

SPORT



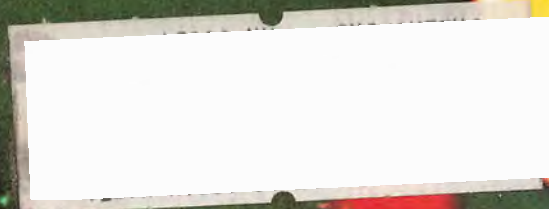
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Nobody Can Touch Joe Namath

Fran Tarkenton
Scrambles For
ALL The Records

Rick Barry In
Wonderland:
His Story
Of The
NBA
Playoffs



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30TH YEAR OF PUBLICATION

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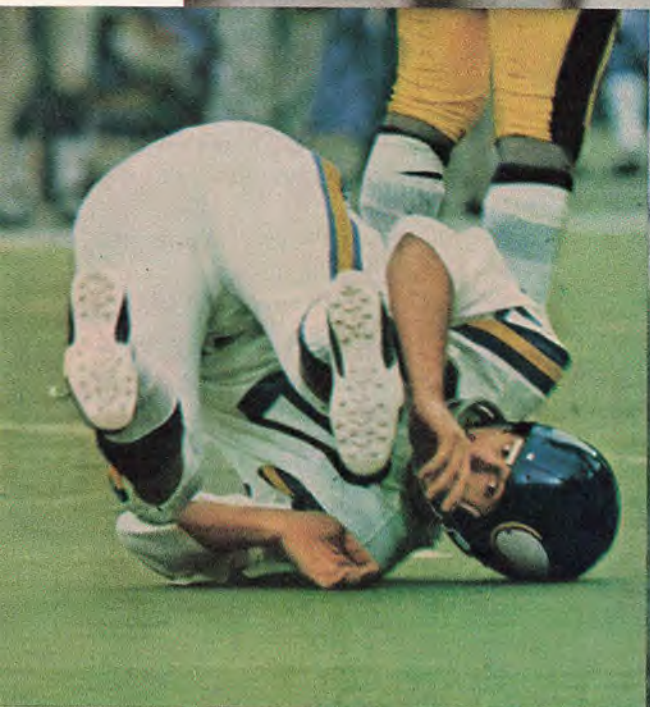
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Fran Tarkenton Is Out To Steal All The Passing Records

BY MURRAY OLDERMAN

In 1961, upon observing the quarterback's habit of scrambling unprotected among opponents who loved to maim, veteran defensive end Gino Marchetti offered a prediction. "The kid," said Marchetti, "will never last more than two or three years."

In 1972, upon acquiring the same quarterback in a trade, Minnesota general manager Jim Finks offered an assessment. The quarterback, said Finks, is "a great leader." But he's "not a great passer—and he never will be."

Today, the quarterback is in his 15th National Football League season, having survived the first 14 without ever missing a game because of injury. And sometime next season, if his health and skills endure, the quarterback will become the greatest passer, statistically, in the

history of professional football.

Fran Tarkenton? The greatest passer *ever*? That sounds even more ridiculous than Marchetti's prediction or Finks' assessment.

When thinking of Fran Tarkenton, it is reflex to think of his running. Throughout his career, after all, he has been known as "The Scrambler" and going into the 1975 season, he had rushed for 3,521 yards, more than any other quarterback in NFL history. But at the same time, with less fanfare, he has compiled better passing records than all the quarterbacks in pro football's Hall of Fame, a nine-man roster that includes Sammy Baugh, Otto Graham and Y. A. Tittle. There is only one quarterback, in fact—Johnny Unitas—who currently ranks ahead of Tarkenton in pro football's four major career passing categories.

In 18 seasons, Unitas set lifetime records for most passes attempted,

most completed, most yards gained passing and most touchdown passes. In this, Tarkenton's 15th season, he can pass Unitas in three categories. To do so, he minimally will have to attempt 387 passes and complete 173, 25 for touchdowns. To pass Unitas in most yards gained passing, Tarkenton needs 4,394, a reasonable two-season goal for a man who last year passed for 2,598.

"It's all tickling me beyond belief," says Tarkenton, "because I don't feel that I've ever gotten the proper notice as a passer. Almost no one has ever called me a great passer. If I break all the records, it still may not mean I'm a great passer—but, like they say, there have been greater power hitters than Henry Aaron, but nobody has hit more home runs."

During Tarkenton's first six pro seasons, his coach, Norm Van Brocklin, referred to him not as a passer, but as a scrambler, a description

The image of Fran Tarkenton is the image of a scrambler, but the record book paints a picture of a brilliant passer.

