

Watching the Super Bowl? A Primer on YPAs

By Allen Barra

Thirty years ago this Super Bowl, Bud Goode, the father of pro-football analysis, shook up the NFL when Sports Illustrated's Joe Marshall got him to reveal his projection for the Super Bowl. Mr. Goode (pronounced "goody") had been researching sports since 1959, and his computer didn't hesitate. The Miami Dolphins, it said, should defeat the Minnesota Vikings by at least nine points. (The Vikings were favored by three; ST's Tex Maule took them to win by four.) Miami won, 24-7.

Mr. Goode—who has, since 1985, done research for 21 NFL franchises, including 10 Super Bowl teams—has always insisted that computers don't win games, people do. "But the people who win the games are usually the smartest people, and the smartest people know how to make best use of computers." And, he might have added, the smartest people often come to Bud Goode and his computers. Some of those smart people over the years have included George Allen (Mr. Goode's first client with both the Rams and Redskins), Bill Parcells and Dick Vermeil.

Among Mr. Goode's revelations in 1974 was the importance of yards per pass attempt, meaning the number of net yards a team gains passing divided by the number of attempts (a sack is regarded as an attempt). He told Mr. Marshall, "When I die, my tombstone can say 'Here Lies Goode. He Told the World About Average Yards per Pass Attempt.'" YPA, as it came to be known among statisticians, is still one of the best kept secrets in the football world. "You still don't see it referred to very often," says Mr. Goode, "even though most of the great offensive teams in NFL history ranked high in the category."

Mr. Goode stresses that he's not talking about total yards gained passing. "I'm talking about the efficiency of the passing game," he says. "The best teams don't always have to pile on the passing yards. Passing is risky. As Bear Bryant

used to say, 'Three things can happen when you go back to pass, and only one of them is good.' He meant that a sack or an interception can negate the value of a big pass play. The best teams often get their points with relatively few passes and then spend much of the game running the clock down with running plays."

YPA is an equally potent indicator of defense. "The 2000 Baltimore Ravens and the 2002 Tampa Bay Bucs had two of the lowest YPA averages since I began keeping stats," says Mr. Goode.

"If you knew nothing else about those teams, you could look at their YPA on defense and know that they'd have winning records."

Another Goode goody is his assessment that an interception is generally about three times more costly than a fumble. From this, he reached the seemingly contradictory conclusion that "Fumbles can actually be an indication of power. The better teams tend to run the ball more often—particularly in the second half, when they're winning—and thus tend to fumble more."

"On TV, the commentators always put fumbles and interceptions together under the heading of 'Turnovers,' as if they're the same thing. It would be almost like taking home runs and doubles and lumping them together under 'extra base hits' without explaining that a home run is better," he says. "It drives a statistician nuts."

Mr. Goode refers to Yards per Pass Attempt as "Killer Stat 1." He has also developed an even more lethal statistic, or "Killer Stat 2"—Points per Pass Attempt, which simply means the number

of points a team averages per pass attempt. (You can check out his Web site at BudGoodeSports.com.)

Now 81, Mr. Goode currently consults for two NFL teams, one AFC and one NFC. "I can't tell you who they are," he says, "but I can tell you that not too long ago two of my clients met in the Super Bowl. Which one won? 'The one who paid the closest attention to my research.'"

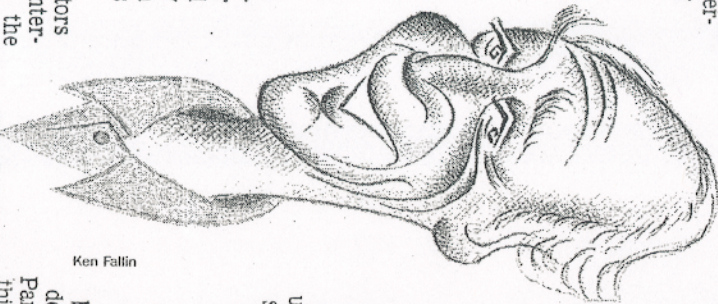
What do Mr. Goode's numbers say about the Patriots and Panthers, who face off in the Super Bowl on Sunday? He is quick to say, "I do not make predictions. You can't predict a coach's degree of preparation or a team's mental state at the time of a game. Last year, Oakland and Tampa Bay should have been a competitive matchup. Who knew that Raiders coach Bill Callahan would have used the same game plan designed by Tampa Bay coach Jon Gruden when he was at Oakland?"

(Oakland, a two-point pick by most prognosticators at kickoff, lost 48-21.)

"The key this year should be the way the Patriots' pass defense matches up with the Panthers' pass offense. Put it this way: The preponderance of defensive stats falls on New England's side."

Mr. Goode's projection? "The numbers make a strong case that New England is seven points better." That, perhaps not coincidentally, is the current line. "The guys who make those lines," says Mr. Goode, "know where to go for their stats."

Mr. Barra last wrote on the Bowl Championship Series.



Ken Fallin

Bud Goode