

A FREE SAMPLE FROM THE BOOK

THE TOP TEN QUARTERBACKS

From Johnny U to Mahomes: The Top 100 Quarterbacks of All Time — one fan's rankings, and 60 years of watching the game.

William Paige

Ten men, ranked one through ten, exactly as they appear in the full book — including the Extended Takes, the sections where the rankings stop and the memory starts.

This is the whole introduction to what the book is. If you finish these ten and want the other ninety, that's the point of sending it to you.

01 TOM BRADY

No quarterback in NFL history combined volume and dominance the way Tom Brady did. A sixth-round afterthought out of Michigan, Brady took over for an injured Drew Bledsoe in 2001 and never gave the job back for the next two decades, first with New England and then, remarkably, in an age-defying final act with Tampa Bay. He won seven Super Bowls — three more than any other player in league history — and made ten Super Bowl appearances, a number no other quarterback has come within three of.

What set Brady apart wasn't otherworldly arm talent (though he did have a pretty strong arm); it was processing speed, anticipation, and an almost pathological refusal to lose. He threw for over 89,000 career yards and 649 touchdowns, both NFL records, while playing until the ripe age of 45 at a level that defied every historical aging curve for the position. His partnership with Bill Belichick produced the most successful era any franchise has had with one coach-quarterback pairing, but Brady's 2020 Buccaneers title — won with a completely different roster, coach, and system — silenced any lingering argument that he was a product of New England's machine.

Brady's game was built on pre-snap diagnosis and getting the ball out before pressure arrived, which is part of why he absorbed relatively little punishment for a quarterback who played as long as he did. He wasn't flashy, but he was surgical, and in the biggest moments of his career — fourth-quarter comebacks against Atlanta, Seattle, and countless others — he was as clutch as the position has ever seen. He retired in 2023 holding nearly every meaningful career passing record, and it's probably unlikely any of them fall soon.

EXTENDED TAKE

I said it under Montana's entry, and I'll say it again here since Brady's the reason I had to write it in the first place: for most of my adult life, Joe Montana was the best quarterback I'd ever seen and the greatest of all time. Then Brady went and ruined a perfectly good opinion by winning for twenty years straight. Montana's still who I would like to close my eyes and think GOAT, but Brady was just indomitable year after year, so... fair is fair, Brady's the GOAT. He's the one who gets the number one spot on this list, and he earned every bit of it.

02 JOE MONTANA

Joe Montana has been the standard against which "big-game quarterback" gets measured. Across four Super Bowl appearances with the San Francisco 49ers, he went 4-0, was named Super Bowl MVP three times, and never threw an interception in any of them. His first signature moment — "The Catch," an 89-yard march to beat Dallas in the 1981 NFC Championship culminated by Dwight Clark making the clutch catch fired by Montana — became the measuring touchstone for late-game quarterback heroics for a generation of players who followed.

Montana's biggest brilliance was in his calm. Bill Walsh's West Coast offense demanded a quarterback who could read coverages quickly and deliver rhythm throws with precision, and Montana executed it as well as anyone ever has. He wasn't the strongest arm or the biggest athlete on the field at 6' 2" and about 190 pounds tops, but his accuracy, footwork, and pocket presence made him nearly impossible to rattle. Teammates and opponents alike

spoke of an eerie calm that came over him in two-minute situations, as if the chaos of a closing game simply slowed down for him.

He finished his career with 40,551 passing yards and 273 touchdowns, numbers that look modest by modern standards but were built almost entirely within a run-first, ball-control system that didn't ask him to throw 35 times a game. Advanced metrics and film study have only reinforced his reputation over time — Montana consistently ranks at or near the top of quality-adjusted efficiency numbers for his era. Add in a fifth ring won as the trigger man (even if it was Steve Young's MVP season that followed him). Montana's case for the top spot rests on a simple, undeniable foundation: he won more, and lost less, in the biggest moments that mattered most as much if not more than anyone else who's played the position. No wonder so many affectionately referred to him as "Joe Cool."

EXTENDED TAKE

For most of my adult life, Joe Montana was the best quarterback I'd ever seen and the greatest of all time, full stop. The reasons are laid out above, and most people who lived through that era, and plenty who came after, felt exactly the same way. In a lot of ways, he's still my guy. But Brady just kept performing and winning, year after year, long after Montana's career was over. To be fair about it, I have to consider Brady the GOAT. Montana will always be the quarterback I measure everyone else against, though.

