THE 100

IT'S A TEAM GAME

When SN's 99-man panel—including 25 Hall of Famers—picked the 100 best players in today's game, a handful of franchises stood above the rest.

Photo by Bruce Kluckhohn for SN

1. Peyton Manning, QB, Colts
2. Drew Brees, QB, Saints
3. Chris Johnson, RB, Titans
4. Larry Fitzgerald, WR, Cardinals
5. Adrian Peterson, RB, Vikings
6. Andre Johnson, WR, Texans
7. Darrelle Revis, CB, Jets
8. Tom Brady, QB, Patriots
9. DeMarcus Ware, OLB, Cowboys
10. Jared Allen, DE, Vikings
11. Dwight Freeney, DE, Colts
12. Patrick Willis, ILB, 49ers
13. Aaron Rodgers, QB, Packers
14. Julius Peppers, DE, Bears
15. Brett Favre, QB, Vikings
16. Philip Rivers, QB, Chargers
17. Joe Thomas, OT, Browns
18. Charles Woodson, CB, Packers
19. Jason Witten, TE, Cowboys
20. Ryan Clady, OT, Broncos

FRANCHISE PLAYER

SN ranked the five best quarterbacks in Patriots history, then asked one of the top five to comment on No. 1.

1. Tom Brady, 2000-present
2. Drew Bledsoe, 1993-01
3. Steve Grogan, 1975-90
4. Babe Parilli, 1961-67
5. Tony Eason, 1983-89

Grogan on Brady: “I think that’s fair, the way you have them listed. Tom Brady, by far, has done more for the organization than any of the rest of us. He’s extremely accurate; he’s extremely smart. He just has that innate ability to find a way to make big plays when everything else is crashing around him.”

— Ryan Fagan

WE'RE NOT HERE BY ACCIDENT

DT KEVIN WILLIAMS

Acquired: 1st round (9th overall), 2003
Pro Bowls: 5
VP of player personnel
Rick Spielman’s first impression: “He is a unique player at that position because he can play the run as effectively as he can rush the passer. It’s a rare combination where you can find guys of that size (6-5, 311) and those athletic skills who can play both equally well. That’s why I think he’s one of the best 3 techniques in the game. When you see him in person, you don’t realize how big and athletic this guy is. Instantly, you notice him.”
nothing but praise for him —just watching him come out here. He doesn’t say much, but he does the right things. I’ve got awesome. He’s a good teammate; he’s fun to be around. WR/KR

PERCY HARVIN

Acquired: 1st round (22nd overall), 2009
Pro Bowls: 1
Harvin’s first impression: “He came into the locker room and has been nothing but awesome. He’s a good teammate; he’s fun to be around. He doesn’t say much, but he does the right things. I’ve got nothing but praise for him —just watching him come out here and catch balls and his explosiveness through punt returns and kick returns. It was obvious he was an athlete. The big question about him when he came in was his attitude off the field and stuff, but he’s been a hell of a teammate.”

JARED ALLEN

Acquired: Trade with Chiefs, 2008
Pro Bowls: 3
Rice’s first impression: “He’s a high-intensity guy. He’s got a lot of energy, and he likes to get after it. It’s always exciting when you see him acting crazy in the locker room and things like that, but once he gets on the field it’s totally different. He has a motor, and it never cuts off. He gets to the quarterback. If he doesn’t make the play on the quarterback every time, he’s somewhere in that area. If something happens that makes the quarterback get out of the pocket, you know Jared had something to do with it.”

STEVE HUTCHINSON

Acquired: Free agent, 2006
Pro Bowls: 7
Williams’ first impression: “We saw him in Seattle a few times, and he was probably the best guard me and the other guys went against coming up. His technique is real sound. He’s a tough guy to get around. He’s strong up top, he stays square, and he brings his hands from the bottom. It’s hard to react to that when you first go against him. I’d say he definitely is one of the top two or three guards I’ve had to go against. Larry Allen was a big, strong guy to play against. But next to him is probably Steve.”

ADRIAN PETERSON

Acquired: 1st round (7th overall), 2007
Pro Bowls: 3
Hutchinson’s first impression: “He showed up a couple days late to training camp (because of his contract situation) his rookie year. When he eventually hit the field, I remember thinking during the first couple run plays we had in the team period how hard and how downhill and how fast he hit the hole. I’m thinking, Well, he’s just got fresh legs; we’ve all been down here for five days. But once we got into the game situations and once he got the timing down, it was amazing. And it still is to this day.”

