

A Fan's Guide to Fantasy Football

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1 High Volume Players

Prioritize having players who receive a large number of targets, because their scoring will be more stable and reliable from week-to-week.

This is clear for studs like the Bengals' Ja'Marr Chase, Seahawks' Jaxon Smith-Njigba, and Vikings' Justin Jefferson. However, other players who aren't as popular or on worse teams can still be great examples:

Chris Olave (Saints, WR)

Olave has 83 targets through 8 games; his team is awful (1 win, 7 losses), but he ranks second in the league in targets, so he's still top-10 in fantasy points.

Consistently high targets bring a higher floor, which brings increased fantasy stability. However, there are cases of players who get a lot of targets, but it doesn't translate to fantasy points because they don't catch those targets at a high rate. This is not the norm, but it's definitely frustrating:

Brian Thomas Jr. (Jaguars, WR)

27 catches on 55 targets; he's getting the targets, but he's catching less than half of them. And with only one touchdown this season, he just hasn't been good enough.

Jerry Jeudy (Browns, WR)

22 catches on 54 targets; same situation but to a worse extent. He plays for a very poor Browns team that focuses on running the ball, and despite a strong season last year, he hasn't continued it this year.

Those are ugly situations, but it's not the norm. Chase players with lots of targets week-to-week, because they'll come through.

TLDR

Look for players who consistently get a lot of targets and/or are efficient with their targets, with a bonus if they play on good teams.

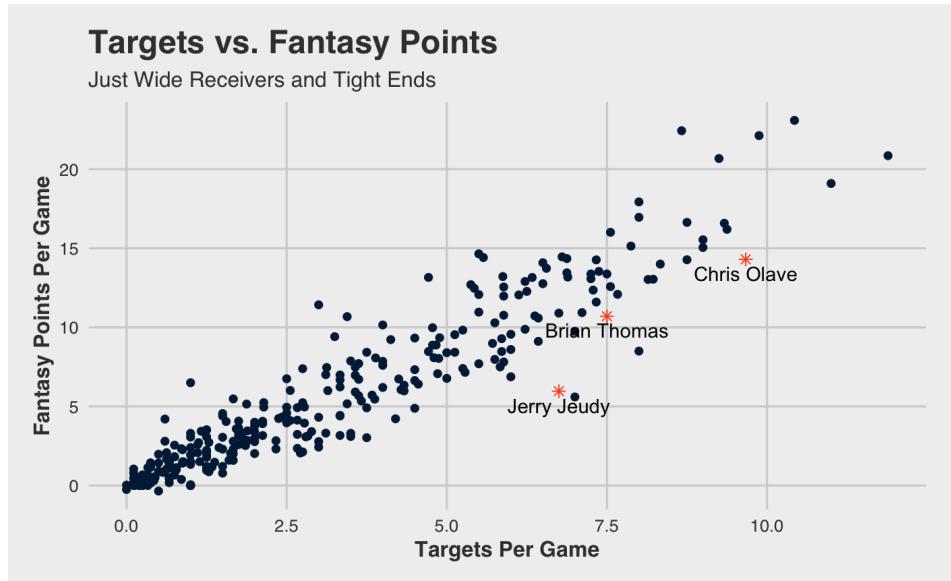


Figure 1: Data From Pro-Football Reference

2 Greater Opportunity/Have Backups Rostered

Injuries happen like crazy, especially at the running back position. It might be smart to have the backups to your starting RBs, especially if they're on a good team and/or they are extremely talented. In theory, if one of your starters gets hurt, you could fill that now-vacant spot with his back-up.

Before going further, here's a term you might not know if you're not a fantasy sicko:

Snap

An individual play in a football game; e.g. “1st and 10”

In the fantasy world, you want players who play as many snaps as possible. Some players can be productive on fewer snaps (like **Derrick Henry**), but you typically want players who play a lot of snaps. Especially running backs, because some teams divide a game's worth of snaps among multiple.

Christian McCaffrey (49ers, RB)

McCaffrey consistently plays between 75-95% of snaps for the Niners.

Kenneth Walker III (Seahawks, RB)

Walker consistently posts less than 50% of snaps as a direct result of sharing snaps with his teammate Zach Charbonnet.

McCaffrey's situation is more desirable from a fantasy standpoint.

