

FINDING VALUE IN THE YPG

by Phil Steele

If you've been reading my College Preview Magazine, you know that every year I look for teams that are much better than their final record would indicate, or those that are much weaker than the final standings would indicate based on the yards per game earned in league play. I only base statistics on league play in the NCAA because teams play non-conference slates of various degrees of difficulty, which affects their overall ypg [yards per game] for the season.

In the NFL I look at the entire season since there is more parity and the strength of schedule is fairly even. I devised a system that compares the net wins of a team from the previous season with the team's net yards per game (ypg) of the previous year. Since I needed some way to translate the ypg into net wins, I determined that every 10 net ypg (+ or -) for a team should translate into one net win (+) or loss (-). As an example: if a team outgained their foes by 320 yards on the year, they would have outgained foes by 20 ypg during the 16 game season, which would work out to an expected 9-7 season. Naturally, since this is a statistical formula based on yards, the numbers do not always transfer out to a true NFL type record. A team could have +0.3 net wins which, of course, cannot happen on field, but the ypg net wins is hypothetical so the numbers can vary.

I went back in the NFL to 2001 and compared what the ypg record would have been vs the actual net win total. Let's first look at the overrated teams from the previous year and how they fared the following season. The 2001 Bears graded out at -11.8 net wins with the ypg saying they should have been -1.8 wins (-17.75 ypg) and their actual record was 13-3, or +10 net wins. In 2002 Chicago plummeted to 4-12. Another team of note in this section is Philadelphia, which in 2004 was +10 net wins with a 13-3 record. They were only +31.5 ypg (+3.2 wins). That was a 6.8 net win difference and the Eagles had a losing record the next year. Last year Minnesota was the poster team for this article. They won so many close games in 2022 and went 13-4 despite being outgained by 31 ypg! That rated them a -11.7 last year and as you would expect they dropped down to 7-10 despite actually outgaining their foes by 15 ypg.

The last time I wrote this article was in 2018 and only 17% of the teams that had a -4.7 or higher improved. From 2019-23 it has been even stronger with teams at -4.7 or higher occurring 25 times and only 3 times (12%) did a team improve their record with 3 teams having the same record and 19 having a weaker record for an **88% success rate!**

SINCE 2001 TMS WITH -4.7 OR MORE NET WINS			
Total	Weaker	Improved	Same
104	73 (70.1%)	16 (15.3%)	15 (14.4%)

Here are the teams that overachieved relative to their yards per game last year. These teams all finished 2023 with -4.7 or more net wins and have a 70.1% chance of having a weaker record this year.

This year, there are 5 teams with Pittsburgh on top with -6.8 net wins. The Steelers were actually outgained by 38 ypg (-3.8 wins) despite their 10-7 record. With their +3 overall victories, Buffalo translates into a -6.8 difference.

GOING DOWN IN 2024					
Team	Diff	2023 (Wins)	YPG	Est record	
Pittsburgh	-6.8	10-7 (+3)	-38	-3.8 wins	
Cincinnati	-6.6	9-8 (+1)	-55	-5.5 wins	
Denver	-6.2	8-9 (-1)	-72	-7.2 wins	
Seattle	-5.9	9-8 (+1)	-49	-4.9 wins	
Philadelphia	-5.2	11-6 (+5)	-3	-5.3 wins	

From 2001 to 2012, many teams in the NFL were much stronger than their final record. The team that had the most glaring difference was the Cleveland Browns of 2017, who finished 0-16 but were only outgained by 309 yards on the season or -19 ypg. Using my ypg system to determine their net wins for the season, the Browns should have been -1.9. When subtracted from their -16 net wins, they were +14.1 net wins better

Yards/16 Games	=	ypg	=	Net Wins	Record
-1280 yds	=	-80 ypg	=	-8 wins	4-12
-960 yds	=	-60 ypg	=	-6 wins	5-11
-640 yds	=	-40 ypg	=	-4 wins	6-10
-320 yds	=	-20 ypg	=	-2 wins	7-9
Even	=	0 net yds	=	0 wins	8-8
+320 yds	=	+20 ypg	=	2 wins	9-7
+640 yds	=	+40 ypg	=	4 wins	10-6
+960 yds	=	+60 ypg	=	6 wins	11-5
+1280 yds	=	+80 ypg	=	8 wins	12-4

A TEAM THAT IS EVEN IN YARDS SHOULD BE 8-8 OR 0 NET WINS. EVERY 160 NET YARDS OR 10 YPG FORMULATES INTO ONE WIN.

than their actual record. The next year the Browns actually showed that improvement on the field by winning 7 games. Another example was the 2005 New Orleans Saints, who finished just 3-13 on the year or -10 net wins. In 2008 the top team on this list was the Miami Dolphins. Miami was 1-15 in 2007 for -14 net wins despite being outgained by only 54.7 ypg (-5.5 wins). In 2008 they finished +10 net wins from the year prior and won the AFC East. In 2009 the top team was New Orleans. The Saints had been 8-8 in 2008 but outgained foes by 71.2 ypg which translates to +7.1 wins. In 2009 New Orleans had a dream season culminating in their first Super Bowl Championship. When I last wrote this article in 2018 teams that were +4.7 in the YPG had a better or the same record 85.9% of the time the next year. **Over the last 6 years it is even stronger with 23 teams qualifying and 20 having a stronger record, 1 the same and only 2 with a weaker record for a 91.3% success rate!**

SINCE 2001 TMS WITH +4.7 OR MORE NET WINS			
Total	Improved	Weaker	Same
101	81 (80.1%)	13 (12.8%)	7 (6.9%)

Here are this year's teams that were much better than LY's final record would indicate, and fall into the +4.7 net wins category in the ypg factor.

GOING UP IN 2024					
Team	Diff	2023 (Wins)	YPG	Est record	
Carolina	+10.1	2-15 (-13)	-29	-2.9 wins	
New England	+6.5	4-13 (-9)	-25	-2.5 wins	
Arizona	+5.8	4-13 (-9)	-32	-3.2 wins	
Minnesota	+4.5	7-10 (-3)	+15	+1.5 wins	

This chart has had amazing success the last six years of research. I took a look at teams that rated as little as +0.9 the last six years and there were 66 teams in that category. Of the 66 teams, 54 had a stronger record the next year, 5 had the same record and just 17 had a weaker record for a strong 77.6% success rate even going down to that low level. On the flip side teams that rated -1.3 or more had a weaker record 50 times, the same record 13 times and just 17 times improved their record for a success rate of 78.8%! Here is the complete list for 2024.

Team	Diff	Cleveland	1.7	Houston	-1.8
Carolina	10.1	Washington	1.4	Baltimore	-2.1
New England	6.5	Kansas City	1.2	Indianapolis	-2.3
Arizona	5.8	NY Jets	0.6	Las Vegas	-3.1
Minnesota	4.5	Tennessee	0.3	NY Giants	-3.2
Atlanta	4.3	Dallas	0.2	Tampa Bay	-4.1
LA Chargers	3.6	Green Bay	0.0	Philadelphia	-5.2
Miami	3.3	New Orleans	0.0	Seattle	-5.9
Chicago	2.9	LA Rams	-0.9	Denver	-6.2
San Francisco	2.4	Detroit	-1.1	Cincinnati	-6.5
Buffalo	1.7	Jacksonville	-1.3	Pittsburgh	-6.8