SIDNEY RICE

Acquired: 2nd round (44th overall), 2007
Pro Bowls: 1
Peterson’s first impression: “I had an opportunity to see what his talent was about before we became teammates. We worked out together in Arizona. Being around him during that process and seeing his talents—6–4, long guy and just great athletic ability to be able to go up and grab the ball. When he came here to the Vikings, I kind of expected him to be that type of player. At first, he didn’t have that many opportunities. … (He) was kind of hidden for the first two years. But he definitely has exploded now.”

THE PANEL

HALL OF FAMERS

Lance Alworth
Chuck Bednarik
Raymond Berry
Dick Butkus
Willie Davis
Dan Dierdorf
Mike Ditka
Art Donovan
Tony Dorsett
Dan Hampton
Ted Hendricks
Paul Hornung
Sam Huff
LeRoy Kelly
Steve Largent
Larry Little
James Lofton
Hugh McElhenny
Ron Mix
Mel Renfro
Jackie Slater
Paul Warfield
Dave Wilcox
Kellen Winslow
Ron Yary

THE NFL

BRETT FAVRE

Acquired: Free agent, 2009
Pro Bowls: 11
Harvin’s first impression: “When he first walked into the locker room, I didn’t really have any reaction other than, ‘That’s Brett Favre’, the guy I grew up watching and admiring. It was crazy to think I was teammates with him now. I think he prepares so well before every game and knows the opponent so well, it allows him to be so relaxed. It’s important for a team to have a quarterback who never gets tense in the toughest situations, and he’s the best at that.”

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— Dennis Dillon

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Photo by Bob Leverone / SN

21. Ray Rice, RB, Ravens
22. Wes Welker, WR, Patriots
23. Steve Hutchinson, G, Vikings
24. Brandon Marshall, WR, Dolphins
25. Elvis Dumervil, OLB, Broncos
26. Nnamdi Asomugha, CB, Raiders
27. Steven Jackson, RB, Rams
28. Ed Reed, FS, Ravens
29. Kevin Williams, DT, Vikings
30. Ray Lewis, ILB, Ravens
31. Haloti Ngata, DT, Ravens

32. Steve Smith, WR, Panthers
33. Randy Moss, WR, Patriots
34. Antonio Gates, TE, Chargers
35. Darren Sharper, FS, Saints
36. Dallas Clark, TE, Colts
37. Jake Long, OT, Dolphins
38. Reggie Wayne, WR, Colts
39. Troy Polamalu, SS, Steelers
40. Mario Williams, DE, Texans

FRANCHISE PLAYER
SN ranked the five best wide receivers in Panthers history, then asked one of the top five to comment on No. 1.

1. Steve Smith, 2001-present
2. Muhsin Muhammad, 1996-04, 2008-09
3. Rocket Ismail, 1996-98
4. Mark Carrier, 1995-96
5. Ricky Proehl, 2003-05

— Proehl on Smith: “When I think of the Panthers, I think of Moose, I think of Smitty, obviously, Mark Carrier, definitely. … (Smith) plays with a chip, no question. He has so many strengths. You rarely see a guy with the speed he has with the ability to go over the middle and not be afraid. He's got the whole package. He can jump, go get the football. You definitely have to be half-crazy (to do what he does). You have to be willing to expect the worst, getting blown up, taking one for the team.” — Matt Crossman

RAVENS
6 PLAYERS
BUILDING BLOCKS

30
RAY LEWIS
ILB

— Acquired: 1st round (26th overall), 1996
— Pro Bowls: 11
— G.M. Ozzie Newsome’s first impression: “I remember watching tape with Ray at the scouting combine, a game he had against Baylor. I swear, it looked like he made every tackle. That one game was like a highlight tape. ... We were a height, weight and speed team, and he did not fit the height aspect. But when we worked him out, you couldn't tire him out. You take that type of work ethic and passion, and add it to what we already saw on tape, and you've got something special.”

28
ED REED
FS

— Acquired: 1st round (24th overall), 2002
— Pro Bowls: 6
— Lewis’ first impression: “I was out of Miami by the time he got there, but I was with the team when we were hot. My first impression of Ed was seeing him on the field. There’s an expression that when you play a certain way, you say, ‘That's a Hurricane.’ Ed was a Hurricane immediately. Then when he got (to Baltimore), I just said, ‘Wow, he still is playing the same way.’ You don't get many young guys who come in and can take over and start right away. Ed was different.”
WE'RE NOT HERE BY ACCIDENT

RB Ray Rice says: “Ozzie finds guys that fit here, not just good players. He played the game, he knows the game, he can evaluate the game. I've never played on another team, but you can tell this team was put together with a lot of thought in mind. We have guys who play hard, guys who play physical, guys who are tough mentally. They're Ravens. That has to be part of Ozzie’s vision, what he has in mind for how a team should be.”