The Carolina Panthers

In the Panthers' first four games, their top running back was Chuba Hubbard. He had 53 carries and played 64.1% of the snaps. Hubbard got injured in practice and ended up missing two games; in his place, Rico Dowdle took over the top spot, and his role took off:

First four games for Dowdle:

- 8 carries per game
- 35% of snaps
- 5.3 fantasy points per game

The next two games while Chuba was hurt:

- 53 total carries
- 77% of snaps
- 33.1 fantasy points per game

Will backups always go that crazy? No, but they're getting starting-level opportunities with less competition, especially if the backup is/was an established RB elsewhere. We have seen many standout stand-in performances in 2025 alone.

Other Great Backup RB Performances

Bears:

- Starter De'Andre Swift misses Week 9 with an injury.
- Backup and rookie RB Kyle Monangai rushes for 176 yards and scores 22.8 fantasy points.

Buccaneers:

- Starter Bucky Irving has been injured since Week 4.
- Backup Rachaad White has averaged 14.3 fantasy points in the last four games in Irving's place.

Chargers:

- The top two guys (Omarion Hampton and Najee Harris) got injured.
- Backup Kimani Vidal has had two huge games (124 yards, 117 yards and 2 touchdowns).

Takeaway

All four examples were different in some way, but when given a greater opportunity, they all delivered.

- Dowdle ran for 1,000 yards last year for Dallas as the starter before signing with Carolina.
- Monangai is rookie drafted in the seventh round.
- White used to be the starter in Tampa and showed he's still very capable.
- Vidal is a 2024 sixth-round pick who barely played in his rookie season.

Similarly, at the wide receiver position, if a starter gets hurt, the other players stand to gain more chances for targets in that player's absence.

New Number Ones

Dolphins:

- No. 1 receiver Tyreek Hill is hurt for the rest of the season.
- No. 2 receiver Jaylen Waddle gets more work.

Cowboys:

- No. 1 Ceedee Lamb gets hurt for multiple weeks.
- No. 2 George Pickens steps in and becomes a machine.

Giants:

- No. 1 Malik Nabers gets hurt for the rest of the year.
- No. 2 Wan'dale Robinson collects more targets and yards.

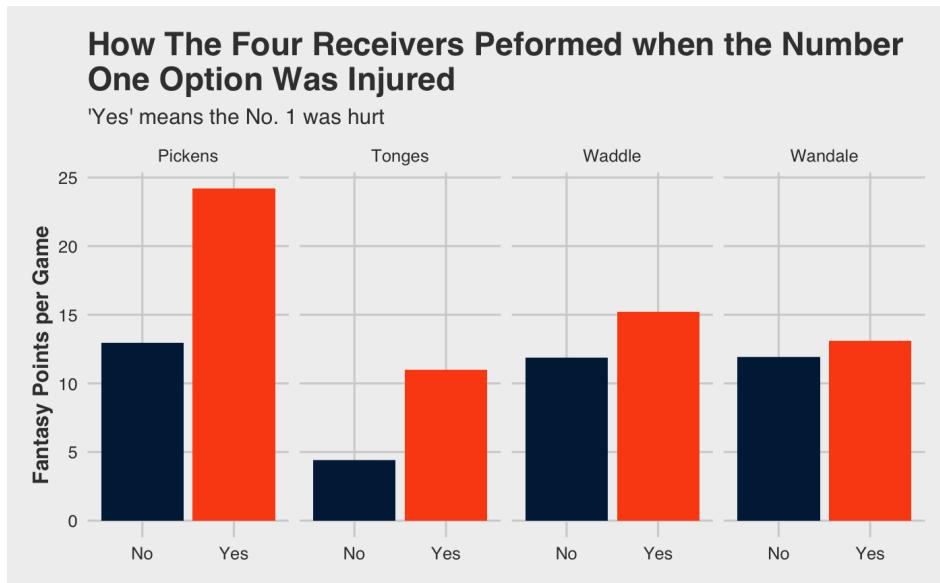
49ers:

- No. 1 tight end George Kittle misses a few weeks.
- The previously unknown Jake Tonges gets more work and has a couple of decent games.

These players are in different tiers, but all had the same opportunity to produce more when the player ahead of them was injured.

TLDR

Keep an eye out for understudies at RB, WR, and TE when the starter(s) get injured; the targets and carries have to go somewhere.



