN** (10 starts), Buffalo's **J.P. LOSMAN** (11), San Diego's **PHILIP RIVERS** (2), and San Francisco's **ALEX SMITH** (10) display the poise of more seasoned veterans while Houston's **DAVID CARR** (27 years old) and the Giants' **ELI MANNING** (25) also have elevated their performance.

"There's a word called 'magic,'" says Pro Football Hall of Fame quarterback **FRAN TARKENTON**, 66, who owned nearly every significant NFL passing record upon his retirement in 1978. "Some have it and some don't.

"A quarterback has got to have magic," says Tarkenton. "When he steps on the field or enters a huddle, there's got to be some action there. Somehow he's going to get it done. That's important. He's got to be the leader and he's got to have freedom to express that and play his game. It's not that easy. He'll miss a putt or two, he may plunk one in the water – he's not going to be perfect."

With Grossman, Rivers, and Smith, three of the league's top 10 quarterbacks in passer rating have played 12 career games or less.

"There is an influx of good, young quarterbacks in this league that teams can build around," says NFL Network and FOX analyst **BRIAN BALDINGER**. "It starts on the college level – everyone's throwing the ball today."

Below is a look at where these emerging passers stand in league rankings:

Quarterback	Passer Rating	Yards	TDs	INTs	Pct. Comp.	Avg. Gain Per Att.
David Carr, Hou.	1	19	3t	5t	1	7
Philip Rivers, SD	2	30	18t	1t	2	11
Rex Grossman, Chi.	5	5	3t	18t	8	1
Eli Manning, NYG	7	3	1	27t	6	6
Alex Smith, SF	10	6	12t	1t	22	9

Losman, who is completing 60.8 percent (48 of 79) of his passes and has thrown only one interception in 79 attempts, is coming off a career-best outing in passing yards (328) last week against the Jets. The third-year Buffalo quarterback owns a passer rating of 86.2 through three games compared to a 63.5 mark for his first two seasons.

"You've got talented kids playing quarterback today," says Tarkenton. "They're big, strong, and fast. They're playing the most difficult position to play in all of sports – they've got eight zillion things to think about."

"If you look at Rex and Philip, they're sons of high school coaches – they've been around the game and the quarterback position their whole lives and they've played a lot of college football," notes Baldinger, an NFL offensive lineman for 11 seasons. Grossman was a three-year starter at Florida. Rivers started 51 games at North Carolina State before learning the Chargers' system for two years behind **DREW BREES**.

"In San Francisco, they're putting talent around Alex and employing (offensive coordinator) **NORV TURNER**'s offense around his strengths," continues Baldinger. "It's a similar scenario in Houston with David Carr and (head coach) **GARY KUBIAK**. Carr has the smarts, mobility and strength to be successful.

"What we will find out about these young quarterbacks is, 'Can he lead a team like Donovan McNabb? Can he manage the team in a two-minute drill?' The only way that we'll be able to examine that is by watching them play more games."