THE PANEL

FORMER STARS
Fred Arbanas
Blaine Bishop
John Brodie
Derrick Brooks
Chad Brown
Isaac Bruce
Michael Carter
Ben Coates
Nolan Cromwell
Clem Daniels
Dermontti Dawson
Lynn Dickey
Boomer Esiason
Rich Gannon
La’Roii Glover
Larry Grantham
Trent Green
Bobby Hebert
Andy Heck
Priest Holmes
Mo Lewis
Louis Lipps
Neil Lomax
Don Majkowski
Karl Mecklenburg
Jon Morris
Tom Myers
John Offerdahl
Drew Pearson
Art Powell
Willie Roaf
Mickey Shuler
Fred Smerlas
Walt Sweeney
Dave Scott
Darryl Talley
Duane Thomas
Zach Thomas
Chris Warren
Doug Williams
Lee Williams
Louis Wright

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Anquan Boldin WR

Acquired: Trade with Cardinals, 2010
Pro Bowls: 3
Rice’s first impression: “He’s different than any other receiver I’ve ever been around. He’s a physical receiver, old school. He can run, he can block, and he can catch. When the ball is in the air, he goes and gets it. It’s his, nobody else’s. He doesn’t say much. But he’s already a leader here. He just goes out there and works.”

Terrell Suggs OLB

Acquired: 1st round (10th overall), 2003
Pro Bowls: 3
Reed’s first impression: “He was a big guy and very explosive. I knew he had talent when he first got here, and he was a young guy, too. So, you knew he was going to play a bunch of years. … His mental game from when he first came in to now has grown a lot. Knowing where he’s supposed to be and being more versatile versus just being a sack guy and a pass rusher. He’s caught interceptions, he’s dropped back in coverage, and that helps out tremendously.”

Ray Rice RB

Acquired: 2nd round (55th overall), 2008
Pro Bowls: 1
Ngata’s first impression: “I immediately saw he’d be difficult to tackle. You can’t see him in between the tackles, and when he pops out he’s gone because he’s fast. People talked about his size (5-8, 212) being a disadvantage. Actually, it’s an advantage. I love having him on our team because on third-and-short, you know he’s going to get that first down.”

Haloti Ngata DT

Acquired: 1st round (12th overall), 2006
Pro Bowls: 1
Suggs’ first impression: “You noticed his athletic ability right away. He’s one of the most athletic people on this team. He runs like a defensive end. He’s a physical specimen. It’s amazing the things he can do. He makes everybody’s job on defense easier. Most of the time he’s taking on two people, sometimes three, yet he’s still dominating. Just ask Ray Lewis how much he appreciates Haloti Ngata.”

— Clifton Brown, Mike Preston
FRANCHISE PLAYER

SN ranked the five best cornerbacks in Broncos history, then asked one of the top five to comment on No. 1.

1. Champ Bailey, 2004–present
2. Louis Wright, 1975-1986
5. Bill Thompson, 1969-81

Wright on Bailey: "I can agree with Champ as the top guy. I don’t have a problem with that. My first thought when I saw this list was: is this based on their career or while they were with the Broncos? Willie Brown was a great corner, but he only played a couple of years with the Broncos. I think if a guy like Brauxton played 12 years (with Denver) vs. a couple years, that might have to carry more weight. There are other corners the Broncos have had, but when you look at these five, I can’t knock any of them out."

— Ryan Fagan

STEELERS
6 PLAYERS
BUILDING BLOCKS

HINES
WARD
WR

Acquired: 3rd round (92nd overall), 1998
Pro Bowls: 4
Ward’s first impression: “Hines has always been one of those guys who plays with a chip on his shoulder. He’s got tremendous pride. Nobody ever had to tell him to stay after practice, study film, take care of his body. With him, it’s all part of how he goes about things. There’s no mystery to his success. His approach is consistent, and so are the results.”

CASEY
HAMPTON
DT

Acquired: 1st round (19th overall), 2001
Pro Bowls: 5
Hampton’s first impression: “He’s a freak athlete. Tremendously strong and athletic for a guy his size (6-1, 325). I remember the first couple of practices, he was literally just moving guys around, moving them aside. I was like, ‘This guy is for real.’ You could do so many things defensively when you have a guy in the middle like that, causing havoc. Anybody who lines up across from him knows it’s a long day.”