03 JOHNNY UNITAS

Before there was a modern passing game, there was Johnny Unitas. Cut by the Pittsburgh Steelers and playing semi-pro ball for six dollars a game before the Baltimore Colts gave him a shot, Unitas became the prototype for everything a quarterback was supposed to be: tough, cerebral, and utterly fearless in the pocket. His performance in the 1958 NFL Championship vs. the New York Football Giants deemed "The Greatest Game Ever Played" — is widely credited with launching professional football into the mainstream of American sports culture.

Unitas threw touchdown passes in 47 consecutive games, a record that stood for 52 years until Drew Brees finally broke it in 2012 — and even then, only barely. He played the position the way it was played before full facemasks were common and pass-blocking rules protected quarterbacks at all, absorbing hits that would end careers today and getting back up to call the next play, often audibling out of the huddle-called play based on what he read from the defense — an authority over the offense that few quarterbacks of his era, or since, were given.

He won three NFL Championships and a Super Bowl and was named NFL MVP three times, and retired with nearly every meaningful passing record the league kept. What separates Unitas from other legends of his era is how well his game has aged in memory: coaches and historians who study old film consistently note that his reads, sequencing, and pocket movement would translate cleanly into a modern offense, which is rare for a quarterback whose career began in 1956. He wasn't just great for his time — he was ahead of it.

EXTENDED TAKE

Johnny Unitas, or "Johnny U" as my era of Young Bucks (the sixties to early seventies) used to call him, was at the top of the list of greatest quarterbacks all by himself. He was known for his black high-top cleats — if someone had on high-top black cleats, we'd say "he's got them Johnny U's on." They were ugly but distinctive. Unitas was my

unquestioned idol at quarterback back then. In fact, at that Super Bowl III matchup I was at (as I described in my Namath take), I was rooting for Johnny U and his seemingly invincible Colts. Uitas didn't start the game — he had an elbow injury — but he came in during the second half and began leading a frenetic comeback against the Jets that ultimately fell short in New York's incredible, historical upset.

That win by the Jets settled what the AFL-NFL merger was going to mean. The merger had already been agreed to back in 1966, but after two Super Bowl blowouts the AFL still looked like the junior partner; after Namath, it didn't. When the leagues formally combined in 1970, the NFL people see today absorbed the AFL franchises as equals. Younger folks don't always realize the following teams came from the upstart AFL: the New York Jets, New England Patriots, Kansas City Chiefs, Denver Broncos, Buffalo Bills, Cincinnati Bengals, San Diego (now LA) Chargers, the Oakland (now Las Vegas) Raiders, the Miami Dolphins, and the Houston Oilers (now the Tennessee Titans). Joe Namath and his exciting Jets, with their thrilling 16-7 victory that day, changed the NFL forever.

04 PEYTON MANNING

Peyton Manning turned quarterback play into a science. No player in NFL history exerted more pre-snap control over an offense — the exaggerated arm waves, the coded audibles, the constant re-checking of protections were as much a part of Manning's game as his release. He retired with the most career passing yards and passing touchdowns in NFL history at the time (both since passed by Brady), and won five NFL MVP awards, more than any other player at any position.

Manning's genius was preparation. Teammates and opposing defensive coordinators alike described him as having already diagnosed a defense's tendencies before the ball was snapped, turning games into a chess match he'd often solved by halftime. His 2013 season with Denver — 55 touchdown passes and 5,477 yards — is still one of the greatest single seasons any quarterback has produced, and it came after a neck surgery that had many wondering if he'd play again at all.

Peyton Manning became the first quarterback to win two Super Bowls with two different franchises with the Indianapolis Colts and Denver Broncos, the second coming at age 39 while functioning more as a game manager behind an elite defense — proof that his football IQ alone could still help win championships even as his arm strength faded. Manning's career is sometimes knocked for a rocky postseason record relative to his volume of playoff appearances, but that criticism has softened with time as his 14 playoff berths, back-to-back title runs a decade apart. The sheer command with which he had over the sport's most important and arguably most cerebral position have taken their proper place in the game's history.

EXTENDED TAKE

I think Peyton's spot at #4 is fair and correct, but I have to add one thing: Peyton was my oldest daughter Tajuana's favorite quarterback throughout his entire career.

