With his analysis of quarterbacks already out of the way, Jesse Lamovsky moves on to his survey of the running backs taken in the top five of the NFL Draft since 1967. Is it true that running backs are a

With quarterbacks already out of the way , it's time to move on to the survey of the running backs taken in the top five of the NFL Draft since 1967. Is it true that running backs are a "safer bet" than quarterbacks, who tend not to make the immediate impact of a good first-round runner? We shall see.

Qualifications for Boom-Hood

- Multiple seasons of 1,000-yard production
- A career of reasonable length (five years or more)
- The ability to be a workhorse, to carry a team on his back (I know, it's a little nebulous, but work with me)

Qualifications for Bust-Hood

- Poor production; no 1,000-yard seasons, no Pro Bowls
- Career radically shortened by injuries, off-field problems or just general suckiness
- Only a part-time player

Like always, it comes down to opinion.

1967

#2- Clint Jones, Michigan State (Minnesota)

Jones didn't make much of an impact in six years with the Vikings, never rushing for more than 675 yards in a season and failing to jump-start a Minnesota offense that struggled to hold up its end of the bargain with the Purple Gang defense. The Vikings didn't find their franchise back until the first round of the 1973 draft, when they took Chuck Foreman with the 12th pick. Bust

Best RB in Draft- Floyd Little (1st round, 6th pick)

1969

#1- O.J. Simpson, USC (Buffalo)

O.J.'s career got off to a slow start- he didn't break the 1,000-yard barrier until his fourth season- but once he got going, he became the best back in the game. From 1972 through 1976, Simpson averaged 1,540 yards per season, including his 2,003-yard season of 1973. He also broke his own single-game rushing record twice. For all his heroics, the Bills only played in one playoff game during Simpson's nine seasons in Buffalo. Boom

#3- Leroy Keyes, Purdue (Philadelphia)

The consolation prize in the O.J. Simpson sweepstakes, Keyes, who finished in the top three of the Heisman voting twice while at Purdue, never became a serviceable pro running back and was forced out of football by injuries after just four seasons. Known for his versatility, Keyes finished his short NFL career as a cornerback. Bust

Best RB in Draft- Simpson

1974

#2- Bo Matthews, Colorado (San Diego)

Matthews rushed for a total of 1,566 yards in an eight-year career spent mostly on the margins of the Charger roster. A San Diego running back set the rookie season-yardage record in 1974, but it wasn't the second overall pick- it was Don Woods, a fifth-round selection of Green Bay who the Chargers had claimed on waivers during training camp. Bust

Best RB in Draft- Delvin Williams (2nd round, 49th pick)

1975

#4- Walter Payton, Jackson State (Chicago)

Walter turned out all right. Boom

Best RB in Draft- Payton

1976

#3- Chuck Muncie, Cal (New Orleans)

Muncie had one big year for the Saints- 1979, when he rushed for 1,198 yards, a 5.0 yards-per, and scored eleven touchdowns for a New Orleans team that finished .500 for the first time ever (in its thirteenth season). But he finagled his way out of New Orleans early in the disastrous 1980 season, and spent his most productive years with the Chargers. There was really nothing wrong with this pick- just with the team that made it. Boom

#4- Joe Washington, Oklahoma (San Diego)

Little Joe was a little *too* little to be an every-down back in the NFL. He suffered a knee injury in his first preseason and spent just two seasons in San Diego before being traded to the Colts. He definitely made things happen as a scat-back and return man, but his contributions didn't equal his lofty draft status, the silver shoes and two-bar facemask aside. Bust

Best RB in Draft- Mike Pruitt (1st round, 7th pick)

1977

#1- Ricky Bell, USC (Tampa Bay)

A vintage USC workhorse back, Bell had one outstanding season in his short NFL career-

1979, when his 1,263 yards paced the surprising Buccaneers in their run to the brink of the Super Bowl. He had a vintage performance against the Eagles in the ’79 playoffs, pounding out 142 yards on 38 bruising carries with two scores in Tampa’s 24-17 win. A muscle disorder ended his career early and led to the heart condition that killed him in 1984. Bust (you want more than one good year out of such a high pick)

