

Andre Reed and the Hall of Fame

A Way of Evaluating Pass Receivers

By Keith Joyner

I was watching a Denver-Buffalo Monday Night Football game about three years ago and heard something that made my ears perk up. After Andre Reed made a catch for a first down, Dan Dierdorf said that most people would be amazed to find out that Reed had 600 pass receptions, and he suggested that with that number of catches, Reed was probably headed for the Hall of Fame. I have to admit that I was surprised that Andre Reed had that many receptions. The Hall of Fame comment took me by surprise as well. I had never considered Andre Reed a potential Hall of Fame candidate, so I decided to examine the issue further.

In reviewing Andre Reed's Hall of Fame qualifications, I always come back to Bill James. Ever since I was a teenager, I have been reading James' baseball books, and a constant theme in his books is perspective. Anytime he reviews a player, team, or era, he always tries to maintain historical perspective. In reviewing a ballplayer, he will try to view the player's accomplishments in relation to the other players of the era. If many ballplayers hit .350 (as happened during the 1920's) hitting .350 isn't as significant an accomplishment as hitting .350 in an era where no one else does (as happened in the 60's) One of the first issues I thought I had to face in determining whether or not Andre Reed's stats were of Hall of Fame caliber was the issue of perspective.

Andre Reed at the time had 600 receptions. He now has 766, but you have to ask yourself: Do 766 receptions, made during an era where more receivers are catching more passes than ever, qualify Andre Reed for Canton?

Since the advent of the ball control pass offense, reception totals have increased steadily almost yearly. More receivers are catching more passes than at any other time in history. In 1965, Johnny Morris led the league with 93 receptions, which was 28 receptions more than his nearest competitor. In 1995, 10 receivers had more than 93 receptions. While 1995 may seem an extreme example, it is illustrative of the sheer volume of receptions being made in this era. If we are to measure Andre Reed's career accomplishments, we cannot simply line them up against receivers from the 70's and say "OK, Andre Reed caught more career passes than Harold Jackson, therefore he must have had a better career." Instead, we need to measure Reed's accomplishments against his contemporaries, measure receivers from other eras against their's, and then compare the two.

In attempting to create a system to measure receivers, I wanted it to meet a few criteria. First, the system was to measure wide receivers only, not tight ends or running backs. In addition, I wanted a system that accounted for all receivers in a year, not just the top receivers. I also didn't want to only measure receptions. Yardage is just as important, and needs to be included in an overall measurement of a receiver's worth. This is the system: Take all the receivers for the league for a year, add up their receptions, and divide that number by the number of teams in the league. This number represents the average number of catches per team. Then take a receiver from that year and divide his receptions by the average number of catches per team that year, and multiply that by 100 for ease of measurement. For example, in his rookie season of 1985, Andre Reed caught 48 passes. The average for a team that year was 128.2 receptions, so $48/128.2 = .374 \times 100 = 37.4$. This is the number of reception points Reed gets for that year. I did the same process for yardage. I measured all of the top receivers for every year, and compiled career totals for 166 receivers.

What this system of measurement does is place weights on each season so that a receiver's accomplishments are kept in perspective. A Hall of Fame receiver should set a certain standard of excellence that other receivers do not reach, or, failing that, he should maintain a certain level of

excellence for substantially longer than his contemporaries. With this system, a receiver can be measured not only versus his contemporaries, but also against receivers from other eras.

Having presented the overall statistical measure of Andre Reed's career versus other receivers, we should also review these statistics in closer detail. One could reasonably argue that there is more to a Hall of Fame candidate than his statistics, and that there are other issues that should be considered. I would agree, and with all due credit to Bill James, I will use the statistical measurements in conjunction with what he calls The Keltner List. The Keltner list is a series of questions that James used to help him determine whether a player is of Hall of Fame caliber (the list was originally designed to help determine if a baseball player named Ken Keltner belonged in the Hall of Fame). With some modifications, it is an excellent vehicle to measure Andre Reed's qualifications for Hall of Fame status. The questions are.

- 1) *Was he ever regarded as the best player in football?*
- 2) *Was he the best player on his team?*
- 3) *Was he the best player in his conference at his position?*
- 4) *Was he the best player in football at his position?*
- 5) *Did he have an impact in any playoff or playoff caliber games?*
- 6) *If he retired today, would he be the best player in football not in the Hall of Fame?*
- 7) *Are most players at his position with comparable stats in the Hall of Fame?*
- 8) *If he retired today, would he be the best player at his position not in the Hall of Fame?*
- 9) *How many All-Pro type seasons did he have? How many Pro Bowls did he play in? Did most other players at his position who made the Hall of Fame play in a comparable amount of games or have a comparable amount of All-Pro or Pro Bowl seasons?*
- 10) *Did the player possess any other qualities which would not be measured by his statistics?*

Let's examine Andre Reed.

