

Derby Day Magic

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SPORTS EDITOR

This weekend of Premier League action featured two of the premier derby games of the season; the Merseyside derby and the North London derby. The Merseyside derby featured a Liverpool side in the best form of any team in the league and an Everton squad in danger of slipping into a relegation battle. The first half featured strong attacking movements by both sides with the best chance of the half coming from 19 year old Liverpool youngster, Jordan Ibe, who drove from midfield and cut past an Everton defender for a 30 yard wonder strike that struck the far post and bounced safely away from the goal. In the end neither team was clinical in the final third making a goalless draw was a fair assessment of the match. The other storyline of the match was the fact that this was Liverpool captain and living legend, Steven Gerrard's final derby in which he is the fourth leading scorer in the matchup and has only lost 5 out of 33 derby games. His play was average for the match and unable to conjure up derby day brilliance for the Reds, but will

be remembered for all the memorable derby moments throughout his career. The draw holds Liverpool in 7th place and five points out of the top four while Everton remains in 12th, just 7 points out of the relegation zone.

The best match of the weekend was easily the North London derby where Tottenham Hotspurs battled the Gunners to dramatic 2-1 victory. In the first half the Gunners struck first when Mesut Ozil volleyed home an Olivier Giroud misfire for his second goal in two matches. Later in the half, Spurs answered when a corner was headed to the far post where the predatory Harry Kane scored his 21st goal of the season in all competitions as he calmly passed the ball into the net from a foot out. Neither team was able to strike again until Harry Kane came calling again the 86th minute when he beautifully looped a header away and over the Arsenal keeper into the far side netting to give Tottenham the most dramatic North London win of the last few seasons. Arsenal now falls to sixth with 42 points and Tottenham leaps ahead to fifth with 43 points.

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Statistical perspective offers Super Bowl analysis

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As many of you will still recall, the Super Bowl happened a few days ago, and according to Seattle Times, this year, the crowning moment of the American football season ended with, "the worst play call in Super Bowl history."

Before we dig into the numbers behind what was to many fans a borderline treasonous decision, let's bring the readers who are not so well informed on the happenings of American football up to speed. (If the readership of this publication mirrored the demographic distribution of the world, about 98.5% of those reading this article would not have even watched the Super Bowl).

The Seattle Seahawks played the role of defending champions in this year Super Bowl game. The star players which form the core of their offensive lineup are Russell Wilson, the phenomenal quarterback, and Marshawn Lynch, a star rusher who is prodigiously gifted in terms of physical size, strength, and dexterity.

In the final quarter of the game, the Seahawks were down 28-24 and on the wrong end of the field to score. However, thanks to an outstanding 30+ yard pass, followed by one of the most incredible catches in Super Bowl history, in which the ball bounced no fewer than five times off the body of the defender and intended receiver before finally being caught, without ever touching the ground.

This remarkable chain of events

ended with the Seahawks in possession of the ball, within one yard of the end zone, and with a generous three downs and over a minute left on the clock. Scoring a touchdown would have all but precluded any possibility of a loss, and Patriot fans were justifiably tittering on the edge of despair, for in this exact kind of situation in the history of the NFL, according to Pro-Football website, the offensive team goes on to win the game 85% of the time.

However, instead of handing the ball to Marshawn Lynch, who has reliably and very visibly performed beyond expectations all through the season, Mr. Wilson choose instead to pass the ball to a receiver who appeared to be open. The next few moments are well remembered by anyone who has seen the game, when New England intercepted the pass and thus destroyed the seemingly certain Seahawk victory.

This season, Seattle secured a first down or touchdown 81 percent of the time they attempted a run with less than two yards to go on third or fourth down. That was the second-best mark in the league, well above the 65% overall average. Meanwhile, New England's defense was unusually porous against such plays: they allowed first downs or touchdowns on 81% of such attempts, ranking dead last in the NFL.

The phrase Monday night quarterbacking originated no doubt in American football to describe the kind of verbal and other abuse Mr. Wilson would quickly receive for his actions, but no amount of appeal to hindsight and hypocrisy seems to stem the tide of ruthless

criticism against the Seahawks. Its been nearly a week now since the game, let us now, with hopefully cool heads, look once again at the statistics and facts available to Mr. Wilson and his coach.

Let us recall that in game theory, there is no move which cannot be countered if the opposing party knows of it in advance. If it truly was, as suggested by numerous hot blooded fans, set in stone that a run by Marshawn Lynch was the only thing that the Seahawks could have done in the situation, the Patriots would have simply made a column of men eleven deep right in front of Lynch and steamrollered him the moment he touched the ball.

So it is certain then, that there was a decision to be made on that play, that at least the possibility of a pass had to be kept open to ensure that the rush play would have a nonzero chance of success.

Now, let us look at the probability numbers for the passing and running of the ball.

In a textbook example of a statistical equilibrium, during the 2014 season, offenses on an opponent's one-yard line ran two-thirds of the time (there were 212 rushes and 106 passes). The running plays went for touchdowns 57.5% of the time...and the passing plays went for touchdowns 57.5% of the time. If either play offered a slightly higher probability of success, the proportion of throw and rush decisions would have, in turn, shifted away from one third to some other number. Mr. Wilson had exactly three plays to make, so it is therefore sensible, by this statistically proven model, that at least one of his three expected plays be a passing play.

Moreover, throughout the 2014 season, the pass interception rate for Mr. Wilson was 1.5%, while the 1.4% of the rushing plays made by Mr. Lynch were fumbled. Mathematically, there should have been a marginal benefit of attempting the two rushes first, but in the end, the 0.1% difference in expected risk of failure is quite arguably non-significant.

In the end, the decision to pass was a well meditated and reasonable choice. Statistical measurement finds that although the defense is expecting with 66.6% probability a rush play, a passing play in that particular situation had just as high a chance of success, just as low a chance of failure, as the rush play that all parties expected. Let us realize that had the past been successful, Mr. Wilson would have been lauded by the same shameless critics for his ingenuity and daring, and even had the pass failed (42.5% expected), the Patriots would have been very much been more threatened by the possibility of a pass play, and perhaps changed their lopsided ratio of eight defenders on the line and a meager three to cover receivers.

In the end, the Seahawk was unexpected and regrettable, not because of a particularly ill informed decision, (certainly not because of Illuminati intervention) but because it ended with a play that by all means was the statistically correct decision, but failed in the most improbable and catastrophic way possible.



Thursday, February 12
Swimming and Diving
Liberal Arts
Championships
@ Coe College

Friday, February 13
Swimming and
Diving
Liberal Arts
Championships
@ Coe College

Saturday, February 14
Swimming and Diving
Liberal Arts
Championships
@ Coe College

Women's Basketball
vs. Cent. Christian
2 p.m.

Men's Basketball
@ Maranatha Baptist
3 p.m.

Tuesday, February 17
Women's Basketball
vs. Lincoln Christian
7 p.m.

Men's Basketball
@ Carthage
5 p.m.

Thursday, February 19
Women's Basketball
vs. Moody Bible
5 p.m.