#2- Tony Dorsett, Pitt (Dallas)

Three times during the ‘70s the powerful Cowboys traded up into the top five, netting Too Tall Jones, Randy White, and in 1977, Heisman winner Tony Dorsett after Dallas swapped for Seattle’s pick. Dorsett gave the Cowboys the home-run punch they had long sought out of the backfield. Eight times he topped 1,000 yards, and he finished his twelve-year career with 12,739 rushing yards and ninety touchdowns. Boom

Best RB in Draft- Dorsett

1978

#1- Earl Campbell, Texas (Houston)

The Oilers paid a hefty price- their first two picks in ’78 and two more picks in ’79- to move up to the top spot and nab the Tyler Rose, who revitalized the Houston franchise and, in a career shortened by the constant punishment he meted out and received, became one of the game’s great blends of power and speed. Boom

#5- Terry Miller, Oklahoma State (Buffalo)

Miller, the Heisman runner-up to Earl Campbell, had an outstanding rookie season, running for 1,060 yards, including a 206-yard effort, and seven scores. But he would only score one more touchdown in a career that petered out after just four seasons. By the time Buffalo got back to the playoffs in 1980, Joe Cribbs, a rookie second-rounder, was the team's starting running back. Bust

Best RB in Draft- Campbell

1980

#1- Billy Sims, Oklahoma (Detroit)

The 1978 Heisman winner, Sims made an immediate impact as a rookie, rushing for 1,303 yards, scoring sixteen touchdowns, and helping the Lions jump from 2-14 to 9-7 in just one year. Sims's career was cut short by a knee injury in 1984, but he still topped the 5,000-yard mark. The Lions never did build upon the surge of his rookie season, however, and failed to win a playoff game during Sims's career. That's because for most of that period, Detroit's quarterback was Eric Hipple, the Charlie Frye of the '80s. Boom

#5- Curtis Dickey, Texas A&M (Baltimore)

A world-class sprinter, Dickey failed to become an impact player in the NFL, rushing for over 1,000 yards only once while with Colts teams that were worse than bad. By 1986 he was an insurance policy for Cleveland, filling in for the injured Earnest Byner. Bust

Best RB in Draft- Sims

1981

#1- George Rogers, South Carolina (New Orleans)

Rogers sabotaged his career with drug use, but still turned in a few stellar seasons for the Saints, and led the NFL in rushing as a rookie with 1,674 yards. Coming off a 1-15 season, New Orleans needed the impact of a good back, and got it. The fact that the second overall pick in ’81 was Lawrence Taylor takes some of the luster off this selection, but George Rogers was a good pro back. Boom

#3- Freeman McNeil, UCLA (N.Y. Jets)

He’s been almost forgotten, but Freeman was a very productive back for a good length of time. He rushed for 1,000+ only twice, but he played twelve seasons, a long time for a running back, amassed over 8,000 career rushing yards, and was the main man for some pretty good Jets teams in the early-to-mid ‘80s. Boom

Best RB in Draft- James Brooks (1st round, 24th pick; this was a good class for running backs, with Rogers, McNeil, Brooks, James Wilder, Andra Franklin, Stump Mitchell, and the late Joe Delaney all selected)

1983

#2- Eric Dickerson, SMU (L.A. Rams)

Dickerson broke the single-season rushing record in his second year and led the league in rushing four times despite hauling water for offenses led by the likes of Jeff Kemp, Dieter Brock, and Jack Trudeau. For those who shy away from backs who run straight up, the be-goggled ex-SMU Mustang is Exhibit 1-A for why they should check their premises. Dickerson could have balanced a tea service on his helmet while he ran, but it didn't seem to bother him. Boom

#3- Curt Warner, Penn State (Seattle)

Warner ran for 1,449 yards and thirteen touchdowns as a rookie, helping the Seahawks to their first-ever playoff appearance and a surprise trip to the AFC Championship Game. He blew out his knee in the first week of the '84 season (against the Browns), but came back to rush for over 1,000 three more times in an eight-year career. For the impact Warner made on the Seahawks, especially as a rookie, the pick was worth it. He was really that franchise's first legitimate star. Boom