- 1) *Was he ever regarded as the best player in football?*

This is a very high standard, to be sure, but no, I don't think anyone has ever suggested it.

- 2) *Was he the best player on his team?*

Andre Reed would be considered one of the best players on his team, but I don't think he would be considered the best. Bruce Smith is thought to be one of the finest defensive linemen of all time, Thurman Thomas is one of the two or three best running backs of his era, and Jim Kelly was one of the best quarterbacks in football. Andre would probably have to be ranked fourth by this measurement.

- 3) *Was he the best player in his conference at his position?*

- 4) *Was he the best player in football at his position?*

I decided to answer these questions concurrently. Andre Reed has never been considered the best receiver of his era, what with competing directly with Jerry Rice. To decide the race for second best receiver of this era, I decided to look at the All-Pro teams. The Professional Football Writers Association of America and the Associated Press vote for All-Pro teams every year. These teams are supposed to represent the best players at their position. Two wide receivers are named on each team. Jerry Rice, whose career started at the same time as Reed's did, has been named All-Pro in every year except two. This leaves only one All-Pro slot per year for most of the years that Reed played in. Andre Reed has only been voted to an All-Pro team once, during the 1989 season.

The best receivers of Reed's era (1985-1997) are generally considered to be Rice, Michael Irvin, Sterling Sharpe, Andre Rison, Mark Clayton, Mark Duper, Tim Brown, Art Monk, Steve Largent, Cris Carter, Herman Moore, and Reed himself. With the exceptions of Largent, Duper, Clayton, Brown, and Reed, all of these receivers are NFC receivers, and most of these receivers were the All-Pro receivers during Reed's career. As such, it would seem that the NFC had the better receivers. That being the case, you could probably make an argument for Reed being the AFC's best receiver of that era. With Duper, Clayton, Brown, Largent, Haywood Jeffires, Ernest Givins, and Anthony Miller as his chief competition, you would probably find that Reed ranks as good, or better, year in and year out. He was voted as the AFC Pro Bowl starter four times and voted in as a backup three other times in his 13 seasons, and no one else in the conference comes close to that. For the honor of the best receiver in the AFC over the last 13 seasons, Andre Reed gets my vote.

5) *Did he have an impact on any playoff or playoff caliber games?*

Andre Reed made a number of large contributions in big games for the Bills. He was an integral part of Buffalo's comeback vs. Houston in the 1994 AFC Wildcard game. He caught two touchdown passes in a 1991 AFC Divisional playoff game against the Chiefs. He also had a big game against Miami during the 1995 season that helped clinch a playoff spot for the Bills. The overriding memories I have of Andre Reed in the postseason, though, are in Super Bowls XXV and XXVI. In Super Bowl XXVI, Reed disagreed with an official's call, got mad, and tossed his helmet down in anger. This was pointed out to the official by one of the Redskins' players, and it cost Buffalo a 15-yard penalty. The penalty knocked the Bills out of field goal range at a point in the game where a field goal could have helped swing the momentum toward the Bills.

In Super Bowl XXV, the Giants defensive game plan was to stop the big play, and force the Bills offense to put together a drive in order to score. They were very successful in achieving this. The Bills that year had James Lofton as their deep threat. Lofton's repertoire of pass patterns consisted of a go pattern and a deep out. The Giants took away the deep out pattern all game, and the Bills hit the go pattern successfully only once. On that play Lofton was covered, but the defender was only able to knock the ball into the air, where Lofton caught it on a rebound.

Lofton finished with one catch for 61 yards. This left two other options in the Bills receiving corps. Andre Reed and Keith McKeller, the Bills tight end. McKeller was a pedestrian receiver, so therefore Reed had to be the focal point of the Bills passing game. Through the first quarter and part of the second, Reed performed admirably, catching passes over the middle and keeping the Bills drives alive. In the second quarter, Reed caught a pass on a crossing route. He evaded one tackler, then was nailed by another. Reed struggled to his feet, and after the game said he had never been hit harder. It showed. Reed was still the focal point of the passing game, but he dropped three key passes throughout the rest of the game, two on 3rd down when the Bills needed the catch to keep the drive alive. He short armed balls in order to protect his ribs from the Giant defenders. It is my feeling that when the Bills offense needed him the most, Andre Reed, the man who once appeared in a magazine ad stating "You're going to get hit either way, so you might as well catch the ball," did not do so. The Bills offense refocused its attack with Thurman Thomas at the center, but was unable to overcome the loss of their entire passing attack, and lost 20-19.

