

The NFL's irreplaceable players



Peyton Manning, Ware top list of essential stars

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In the NFL, star players are considered irreplaceable until proved otherwise. Take Tom Brady: The 2007 NFL MVP would've topped any list of the most irreplaceable players in football this time last year, but by the end of the season, Matt Cassel was considered to be an adequate impersonation of the guy who had put up the best season of any quarterback in NFL history.

If a guy who didn't start even a single college game could replace the best quarterback in the league, are there any irreplaceable players in the NFL? We think so, and we've compiled a list of the 10 most irreplaceable players in the game, taking into account their performance on the field (using our statistics), the scheme they play in, and the depth chart around them.

Since games are won and lost in the trenches, that's where we start.

10. Kris Jenkins, DT, Jets

It seems strange that one of the 10 most irreplaceable players in football could have been acquired for third- and fifth-round picks as recently as a year ago, but the Panthers had grown sick of Jenkins' weight issues and injury problems. It was to their detriment.

The Panthers' rush defense, according to DVOA, fell from -5.1 percent in 2007 (17th in the league) to 8.0 percent in 2008 (24th -- the percentage increased, but since DVOA measures performance versus the league average of yards allowed in the same situation, a negative number is actually a good thing for a defense). Meanwhile, the Jets went from a 2007 DVOA of 11.3 percent, 30th in the league, to -7.7 percent in 2008, the seventh-best total in the league. The Jets have only journeyman Howard Green and the middling Sione Pouha behind Jenkins, leaving them with precious little depth if Jenkins should go down.

9. Michael Roos, LT, Titans

Roos has quietly emerged as an elite left tackle, making his first Pro Bowl a year ago. He allowed only one sack all season, a remarkable total for a left tackle (the average NFL left tackle allows around five sacks per year). He's backed up by two players -- Peter Clifford and Michael Otto -- who have combined for a total of one NFL game. He's absolutely essential to the success of the Tennessee offense.

8. Ed Reed, S, Ravens

We often define a player's value by how much a team suffers when the player is missing; Reed represents the opposite. During a season when the other three projected starters in the Ravens' secondary combined for only 18 appearances because of injury, Reed played like a man possessed. Despite suffering through injuries of his own, the Ravens had the second-best pass defense DVOA (-23.3 percent) in the league thanks to Reed's raising the play of journeymen like Fabian Washington, Frank Walker and Jim Leonhard.

7. Andre Johnson, WR, Texans

We could just list the wide receivers whom Johnson has spent his career playing across from, but that doesn't quantify just how important Johnson's presence is to making the Texans' offense work. Instead, we'll look back to 2007, when Johnson was on the shelf for seven games. Their passing DVOA was 11th in the league with Johnson in the lineup and 19th without, but he had an even bigger impact on the running game; the Texans actually had the fifth-best rushing DVOA in football when Johnson was around, falling to 28th when he was injured. Think he keeps a safety or two occupied?

6. Tommie Harris, DT, Bears

Since Harris started struggling with assorted ailments toward the end of the 2006 season, the Bears have been 25-15 when he starts and 4-4 when he doesn't. That's a vague statistic, but it's hard to find just one that assesses Harris' impact on the defense. Not only is he a stout defender against the run, but he is also the team's best pass-rusher. By occupying two blockers at his best, Harris creates opportunities for other players on the outside to beat their blockers in one-on-one situations. The Bears have failed to replace him adequately when he's been out of the lineup -- the likes of Israel Idonije and Marcus Harrison are simply inadequate replacements.

5. Ryan Clady, LT, Broncos

Like Roos, Clady also allowed only a single sack despite playing left tackle all season. Unlike Roos, though, Clady was an elite run-blocker. Denver was the best team in the league running to left end and fifth-best running at left tackle. While Marcus McNeill and Joe Thomas have both impressed as rookies before struggling as sophomores, Clady was better than either as a rookie. Backup Brandon Gorin is strictly for show.



4. Roddy White, WR, Falcons

Although Larry Fitzgerald laid his claim to the title of best wide receiver in football during the playoffs, no wideout played a bigger part in his team's success than White. Matt Ryan threw 32.5 percent of his passes in 2008 to White, the highest such percentage for any receiver in football. (Carolina's Steve Smith was second, at 29.5 percent.) The Falcons added Tony Gonzalez to help ease White's load in 2009, but it's not as if Gonzalez made the Kansas City offense go last year. If the Falcons lost White, the effects on their offense would be catastrophic.

3. Nnamdi Asomugha, CB, Raiders

The only reason Asomugha isn't No. 1 is because, well, the Raiders stink even with him in the lineup. Thanks to a poor game against the Patriots, Asomugha didn't have the otherworldly numbers he had in 2007, but he was still targeted on only 32 passes, the lowest total (by far) of any starting corner in football, and a sign of how dramatic his impact is. No one in the league could replace Asomugha, let alone anyone on Oakland's roster.

2. DeMarcus Ware, ROLB, Cowboys

Some pass-rushers aren't effective against the run -- take Dwight Freeney, who often vacates his gap to try to rush around the offensive tackle to the passer. Ware's not like that. When it comes to stopping the run, the only gap against which the Cowboys were in the top 10 a year ago was left tackle, which is Ware's responsibility. The Cowboys' league-high Adjusted Sack Rate (which adjusts cumulative sack totals for the number of passes attempted and quality of offense), of course, owes much to the impact Ware has. He's the best two-way defender in the game.



1. Peyton Manning, QB, Colts

Whether you think Manning is the best quarterback in the game or not, it's hard to argue that anyone is more difficult to replace. Essentially serving as his own offensive coordinator, Manning chooses his own play at the line of scrimmage and then famously spends a fair amount of time there changing it. While some other quarterbacks can read defenses as well as Manning, no one's better at adjusting the play on the fly, and there's simply no one in football who plays like him. If Manning were to miss time, Indianapolis would have to change its offensive scheme to the point of making it unrecognizable. That's why Manning remains the most irreplaceable player in football.

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