

Risky Business Week 8

Did the Saints unnecessarily enable Brady in the final minutes?

With 1:41 remaining in the game, Tom Brady found himself trailing by two points to the New Orleans Saints. With one timeout and a first down on the Bucs' 25-yard line, this was ample time for Brady to do what he does best, march his offense down the field for a game winning field goal. Moments later a pick-six by PJ Williams squashed those dramatic plans and effectively ended the game for the Bucs. The Saints were very fortunate to escape with a victory despite some questionable time management on their prior possession.

At the two-minute warning, the Saints were trailing 27-26 with a first and goal on the Bucs' 9-yard line. In this advantageous position, the Saints ideally want to burn as much clock as possible exercising their option for a touchdown, while retaining access to a high percentage field goal attempt. The Bucs on the other hand, had two timeouts to combat the Saints efforts to erode the clock if necessary. Somewhat surprisingly, the Saints decided to attempt three consecutive passes. The first two were incomplete and they managed a five-yard gain on third down. When Brian Johnson was summoned to attempt a 23-yard field goal, the Saints had only managed to burn 16 seconds of clock. To gain a better understanding of how this clock management potentially could have affected the outcome, it is helpful to consider a few different possible strategic approaches and relevant game states.

- The ultra-conservative approach of burning clock and forcing the Bucs to use the remaining timeouts by taking three knees and kicking a field goal from the 12-yard line.
- The slightly conservative approach of rushing the ball three times with intent to score a touchdown and kicking the field goal on fourth down if unsuccessful. This will either result in a touchdown or a high percentage field goal with approximately one minute remaining in the game. Again, the Bucs will likely be forced to use all remaining timeouts.
- The actual approach of more aggressively pursuing a touchdown with passing plays while potentially stopping the clock on incompletions.

Saints lead 29-27 with 1:41 remaining, Bucs have one timeout.

Saints GWC = 46.1%

Saints lead 29-27 with 1:00 remaining, Bucs have no timeouts.

Saints GWC = 61.8%

Saints score touchdown with 1:41 remaining (attempt 2PAT) Bucs have 1-2 timeouts.

Saints GWC= 76.5%

Saints score touchdown with 1:00 remaining (attempt 2PAT) Bucs have no timeouts.

Saints GWC= 87.9%

There are of course many possible game states and play sequences that could precede the Bucs final drive, but the listed scenarios with corresponding GWC provide some indication of the

premium of a touchdown vs a field goal and the value of burning the clock. Depending on whether there is a successful field goal or touchdown the value of burning an additional 41 seconds and forcing the Bucs' to use timeouts is worth between 11% – 16% GWC. Depending on clock usage the premium of the touchdown over the field goal is worth between 26% - 30% GWC. The touchdown is worth approximately 2X the value of the clock. The beauty of rushing the ball is that it assures that either the clock usage or the touchdown occur, and both of those represent a premium. This realization should serve to quickly dismiss the ultraconservative strategy of taking three knees and kicking on fourth down. The passing approach by the Saints may increase the occurrence of a touchdown, but it will most likely leave the Bucs in a more advantageous position for the final drive by conserving clock and timeouts. A more aggressive passing strategy on 1st-3rd down can be justified if it produces a touchdown at least 50% more often than a more conservative rushing strategy. This is due to the approximate 2:1 ratio of GWC gained by scoring a touchdown vs the GWC lost by preserving clock.

This is an instance where I am going to leave the readers with a criterion for the opposing strategies rather than a conclusion. If the Saints aggressively try to pass their way into the endzone it seems within reason they could score a touchdown 50% more often than with a rushing strategy. Interestingly, a custom simulation of the first down play-choice indicates a rushing play increases GWC by 2%, but this is not necessarily a committal strategy. The Saints may then choose to pass on 2nd or 3rd down. This argues in favor of a more hybrid approach. I look forward to the readers opinions. Undoubtedly, the play-calling of the Saints would have come under greater scrutiny if Brady would have executed the final drive in more typical Brady fashion.

NO after TD 78%, after FG 45%

1:44 TB with 2 timeouts, 1st and 10 on 25 down 2 55%

1:00 TB with 0 timeouts, 36%

NO run vs pass on 1st and goal at TB 9 down 27-26 69.7 vs 67.4