6) *If he retired today, would he be the best player in football not in the Hall of Fame?*

By my estimation, there are many players who were held in higher esteem during their era than Andre Reed is held in his. Dwight Stevenson was the Gale Sayers of offensive linemen, a man who only played six years but made such an impact that he is considered one of the best linemen ever. Ray Guy was the best punter ever, with the possible exception of Sammy Baugh, and is the only pure punter to ever garner any serious Hall of Fame consideration. Mick Tingelhoff was voted All-Pro for seven straight years in the 60's, five of which were unanimous selections. Del Shofner was voted All-Pro unanimously five times in six years. Benny Friedman was the best passer of the 20's and has been kept out of the Hall due to issues other than on field accomplishments. All of these players were considered to be by far the best at their positions at some point during their careers. Andre Reed has not been considered to be the best during his career, and as such would not rank ahead of any of these men.

7) *Are most players with comparable stats at his position in the Hall of Fame?*

Andre Reed's career total for reception and yardage points is 1009. He is thus currently tied for 27th all time. This places him in the company of receivers such as Haven Moses, John Stallworth, Reggie Rucker, Wes Chandler, and Ken Burrough, with whom he is tied. It puts him just ahead of Elroy Hirsch, John Gilliam, Carroll Dale, Gene Washington, and Dante Lavelli. Of all of the receivers just mentioned, only Hirsch and Lavelli are in the Hall of Fame, and one could argue that they were inducted more for being one of the great receivers of their eras than for their career totals.

My next thought was that it was entirely possible that I was comparing apples to oranges. In order to obtain a more accurate assessment of his productivity, shouldn't he be measured against the same type of receiver? One of the first things that I noticed after compiling the list was the large amount of deep threat receivers on the list (24 out of the top 53 are pure deep threats, and another nine are considered combination/deep threats). This illustrates the fact that teams have always placed a premium on yardage

as opposed to catches. In other words, if a receiver can catch the ball, great, but that receiver will always lose his job to a receiver who can get the ball deep, even if the deep threat cannot catch as well as the possession receiver. This is probably because coaches feel they can always teach a deep threat receiver how to catch the ball, but they will never be able to teach the possession receiver to get open deep. Or, as John Madden so eloquently puts it: "Speed kills. You can't coach it. You can't teach it. You better draft it."

Unless you are a great possession receiver, your career will probably not last long, as coaches will always be looking to replace you. If you are a great possession receiver, you will, barring injury, play for a long time, which raises the bar for all career totals for possession receivers. Andre Reed has been a possession receiver for most of his career (although he has served as a more of a deep threat for the past three years). The next step I took was to divide the career productivity list into three categories of receivers: Possession, deep threat, and combination.

I originally decided to place Reed into the combination list due to the change in his role from a possession receiver to a deep threat in the Buffalo offense the past few years. He ranks 12th on the all time list of combination receivers. There are five Hall of Famers in the combination receivers list. Reed ranks ahead of Dante Lavelli, Bobby Mitchell, and Wayne Millner, and ranks behind Hutson and Largent. He is also well behind another bonafide Hall of Famer, Jerry Rice. One could reasonably argue that Lavelli, Mitchell, and Miliner did not make the Hall of Fame based on their career stats (one would be hard pressed to argue any reason Millner should be in the Hall), so that doesn't help Reed's case.

The receivers who were inducted in the Hall of Fame based on career stats were mostly the pure possession receivers. If you place Reed on the possession list, he would be in 6th place, just two points behind Ahmad Rashad. He would, however, be well behind the four receivers on the possession list who are in the Hall: Charley Taylor, Charlie Joiner, Raymond Berry, and Fred Biletnikoff. He is also well behind Art Monk, who will probably be inducted soon after he is eligible. Based on this, we can say that most receivers with Reed's stats are not in the Hall.

8) If he retired today, would he be the best player at his position not in the Hall of Fame?

If you measure this according to career productivity, the answer is an emphatic no. There is more to assessing greatness than career totals, however, so I devised another system of measurement to help answer this question. The system gives one point for every All-Pro season, another .25 points if it was a unanimous All-Pro season. I also gave each receiver one point for every Pro Bowl season, and another .25 for every Pro Bowl game he started.

