

## **AN AWESOME DEFENSE DOESN'T GUARANTY A CHAMPIONSHIP**

By Stephan Jordan

What pro football defense was the best of all-time? The defenses most often considered by commentators as the best in the history of the game include the Packers of the 1960s, the Rams of the 1960s ("Fearsome Foursome"), the Vikings of the late 1960s and 1970s ("Purple People Eaters"), the Cowboys of the 1960s and 1970s ("Doomsday Defense"), the Dolphins of the early 1970s ("No Name Defense"), the Steelers of the 1970s ("Steel Curtain"), the Broncos of the late 1970s ("Orange Crush"), the Bears of 1985, the Giants of the 1990s, and most recently the Ravens of 2000.

Considering these defenses, "experts" typically conclude that the all-time best is either the Steel Curtain or the 1985 Bears. I emphatically disagree. No defense in the history of pro football has shut down the opposition as well, and for as long as the Purple People Eaters, during the Vikings' glory years.

I know, I know, the Vikings never won the big one. So what. It is irrelevant to the question posed. It is not a responsive answer to the question, what team had the best DEFENSE of all-time? To determine what TEAM is the best of all-time, you would have to consider additional factors, such as special teams, coaching, depth of the bench, and of course the offensive unit. To determine what team had the best defense of all-time, you need to consider how well a defense shut down its opponents, and how long they could sustain its dominance. Any team can have career year. See the Falcons of 1977 (more on this in a moment), and perhaps the Ravens of 2000.

The best statistics to look at to determine how well a defense did, is simply how many points and how many yards a defense gave up per game. As for points allowed per game, going back to 1950, looking over 51 seasons of the pro football, ONLY 38 defensive units have been able to hold their opponents under an average of 13 points per game, which I'll call the "Level of Dominance".

The Packers of the 1960s were able to reach this level of dominance twice, in 1962 and in 1966. The Cowboys of the 1960s and 1970s--spanning a twenty-year period--NEVER accomplished this feat. They had some good defenses, but "Doomsday"? The Rams of the 1960s also failed to ever reach the Level of Dominance. The Dolphins of the early 1970s were impressive, holding their opponents under the Level of Dominance three consecutive years, in 1971-73. The Steelers of the 1970s were even more dominating, reaching the Level of Dominance four times, in 1972, 1975, 1976, and 1978. The Broncos of the late 1970s reached the Level of Dominance twice, in 1977 and 1978. The Bears of the mid-1980s reached this level twice in 1985 and 1986. The Giants of the 1990s got under the Level of Dominance 1 time, and barely, in 1993.

And then, there are the Purple People Eaters, standing apart from all the rest. The Vikings of the late 1960s and 1970s reached the Level of Dominance SIX times, in 1969-71, 1973, and 1975-76. What is equally as impressive is how far under the Level of Dominance opponents were held by the Vikings over these years. Since 1950, the best single-year performance for fewest points allowed per game was, curiously, carried out by the 1977 Falcons, who held their opponents to an average of only 9.2 points per game. (This Falcons team had a sad offense, and it went 7-7 during the year. During the 1977 season the Falcons lost a game to the Bills 3-0.) After the 1977 Falcons, the best performance was turned in by the 1969 Vikings, holding opponents to only 9.5 points per game. The Vikings held their opponents under 10 points per game again in 1971. No other defensive unit has ever held its opponents under 10 points per game twice.

What about the fewest yards per game? Since 1950, the record is held by the Vikings of 1969. That defense gave up only 223.14 yards per game. The next season, 1970, the Vikings yielded only 225.93 yards per game, which is third best since 1950 (second best is held by the 1971 Colts). Compare these numbers to the 2000 Ravens' 259.06 yards per game, the 1985 Bears 288.63 yards per game, and the Steelers' best of 1976 (a year they failed to win the Super Bowl) of 260.43 yards per game. In 1972, a

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year the Purple People Eaters failed to reach the Level of Dominance, the Vikings STILL held opponents to only 270.93 yards per game, which is better than the 1985 Bears performance.

