

# Belichick critics are letting 'rule book' foolishly rule them

As much as New England Patriots head coach Bill Belichick might think he's all alone on an island after his 4th-and-2 call Sunday night, especially in watching as a growing horde of critics have been burning the coach in effigy across the bay, it took all of the next morning for me to sail a boat to that island, in my show of support for that gutsy call.

What has been amazing, though, has been how the disgust for that call has even grown stronger over the airwaves and on the printed page since that fated call failed to continue a late Pats drive, in Belichick's attempt at holding onto a six-point lead against the undefeated Indianapolis Colts.

When Pats quarterback Tom Brady came back onto the field to go under center for that fourth down, I, like most in New England, was watching with mouth gaping open.

Once the dust settled, though, and Indianapolis was handed another nailbiter of a win to maintain their undefeated status this season, it seemed pretty clear to me why Belichick made that call.

"I thought it was our best chance to win," opined the Pats head coach once the score of 35-34, Colts, was in the books.

While considered one of the prominent unwritten rules in the "NFL rule book" pertaining to football coaching — that you punt on fourth down, particularly when on your side of the field — Colts quarterback Peyton Manning has made a career of holding book burnings pertaining to that book.

With Belichick's Pats having already faced Manning 14 times in his career, the memories are much more glorious for Pats fans during Manning's early years — as Belichick certainly had the quarterback's number through the Jan. 16, 2005 AFC Championship game. With that 20-3 loss in the Foxboro snow, Belichick had up to

then defeated the Colts signal-caller in their first eight of nine meetings.

That all began to change the following November, when Manning helped put up 40 points for his Colts, with that win being one of five victories in their last six against New England.

## ON THE SUBJECT OF SPORTS



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From the sideline, all Belichick has seen is a quarterback that has averaged slightly more than 300 yards against the Pats in those six games. Of those, it would be hard for Belichick to completely erase from his memory the 2007 AFC Championship Game, when Manning led the Colts from a 17-point fourth quarter deficit to win, 38-34.

For Manning, though, such comebacks are becoming almost commonplace, with Sunday's fourth quarter comeback his second straight, his fourth of the season, and 40th of his career.

Which then requires one to ask if one can even recall the last time Manning has failed to come through in the final minutes of a game to lead his Colts to victory.

In other words, Belichick's been there, done that.

So Belichick chose to think outside the box, go for it on fourth down in trying to keep the ball out of Manning's hands for the remainder of the game.

And with the catch by Kevin Faulk, that drive presumably should have continued for at least three or four more plays.

Initially, the ball was placed correctly, with it past the first-

down marker.

Which would have virtually locked up the game for the Patriots.

At that exact moment, the anointers of Belichick were ready to race out the door to scream from the mountain tops how the man with three Super Bowl rings had proven himself to be a "genius," in making that bold call, helping his team with a road win — in Indianapolis no less — while knocking the Colts from the undefeated ranks.

Then, out of nowhere, one of the officials on Scott Brown's crew — which had shown its ineptitude on the previous Colts scoring drive, by waiting to throw an interference flag until a pass fell incomplete, intended for Austin Collie, for which the announcers replied, "they really didn't have anything there" — looked as if he was on a sugar high in his emphasizing Faulk's "juggling" of the football.

But "on further review," as my other weekly column states, while Colts safety Melvin Bullitt did his best to drive Faulk back upon the Patriot making the catch, one can clearly see that the ball bounces a single time off Faulk's fingertips by about six inches, and then quickly rests again, unmoved in Faulk's two hands. In the time it took for the bounced ball to be retained in possession, Faulk lost at most a quarter yard in distance, but that second member of Brown's crew penalized Faulk by about a yard and a half with the ball's new placement.

In discussing Belichick's decision, Tom E. Curran of CSNNE.com opined that if you had left the room with the Patriots facing 4th-and-2, only to see the Colts with the ball at the New England 29 upon your return, you would have figured the Colts had run off a great punt return, or there had been a fumbled snap on the punt or a blocked punt.

And there in lies the reality that even by choosing to punt, that

hardly ensures success by choosing that route.

