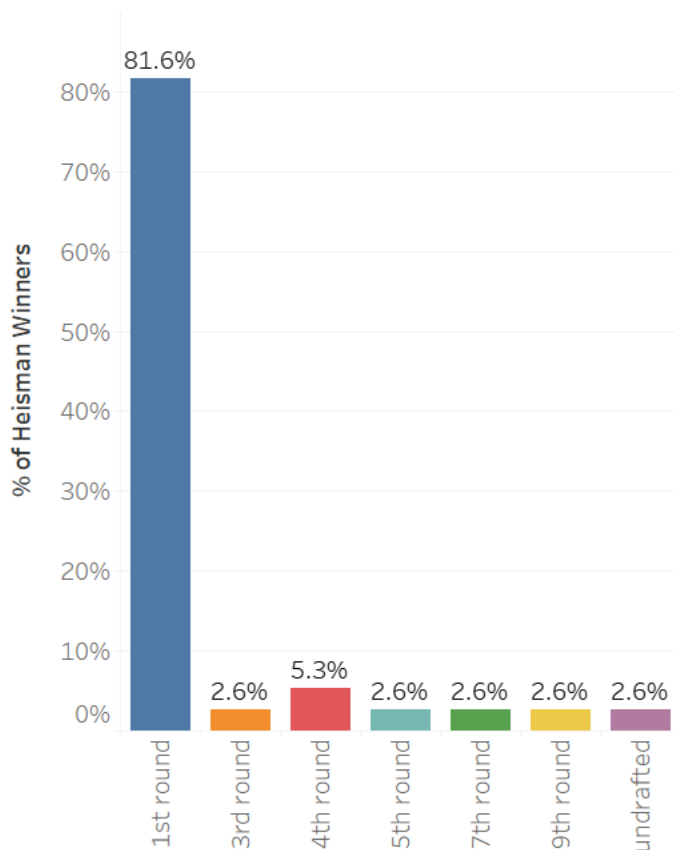


How the Heisman Trophy has Impacted the Value of NFL Running Backs

The value of NFL running backs has been an increasingly hot topic in recent years, coming to a tipping point this past offseason and preseason where big names like Saquon Barkley and Josh Jacobs were not granted the long-term contracts they were seeking, leading to a players'-only Zoom meeting between the top names at the position to discuss what can be done to change its perception. What was once the NFL's preeminent position has been relegated to an afterthought.

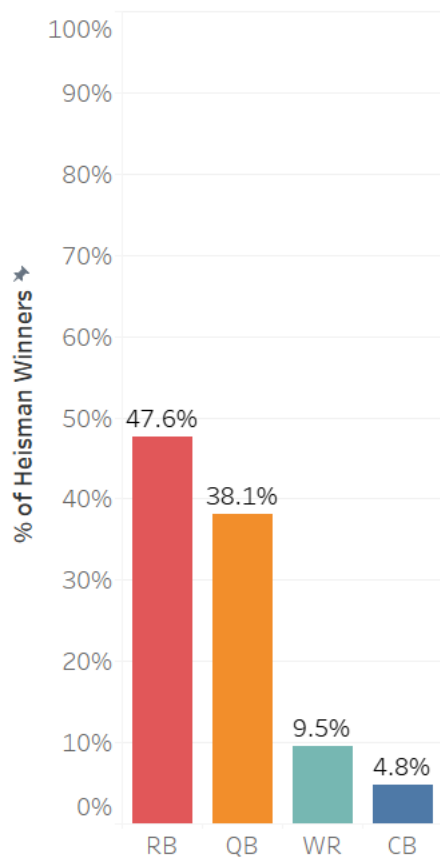
How did we get here? Statistics show that college football has played a major role in the demise of the value of NFL running backs. The Heisman Trophy, given to college football's best player (although it's probably more accurate to say it's given to the offensive player who had the best statistical season on highly-ranked team), is held in high regards by NFL decision-makers when it comes to value. From 1980 to 2021, excluding players that were drafted by USFL or NBA (shout to Charlie Ward), 81.6% of Heisman winners were drafted in the 1st round of the NFL Draft.

