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The Significance of the Kicker in American and European Football

Richard C. Crepeau

University of Central Florida, richard.crepeau@ucf.edu

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One of the primary objectives in sport is to win. In American sport winning is too often the only thing. Coaches spend sixteen to eighteen-hour days in seven-day weeks searching for all those little keys to victory that are necessary to success. Owners too spend time, energy and especially dollars in the great quest for the glory that comes with winning.

What is most surprising in this obsessive-compulsive behavior is how often the obvious is overlooked. How often the architects of greatness ignore some small thing, which turns out to be a big thing.

In football great attention is paid to quarterbacks and running backs, times in the forty, smash-mouth defenses, and motivational techniques. What is too often ignored is a simple thing like the kicking game, especially the place-kicker in whose foot the fate of winning or losing often resides.

This week the failure to pay attention to this small matter cost Norv Turner his job as head coach of the Washington Redskins. It will probably cost the Redskins a place in the playoffs and a shot at the Super Bowl. What started as a season of great promise for the Skins has turned into a nightmare of missed kicks. Instead of being 10-3 today they are 7-6 largely because three games got away on missed field goals.

Daniel Snyder, Skins' owner, spent over \$100M constructing this team over the past summer. He, and many others, thought that they had put together a Super Bowl champion. As it turned out the only thing they didn't have was a healthy place-kicker, and Snyder declined to go out and spend a few more million to remedy that situation. Did he think the Skins were so good they wouldn't need a kicker? If so, and one can think of no other explanation, then he is foolish, stupid, and/or doesn't know football.

Even the casual football fan knows that week after week games are decided by the foot of some semi-athletic type. Year after year the lack of a kicker costs teams in crucial situations and no one can survive the perils of NFL parity without a first-rate kicker.

Perhaps it is just hubris that creates such a blind spot.

Nor is Daniel Snyder the first owner or coach to be victimized by overlooking the kicking game. At Florida State University where the reigning genius Bobby Bowden rules the lack of a kicker has imprinted the words "wide right" on the emotional scar tissue of every FSU fan. Bowden himself was so emotionally traumatized by the lack of a kicker that he went out and actually recruited one and burned a scholarship on one. Sebastian Janikowski, the Polish Rifle, was an essential cog in the Seminole winning machine of the past four years.

All that has now changed. Winning games by thirty to fifty points apparently creates complacency and dulls the memory. Bowden does not have a reliable kicking game this year and it certainly contributed in the loss to Miami. If the Noles play another close game in the Orange Bowl the lack of a kicker could cost Bowden a national championship. If it does he will get what he deserves.

In the last World Cup England went to overtime and lost on penalty kicks. When the game was over the England coach matter-of-factly reported that his team never practices penalty kicks because he did not consider them an integral part of the game. What an astounding admission. Even more astounding was the lack of any general condemnation of the coach for his sheer stupidity.

How can otherwise brilliant coaches and owners make such mistakes? The kicker in American football is seen as not an integral part of the team, just as apparently the English coach did not regard the penalty kick as a significant part of the game. But of course they are and it is.

In the case of these coaches, and one must say many others, one suspects that some internal ethic is operating here. Internal to the coach may be some personal bias against kickers who don't really register in the game plan. Likewise within the ethos of the game is the view that kickers do not really belong because most of them do not partake in the contact and sweat of both practices and games.

What this tells us is that for many coaches and players winning may be important, but the game and its culture are even more important.

In the case of owners like Daniel Snyder it tells us that successful businessmen don't necessarily succeed by their brilliance or even their attention to detail. If they did surely

Snyder would be able to master such an elemental detail of football success.

This isn't brain surgery, but it is apparently more complex than making money or drawing up a game plan. Daniel Snyder couldn't figure it out, and Bobby Bowden may yet pay a price for his lack of short-term memory.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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