Best RB in Class- Dickerson

1986

#1- Bo Jackson, Auburn (Tampa Bay)

Jackson, far and away the best prospect in the '86 Draft, said thanks but no thanks to the

woeful Buccaneers and set forth on his baseball career. Eventually Tampa Bay's rights to Bo were voided and he re-entered the 1987 Draft, where the Raiders selected him in the seventh round. Considering the weakness at the top of the '86 Draft- the next four selections after Bo were Tony Casillas, Jim Everett, Jon Hand, and Anthony Bell- the Buccaneers were right to take a flier on the Auburn Heisman winner. Bust (obviously, there are mitigating factors, because talent-wise, Bo was among the all-time greats)

Best RB in Draft- Dalton Hilliard (2nd round, 31st pick)

1987

#3- Alonzo Highsmith, Miami (Houston)

Highsmith wasn't up to the fairly mundane task of being a run 'n shoot tailback; by the early '90s, thanks to injuries, he was out of football altogether and into a new career as a boxer (where he knocked out, among others, Mark Gastineau). Bust

#4- Brent Fullwood, Auburn (Green Bay)

Fullwood was just another piece of rubble in the flaming ruin that was Green Bay's draft record during the franchise's long, dark night between Vince Lombardi and Brett Favre. In his best season, 1989, he ran for an uninspiring 821 yards and five touchdowns, numbers that didn't exactly scream "second coming of John Brockington." Bust

Best RB in Draft- Christian Okoye (2nd round, 35th pick)

1989

#3- Barry Sanders, Oklahoma State (Detroit)

Detroit- you chose wisely. Boom

Best RB in Draft- Sanders

1990

#2- Blair Thomas, Penn State (N.Y. Jets)

Thomas played only four seasons in New York, and failed to top 728 rushing yards in any of them. More than anyone, he is responsible for affixing the future-bust label to pretty much every running back to come out of Penn State, a school that produced Lenny Moore, Franco Harris, and Lydell Mitchell. Bust

Best RB in Draft- Emmitt Smith (1st round, 17th pick)

1994

#2- Marshall Faulk, San Diego State (Indianapolis)

Faulk was a very good back for the Colts, but it took a trade to the Rams in 1999 to make him a great one. In the early 2000's, he was the best all-purpose back in the league, catching 80+ passes for five straight seasons, and topping 1,000 receiving yards in 2000. He also ran for over 1,000 yards seven times, and scored 136 touchdowns in his career. Next stop- Canton. Boom (From 1990 to 1994, the Colts had five top-five picks, and used them on Jeff George, Steve Emtmann, Quentin Coryatt, Trev Alberts, and Marshall Faulk. Blind squirrels and nuts come to mind)

Best RB in Draft- Faulk

1995

#1- Ki-Jana Carter, Penn State (Cincinnati)

Ki-Jana tore up his knee on the first possession of his first preseason game in 1995, and compiled a paltry 1,127 rushing yards in parts of six seasons. Bust

Best RB in Draft- Curtis Martin (3rd round, 74th pick)

1998

#5- Curtis Enis, Penn State (Chicago)

An Ohio high school legend, Enis was yet another high-profile Penn State tailback-bust, averaging a puny 3.3 yards per carry and scoring six touchdowns in a three-season cup of lukewarm NFL coffee. Bust

Best RB in Draft- Fred Taylor (1st round, 9th pick)

1999

#4- Edgerrin James, Miami (Indianapolis)

In Edge's rookie year, he rushed for 1,553 yards and thirteen touchdowns as the Colts flip-flopped from 3-13 to 13-3. He followed that up with a 1,709-yard effort in 2000, and has come back from a career-threatening knee injury to pound out four more 1,000-yard seasons. Boom

#5- Ricky Williams, Texas (New Orleans)

For all of the negative associations with his name, Williams actually had a pretty good pro career, rushing for over 7,000 career yards and scoring 51 touchdowns in six seasons. But he wasn't worth the eight draft picks the Saints gave up to get him in 1999, and he wasn't worth the pair of high picks the Dolphins gave up to get him in 2002. Bust (he'd be a boom if not for Ditka's trade, and the weed, and all that other stuff)

