

Analysis of Najee Harris, RB, Pittsburgh Steelers

By Eric Krusinski

Entering the 2024 season, the Pittsburgh Steelers decided to decline the fifth year option on 2021 first round draft pick Najee Harris. With this potential free agent status coming after the season, I thought it would be good to do a deep dive on Najee Harris—his strengths and weaknesses, what his market value could be, and what the rest of his career might look like.

In the 2021 draft, Najee Harris was considered one of the best running backs in the class. Draft pundits said he was great between the tackles and a great receiver out of the backfield. When he was selected 24th overall by Pittsburgh, the biggest criticism was that the Steelers drafted a running back in the first round.

Consider these comments:

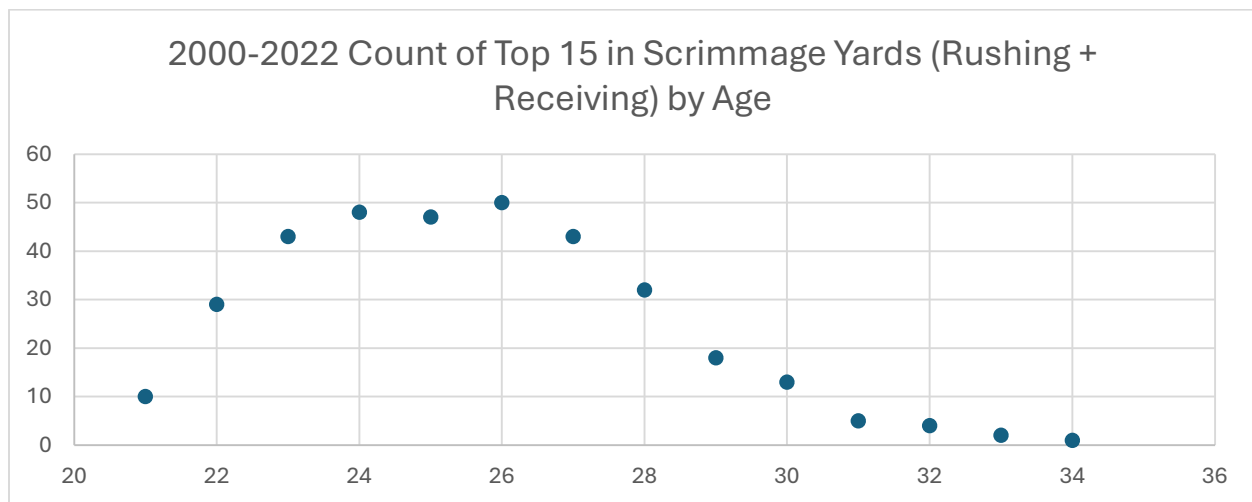
“...shouldn't be shocking to hear that we at PFF wouldn't pound the table for such a selection; any running back in Round 1 is a reach.” *Pro Football Focus*

“I don't like picking backs in the first round. Good player, but backs should come later.” *CBS Sports*

This, of course, follows analytics ideology as in the first round you want to focus on more impactful positions, like quarterback, offensive tackle, and edge rusher. To this point, Najee Harris was a major contributor for the Steelers by ranking 2nd, 5th, and 6th in carries and gaining 1,000 yards in each of his first three seasons, but the Steelers as a team ranked 29th, 16th, and 13th in rushing and 21st, 26th, and 28th in points scored. Perhaps the team could have found other ways in the draft to improve the offense. (Although, I am sure there are other factors that led to these low offensive statistics.)

The other concern with Harris coming into the draft was his age. Since 2000 Harris was the fifth oldest running back selected in the first round, and he had more touches in college than any of the other four running backs. (Reference: [Why Najee Harris' Age, Position Might Just Matter To Steelers - Steelers Depot](#)) While we are only talking about players in the first round and while we are only talking about differences in up to one or two years, age is not a very friendly statistic for running backs.