Peyton Manning came into the NFL much the same way he came into the University of Tennessee as a freshman — enormous hype and overwhelming expectations. He mostly lived up to that in college, and went on to far exceed anyone's honest expectations as a pro.

He had a rough start to his career, thrown right in as the Indianapolis Colts' starter from day one. In that rookie season he threw more interceptions than touchdowns, 28 to 26. Manning learned fast, though — by his second year he'd nearly cut the picks in half, and he leaned on a vaunted running game led by the great Edgerrin James.

After a few years of that balanced attack, he began pressing the NFL like no one had before, with a quick-strike air attack where most of the plays were called or changed right at the line of scrimmage. He put searing pressure on other teams' defenses and their offenses too. Watching those games back then, it just felt like the Colts were going to score every time they had the ball, which put pressure on the other defense to stop them — but it put just as much pressure on the other offense, because they knew they had to control the ball or score right back, or the game would be out of reach by halftime. Every game for a few years seemed to go that way. It was something to watch. You'd seen great offenses before, but the Colts felt different — they made you feel like you'd better keep up, right from the opening drive.

The only thing standing in his way for years was Brady and the great Patriots, who slowed the Colts down and beat them in some tough playoff games. "The Sheriff" finally broke through with a dominant 2006 season and a total blitz of the Chicago Bears in Super Bowl XLI, in February of 2007. Years later, in 2013 with the Denver Broncos, he shredded the record books and the entire NFL again — 55 touchdowns, the best statistical season any quarterback had ever put together. That season ended badly, a blowout loss to Seattle in the Super Bowl. But two years after that, he got his second ring anyway, beating Carolina in Super Bowl 50 to close out his career on top.

05 PATRICK MAHOMES

Patrick Mahomes has already rewritten the ceiling for what a quarterback can do on the gridiron with his arm. Drawing on a backyard-improvisation, no-look-pass, cross-body-throw arsenal that owes as much to his background as a baseball prospect as anything from a quarterback coaching tree, Mahomes made defenses look like they were playing a different sport at times in his early seasons with the Kansas City Chiefs.

He won NFL MVP in just his second year as a starter, then delivered a Super Bowl title that same season, becoming the youngest player to win both in the same year since the AFL-NFL merger. He's since added 2 additional Super Bowl rings, cementing a dynasty along with Head Coach Andy Reid that has taken over the AFC through the mid-2020s. His combination of touch on deep balls, arm strength on line drives, and pure improvisational instinct when plays break down has no true precedent — He makes throws that would be considered reckless gambles from other quarterbacks are for Mahomes many times high-percentage looks.

What elevates Mahomes into the inner circle this early in his career is that the brilliance hasn't been a product of gunslinging chaos alone — he's also become one of the league's most disciplined operators in structure, capable of putting up efficient, low-turnover performances when defenses take away the highlight-reel plays. He also like some of his great predecessors is many times at his best in extreme clutch moments. Barring injury, he's on a clear path to finishing with a case as the greatest ever, and even with a career still in progress, his combination of accuracy, ring count, and pure shot-making and clutch play, already to me places him among the five best to ever play the position.

That caveat about injury arrived in 2025. Mahomes tore his ACL in Week 15, the first significant injury of his professional career, ending a season that was already the worst he'd had — 3,587 yards, 22 touchdowns and 11 interceptions in fourteen games, with Kansas City going 6-8 in his starts and losing all three games after he went down. It was Andy Reid's first losing season with the Chiefs. Mahomes has targeted Week 1 of 2026 for his return, and how completely he comes back from it is now the central question of the rest of his career.

EXTENDED TAKE

Patrick Mahomes is pretty much the unquestioned best quarterback in the game today. He's the best player at the most important position on an NFL team. I've been discerningly watching football for 60 years or so, and Mahomes is the best quarterback I have seen. His combination of incredible overall arm talent, football IQ, overall athleticism, on-field imagination, preparation, clutch ability, and undeniable will is the greatest that I have seen. He hasn't quite attained as many historical achievements as the few listed in this book ahead of him, but if he continues on this arc for some more years, I think he'll be the GOAT... until the next One. Only time will tell.

