

PLAYING GOD

Meet the man
who slices
and splices
the Madden
NFL 09 DNA



Jonathan Crankshaw sits in his living room surrounded by three TVs feeding him live coverage of every NFL game being played at any given moment. He sits at his laptop jotting down notes on players who break long touch-down runs, make acrobatic catches and dish out bone-rattling hits. He is the man (or maybe more than a man) behind the ratings in Madden.

As an assistant producer for the game,

Crankshaw is responsible for ratings updates for every player in Madden. During the season, his main responsibility is updating player and team ratings to accurately reflect what is happening on the field. That's why guys like Adrian Peterson are 10 ratings points higher at the end of the season than they were at the beginning.

We talked with Crankshaw about his power of creating the ratings and how he and his team

determine what players get better and which ones get worse.

Where do you begin in determining the ratings? What criteria are used?

Jonathan Crankshaw: "It really starts at the Combine, but most of it is how fast they look in the game. They come into the league, and based on their stats, public perception, basically, just how they look on the field determines how they

go from year to year. The main thing is public perception. Devin Hester is perceived by many as the fastest [in the NFL], so he is in the game. He shows it all the time. If a guy is on the field showing it time after time, he's going to be rated higher; he's going to be faster; he's going to be stronger."

How much is updating the ratings based on the previous season's performance?

JC: "It's big on last year, and also what they could do this year and what's around them. Guys like Steve Smith and Terrell Owens can't really be looked at the same based on performance because one is on a prolific offense, and one is on a team that was shuffling QBs game after game last year. So we kind of look at what they did last year and what they could be doing this year based on personnel and what they have around them.

"That's why a formula would have holes in it. That's where a person comes in at the end at looks at it. Steve Smith is still an elite receiver and should be up there with the top five."

What goes into tweaking the sub-ratings, such as speed or agility?

JC: "A lot of it is one or two plays you see in Week 7 or something. A guy runs away from everybody or a guy is fast enough to make a play. I remember last year where Rob Morris on the Colts was able to chase down Reggie Bush sideline to sideline. So I thought, he might be able to beat this guy in a race in the parking lot, but on Sundays, he runs fast enough. Or when a guy goes across the middle and gets killed and holds onto the ball. That's going to get him in the next roster update, or in next year, some points because he showed it. That's better than reading it when you can actually see it."

Do players ever gripe at you about their ratings being too low?

JC: "Edgerrin James text my buddy about his pass blocking rating. He wants to make sure he's looking good in the game. I've ran into Travis Henry, and he said that he would stiff arm [everyone] to the ground. They all want to make sure they're fast. That's the main thing."

Have you ever bumped up players' ratings based on what they told you?

JC: "Yeah, Edgerrin's pass blocking definitely had merit, and he right about it. But a lot of the guys are kind of out there. When T.J. Houshmanzada was saying he was faster than Chad Johnson, I don't know. I don't believe that."

Does being able to change the ratings in the game nullify the work and research that you do?

JC: "No, that's fine with me. Everybody has their own opinion. I'm not going to be 100 percent right on what the realistic fan thinks. It's their game. They paid \$60 for it, so if they want to go home and edit the sky before they go into Franchise, I've got no problem with that."

Some guys like Giants defensive end

Justin Tuck have improved at lot in their overall rating, but their sub-ratings pretty much stayed the same. Are they really that much better in the game?

JC: "He's probably hitting all the ones that make up the overall rating. For a defensive end it would be a certain amount of ratings such as block shedding, finesse moves, power moves, play recognition. So he's probably hitting all of those. It will definitely make a difference. That's one of the things we were noticing this year. Those elite ends like Jared Allen, Aaron Campman and Mario Williams, they're monsters on the game.

"With Jared Allen, he's not a really fast end, but he's fast enough. You're not going to be able to run at him because he's strong and he'll be shedding blocks. He's going to get to the QB too."

"IN THIS GAME, IT'S ALL ABOUT SPEED. YOU WANT TO GET THE FASTEST PLAYERS YOU CAN."

— MADDEN NFL 09 ASSISTANT PRODUCER JONATHAN CRANKSHAW

Does each position have certain ratings that are stronger in determining their overall rating?

JC: "Each position has certain ratings that are tied to that. Each one has different weights. A QB might have a little bit of speed, [a lot of] throwing power, throwing accuracy, whereas a running back would have a lot of speed. Running back has the most, because it has juke, spin moves, stiff arm, ball carrying vision, all those. Each one is weighted differently to get that overall number."

Say one player has a 90 Speed rating and another has a 95 Speed rating. Is the 95 guy significantly faster than the 90 guy?

JC: "I think 96 is really the number where they start to get faster than everyone else. A 96 will be faster than a 95 more than a 94 will be faster than a 93. A 99, we don't give many of those out, because they are really fast. Like [Devin] Hester and [DeAngelo] Hall will be noticeable faster than the rest of the guys. In this game, it's all about speed. You want to get the fastest players you can."

The Patriots have Tom Brady, Randy Moss and Wes Welker all with 90-plus ratings. Do you ever look at teams like that and think they should be toned down a little bit?

JC: "They were a tough team last year, because they had [Donte] Stallworth. He was a really fast receiver. So in the game, they were really tough, but they broke a lot of

records last year."

Do you ever look at a player at the end of the season and think that you got his ratings wrong?

JC: "Yeah, Shaun Alexander. He was way off. That's the good thing about the roster updates, though. It's not as permanent. Hopefully it doesn't happen as much, but it happens sometimes. You've got to fix those guys."

How often are the individual and team updates made throughout the year, and how are those decided?

JC: "The individual ratings are updated more than the team ratings. The team ratings are set manually. I just kind of make those up to give people a feel for how good the teams are. The individual ones are updated about every two to three weeks. This past year, in my old house, I had three TVs with a laptop every Sunday. I'd have all the games on and just jot down notes. By looking at the stats and what I've saw, I had a good idea of what the guys were doing from week to week. Fantasy is real good for that too. I was in a ton of leagues last year."

How much of last year's final rankings was used for this Madden 09?

JC: "That was the starting point for this year. I was real aggressive with them last year, and I thought there wouldn't be that much to do. But a new season starts, and this guy's on a different team, and this team has a different coach. There were a lot of changes, and I didn't think there were going to be that many. There's a lot of turnover in the league."

"Adalious Thomas last year was more relegated to inside, where as this year he's going to outside blitzing a lot. He might get an extra point or two because he might have 10 sacks. A guy that's in line to put up stats is going to be given a point or two to foresee the future, basically."

How do you get the word out when rosters and ratings are updated throughout the season?

JC: "We've gotten really good about that. I do a list of all the player moves and ratings changes. We send it out on the forums and EA SPORTS site. People can comment on it. That was some pretty good feedback last year, and some guys had some good stuff on ratings changes."

How do you what ratings and attributes to give rookies as they make the transition from college to the NFL?

JC: "It's a huge learning curve. Someone like Colt Brennan, who had an arm good enough for college, but when he gets to the NFL, it's going to be different. Obviously his stats aren't going to carry over for him. Someone like Darren McFadden, who was very fast against the best conference in college football, his performance is weighed a little higher than someone else's like Colt Brennan. It's just the situation they're put in and how likely they are to succeed."