

Fantasy Football Age Study – Running Backs

By Ted Kluck

Ed. Note: Ted Kluck is the author of three books, a former professional indoor football player, and a contributor to ESPN.com. He has agreed to write weekly fantasy content for PhilSteele.com during the 2007 season. His opinions are his own, and do not reflect those of Phil Steele's Publications.

When does a running back start to break down? This is a topic of much debate among fantasy players, where the siren song of youth is apparent, but where the right veteran backs – like Corey Dillon and Jerome Bettis in recent years – can make significant impacts. Shaun Alexander, long a fantasy stud, has reached the dreaded age of 30, which led me to study a handful of classic backs – both Hall of Famers and others – to determine when the wheels truly fall off, and how effective a good back can be in the twilight of his career.

For our classics, I've tried to comprise a sampling of backs spanning different styles – finesse backs and power backs. And for current players, we'll take a look at each relevant starter nearing the age of 30, to try to determine the arc of the rest of their career.

Classic Backs, Seasons After Age 30

Marcus Allen	Rushing					Receiving			
	G	Att	Yds	Avg	TD	Rec	Yds	Avg	TD
1991 rai	8	63	287	4.6	2	15	131	8.7	0
1992 rai	16	67	301	4.5	2	28	277	9.9	1
1993 kan	16	206	764	3.7	12	34	238	7.0	3
1994 kan	13	189	709	3.8	7	42	349	8.3	0
1995 kan	16	207	890	4.3	5	27	210	7.8	0
1996 kan	16	206	830	4.0	9	27	270	10.0	0
1997 kan	16	124	505	4.1	11	11	86	7.8	0

Ernest Byner

1992 was	16	262	998	3.8	6	39	338	8.7	1
1993 was	16	23	105	4.6	1	27	194	7.2	0
1994 cle	16	75	219	2.9	2	11	102	9.3	0
1995 cle	16	115	432	3.8	2	61	494	8.1	2
1996 bal	16	159	634	4.0	4	30	270	9.0	1
1997 bal	16	84	313	3.7	0	21	128	6.1	0

Earl Campbell

1985 nor	16	158	643	4.1	1	6	88	14.7	0
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Roger Craig

1990 sfo	11	141	439	3.1	1	25	201	8.0	0
1991 rai	15	162	590	3.6	1	17	136	8.0	0

1992 min	15	105	416	4.0	4	22	164	7.5	0
1993 min	14	38	119	3.1	1	19	169	8.9	1

Eric Dickerson

1990 ind	11	166	677	4.1	4	18	92	5.1	0
1991 ind	10	167	536	3.2	2	41	269	6.6	1
1992 rai	16	187	729	3.9	2	14	85	6.1	1
1993 atl	4	26	91	3.5	0	6	58	9.7	0

Marshall Faulk

2003 stl	11	209	818	3.9	10	45	290	6.4	1
2004 stl	14	195	774	4.0	3	50	310	6.2	1
2005 stl	16	65	292	4.5	0	44	291	6.6	1

Eddie George

2003 ten	16	312	1031	3.3	5	22	163	7.4	0
2004 dal	14	132	432	3.3	4	9	83	9.2	0

Franco Harris

1980 pit	13	208	789	3.8	4	30	196	6.5	2
1981 pit	16	242	987	4.1	8	37	250	6.8	1
1982 pit	9	140	604	4.3	2	31	249	8.0	0
1983 pit	16	279	1007	3.6	5	34	278	8.2	2
1984 sea	8	68	170	2.5	0	1	3	3.0	0

Walter Payton

1984 chi	16	381	1684	4.4	11	45	368	8.2	0
1985 chi	16	324	1551	4.8	9	49	483	9.9	2
1986 chi	16	321	1333	4.2	8	37	382	10.3	3
1987 chi	12	146	533	3.7	4	33	217	6.6	1

John Riggins

1979 was	16	260	1153	4.4	9	28	163	5.8	3
1981 was	15	195	714	3.7	13	6	59	9.8	0
1982 was	8	177	553	3.1	3	10	50	5.0	0
1983 was	15	375	1347	3.6	24	5	29	5.8	0
1984 was	14	327	1239	3.8	14	7	43	6.1	0
1985 was	12	176	677	3.8	8	6	18	3.0	0

Emmitt Smith

1999 dal	15	329	1397	4.2	11	27	119	4.4	2
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	2000	dal		16		294	1203	4.1	9		11	79	7.2	0	
	2001	dal		14		261	1021	3.9	3		17	116	6.8	0	
	2002	dal		16		254	975	3.8	5		16	89	5.6	0	
	2003	ari		10		90	256	2.8	2		14	107	7.6	0	
	2004	ari		15		267	937	3.5	9		15	105	7.0	0	

Reaction

Emmitt Smith had three, arguably four, statistically relevant seasons post-30, while Walter Payton was a statistical beast until his last season in 1987. However, both men are among the greatest backs to ever play the game.

