Paper Chasing: Do NFL Stars Level Up in Contract Years?

Executive Summary

This white paper investigates the "contract year" phenomenon in the NFL – the notion that players elevate their performance in the final season before a new contract (often colloquially, "playing for the money" or "paper chasing"). Focusing on starting quarterbacks (QBs), running backs (RBs), wide receivers (WRs), and tight ends (TEs) from 2010–2024, we compare contract-year performance to the players' prior two-year average, control for factors like age, usage, team changes, and injuries, and assess how prevalent any "contract-year bump" truly is. Our analysis finds that **while some players do show noticeable improvements in contract years (especially younger players in expanded roles, and notably many WRs), the effect is far from universal**. Approximately as many players decline or stagnate in their contract year as improve, and overall average gains are modest – often within the normal year-to-year performance variance[1][2]. In short, the data suggests the contract-year bump is **partly real but frequently overstated**, with context (health, opportunity, age) playing a larger role in performance than a player's impending free agency. We provide detailed case studies (both "bump" successes and "no-bump" letdowns), statistical breakdowns by position and demographics, and discuss implications. **For NFL teams**, the findings caution against overpaying based on a single contract-year spike and encourage the use of incentives or franchise tags to manage

motivation. **For players**, it underlines the importance of showcasing durability and impact in that crucial year – but also the reality that consistent effort and skill, not just a one-year sprint, ultimately secure the biggest paydays. Overall, "paper chasing" exists, but our evidence-backed verdict is that it is **a minor factor relative to fundamentals** – more nuanced than the popular narrative and highly dependent on individual circumstances.

1. Definition and Scope of "Contract Year"

In this analysis, a **"contract year"** refers to a player's final season under his current contract, after which he will be a free agent or subject to a franchise/transition tag. In practical terms, this includes:

- **The last year of a multi-year deal** for veteran players (e.g., a player in Year 4 of a 4-year contract).
- **The last year of a rookie contract** – for first-round picks, this could be the **fifth-year option** season if that option is exercised, or the fourth season if the option was declined; for other draft picks, the fourth season is typically the final year.
- **Franchise tag or one-year "prove-it" deals**, since those players are essentially on a one-season contract before needing a new deal. A franchise-tagged player (or someone on a cheap one-year contract) knows he will be a free agent the next offseason unless extended, so we treat those as contract-year scenarios as well.

Scope of players: We focus on *starting-caliber* QBs, RBs, WRs, and TEs – positions where performance is easily quantified and where the contract-year narrative commonly arises. To be included, a player had to play a significant role in his contract year (for example, QBs with ≥8 games started; RB/WR/TE with a substantial snap count or at least half a season played). This ensures we aren't skewing results with fringe players or those whose contract year was effectively nullified by injury (those cases are considered separately). We compiled contract status data from public sources like Spotrac/OverTheCap (e.g., identifying when a player was in the final year of a deal or tagged) and performance data from Pro-Football-Reference and team sources. Performance was measured on a **per-game basis** (to account for any missed games) and compared to the average of the prior two seasons (the "baseline"). This baseline provides a personalized benchmark for each player, helping isolate whether the contract year was a notable departure from recent performance.

Example: If a wide receiver averaged ~50 receiving yards per game over the 2021–2022 seasons, and then put up 65 yards/game in his 2023 contract year, that's a +30% increase – a potential contract-year bump. We calculate such deltas (Δ) for multiple metrics where available. Key metrics by position include: for QBs, passer rating, yards/attempt (ANY/A), TD–INT ratio, Expected Points Added (EPA/play) or Completion% Over Expected (CPOE) if available; for RBs, rushing yards per game, yards per carry (YPC), yards after contact per attempt, and total touchdowns; for WRs/TEs, receiving yards per game, targets and receptions per game, catch rate, yards/route run or aDOT (average depth of target) when data permits, and touchdowns. We also tracked **scrimmage yards and fantasy points** as

aggregate measures of production. All changes are evaluated in percentage terms (and in some cases, absolute differences) to facilitate comparisons.

What's not included: purely defensive players (contract-year effects are discussed primarily on offensive skill positions in media), and players who had negligible playing time in their contract year (often due to injury or coach's decision). Those latter cases (e.g., a player tears an ACL in Week 2 of his contract year) are obviously "no improvement" scenarios. Still, for reasons unrelated to motivational effort – we address the impact of such injuries in our analysis of biases and controls rather than in the main sample. Finally, our focus is regular-season performance; postseason "contract pushes" (like Joe Flacco's famous Super Bowl run in the 2012 playoffs) are notable but outside our quantitative scope.

2. Theory: Why Would Performance Spike? (And Why Not?)

Why might a player excel in a contract year? The intuitive explanation is *incentives*. In a league as competitive as the NFL, the prospect of a life-changing contract can sharpen focus and effort. Several theories and mechanisms support the idea of a contract-year boost:

- **Extrinsic Financial Motivation:** The looming opportunity of a big payday can motivate players to put in extra work in the offseason and play at maximum intensity during the season[3][4]. A player knows that an outstanding walk year could mean millions of extra guaranteed dollars. From an economic perspective, it's a classic principal-agent scenario: the "agent" (player) has an incentive to increase output when a new contract (with the team or on the open market) is the reward for high performance. Anecdotally, players and coaches often acknowledge this. A tongue-in-cheek saying is that "*nobody is in better shape than a player in his contract year*" – crash diets, extra training sessions, you name it[^1].

- **"Career Earnings Maximization" and Prospect Theory:** Behavioral economics suggests people are risk-seeking when a significant gain is in sight. A player in a contract year might take extra risks on the field to make big plays, knowing a standout season could secure his family's financial future. He might also play through minor injuries he'd otherwise rest for – essentially raising his personal risk tolerance because the reward (a contract) justifies it. In psychological terms, the contract becomes a highly salient *extrinsic motivator*, which some theories predict can temporarily boost performance (though potentially at the cost of intrinsic motivation later)[4].

- **Offseason Investment and Focus:** With a contract on the line, players may invest in personal trainers, nutritionists, or extra film study. They are effectively treating themselves like someone about to audition or go public, putting their best foot forward. For example, a report might surface that a usually middling player "spent the summer training twice a day and is in the best shape of his life" as he enters a

contract year. While such reports are sometimes just hype, there are cases where players showed up visibly leaner, stronger, or more technically refined in that final year, correlating with improved play.

- **Opportunity and Snap Count Bump:** Sometimes the contract year coincides with a *spike in usage by design*. A team might give an impending free agent a larger role – either to evaluate him fully or to maximize short-term results without worrying about long-term wear. A classic scenario is a running back in his last year being fed the ball extensively. Coaches know the player's future is uncertain, so they might run him into the ground (cynically, "use up the tread now"). This happened in 2022 with the Raiders and RB **Josh Jacobs**: after declining his fifth-year option, Las Vegas handed him **340 carries** (career high) and he responded with an NFL-leading 1,653 rushing yards[5][6]. Jacobs himself admitted he was motivated by the lack of long-term security, and the team certainly didn't hold him back. Increased volume often leads to better counting stats – so a "bump" may appear simply because the player was on the field and touching the ball more in that year.

- **Contract-Year Focus and Intensity:** Some coaches and teammates observe that players in a walk year can have an extra edge – running routes a bit crisper, finishing runs harder, etc. Especially for positions like WR or TE where effort on things like blocking or route detail might wane at times, a contract-year player might give consistently high effort, hoping the all-22 film will impress future employers. As one analyst quipped, "you can tell when a receiver is trying hard on every play – in a contract year, suddenly even the downfield blocking looks ferocious"[7][8]. While effort is hard to quantify, this intensity can manifest in more "hustle" plays (e.g., extra yards after catch, chase-down tackles on turnovers, etc.).

These points paint the contract year as a perfect storm of extrinsic motivation driving peak performance. Notably, academic studies in other sports have found patterns consistent with this. In the NBA, player efficiency ratings on average **increase in the contract year and then drop off after signing the deal**[9], suggesting players exert maximum effort to get the contract and perhaps ease off once the bag is secured. Similarly, an MLB study found hitters' stats didn't jump in contract years on average but declined the year after signing, hinting that effort might indeed be higher in the contract year (and then fall off)[9]. More recent research using advanced models did detect a significant **contract-year boost of ~4–6% in MLB hitters' OPS** (on-base plus slugging), once controlling for the self-selection of who makes it to free agency (excluding those likely to retire, etc.)[10]. In other words, among players motivated to continue playing, a noticeable uptick was observed in the walk year, consistent with the "playing for a contract" theory[11][12].

Why might performance *not* spike (and maybe even drop) in a contract year? There are strong counterarguments and confounding factors that suggest the contract-year effect could be mild or mostly myth:

- **Regression to the Mean:** Players coming off two subpar years might be due for a bounce-back *regardless* of contract motivation. Likewise, if a player had two great years, he'll likely regress a bit. The contract timing could be coincidental. For example, suppose a receiver had an uncharacteristically low catch rate due to bad luck or a nagging injury in Year N-1. In that case, we'd expect improvement in Year N (which might be his contract year) simply by mean reversion, not magic contract pixie dust. Any analysis must disentangle genuine above-expectation improvement from normal variation.

- **Age and Wear-and-Tear:** There's a natural performance curve in sports. Many players heading into free agency are around 27–29 years old – near their physical prime but also at risk of decline soon after. Especially for running backs, heavy usage in prior years can lead to a downturn in the contract year due to accumulated wear (the "tread off the tire" effect). If a 29-year-old RB's numbers slip in his walk year, it might be age or mileage, not lack of motivation. Conversely, very young players (say 23–24) often improve each year as they develop – their contract year might coincide with that upward trajectory, making it look like a contract effect when it's just the natural growth of a still-peaking athlete. In short, underlying **age/experience trends** can overshadow any contract incentive. Our data indeed will show that younger players had higher odds of improvement than older ones – which is precisely what you'd expect from normal career arcs.

- **Scheme and Team Changes:** NFL performance is heavily context-dependent. A player's contract year may come under a new head coach or coordinator, or with a new supporting cast (e.g., a WR's contract year might be the season his longtime quarterback was replaced with a less effective one, hurting his stats). Alternatively, a player might change teams on a one-year deal – learning a new playbook and building chemistry in Year 1 can suppress stats initially. All these **external factors** can either mask a would-be contract-driven jump or create noise unrelated to the player "trying harder." For example, QB **Jameis Winston** in 2019 (his Tampa Bay contract year) saw a significant spike in passing yardage and TDs – but one could attribute that to Bruce Arians' new vertical offense and being allowed to air it out, *plus* the fact that he also threw 30 interceptions (hardly a pure positive)[13][14]. The changes in scheme explain a lot; Winston's effort level wasn't necessarily in question, but neither did "trying harder" stop him from making mistakes. On the flip side, if a player goes to a new team in his contract year and the coach deploys him poorly, no amount of hustle will overcome a bad scheme fit.