To explore this further, I took a look at the top 15 running backs in terms of scrimmage yards per game (rushing yards plus receiving yards per game). I also did this for each of the years between 2000 and 2022, so a total of 345 running backs were reviewed (15 times 23 years). The graph below shows how many players at each age made it in the top 15 for any of these years. For example, there were 50 running backs that were 26 years old and made it in the top 15 for scrimmage yards per game.



So from this chart, we can conclude that after the age of 26, running backs are less impactful to an offense because they are not as often seen in the top 15 for scrimmage yards per game.

Aside from these issues, Najee Harris was still considered one of the best running backs coming out of the draft, and his strengths certainly showed as he started his NFL career. First, he never missed a game in his career. This helps him with his pursuit of another contract because he has not had any major injuries to suggest that his value is diminished.

Another one of my favorite strengths for Harris is his character. I know this does not help that much on the field, but it is good for the locker room. Also, it is good for fan appeal and how that brings in more revenue for the team. On the day that Harris was drafted, he had a draft party at a homeless shelter and, of course, donated food for the event. Incidentally, this was the same homeless shelter he used to live in with his mother and siblings for several years. (Reference: [Najee Harris hosts draft party at his old homeless shelter - Sports Illustrated](#))

Also, I love how Najee Harris interacts with fans and teammates. Here is an article on Najee Harris at a Pittsburgh Pirates game: [Najee Harris Again Proves Why He's A Fan Favorite - Steelers Depot](#). Here, you can see he just happened to meet and hang out with some random young Steeler fans. In addition to other fan events, Najee Harris has also been a Steelers representative for engaging with fans in Mexico. He was also a team captain in just his second season (2022). He was not a team captain in 2023. The belief is that he was set up as a captain too early in his career, so the team decided to scale it back in 2023. In my opinion, he still shows leadership traits regardless if he is officially designated as a captain.

As stated earlier, Najee Harris has been a major contributor to the Steelers offense. However, his output does not quite line up with how much he has contributed. For example, while he ranked 2nd, 5th, and 6th in rushes in his first three seasons, it resulted in rankings of 4th, 14th, and 7th for rushing yards. The table below summarizes Najee Harris' rankings compared to other running backs for major statistical categories, including advanced stats, specifically PFF grade, running back success rate, and approximate value (AV) determined from Pro Football Reference. (Note: I filtered running back success rate by those with 100 carries or more because players with low numbers of carries present a small sample size to compute success rate.)

Najee Harris Statistical Rankings Compared to Running Backs									
Season	Rush Att	Rush Yds	Rec Targets	Rec Yds	Total Yds	TDs	PFF Grade	Success Rate	AV
2021	2	4	2	3	2	11	30	33	10
2022	5	14	18	25	14	12	27	36	31
2023	6	7	33	44	15	20	21	25	22
Combined	2	4	7	13	7	8	N/A	32	14

With these results, I drew the following conclusions:

- The lower rankings on the advanced stats (PFF grade, success rate, and AV) indicate that Harris' other rankings are mostly because of high volume (high snap rate, high number of carries, etc).
- Success rate is very specific on rushing output, so Najee Harris did not do well in terms of the numbers he got from rushing the ball.
- AV is mostly a summary of basic statistics. The PFF grade, on the other hand, is supposed to separate out things like the player's supporting cast and what types of opponents he played against. This concludes, then, that Najee Harris ranks somewhere between 20 and 30 just based on his skills as a running back.

Even though PFF tries to consider it, I wonder how much Najee Harris' supporting cast, specifically quarterback and offensive line, affected his overall statistics. In a model I developed for fantasy football (Reference: [FFF\(ekrusinski.com\)](http://FFF(ekrusinski.com))), I determined that a percentage of a running back's overall statistical output is based on the quarterback and offensive line he is playing with. The table above indicates that Harris' best basic statistics came in his rookie season when the Steelers had Ben Roethlisberger at quarterback, who is considered better than the quarterbacks they had in 2022 and 2023. Incidentally, the PFF grade in Harris' rookie year is low, which shows that they accounted for this difference at quarterback.