06 JOHN ELWAY

John Elway's powerful arm was legendary before he ever took an NFL snap — teams built entire draft strategies around trying to acquire him coming out of Stanford, and the Baltimore Colts famously traded his rights to Denver rather than deal with his refusal to play for them. What followed was one of the most physically gifted careers the position has ever seen: a cannon-like arm, elite mobility and athleticism along with an innate ability to extend plays that often turned busted protections into 60-yard plus completions.

"The Drive" — a 98-yard march against Cleveland in the 1986 AFC Championship — remains one of the most iconic clutch performances in NFL history, even though it preceded three lopsided Super Bowl losses that dogged Elway's reputation for years. He answered those doubts emphatically at the end of his career, winning back-to-back Super Bowls in 1997 and 1998, the second of which came in his final NFL game, a storybook ending built on a supporting cast (Terrell Davis chief among them) but capped by Elway's own iconic "helicopter" third-down run in Super Bowl XXXII.

He retired with the most career wins by a starting quarterback in NFL history at the time and remains one of the only quarterbacks ever to combine elite arm strength with legitimate rushing ability across a two-decade career. Elway's Broncos also made the postseason in eleven of his sixteen seasons as a starter, a level of sustained team success that reflected how much of Denver's offensive identity was simply built around covering for whatever the roster lacked around him.

EXTENDED TAKE

John Elway was the complete package, the prototypical model of a quarterback. Great size at 6'3" and 215 or so, with a bazooka for a right arm — possibly the strongest and most gifted arm ever to play the position. He had athleticism in the form of speed, elusiveness, and strength. And he had beyond the goods in terms of the mental acuity the position demands.

He was such a prized athletic catch that George Steinbrenner drafted him to play baseball, and not as a flyer either — the Boss was convinced he had a future superstar, and compared him to DiMaggio and Mantle. Elway went out and hit .318 in a season of Class A ball. He then used the Yankees as leverage to force his way out of Baltimore and into Denver.

I didn't really see the specialness in him at first. He kept looking like he failed in the big moments as his teams lost three Super Bowls with him at the helm. It was clear, though, that he had basically dragged those Broncos to the big game and then run into teams that far outmanned them, physically and in football talent. He proved his clutchness later with two Super Bowl wins and a Super Bowl MVP.

Truthfully, there's a case to be made that he's the greatest quarterback who ever played, when you add up all the physical and mental attributes and then put five Super Bowl appearances and two wins on top. Elway the GOAT? I can see how some get there — especially those who saw him play.

07 DAN MARINO

Dan Marino redefined what a passing offense could look like. In 1984, just his second NFL season, he threw for 5,084 yards and 48 touchdowns — numbers so far ahead of the era's norms that both records stood for nearly two decades before Drew Brees and Tom Brady, playing in a considerably more pass-friendly rules environment, finally topped them. Marino's release was about the fastest the league had ever seen, allowing him to get the ball out before pressure could reach him without needing elite mobility to escape it. He also possessed a powerful cannon-like right arm and was one of the most accurate deep ball throwers in history.

He never won a Super Bowl — a fact that's shadowed his legacy more than it probably should — but that comes down largely to circumstance: Miami's running game and defense were rarely championship-caliber during Marino's prime, forcing him to carry an offensive burden that few quarterbacks in history have shouldered for as long. He made the playoffs ten times and did reach one Super Bowl, in his second season, losing to Montana's 49ers.

Marino retired holding nearly every major career passing record — yards, touchdowns, completions, attempts — a testament to both his brilliance and his remarkable durability, missing significant time to injury only once in a 17-year career. His pure passing statistics still hold up today: adjusted for era, Marino remains one of the two or three most efficient deep-ball throwers the league has ever produced, and his rapid release is often cited by quarterback coaches as the closest historical comparison to Patrick Mahomes' get-it-out-fast mechanics.

EXTENDED TAKE

Dan Marino did not come into the NFL with incredible hype, and he was drafted rather late for a quarterback who'd end up top-ten all-time. He had all the goods, though — he'd put them on display at Pitt during his college years. He had the prototypical size at 6'4", and that cannon arm with the ridiculously quick release. He reminded me of Joe Namath, with that same incredible release and arm talent.

Rumors about his dedication, and some other things, followed him out of a rough senior season, and six other quarterbacks went off the board before Miami finally took him 27th overall — Elway, Blackledge, Kelly, Eason, and O'Brien all got picked first. He quickly showed everybody he should have gone in the top few picks that year, and for some, he's possibly the greatest passer the league has ever seen. He was a joy to watch, for me, with those passing talents. He's locked in at #7.