- **Random Injury Luck:** Not everything is within a player's control – injuries certainly aren't, and they can derail a contract year. A player could be highly motivated, but if he suffers a high-ankle sprain that lingers or misses games, his production will fall. Survivorship *bias* plays a role: those who manage to stay healthy through their contract year have the opportunity to post good numbers, whereas those who get hurt do not. One cynical saying is *"the best ability is availability,"* especially in a

contract year. We found instances where players had mediocre prior stats, mainly because they were hurt, then in their contract year, they were finally healthy and thus played better. Was that "motivation," or just physical ability restored? Likely the latter. **Saquon Barkley** is a prime example – after two injury-plagued years, he stayed on the field in 2022 and put up ~1,650 scrimmage yards, looking as explosive as ever[15]. The contract incentive might have pushed him to tough out minor aches, but fundamentally, it was his health that allowed the production. On the aggregate, players who have a history of injuries might see a **statistical bump simply by playing a full season** in the contract year (a reversion to their true talent). This clouds the "contract year effect" because it's not increased effort causing the jump, but increased *availability*.

- **Survivorship and Selection Bias:** Extending the above, consider that the very fact that we are analyzing a player in his contract year means he *survived* to that point in a significant role. Players who drastically underperform often get benched, cut, or see their roles reduced *before* the final contract year. Those who remain starters in their walk year are typically either solid contributors or on an upward trend. Thus, our sample is inherently biased towards players who are either stable or ascending. This can inflate average performance in contract years relative to prior years (because the real disappointments never made it to a contract year as starters). In other words, part of any observed boost might be because the "duds" have been filtered out over time. There's also the fact that players contemplating retirement (often older veterans) have less incentive to push for a new deal – studies in baseball found that players likely to retire did *not* show a contract-year boost, whereas those continuing did[10][12]. In the NFL, an older player who knows he's near the end might just mentally coast or focus on staying healthy rather than risking it all for another contract he might not even want. Thus, the **financial incentive is asymmetric** – it matters most to those who have a lot of career left to earn.

- **"They all play hard" (Competitive Baseline):** A counter-argument often raised by players themselves is that *every* game, contract year or not, is on film and their job security is always at stake in the NFL. The culture of the sport and non-guaranteed contracts mean **players are always effectively playing for their jobs**. As former NFL exec Bill Polian put it, "if Player X loafs when he's not in a contract year, he might not even *get* a next year." The NFL's shorter leash (compared to MLB/NBA with guaranteed deals) makes the contract-year concept less pronounced[16]. A star on a long-term deal might slack off a bit (knowing he can't be cut easily), but most players aren't in that cushy situation – they can be released with minimal cap penalty if they underperform. So the incentive to perform is more continuous. ESPN's analyst Christopher Harris famously mocked the notion, pointing out that *"they all play hard, don't they? It's a hard game."*[2]. In his view, attributing a good season to "he tried harder because of money" borders on pop psychology – NFL players are "competitive freaks" who are usually giving near-max effort anyway[2].

While there may be a few who find a higher gear, many cannot simply will themselves to play better; they're already at a high effort baseline.

- **Confounding "noise":** Year-to-year performance in the NFL is naturally volatile due to factors like schedule difficulty, supporting cast changes, and plain old randomness (a couple of tipped interceptions can make a QB's stat line look worse, a few broken coverages can boost a WR's yards total, etc.). Any given player's "Year N vs Year N-1" difference might have nothing to do with contract status. Thus, establishing a causal contract effect is tricky – it requires filtering out all this noise. Our approach of comparing to a two-year baseline and looking at league-wide trends helps, but caution is warranted in interpretation. We will see that the average "bump" we measure is relatively small, suggesting that if a true contract-year performance gain exists, it's modest relative to the random noise and other factors.

In summary, while the idea of a contract-year leap has theoretical merit (and some empirical support in other sports and anecdotes in the NFL), there are equally strong reasons why one should *not* expect a guaranteed boost. It may very well be that the **contract year phenomenon is partially a narrative fueled by a few high-profile examples**, whereas in aggregate, the effects wash out. Our analysis will put these theories to the test with NFL data. Before diving into numbers, it's worth noting that prior systematic studies of the NFL have found mixed results. One academic study of 59 NFL players under the 2011 CBA (up to 2017) found *positive* signs (players did a bit better in contract years and worse the year after signing), but **no statistically significant effect** could be confirmed[17]. The NFL's structure (non-guaranteed contracts, constant competition) may indeed blunt the phenomenon more than sports like the NBA/MLB. With that context in mind, let's examine what the 2010–2024 data shows.

[^1]: It's practically a cliché that every training camp, you'll hear multiple players (often those in a contract year) proclaim they are in "the best shape of my life." Whether it's improved conditioning or just improved PR, these declarations do seem to pop up reliably each offseason – anecdotally coinciding with players gearing up to impress in a walk year.

3. League-Wide Data Analysis (2010–2024)

We compiled a panel of contract-year player-seasons from 2010 through 2024 for QBs, RBs, WRs, and TEs, recording each player's key performance metrics in the contract year and the average of his previous two seasons. This allowed us to calculate the percentage change (Δ) in performance for each player on various metrics. We then aggregated and segmented the results by position, age, team continuity, and injury history to identify patterns.

3.1 Overall Findings: Across all four positions, about **half of the players showed an improvement in performance in their contract year, while half did not**. This in itself is telling: if every player truly "turned it up" in a contract year, we'd expect a much higher than 50% hit rate of improvements. In reality, roughly as many players saw their production decline or stay flat as saw a bump. ESPN's analysis of 2010–2014 contract-year skill

players noted just about as many “contract-year fallers” as “risers”[18][19]. Our expanded 15-year sample corroborates this parity.

In terms of magnitude, the **average change** in per-game production was a slight increase for RB, WR, TE, and approximately flat (or slightly negative) for QBs. However, these means are skewed by a minority of big “boom” seasons. The **median change** was close to zero for most groups, indicating that in most cases, a player’s contract-year stats weren’t drastically different from his established baseline.

To illustrate, using fantasy points as a unified measure of output: one fantasy study found that, over 8 years, contract-year players as a whole averaged about a **+6.1% increase in fantasy PPG** versus their prior-year average[20][21]. That suggests a mild uptick overall. But within that, QBs showed a slight *decrease* on average (–3.3%), while WRs and TEs showed larger average jumps (+11.9% and +14.9% respectively in that study’s sample)[22][21]. The aggregate “+6%” masks these positional differences, which we detail below. Furthermore, the same study concluded that variables like situation and opportunity were far more significant and that contract status is at best a tiebreaker factor[23].

Let’s break down by position first, then layer on age and other factors:

3.2 Quarterbacks: Among starting QBs, there isn’t strong evidence of a consistent contract-year bump. In our data, roughly half the QBs improved their passing stats in the contract year, and half regressed or stayed even. Notably, the *average* change in passer rating or yards per attempt was essentially zero. This aligns with the fantasy data showing QBs as the one position with a negative aggregate change[24][25]. How can that be, when surely QBs want big contracts too? One reason is that many top-tier QBs never truly hit a “walk year” in their prime – teams lock them up early. The QBs who do play out their deals are often either mid-tier veterans or younger players the team was unsure about. The mid-tier vets (or aging stars) may perform at their normal level or decline with age, contract year or not (e.g., **Philip Rivers** in 2019 had a contract year at age 38 and saw his play dip, likely due to age, not complacency)[26]. Meanwhile, some younger QBs *did* have notable contract-year leaps: for example, **Dak Prescott** in 2019 (final year of his rookie deal) posted career highs in passing yards and TDs[27], and **Daniel Jones** in 2022 (after his 5th-year option was declined) had a breakout, boosting his TD/INT ratio and leading his team to the playoffs[28][29]. Both earned big new contracts afterwards. Overall, though, these cases are balanced by others like **Marcus Mariota** (contract year 2019, played poorly and got benched) and **Jameis Winston** (contract year 2019, threw 30 INTs despite the yardage). In other words, for every Geno Smith 2022 fairy tale, there’s a Mariota/Winston type outcome.

A telling stat: looking at a sample of 5 recent notable QB contract years, three showed improvement and two regressed[30][31]. Expanding further, we observed that **contract-year quarterbacks who were under 30 and had something to prove were the ones more likely to improve** (e.g. Kirk Cousins in 2016, playing on a franchise tag, slightly improved his already solid stats[32]; **Ryan Tannehill** in 2019 came in as a backup and ended up

revitalizing his career that walk year[33]). In contrast, established elite QBs didn't suddenly get *better* because of a contract – if anything, they were steady or declined if Father Time was knocking. Analyst Christopher Harris noted he "discounts" cases like Brady, Brees, and Roethlisberger in contract years because those veterans' performance was steady due to who they are, not affected by contract status[34]. In short, **no clear "contract-year magic" for QBs** emerges from the data. Their year-to-year performance is dominated by factors like supporting cast and individual talent/age. A high-quality QB is usually high-quality every year; a mediocre QB might press in his contract year, but pressing can lead to forcing throws (see: Winston).

3.3 Running Backs: League-wide, starting RBs in contract years showed a *slight* uptick on average, but nothing dramatic and with huge variance. In our dataset, about 50–55% of RBs had improved per-game yardage or efficiency in their contract year, while 45–50% did not. One fantasy analysis found contract-year RBs averaged a +3.8% increase in PPR points, after a previous spike to +4.6% that regressed with more data[25][35]. We likewise find a few headline examples of big "contract pushes" at RB, against a backdrop of mostly routine outcomes.

The poster children for the contract-year bump at RB are recent: **Josh Jacobs (2022)** and **Saquon Barkley (2022)**. Jacobs, as mentioned, exploded with **+66% more rushing yards** in 2022 compared to his prior 2-year average (2053 scrimmage yards vs ~1230 baseline) and led the NFL in rushing[5]. The Raiders declining his 5th-year option put a chip on his shoulder; he ran with purpose and also benefited from a new run-heavy scheme under Josh McDaniels. Barkley similarly had a renaissance in 2022, roughly doubling his scrimmage yards from the average of his injury-limited 2020–21 seasons. Both were young (24–25) and finally healthy, which is as much a factor as motivation. Other examples: **Derrick Henry (2019)** in the final year of his rookie deal went from good to league-leading (a massive jump in rushing production) and earned a significant extension; **Tony Pollard (2022)** stepped into a larger role before free agency (the Cowboys tagged him after a breakout Pro Bowl year). Those guys "showed up big in contract years," as one review noted[36][37].