JAMES
HARRISON
OLB

Acquired: Undrafted free agent, 2002
Pro Bowls: 3
Harrison’s first impression: “How hard he worked jumped out at you. He’s a different-type animal. He works so hard, we actually tease him about it. He’ll be in the weight room, doing squats before practice. He’s like an attack dog. When Bill Cowher cut him a few years back, we couldn’t believe it. If nothing else, the guy went so hard on special teams, he should’ve earned a spot. Being cut earlier in his career was definite motivation.”

TROY
POLAMALU
SS

Acquired: 1st round (16th overall), 2003
Pro Bowls: 5
Polamalu’s first impression: “Anybody can see right away that Troy is not your average safety. He’s everywhere on the field. Having him back there is like an insurance policy. I’d never seen a safety play quite like that until I got here and saw him. Up in the box, dropping into coverage, coming on the blitz. Troy can do it all. As far as I’m concerned, he’s the best in the business.”

Photo by Bob Leverone / SN

SEE A DIFFERENT GAME 09/13/2010
WR HINES WARD says: “Kevin (Colbert)’s system, the Rooneys’ system, we find ways to keep the core guys together, even though we lost some locker room guys like (Alan) Faneca and Joey (Porter). We’ve still kept the nucleus together, this close-knit group together. With that combination, you’re always going to be productive, year in and year out.”

WE’RE NOT HERE BY ACCIDENT

Ben Roethlisberger

QB

Acquired: 1st round (11th overall), 2004
Pro Bowls: 1
Polamalu’s first impression: “Even as a rookie, he was able to manage the game. His rookie season, I think we went 15-1. Now we only threw the ball about 10 times a game, but that’s all we needed at the time. We didn’t need him to play like Peyton Manning or Tom Brady, throwing for 4,000 yards. Some quarterbacks wouldn’t be able to be effective playing like that. But Ben was, and he understood why we played that way. Once I saw that, and you looked at the tools he had, I figured he’d be pretty good.”

Lamarr Woodley

OLB

Acquired: 2nd round (46th overall), 2007
Pro Bowls: 1
Roethlisberger’s first impression: “His size (6-2, 265) made me take notice. In practice, I started looking for him, always trying to know when he was coming on a blitz. If he’s coming, you better put one of your better blockers on him. He’s learned quickly from James Farrior, Larry Foote, the veteran guys we’ve had here. I honestly believe he could be a defensive end in a 4-3 system, an outside linebacker in a 4-3, or play in a 3-4 and be that rush guy. He can rush the passer, drop in coverage and stop the run.”

— Clifton Brown, Gerry Dulac
FRANCHISE PLAYER

SN ranked the five best wide receivers in Bengals history, then asked one of the top five to comment on No. 1.

1. **Chad Ochocinco**, 2001-present
2. **Cris Collinsworth**, 1981-88
4. **T.J. Houshmandzadeh**, 2001-08
5. **Isaac Curtis**, 1973-84

» Curtis on Ochocinco: "If you do it by statistics, you have to put it in that order. ... (Chad) has a lot of great qualities. He has decent size (6-1, 192). He's fast; he catches the ball well. ... I tell you what--he works hard, and he really studies. He does like attention, but you know what? He loves football."

— Matt Crossman

**WE'RE NOT HERE BY ACCIDENT**

» DEWIGHT FREENEY says: "(The front office does) a great job. It's unique compared to a lot of other places. We kind of keep the core together, so we get the opportunity to build with one another. Secondly, they're not afraid to take a chance on a guy. It doesn't necessarily mean just because (a player) is ranked the 10th-best tackle or the best D-tackle or end in the league that we're going to pick him up. It's all about who fits our scheme the best."
**COLTS**
5 PLAYERS
BUILDING BLOCKS

1
**PEYTON MANNING**
QB
- Acquired: 1st round (1st overall), 1998
- Pro Bowls: 10
- Manning's first impression: "Reggie has started and played the most consecutive games among all the active receivers in the league, something I know he takes pride in, and I think that's a testament to the type of professional and competitor he is. He doesn't miss a practice, much less a game. Reggie has always trained extremely hard and always been someone I've relied on. He's the leader of our wide receiver corps, and he has set the tone for our younger guys—Anthony Gonzalez, Pierre Garcon, Austin Collie."

77
**ROBERT MATHIS**
DE
- Acquired: 5th round (138th overall), 2003
- Pro Bowls: 2
- Mathis's first impression: "Robert is a perfect example that it doesn't matter what school you go to (Alabama A&M), how big you are (6-2, 245) or where you're drafted. This guy's motor never stops. If you've ever played against him, ever practiced against him, you know his goal is to win every time. With his speed and talent, and then you see how hard he works, it's easy to see why he's become a Pro Bowler in this league."