Fran Tarkenton

CONTINUED

which, in Van Brocklin's view and tone of voice, was clearly derisive; Van Brocklin believed, firmly, that quarterbacks belonged in the protective pocket. Traded from Van Brocklin's Vikings to the Giants, Tarkenton then found his passing skills measured, unfavorably, against those of New York's other pro quarterback, Joe Namath. And when the Vikings acquired Tarkenton a second time, general manager Finks welcomed him back by praising only his leadership. "That," says Tarkenton, "bothered me."

Even while leading the Vikings to the Super Bowl in the past two seasons, even while accumulating a 61.7 completion percentage in 1973 and throwing only seven interceptions, Tarkenton remained underpublicized as a passer. So it is not surprising to hear him say: "I do have career ambitions—to throw the most touchdown passes and to gain the most total yards. I would love to break that touchdown passes record. Of course you can't be thinking of throwing a touchdown pass if you're inside the five-yard line and it's not the right play, just for the sake of a record. But they'll come, all those records, if not this year, then next. There've been few people who have given me any due as a great passer, both in and out of football. So it's a great satisfaction to me to find myself up there among the greatest."

Tarkenton feels, obviously, that only the records will certify his own opinion of his passing skills. And it would have been, at the least, ironic if, after never missing a game due to injury, he had been robbed of a chance at the records because of one. Which is almost what happened. As recently as several months ago, a mysterious arm ailment was threatening to end Fran

Tarkenton's career.

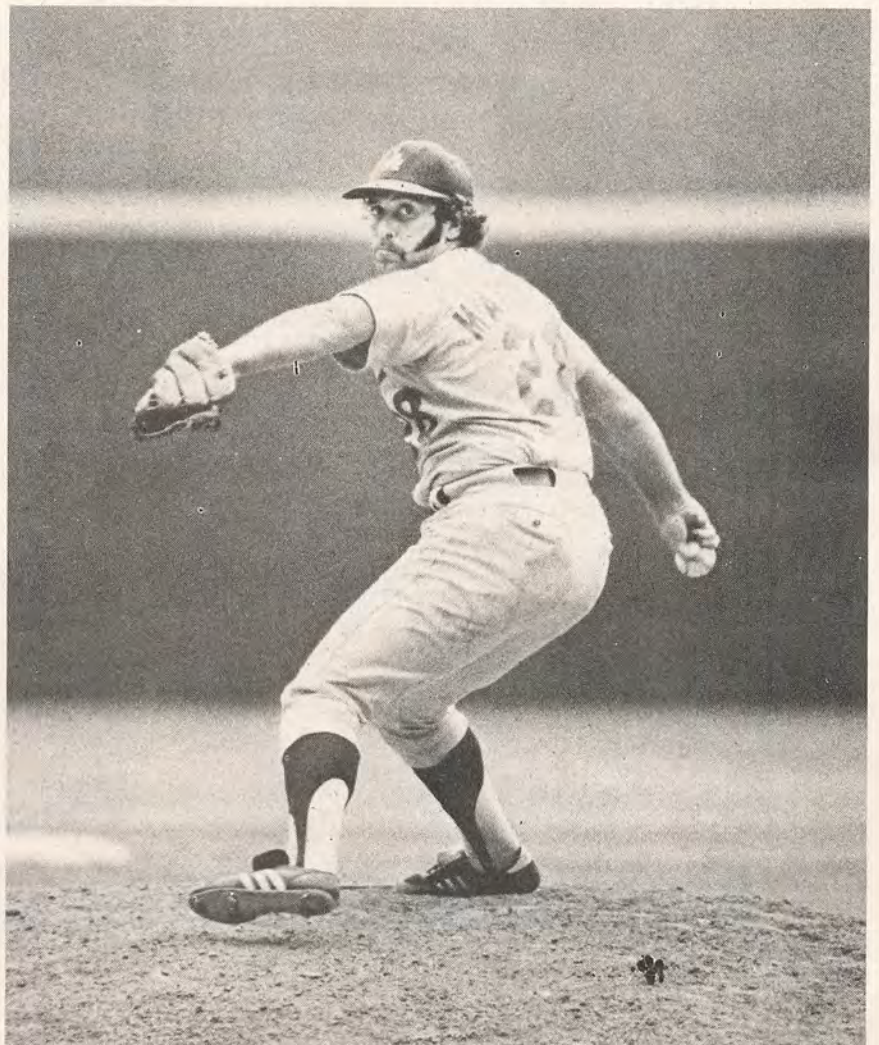
One afternoon early in the fall of 1974, Tarkenton rallied the Vikings to a last-second 23-21 victory over the Dallas Cowboys. That night he felt a severe throbbing on the outside of his right arm between the elbow and the shoulder. The throbbing was followed by sharp pains.