Regarding offensive line play, the Steelers have been subjectively criticized in this area from 2021 to 2023. Statistically, we can see that the offensive line was poor in 2021 but improved a little bit in 2022 and 2023. PFF rankings for the offensive line were shown as 26th in 2021 and 17th in 2023. (There was no data available for 2022.) And run block win rate by ESPN showed a ranking of 30th in 2021, 14th in 2022, and 12th in 2023. With this information, we can conclude that PFF's rankings for Najee Harris were justified, and Najee Harris' success rate rankings were only mildly attributed to the offensive line.

In reviewing Najee Harris' statistic splits, two things stand out the most. First, like typical running backs, Harris performed better when the Steelers won versus when they lost. In comparison, Harris had 18.4 rushing attempts for 74.3 yards per game when the Steelers won and 13.3 rushing attempts for 49.2 yards per game when the Steelers lost. Second, Harris seemed to perform better later in the season than earlier. In September, he averaged 12.8 rushing attempts for 43.3 yards per game, and in December, he averaged 17.5 rushing attempts for 66.1 yards per game. This falls in line with Harris' durability as he produced at high volume and never missed a game.

With all the information above, I can try to project what should be done with Najee Harris after his contract expires next year by summarizing his strengths and weaknesses as follows:

Strengths

- High character and leadership traits.
- Major contributor on offense – high snap rate, high rushing attempts, etc.
- Durable. Does not show any signs of diminishing since he has not missed any games due to injury.
- May be able to show a little bit more statistically if he played in a system with a better quarterback and offensive line.

Weaknesses

- Age. Currently 26, which means his production could start to drop.
- Based only on his skills as a running back, Najee Harris can be ranked somewhere between 20 and 30 compared to all other backs.

As far as where Najee Harris' next contract will take him, I would like to sign him to a three-year contract but no more considering his age. I think his high character and volume of production are enough for me to see if he can do more with a new contract.

On the other hand, I can see a couple of things going against him for a new contract. First, running backs in general are easy to replace, so it makes sense not to make a large offer when a similar, cheaper alternative can be made. This can be confirmed by comparing wins above replacement (WAR) between running backs and other positions. (As an example, see PFF WAR, [5f6a67e0957a471f8a59fdf5_Eager_PFF_WAR.pdf](#) ([webflow.com](#))). Second, based on his PFF grades, I am not sure that Najee Harris is worth fighting for the next big contract.

To determine his next contract, we can review other similar running backs who signed new contracts this year. See the table below.

Running Back PFF Grade and Contract Comparison			
Player	Age	2023 PFF Grade	2024 Contract Terms
Josh Jacobs	26	65.0	4 years, \$48M, \$12.5M guaranteed
Tony Pollard	27	77.5	3 years, \$21.75M, \$10.49M guaranteed
Joe Mixon	28	71.1	2 years, \$19.75M, \$13M guaranteed
Zack Moss	27	66.9	2 years, \$8M, \$3M guaranteed
Devin Singletary	27	75.1	3 years, \$16.5M, \$9.5M guaranteed
Najee Harris	26	76.2	N/A

Based on this information, I could offer Harris something similar to Tony Pollard's 2024 contract. But based on analytics, I would not want to do much more since, again, running backs are generally easier to replace and their production tends to drop off after the age of 26. As a result, I recommend a contract of 3 years, \$22.5M, with a \$7M signing bonus, a \$1.5M roster bonus in 2026, and a \$1.8M roster bonus in 2027. This, I think, gives Harris a very fair salary while protecting my team in case his production slips in the later years of his contract.

Considering the age trends for running backs, I predict that Najee Harris' new contract in 2025 will at least be his last big contract if not his last contract altogether.

In summary, Najee Harris is a player with high character and lots of production at the running back position. Even though the statistical production is there, Harris does not really seem to show any elite traits. Since his contract is coming up, he deserves a new contract because of his character, the fact that he has not had any major injuries, and simply because he produces. Of course, based on analytics, any contract offer should be limited because of Najee's age and because of the overall low value of a running back.