Draft Position by Heisman 1980-2021

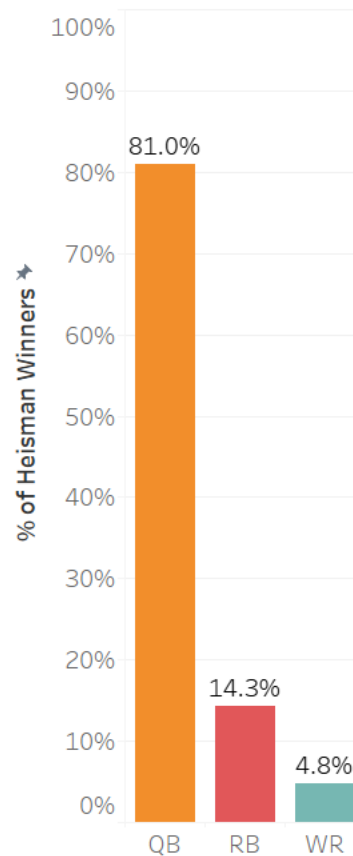


Splitting this time frame evenly for the sake of fair analysis, 47.6% of Heisman winners came from the running back position compared to 38.1% for quarterbacks for 1980 – 2000. 2001 – 2021 shows a seismic shift in this trend with QBs representing 81%, while RBs show a 33.3% drop to 14.3%.

Heisman by Position 1980-2000



Heisman by Position 2001-2021

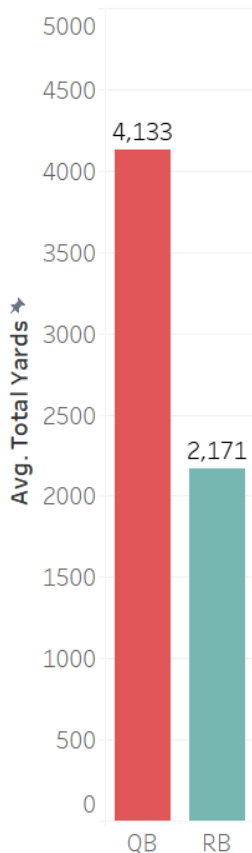


I know what you're asking – what does this have to do with the value of NFL running backs? Well, let's take a look.

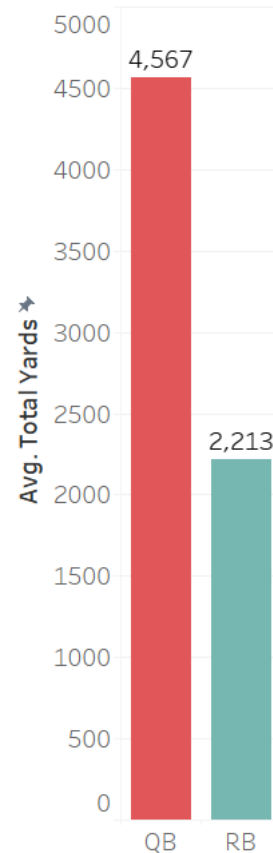
The NFL's equivalent of the Heisman Trophy is the Most Valuable Player, MVP for short, another award that should probably be renamed. Offensive Player Who Had the Best Statistics on One of the Best Teams is probably more fitting, but MVP does sound cooler and probably fits better on a trophy. I decided to look at TOTAL yards for the MVP winners for the same time frame as the Heisman analysis for quarterbacks and running backs since an overwhelming number of winners come from those positions. Most look strictly at passing yards for QBs and rushing yards for RBs, but that wouldn't do justice for dynamic players like Lamar Jackson, Cam Newton, and to a certain extent, Steve Young – QBs that got a bevy of yards running the ball, along with running backs such as Marshall Faulk, LaDainian Tomlinson, and Marcus Allen – running backs who were known for producing as receivers out of the backfield. To better account for exceptions such as this, total yards is a more accurate assessment than passing yards/rushing yards. For 1980-2000, years where the Heisman trophy was more running back-centric, the average total yards per season for the NFL MVP was 4,133 for QBs and 2,171 for RBs. For 2001-2021, the total yards for QB increases to 4,567. Even with a 10.5% uptick for the QBs, the RBs still see an increase in their production, albeit a small one, of 1.9% to 2,213 yards. However, that increase