A few days later, in practice, Tarkenton tried to throw. The ball fluttered, then flopped crazily to the ground like a feather abruptly deserted by wind. "I couldn't throw any longer than ten yards without excruciating pain," Tarkenton remembers. "I rested it. I got all kinds of heat treatments. Nothing worked. It just got worse as the season wore on. It would be embarrassing to warm up before a game. I couldn't throw an 'out' ball."

An "out" ball is the pass a quarterback must throw when a receiver cuts sharply to the sideline in front of a defender. Because the football field is 53⅓ yards wide, the out pass must travel at least 30 yards on a tangent. And it must be delivered precisely and sharply. If it is thrown without force, a defensive back can step up and pick off a soft lob for a touchdown. In warmups, Tarkenton found himself able to throw only soft lobs when attempting this very important pass.

He had played in pain before; in 1968 he had suffered a shoulder separation in the fifth game and, sustained by cortisone shots, had played out the rest of the schedule. But he had never experienced any injury like the sore arm that was hanging on through the fall and winter of 1974.

"I took butazolidin drugs for the last seven weeks of the season," Tarkenton says, "and that's dangerous because you've got to check your blood count every Monday after you take the drug for four



When Mike Marshall, the pitcher, talks about muscles, he knows just what he's saying—even if no one else does.

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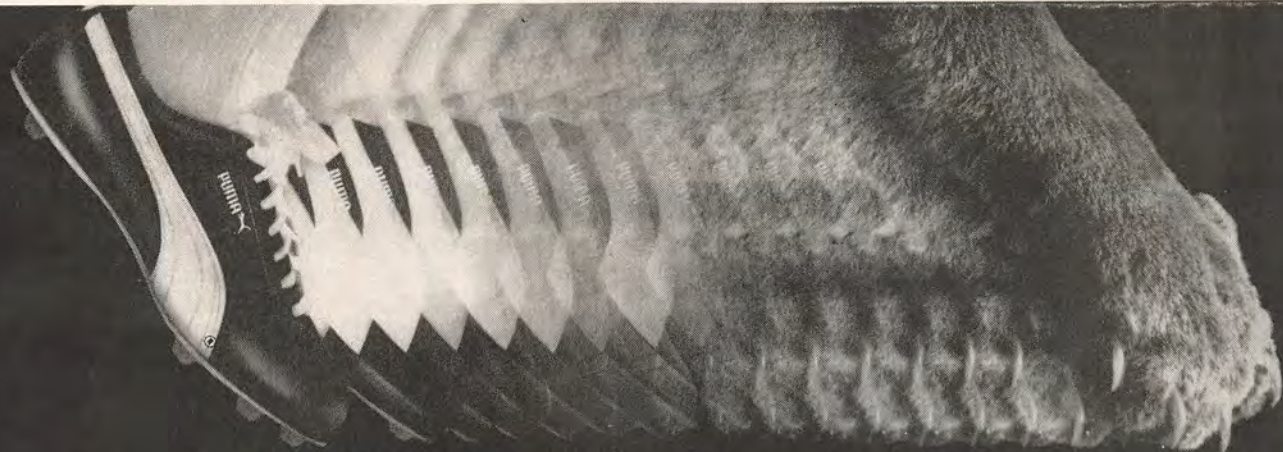


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days. They didn't help much, but did alleviate some of the pain. And when you get in a game, you get the adrenalin flowing. So I did throw, and I threw whatever pass I had to throw. But I wasn't as sharp as I had been or could have been. We got by."

Tarkenton passed for 2,598 yards and 17 touchdowns, nevertheless, and quarterbacked the Vikings through the Super Bowl. Then he went home to Atlanta, Ga., with his arm still aching and for weeks worried about his future in football. "I rested it completely for a month, and the arm got worse. It hurt all the time—without throwing. Nobody really knew what the problem was. It was too high to be tennis elbow, too low to be bursitis."

Tarkenton had read about a professor of kinesiology at Michigan State and about the professor's studies in the mechanics of throwing a ball. The professor's credentials included pitching in a record 106 games for the Los Angeles Dodgers in 1974 and winning the Cy Young

Award as the National League's outstanding pitcher. Tarkenton prodded Fred Zamberletti, the Vikings' trainer, to contact Professor Mike Marshall of Michigan State.

Zamberletti made contact in February, then Tarkenton personally telephoned Marshall. They arranged to meet on the Michigan State campus in March.