3 Quit Your Job

This builds off the idea of having backups rostered. One of the more tense parts of fantasy football is seeing that small, red, and foreboding "Q" next to one of your players during the week. That leads to one of the more trying parts of fantasy: following and monitoring the weekly practice reports.

Most teams play on Sunday and practice on Wednesday through Friday. Those three practice days are when clarity is (hopefully) gained about a player's status. Those practice reports contain valuable information on whether or not you should expect that player to play on Sunday. If the player isn't practicing for multiple days, then it's trending the wrong way and it might be time to see if there are other options available (like their backup if they are a RB).

This is definitely "the weeds" territory of fantasy. It's extra work, which is why I titled it "Quit Your Job," because some people are incredibly invested, which is tough because we naturally live very busy lives. Fantasy apps include player news sections that relay practice updates for all players, making injury information accessible.

TLDR

Keep an eye out for practice reports for injured or banged-up players. It can help you get a clear idea on if they're going to play in the upcoming game and avoid having to scramble to find a replacement.

4 Prioritize Good Offenses

Stronger offenses can feed more players and consistently produce good weeks. There's more potential for touchdowns too!

The Detroit Lions

They are an extremely high-powered offense, and they have five different players at four different positions that are elite or starters (QB Jared Goff, RBs Jahmyr Gibbs and David Montgomery, WR Amon-Ra St. Brown, TE Sam LaPorta).

The Tennessee Titans

Their quarterback is a rookie, their offensive linemen are useless, so their offense is permanently stuck in quicksand. They are not very reliable despite the talent present (RBs Tony Pollard and Tyjae Spears, WRs Calvin Ridley and Elic Ayomanor, TE Chig Okonkwo).

There can be exceptions for this, too. The aforementioned Chris Olave and Rico Dowdle aren't part of great offenses, but their talent is carrying the weight.

TLDR

In combination with the previous two, try to prioritize getting players with high volume of carries/targets from good offenses. Similarly, a backup player who gets the opportunity to start as a part of a good offense will have a great chance to produce.

5 Young Breakout Stars

For some players, you can be betting on potential and their talent, rather than proven results. This is the case with rookies and second-year pros. Not every player hits the ground running when making their NFL debut. Some players take time to find their niche and get comfortable. If they're talented enough and in the right situation, they should break out. Some ugly games will happen, so patience must be shown.

Rookies who broke out mid-way through the season

2025 (so far):

- Emeka Egbuka (Buccaneers, WR), Cam Skattebo (Giants, RB), Tyler Warren (Colts, TE), Tetairoa McMillan (Panthers, WR)

2024:

- Brock Bowers (Raiders, TE), Jayden Daniels (Commanders, QB), Malik Nabers (Giants, WR), Ladd McConkey (Chargers, WR)

2023:

- Jahmyr Gibbs (Lions, RB), Puka Nacua (Rams, WR), Bijan Robinson (Falcons, RB), Sam LaPorta (Lions, TE)

Some players become huge contributors later in the season, whether it is due to earning more opportunities, the starter getting injured, or outplaying the starter.

Rookies who became more productive later in the season

2025 - TreVeyon Henderson (Patriots, RB) [MAYBE]

- Henderson has been the center of one of the more frustrating fantasy storylines. He was drafted in the second round and has not played much this season, despite the two players ahead of him trading injuries and poor performance. Both of those players (Rhamondre Stevenson and Antonio Gibson) have been out for two weeks, giving Henderson the chance to start and dominate.

2024 - Bucky Irving (Buccaneers, RB)

- Irving was behind Rachaad White to begin the season, but White struggled, and Irving earned an increased role, ending the season as the starter and playing very well.

2023 - Rashee Rice (Chiefs, WR)

- Rice didn't play too much at first, but the Chiefs' lacking wide receiver room paved a path for Rice to become the top receiver by season's end.

2022 - Brock Purdy (49ers, QB)

- Brock opened the season as the third QB before the two players ahead of him got injured. Purdy took full advantage of that chance and played well enough to retain the starting QB job.

Some players take a season or two to break out. That makes them solid targets in the fantasy draft; you could draft them with a lower pick and possibly strike gold.

