

NOW 'N THEN

by Bob Carroll

The other day I got to wondering about one of those things I say all the time -- the one about how the game has changed so much over the years. It seems like I say "It's a different game today" almost as often as I say "The check is in the mail."

Everybody knows about one platoon football, but what else has changed? I decided to run a little statistical comparison between the 1940 and the 1981 seasons (1940 because it's the earliest for which I had some stats; 1981 because it's the latest without a strike). How many of the things people say are true?

They pass more now. Well, of course they do, you say. What you might be interested in knowing is how much more. In 1940, they threw about 37 passes each game (18.5 for each team), and that might be a little higher than most fans remember. In 1981, NFL fans saw about 63 passes every time they watched a game. Most interesting of all is that, while the teams throw 26 more passes each game now, they complete 17 more. In other words, the extra tosses are completed at a 65.0 percentage!

They run less now. You probably knew that, but the difference is less than you might expect. In 1940, about 76 rushing attempts were made per game. In 1981, they rushed about 65 times each outing. Even that is misleading. In 1940, when a passer got sacked, the play was counted as a rush. If we count today's sacks as runs, the difference narrows even more.

One thing you'll see today is more kicking. Although punts are down about two a game, field goals are up almost two and kickoffs (because of increased scoring) are up about two and a half.

Altogether you'll see about 21 more plays in a game today than you would have seen in 1940. My guess is that the increase is mainly due to the passing game -- more incompletes and more plays ending out of bounds stopping the clock. A small amount of the increase was no doubt caused by sudden-death overtimes.

Here are the figures:

Per game	1940	1981	+ or -
Rush attempts	76.2	64.8	-11.4
Sacks	?	4.6	--
Total Rushes	76.2	69.4	-6.8
Passing Attempts	37.3	63.3	+26.0
Passing Comp.	17.6	34.6	+17.0
Inc. Passes	19.7	28.7	+9.0
Punts	12.1	10.0	-2.1
FG att.	1.9	3.5	+1.6
Kick-offs	6.7	9.3	+2.6
Total Plays	134.2	155.4	+21.2