By contrast, the rest of the backs studied really began to break down after age 30, often with the “Age 30 Season” marking a significant drop off from the previous year. Marshall Faulk, Eric Dickerson, Roger Craig, and Marcus Allen all suffered significant statistical drop-offs after blowing out 30 candles though, in his defense, Faulk still managed ten rushing TD’s in 2003 and Allen still flourished as a goal-line stud despite dwindling yardage totals.

Eddie George and Earl Campbell, similar bruising runners, both broke down almost entirely after 30. Byner managed a longer career, but did so in job-share situations where his workload was lightened.

Franco Harris and John Riggins – both larger backs – managed a few decent seasons after 30, with Harris scoring 8 TD’s in ’81 and racking up 1,000 yards in ’83. Riggins notched three 1,000 yard seasons after 30, and remained a goalline beast until his retirement.

Current Backs Age 29 and above

Shaun Alexander

+-----+-----+-----+-----+-----+															
		Rushing						Receiving							
Year	TM	G	Att	Yards	Y/A	TD	Rec	Yards	Y/R	TD					
	2000	sea		16		64	313	4.9	2		5	41	8.2	0	
	2001	sea		16		309	1318	4.3	14		44	343	7.8	2	
	2002	sea		16		295	1175	4.0	16		59	460	7.8	2	
	2003	sea		16		326	1435	4.4	14		42	295	7.0	2	
	2004	sea		16		353	1696	4.8	16		23	170	7.4	4	
	2005	sea		16		370	1880	5.1	27		15	78	5.2	1	
	2006	sea		10		252	896	3.6	7		12	48	4.0	0	
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	TOTAL		106		1969	8713	4.4	96		200	1435	7.2	11		
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Comment: Will turn 30 during training camp, and suffered his worst season, statistically, since his rookie year in 2000, averaging only 3.6 yards per carry in 2007. Alexander has taken a tremendous pounding in the last three seasons, with injuries finally taking their toll, causing him to miss six games in 2006. Perhaps most disconcerting is the fact that Alexander doesn’t seem to have the passion for the game or, call it a “warrior” mentality that were hallmarks of backs like Emmitt Smith and Walter Payton. He seems like the kind of guy who played for numbers and a contract, and now he has both.

Warrick Dunn

		Rushing						Receiving			
Year	TM	G	Att	Yards	Y/A	TD	Rec	Yards	Y/R	TD	
1997	tam	16	224	978	4.4	4	39	462	11.8	3	
1998	tam	16	245	1026	4.2	2	44	344	7.8	0	
1999	tam	15	195	616	3.2	0	64	589	9.2	2	
2000	tam	16	248	1133	4.6	8	44	422	9.6	1	
2001	tam	13	158	447	2.8	3	68	557	8.2	3	
2002	atl	15	230	927	4.0	7	50	377	7.5	2	
2003	atl	11	125	672	5.4	3	37	336	9.1	2	
2004	atl	16	265	1106	4.2	9	29	294	10.1	0	
2005	atl	16	280	1416	5.1	3	29	220	7.6	1	
2006	atl	16	286	1140	4.0	4	22	170	7.7	1	
TOTAL		150	2256	9461	4.2	43	426	3771	8.9	15	

Comment: Dunn, 32, has quietly put together one of the most impressive RB careers in football over the last ten years. He celebrated his 30's with three straight 1,000 yard seasons, from 2004-2006, and doesn't appear to have lost much. The Falcons, however, seem to have an eye toward the future, as they brought in T.J. Duckett during Dunn's tenure, and drafted the talented Jerious Norwood last year. Dunn looks as though he will have to win his job back from Norwood, as he spends training camp rehabbing from back surgery.

Ahman Green

		Rushing						Receiving			
Year	TM	G	Att	Yards	Y/A	TD	Rec	Yards	Y/R	TD	
1998	sea	16	35	209	6.0	1	3	2	0.7	0	
1999	sea	14	26	120	4.6	0	0	0	0.0	0	
2000	gnb	16	263	1175	4.5	10	73	559	7.7	3	
2001	gnb	16	304	1387	4.6	9	62	594	9.6	2	
2002	gnb	14	286	1240	4.3	7	57	393	6.9	2	
2003	gnb	16	355	1883	5.3	15	50	367	7.3	5	
2004	gnb	15	259	1163	4.5	7	40	275	6.9	1	
2005	gnb	5	77	255	3.3	0	19	147	7.7	0	
2006	gnb	14	266	1059	4.0	5	46	373	8.1	1	
TOTAL		126	1871	8491	4.5	54	350	2710	7.7	14	

Comment: Is 30 this year, and takes over the RB responsibilities in Houston, where he will be operating behind an offensive line that is among the worst in pro football. Managed 1,000 yards last year, but it seems that his days of double-digit touchdown production are over. Is simply a stopgap in Houston, who could have had Reggie Bush last year.