Rookies who broke out after their rookie season

Drafted in 2024:

- Rome Odunze (Bears, WR), Drake Maye (Patriots, QB)

Drafted in 2023:

- Jaxon Smith-Njigba (Seachickens, WR), De'Von Achane (Dolphins, RB)

Drafted in 2022:

- James Cook (Bills, RB), Trey McBride (Cardinals, TE), Drake London (Falcons, WR), Kyren Williams (Rams, RB)

A huge part of a player's expected fantasy production is where they get drafted. Often, players drafted in later rounds are overlooked, but they can still deliver when they get the opportunity. Many of the players mentioned above were late-round picks (Irving, Purdy, Kyren, Puka). First- and second-round picks are safer bets to deliver because of their talent and the team's investment. However, regardless of where a player

is drafted, it is still a gamble. Sometimes, the gamble doesn't pay off.

TLDR

Keep an eye out for young and talented players in encouraging situations. Players that are not yet established can be acquired for lower fantasy draft picks and could lead to great returns. However, it is a gamble, but some are less risky than others.

6 Good Skillsets to Have

Sometimes, a good football player doesn't make a good fantasy player. You want to prioritize players who have more fantasy-friendly skillsets.

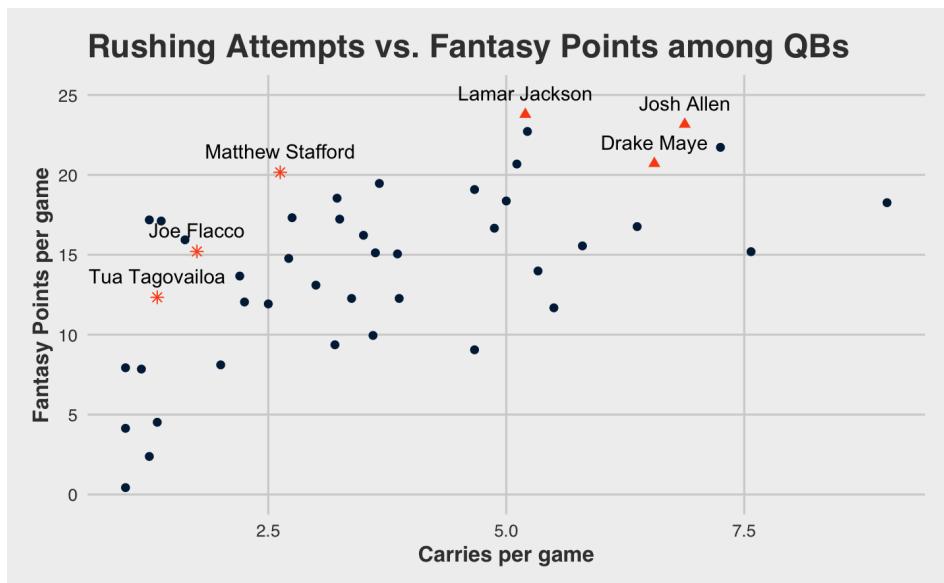
For quarterbacks, it's preferred to have one that can and will run. A rushing yard is worth more fantasy points than a passing yard, so it adds up if they run frequently. It's the perfect package if they can throw the ball competently too.

QBs with more fantasy-friendly skillsets

Drake Maye (Patriots), Josh Allen (Bills), Lamar Jackson (Ravens)

QBs with less fantasy-friendly skillsets

Matthew Stafford (Rams), Tua Tagovailoa (Dolphins), Joe Flacco (Bengals)

