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Route Running an Underrated Reason for Calvin Johnson's Unprecedented Success



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On December 22, [Detroit Lions](#) wide receiver [Calvin Johnson](#) dominated the [Atlanta Falcons](#) secondary by racking up 225 yards on 11 receptions. In doing so, he broke Jerry Rice's single-season record 1848 yards, surpassing the mark Rice set in 1995 with the San Francisco 49ers. The game also marked the eighth consecutive time this season in which the man known as Megatron posted at least 100 receiving yards.

Fans would be correct to attribute Johnson's ascension to his incredible 6'5" stature and sub-4.4 speed. However, his vastly improved route running skills have been equally vital to his success.

Johnson was an unfinished product in terms of his route running when he entered the NFL in 2007. His massive size and speed masked this shortcoming at the collegiate ranks, but his pre-draft visits and workouts clearly showed that he was far from a true route running technician.

Indeed, the one knock NFL scouts had on Johnson coming out of Georgia Tech was that he lacked the route running skills necessary for grabbing passes over the middle of the field.

He had a respectable rookie year, posting 756 yards and 4 touchdowns. In the five years since, he has transformed himself into the league's most dominant receiver and is already worthy of being compared to all-time greats such as Rice and Randy Moss.

Johnson's improvement does not come from growing visibly stronger or faster, but rather from sharper route running, which has allowed him to catch passes between the numbers and to slide into the slot to avoid being bracketed by double-coverage down the sideline.

The tremendous development in Johnson's route running since his rookie year has vaulted him to his current Pro-Bowl level, and this huge improvement speaks to incredible importance of route running, a fundamental yet underrated aspect of pass catching.

Route running begins with getting off the line of scrimmage. Indeed, the receiver's stance and initial step dictate how well he will enter his route and invade the defensive back's cushion.

Once off the ball, the receiver must begin the route in a way such that every route initially looks the same. This skill prevents the defense from being able to jump the route for a deflection or an interception, but it requires intense repetition in getting off the ball and into the route.

A pass catcher must also run crisp routes-ones that are run to a point. For example, an "in" route is squared at 90 degrees toward the center of the field. An in route run at anything other than a right angle gives the defender an opportunity to make a play on the ball.

If a receiver is called to run [a 10-yard in route](#), the receiver must get off the line quickly and drive toward the cornerback's outside shoulder. He must get off the ball with explosion to eat up the corner's cushion as quickly as possible. After all, the receiver only essentially has ten yards to dupe the defensive back into thinking that he will be running vertically down the sideline.

A receiver typically pushes the cornerback for about eight yards in an attempt to force the defender to

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open his hips as if he were defending a fly route. Therefore, by exploding off the ball, the receiver can force the defender far out of position and then make a wide-open catch.

After running forward for eight yards, the receiver typically "breaks down," or slows down abruptly by chopping his feet, to make his cut inward at ten yards. A strong route-runner is able to maintain complete control of his body by lowering his center of gravity as he breaks down.

At exactly ten yards, the receiver then uses his outside foot to cut inward at a right angle. If the receiver maintains a low center of gravity, remains completely under control, and has planted his outside foot, he is then able to accelerate out of his break and separate from the defender.

Thus, even a very simple in route requires an extraordinary degree of discipline and body control. A receiver must practice his routes hundreds, if not thousands, of times to make sure that they are of second nature. Moreover, the receiver must know by heart how many steps it takes for him to run each route distance, be it 5, 10, or 20 yards.

By being consistent off the line of scrimmage, the receiver keeps the defender honest by forcing him to respect the vertical threat. Pushing the defender also invades the corner's cushion and may force him to adopt a poor position. Lastly, breaking down and making a sharp cut allows the receiver to separate from the defender for an open reception.

These skills are critical as a whole because they allow the receiver to separate from the defender, which, in turn, creates more space for the quarterback to throw the football.

Poor route running, on the other hand, can be very detrimental to a team, even though it may not show up in the receiver's statistics. Look no further than Terrell Owens. T.O. is widely regarded as one of the greatest receivers in league history, but his gaudy numbers are misleading.

Owens was able to generate eye-popping numbers for over a decade, but one key reason he cannot find a home despite posting nearly 1,000 yards in 2010 is his shoddy route running.

For years, Owens improvised his routes, and this lack of discipline forces the quarterback to throw to larger targets, as opposed to smaller, more precise ones that only the receiver can reach.

In his last year in the league, T.O. led the NFL in "[most interceptions as a targeted receiver](#)" with 12, meaning that his quarterback threw 12 interceptions when targeting him that season. In fact, he led the league in this category with 43 interceptions over his final five years.

It is not surprising that Tony Romo's and Carson Palmer's interception totals spiked during the years when Owens was their primary target for the [Dallas Cowboys](#) and Cincinnati Bengals, respectively.

On the other hand, the Miami Dolphins' Davone Bess has [made a name for himself](#) despite not having the physical gifts of Johnson or Owens largely because of his remarkable route running.

Bess is listed at a petite 5'10" and would lose a footrace to almost all NFL wideouts. He hardly looks the part of an NFL receiver and would likely go unrecognized on a street not in Miami.

Yet his diminutive stature and limited speed have hardly prevented him from serving as a top-flight slot receiver. He has found a secure place in the NFL because he is a perfectionist—his immense body control and precise routes remain among the best of any pass catcher. Few others have been able to perfect their route running and showcase it on every snap, every Sunday.

Catching aside, polished route running is arguably the most fundamental skill of a wideout, and it is so vital that it has also allowed Bess to carve out a role in the NFL and Johnson to harness his freakish athleticism as he steps onto the pedestal of the all-time greats.

1. FIGUREFOUR. "[The WR Position: Route Running](#)", SB Nation.
2. Josh Kirkendall. "[NFP: Terrell Owens](#) Leads NFL with Most Interceptions Allowed As a Targeted Receiver", SB Nation.

3. Tim Graham. "[Marshall calls Bells top all-time route runner](#)", ESPN.

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