Edgerrin James

		Rushing						Receiving			
Year	TM	G	Att	Yards	Y/A	TD	Rec	Yards	Y/R	TD	
1999	ind	16	369	1553	4.2	13	62	586	9.5	4	
2000	ind	16	387	1709	4.4	13	63	594	9.4	5	
2001	ind	6	151	662	4.4	3	24	193	8.0	0	
2002	ind	14	277	989	3.6	2	61	354	5.8	1	
2003	ind	13	310	1259	4.1	11	51	292	5.7	0	
2004	ind	16	334	1548	4.6	9	51	483	9.5	0	
2005	ind	15	360	1506	4.2	13	44	337	7.7	1	
2006	ari	16	337	1159	3.4	6	38	217	5.7	0	
TOTAL		112	2525	10385	4.1	70	394	3056	7.8	11	

Comment: Feels like an old 29, as James has had a herculean workload since his rookie year in '99. That said, he has been a standout performer as a runner, receiver, and red-zone threat, with 81 career touchdowns. James has a backfield to himself in Arizona, where new head coach Ken Whisenhunt seems dedicated to running the football.

Thomas Jones

		Rushing						Receiving			
Year	TM	G	Att	Yards	Y/A	TD	Rec	Yards	Y/R	TD	
2000	ari	14	112	373	3.3	2	32	208	6.5	0	
2001	ari	16	112	380	3.4	5	21	151	7.2	0	
2002	ari	9	138	511	3.7	2	20	113	5.7	0	
2003	tam	16	137	627	4.6	3	24	180	7.5	0	
2004	chi	14	240	948	4.0	7	56	427	7.6	0	
2005	chi	15	314	1335	4.3	9	26	143	5.5	0	
2006	chi	16	296	1210	4.1	6	36	154	4.3	0	
TOTAL		100	1349	5384	4.0	34	215	1376	6.4	0	

Comment: Is 29 this year, but seems like a young 29 due to his impeccable conditioning and the fact that his workload was relatively light until 2004, when he took over as the featured back in Chicago. Will be joining a Jets squad that struggled to run the football in 2006, but which features a young and emerging offensive line.

Fred Taylor

		Rushing						Receiving			
Year	TM	G	Att	Yards	Y/A	TD	Rec	Yards	Y/R	TD	

	1998	jax		15		264	1223	4.6	14		44	421	9.6	3	
	1999	jax		10		159	732	4.6	6		10	83	8.3	0	
	2000	jax		13		292	1399	4.8	12		36	240	6.7	2	
	2001	jax		2		30	116	3.9	0		2	13	6.5	0	
	2002	jax		16		287	1314	4.6	8		49	408	8.3	0	
	2003	jax		16		345	1572	4.6	6		48	370	7.7	1	
	2004	jax		14		260	1224	4.7	2		36	345	9.6	1	
	2005	jax		11		194	787	4.1	3		13	83	6.4	0	
	2006	jax		15		231	1146	5.0	5		23	242	10.5	1	
	TOTAL			112		2062	9513	4.6	56		261	2205	8.4	8	

Comment: Long an enigma to fantasy owners, Taylor turned 30 last season, which in spite of the emergence of Maurice Jones-Drew was one of his strongest. Taylor can almost always be counted on to miss significant time with injuries, and it seems a foregone conclusion that Drew will cut into his carries in 2007. Taylor hasn't been a factor at the stripe since his first few seasons in the league.

Conclusion

A look through any preseason fantasy publication's running back rankings is telling: There simply aren't many "older" backs near the top of the rankings. Alexander is the exception, and that is more based on the monster season he had in 2005 than anything he has done recently to spark excitement. James lurks near the top ten, but the rest of the backs in our study – Green, Jones, Dunn, and Taylor – will all be ranked in the late-teens to early-thirties.

Now, whether this is a function of older backs truly breaking down, or the NFL's fascination with young legs, we'll never know. Of those mentioned Jones and James, both 29, seem to be the safest. They both have backfields to themselves, while Taylor and Dunn will be sharing carries with younger backs.

Those owners with a high first round pick, who aren't able to snag LT or LJ, are faced with an interesting conundrum. Do they draft Alexander based on his previous body of work, or do they target younger backs like Frank Gore, Brian Westbrook or Rudi Johnson? Alexander has certainly proven himself worthy in the past, but last season gave owners nothing to get excited about.

Ted Kluck is the author of three books and a frequent contributor to ESPN.com. Visit him online at www.tedkluck.com.