can be attributed to two of the greatest seasons by a RB, LaDainian Tomlinson in 2006 with 2,366 total yards and Adrian Peterson in 2012 with the 2nd most single-season rushing yards ever with 2,097 combined with 217 receiving yards. Both of those totals are well above the 2,171- average for 1980-2000. Also, receiving yards by RBs in today's NFL are credited more to the QBs than the RBs, which further emphasizes the decline in perception of importance towards the running back position.

MVP Avg Total Yds 1980-2000

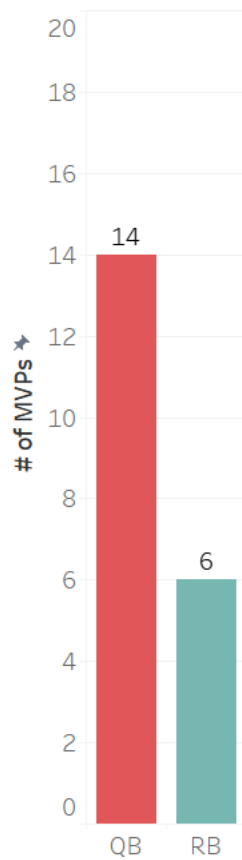


MVP Avg Total Yds 2001-2021

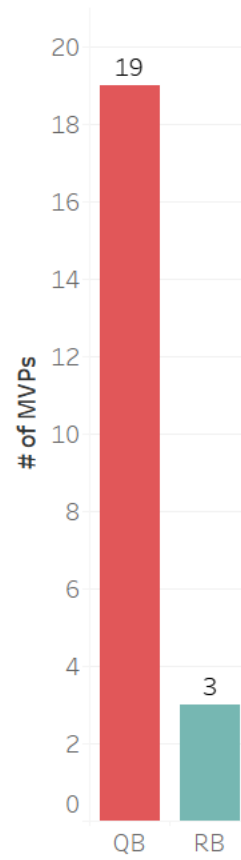


This correlation between Heisman winners and NFL MVPs in regard to position and total yards provides an indication of how college offensive schemes have been adapted by the NFL. As the number of Heisman and NFL MVP running backs have decreased, the number of Heisman and NFL MVP quarterbacks have increased due to more emphasis on the passing game. Between 1980 and 2000, 6 RBs won MVP compared to 3 from 2001 to 2021, with the most recent being in 2012.