In Curran's faulty logic, totally dependent on the result, he doesn't want to use an example where Belichick chose to go for it on his own 24 up by six against Atlanta from a few weeks earlier. Whether he wants to say it or not, that's because it worked then and the Patriots won.

Nary a criticism for that call then, so to turn back the clock and criticize it now, shows a new level of Monday Morning Quarterbacking.

And in trying to claim he has actual numbers to support his argument, he touts that the Colts had only a 30 to 40 percent chance of driving 60 yards for the winning score.

So exactly where are the numerous examples in the last five years where Manning failed to come through, to support that baseless claim?

Belichick was right when he did it against Atlanta, and didn't get crucified for it. This time the football gods weren't so kind, but that doesn't make his decision suddenly a wrong one.

In a way, most NFL coaches should wish to be in Belichick's position, so to have the same freedom in making tough decisions, no strings attached.

But Belichick had to acknowledge that without the luxury of a Mike Carey or Ed Hochuli calling the game, that meant that someone well over his head would be left twisting in the wind officiating the NFL's biggest game this season.

To which Brown didn't disappoint, which in part explains why Belichick went for it on 4th-and-2.

Belichick looked at the cards he was dealt — like a straight set of fours, in asking his defense to make one final stand, or a straight set of fives, in asking Brady to get the first down.

Neither was a hand offering a whole lot of confidence, but if forced to take one over the other — as every statistic that's been

unearthed about which had greater odds of success — going for it on fourth down was the "winner."

And those odds account for all quarterbacks needing to drive for a winning score, not just Manning. When accounting for that small detail, tied to his likely needing to go less than 70 yards, with a timeout and the two-minute warning, that should be considered a Las Vegas lock in anyone's eyes. To Belichick, he also had to consider that his team, since 2001, had a 62 percent success rate on fourth downs, when needing two yards or less to make a first down.

Given those choices, I'll take a serving of Brady throwing for first down, thank you.

For all those who continue to desperately hold onto the remnants of the "rule book" by demanding that Belichick admit to having made a mistake by not punting the ball back to Indianapolis back with 2:08 remaining, let's fire up the DVD player to see how that game on Jan. 21, 2007 concluded.

With 2:27 remaining in that game, and a 4th-and-4 at the New England 46 staring Belichick in the face, he elected to have Todd Sauerbrun punt. From there, Sauerbrun blasted the ball 54 yards into the end zone for a touchback, and high fives were a plenty at forcing Manning to drive 80 yards to win the game.

While some may try to look at the two poorly thrown balls by Manning Sunday night resulting in interceptions as evidence to proclaim that Manning could have choked it away in its final moments, it's clear they haven't stepped back and realized they are no longer talking about the Manning that stumbled in similar opportunities earlier in his career, but of a quarterback who will surely be enshrined into the Hall of Fame when his playing days are over.

With Brady's incomplete pass to Wes Welker on third down, the clock stopped at 2:08. If the Pats had chosen to punt, the Patriots

would have only seen the clock restart once the ball was snapped. By the time the ball rested in the hands of a Colts returner, he would have likely stepped out of bounds with a second remaining before the 2 minute warning, giving Manning one more stoppage of play, to go with the one timeout they still had.

In averaging 44 yards on each of his four punts, Pats punter Chris Hanson could be expected to have forced Manning to start an attempt at a game winning drive from somewhere between his 35- to 40-yard line.

So how long did it take for Manning to execute that winning drive of 80 yards in the 2007 AFC Championship Game?

Seventy-seven seconds, and eight plays.

And while we're at it, enough of the "Belichick disrespected his defense" garbage, in that by Belichick choosing to go with trying to go for the first down, he didn't trust his defense at stopping Manning.

Had the Patriots punted, and the Colts fumbled the ball away on the return, could you envision Patriots defensive players screaming at their cohorts on special teams not to recover the fumble — because they didn't want to have the chance to stop the Colts taken away from them?

I didn't think so.

Even after having watched how easily Manning was able to score against his defense on the previous drive, Belichick had to also take into consideration — something that has been completely left out of this debate — the strong possibility that the men wearing black and white stripes would again, as they did on the previous Indy drive, offer a helping hand to the Colts.

Only if Belichick knew how badly he'd be burned by Brown and his cohorts while still holding the ball.

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