

Orange fail to make good on chances

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SYRACUSE, N.Y. - Each week during the college football season, coaches preach the value of points from turnovers. Scoring on an 80-yard, clock-burning drive is great, but a quick strike off of a bonus possession caused by an interception or a fumble is even sweeter.

In just three games, the Syracuse defense has developed a reputation for causing drive-ending turnovers with its heels on the goal line. It did that three times on Saturday and more than once against West Virginia two weeks ago.

And before a highlight-filled second half saw the Orange turn a 17-7 deficit into a

24-24 tie before ultimately losing 27-24, those clutch plays were the bright moments in Syracuse's season.

An ideal defense

But even before the season started with just more than 128 minutes of shutout ball (The Orange held Buffalo scoreless last week and the lone West Virginia touchdown on Sept. 4 came via an interception return) rookie Syracuse coach Greg Robinson's defensive philosophy started to take hold.

Senior defensive end Ryan LaCasse spoke about how one play during the preseason sold the Orange's defense on its new head coach.

"Coach Robinson's big on 'keep on playing.'" LaCasse said after Virginia's victory in the Carrier Dome. "In a scrimmage, the offense had the ball on the one-yard line and [safety] A.J. Brown came in and smacked somebody and forced the ball out. He showed us there that if you keep on playing, you can get a turnover on any play."

That defensive idealism came through for the Orange in the second quarter as it intercepted Cavalier quarterback Marques Hagans three times. Unfortunately for Syracuse, something else that emerged during the West Virginia game showed itself on Saturday - its offense consistently had trouble capitalizing on turnovers.

After the game, Robinson and his players spoke freely about Virginia fullback Jason Snelling's fourth-and-inches first-down run that set up Connor Hughes' last-second game-winning field goal, but few realized the significance of three unconsummated second-quarter turnovers.

In fact, LaCasse didn't seem to care that his offense couldn't take advantage of the defense's efforts.

"That's fine. We're just going out there and trying to get the ball back for them as many times as possible. That's all we care about. What they do with the ball is the offense's prerogative," LaCasse said.

0 for 3 and three and out

Taking over the ball late in the first quarter with the game tied 7-7, Hagans led the Cavaliers on a 75-yard march to the Syracuse five. On third-and-four, Hagans tried to hit tight end Tom Santi near the goal line, but Syracuse defensive back Tanard Jackson tipped the pass into the hands of LaCasse.

Syracuse took over on its 20-yard line, and promptly punted after two short runs and a Kai Parham sack of Perry Patterson resulted in no gain.

Hagans and the Cavaliers took over after a Brendan Carney punt was returned to Syracuse's 48. He dropped back and tossed the ball deep down the left sideline, but was intercepted by Syracuse cornerback Steve Gregory, who leapt to catch the ball at his own 8.

What happened next?

Syracuse running back Damien Rhodes carried three times for one yard, and Carney was forced to punt from his goal line. Virginia return man Michael Johnson settled under the punt at the Syracuse 47, but was run into by Jackson, and the resulting penalty gave the Cavaliers a first down at the Syracuse 32.

This time, Hagans wasn't so charitable, as he hit Santi for 23 yards on the next play to put the ball on the Syracuse 9. Three plays later, Hagans found Cedric Peerman on a crossing route to give the Cavaliers a 14-7 lead.

The Orange converted two first downs following the kickoff, but the drive stalled and Carney made another appearance, punting Cavaliers back to their 19 yard line with 4:20 left in the half.

Virginia managed two first downs and moved the ball to midfield as the clock approached 2:30. Hagans, who only threw five interceptions all of last season, dropped back on first

down and hit Syracuse free safety Dwayne Davis in the hands at the Syracuse 30 for his third interception of the quarter. Davis crisscrossed the field as he returned the ball to the Virginia 34 as the clock struck 2:00 to play in the half.

Davis said that his offense's ineptitude in the first half made scoring a touchdown the first thing he thought of as he turned upfield.

"I was definitely trying to get to the end zone, trying to score, trying to put some points on the board," Davis said. "But unfortunately, it didn't happen."

What did happen, however, is that Davis turned the ball over to his offense in prime field position. But two incompletions and another Parham sack brought Carney in to punt again.

Neither team scored before halftime, but with the Orange set to receive the second-half kickoff, points in the waning moments of the first half could have made a difference.

After the game, Robinson said he didn't feel that his team's inability to score points off of the turnovers was a major problem. Instead, he focused on the offense's second half turnaround that resulted in 17 points in just over 15 minutes.

"The offense, what I like, is they kept fighting. They didn't get discouraged, and man, they came up with some huge plays [later in the game]."

But Davis said that ultimately, the offense's struggles will weigh down the defense.

"It feels a little bad," the redshirt freshman said of watching the offense fizzle. "But that's our job, we're gonna have to get them back the ball, and eventually they're gonna come around."

When the offense comes around, so might Syracuse's record.

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