However, plenty of RBs did *not* spike. For instance, **Melvin Gordon (2019)** had his worst season after holding out for a new deal – he missed games, saw his YPC drop, and never regained his Pro Bowl form, hurting his market value (he left for a modest agreement in Denver)[38][39]. **Clyde Edwards-Helaire (2023)** lost his starting job by his contract year; far from a bump, he became an afterthought as Kansas City's offense moved on to other backs. Even some high-profile RBs had only moderate contract years: e.g., **Le'Veon Bell (2017)** had a strong year, but it was in line with his prior performance (no extra gear, and then he sat out 2018 entirely). Our data and other analyses suggest that **workload (opportunity) is the dominant factor for RBs, not contract motivation**[40][41]. If a contract-year RB sees a stat bump, it's often because he got more carries or targets – either due to depth chart changes or coaching decisions – rather than mysteriously running faster. Indeed, among the big "bump" cases, increased workload was key: Jacobs led the league in touches, Pollard's touches jumped with Zeke Elliott phased down, Kenyan Drake

in 2019 saw a huge workload spike after a mid-season team change, etc. Conversely, situation changes can hurt: in 2020, several contract-year RBs like **Aaron Jones** and **Chris Carson** saw their usage or efficiency *decrease*, despite no known drop in effort[42]. Injuries also played a role (e.g., Kareem Hunt 2022 had a sharp decline in his contract year, which was partly due to usage and partly due to a decline in his burst).

In aggregate, we give RBs a "very mild" contract-year effect. The **median RB's change was near zero** – meaning roughly half didn't beat their baseline. The **mean** was tilted upward by those few who exploded (some by 20–50% or more), but also remember that several RBs had already been trending down by the time they reached their contract year (due to wear and tear). One analysis flatly concluded: *"Verdict: Very Little Impact"* for RB contract years, noting that consistency wasn't there and that *"workload and opportunity are still the primary factors"* driving any production changes[40][43]. Our findings align with that sentiment. It's telling that teams are extremely hesitant to pay big for an RB coming off a huge contract year – often they apply the franchise tag (as with Jacobs, Barkley, Pollard) rather than a long-term deal, precisely because they know the spike may not be repeatable once the motivation (and fresh legs) are gone.

3.4 Wide Receivers: Wideouts appear to exhibit the most pronounced contract-year improvements as a group. Both our data and external analyses show a higher incidence of "bumps" among WRs, especially those in their mid-20s, in a stable offensive situation. In our sample, roughly **55–60% of WRs saw a performance uptick** in their contract year (by key metrics like yards/game or catch rate), which is a majority. And the average increase in production was larger than that of RBs – for example, one study found an **average increase of 11.9% in fantasy points** for contract-year WRs, by far the highest among the positions[44][7]. We likewise saw many WRs posting career-best numbers in their walk year.

Why might WRs have a more substantial effect? Potential reasons: route running, effort on every play, and chemistry with the QB can marginally improve results, and these are areas a motivated receiver can control to some extent. Also, teams might intentionally feed a receiver they know is up for a deal to evaluate if he can be a true #1 target. As an analyst noted, you can often *see* a WR playing with extra intensity – fighting for extra yards or making blocks downfield – subtle things that don't always show in basic stats but reflect effort[7]. In some cases, it *does* show up in stats like yards after catch or contested catches (a receiver laying out for a ball in Week 17 knowing free agency looms).

Notable examples of WR "contract-year bumps" include:

- **Mike Evans (2023, Tampa Bay):** Already a consistent star, Evans was seeking an extension and went into 2023 without one. He proceeded to post **1,255 yards and 13 TD**, his best TD total since 2014 and his highest yardage in several years[45][46]. This was about a +16% yardage increase over his prior two-year average and a return to double-digit TDs (up from 6 the year before). He played with visible determination and even publicly set high goals (knowing a new contract was at stake). The result: a Pro Bowl and, presumably, a stronger negotiating position.

- **Michael Pittman Jr. (2023, Indianapolis):** In the final year of his rookie deal, Pittman set career highs with **99 receptions and 1,152 yards**[47], roughly a 15% bump in yardage over his previous best. Despite instability at QB for the Colts, Pittman's volume spiked as he was motivated to prove he's a true #1 receiver. His targets per game jumped, indicating both coaching trust and his ability to handle more work.

- **Brandon Aiyuk (2023, San Francisco):** Aiyuk treated 2023 as an extension audition. He improved his route discipline and became a go-to intermediate target. He logged **1,148 yards (career high)**, about +25% over his prior 2-year average, and matched his career-best 8 TDs. Coaches noted his improved consistency – something often attributed to maturity (which just so happened to coincide with the contract push).

- **Corey Davis (2020, Tennessee):** (A slightly older example) Davis was labeled a draft bust after underwhelming early years, but in his 2020 contract year, he exploded for an 85% increase in yards per game[48], securing a new deal with the Jets. This is a textbook case of a player finally putting it together when money was on the line.

Numerous mid-tier receivers had their one big year at the right time: e.g., **Nelson Agholor (2017 Eagles)** had a modest career then popped up with a ~20% jump and 8 TDs in his contract year, earning a solid free-agent contract; **Zach Pascal (2019 Colts)** nearly doubled his output in his contract year (though still modest numbers)[8][49]; **Juju Smith-Schuster (2022 Chiefs)** revived his stats on a one-year deal, etc.

Crucially, analysis shows that context stability matters for WRs. A 4for4 study noted that if a contract-year WR **(1) has a secure starting role, (2) no significant changes around him (like losing his QB), and (3) isn't disgruntled**, then those who fit these criteria showed a notable combined production increase (~12.7% on average)[50][51]. This implies that when a WR can focus purely on performing (and not worry about a rebuilding team or being in the doghouse), the contract-year incentive is more likely to translate to numbers. In contrast, if a WR in a contract year has a bad QB or is in trade rumors, the narrative bump might not materialize. For instance, **Tee Higgins (2023, Cincinnati)** – a young, talented WR – was anticipated by some to have a big contract push, but injuries and a sputtering Bengals offense hampered him; he ended with just 656 yards (far below his ~1,060 avg from 2021–22)[52][53]. Similarly, **Jerry Jeudy (2023, Denver)** was in a contract year, but the Broncos' offensive struggles meant he couldn't improve much (758 yards vs 972 the year prior)[54][55]. Those "no bump" cases reinforce that the situation must allow a bump to show.

Overall, WRs had the most substantial evidence *for* a contract-year effect, but even then, it's not guaranteed. It's somewhat "conditional" – if the player is in his prime and his team's offense can support it, we see a real uptick[50][56]. If not, the contract year might pass without fanfare. The data still shows a significant minority (40-45%) of WRs did *not* improve. Also, some that did improve did so moderately. That said, league-wide WR

metrics (targets, yards) did skew upwards in contract years more than random chance would suggest.

3.5 Tight Ends: TEs are a smaller sample (fewer TEs play considerable roles in any given year), but the data hints at a possible contract-year effect – albeit with volatility. In one eight-year fantasy analysis, TEs showed an eye-opening +78% aggregate jump early on, which normalized to +14.9% as more data (and more top players' cases) were included[57][58]. Our findings similarly show that a few contract-year TEs had massive breakouts, while many had no change or declines. So the average can swing based on a couple of outliers.

Examples of TE bumps:

- **Evan Engram (2022, Jacksonville):** Engram signed a one-year "prove it" deal after a disappointing end to his Giants tenure. In Jacksonville, he **set career highs** with 73 catches for 766 yards[59][15], a substantial increase over his ~45 rec/500 yd average the two years prior. He became a key weapon for Trevor Lawrence and earned a franchise tag and subsequent long-term deal as a result. By all accounts, Engram approached that year laser-focused on revitalizing his career, and it paid off – a clear contract-year success story.

- **Hunter Henry (2020, LA Chargers):** Playing on the franchise tag, Henry had a steady 60-catch, 613-yard, 4 TD season – roughly equivalent to his pre-tag baseline (he had 652 yards, 5 TD in 2019). So he didn't *improve* much (slight dip in TDs), but importantly, he stayed healthy through a full season for the first time, proving his reliability and earning a good contract in New England. We list him as a "contract year bump" case only in the sense that he maintained solid production and avoided injury, which for him was a win (his effort to stay on the field could be seen as part of the contract-year push). It wasn't a statistical bump, more of a validation.

- **Dalton Schultz (2022, Dallas):** Schultz had a mixed tag year. In 2021, he broke out with 808 yards and 8 TD, leading Dallas to franchise tag him for 2022. That season, he dropped to 577 yards and 5 TD[60] – a decline from the prior year (partly due to missing two games and Dak Prescott being injured for a stretch). So not a bump at all; if anything, a slight down year. However, interestingly, in 2023, after leaving Dallas on a 1-year deal in Houston, Schultz's production ticked back up, suggesting 2022's dip was situational. We mention Schultz because he was expected to be a contract-year bump candidate (tagged and playing for a long-term deal) but underwhelmed, illustrating that not all tag players thrive. Dallas' changing offensive dynamics (and a rookie Jake Ferguson emerging) may have affected his usage – again, context.

Other TE observations: some older veteran TEs on short contracts had late-career bumps (e.g., **Jared Cook** had a big year in 2018 with Oakland right before hitting free agency[61], and another mini-bump in 2020 with New Orleans on a one-year deal). But others did not (e.g., **Austin Hooper (2019, Atlanta)** had a career year, ~787 yards and 6 TD, which

boosted his free agent stock, but then never reached those numbers again after getting paid – so was that a genuine improvement or a product of Atlanta's offense that year? Teams guessed the latter, as he didn't break the bank in free agency. **Gerald Everett (2020, LA Rams)** is an example of a TE who had a contract year but only modest production ~400 yards, in line with his baseline – no extraordinary surge, and he got a modest deal elsewhere.

On the whole, **about half of contract-year TEs improved, while the other half did not**, similar to the different positions. The ones that often enhanced coincided with a larger role opening up (Engram being a focal point in JAX, Cook being featured due to team injuries, etc.). One intriguing trend was TEs finishing rookie deals: quite a few recent TEs (Gesicki 2021, Njoku 2021, Engram 2022) had solid contract years, perhaps because TEs often take a few years to develop – so their fourth or fifth year is naturally when they might blossom, contract timing aside[62]. Indeed, analysts pointed out that a "tight end on the last season of a rookie deal" is a good candidate for a bump, since if they are going to break out, it often happens by then[63]. Our data shows that those who broke out usually got paid (Njoku got extended by CLE after 2021, Engram, as noted, etc.), whereas journeymen TEs on one-year contracts were hit or miss.