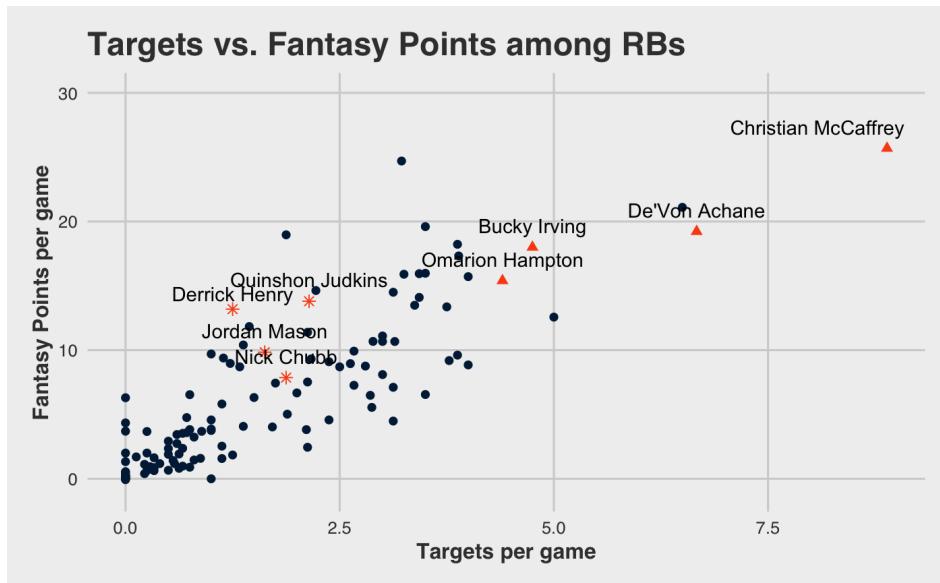


RBs with more fantasy-friendly skillsets

Christian McCaffrey (49ers), De'Von Achane (Dolphins), Bucky Irving (Buccaneers), Omarion Hampton (Chargers)

RBs with less fantasy-friendly skillsets

Derrick Henry (Ravens), Nick Chubb (Texans), Quinshon Judkins (Browns), Jordan Mason (Vikings)



TLDR

Quarterbacks that can run and running backs that catch passes are better fantasy choices because they have higher scoring potential.

7 Gamescript and Team Philosophy

Each team has their own identity/gameplan that they want to execute on a week-to-week basis. Talent is talent, but the team that a player is a part of can greatly affect how much fantasy value that player has. Here are a few examples of different general philosophies present:

Lean on Talent

These are teams that focus their offensive gameplan on a few players.

- Los Angeles Rams - How heavily they target WRs Puka Nacua and Davante Adams; RB Kyren Williams gets most of the snaps.
- Atlanta Falcons - Similar to the Rams; RB Bijan Robinson and WR Drake London are stars, and the rest of the offense doesn't get much shine, aside from TE Kyle Pitts's occasional good day.
- Takeaway: The top players in these offenses are elite starters, but the surrounding players will have inconsistent and lacking usage.

Runningback by Committee

A dreaded strategy among fantasy players. This is when teams decide to split running back duties among two or three players rather than giving one player the job.

- Seattle Seahawks: The 2025 Seahawks have had a consistent committee, splitting the workload nearly evenly between Kenneth Walker III and Zach Charbonnet. They have their strengths: Walker is more explosive and faster, whereas Charbonnet is used for his strength and power. The latter has scored more touchdowns this season, but it's not a great situation.
- Kansas City Chiefs: The Chiefs have divided work among Kareem Hunt, Isiah Pacheco, and even Brashard Smith. None of them have been particularly effective, so it's easy to make the wrong choice.
- Carolina Panthers: More of a counter-example. As mentioned before, the Panthers have a two-headed backfield in Chuba Hubbard and Rico Dowdle. Early in the season, Hubbard was the number one. He got injured a few weeks ago and missed two games in which Dowdle played amazing. Upon returning, Hubbard was given his number one role back and played much worse than Dowdle, so the Panthers coach announced that Dowdle would take the starting spot back. This is an example of how quickly things can change in the NFL. Despite Hubbard and the Panthers recently agreeing to a multi-year contract, the combination of an injury and poor performance lead to Dowdle taking his spot.
- Takeaway: Teams that divide running back work can be frustrating because you're left almost blindly picking which player to start. They are unpredictable, and even if you roster both members of a two-man committee, you still don't always know who to start. These situations are alleviated by injuries or one of the committee members losing their spot due to poor performance.

Run First

These are teams that really want to run the ball, especially when they are winning, and this leads to quicker games with less time for either teams to rack up points.

- Green Bay Packers (again): Starting RB Josh Jacobs is a beast and the Packers love to run the ball. Their desire is to take the lead early and let Jacobs wear down their opponent.
- Indianapolis Colts: They have a very strong passing offense featuring QB Daniel Jones and weapons Michael Pittman and Tyler Warren, but similar to the Packers, their offense is best when RB Jonathan Taylor is dominating. He's the first priority.
- Philadelphia Eagles: Spearheaded by QB Jalen Hurts and RB Saquon Barkley, the Eagles are a team that wins by relying on their dominant group of offensive linemen. They will pass occasionally, but they rely on the run first.
- Takeaway: These teams will pass the ball, but they would much prefer to run as much as possible, so that can lead to lighter weeks for receivers and better weeks for the starting running backs.

