

The Downfall of the Kick Return

By Caleb Evans November 25, 2024

The kick return has long been one of the most electrifying aspects of the National Football League (NFL). From the league's early days to the present, the kick return has provided some of the most memorable moments in football history. However, over the past 15 years, there has been a noticeable decline in the frequency of kick returns, driven largely by rule changes aimed at enhancing player safety.

Evolution Through the Decades

In the early days of the NFL, kick returns were a crucial part of the game. Players like Gale Sayers, who played for the Chicago Bears in the 1960s, set the standard with his incredible speed and agility. Sayers, known as the "Kansas Comet," was a pioneer in the return game, recording multiple return touchdowns and inspiring future generations of return specialists.

Throughout the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, kick returns continued to be a significant aspect of the game. The NFL saw players like Rick Upchurch and Billy "White Shoes" Johnson make their mark. Upchurch, who played for the Denver Broncos, was known for his explosive returns, while Johnson's end zone celebrations became legendary.

The 1990s also featured standout returners such as Brian Mitchell and Mel Gray. Mitchell, who played for several teams including the Washington Redskins and Philadelphia Eagles, holds the record for the most career kick return yards with 14,014. Gray, who played primarily for the Detroit Lions, was a four-time Pro Bowl selection known for his consistency and speed.

Peak in the Early 2000s

The early 2000s marked the peak of the kick return era. This period saw the emergence of some of the greatest returners in NFL history. Devin Hester, who entered the league in 2006, quickly made a name for himself with his remarkable ability to find the end zone on kickoffs and punts.

Hester, often considered the best returner of all time, holds the NFL record for most return touchdowns with 14, according to Pro-Football-Reference.

Other notable returners from this era include Dante Hall, known as "The Human Joystick," who thrilled fans with his quick cuts and explosive speed, and Josh Cribbs, who combined power with agility to become one of the league's most consistent return threats.

Rule Changes and Their Impact

Starting in the 2010s, the NFL implemented several rule changes aimed at reducing the number of high-speed collisions on kick returns, which are a major cause of concussions and other serious injuries. In 2010, the league moved the kickoff line from the 30-yard line to the 35-yard line, resulting in a significant increase in touchbacks. This change drastically reduced the number of kick returns, as more kicks were sent into the end zone.

Additionally, the NFL introduced rules to limit wedge blocking and reduce the running start for kickoff coverage players. These changes further diminished the opportunities for returns, as they made it more difficult for return teams to set up effective blocks and create lanes for returners.

In 2009, there were 2,568 kick returns in the NFL season, compared to just 1,480 in the 2023 season. This steady decline, charted by Pro-Football-Reference, underscores the impact of the rule changes on the game.

The Dynamic Kickoff for 2024-2025

To balance excitement and safety, the NFL has introduced a new "dynamic" kickoff rule for the 2024-2025 season. Under this new rule, all players except the kicker and two deep receivers must remain stationary until the ball is touched or lands in the designated landing zone. The goal of this change is to create more opportunities for returns while minimizing high-speed collisions, thereby enhancing player safety without sacrificing the excitement of the game.

The new dynamic kickoff rule for the 2024-2025 season has provided a modest boost in the number of kick returns per game compared to the previous season. However, there is skepticism about whether this change will be enough to bring the NFL back to its kick return golden age of the early 2000s. Despite the increase in returns, many teams appear to prioritize the tactical

advantage of having their opponents start on the 30-yard line, leading to a continued preference for touchbacks. As the league and teams continue to weigh safety against the desire for exciting returns, the future of the kick return remains uncertain.