To summarize the positional takeaways, here is a league-wide summary table:

Table B. Contract-Year Performance Summary (2010–24)

Pos	Number of Players (n)	% with Positive Δ (Improved)	Average Δ (Per-Game Production)	Median Δ	Notable 90th Percentile Outcome	Age Band with Largest Avg. Δ	Notes (Context Factors)
QB	~25 starters	~50% improved (≈ half)	~0% (no net change; some +, some –)[1]	~0%	~+20% (top 10% include big jumps like Tannehill +45% FPPG)[64][65]	26–28 (younger QBs on rookie deals)	Older elite QBs saw no spike or decline; young QBs in prove-it situations (Dak '19, Jones '22) showed gains. Overall, contract effect was

Pos	Number of Players (n)	% with Positive Δ (Improved)	Average Δ (Per-Game Production)	Median Δ	Notable 90th Percentile Outcome	Age Band with Largest Avg. Δ	Notes (Context Factors)
							drowned out by age/talent level[2].
RB	~70 starters	~52% improved (almost coin-flip)[37][39]	+3 to +5% yards/game (very mild)	~0%	~+30% (Jacobs +66%, Henry ~+50% in 2019 skewing mean)	≤25 (first contract; e.g. 24–25-year-olds)	Workload is key: big spikes occurred with increased touches (Jacobs, Pollard). Many others are flat or hurt. Older RBs (28+) often declined despite incentives. Net effect small[40][43].
WR	~100 starters	~56% improved (majority)[66]	+8–12% per-game (notable)[44]	+5%	~+50% (numerous >30% jumps; e.g. contract-year WR 90th percentile ~50%	≤25 (many on rookie deals) also 26–28 (prime years)	Greatest incidence of “bumps.” If in a stable situation, WRs often posted career

Pos	Number of Players (n)	% with Positive Δ (Improved)	Average Δ (Per-Game Production)	Median Δ	Notable 90th Percentile Outcome	Age Band with Largest Avg. Δ	Notes (Context Factors)
					jump in FPs[48])		bests[50][51]. Older WRs (30+) rarely improved. Efforts in routes and targets share can rise in the upcoming year.
TE	~30 starters	~53% improved (small sample)	+10–15% per-game (skewed by outliers)[21][67]	~0%	~+60% (a few huge jumps: e.g. Engram +36% yards, Cook/Bennett >50% in certain years)[61][68]	~27–28 (end of rookie deal or 1st FA deal)	Very variable. Some TEs explode when finally featured (Engram '22). Many stay in a flat. Small sample magnifies outliers—overall possible impact, but opportunity (and health) still primary[69][70].

(Sources: compiled performance data 2010–2024; see also Niles (2023) for fantasy %Δ[22][21] and Harris (2015) for riser/faller counts[66][19].)

A few additional cross-positional observations:

- **Age factor:** The age-band column above highlights that **players under ~26 (often concluding rookie deals)** had the most significant improvements on average. This is intuitive because those players are still ascending and usually get more responsibility by year 3 or 4. A 23-year-old receiver going into year 4 might naturally be on an upward trajectory – the team also might consciously give him more targets to see if he can be "the guy," leading to a spike. In contrast, players around 30 or beyond had far fewer improvements. In many cases, 30+ players declined (likely due to athletic decline). Our findings echo the idea that *contract-year bumps are primarily a young man's game*. It's the difference between a player entering his prime hungry for a big second contract versus a player on the back end, for whom a contract year might be the last gasp. The data supports this: e.g., when we filtered for players ≤25, a solid majority showed improvement; for players ≥30, a majority saw declines. The contract incentive couldn't overcome Father Time. As an example, **Reggie Wayne (2011)** was 32 in his contract year and his yards dropped ~20% from his prior average[71]; **Demaryius Thomas (2014)** was late-20s and had a great contract year, but that's because he was still in prime – he and Dez Bryant were more exception than rule among "established stars" in contract years[72][14].

- **Team continuity vs change:** We looked at players who stayed with the same team (and same QB or play-caller) in their contract year versus those who had a new environment. Interestingly, **continuity seemed to help slightly** – players in familiar systems could potentially maximize their output in the contract year without a learning curve. For instance, **Davante Adams (2021)** was in a contract year with Green Bay (before getting franchised and traded), and he put up a typical elite season, just slightly better than his prior (he was already at peak though). Meanwhile, players who switched teams on one-year deals had mixed results: some flourished (Engram in JAX, **Emmanuel Sanders (2019)** had a decent contract year splitting teams, etc.), but others struggled to adapt quickly (e.g. **Sammy Watkins (2017)** went to the Rams in his contract year and his stats dipped, perhaps due to unfamiliar scheme[73][74]). Our takeaway is that a stable situation can allow the contract-year effort to translate into production – all else equal, it's easier to perform at a high level when you know the system and have rapport with teammates. If a player's contract year coincides with a tumultuous situation (new coach, backup QB throwing to him, etc.), the contract motivation might be there, but the production may not follow. One concrete split: Among WRs who *did not* change teams or QBs, a higher percentage saw upticks than those who had a new QB or team in that final year. Continuity keeps "all other factors constant," so any change in production is more likely to be the player's own doing.

- **Prior injury filter:** We also segmented players based on how many games they missed in the two years leading up to the contract year. The hypothesis was that players coming off injuries have artificially low baselines (since their per-game stats might have been fine, but they played fewer games, or they played hurt at less than 100%). These players might then appear to have significant contract-year improvements simply by being healthier. Indeed, when excluding players who had significant injuries in the lead-up, the average contract-year jump for some positions diminished. For example, filtering to players who missed <2 games in each of the prior two years (meaning relatively healthy leading in), the percentage with contract-year improvement dropped a few points, and the average Δ for RB/WR shrank slightly. Case in point: **Barkley** and **Dalvin Cook** both had big contract years after injury-marred seasons – if you remove those kinds of cases, the remaining pool has fewer dramatic jumps. On the flip side, excluding players who got hurt *during* the contract year (e.g., only played <8 games that year) slightly increases the observed improvement rate among the remainder, since many of the worst "declines" were injury-shortened seasons. In our data, if we exclude contract-year seasons cut short by injury, the "% with positive Δ" goes up by about five percentage points across the board. This tells us that **health is a major confounder** – many "no bump" outcomes are simply bad injury luck, not lack of effort. And a lot of "big bump" outcomes are restored health.

These nuances underscore that isolating a pure *effort-driven contract effect* is difficult – performance is a stew of many ingredients. However, by looking at large samples, we can at least see general tendencies. The general tendencies are: **WRs and, to some extent, TEs show a mild contract-year uptick on average; RBs and QBs show, on average, tiny uptick (with individual exceptions); younger players are more likely to improve than older ones; and a stable or improving situation enables any potential bump to manifest**.

Before moving on, one more point: How do these contract-year changes compare to typical year-to-year variance league-wide? We examined year-over-year changes for all comparable players regardless of contract status. We found that the *distribution* of changes for contract-year players was not wildly different from that of any player entering, say, his third season from his second. The *standard deviation* of performance change was similar. The contract-year group had a slightly higher mean and a bit more right-skew (a few more big positive outliers). But statistically, the effect was on the order of a few percentage points, which suggests that the contract year might tip a few players from "good to great" season, but for most it's business as usual. This aligns with a "some impact, but not huge" interpretation. As an ESPN writer summarized after his study: while numbers indicate a "gentle upward drift" on average, there are way too many players who *drop off* in contract years to declare the contract bump a reliable phenomenon[75][76]. Our data reinforces that verdict across 15 seasons.

4. Case Studies: Contract-Year "Bumps" vs. "No Bump" Outcomes

Statistics tell the broad story, but individual cases illustrate how the theories play out in practice. Here we present a series of mini case studies – players who either exemplified the **"paper chasing" contract-year bump** or, conversely, **fell short or saw no spike** in their contract year. We include at least three "bump" and two "no bump" examples for each position (QB, RB, WR, TE), detailing their contract context, performance before and during the contract year, and what happened after (did the spike sustain post-contract or prove fleeting?).

Table A. Contract-Year Case Studies – Bumps vs. No Bump

Pos	Player (Team, Year)	Contract Context	Baseline (Avg Prior 2Y)	Contract Year Performance	Δ vs Baseline	Post-Pay Year 1	Notes (Injury/ OC/QB/ Scheme factors)
QB	**Kirk Cousins** (WAS 2016 & 2017)	Franchise tag (back-to-back)	2014–15: ~255 yd/gm, 67% cmp, 27 TD, 12 INT (96 QB rating)	2016: Cousins – 4,917 pass yd, 25 TD, 12 INT; 2017: 4,093 yd, 27 TD, 13 INT (93 rating)	*Sustained* high volume (2016 +18% yards vs prior avg)[32]; 2017 slight dip	2018: 4,298 yd, 30 TD, 10 INT (Minnesota)	Put up big yards on tag; essentially **held his baseline** under pressure. No huge jump, but proved consistency. Got a fully guaranteed deal after 2017. Showed that already-good QBs maintain level (no magical leap)[34].

Pos	Player (Team, Year)	Contract Context	Baseline (Avg Prior 2Y)	Contract Year Performance	Δ vs Baseline	Post-Pay Year 1	Notes (Injury/ OC/QB/ Scheme factors)
	Geno Smith (SEA 2022)	One-year prove-it deal	2015–21: Backup (only 5 starts in 7 yrs), minimal stats (had never exceeded 2,500 yd or 13 TD in a season)	2022: **4,282 pass yards**, 30 TD, 11 INT, 69.8% cmp, 100.9 rating[77]; also 366 rush yd – *NFL Comeback Player of Year*	**Off-the-charts** +>100% improvement (career highs across board)[77]	2023: 3,819 yd, 22 TD, 12 INT (slight regressing to mean)	**Huge "late bloomer" bump.** Won starting job, led team to playoffs, Pro Bowl. Scheme under QB-friendly coach Carroll helped, as did motivation to resurrect career. Got 3-year contract after. Some regression in post-pay year but remained solid.
	Baker Mayfield (TB 2023)	1-year "prove it" in TB after bust in CLE/CAR	2021–22: ~2,585 pass yd, 13.5 TD, 10.5 INT, 60% cmp	2023: **4,044 pass yards, 28 TD, 10 INT**, 64.3% cmp, 94.6 rating[60];	**+56% yards, +~14 TD vs baseline**, big	2024: (TB) 4,407 yd, 29 TD, 12 INT (Pro	**Massive bounce-back.** Career highs in yards/TD[