Tarkenton is an engaging man—open, self-confident, possessed of a sense of humor. Marshall, who is himself a brusque man, admits he was impressed by Tarkenton's personality. "That's probably the reason I chose to see him," says Marshall. "I'm not ready yet to open a clinic to treat individuals. Otherwise I'd become deluged with requests from professionals who have little sore arms here and there. I treated Fran under contract with the Minnesota Vikings."

Extensive X-rays were taken. Then Marshall and Tarkenton spent an afternoon in the anatomy department at Michigan State. "We looked at cadavers," says Tarken-

ton. "He wanted to explain to me the muscles that I use in throwing a football, and how they work."

In Marshall's mind, he already had Tarkenton's problem analyzed. "When Fran told me what it felt like when he was standing and what it felt like when he was throwing," says Marshall, "there was no doubt what muscle was giving him the trouble. The muscle is the supraspinatus and inserts at the apex of the greater tuberosity, and the pathway is under the acromioclavicular joint. It's involved primarily with stopping the forward movement of the arm and is also primary, I believe, in initiating inward rotation of the humerus, the bone of the upper arm, as well as stopping the action. So it's a dual-function muscle which tends to be injured frequently." Professor Irwin Corey, the master of double talk, could not have put it better.

While Marshall's analysis defies comprehension by mere mortals, his results inspire respect. He put Tarkenton on a training program of

Fran Tarkenton

CONTINUED

light weights, ten minutes a day, and flexibility exercises specifically designed to eliminate the muscular weakness—and he predicted that Fran would increase the strength in his arm ten to 15 percent this year. The arm pain stopped almost immediately. “Here I’ve played the pro game 14 years,” says Tarken-

ton, “which proves one thing. You never know it all. He’s taken high-speed motion pictures of football throwing motions and showed me some techniques which he’d found helpful in getting distance throwing the football.”

Marshall also convinced Tarkenton that an athlete needs to use his muscles the year round. Thus, even during a three-week family vacation at Hilton Head Island, S.C., in July, Tarkenton threw 250 passes a day, ran on the beach for 20 minutes each morning and did 50-yard sprints 50 times each afternoon. “I’m not saying Mike Marshall is the Messiah,” says Tarkenton, “but he’s the only guy I’ve talked to about sore arms and throwing who’s made any sense.”

When he is not playing football, Fran Tarkenton is the best-known commuter at the Atlanta airport. He logs between 12,000 and 20,000 miles a month traveling for Behavioral Systems Consultants, Inc., the management consultant company which he owns and which employs 200 people. His company deals with 52 corporations, ranging from the Kaiser shipyards in San Diego, Calif., to the textile plants in Lawrence, Mass. “Business to me is the same as football,” says Tarkenton. “The

It took John Unitas 18 years to set all the major passing marks, but Tarkenton should break them in his 16th season.

same juices burn—to get an account, to do well with it.

“I’ve always said,” he continues, “that a pro quarterback has to be a stand-up, take-charge guy. That’s the kind of executive that business looks for, too. The quarterback has to be assertive. He has to take command.”

His own juices for football, he says, remain very much alive, even though he is now 35-years-old. “My longevity,” he says, “will be governed by three factors. One, injuries. Two, effectiveness. Those two are really inter-related. And three, enthusiasm. Don Meredith at the age of thirty didn’t have any more enthusiasm for the game. He felt there were other things in life for him. My enthusiasm is like that of a ten-year-old. Really. I still like everything about football.”

Even training camp?

“Above all, training camp. It’s almost a relaxing time for me. I have a thousand decisions to make during the off-season in my business. I have a thousand decisions to make during the season in football. During training camp, I have no decisions to make. Bud Grant tells me when I have to get up, when I eat my meals, when I practice, when I go to meetings, when I go to bed. And there’s the camaraderie of being with the guys.”

In addition to the three factors Tarkenton lists, there is, of course, a fourth that will help influence his longevity in pro football: His pursuit of the career passing records. If he breaks them all by the end of next season, his enthusiasm might wane—or it could be stronger than it’s ever been before. ■



The NFL Career Passing Leaders

Most Passes Attempted, Lifetime	JOHN UNITAS	5,186
	FRAN TARKENTON	4,800
Most Passes Completed, Lifetime	JOHN UNITAS	2,830
	FRAN TARKENTON	2,658
Most Yards Gained, Lifetime	JOHN UNITAS	40,239
	FRAN TARKENTON	35,846
Most Touchdown Passes, Lifetime	JOHN UNITAS	290
	FRAN TARKENTON	266