Only four times since 1950 has a defense finished the season being number one against the pass and number one against the run. Of all the great defenses discussed above, only one achieved this amazing feat. It was the Purple People Eaters of 1975. (That was probably the Vikings best season in its history, and it took a blown pass interference call--Drew Pearson pushing cornerback Nate Wright to the ground to catch Roger Staubach's desperation pass--to keep them from yet another Super Bowl.) The other defenses to be ranked number one against both the pass and the rush were the 1954 Browns, the 1959 Giants, and the 1991 Eagles.

The Purple People Eaters were a defensive unit unparalleled. Their motto was "meet you at the quarterback". This defensive unit can boast that it has the player with the most interceptions of all-time, Paul Krause with 81, and the most fumble recoveries of all-time, Jim Marshall with 29. Also, Alan Page is tied for the record for the most safeties in a season, with 2 in 1971.

Somehow, only two of the members of the most impressive defense in the history of pro football are members of the Hall of Fame, Page and Krause. Most people are aware of Page's rare talent and his achievements. Most notably, in 1971, Page became the first defensive player to ever win the MVP award. When Page was only 22, Bart Starr said "He's the best tackle I've ever faced." For some strange reason, Paul Krause was not immediately elected to the Hall of Fame, despite his credentials which scream immediate induction. Eventually, however, he was elected.

By comparison, the Steele Curtain defense has four defensive players in the Hall of Fame (Mel Blount, Joe Greene, Jack Ham, Jack Lambert). For some reason, the so-called Doomsday Defense of the Cowboys has four defensive players in the Hall of Fame (Herb Adderley, Bob Lilly, Mel Renfro, and Randy White).

At least 2, if not 3, other Vikings defensive players from the Purple People Eaters era deserve to be in the Hall of Fame. Carl Eller and Jim Marshall deserve to be elected. Also, Bobby Bryant deserves serious consideration to be so elected.

In a 1968 game, Bart Starr, who had won 2 consecutive Super Bowls, was sacked 3 times by Eller and also watched Eller recover a fumble and block a field goal. Starr said, "Doug Atkins, Deacon Jones and Gino Marchetti are pretty special, but Carl Eller combines the best qualities of all of them. Of Eller, Starr added "He has it all: strength, excellent speed for a big man, quickness on the pass rush and agility to defend against the run. He's the finest defensive end I've ever seen." Starr was sacked 8 times by the Vikings in a game in 1969. In his career, Eller registered 134 sacks, recovered 23 fumbles, and blocked 10 kicks.

Marshall is the holder of two coveted records that may never be broken. Unbeknownst to most football fans, Marshall is football's true iron-man. He played in a record 270 consecutive games. In addition to recovering more fumbles than any defensive player in history, Marshall has 127 career sacks. Hall of Fame offensive lineman Jim Langer has said "[I]t was essential that the uncovered linemen in the Dolphin's line be looking to see what Jim was up to! In other words, when you prepare to play a defensive team you must account for the playmakers on the defensive team that can ruin your offensive game plan. Jim was one of those players."

The sacks and fumbles totals for the Hall of Fame defensive linemen for the Steel Curtain and the Doomsday Defense (Greene, White, Lilly) don't measure up, or even come close to the totals put up by Eller and Marshall. For example, "Mean" Joe Greene had only 66 sacks and 16 fumble recoveries in his career.

Another member of the Vikings defensive unit, whose name is rarely, if ever, heard any more, who performed at a Hall of Fame level is Bobby Bryant. Bryant's career numbers are every bit as impressive as the totals for Blount, Adderley, and Renfro. Bryant had 51 career interceptions, was a solid punt returner, and he came up with many big plays for the Vikings in the post-season. Blount had 57 career interceptions, Adderley had 48, and Renfro had 52. Bryant stacks up very well against other Hall of Fame defensive backs who were his contemporaries: Lem Barney (56 picks), Willie Brown (54), Ken Houston (49), and Jimmy Johnson (47).

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The Purple People Eaters did not win a Super Bowl game. But, no defensive unit has terrorized pro football like the Minnesota Vikings did in the late 1960s and 1970s. It's about time they get the credit they deserve.