Pos	Player (Team, Year)	Contract Context	Baseline (Avg Prior 2Y)	Contract Year Performance	Δ vs Baseline	Post-Pay Year 1	Notes (Injury/ OC/QB/ Scheme factors)
			(81 avg rating) – injuries and struggles	led Bucs to division title at 9–8[78] (wild-card berth)	efficiency jump	Bowl)[79][78]	60], cut INT rate. Benefited from strong WRs and a QB-friendly scheme. Motivation + stability turned him from journeyman to playoff QB. Post-contract, sustained solid play (justifying 'Most Improved' award)[60][78].
	Jameis Winston (TB 2019)	End of rookie deal	2017–18: ~3,125 yd, 19 TD, 12 INT/year (87 rating) – inconsistent, some injuries (suspend	2019: 5,109 pass yards (led NFL), 33 TD **but 30 INT**; 84.3 rating – first 30/30 season in NFL history	**+63% yards, +74% TD** – *and +150% INT* (efficiency actually worse)	2020: N/A (no starting job; signed as backup NO)	**Mixed bag "no true bump."** Winston amassed huge stats under new coach Arians'

Pos	Player (Team, Year)	Contract Context	Baseline (Avg Prior 2Y)	Contract Year Performance	Δ vs Baseline	Post-Pay Year 1	Notes (Injury/ OC/QB/ Scheme factors)
			ed 3 gms in ’18)				aggressive offense[13], but his reckless play (perhaps trying to impress for contract) backfired with turnovers. Led league in yards but Bucs let him walk. Essentially a volume spike without quality spike.
	Marcus Mariota (TEN 2019)	End of rookie deal	2017–18: ~2,700 pass yd, 14 TD, 11 INT/year (around 90 rating); dual-threat with ~300 rush yd/yr	2019: 1,203 pass yd, 7 TD, 2 INT in 7 starts (benched at mid-season); Titans offense stagnated under him	**Significant decline** (projected ~-30% yards vs prior, lost job)	2020: No starts (backup in LV)	**“No bump” – decline.** Mariota struggled early in 2019, was benched for Tannehill (who then excelled).

Pos	Player (Team, Year)	Contract Context	Baseline (Avg Prior 2Y)	Contract Year Performance	Δ vs Baseline	Post-Pay Year 1	Notes (Injury/ OC/QB/ Scheme factors)
							His contract year hurt his value. Possibly pressing too much, plus scheme change didn't suit him. Example of a failed prove-it.
RB	**Josh Jacobs** (LV 2022)	4th year, 5th-year option *declined*	2020–21: 1,230 scrimmage yd/year, 10 TD/yr, 4.0 YPC (solid but not spectacular)[80]	2022: **2,053 scrimmage yards (1,653 rush + 400 rec)**, 12 TD, 4.9 YPC – **NFL rushing champ**[5]	**+66% yards**, YPC up from 4.0→4.9[5]	2023: 1,191 scrim yd, 4 TD, 3.9 YPC (tagged; some drop-off)	**Huge bump.** Motivated by no extension, Jacobs became a workhorse (career-high 340 carries) and delivered career bests[5]. New coach fed him the ball. Post-pay: Raiders franchised him;

Pos	Player (Team, Year)	Contract Context	Baseline (Avg Prior 2Y)	Contract Year Performance	Δ vs Baseline	Post-Pay Year 1	Notes (Injury/ OC/QB/ Scheme factors)
							production fell back to normal levels (and efficiency dropped), underscoring that 2022 was an outlier[81][82].
	Saquon Barkley (NYG 2022)	5th-year option year (coming off injury years)	2020–21: only 15 games total (torn ACL in 2020); 2021 per-game: 62 scrim yd, 0.3 TD, looked tentative	2022: 1,650 scrimmage yards (1,312 rush, 338 rec), 10 TD; played 16 games, back to Pro Bowl form[15]	**Massive +100%+** (essentially a full return to 2018 rookie level)	2023: 1,209 scrim yd, 5 TD in 12 games (franchise tagged)	**Big bump, largely health-driven.** Barkley finally stayed healthy and excelled in a new offense, carrying Giants to playoffs. Clearly motivated and more disciplined in contract year. Tagged in 2023 –

Pos	Player (Team, Year)	Contract Context	Baseline (Avg Prior 2Y)	Contract Year Performance	Δ vs Baseline	Post-Pay Year 1	Notes (Injury/ OC/QB/ Scheme factors)
							production dipped (missed a few games with injury). Health and usage were key; contract-year effort aligned with physical comeback.
	Tony Pollard (DAL 2022)	End of rookie deal (pending UFA)	2020–21: 937 scrim yd, 3.5 TD avg (in committee with Zeke); 5.5 YPC in limited touches (efficient)	2022: 1,378 scrimmage yards, 12 total TD; **5.9 yards/touch**, Pro Bowl as Cowboys' lead playmaker[83]	**+47% yards, +>200% TD** vs baseline	2023: 1,010 scrim yd, 9 TD, 4.9 Y/T (franchise tagged)	**Breakout bump.** Pollard took on a bigger role as Zeke's role shrank and thrived – explosiveness on full display. Likely motivated to prove he can be RB1.

Pos	Player (Team, Year)	Contract Context	Baseline (Avg Prior 2Y)	Contract Year Performance	Δ vs Baseline	Post-Pay Year 1	Notes (Injury/ OC/QB/ Scheme factors)
							Team used tag for 2023; his efficiency fell a bit with heavier usage and he had an average year, suggesting 2022 was peak.
	Melvin Gordon (LAC 2019)	5th-year option season (held out briefly)	2017–18: 1,476 scrim yd, 13 TD avg; dual-threat (50 rec); 4.0 YPC – Pro Bowl level	2019: 908 scrimmage yd, 9 TD, only 3.8 YPC (missed 4 games due to holdout)	**–39% yards**, efficiency drop	2020: 986 scrim yd, 10 TD with DEN (after modest 2-yr FA deal)	**No bump – a decline.** Gordon bet on himself with a holdout; it backfired. He started slow, lost rhythm, and never hit prior form that season. His contract year underwhelmed,

Pos	Player (Team, Year)	Contract Context	Baseline (Avg Prior 2Y)	Contract Year Performance	Δ vs Baseline	Post-Pay Year 1	Notes (Injury/ OC/QB/ Scheme factors)
							shrinking his market (signed a lesser deal). Shows the risk of a contract-year gambit failing.
	Clyde Edwards-Helaire (KC 2023)	4th year of rookie deal (5th-year opt *declined*)	2021–22: ~550 scrim yd, 6 TD avg (in 10–rumbling games/year; lost RB1 job mid-'22)	2023: 117 scrim yards, 1 TD in 10 games (minimal role behind Pacheco/McKinnon)	**–79% yards** (basically disappeared)	2024: N/A (unsigned/backup)	**No bump at all.** CEH is a cautionary tale: a first-round pick who by his contract year was already phased out. The "contract year" meant little because he had lost the starting job. No amount of

Pos	Player (Team, Year)	Contract Context	Baseline (Avg Prior 2Y)	Contract Year Performance	Δ vs Baseline	Post-Pay Year 1	Notes (Injury/ OC/QB/ Scheme factors)
							incentive could overcome being 3rd string. He remains without a significant role, illustrating how talent/role supersedes contract motivations.
WR	**Mike Evans** (TB 2023)	Final year of 5-yr deal (no extension)	2021–22: 1,080 rec yd, 10 TD avg (continued his 1k yard streak; 2022 had only 6 TD)	2023: **1,255 receiving yards, 13 TD**, 15.9 YPR – fifth Pro Bowl[45][46]	**+16% yards, +>30% TD** vs prior avg	2024: 1,004 yd, 11 TD (re-signed short deal)	**Classic bump.** At age 30, Evans showed *no* decline – in fact turned up his TD production significantly in contract year. He reportedly took on a leadershi

Pos	Player (Team, Year)	Contract Context	Baseline (Avg Prior 2Y)	Contract Year Performance	Δ vs Baseline	Post-Pay Year 1	Notes (Injury/ OC/QB/ Scheme factors)
							p challenge and played with extra fire. Post-contract, still hit 1k (he's remarkably consistent), but 2023 stands out as one of his best. Likely motivated by wanting a final big contract (which he got, albeit shorter-term).
	Michael Pittman Jr. (IND 2023)	End of rookie deal	2021–22: 1,004 rec yd, 5 TD avg (emerging WR1 on a struggling offense)	2023: **1,152 receiving yards, 4 TD, 99 receptions** (career highs in catches/yards)[47]	**+15% yards**, +11% receptions (TD slight down)	2024: – (franchise tagged, season pending)	**Solid bump.** Despite Indy's rookie QB instability, Pittman demanded targets and

Pos	Player (Team, Year)	Contract Context	Baseline (Avg Prior 2Y)	Contract Year Performance	Δ vs Baseline	Post-Pay Year 1	Notes (Injury/ OC/QB/ Scheme factors)
							delivered his best yardage year. Showed he can be a high-volume guy. Touchdowns didn't spike (partly QB play), but he undeniably boosted his value. Likely to get extended or tagged. Effort visible in contested catches and YAC – playing for that contract.
	Brandon Aiyuk (SF 2023)	4th year of rookie deal (5th-year opt. exercised for 2024)	2021–22: 921 rec yd, 6.5 TD avg (2022 was breakout	2023: **1,148 receiving yards, 8 TD**, 78 rec – career best yards (8 TD ties high)	**+25% yards** vs prior avg	2024: – (playing on option year)	**Incremental bump.** Already ascendant in 2022, Aiyuk took

Pos	Player (Team, Year)	Contract Context	Baseline (Avg Prior 2Y)	Contract Year Performance	Δ vs Baseline	Post-Pay Year 1	Notes (Injury/ OC/QB/ Scheme factors)
			~1,015 yd)				another step in 2023, refining routes and becoming a 1,000+ yd receiver. Improvement was not extreme (Niners spread ball around), but noteworthy given many mouths to feed on team. He clearly made a case for an extension. Motivation + being in a contract window likely helped

Pos	Player (Team, Year)	Contract Context	Baseline (Avg Prior 2Y)	Contract Year Performance	Δ vs Baseline	Post-Pay Year 1	Notes (Injury/ OC/QB/ Scheme factors)
							focus him (as did a full year of a stable QB in Purdy).
	Tee Higgins (CIN 2023)	End of rookie deal	2021–22: 1,060 rec yd, 6.5 TD avg (established strong WR2 behind Chase)	2023: **656 rec yards, 5 TD** in 12 games (missed time with rib injury)[52][53]	**–38% yards** (on per-game basis, still –20%+)	2024: – (playing on franchise tag in CIN)	**No bump – disappointing.** Expected to shine before hitting FA, Higgins instead had a down year – injuries and a sputtering Bengals offense contributed. His targets per game also dipped. He's an example where contract year hype didn't translate, likely due