Spread the Ball Around

These are teams that share the ball among several different receivers.

- Buffalo Bills: QB Josh Allen and starting RB James Cook are always great, but the other offensive players (WRs Khalil Shakir, Keon Coleman, TE Dalton Kincaid, etc.) can have busy or lighter weeks. It's hard to predict their output.
- Green Bay Packers: The Packers receivers are all extremely talented but highly volatile for fantasy purposes. It could be Romeo Doubs's week, it could be Matthew Golden's week, or it could be Tucker Kraft's week. Sometimes it can feel like guessing, especially if all their players are healthy.
- Takeaway: Beware starting a receiver or tight end in an offense that isn't committed to looking for them. Some weeks, it will work out, but consistent targets are no guarantee.

When the games actually happen, philosophies might need to be altered depending on how it's going. This is called **game script**, the idea that an offensive gameplan is changed depending on how well or poorly the game is going for a team.

Game Script

How the score margin affects a team's decision making

In general, throwing the ball is a faster route to scoring than running the ball. Passing

yields more yards on average and if the pass is incomplete, the clock stops. If a running play goes poorly or gets negative yards, the clock continues. When teams are losing and need to score points quickly, they will pass the ball much more often. This can result in more opportunities for quarterbacks, receivers, and tight ends and less opportunities for running backs, especially those that don't have strong pass catching ability. On the other side, when a team is winning comfortably and trying to shorten the game, they will run the ball more often and continue doing it if the opposing defense is unable to stop it. This creates less opportunities for receivers, tight ends, and quarterbacks. This logic can be used when choosing receivers, with the idea that if they play on a bad team or they're facing a tough opponent, their team will need to throw a lot to stay in the game.

Another facet of football games that can either benefit or damage a fantasy week is **garbage time**.

Garbage Time

When the game is essentially over well before the clock runs out, and the winning team is in no real danger of losing; more of a relative term

Garbage time is when the game's score is extremely lopsided and the losing team is effectively done trying to come back and win. All hope is lost. If it's late in the game, teams might take out their stars and put in subs, especially at the offensive skill positions; they want to avoid injuries. That means no more fantasy points. However, if it is early enough, the losing team might leave their starters in and they will have a chance to accumulate some meaningless stats. Those empty calories are great for fantasy purposes, but they mean nothing for the actual game. In general, garbage-time stats are great for fantasy.

TLDR

Every team has their own unique identity and philosophy that they want to impose on a weekly basis, and that will affect which players are stronger fantasy options. How much a team is winning or losing by affects how often a team will run or pass, respectively, so that could either really help or hurt a player's fantasy day. However, teams losing also provides a chance for some cheap fantasy points, even if it doesn't help win the actual football game.

8 Considering Matchups (Sometimes)

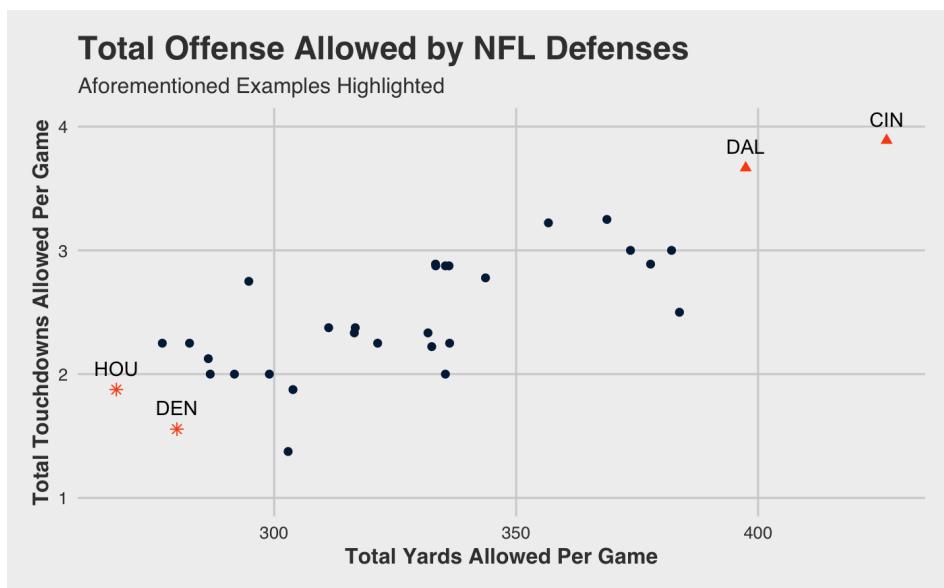
So much of fantasy can come down to the teams your players are facing. Whether they're facing an opponent that's strong or weak in defending a particular position, an opponent who's elite or terrible, it can affect the turnout in different ways. Terrible defenses are great for fantasy purposes because it means more scoring potential.