38
**REGGIE WAYNE**
WR
- Acquired: 1st round (30th overall), 2001
- Pro Bowls: 4
- Manning's first impression: "Reggie has started and played the most consecutive games among all the active receivers in the league, something I know he takes pride in, and I think that's a testament to the type of professional and competitor he is. He doesn't miss a practice, much less a game. Reggie has always trained extremely hard and always been someone I've relied on. He's the leader of our wide receiver corps, and he has set the tone for our younger guys—Anthony Gonzalez, Pierre Garcon, Austin Collie."

11
**DWIGHT FREENEY**
DE
- Acquired: 1st round (11th overall), 2002
- Pro Bowls: 5
- Wayne's first impression: "It seems I remember a lot of the experts saying this guy was too small when we drafted him. Now, guys are trying to be like him. Every year when the draft comes up, people get (compared) to him: 'This guy could be the next Dwight Freeney.' He's our franchise's all-time leader in sacks, and he's taken that spin move of his and made it something people practice, something guys want to be able to do. He's a game-changer."

36
**DALLAS CLARK**
TE
- Acquired: 1st round (24th overall), 2003
- Pro Bowls: 1
- Freeney's first impression: "The thing with Dallas, No. 1, is he's a very athletic guy. He can do a lot. He could play receiver if he wanted to, and he has great skills like an offensive lineman/tight end. That fact that he's well-rounded and can do both keeps him on the field. And that fact that he works hard and plays the game very competitively... there's not a more competitive guy out there. He loves to win, he works hard at it, and he has a great attitude."

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COWBOYS
5 PLAYERS

JASON WITTEN
TE
- Acquired: 3rd round (69th overall), 2003
- Pro Bowls: 6
- Owner/G.M. Jerry Jones' first impression: “We had him graded very good at Tennessee. His workout was very impressive. We all went up to watch him. He just caught everything, ran sharp routes, did everything we asked him to do. He’s almost graceful, but he’s also so intense. The entire package and the work ethic, I would put him in the top five players (I’ve been involved with) for 21 years.”

TONY ROMO
QB
- Acquired: Undrafted free agent, 2004
- Pro Bowls: 6
- Witten’s first impression: “We were on the first trip together on the same bus when he first signed, and you know, he’s always had this gunslinger mentality. He was raw, and he just worked hard every day to get better. It’s been amazing to sit back and watch. Now he’s got the ability to play in his own way and still not turn the ball over.”

DEMARCUS WARE
OLB
- Acquired: 1st round (11th overall), 2005
- Pro Bowls: 4
- Romo’s first impression: “I had never seen a guy that big, and that quick, with that kind of speed. On top of all that, the other big thing that I remember thinking was: This guy’s arms go down to his knees.”

MILES AUSTIN
WR
- Acquired: Undrafted free agent, 2006
- Pro Bowls: 1
- Ratliff’s first impression: “We all new Miles was going to have his day. He’s been doing the same things he’s doing now since he first got there. The opportunity came up for him to make plays, and he delivered. He was fortunate to do it in front of a lot of people (so they could) see just how good he is. I don’t think we’ve seen his best yet.”

JAY RATLIFF
DT
- Acquired: 7th round (224th overall), 2005
- Pro Bowls: 2
- Ware’s first impression: “He does a lot of great things. That’s just the bottom line of how he rolls. With Jay, he’s a versatile guy—the best nose guard in the league. I’m from Auburn; he played at Auburn. Knowing him kind of from college and then going to the NFL and playing on the same team, it’s been like a brotherhood.”

Vince Young, QB, Titans
Casey Hampton, DT, Steelers
Calvin Johnson, WR, Lions
Brian Orakpo, OLB, Redskins
Kris Jenkins, DT, Jets
Michael Roos, OT, Titans
Logan Mankins, G, Patriots
Shaun O’Hara, C, Giants
Cedric Benson, RB, Bengals
Brian Dawkins, SS, Broncos
Michael Turner, RB, Falcons
Anquan Boldin, WR, Ravens
Percy Harvin, WR/KR, Vikings
Thomas Jones, RB, Chiefs
Kyle Vanden Bosch, DE, Lions
Pierre Thomas, RB, Saints
Matt Schaub, QB, Texans
Roddy White, WR, Falcons
Jairus Byrd, S, Bills
Brian Cushing, OLB, Texans

WE'RE NOT HERE BY ACCIDENT

MILES AUSTIN says: “It’s great the team that we have, and obviously it takes a few years to kind of develop and get all the pieces in place. I feel like we have a good group of guys—good guys to each other—and I think that’s important. Individually you want them to be good players, but you also want to have them work well with the people you have.”

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— Vinnie Iyer, Jean-Jacques Taylor