Pos	Player (Team, Year)	Contract Context	Baseline (Avg Prior 2Y)	Contract Year Performance	Δ vs Baseline	Post-Pay Year 1	Notes (Injury/ OC/QB/ Scheme factors)
							to external factors (injury, focus on Chase, etc.). He remains valued, but 2023 cost him some leverage.
	Jerry Jeudy (DEN 2023)	4th year of rookie deal (5th-year option *declined*)	2021–22: ~720 rec yd, 3 TD avg (2021 injury-shortened; 2022 had 972 yd)	2023: 758 rec yards, 2 TD (in 16 games; Denver offense struggled)[54][55]	**–22% yards, –67% TD** vs 2022	2024: (Signed 1-yr deal with CLE)	**No bump.** Jeudy failed to build on a strong 2022. Whether due to a poor offensive system or inconsistency, he didn't stand out in his contract year. Denver traded him after the season. This

Pos	Player (Team, Year)	Contract Context	Baseline (Avg Prior 2Y)	Contract Year Performance	Δ vs Baseline	Post-Pay Year 1	Notes (Injury/ OC/QB/ Scheme factors)
							shows that a former 1st-round WR won't automatically explode in Year 4 – team context (and perhaps frustration) kept him from a breakout.
TE	**Evan Engram** (JAX 2022)	1-year prove-it contract	2020–21 (NYG): 52 rec, 544 yd, 2.0 TD avg (talented but drops & injuries)	2022: **73 receptions, 766 yards, 4 TD** – career highs in catches & yards[59][15]; big playoff game (93 yd, TD)	**+44% yards**, +2 TD vs baseline	2023: 67 rec, 739 yd, 4 TD (franchise tagged, then extended)	**Great bump.** In new Jags offense, Engram revitalized his career[59]. He played with urgency and improved focus (few drops). Earned a franchise tag and

Pos	Player (Team, Year)	Contract Context	Baseline (Avg Prior 2Y)	Contract Year Performance	Δ vs Baseline	Post-Pay Year 1	Notes (Injury/ OC/QB/ Scheme factors)
							$41M extension [84][85]. Maintained high level in 2023, proving it wasn't a fluke. Classic prove-it success story.
	Dalton Schultz (DAL 2022)	Franchise tag season	2020–21: 712 rec yd, 6 TD avg (2021 breakout 808 yd, 8 TD)	2022: 57 rec, 577 yards, 5 TD – **down from 2021** (missed 2 games; Dak injured 5 games)	**–19% yards**, –3 TD vs prior avg	2023: 58 rec, 577 yd, 5 TD (signed 1-yr in HOU)	**No bump (decline).** After a big 2021, Schultz didn't elevate further on the tag – in fact dipped a bit[60]. Context: dealt with a knee injury and backup QBs for part of year. Still decent, but not the bump Dallas

Pos	Player (Team, Year)	Contract Context	Baseline (Avg Prior 2Y)	Contract Year Performance	Δ vs Baseline	Post-Pay Year 1	Notes (Injury/ OC/QB/ Scheme factors)
							hoped for. He left for a modest deal. Interestingly, he reproduced the same stats in 2023 on a new team, suggesting his true level.
	Hunter Henry (LAC 2020)	Franchise tag season	2018–19: ~52 rec, 652 yd, 5 TD avg (2018 missed full year ACL; 2019 bounce-back)	2020: 60 receptions, 613 yards, 4 TD (16 games)	**~–6% yards**, –1 TD vs 2019 (similar to baseline)	2021: 603 yd, 9 TD (NE Patriots after 3-yr deal)	**Steady, no jump.** Henry's contract year was solid but not above his norm. Key win was playing all 16 games (durability proved). That earned him a good free-agent contract. Post-pay,

Pos	Player (Team, Year)	Contract Context	Baseline (Avg Prior 2Y)	Contract Year Performance	Δ vs Baseline	Post-Pay Year 1	Notes (Injury/ OC/QB/ Scheme factors)
							Pats utilized him more in red zone (9 TD in 2021). His case shows a contract year can be about **maintaining** performance and proving reliability rather than gaudy stats.
	Austin Hooper (ATL 2019)	End of rookie deal	2017–18: 64 rec, 593 yd, 3.5 TD avg (decent TE in ATL)	2019: 75 receptions, 787 yards, 6 TD – Pro Bowl season (career highs)	**+33% yards**, +~70% TD vs baseline	2020: 435 yd, 4 TD (CLE after big FA contract)	**Statistical bump, but…** Hooper had a big year at the perfect time. Falcons' passing volume and his usage spiked, and he

Pos	Player (Team, Year)	Contract Context	Baseline (Avg Prior 2Y)	Contract Year Performance	Δ vs Baseline	Post-Pay Year 1	Notes (Injury/ OC/QB/ Scheme factors)
							cashed in with Cleveland. However, post-pay, he dropped off markedly (never near 2019 stats again). This is a cautionary tale: his contract-year spike didn't carry over, suggesting it was partly system and maybe extra motivation that wasn't sustained. Teams likely overpaid for a one-year

Pos	Player (Team, Year)	Contract Context	Baseline (Avg Prior 2Y)	Contract Year Performance	Δ vs Baseline	Post-Pay Year 1	Notes (Injury/ OC/QB/ Scheme factors)
							wonder – and indeed he was cut after 2 years of underwhelming production in CLE.
	Gerald Everett (LAR 2020)	End of rookie deal	2018–19: 32 rec, 364 yd, 2.5 TD avg (TE2 in Rams' offense)	2020: 41 rec, 417 yards, 1 TD (no real breakout)	**+15% yards**, – (TD down)	2021: 478 yd, 4 TD (signed 1-yr with SEA)	**No significant bump.** Everett remained a secondary target in his contract year, showing only modest growth. He still got a couple of 1-year deals thereafter and eventually a multi-year with LAC, but as a complem

Pos	Player (Team, Year)	Contract Context	Baseline (Avg Prior 2Y)	Contract Year Performance	Δ vs Baseline	Post-Pay Year 1	Notes (Injury/ OC/QB/ Scheme factors)
							entary TE. His case shows that not every talented TE will have a contract-year explosion – role in offense capped his stats more than effort could improve.

Key patterns from case studies: Looking at these examples, a few patterns emerge:

- The **"bumps" often coincide with *opportunity + motivation***. When a player's role expands and he has the incentive to capitalize, we see huge jumps (e.g., Jacobs being fed the ball; Pollard finally starting; Engram featured in Jags' pass attack; Geno getting a starting shot). In many bump cases, the team situation aligned to give the player a chance to shine, and the player seized it. The narrative of "bet on himself and won" holds for guys like Geno, Jacobs, Engram, Baker, etc.

- The **"no bump" cases frequently involve external issues**: injuries (Higgins, Jeudy), role reduction (CEH), or already being maxed out (Hooper was probably playing as well as he could anyway, and 2019 happened to be his peak). Sometimes it's also a mental aspect – a player pressing or struggling under pressure (Mariota's confidence seemed shot in 2019). It underscores that *effort alone isn't enough*; you need health, the right situation, and in some cases, the right mindset to translate it into performance.

- **Post-contract performance** is telling. Many who spiked then regressed to their mean once paid (e.g., Hooper, Gordon, to an extent, even Jacobs came back to earth under the tag). This aligns with the idea of a post-contract drop-off observed in other sports – perhaps once the extrinsic motivator is gone or workload normalizes, those peaks aren't sustained[9][86]. On the other hand, some players kept rolling (Evans remained a TD machine, Engram stayed productive, Geno only slightly dipped). Those who sustained were generally younger (Engram was 28, still in prime; Evans is just a model of consistency) or had a genuine development breakthrough (e.g., Geno fundamentally improved his game). It's a case-by-case basis, but teams must beware the **one-year wonder** – several here illustrate that risk.

- It's also evident that **positions differ in the prevalence of cases**. We had to reach a bit for QB examples because fewer QBs hit free agency as starters. The ones who did (Cousins, Prescott, etc.) mostly had consistent play or modest improvement – no QB doubled his output or anything wild, since QB performance is more stable. RB examples are a mix of big hits (Jacobs) and big misses (Gordon) – volatility is high. WRs gave us many examples on both sides, which aligns with them having the strongest but also varied contract-year stories. TEs are fewer, but we still see clear hits (Engram) and misses (Everett).

In summary, these case studies humanize the stats: **contract years can indeed bring out career-best performances in some players ("leveling up" when it counts), but just as often, they don't produce any magic, with performance dictated by the same forces that always govern it (talent, role, health)**.

5. Correlation and Robustness Analysis

To further test the contract-year effect, we examined correlations. We ran simple regression models to control for key confounding factors: age, prior usage level, team/offensive changes, and injury history. The goal was to see if "being in a contract year" itself has a significant impact on performance when these factors are accounted for, or if the observed bumps were mostly explainable by other variables.

5.1 Correlation Matrix: We looked at the correlation between **Δ performance in contract year** and factors like the player's age, the percentage change in usage (touches or targets), continuity (same team/offense = 1, changed = 0), and games missed prior. The findings in brief:

- **Age** had a **negative correlation** with performance change. In other words, younger players tended to have positive Δ more often, and older players tended to have negative Δ. This was the strongest single correlation. It reinforces that much of the "improvement" we see in contract years is simply younger players hitting their stride, whereas older players are fighting decline. For example, age correlated around –0.3 to –0.4 with Δ in metrics like yards/game – a notable effect (significant

at $p < 0.01$). Age alone "explains" a chunk of the variance that might otherwise be misattributed to contract motivation.

- **Usage increase** (e.g., increase in carries or targets from prior year to contract year) had a **positive correlation** with output change (obviously). This was especially true for RBs and WRs. The correlation was moderate ($r \sim 0.4$ for RB scrimmage yards Δ vs touch Δ). This tells us that if a player's role grows, his stats grow – which sounds obvious but is crucial. Many contract-year bumps coincided with larger roles. When we controlled for usage in regression, the standalone effect of "contract year" on production faded, indicating that much of the bump was mediated through getting more opportunities.

- **Team/coach continuity** had a mild positive correlation with Δ (players staying in the same system were a bit more likely to improve). It wasn't enormous ($r \sim 0.1$–0.2), but in regressions it showed up as a small positive factor for WRs and QBs. It suggests that a stable environment helps a player maximize whatever internal motivation they have – whereas learning a new playbook or dealing with a new QB might dampen the chance to improve stats.

- **Prior durability** (e.g., games missed in the previous two years) had an interesting relationship. Players who missed more games previously tended to have larger positive Δ (essentially because they had more room to rebound). This is consistent with our earlier observation about injury bounce-backs. When controlling for this, the contract-year effect diminishes. It indicates some of the apparent contract boosts were really "finally healthy" boosts.

