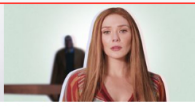




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Three Things Every Football Coach Should Know

With a software system called ZEUS Football, three guys named Chuck, Bo, and Frank have unlocked the secrets to winning football games. ▶

By Buddy Kite Dec 1, 2006

EARLIER THIS SEASON, the Washington Redskins were trailing the Minnesota Vikings by three points with four minutes and twenty-eight seconds remaining in the third quarter. Facing a fourth down and three yards on the Vikings' four yard line, the Redskins decided to do what most NFL teams routinely do in this situation: take the "guaranteed" points and tie the game. But according to three guys named Chuck, Frank, and Bo, the Skins couldn't have been more wrong.

Or, more precisely, that's the conclusion of software developed by astrophysics researcher Charles Bower, fifty-three, along with partners Frank Frigo, forty-four, and Bo Durickovic, thirty-three. Their system, ZEUS Football, is a play-calling program that combines game theory, computer modeling, and a massive NFL statistics database to provide coaches with recommendations on critical calls. The user enters situational input—down, yardage, quarter, time—and ZEUS can envision a hundred thousand or more play simulations in a matter of seconds. The often-counterintuitive results are expressed in Game Winning Chance (GWC) percentage.

ZEUS could alter how football is coached and played. But since the NFL currently prohibits any computer aids on the sidelines or in the booth, it's being pitched as a postgame-analysis and practice tool for coaches. Even if the league never embraces it, however, thank Chuck, Frank, and Bo for elevating armchair QBing to a hard science. (They provide analysis of play-calling decisions during the season at pigskinrevolution.com.)

We asked team ZEUS to draw up three of its most surprising conclusions from its evaluation of play-calling errors over recent seasons.

1. ALWAYS (ALMOST) GO FOR IT ON FOURTH AND SHORT

Even the lowest-ranked offense in the NFL is a favorite to succeed on fourth and one. According to ZEUS, the significant gain in GWC of converting the fourth down far outweighs the risk of relinquishing possession. Nowhere is this phenomenon more evident than at the end of a long offensive drive deep into opposing territory, when a coach feels he must have something to show for his efforts and the team kicks a field goal.

Even in the Redskins' case, with Washington facing fourth and three, the team squandered nearly 6 percent expected GWC by kicking the field goal and not going for the first down. If 6 percent doesn't sound like much, consider that only one error of this magnitude per game will cost a team one full game per season on average.

Similarly, between average and equal opponents, choosing to punt on fourth and one is rarely the better option. With the exception of a few circumstances (when leading by less than a touchdown very late in the second or fourth quarters and holding poor field position, or if there are extreme offensive and defensive skill differentials), leave the punting unit on the bench.

2. USE THE ONSIDE KICK MUCH MORE

FREQUENTLY

Traditionally a desperation measure, the onside kick can optimize a team's chances of winning in a broader range of circumstances. There's only a small variation in potential outcomes: The ball is almost always recovered or received within a band of ten to fifteen yards. Using a conservative recovery rate of 25 percent for the kicking team, ZEUS suggests this strategy is used less than half as often as it should be.

3. IN KICKING, STRENGTH TRUMPS ACCURACY

Placekickers are typically judged on what is believed to be two equally valued assets: kickoff strength and field-goal accuracy. But ZEUS discovered that a hypothetical team with the league's best performer in kickoff distance and the worst performer in field-goal accuracy would win more games than a team with the opposite. Put another way: A top performer in kickoff distance with poor field-goal accuracy is 2 percent more likely to win a game than a weak performer in kickoff distance with the league's most accurate leg.

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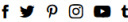


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