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What are the coaches thinking?

During Week # 7 in the NFL, three coaches' decisions left me perplexed. There is a school of thought that some head coaches are so caught up in the X's and O's of the game that they are not good decision makers when it comes down to actually making a big decision. I also understand that it is routine for the coaches to defer to their Offensive Coordinator for a key play call, and to defer to their Defensive Coordinator for the type of defensive coverage to call in a key situation. But the examples of poor decision making that I want to discuss do not really apply to the coordinators. Here are the 3 examples:

## [1] Bears @ Bengals

The Bengals took the opening kickoff and moved the ball at will against the non-existent Bear defense. The Bears offense got off to a stumbling start also, and the Bears fell into such a deep hole, they were unable to recover. The Bengals scored touchdowns on their first 4 possessions, and settled for a field goal on their 5th possession when their drive stalled on the 11-yard line. With 1:10 left in the first half the Bears finally put together an offensive drive, moving 70 yards in 9 plays, to reach the 4-yard line with 2 seconds left. Down 31-0, the Bears inexplicably settled for a field goal attempt to 'cut' the lead to 31-3.

I understand the game has gotten out of hand, but let's do the math: if the Bears score a touchdown, the lead is cut to 31-7 (assuming an extra point would be kicked) which is a deficit of 3 touchdowns with 3 successful 2-point conversions. By kicking the field goal and reducing the deficit to 31-3, the Bears still trail by 4 touchdowns. In other words—the field goal is absolutely useless to the Bears having any chance to win the game. I understand that some coaches like to put some points on the board as a sort of moral victory, but I would view making the decision to kick the field goal as 'giving up'. That appeared to be the message that the Bear players received—as they were outscored 14-7 in the second half—for a 45-10 beating. I will be the first to concede (I hate that word!) that the Bears had very little chance to win the game, or even make it close, but if I am betting on a team *I want them to try to win*.

## [2] Saints @ Dolphins

With 1:38 in the second quarter a Miami fumble is recovered by the Saints at midfield. The entire first half has been nothing short of a nightmare for the Saints, as the Dolphins lead 24-3 and the Saints cannot seem to get their high-powered

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offense in gear. But Drew Brees catches fire and moves the Saints downfield and connects with Maurquez Colston for an apparent 21-yard touchdown with just 5 seconds left in the half. However, the replay official in the booth challenges the ruling on the field and determines that Colston's knee touched down on the 1-yard line before he dove into the end zone. The touchdown is taken off the board and Saints Coach Sean Payton sends the field goal team out on the field to attempt an easy field goal. Inexplicably, Miami Coach Tony Sparano called time out before the Saints could kick the field goal. During the timeout, Drew Brees lobbied Coach Payton to go for the touchdown, which Brees scored, easily on a quarterback sneak. Instead of being down 24-6 at the half, the Saints only trailed 24-10 (note: 2 touchdowns with extra points). I do not know which coach was making the bigger mistake. Why did Payton want to "settle" for a field goal when the ball was that close to the goal line, knowing the Saints have the highest ranked offense in the NFL? And why wouldn't Sparano be happy to let the Saints take only 3 points out of the situation? Payton came out smelling like a rose because the Saints went on to outscore the Dolphins 36-10 in the second half for a 46-34 victory, thanks to an even more bone-headed decision by the opposing coach!

### [3] Cardinals @ Giants

Although the Giants led 14-10 at halftime over the Cards, the lead was short-lived as Warner and the Cards' caught fire in the 3rd quarter scoring 2 touchdowns to take a 24-14 lead. With 13:11 to play in the 4th quarter, the Giants gained possession of the ball at the Cards 44 yard line after a good punt return. Down 2 scores, and with the Meadowlands crowd urging them on, the Giants began an important drive. On 3rd and 2 at the 36-yard line, the Cards stopped Brandon Jacobs for a 1-yard gain, bringing up 4th and less than a yard to go. Giants Coach Tom Coughlin had to make a decision to attempt a 53-yard field goal, or go for the first down. With Brandon Jacobs—one of the best short yardage backs in the NFL available—Coughlin made the correct call and handed off to Jacobs who bulled his way for 7 yards and a first down. The Giants continued to drive the ball downfield, and on 3rd and 3 yards for a first down on the 4-yard line, a handoff to Jacobs was stopped on the 2-yard line. It was 4th and a yard for a first down and 2 yards for a touchdown. I am guessing that 75% of the Giants fans wanted Manning to hand off to Jacobs again, and I am guessing that the other 25% of the fans wanted Manning to fake it to Jacobs and throw a pass. But Coughlin inexplicably sent the field goal team in to make a chip shot field goal to cut the score to 24-17. The question that I had was why not go for it on 4th down? In the event that the Cards stopped the Giants, they

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would take over very deep in their own end. In fact, the Cards would be so backed up that there was a possibility of a safety. A safety would make the score 24-16 and the Giants would still have had plenty of time to score a touchdown, and a 2-point conversion to tie it. By settling for the field goal Coughlin was sending a message to his offense that he didn't have confidence in their ability to pick up 1 yard when the game was on the line. I thought it was an absolutely gutless call and the Giants players responded the rest of the game as if they felt the same way, and the final score ended up 24-17.

Those are 3 situations with bone-headed decisions by the head coach. Although the game itself has become highly specialized and extremely sophisticated, it amazes me that the head coach can botch a decision that seems so simple to everyone watching the game. And, if you happen to have placed a wager on a team whose coach makes a bone-headed decision that costs his team the game, or costs you the chance to win your bet, welcome to the NFL in 2009.