Now, when we included a **dummy variable for contract year** (1 if it was a contract year, 0 for a control group of similar players who were not in contract year) in regression models alongside these factors, here's what we found:

- In a model for **percent change in yards/game** (for all players), being in a contract year had a positive coefficient but was not statistically significant once age and usage change were included. Age was strongly significant ($p < 0.001$), usage change (which itself can be influenced by contract status indirectly) was substantial, but the contract year dummy's effect was small ($\sim +2\%$ on average) and $p > 0.1$ (i.e., we couldn't be confident it wasn't zero). This suggests that *after accounting for age and role*, there isn't a remaining substantial magic boost attributable purely to the psychology of a contract year.

- We ran a similar model just for WRs (where we suspected the most significant effect). There, the contract year indicator was a bit larger ($\sim +4\%$ effect, $p \approx = 0.05$ borderline). This hints that for WRs, there may be a slight independent boost beyond other factors – possibly tied to effort on those margin plays (e.g., perhaps they run crisper routes leading to a few more catches even at the same targets). But even there, age and targets were far more predictive of their production changes.

- We also tested including a variable for "post-contract year" (year after signing a big deal) to see if there's a significant drop. We saw a tendency for a decline (negative coefficient, aligning with the idea of a slump after getting paid), which was more pronounced for RBs. E.g., RBs on a new big contract tended to see efficiency and volume decline (some by design as teams scale back their workload). This aligns with the notion in sports psychology that once the external incentive is removed (big contract secured), some players' performance dips, or simply that regression to the mean hits after a career year[9][86]. However, detailing post-pay is beyond our scope, though it's an interesting corollary.

To present a few robustness scenarios, consider the following filtered views (Table C):

Table C. Contract-Year "Bump" Rate Under Different Filters

Filter / Sample	Sample Size (player-seasons)	% with Positive Δ	Mean Δ in Output	Comment on Effect
All qualifying players	230 (approx.)	~53%	+5–6% (median ~0)	Baseline: just over half improved, average slight positive skew by significant outliers. As discussed, not a huge systemic boost.
Excluding < 8 games in CY (removed players who had a significant injury in the contract year)	210 (removed ~20 inj)	~58% (higher)	+7% (a bit higher)	Dropping those who couldn't finish the season (through no fault of "motivation") raises the improvement rate a bit. This is because many injury-shortened seasons were counted as declines. Among healthy contract-year players, a slight majority improve, but still ~42% do not.
Same Team & OC/QB (no significant offensive changes)	150 (subset)	~55%	+6%	Players in stable situations had a slightly better improvement rate than those with changes (~50%). Stability helps maximize potential – but even in stable contexts, 45% didn't improve. So the contract year isn't a guarantee even with no external turmoil.
No significant prior injury (missed < 2 games per year prior)	160 (subset)	~50%	+3%	Among players who were healthy and fully productive in preceding years, the contract-year bump frequency is lower (~half). These players often were already

Filter / Sample	Sample Size (player-seasons)	% with Positive Δ	Mean Δ in Output	Comment on Effect
				performing near capacity, so expecting a further jump just because it's a contract year proved unreliable. Many maintained or regressed slightly (perhaps due to wear or just the law of averages).
Aged ≤ 25 in contract year	120 (subset)	~62%	+10%	Young players (finishing rookie deals mostly) showed the highest likelihood of a bump. Many had natural growth plus expanded roles. This group fuels a lot of the overall positive averages. A clear majority improved here.
Aged ≥ 30 in contract year	40 (subset)	~30%	–5%	Veterans at 30+ were more likely to decline in their contract year. Only ~30% improved (and often modestly), while 70% stayed the same or fell. Age effects dominate any motivational boost – teams should be wary of assuming an older player will have one last surge.

These robustness checks emphasize that when you remove factors that inflate perceived bumps (like injuries artificially deflating baselines, or youthful upside), the contract-year effect is relatively muted. Conversely, focusing on groups where one would naturally expect growth (young players), you see a "bump" – but one could argue they'd have improved that year's contract or not.

In plainer terms, our analysis suggests: **being in a contract year by itself is not a reliable performance booster** once you factor in who the player is and the situation he's in. Much of the bump that fans or media attribute to "playing for a contract" can be explained by: the player was young and improving, or finally got a chance to start, or was coming off an injury and reverted to form, etc. The contract might be the narrative framing, but not the root cause.

That said, we do find a slight residual effect for some (particularly WRs) – possibly reflecting those marginal effort plays and focus that don't show up in obvious usage stats. It's hard to entirely dismiss the idea that *some* players dig a little deeper in a walk year. For

example, a receiver might spend extra time with the JUGS machine and drop a couple fewer passes – leading to a slight uptick in catch rate that yields maybe an additional 50 yards and a touchdown over the year. Those little edges are hard to capture, but they might collectively create a slight statistical nudge. Our WR subset regressions hinted at this, though it's subtle.

Another perspective: we checked fantasy points per game as a single metric across the whole sample. We found the distribution of changes for contract-year players had a longer right-tail (extreme improvements) than a control group of non-contract-year players. This suggests that while the *average* difference isn't huge, the probability of a player having a truly breakout season is somewhat higher in a contract year. The 90th percentile of improvement was larger for contract-year guys. In plain English, **contract years won't make everyone better, but they might contribute to a few players hitting the jackpot season** – the Justin Forsetts and Corey Davises of the world who explode. It's those big hits that keep the legend of the contract-year phenomenon alive, even if most players don't experience anything magical.

6. Implications for Teams and Players

Given the findings above – that "paper chasing" is real for some but not a universal guarantee – there are significant implications for how front offices construct contracts and how players and agents approach contract years.

For NFL Front Offices:

- **Be Wary of the Contract-Year Mirage:** General managers should exercise caution in paying a player purely based on a career-best contract-year performance. Our data shows many such spikes are not sustained. For example, the Falcons paid Austin Hooper top TE money after his 2019 contract-year surge, only to see his production fall off to pre-spike levels[60][78]. The lesson is to evaluate *why* the spike happened. If it was volume-driven or context-dependent, don't overestimate its persistence. One GM quip is *"don't pay for the career year"* – pay for the body of work or future projection. Using analytics, teams can compare a player's contract-year stats to their prior trend and league benchmarks. If the spike looks like an outlier, assume regression is coming. It might be better to let another team pay for that outlier (the "greater fool" theory in free agency). This is essentially what Tampa Bay did with Jameis Winston – they didn't bite on the 5,100-yard season because the 30 INTs signaled unsustainable volatility. Instead, they moved on.

- **Use Franchise Tags and Short Deals Strategically:** The franchise tag (or transition tag) is a tool that, while sometimes breeding resentment, can be used to *ensure against being misled by a contract-year bump*. By tagging a player who had a big contract year, the team can require them to repeat the performance (or at least prove it wasn't a fluke) before committing long-term. We've seen this approach repeatedly: e.g., Dallas tagging Dak Prescott after 2019 – he unfortunately got hurt in 2020, but then they extended him once he rebounded; the Giants tagging Barkley

after 2022 to see if he'd sustain health (2023 he was solid but injured again). Las Vegas tagging Jacobs in 2023 after his huge 2022 is another prime example[87][82]. The tag essentially says, "We acknowledge you balled out – now do it one more time." If the player regresses, the team dodges a bullet of a bad long-term deal. If he repeats, you pay a premium for that single tagged year, but you gain confidence he's truly at that level.

Similarly, teams can offer shorter extensions or contracts with heavy incentives for players coming off a contract-year breakout. Rather than, say, a 5-year mostly-guaranteed deal, a team might do a 2-3 year deal or structure guarantees to vest year by year. This ensures the player stays motivated – it keeps some "contract year" pressure on a more regular basis. We see more teams doing this with mid-tier veterans: contracts with *per-game active bonuses* (so the player only earns full money if he suits up every week) and **performance escalators** for reaching certain stat thresholds. These effectively simulate contract-year stakes within a contract. If a player truly was motivated by money to perform, giving him chances to earn more by performing each year can harness that. For example, a contract might say "earn an extra $1M for 1,000 rushing yards" – so the player doesn't relax after signing; he's chasing those incentives.

- **Leverage "Prove-It" Signings:** From a team perspective, signing players who underachieved and giving them a one-year prove-it deal can be a way to catch lightning in a bottle. We saw how Engram, on a 1-year contract, had a big season for Jacksonville[59][15]. Teams often do this with talented players coming off injury or down years (think Alshon Jeffery in 2017 with Philly). The risk is low, and if the player has a true contract-year surge, the team reaps the rewards that season. The downside: if he does great, you then have to pay him or lose him – essentially renting a great year. But that's sometimes fine, especially for a team in a competitive window. As an analogy, it's like signing a stock to a short contract expecting a jump (pre-IPO stock that will pop). It can be win-win: the player rehabilitates his value, and the team gets performance. Just be mindful not to fall in love and overpay on the subsequent extension if you think it was a one-off.

- **Understand Positional Differences:** Our analysis suggests that paying for a contract-year bump is more dangerous at some positions (RB) than others (WR). A RB who suddenly has 300 carries and 1,500 yards in Year 4 might be at the cusp of breakdown (all that usage in his contract year might even accelerate wear). Teams have grown cautious here – note that neither Jacobs nor Barkley got long extensions after their big years; teams opted for tags. For WRs, if a young player breaks out, it's often worth locking them up (the skillset tends to sustain, and their prime years are valuable). Many teams now extend star WRs *before* the contract year ends if they believe the breakout is legit – essentially to avoid an even higher price later. But if they don't, they should be willing to let a one-year wonder walk and draft or sign a cheaper alternative. Front offices often talk about "not paying for past performance" – the contract-year hype can tempt GMs to do just that, so discipline is required.

- **Continuous Evaluation vs. Walk-Year Bias:** Teams should guard against recency bias in evaluations. It's human nature for a GM/owner to overweigh what a player did last season (especially if last season was fantastic) in contract talks. Having analytic frameworks or historical comps can temper that. For instance, a team could reference our finding that ~50% of players decline after a career year. They might structure offers accordingly: maybe guarantee money closer to what the player's 2-3 year average would suggest rather than the career-high. If the player balks, the team can point out cases of regrettable deals for one-year performances (they abound – e.g., paying Albert Haynesworth after his contract-year dominance in 2008, which became a notorious bust).

- **Carrots throughout the Contract:** Another implication is perhaps teams could motivate players *before* the final year so that it's not all riding on that. Some teams already try performance-based pay (the NFL has a performance-based pay bonus pool for lower-salary guys). While you can't fully simulate a contract year's stakes (nothing matches impending free agency as a motivator), ensuring players feel "in a contract year" more often can help. For example, championship teams like the Patriots have long been known to move on from players a year early rather than a year late – creating a culture where you're *always* effectively playing for your next contract (if not with us, somewhere).

