

TAMPA BAY 20, VIKINGS 17



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'Self-inflicted mistakes' sink Vikings in season opener

VIKINGS INSIDER

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The end zones at U.S. Bank Stadium were painted in vintage Vikings font Sunday, the sidelines festooned with logos from a half-century ago. The cheerleaders were dressed in replicas of uniforms from the team's early years at Met Stadium, while dancing to radio staples from Earth, Wind & Fire and James Brown. The Vikings' intrepid production team unearthed videos of old Hamm's beer commercials and an ad Bud Grant once did for a local Ford dealership.

Offensive coordinator Wes Phillips walking to the coaches' booth wearing an itchy wool sweater that could have passed for one Jerry Burns wore while overseeing Grant's offense. While Minnesota Orchestra principal trumpet Manny Laureano played the national anthem, several of Grant's former players stood in the end zone, helmets under one arm, just like they had done years ago.

The Vikings' regular-season opener was their first since Grant, the Hall of

Famer who coached them to all four of their Super Bowl appearances, died at age 95 in March. They turned Sunday's game against the Tampa Bay Buccaneers into an event that celebrated their revered former coach and his era at the center of Minnesota sports.

While the production honored Grant, the current iteration of the Vikings turned in the kind of undisciplined performance that might have galled him.

The Vikings lost 20-17 in a game in which they turned the ball over three times, including a Kirk Cousins interception at the goal line and a fumble in which guard Ed Ingram knocked the ball out of his quarterback's hands. They provided their opponent, which had just 242 yards of offense, a fresh set of downs near the goal line when rookie Jay Ward lined up in the neutral zone on a third-quarter field goal. They burned time out when they were lined up incorrectly for a fourth-quarter Tampa Bay field goal and gave the Buccaneers 15 yards on a Dean Lowry face mask penalty to begin the drive that ran out the clock.



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A TALE OF TWO GAMES Tampa Bay safety Antoine Winfield Jr. (31), top, a former Gophers star, jumped on a loose ball after forcing a fumble on a sack of Vikings quarterback Kirk Cousins in the first quarter. It wasn't all negative Sunday, as Vikings rookie receiver Jordan Addison, above, celebrated his first NFL touchdown in the second quarter.

It was the Vikings' eighth home opener at U.S. Bank Stadium; the only other one they lost was in 2020, when Aaron Rodgers operated with stunning serenity in an empty stadium. On Sunday, Kevin O'Connell, the head coach who had formed a fast friendship with Grant in the final year of his life, was left to recount the errors that put the Vikings under .500 for the first time in his career.

"When you lose the turnover battle three to nothing and have a few critical penalties on some third downs or fourth downs, you're doing a lot of things to help the opponent," O'Connell said. "All credit to the Tampa Bay Buccaneers; they came in and played a good, hard-fought game. But I did feel like there was quite a few self-inflicted mistakes that hopefully we can get ironed out."

The most critical mistakes came from an offense that ranked eighth in the NFL a year ago and unveiled its full complement of talent early in the game. Justin Jefferson had seven catches for 135 yards by halftime.

When two Buccaneers defenders clamped down on his out route in the second quarter, Cousins threaded a perfect third-and-11 throw up the seam for first-round pick Jordan Addison, who beat safety Ryan Neal for a 39-yard touchdown.

The Vikings led 10-3 in the second quarter, and had out-gained the Buccaneers 287-95 by halftime. The fact the score was tied at 10-10 through two quarters, though, was because of their three turnovers.

Their first one was the most bizarre of the three. As Cousins turned to hand the ball to Alexander Mattison at the Tampa Bay 26, Ingram began moving to his left. His left arm swung back and stripped the ball from Cousins' hands before he could give it to Mattison, and the Buccaneers recovered.

On the Vikings' next possession, safety Antoine Winfield Jr., a former Gophers star, blitzed through an open gap on the right side of the line, sacking Cousins and recovering the fumble he forced. It led to a Tampa Bay field goal for the first points of the game.

The Vikings answered with 10 straight points before Mike Evans beat safety Josh Metellus on a double move, peeling back inside when Metellus was expecting a corner route, and catching a 28-yard pass from Baker Mayfield to tie the score at 10-10 with 1:09 remaining in the second quarter.

Still, the Vikings had time to drive down the field, and they appeared set to regain the lead before halftime when Cousins hit Jefferson for 42 yards.

That's when the quarterback's interception led to perhaps the most critical turn of the game.

After hitching once when T.J. Hockenson was covered, Cousins fired into a tight window for K.J. Osborn, trying to fit the ball between Christian Izien and Neal. He put the ball slightly behind Osborn while attempting not to lead him into a hit from Neal, but Izien snatched the ball just before Osborn could secure it at the goal line.

