

Veteran running backs dot playoff rosters

By STEVE MEGARGEE
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GREEN BAY, Wis. — Those veteran running backs who changed addresses in the off-season have given themselves a chance to showcase the difference they can make in the post-season.

Plenty of contenders capitalized on a crowded market by adding proven ball carriers. The moves paid major dividends.

Now players such as Philadelphia's Saquon Barkley, Baltimore's Derrick Henry and Green Bay's Josh Jacobs are welcoming the playoff opportunities they didn't get often enough with their original teams. Barkley made that clear after the Eagles decided to rest him for their regular-season finale rather than giving him a chance to break Eric Dickerson's single-season rushing record.

"We didn't come here and I didn't sign here to break Eric Dickerson's record," Barkley said. "We came here to win a Super Bowl. I think everyone knows that."

Barkley's only playoff experience in his seven seasons with the New York Giants was a two-game run to the 2022 divisional round. Jacobs appeared in just one playoff game in five seasons with the Oakland/Las Vegas Raiders.

Their new teams meet Sunday when the Eagles (14-3) host the Packers (11-6) in the wild-card round.

"I'm not just satisfied with going to the playoffs," Jacobs said. "I came here to win the Super Bowl. So, for me, that's the only thing that's really on my mind. I'm about to give everything that I've got to this and see how it could play out."

Their playoff matchup follows a banner regular season for veteran running backs who switched teams.

Heading into this season, only three players had rushed for at least 1,200 yards with multiple teams since 2010, according to Sportradar: LeSean McCoy (Philadelphia and Buffalo), DeMarco Murray (Dallas and Tennessee) and Christian McCaffrey (Carolina and San Francisco).

That total doubled this year, thanks to Barkley, Henry and Jacobs.

Barkley rushed for an NFL-leading 2,005 yards after exceeding 1,300 yards in 2018



Philadelphia Eagles running back Saquon Barkley (center) leaps as Dallas Cowboys linebacker Marist Liufau tries to trip him up during a Dec. 29 game in Philadelphia.

and 2022 with the Giants. Henry, a two-time NFL rushing leader at Tennessee, ranked second with 1,921 yards. Jacobs, who had an NFL-leading 1,653 yards in 2022, is sixth with 1,329 yards.

Each got a giant boost from joining a winning team.

Barkley more than doubled his rushing total from his last year in New York, when he ran for 962 yards. Jacobs had rushed for just 805 yards in 2023 following a preseason holdout. Henry ran for 1,167 yards — an impressive number, but 754 fewer than he had this year — his final season in Tennessee.

CBS analyst Tiki Barber, who rushed for 10,449 yards with the Giants from 1997-2006, said running backs often need "the right infrastructure" to thrive.

"In order to have a running back thrive, you have to be properly built," said Barber, a 2005 All-Pro. "Good offensive line. You have to have an offensive system that's not just predicated on your running back being your most productive asset or your big-play playmaker. When I think back with Saquon with the Giants a year ago, they fully depended on him to make their big plays. There was really nobody else that could do that."

Barber noted that Barkley, Henry and Jacobs got a better



Baltimore Ravens running back Derrick Henry scores on a 43-yard touchdown run against the Cleveland Browns on Saturday in Baltimore.

chance to maximize their talents when they joined their new teams, which had more dynamic offenses with additional playmakers.

They're not the only playoff running backs who benefited from fresh starts.

When the Packers signed Jacobs, they allowed Aaron Jones to depart in free agency. Jones joined the Minnesota

Vikings and rushed for a career-high 1,138 yards.

Joe Mixon rushed for 1,016 yards as a Houston Texans newcomer after spending seven seasons in Cincinnati. Barkley, Henry, Jacobs and Mixon all earned Pro Bowl selections.

Just as these running backs thrived in their new situations, their new teams benefited from their arrival.

The Eagles went from 11-6 last year to 14-3 this year. The Packers improved from 9-8 to 11-6. Minnesota, which went 7-10 last year, soared to 14-3 this year with Jones leading an improved ground attack.

The impact is evident to the running backs themselves. Jones emphasized the point when he was asked about how so many of the NFL's top running backs this year had switched teams in the offseason.

"Running backs matter!" Jones replied. "Hey guys, 'Everybody hear me? Running backs matter!'"

Henry already showed how much running backs can mean in the postseason when he carried the 2019 Titans to the AFC championship game by rushing for 182 yards in a wild-card win at New England and 195 yards in a divisional round upset at top-seeded Baltimore.

After missing the postseason the last two years at Tennessee, Henry is back in the playoffs chasing his first Super Bowl.

"The reason why I came here is to have the opportunity," Henry said. "But we know what's at stake. We know what we've got to do."

It's too early to tell whether the success so many running backs had with their new teams this year will start a trend and cause more teams to pursue proven ball carriers.

Jones signed a one-year deal with Minnesota and is one of the top potential names in a free-agent running back class that doesn't feature nearly as much star power as it did last spring, when Barkley, Henry and Jacobs were all available.

But there's no doubt these veteran running backs on new teams made a statement this year with their impact production.

"The proof is in the pudding," Packers center Josh Myers said. "All those teams got veteran running backs, and look how great all of them are doing. It's a position that still has a ton of value, and I think more value than most people give it credit for."

And that makes former running backs such as Barber proud.

"I love to see the running back has become important to teams that are successful again," Barber said. "Obviously it's a quarterback-driven league, but when you have a great running back, you feel it. And the other team feels it."

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