Andre Reed ranks very high in the Pro Bowl list, placing 6th all time. He doesn't do nearly as well in the All Pro list, ranking tied for 66th (although in all fairness, if his All-Pro vote had been unanimous, he would be tied for 42nd). In any event, I think this does more to illustrate the strength and weakness of Andre Reed's Hall of Fame credentials as anything. Andre Reed ranks as high as he does in the Pro Bowl rankings because he plays in the AFC. It could very easily be said that if Reed played for an NFC team for the past 13 years, he would make maybe half as many Pro Bowls as he did.

That being said, there are many other choices for the honor of best receiver not in the Hall that are better than Andre Reed. DeLoach was a unanimous All-Pro selection five times in his career, and to my thinking, his absence from the Hall is a glaring one. Cliff Branch was named All-Pro four times, twice unanimously, and ranks ahead of Reed on the career production list. He also performed very well in two Super Bowls. James Lofton, who is not yet eligible, had four All-Pro selections, and is also well ahead of Reed on career points. I think that a good argument could be made for Billy Wilson or Tommy McDonald being very competitive with Reed in many career categories. I also have to wonder how well Reed's accomplishments will look against his contemporaries once all of their careers have ended. Michael Irvin, Anthony Miller, Herman Moore, and even Andre Rison (if he can get his career back in order) may equal or surpass Reed's totals when all is said and done.

10) Did the player possess any other qualities which would not be measured by his statistics?

Being that I do not know the man personally, I hesitate to say this, but it seems to me that Andre Reed is not exactly a calming influence on his teammates. He has had more than one instance of being involved in locker room disputes, threw the on-the-field tantrum in Super Bowl XXVI, and had a nasty

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contract holdout last summer. On the plus side, he has been very durable, and willingly made the shift from a possession receiver to a deep threat.

In the final analysis, the question you have to answer is this: Do you induct a receiver who is consistently good, but never really great into the Hall of Fame? When I first started doing the research for this article, I honestly thought that Andre Reed's accomplishments would fall short of serious Hall of Fame consideration. Regardless of what era it occurred in, 766 receptions are still 766 receptions, though, and that is a considerable total. The strength of the argument for Reed is that he has performed year in and year out at a high level for a length of time that few others have. The weakness of that argument is that the few others that have performed at that level for a great length of time, did so for much longer than Andre Reed has.

Unless the player is among the all time greats, it is very difficult to measure a his worthiness for Hall of Fame status while he is still active. That being said, if Andre Reed retired today, I do not feel he is a Hall of Fame level receiver I spoke earlier of how the bar for all possession receivers has been raised because a possession receiver has to be a great possession receiver to stay in the league. That bar is quite high and if Reed is to be proclaimed the equal of the likes of Fred Biletnikoff, Charlie Joiner, Raymond Berry, and Art Monk, the receivers he most resembles, he needs to jump over that bar. Andre Reed currently averages approximately 80-90 reception points per season. At that pace, he is approximately 3-4 seasons from clearing that height. When he does, I would be happy to support his nomination.

THE TOP 50 (as of the beginning of the 1997 season)