The quarterback fumed as he went to the sideline, and CBS' broadcast showed him angrily discussing the play with quarterbacks coach

Chris O'Hara. Afterward, O'Connell said he "didn't mind the decision" to throw to Osborn, adding he wanted the quarterback to be aggressive. "We'll take a look, whether the location could have been better," O'Connell said.

In retrospect, Cousins said, he should have continued his progression to Addison rather than throwing to Osborn.

"I tried to knife it in there," he said. "Was a little too aggressive, and Jordan is there on the under route."

The Vikings offense then hardly had the ball in the second half, which Tampa Bay began with a nearly nine-minute drive that ended in a touchdown after Ward's penalty on a field-goal attempt. The Vikings tied the score at 17 early in the fourth quarter on a swing pass from Cousins to Mattison, but Chase McLaughlin's 57-yard field goal with just more than five minutes left provided the winning points.

Cousins completed 33 of his 44 passes for 344 yards and two scores, while facing pressure from a swarming Buccaneers defense and managing injuries on the offensive line.

Austin Schlottmann stepped in for Garrett Bradbury after the center left because of a back injury, while tackle Christian Darrisaw twice left and returned because of an ankle injury.

The Vikings could draw some encouragement from the fact their corners mostly held up against Evans and Chris Godwin, while new defensive coordinator Brian Flores' pressure packages got to Mayfield. Their inefficiencies Sunday, though, kept them from starting 1-0 before a tough road trip to Philadelphia on Thursday, and thinned their homage to Grant into the kind of game that might have put them on the receiving end of the old coach's famous glare.

"Now that we didn't get it done today, we just have to have that much more urgency, that much more detail," O'Connell said. "Everybody's got to look inward, and we got to persevere together."

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EXTRA POINTS

Ward blunder one of many fatal blows

1. Ward told he wasn't offsides

Rookie safety Jay Ward had the most easily avoidable gaffe among the many blunders the Vikings made during Sunday's 20-17 season-opening loss to Tampa Bay at U.S. Bank Stadium. "I looked over and got the thumbs up," Ward said. "He said I was good. Then when I looked back after they made the field goal, they said I was offsides." The Bucs took the field goal off the board and scored a touchdown three plays later to take a 17-10 lead.

2. Jones' ill-timed jump turned tide on third-down dominance

The Bucs were 0-for-6 on third downs — all coming third-and-4 or longer — when Patrick Jones II jumped offsides on third-and-7 late in the first half. The Bucs converted the third-and-2 en route to a game-tying touchdown. Throwing more quickly in the second half, the Bucs converted five of seven on third-and-4 or longer. The Vikings' defense faced 12 third downs of 4 or more yards 12 times in Brian Flores' first game as coordinator. Flores rushed three men six times, including four with a seven-man presnap front. He rushed four men three times, six twice and five once. A key third-and-8 stop in the fourth quarter was a six-man rush from a four-man presnap look. The offense then went three-and-out to set up the Bucs' winning field goal.

3. Be it Ed D or B-Flo, zero takeaways doom the Vikings

Danielle Hunter may have summed things up best when he said, "I think this defense confuses offenses, offensive linemen, quarterbacks. It's designed to do that. But you lose the takeaway battle 3-0, you still lose." The Bucs got three takeaways, turning them into three points and a red-zone stop. Meanwhile, Flores' defense had zero takeaways, something his beleaguered predecessor, Ed Donatell, didn't experience until Week 10 a year ago. The 2022 Vikings were 12-1 when they had a takeaway and 1-4 when they didn't. Counting last year's playoff upset to the Giants, the Vikings have now lost two straight one-score games without a takeaway.

4. Hunter one step closer to \$3M incentive

Weeks after his "hold-in" forced the Vikings to bump his pay with a one-year deal worth up to \$20 million, Hunter showed why the Vikings had no other choice but to pay da man. The Bucs' first snap was a tipped pass by Hunter. He followed with a game-high two tackles for loss, seven tackles and the only sack of Baker Mayfield, which came on third-and-6 and held the Bucs to a field goal after the Vikings' first turnover. Hunter dropped into shallow coverage only twice on a couple third-and-short situations but spent most of his day charging forward like the edge rusher the team pays him to be. Hunter sat out some first- and second-down situations in the first half. Hunter's contract guarantees him \$17 million. He gets another \$1 million for 11 sacks, \$2 million for 12½ sacks or \$3 million for 14 sacks.

5. KOC 1-0 in challenges, but Bowles wins with new kicker

After going 2-2 in challenges as a rookie head coach last year, Kevin O'Connell won his only challenge Sunday when replays reversed a Bucs catch for a first down midway through the first quarter. That led to a punt following a Vikings turnover. Bucs coach Todd Bowles went 0-for-1, failing to overturn the spot of the ball on a failed third-and-1 try on the game-winning drive. The Bucs converted fourth-and-1 en route to showing why Bowles wanted to sign Chase McLaughlin to replace Ryan Succop as his kicker.

MARK CRAIG