



## FFU201: Stud RB Theory

 December 1, 2008

There are two main thoughts here as it relates to the RB. Some people say this is the most important position to draft. I say in some cases that may be true due to the fact you can start multiple RB's and only 1 QB (the second most important position on a team). But all that has been changing. I will present you with two theories, and let you decide what is best for you and your team!

### Theory 1: Top 20 RB's

The landscape of fantasy football has changed over the years and it seems that every year more and more owners are realizing the importance of RBs. When I first started playing fantasy football over 10 years ago, QBs seemed to fly off the draft board. It wasn't as important to grab top RBs as early because they were still available after the first few rounds. These days, with RBs going early and often, you can no longer wait a few rounds to grab one. If you do, you'll be left with the bottom of the barrel.

The Stud RB Theory, in a nutshell, is to grab 2 RBs with your 1st two picks and even look to add another RB or two as early as possible to build depth and to expand trading options. Since the majority of fantasy leagues allow owners to start at least 2 RBs, there are only so many to go around, so you have to act early.

Some fantasy owners will argue that QBs outscore RBs, so why not grab them early? The main reason is supply and demand. Since most leagues only start 1 QB and 2 RBs, in a 10-team league, each team can draft 3 starting NFL QBs, but only need to start 1. While each team can only have 3 starting RBs and must start 2, it doesn't leave you with much coverage for bye weeks and injuries. Don't forget the fact that after the top 20 RBs are drafted you begin to sudden decline in talent at the position...or the dreaded RB by committee. This means that there could be 2 solid starting RBs per fantasy team, but if you draft another position and another team drafts a 3rd RB (which is a likely scenario in this day and age), you could be left with only 1 top 20 RB. After Tom Brady's monster season in 07, he certainly deserves to be drafted in the first round (Peyton Manning could also merit consideration), but after that, the difference in the value of QBs isn't very big.

Yet other fantasy owners will say, "Why draft a lesser tiered RB when a top 10 WR is available?" Most NFL teams have 2 solid WRs, while some even have 3, thus there are at least 60 WRs that have fantasy value, or about 6 per fantasy team. Most leagues allow teams to start 3 WRs, so you could easily have 3 solid options sitting on the bench. I will admit that Terrell Owens and Randy Moss (Marvin Harrison could also merit consideration) put up such strong numbers that they certainly merit taking over a lesser-tiered RB, but those guys are the exception to the rule. You can usually find top 30 WRs sitting on the draft board in the 7th and 8th rounds, so you can certainly wait on WRs and still end up with some solid options.

Another reason to draft RBs, and probably the most important reason, you can likely grab your QB or WR a couple rounds later, and have a good chance at getting the one you want, or at least a comparable one. We will stick with the 10-team model and pretend we are picking somewhere in the middle. If you draft a QB first, you could end up with a team consisting of Ben Roethlisberger, Rudi Johnson, Julius Jones, Chad Johnson and Randy Moss. I don't think that team is a bad squad, though I wouldn't be too thrilled about starting Jones every week since he seems to be losing TDs to T.J. Duckett. Now, let's draft a couple RBs first and wait on QB. You could end up with Stephen Jackson, Marion Barber, Bernard Berrien, Wes Welker and Brett Farve. While Farve may be a downgrade over Roethlisberger (though Farve could certainly out-perform Roethlisberger). Jackson is a huge upgrade over Jones and most owners consider Moss and Welker to be evenly matched (as long as Tom Brady is throwing to them). I would rather have the 2nd team. If you really expect Farve to have a bounce back season in 2008, you could certainly find him available in the 3rd round, so there is no need to reach for him in the 1st.