Best RB in Draft- Edge James

2000

#5- Jamal Lewis, Tennessee (Baltimore)

The Ravens took a gamble on Lewis, who had suffered a severe knee injury at UT, and despite a second knee injury in 2001 and a prison stint in 2004, the gamble paid off. Lewis breached 1,000 yards six times in Baltimore, including 2,066 in 2003. It's worth noting that Phil Savage isn't scared off by running backs that were injured in college. Boom

Best RB in Draft- Shaun Alexander (1st round, 19th pick)

2001

#5- LaDainian Tomlinson, TCU (San Diego)

LT is that rarest of athletic specimens- the player who is considered among the all-time greats while still in the prime of his career. Boom

Best RB in Draft- LT

To Be Determined…

2005

#2- Ronnie Brown, Auburn (Miami)

Brown rushed for 1,008 yards in 2006, but so far hasn't shown any indication that he will be an elite back- just a decent one.

#4- Cedric Benson, Texas (Chicago)

A lengthy holdout helped to spoil Benson's rookie season, and he still hasn't become Chicago's number-one tailback. After two seasons, the former Texas star has rushed for a piddling 919 yards. Ced will have a chance to double that figure at least, when he tales over as Chicago's primary ball carrier in 2007.

#5- Carnell Williams, Auburn (Tampa Bay)

The Cadillac had the best rookie season of the three 2005 top-five halfbacks, piling up 1,178 yards for a surprising Buccaneer team, but his numbers took a nosedive during an injury-marred sophomore season.

2006

#2- Reggie Bush, USC (New Orleans)

Perhaps the most hyped back coming out of college since Barry Sanders, Bush made his greatest initial impact as a receiver, as a return man, and as one of the league's best decoys. He has the hands, the quickness, and the moves- the only question left for Reggie Bush is whether he's capable of being an every-down back… or whether he's simply a somewhat evolved version of Little Joe Washington.

The Tabulations…

33 running backs taken in the Top 5 of the Draft since 1967

Booms: 15

Busts: 14

Too Early to Tell: Four

Hall-of-Famers: Six (Eight when Faulk and LT are inducted)

Best RB in Draft by Year: Ten of Twenty Years (not counting 2005-06)

The “safer bet” argument works when the impact of top-five running backs versus top-five quarterbacks is taken into account. There are a slightly higher percentage of ‘booms’ among the backs than among the quarterbacks, and a higher percentage of Hall-of-Famers. A great running back is also fully capable of making a team-altering impact as a rookie, something that is extremely rare for a quarterback.

But the argument breaks down in other areas. When it comes to endurance, it’s no contest: quarterbacks tend to play a great deal longer than running backs as a general rule. Even some great backs, like Earl Campbell and Billy Sims, had relatively short careers due to injuries or a general breakdown of the body due to the constant pounding running backs sustain on almost every carry (unless they run out of bounds on every play like Franco Harris). Bud Grant says there is ability, and then there is *dur*ability. Running backs enjoy an advantage in the former; quarterbacks, in the latter.

The phenomenon of the top draft pick that flames out at his first stop and resurrects his career further down the line is almost non-existent when it comes to runners. A back seemingly gets it fairly early, or he doesn’t get it at all; a quarterback can take years, sometimes as long as a decade, to blossom into what he was expected to be when he was drafted in the first place. There are no Jim Plunkett’s or Vinny Testaverde’s among the running backs.

And when it comes to the most important statistic of all, it’s a runaway for the passers. Six of the 36 top-five quarterbacks led their original teams to Super Bowl championships, and Steve McNair and Donovan McNabb were conference champions with their first teams. In contrast, just two top-five running backs- Walter Payton and Tony Dorsett- won world titles with their original teams, and the Cowboys were already an elite team when they drafted Dorsett.

All of this isn’t intended to be advocacy for the Browns selecting any particular player or position. Personally, I’d like them to think quarterback first, not because I don’t like A-Pete’s potential (I do), but because I’d rather spent three hours every Sunday allowing medical

students to practice their catheterization techniques on me than be subjected to the sight of Charlie Frye impersonating an NFL starter for another season. But it’s just more fodder for arguments before Saturday gets here.