

The NFL and the Myth of Parity (The NFL on REO)

The NFL and the Myth of Parity
by Mike Lytle

It is pretty much universally accepted that the NFL wants parity around the league. In 1992 the league introduced unrestricted free agency which gave every team access to the same pool of players. In 1994 a league wide salary cap was adopted which meant that every team had the exact same limit on what they could spend on players. No matter how deep the owner's pockets were or how much money the team generated from their fans the playing field was, at least theoretically, level. I don't dispute these facts and I completely agree that the NFL wants every team to have a chance to compete for a Super Bowl. This is not like college football where teams like Alabama and Ohio State are simply more talented than just about every team they play and should compete for a title just about every year. While teams like Indiana and Vanderbilt will be lucky to post a winning record once every five years.

Anyone who follows the league knows that on average there are six new playoff teams each year (out of twelve) and that each fall just about every fan base feels like their team has a chance to do something special if things break right for them. It is one of the reasons that despite negative publicity and a recent drop in the ratings the NFL is still the highest rated sport in our country by a pretty wide margin.

If we left it at that I think we would all agree that there is parity in the NFL and most would agree that that is a good thing. Unfortunately many fans and even respected sports media members want to take it further. Just about every year,

especially if a dominant team does not establish themselves early in the season, you will hear a chorus of complaints. They say things like “the NFL wants every team to finish 8-8” or “there are no good teams this year, everyone is somewhere between bad or mediocre”.

I want to be clear that this is a ridiculous position that is not supported by any of the evidence we have at our disposal. Each and every year there are great teams. Each and every year there are terrible teams. The league will never have anything close to a bunch of middle of the pack teams. It just won't happen. Unlike the NBA or college football we might not know who the great or terrible teams will be before the season starts, but rest assured they will emerge every season.

Let's look at the numbers. I decided to go back to the year 2000 partially because it is a nice round number and partially because the cries of “too much parity” started in the late 90s when the salary cap had crippled previous dynasties like the 49ers and the Cowboys. If the NFL is really a race to the middle like some say we would expect to see very few, if any, really great teams and very few, if any, really bad teams from year to year.

I (arbitrarily!) decided that the mark of a very good/great team should be 13 wins. A 13-3 record is an 81.25 winning percentage. If you are going up against highly paid professionals each week and can win over 80% of the time then you are doing something right. Since the year 2000 there has been at least one 13 win (or better) team each season except for two. In 2002 there were three 12 win teams, but nobody reached 13 or more. In 2014 there were four 12 win teams.

On the flip side, if you are winning three or fewer games in a season then you just aren't very good. Since 2000 there has been only one season when at least one team did not finish with 3-13 or worse. That season 4-12 was the worst record in the league.

What do these numbers tell us? The main lesson is that virtually every year there are great teams in the NFL that win over 80% of their games. Most of the time there are a few teams like this per season. There are also really terrible teams in the league virtually every season that win less than 20% of their games.

The second lesson is to ignore sports radio and TV personalities who need to fill several hours each week. They fall to the temptation of overstating things. Fans do this as well, but at least they are not getting paid for their terrible opinions. This season when the Patriots and Steelers started more slowly than expected and no dominant team was emerging early in the season I heard the cries. I knew they would be proven wrong and sure enough the Patriots and Steelers are both 9-2 and on pace to win 13 games each. The Eagles are even better as they are on pace to go 14-2. On the other end of the spectrum the Browns are 0-11 and the 49ers are 1-10. So much for parity.