

Daniel Thomas vs Lamar Miller

Contributed by J.P.
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When Reggie Bush went down at the end of the first half against the Jets, memories of Ronnie Brown's ACL injury came to mind right away. Bush clutched his knee in riving pain and needed assistance getting off the field. Thankfully, the injury isn't nearly as bad as it seemed at one point and there is even a chance that Bush could play this Sunday in Arizona. While completely speculative, I get the feeling that Bush won't play. Regardless of whether he suits up or not, his snaps will likely be limited, meaning that it's up to Daniel Thomas and Lamar Miller to carry the load for the Dolphins. While neither will get all, or even "most" of the carries, I'll tell you why, based on their performances in each of their first two games of the season (mostly focusing on the Jets game since they both played, creating a more even playing field for evaluating), one of them clearly deserves the majority of the workload. First let's take a look at the numbers. The stat that jumps out to me the most isn't the average, or total yards; it's the "long" run play. Despite Thomas having 22 carries, his longest rush of the season this far is 9 yards. Thomas has not been able to create big plays on the ground the way Miller has, and obviously not in the way Reggie Bush has. Thomas also has 2 fumbles, both ill-timed coming directly after a turnover, giving the Texans and Jets, respectively, complete momentum in those two games. Miller has yet to cough the ball up. With that said, you could make the argument that neither fumble give reason to blame Thomas 100%. In the first one he was concussed on the play; the second fumble was a very close call, and personally I thought his knee was down. Still, the impact to the ground didn't cause the fumble, so blame this one on Thomas. While it's easy to look at the stats and come to the conclusion that Miller should be "the guy" over Thomas, at the end of the day 19 and 22 carries are a small sample size; there are a lot of factors that can contribute to these numbers, from blocking, to situational usage, etc. I believe that the real evidence is in the tape. So let's dig a little deeper and compare the two backs on tape. One thing that is evident with Daniel Thomas when you watch the tape is his lack of explosion and instincts. The other major concern is that he's very one dimensional. He can't run the ball outside and he isn't very good out of the backfield. Let's take a look at an obvious example from this past Sunday displaying all of these deficiencies in one play.

{youtube}BPmHgU_XOt{/youtube} Thomas could have (or at least you would hope) easily out-run Calvin Pace (a 265 pound linebacker) to the edge. If Thomas does so, he's gone. Instead he decides to play for the first down rather than the big play, and cuts right back into the teeth of the defense. He's extremely fortunate he ends up picking up the first down, but this should have been a big play. Thomas is strictly an inside-the-hash runner, and it doesn't seem that he's confident or comfortable doing anything else. Safe to say Lamar Miller takes this screen to the house. Let's take at another play that shows Thomas' lack of natural instincts as a runner, and his compulsive need to cut the play back into the teeth of the defense. {youtube}Um2OKvx3Fr0{/youtube} Here's a screen shot that might make it more obvious. In this shot, Thomas has not yet made the decision to cut the ball back; The defender is already well on his way to the ground...Thomas seems to make his decision late, and react even later. As you will be able to see on Miller's big run later in this blog, Lamar makes decisions and reacts without even thinking. While it's clear that Miller is clearly a big play back and Thomas is not, does Thomas deserve the load because he's a more consistent runner in-between the tackles? Surprisingly, he's not... This first video displays a few of Miller's inside runs against the Jets.

{youtube}x6eB1ERaqPM{/youtube} Notice how quickly he gets down hill, but at the same time does it patiently. He squeezes into the hole as quickly as any back I've seen, and finishes runs nicely, consistently falling forward for one or two extra yards. He doesn't leave any yards on the field and certainly gets to the second level quicker than Thomas does. I'll break down Thomas in a little bit, but while the tapes will look similar in terms of production running inside, here's what separates Miller... This is Miller's 22 yard run. The vision and instincts to get outside and then the ability to break a tackle from Darrelle Revis, (one of the better tackling DB's in the game), and get to the edge as quickly as he did is impressive. Thomas could never dream of turning this 5-6 yard run into a big gainer like this. Miller saw it and went; no hesitation at all. Very decisive. That's what you want to see out of a young back. {youtube}njZSrFfxQEk{/youtube} Now let's take a look at Thomas. Notice how in the first run of the video (2 different angles shown), Thomas clearly has more yards if he bounces it outside. The linebackers are all flowing inside, (because they aren't afraid of Thomas' speed), and Thomas has a Javorskie Lane ready to create a nice lane off-tackle. Would Thomas gain big yardage? No. But his lack of instincts/vision again costs him yards, and the next play is 2nd and 10 instead of 2nd and 6. Not only does Miller probably take this outside, but he probably turns the 4 yards Thomas would have gained into a much bigger gain down the sideline. Also notice the 3rd play, (again, 2 angles given), out of shotgun. While Thomas does well to finish the run strong, pushing the pile for extra yardage, he again leaves yards on the field. If Thomas cuts to the right of Pouncey, he has green grass in front of him. Instead, he runs into a pile of defenders. {youtube}QyrBilCfH-k{/youtube} Generally it's 3 yards and a cloud of dust consistently for Thomas. If there's a hole that provides 4 yards, Thomas will likely gain 4 yards. If there's nothing there, there's nothing there. So while Thomas is consistent and somewhat reliable in this role, so is Miller. The biggest difference between the two backs is that Miller can create yards for himself and generates big plays because of it; he's a creative and instinctive runner with elite acceleration and agility. Thomas is a consistent in-between the tackles runner, but he doesn't take more yards than his offensive line gives and he's no more consistent inside than Miller is. My last point is how the defense reacts to each back. As I hinted to earlier, when Thomas is in the game, the offense becomes very one dimensional. He can't run outside and he isn't a big play threat out of the backfield. Because of this the game becomes very condensed, and that's exaggerated further by the lack of talent and depth at the WR and TE position. Miller gives you big play ability, both as a runner and a pass catcher, (although we haven't seen the latter yet with Miller). While Lamar is not as good a pass protector as Thomas, (and had a rookie mistake against the Jets where he didn't know the play, resulting in a busted -3 yard loss, (something we can probably expect out of Miller every once in a while...certainly more often than with Thomas), I think you have to bite the bullet on those things and trust Miller

to be your 1a. Because he's still developing, Thomas certainly has a role; but if this offense wants to generate explosive, chunk plays in the run game to sustain drives, Miller has to be in the game; there's no getting around it.