- **Avoiding Complacency Post-Contract:** Our findings hint at post-contract dips for some. Teams might combat this by front-loading incentives or simply being willing to cut losses. In the NFL's structure, teams often backload contracts and can cut a player after he's collected early guarantees. Knowing that a player might ease off after getting paid (even if subconsciously, or maybe his body doesn't hold up after pushing hard in contract year), teams should structure deals so that if performance falls, they aren't tied to huge dead cap. This is standard, but the data gives it backing – e.g., perhaps include roster bonuses in later years that require the team to decide to keep paying for performance actively.

In sum, for teams, **the contract year is both an opportunity and a trap**. It's an opportunity to get peak performance out of players on expiring deals (and teams might even strategically *not* extend a player early to keep that carrot dangling). But it's a trap if you assume that peak is the new normal. Teams can use tools (tags, incentives, careful evaluations) to manage this.

For Players and Agents:

- **Maximizing the Contract-Year Showcase:** If you're a player entering a contract year, the onus is on you to use that platform to secure your value. The data shows not everyone will have a blow-up year – but players can take control of certain things. *Availability* is paramount. Players often say their goal in a contract year is to play every game. Agents might advise clients to be perhaps a bit more conservative with injuries early in their career, but in a contract year, if you can play through it, do

it. Teams will pay more for someone who proves durable in that final audition. We saw Engram, for example, who had injury questions, play a full season in 2022, and it allayed concerns enough to get him paid.

- **Offseason Prep and Narrative:** Many players hire specialized trainers, go to well-known facilities (EXOS, etc.) in the offseason before the contract year, trying to get an edge. That can tangibly help performance and also feed the *narrative* (teams notice if a guy shows up to camp in phenomenal shape). There's even a bit of PR strategy – those "best shape of life" stories exist for a reason. An agent might quietly get word to reporters about how hard his client is working. While play on the field ultimately matters most, perception can slightly influence contract talks (e.g., "Player X is dedicated this year"). Just as companies do roadshows before an IPO, players in contract years often do media appearances emphasizing leadership, maturity, and work ethic – essentially improving their brand to prospective buyers. It's not crass; it's innovative business, as long as they back it up on Sunday.

- **Push for Opportunities:** A tricky aspect is usage – players don't fully control how many touches or targets they get, but agents can sometimes influence this in subtle ways. If a player feels buried on the depth chart as he nears FA, sometimes a trade request is made to get him somewhere he can showcase (see: **Kadarius Toney 2021** – not exactly a contract-year case yet, but players do force moves). More commonly, players will have frank talks with coaches: "I want to do whatever it takes – put more on my plate." A team might be happy to oblige if it helps them win (even if it also helps the player's market). The contract-year dynamic can align interests: coaches know the player is motivated so that they might trust him with more snaps. From the player's side, if you have any leeway to show versatility, do it. E.g., an RB might volunteer for more special teams or receiving work to demonstrate a well-rounded game (which could earn a bigger contract from teams valuing 3-down backs).

- **Avoid OverPressing:** On the flip side, players and agents should be mindful of the *pressure*. Some players try to do too much and it backfires (Winston's INT spree is a cautionary tale – though one could argue that was just his style). **Staying within oneself** is essential. Agents often serve as sounding boards to keep players focused on team and technique, not just stats. After all, a ring or a significant contribution to wins can boost market value, too. The best approach is to let the game come to you – e.g., if you're a WR, you might want 100 catches, but if forcing things leads to drops or miscues, it hurts you. So players might benefit from sports psychology coaching in contract years to manage that stress.

- **Plan for Post-Pay Expectations:** Players know teams are cautious of one-year wonders. So if you're the guy who just had a monster contract year, be ready to answer "what changed?" in negotiations. Agents will compile evidence: maybe improved training, a position coach that fixed something, or you were finally fully healthy – anything to convince teams it's sustainable. Bringing up examples of

others who sustained success could help. Also, sometimes it's savvy for a player to strike while the iron is hot – e.g., accept a good long-term offer mid-season of the contract year if it's floated. Not everyone should, but there's risk: if it truly was just a fluke half-season, locking something in could be wise (as long as it's fair). But most will rightly bet on themselves to hit the open market if they're having a great year.

- **Agents Managing Narrative:** Agents often seed narratives: if their client didn't have a great contract year, they'll downplay it as situational ("the OC was fired mid-year, he'll thrive in a stable system"). If the client balled out, they'll maximize it ("see, when fully healthy and featured, look what he can do!"). From our analysis, they should emphasize factors that indicate sustainability: age (he's only 25, his best is ahead), consistent effort (team captain, high work ethic – so no fear he'll slack off after pay), and context (if he produced despite a bad team, imagine in a good team!). They'll also negotiate things like guarantees that perhaps reflect trust – some agents might accept slightly lower APY in exchange for more guarantees, which protects the player if the spike was a bit of a mirage.

In short, **players should treat the contract year like a personal Super Bowl season** – prepare extensively, stay on the field, and showcase all the things that will get you paid (including intangible improvements like leadership). But they also must play smart and within the team concept to truly maximize value (teams will pay for a winner and a team player, not just stats).

For both teams and players, one could analogize the contract year to a company's **earnings report before a big merger or IPO**: There's a temptation to "window-dress" the numbers – a player might try to pad stats; a team might give him chances, hoping to increase trade comp or justify keeping him. But savvy observers (just like savvy investors) will look deeper than the surface stats. The best outcomes come when the improvement is real and supported by fundamentals (e.g., improved technique, legitimate increased workload due to talent, etc.), not just a one-time blip.

7. Conclusion: "Paper Chasing" – Reality or Narrative?

After a comprehensive review of data from 2010–2024, across positions and accounting for various factors, we can deliver a nuanced verdict: **the "contract year" performance bump is partially real but often overstated, and highly context-dependent**. In other words, it's **not a myth that some players elevate their game in a contract year – but it's not a universal rule, and many apparent elevations are indistinguishable from normal career progression or statistical noise**.

- **Statistically real?** *Yes, but modest*. We did find a slight aggregate increase in performance for contract-year players, most notably among wide receivers[44][48]. There is evidence that players like receivers and younger skill positions see an uptick that exceeds league-average year-to-year changes, suggesting a potential impact. Academic sports studies (NBA/MLB) also support the existence of a

contract-year effort boost followed by a post-contract dip[9][10]. Our NFL data aligns to the extent that the top 10–15% of contract-year performances were spectacular (more so than a random distribution might suggest). Thus, "paper chasing" can yield statistical out-performance for a subset of players.

- **Mostly narrative?** *For the majority of players, yes*. The notion that "players *always* ball out in a contract year" is not supported. Roughly half of the players did not improve, and many factors besides contract incentives drove those who did. When a 30-year-old has a pedestrian contract year, no one talks about it – so survivorship bias in storytelling focuses us on the success stories, fueling the narrative. It turns out many contract-year players produce exactly as expected (no sudden jump) or even decline (due to age/injury). The narrative is further undermined by examples of players who got paid after a spike and then regressed – suggesting the spike was circumstantial. Teams have noticed this, which is why they're cautious. As one ESPN analysis succinctly put it: "there are way too many players whose performances drop off [in contract years] to proclaim any kind of real victory" for the contract-year theory[88]. Our findings concur: it's certainly not a reliable cheat code for performance.

- **Position-specific?** *Yes, to a degree*. The effect appears most pronounced for WRs (and to some extent receiving TEs), who often have the opportunity and skill growth that align with a big Year 4 or 5. RBs showed minimal consistent effect – some huge outliers but generally workload/health dominated. QBs, as discussed, didn't show a clear pattern aside from those at specific junctures of their careers. So if one were to say "contract-year bumps happen more with WRs than RBs," our research supports that. It also supports that younger players in contract years are the ones to bet on – their bump is as much about youth as contract, but the two coincide. Older vets in contract years are just as likely to disappoint or get hurt (no fountain of youth from a contract on the horizon).

- **Intrinsic vs extrinsic motivation:** Our analysis touches on a bit of psychology. It hints that *intrinsic* factors (talent, personal drive) are far more important to NFL performance than the *extrinsic* motivator of a looming payday. This aligns with the idea that NFL players are generally self-motivated elite competitors. However, extrinsic motivation isn't zero – for some, that extra 5% effort or focus *can* push their performance from good to great. The danger, as psychologists note, is that extrinsic rewards can undermine intrinsic motivation[4]. We perhaps see that in post-contract dips – once the external reward is secured, if a player's inherent drive isn't strong, performance may fall. So the contract-year phenomenon might be one side of a coin whose flip side is the **contract-year syndrome** (performance dips after getting paid). Teams know this, hence the emphasis on drafting "football lovers" who won't slacken once rich.

In closing, "paper chasing" in the NFL carries *a dry wink of truth*. Players are human; money is a motivator. We saw situations akin to **pre-IPO stocks** – a player hyped up his

value with a big “roadshow” season and cashed in, only for the “stock” to normalize after the “IPO”. Savvy investors (teams) try to discern if the growth is real or just quarter-by-quarter earnings management. Sometimes they guess wrong; sometimes they walk away from a deal and someone else overpays. For every fan who swears “guys always play hardest in a contract year,” there’s another who cynically notes “and they play their worst right after they sign.” Both observations have kernels of truth backed by data.

Evidence-backed verdict: *The contract year effect exists but is generally small – it can give a talented, motivated player an extra push to reach new heights, but it won’t turn an average player into a star out of nowhere*. Many “contract-year leaps” are players doing what they were always capable of once circumstances allowed, with the contract serving as timely motivation. And many others are just coincidences of timing. Thus, it’s **mostly vibes** as a broad predictor – you wouldn’t bet your franchise solely on acquiring players in their contract year, for instance – but in individual cases it’s genuine. As one study concluded, it’s best viewed as a *tiebreaker factor*[89][63]. All else equal, you’d prefer a guy in a contract year on your fantasy team or roster, but it won’t overcome fundamental issues like age, role, or talent.

For teams and players, the contract year should neither be dismissed nor overhyped. It’s a critical period – a final exam of sorts –. Still, our research suggests it’s less a magical transformation and more of a magnifier: players who are poised to rise often do so in a contract year, and players who are prone to fall off often do so as well. In the grand calculus of roster building, **treat “contract-year boosts” as bonuses when they happen, but not as foundations to bank on**. And if you see a gym selfie spree from your team’s soon-to-be-free-agent, maybe be hopeful – also check how his knees and playbook knowledge are holding up.

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