Defensive Matchups to Target in 2025

Cincinnati Bengals, Dallas Cowboys

Defensive Matchups to Avoid in 2025

Denver Broncos, Houston Texans



Matchups can cause you to hesitate about starting a certain player, but for the superstars and the elite players, matchups shouldn't affect your decision. These players are called "matchup-proof," and are starters regardless of who they are playing.

A Few Matchup-Proof Players

Christian McCaffrey (49ers, RB), Bijan Robinson (Falcons, RB), Puka Nacua (Rams, WR), Ja'Marr Chase (Bengals, WR), Jahmyr Gibbs (Lions, RB)

In the Fantasy app, they color code your players' upcoming matchup based on difficulty. It's displayed near their name to reference when choosing between two players for one starting spot. It's a nice quality-of-life feature.

K. Vidal 🏈 RB 🎟
27-20 Final @TEN (30th)
30 YDS

Z. Flowers 🏈 WR 🎟
28-6 Final @MIA (1st)
5 REC, 64 YDS

C. Olave 🏈 WR 🎟
10-34 Final @LAR (20th)
3 REC, 57 YDS

Figure 2: ESPN Fantasy App

A. Jones 🏈 MIN - RB
vs. BAL #29 vs RB avg allowed to position 26.33

B. Robinson 🏈 ATL - RB
@ IND #9 vs RB avg allowed to position 19.12

M. Washington 🏈 MIA - WR
vs. BUF #11 vs WR avg allowed to position 30.43

Figure 3: NFL Fantasy App

Anecdote from Week 9

More favorable matchups are preferred, but production isn't guaranteed. For example, Bears WR Rome Odunze had a terrible game on 11/2, despite having several factors working in his favor:

- He had been great most of the season (15.5 fantasy points per game)
- The Bears faced the Bengals (one of the worst defenses in the league)
- The final score was 47-42

However, despite all those positive signs, Odunze scored zero fantasy points. Fantasy can be cruel, unlucky, and downright stupid. That leads to the last point.

On the other side, when picking a starting defense for your fantasy lineup, matchups become much more important. There are different philosophies for starting defenses.

Stream

Adding a player with the intention of starting them for the upcoming week; Typically done to fill a roster gap created by injuries, bye weeks, etc.

Streaming

Some people prefer to chase great matchups every single week, finding the defense on the waiver wire that is facing the worst team, and do that week-to-week. It's smart to prioritize getting defenses that are playing against offensively inept teams; examples this year would be the Saints or the Titans.

Relying on Elite Defenses

Others stick with defenses that score good points all season long. No defense will play great every week, but some are worth starting every week because they will bear fruit far more often than not. The top defenses this year are the Seahawks, Texans, Patriots, Broncos, and Lions. When these teams are on bye weeks, it might be worth it to hold on to a top defense for the week, if your bench has a spot to spare or a player that isn't devastating to drop.

TLDR

Matchups are important and should factor into some starting decisions, but some players are too good to bench. Starting defenses should be targeted based on their opponent being terrible, or if they're elite.

9 Luck

A large amount of fantasy boils down to luck. Great teams on paper can underperform without warning. Your top fantasy drop pick might get injured early in the season (Malik Nabers this year). NFL teams are trying to win football games, not fantasy games, so their gameplan could result in a lesser known player “stealing” a touchdown from your fantasy star (Charbonnet vs Walker or Tyler Allegier on the Falcons). You start a defense against an awful team, and they get torched. The two players you bandy between starting and benching have gone the wrong way multiple weeks in a row. Some random guy on your bench has the game of his life, but you were never going to consider starting him. Your opponent scores nearly 200 points, and it does not matter how well you do.

Of course, we can make better decisions, but we have no control over how the games go. We’re just people with apps refreshing Twitter and looking at numbers. It can be brutal, but it is fun when good fortune hits you.