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Failing to Kill Clock Can Lead to Suicide

HFL SPECIAL

Washington led 37-35 and had the ball on Philadelphia's 22, third down and 10, with 1:16 to play. The Eagles, with no timeouts left, were dead — unless you happened to have bet on them, getting 3 points.

And then Joe Gibbs, the Redskins coach, joined a long list of NFL coaches who have gone brain-dead in that situation. He sent Gerald Riggs off tackle for Riggs' 29th carry of the afternoon. Riggs had gained a club-record 221 yards. But this time he fumbled, Philly recovered and the Eagles were on their way to a 42-37 miracle.

PLAYING

Gerald

Strine

FOOTBALL

Now, admittedly, fumbles are not returned 77 yards to set up game-winning touchdowns very often — even with the help of an illegal forward handoff — as the Eagles did with Riggs' mistake. The point is, Riggs

should never have been sent crashing into the line. The Skins were in position to take all but 20 seconds off the clock with no-risk plays, without Riggs plowing straight ahead into a sea of arms and hands clawing after the ball.

Yet coaches do this more than you would believe. They tempt the fates . . . and on occasion they pay a huge price for their folly.

San Francisco faced a similar situation Sunday at Tampa Bay. The 49ers had rallied to take the lead, 20-16, with 40 seconds remaining. Vinny Testaverde fumbled on the Bucs' next possession, near his own 20. But Tampa Bay still had all three of its timeouts. When Joe Montana dropped to his knee after taking the snap on first and second down, the Bucs quickly called timeouts.

On third down Montana realized it was important to take a little more time off the clock. But he didn't send Roger Craig off right tackle. Instead, he still refused to relinquish possession of the ball. On third down he scrambled around a bit behind the line of scrimmage and eventually went down himself, without being touched. Montana repeated that maneuver on fourth down. When Tampa Bay got the ball back there were three seconds left, just time enough for Testaverde to toss a long desperation pass that was intercepted.

This is precisely the strategy Gibbs should

have employed on third and fourth down against Philadelphia. The Eagles would have taken possession with 15 to 20 seconds left. Randall Cunningham would have had just enough time to put up a long prayer. The receiver would have had to make the catch and get out of bounds immediately for there to have been time for another play. No way, I say.

Yet I'll guarantee you that before this season is over, at least one more NFL coach will repeat Gibbs' error in judgment. There have been numerous times in the past when teams had only to call three or four plays at the end of a game to lock up a win . . . unless they fumbled. All the coaches needed was a little knowledge of arithmetic. But they sent backs into the line, only to throw their hands up in disbelief as the backs fumbled — when adding 45 seconds to 45 seconds to 45 seconds should have told them that 135 seconds will take the final 1:59 off the clock every time.

It's truly amazing. Here we have, in 28 NFL coaches, a group of guys who stand a little bit to the right of Barry Goldwater in their basic conservatism. But when the time comes for them to really play it safe, and take absolutely no chances, they risk everything. Just ask Gibbs. Or Montana.

Praise for Giants, None for Jets

Give the Giants credit for their 24-14 comeback victory over Detroit. The Lions' defense ranks among the top six or seven in the league, a fact readily overlooked because of the team's pathetic offense. As for the Jets, why didn't they do the smart thing last year by hiring Bud Carson as their head coach, when they still had him on their staff? Then again, when was the last time the Jets did the smart thing, except to hire Carson as their defensive coordinator?

I wonder how all those fans holding tickets on Minnesota as the favorite in the future books for Super Bowl XXIV feel today. As the loss to Chicago showed Sunday, the Vikings still don't have a running game. Their defense is the most aggressive in the NFL but their passing attack isn't good enough to offset the absence of a ground threat. Dan Fouts and his San Diego receivers and Dan Marino and his Miami receivers were so exceptional that both could win without a balanced attack, even without a decent defense. But Wade Wilson, the Vikings' passer, never will be compared to Fouts or Marino. He's not even close.

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Bronços Beat Bills on Road

The Associated Press

Orchard Park, N.Y. — Denver's big-play defense, sparked by interceptions from Wymon Henderson and Tyrone Braxton, helped the Broncos build a 21-0 lead and they held on for a 28-14 victory over the Bills last night.

Denver, which lost 10 of its previous 11 Monday night road games and its past eight contests on artificial turf, turned all those negatives around with some positive defense. Just as in their opening victory over Kansas City, the Broncos forced turnovers and converted them into points.

The defense, which ranked 22nd in the NFL last year, contributed a first-quarter safety and set up 13 more points. Those points came on Vance Johnson's 9-yard reception from John Elway and field goals of 46 and 24 yards by David Treadwell. The rookie also hit from 33 and 22 yards.

That same defense began to wilt, though, as Buffalo went to a hurry-up offense — the same ploy Bills coach Marv Levy criticized as unethical when Cincinnati used it last year. Jim Kelly led the Bills on drives of 77 and 66 yards against a suddenly confused Denver defense to pull Buffalo within 21-14.

But the Broncos again made crucial plays after Elway was intercepted early in the fourth quarter. Mark Kelso intercepted Elway's overthrown pass at the Buffalo 31 and Kelly got the Bills to the Denver 41.

Simon Fletcher then sacked Kelly and Ronnie Harmon dropped a potential touchdown pass near the sideline before rookie Warren Powers sacked Kelly.

When Denver took over, Elway hit Johnson for 25 yards on third-and-12 and he scrambled for 31 yards to the Buffalo 5. Rookie Bobby Humphrey scored from the 5 to clinch it and silence the crowd of 78,176 in the first prime-time game in Buffalo since 1984.

The Broncos last won on artificial turf at Philadelphia in the third week of the 1986 season. They had beaten only Pittsburgh, in '86, in all their Monday night road games. Buffalo, which won all its home games in taking the AFC East crown in '88, lost here for the first time since Dec. 20, 1987, against New England.

Steelers' Hinkle Out Indefinitely

Steelers linebacker Bryan Hinkle will be sidelined indefinitely with a fractured right fibula suffered in the second quarter of Sunday's 41-10 loss in Cincinnati . . . Bengals running back Ickey Woods has a strained ankle and is questionable for Monday night's game against the Browns . . . The second week of the Oregon Lottery's Sports Action NFL betting game produced sales of \$337,978, up from the first week's sales of \$221,244, lottery director Jim Davey said yesterday.

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