

denver broncos running backs history

Denver Broncos running backs history is a rich narrative that intertwines the evolution of the game with the triumphs and challenges faced by a franchise that has seen its share of iconic players and unforgettable moments. Over the years, the running back position has been critical to the Denver Broncos' offensive identity, reflecting broader changes in the NFL and the team's commitment to a robust ground game. This article will delve into the history of running backs in Denver, highlighting key players, memorable seasons, and the overall impact these athletes have had on the franchise.

Early Years: The Foundation of the Run Game

The history of the Denver Broncos running backs can be traced back to the team's inception in 1960. During its formative years, the Broncos struggled to find consistency, but a few key players began to carve out a niche in the running game.

The 1960s: The Inception of a Legacy

- Floyd Little: One of the first standout players for the Broncos was Floyd Little, who played from 1967 to 1975. Little was a three-time Pro Bowler and is often credited with helping to put the Broncos on the map. His combination of speed and power made him a dual threat, and he became the first player in franchise history to have his number retired.
- A New Offensive Strategy: During this time, the Broncos relied heavily on the running game, primarily due to the limitations of their passing attack. The success of Little set the stage for future running backs in the organization.

The 1970s and 1980s: The Rise of the Ground Game

As the Broncos moved into the 1970s and 1980s, the team began to establish a more formidable running game, aided by a series of talented backs who would leave their mark on the franchise.

Key Players of the Era

- Otis Armstrong: Playing from 1973 to 1977, Armstrong was known for his explosive speed and ability to break tackles. He became the first Bronco to rush for over 1,000 yards in a season, achieving this milestone in 1974.
- Craig Morton and the Two-Back System: The Broncos began to utilize a two-back system, allowing for greater versatility in their offensive scheme. Morton, the quarterback, benefited from this strategy, which emphasized a balanced attack.

- The 1980s Era of Dominance: The Broncos made their first Super Bowl appearance in 1977, setting the stage for a more competitive team in the following decade. The running backs during this time were pivotal in sustaining drives and helping the team reach three Super Bowls in the 1980s.

The 1990s: A Decade of Excellence

The 1990s marked a transformative period for the Denver Broncos. The acquisition of a legendary quarterback and the emergence of a remarkable running back changed the trajectory of the franchise.

Terrell Davis: A Hall of Fame Career

- Rise to Stardom: Terrell Davis, drafted in the sixth round in 1995, emerged as one of the league's premier running backs. He became a critical component of the Broncos' success in the late 1990s, earning NFL MVP honors in 1998.

- Record-Breaking Seasons: Davis rushed for over 2,000 yards in 1998, becoming only the fourth player in NFL history to achieve this milestone. His performance propelled the Broncos to back-to-back Super Bowl victories in 1997 and 1998, solidifying his place in history.

- Impact on the Franchise: The Broncos' offensive scheme under head coach Mike Shanahan allowed Davis to thrive, demonstrating the effectiveness of a power-running game complemented by play-action passes.

Supporting Cast

- Mike Anderson and Olandis Gary: Both running backs contributed significantly during the late 1990s, showcasing the Broncos' depth at the position. Anderson won the NFL Offensive Rookie of the Year in 2000, while Gary stepped up during Davis's injuries, proving that the system could produce successful backs regardless of individual star power.

The 2000s: Transition and Challenges

As the new millennium dawned, the Broncos faced challenges in maintaining their dominance. The running back position saw a mix of talent and inconsistency during this time.

Key Players and Shifts in Strategy

- Clinton Portis: Acquired in a trade from the Washington Redskins, Portis quickly became a fan favorite in Denver. His ability to make defenders miss and his speed made him a dynamic player. He rushed for over 1,500 yards in 2003 before being traded after just two seasons.

- The Search for Stability: After Portis's departure, the Broncos struggled to find a consistent running back. Players like Tatum Bell and Mike Bell had their moments, but injuries and underperformance plagued the position.

The 2010s: A New Era of Offense

The arrival of quarterback Peyton Manning in 2012 ushered in a new era for the Denver Broncos, changing the dynamics of the offense and the running back position.

Knowshon Moreno and the Power of a Dual Threat

- Knowshon Moreno: Drafted in 2009, Moreno emerged as the lead back during Manning's tenure. His ability to catch passes out of the backfield complemented Manning's passing attack effectively.

- Super Bowl Appearance: Moreno played a pivotal role in the Broncos' Super Bowl XLVIII run, showcasing his versatility as both a runner and a receiver.

The Committee Approach

- Running Back by Committee: The Broncos shifted towards a committee approach, utilizing multiple backs like Montee Ball, Ronnie Hillman, and C.J. Anderson. This strategy allowed the team to keep players fresh and better manage the physical demands of the position.

- C.J. Anderson's Breakout: Anderson emerged as a key player during the 2015 season, helping the Broncos win Super Bowl 50. His combination of power and agility made him a valuable asset in the postseason.

Recent Developments in the 2020s

The landscape of the NFL continues to evolve, and the Denver Broncos running backs' history reflects these changes. The franchise has seen a mix of high draft picks and veteran acquisitions in their quest for a reliable ground game.

Current Roster and Future Prospects

- Melvin Gordon and Javonte Williams: The addition of Gordon provided experience and skill, while Williams, drafted in 2021, showcased immense potential as a workhorse back. Their dual-threat capability presents an exciting opportunity for the Broncos to revitalize their running game.

- The Role of Analytics: As the game becomes increasingly data-driven, the Broncos' coaching staff is likely to utilize analytics to maximize the potential of their running backs, identifying trends and

strategies that can lead to success on the ground.

Conclusion: A Legacy of Excellence

The Denver Broncos running backs history is a testament to the franchise's ability to adapt and thrive through various eras of football. From the early days with Floyd Little to the record-setting performances of Terrell Davis, and the recent dynamic duo of Gordon and Williams, the Broncos have consistently produced talent at the running back position. As the team continues to evolve, the legacy of its running backs will undoubtedly play a crucial role in shaping the future of the franchise. The rich history ensures that the running back position will always be a focal point for the Denver Broncos, driving the team towards success.

Frequently Asked Questions

Who is the all-time leading rusher for the Denver Broncos?

The all-time leading rusher for the Denver Broncos is Terrell Davis, who amassed 7,607 rushing yards during his career with the team from 1995 to 2001.

What impact did Terrell Davis have on the Broncos' Super Bowl victories?

Terrell Davis was instrumental in the Broncos' Super Bowl victories in 1997 and 1998, earning Super Bowl MVP honors in Super Bowl XXXII for his 157 rushing yards and three touchdowns.

Which Denver Broncos running back holds the record for the most rushing touchdowns in a single season?

The record for the most rushing touchdowns in a single season by a Denver Broncos running back is held by Terrell Davis, who scored 21 touchdowns in the 1998 season.

How did the Broncos' running back situation change after the departure of Terrell Davis?

After Terrell Davis' departure due to injuries, the Broncos relied on a rotation of running backs, including Mike Anderson and Tatum Bell, who both had successful seasons, but none matched Davis' impact.

What role did the running back position play in the Broncos' offensive strategy during the Peyton Manning era?

During the Peyton Manning era, the Broncos' offensive strategy relied heavily on a versatile running back duo, with players like Knowshon Moreno and Montee Ball contributing to both the ground game and pass protection, enhancing the overall offensive scheme.

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