

Risky Business Week 7

Managing Instincts and Maximizing GWC in Atlanta

The most remarkable drama of week 7 occurred in the closing minutes of a game that isn't likely to have much bearing on who wins the Super Bowl this year. With 1:12 remaining in the game Todd Gurley of the Falcons reluctantly stumbled into the end zone for a touchdown, and after a successful two-point conversion the Falcons were in front by 22-16. Matt Stafford subsequently orchestrated a thrilling game winning drive in the last minute and left the Falcons' Rakeem Morris wondering what could have been. The actual plot was more complicated than what appeared on the surface. Here's a breakdown of the primary characters and their roles in this drama:

Matt Patricia:

- All indications are that the Lions' defense was instructed to let the Falcons score. This is confirmed by the defenders readily signaling for the touchdown when Gurley crossed the goal line. When Patricia called his final timeout after the Falcons picked up a first down on the Lions' 10 yard line, the plan was to entice the Falcons into the end zone and put Stafford in position to execute a game winning drive. Without this gambit the Lions would likely be helpless to watching a game winning field goal, one that was essentially the equivalent of an extra point.

Rakeem Morris:

- The Falcons must have been on to the Lions ploy as it appears Gurley was told to take a knee before scoring to set up the field goal.

Todd Gurley:

- Gurley charged through the defense on the now infamous play as if his instincts for scoring took over. When he finally realized this was contrary to the plan, he tried to hit the brakes, but it was too late.

Will Harris:

- The Lions' defense properly opened the door for Gurley but an attempt by the Detroit safety to grasp the runner almost thwarted the plan. It was difficult at first to tell if Harris was trying to strip the ball or actually bring Gurley down. Ironically, it may have been Gurley's instinct to break the tackle that provided the momentum into the end zone. When Harris joined his teammates in uncharacteristically signaling for the touchdown, his true intent may have been revealed.

Matt Stafford:

- If Stafford didn't manage to execute the final drive, most of the prior details would be a trivial footnote. However, the opening was provided by Gurley and Stafford was only too happy to take advantage of it.

Danny Amendola:

- An unsportsmanlike conduct penalty after the Lions' last second touchdown added an extra layer of drama and uncertainty to what should have been a formality. The extra point was moved back to the 30 yard line resulting in a 48 yard attempt to avoid overtime.

Matt Prater:

- Prater put the finishing touches on a most unlikely comeback when he had to kick a more challenging 48 yard extra point for the win.

Analysis:

While both head coaches had the right idea, sometimes the execution of the players can get in the way. Detroit's best opportunity to win was indeed to let Atlanta score right away provided the Falcons' accept the offer. Although it was not the Falcons' intent, scoring immediately reduced their Game Winning Chance ("GWC") by 9.1% according to a simulation by the EdjSports model. While Gurley certainly should shoulder much of the blame, it may have been misguided to put him in the position of handling the ball in the first place. If the Falcons simply take a knee and avoid the risk of a turnover, they would be guaranteed a chance at a game winning field goal that was the equivalent of an extra point. The Lions would then have a GWC of 94.7%. By scoring the touchdown and giving Stafford 1:04 and no timeouts, the Falcons' GWC drops to 85.6%. We can debate how likely the Lions might be to successfully execute a game-winning drive, but it should be clear that it is well in excess of 5.3% (the chances of Atlanta missing the field goal). The unsportsmanlike penalty after the Lions' touchdown reduced the success rate of the extra point from approximately 94% to 75% resulting in a cost on average of -19% GWC.