Based on total receiving points

RECEIVER	TP	CAREER	YR	GM	PPG	TOTAL	PC	YARD	AVG	TD	ALL-P	PRO-B	
1	DON HUTSON	CM	1935-45	11	116	17.586	2040	488	7991	16.4	99	11.25	4.25
2	CHARLIE JOINER	PO	1969-86	18	239	6.389	1527	750	12146	16.2	65	1.00	3.00
3	STEVE LARGENT	CM	1976-89	14	200	7.415	1483	819	13089	16.0	100	2.00	6.50
4	<i>Jerry Rice</i>	CM	1985-96	12	188	7.628	1434	1050	16377	15.6	154	11.25	12.50
5	Harold Jackson	DT	1968-83	16	208	6.673	1388	579	10372	17.9	76	1.25	5.25
6	CHARLEY TAYLOR	PO	1964-77	13	165	8.333	1375	649	9110	14.0	79	1.25	8.75
7	James Lofton	DT	1978-93	16	233	5.854	1364	764	14004	18.3	75	4.25	9.25
8	DON MAYNARD	DT	1958-73	15	186	7.177	1335	633	11834	18.7	88	1.00	4.50
9	Art Monk	PO	1980-95	16	224	5.938	1330	940	12721	13.5	68	1.00	3.25
10	FRED BILETNIKOFF	PO	1965-78	14	190	6.958	1322	589	8974	15.2	76	2.00	6.50
11	Harold Carmichael	CM	1971-84	14	182	7.110	1294	590	8985	15.2	79	1.00	4.75
12	RAYMOND BERRY	PO	1955-67	13	154	7.915	1219	631	9275	14.7	68	3.75	6.25
13	LANCE ALWORTH	DT	1962-72	11	136	8.419	1145	542	10266	18.9	85	8.50	8.50
14	Cliff Branch	DT	1972-85	14	183	6.186	1132	501	8685	17.3	67	4.50	4.50
15	<i>Henry Ellard</i>	DT	1983-96	14	205	5.468	1121	775	13177	17.0	61	1.25	2.00
16	Billy Howton	CO	1952-63	12	142	7.831	1112	503	8459	16.8	61	2.50	4.75
17	PAUL WARFIELD	DT	1964-77	13	157	7.006	1100	427	8565	20.1	85	5.25	9.00
18	Jim Benton	CM	1938-47	9	91	11.934	1086	288	4801	16.7	45	2.25	1.00
19	Drew Pearson	CM	1973-83	11	156	6.949	1084	489	7822	16.0	48	3.25	3.75
20	Stanley Morgan	DT	1977-90	14	196	5.459	1070	557	10716	19.2	92	1.00	3.25
21	Roy Jefferson	CM	1965-76	12	162	6.580	1066	451	7539	16.7	52	2.50	4.50
22	Haven Moses	CM	1968-81	14	199	5.266	1048	448	8091	18.1	56	0.00	2.00
23	John Stallworth	CM	1974-87	14	165	6.224	1027	537	8723	16.2	63	1.25	4.50
24	Reggie Rucker	CM	1970-81	12	159	6.409	1019	447	7065	15.8	44	0.00	0.00
25	Wes Chandler	DT	1978-88	11	150	6.773	1016	559	8966	16.0	56	1.25	4.25
26	Ahmad Rashad	PO	1972-82	10	139	7.273	1011	495	6831	13.8	44	0.00	4.50
27	<i>Andre Reed</i>	CM	1985-96	12	175	5.766	1009	766	10884	14.2	75	1.00	8.00
28	Ken Burrough	DT	1970-81	12	156	6.468	1009	421	7102	16.9	49	0.00	2.00
29	ELROY HIRSCH	DT	1946-57	12	127	8.114	998	387	7029	18.2	66	2.25	3.75
30	John Gilliam	DT	1967-77	11	151	6.550	989	382	7056	18.5	48	1.00	4.50
31	Carroll Dale	DT	1960-73	14	189	5.228	988	438	8277	18.9	52	0.00	3.25
32	Gene Washington	CM	1969-79	10	140	6.464	985	385	6856	17.8	60	2.25	4.75
33	DANTE LAVELLI	CM	1946-56	11	123	8.000	984	386	6488	16.8	62	2.00	3.75
34	Gary Clark	DT	1985-95	11	167	5.886	983	699	10856	15.5	65	1.00	4.25
35	Tommy McDonald	CM	1957-68	12	152	5.928	981	495	8410	17.0	84	0.00	7.25
36	Gary Garrison	DT	1966-77	12	134	7.299	978	405	7538	18.6	58	0.00	4.25
37	Nat Moore	CM	1974-86	13	183	5.339	977	510	7546	14.8	74	1.00	1.25

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38	BOBBY MITCHELL	CM	1958-68	11	148	6.534	967	521	7954	15.3	65	3.25	4.50
39	Otis Taylor	DT	1965-75	11	130	7.431	966	410	7306	17.8	57	3.25	3.25
40	Isaac Curtis	DT	1973-84	12	167	5.659	945	416	7101	17.1	53	2.00	5.00
41	Drew Hill	CM	1979-93	15	211	4.398	928	634	9831	15.5	60	0.00	2.00
42	Bob Hayes	DT	1965-75	11	132	6.917	913	371	7414	20.0	71	2.00	3.50
43	Boyd Dowler	CM	1959-71	12	162	5.617	910	474	7270	15.3	40	0.00	2.25
44	Lionel Taylor	PO	1959-68	10	121	7.512	909	567	7195	12.7	45	3.75	3.50
45	Billy Wilson	CM	1951-60	10	100	9.000	900	407	5902	14.5	49	2.25	7.25
46	Mac Speedie	DT	1946-52	7	86	10.395	894	349	5602	16.1	33	2.00	1.00
47	Pete Retzlaff	CM	1956-66	11	132	6.727	888	452	7412	16.4	47	1.25	6.00
48	TOM FEARS	DT	1948-56	9	87	10.195	887	400	5397	13.5	38	2.50	1.25
49	Roy Green	CM	1979-92	14	190	4.658	886	559	8965	16.0	66	2.50	2.25
50	Wesley Walker	DT	1977-89	13	154	5.740	884	438	8306	19.0	71	1.25	2.25

Hall of Famers in CAPS