08 BRETT FAVRE

Brett Favre played quarterback like a gambler who never stopped believing the next big bet would land — and for the better part of two decades, more often than not, it did. Three consecutive NFL MVP awards (1995-1997), a Super Bowl title with the Green Bay Packers and had a Hall of Fame career defined by unmatched durability: Favre started 297 consecutive games (321 including playoffs), a streak that spanned nearly two decades and remains one of the most remarkable iron-man feats in professional sports.

His game was built on gunslinger instinct rather than surgical precision — Favre led the league in interceptions four times, but the same fearlessness that produced those turnovers also produced touchdown throws few other quarterbacks would have attempted, off-platform, across his body, into windows that shouldn't have existed. That high-variance style made him both thrilling and occasionally maddening, but it also delivered some of the most memorable throws in postseason history. Also he had a common characteristic of many of the others at the top of this list—a cannon-like arm.

Favre retired with the career records for touchdown passes, passing yards, and wins at the time of his final season (all since surpassed by Brady and Manning-era passers), and he did it while playing a style of football that seemed to defy the sport's evolving emphasis on protecting the position. Teammates often described him as playing every snap, in the regular season or the playoffs, like a backyard game — an attitude that was infectious in locker rooms across three franchises (Green Bay, Minnesota, and briefly the Jets) well into his 40s.

09 ROGER STAUBACH

Roger Staubach's path to stardom was unlike almost any other Hall of Fame quarterback: a Heisman Trophy winner at Navy, he fulfilled a four-year military service commitment, including a tour in Vietnam, before ever throwing an NFL pass at age 27. Once he took over as Dallas's starter, he made up for lost time quickly, leading the Cowboys to five Super Bowl appearances and two championships across the 1970s.

Staubach's signature trait was late-game composure under pressure, so much so that the term "Hail Mary" pass entered the football lexicon specifically because of his desperation touchdown throw to Drew Pearson against Minnesota in the 1975 playoffs. He led 23 fourth-quarter or overtime comebacks in his career, a number that made "Roger the Dodger" — a nickname earned for his scrambling ability — as feared in the final two minutes as any quarterback of his generation.

He was named Super Bowl MVP in Dallas's win over Miami in Super Bowl VI and led the NFL in passer rating four times despite playing in a run-heavy era that limited his attempts relative to quarterbacks in later decades. Staubach retired at just 38 years old, at the height of his abilities, choosing his family and business interests over chasing further statistics — a decision that, along with his abbreviated career length due to military service, likely cost him a higher spot on all-time cumulative stat lists but does nothing to diminish how dominant he was at his peak.

10 AARON RODGERS

Aaron Rodgers waited three years behind Brett Favre in Green Bay before ever taking a regular-season snap, then spent the next decade and a half proving the wait was worth it. Four NFL MVP awards — tied for the most all-time — and a Super Bowl XLV title anchor a career defined by the best combination of arm talent and ball security the position has produced. Rodgers holds the NFL record for career passer rating and has thrown for more touchdowns than interceptions by one of the widest margins in league history.

His deep-ball placement is often cited as the best any quarterback has shown on film — receivers routinely caught passes in stride 50 yards downfield without having to break stride, a level of touch that few arms in history could match at that distance. Rodgers also built a reputation as one of the best off-script improvisers in the league, extending plays outside the pocket while keeping his eyes downfield rather than immediately looking to run.

Postseason results were, at times, a source of frustration relative to his regular-season dominance — Green Bay's Rodgers-era teams made the playoffs constantly but reached just one Super Bowl in his 15-plus years as a starter, losing several heartbreaking conference title games along the way. Still, his statistical peak — particularly back-to-back MVP seasons in 2020 and 2021 (which to a friend of mine and myself looked like video game play for its seeming ease) delivered in his late 30s — extended the shelf life of his prime further than almost anyone expected, and his case as a top-10 all-time talent rests on some of the cleanest, most efficient tape the position has ever produced.

NINETY MORE TO GO

You just read ten.

Ninety more follow in the full book, down to number one hundred — arguments, records, and the moments that put a handful of men in this book for reasons that have nothing to do with a stat sheet.

Sammy Baugh is in there. So is Milt Plum, who held a passing record for twenty-nine years and whom you have probably never heard of.

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