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Slow It Down?



It's the topic of an argument I've heard over and over – time of possession as an indicator of offensive success. The 2012 Rose Bowl was an opportunity to put this philosophical argument to the test. Wisconsin is a grind it out, hold on to the ball, time of possession team. Oregon could care less about the indicator. Wisconsin came into the game as the No. 22 team in the nation in this category at 31:58. Oregon was dead last at averaging 25:03. Wisconsin was fourth in the nation in scoring at 44.6 points per game, and Oregon was third at 46.2 ppg. These were two distinctly different styles of offense with contrasting philosophies of what holding on to the football means to offensive success. Wisconsin did indeed win the time of possession battle by over 10 minutes. However, Oregon won the game 45-38.

Does this prove the contention that time of possession doesn't matter as an indicator of success? One game probably cannot put this argument to rest. I would offer that the answer is, "It depends." There are many factors that go into this. Even Wisconsin offensive coordinator Paul Chryst admitted that time of possession can be a deceiving statistic, but what the offense really wants to do is move the football and score. Time of possession, therefore, becomes a by-product of being able to maintain the drive down the field.

I think you have to do a careful analysis from year-to-year on how your team is built. Do you have a defense that is more seasoned than your offense? Can they stop opponents from scoring on a regular basis? You certainly want your offense to complement your defense. Scoring fast all of the time may not be the best thing for your defense. This is something that can happen from game to game. There may be times when the defense has struggled or been on the field long in which a grind-it-out type of drive serves them well. Again, it depends on the offense's capability. If personnel-wise you can't grind it out, then there need to be other answers on how to use the personnel and formations you use, yet have the ability to slow play down and milk the clock for a while.

While we prefer the fastest style of attack that we can create, we value having tools to slow play down and help our defense. Scoring always helps a defense, but at times they need the offense to hold onto the ball so they can adjust and regroup. In our final game of 2011, our opponent drove the ball down field in 15 plays, taking 9:43 off the clock. Our intention on the ensuing drive was to use our slow-it-down tempo and take some time off

the clock while our defense rested and regrouped. We did use those procedures but scored in 4 plays, only taking 1:37 off the clock. I looked over to our defensive coordinator and smiled and said, "I'm sorry." The next offensive series we had more success in slowing it down, taking 14 plays to go 82 yards for the score and taking 8:02 off the clock. This happened at a critical time in the game.

We won the game 45-37. We lost the time of possession battle 26:10-33:50. We had some fast scoring drives – 1 play in 19 seconds, 4 plays in 1:26, 4 plays in 1:37, and 3 plays in 1:00. In those situations, we were operating with our fastest procedures. We also had some long scoring possessions – 15 plays in 7:40 and 14 plays in 8:20. I should point out that we were still multiple-tempo during the longer drives, but the use of slow-it-down tactics was more prevalent. We used our base tempo, huddle, and look procedures, along with speeding play up here or there with some of our faster procedures. The whole idea was to keep the defense off balance. Having the ability to score fast, but also grind it out, provided what we needed in the game to get the win. Fortunately, with our use of multiple personnel ranging from 5 wide to 5 tight ends (to be explained in a future column), we can control the clock in the manner in which we see fit.

Our procedures run along the spectrum of being able to get a snap off within eight seconds of the ball being spotted to snapping it with a second or two left on the play clock. There is value for us to have that range of procedures. We know that on our schedule, there are teams against which we don't want to get into a scoring duel. In the same respect, if we can use tempo to get up early and then physically grind it out, we would like to do that also. Playing in northeast Ohio, weather always is a contingency for which we must plan. I've seen the goal post flags flying in opposite directions because of a wind tunnel effect created by our bowl-shaped stadium.

So to reiterate my answer on the topic of time of possession is, "It depends." We always want to score. How we decide to operate to do it is something we are able to maintain control of through the operating procedures we have installed.

How do you slow it down? It's not just by huddling. As I mentioned before, I've seen Boise State operate from a huddle and run at a pace that some no-huddle teams run. While we do huddle and believe that is a valuable tool to milk the clock, we know that the ability to

control the clock lies in the coach's hand. While we will always align and present a formation to a defense as fast as possible, I will hold my call while watching the play clock tick. We use this within our base tempo, and we usually notify our players prior to the series that we want them to get up to the ball and align, but we are not going to get the play call in immediately.

This isn't meant to be a case for slowing the game down and using a huddle. While we carry two huddle tempos in our procedures, we use those for a clearly defined set of situations. The point of this discussion is to illustrate that having the ability to slow the tempo down and help or complement your defense can be valuable to an offense. Remember, this is a team game, and managing the game should be a consideration. It's something that needs to be discussed prior to and throughout the season, and certainly should be a part of in-game strategy.

Multiple tempo keeps the defense off balance. They don't know what to expect. Your procedures should account for those times when you do want to slow it down. It can be a procedure in no-huddle, it can be controlled by the coach, or it can be done by utilizing a huddle. Like anything in your offense, the procedures you use should be practiced and perfected. It's up to the coach to do the work up front to streamline the system so that your procedures and concepts are tightly integrated and work well together.