The more teams you add to the league, the fewer RBs there are to go around. In a 12-team league, not every team will be able to grab 2 of the top 20 RBs. Looking at 2007, 17 RBs were taken in the 1st two rounds. In a 14-team league it is even more magnified, with 20 RBs taken in the 1st two rounds (which shows that the cutoff of top RBs is about 20). Not quite half the teams will have 2 top 20 RBs, so there will be quite a few teams scrambling for RBs. The importance of running backs forces those scrambling owners to grab the lesser RBs early. This is evident as 27 RBs are gone by the end of the 4th round (27 of the first 48 picks are RBs). So while these owners are grabbing lesser-tiered RBs, you can be grabbing top 10 WRs and QBs.

As more and more fantasy owners realize the importance of RBs and start drafting them like they're going out of style, this theory becomes more important. Don't be left with a RB that is part of a RB by committee as your starter. Start your draft off with RBs and you will glance at your roster with pride and be well on your way to competing for your league championship.

## Theory 2: RB's by committee

There are always new twists, strategies and trends, but at its core, it's always been running back/running back in the first two rounds. I've spent a lot of time talking about how fantasy football is all about minimizing risk. If nothing else, you *knew* a team's main running back was touching the ball at least 20 to 30 times a game. You didn't know that about a wide receiver.

Well, for the first time in the decade or so, it's best player available (at least in the second round). Too many running backs are in time shares. Too many quarterbacks are about the same skill level. And look at last year's scoring leaders(2007): Of the top 30 players in standard scoring, only seven were running backs. Eight were wide receivers, 14 were quarterbacks, plus the Chargers D/ST sneaked in there, as well.

The reason for the running back/running back rule in previous years was simple. You score in real football by touching the ball. So you want guys who touch the ball as often as possible. That would be running backs, and then quarterbacks (RB before QB because you often can play three RBs to only one QB, so it's a matter of positional depth).

The idea is also this: Fantasy sports, specifically fantasy football, are about minimizing risk. Luck will always have some part in it, so when you can minimize risk, you have a better chance of success. And you know running backs and quarterbacks will touch the ball.

At least, that was the thought. But with the move to more running back by committees, you know running backs will touch the ball, but you just don't know which one.

Consider this fact from ESPN Researcher Jason Vida:

“Last season, the player who led his team in rushing attempts accounted for fewer than 54 percent of his team's attempts, the lowest percentage in the past 10 NFL seasons. At the same time, a team's *second*-leading ball carrier (the player with the second-most rushing attempts on a team) got the ball on more than 23 percent of team rushing attempts, the *highest* percentage in the past 10 NFL seasons.” The bottom line: **In 2007, NFL teams gave fewer carries to their leading rusher and more carries to their second backfield option than in any of the past 10 seasons.**

Two more points from Jason: “Only three running backs averaged 20 carries a game last year (Willie Parker, Clinton Portis and Edgerrin James). In the previous four years, at least seven runners got at least 20 carries a game.”

Meanwhile, in 2007, LaDainian Tomlinson led the league with 1,474 rushing yards, and Clinton Portis led the league with 325 carries. These totals are the lowest for a league leader in each category since 1990.

More than half the teams in the NFL have at least a somewhat murky distribution of the touches (Atlanta, Carolina, Chicago, Cincinnati, Dallas, Denver, Detroit, Houston, Jacksonville, Miami, Minnesota, New England, New Orleans, New York Giants, Oakland, Pittsburgh, Seattle, Tampa Bay and Tennessee). Sure, some of them -- including the Vikings, Giants and Jaguars -- have multiple productive backs, but the point remains the same. With less that is certain about running backs, the less reliant we should be on them in the early rounds.

As a result, I say you go running back in the first round, and then it is best player available. Points come from everywhere, but they still seem to come most consistently from running backs. The difference now is that the point differential is not as great and there are more running backs contributing to point totals (but contributing less in terms of total points) than before.

## **In Conclusion**

So you can see both theory's are sound and make sense. What you need to ask your self is "What type of season is this year going to be; a RB by committee or a Top 20 RB theory season?" Just to give you some stats to help: For the 2008 season it looks like it will wrap up as a Top 20 RB theory season. This will be due to as of week 14 there were 13 RB's, 15 QB's and only 2 WR's ion the top 30.