MVPs by Position 1980-2000

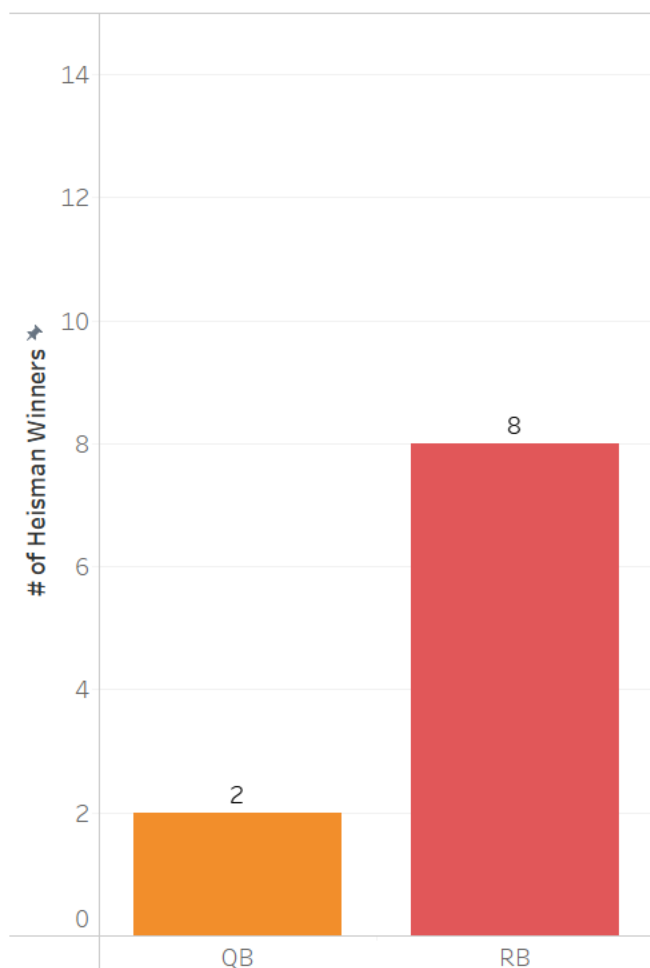


MVPs by Position 2001- 2021

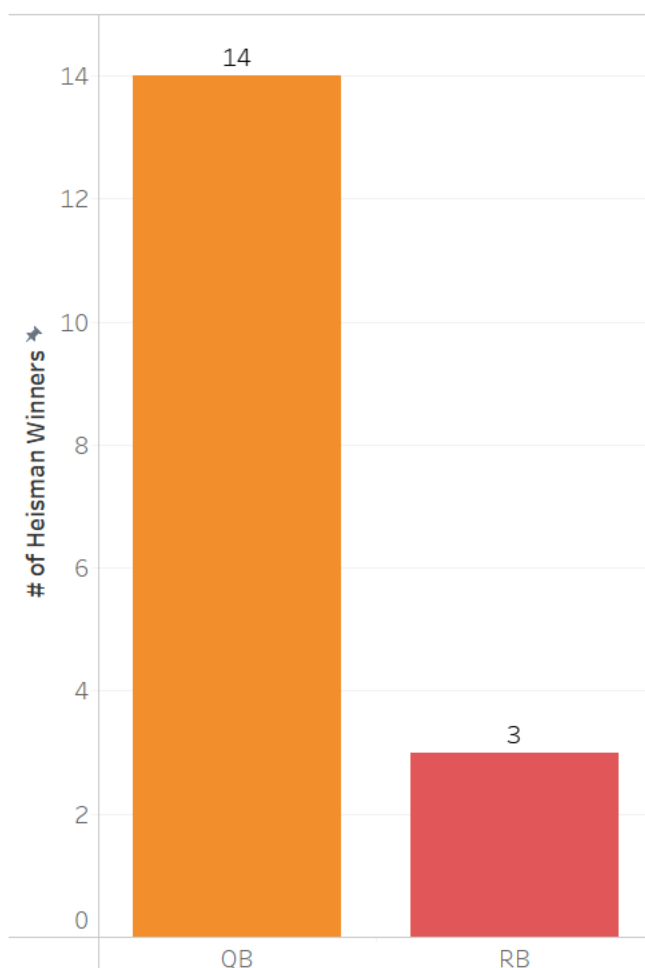


This has caused a decrease in the number of running backs being drafted in the 1st round of the NFL Draft. Look at the comparison between Heisman 1st-round draft picks between the two time spans: 2 QB and 8 RB Heisman-winners were drafted in the 1st round in 1980-2000 while 14 QBs and 3 RBs represent 2001-2021.

Heisman 1st-Rounders 1980-2000



Heisman 1st-Rounders 2001-2021



This highlights how the perception of the RB position has shifted over the last decade in terms of what position NFL front offices are willing to pay the most of its money to. The sports' former premier position is now viewed as expendable, as NFL decision-makers continue to show willingness to ignore legacy draft criteria and measurables in an effort to cater offensive systems to the strengths and comfortability of college QBs (specifically, spread offenses). It doesn't seem this will change unless the college game becomes re-centered on the running back position.