What happened on 3rd down?

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Going into Sunday, the Dolphins were the best team in the entire NFL at getting off the field on 3rd down. Opponents were converting just 26.4% of their 3rd down conversions prior to Andrew Luck's absolute massacre of Miami's secondary.

The Colts converted 13 of their 19 3rd downs, and seven of them were of 10 yards or longer, including ones on 3rd and 14, 20, and 16 yards to go. The 3rd down and 20 conversion gave Indianapolis an extra field goal. So what happened on 3rd down? A few things...

First, let's realize that Andrew Luck is a top 10 QB. Not only is he athletic and deadly accurate, but he's got veteran-like pocket awareness, decision making, and IQ. He knows and sees everything, and is incredibly consistent play in and play out.

This first screen shot is on a 3rd down and 12 on the Colts opening drive. The shot is taken 2.7 seconds after the ball is snapped. Generally, QB's have a "3 second rule", where the ball should be out of your hands in under 3 seconds. Right on que, Cameron Wake is collapsing the pocket at the 3 second mark.

As you can see, not only is the pressure coming, but nobody is open. There's tight coverage on all of Luck's options down the field on 3rd and long. Luck knows this, and also knows that there's a lot of open room to his left.

Because Vernon is not disciplined rushing the passer, Luck has a lot of field to his left to get outside the pocket and run.

Luck creates room for himself, Dansby eventually gets beat by Dwayne Allen, and Luck makes a perfect throw rolling to his left for the first down. If Olivier Vernon contains Luck inside the pocket, Wake is able to get to Luck, and the Dolphins get off the field.

On this next play, Coyle calls a great blitz up the middle, Wake and Odrick contain Luck and Sean Smith does a great job in press coverage against Wayne in the slot. Executed perfectly all around...Except for Jimmy Wilson, who gets completely turned around and ends up giving the WR 5 yards of cushion once he starts to turn around.

Luck not only does a great job of keeping his eyes down field despite the intenses pressure and anticipating that Hilton would be open, but makes an incredible throw off his back foot 30 yards down the field while being hit. Wilson had poor coverage, but this was an outstanding play by Luck.

This next play is the 3rd and 20 conversion. Again, Jimmy Wilson has poor coverage, giving a lot of cushion at the first down marker. The bigger problem here is how much time Luck has to throw the ball. Luck has a completely clean pocket to throw the football down the field comfortably. That said, this was not an extended play. This was a basic hitch route at the first down marker. Wilson has to have better coverage.

As you can see, Wilson hasn't even turned around yet when Avery has already come out of his break and planted his feet at the first down marker. Also notice how Wilson has been primarily a slot corner this season, and both these plays were where Wilson was in one-on-one coverage on the boundary.

This next play takes an assumption about the coverage to dissect. This was 3rd down and 16...The Colts not only

convert, but it leads to another TD.

It's clearly some form of a zone quarters coverage, where the two boundary corners and two safeties each have a quarter of the field, while the linebackers cover underneath. With the slot receiver on the bottom of the formation, Wilson is put as an extra corner. He initially makes it seem that he's covering the slot WR man-to-man, but then tails off as you can see in the photo.

It seems that the play is designed for Smith to cover deep, while Wilson comes back underneath the outside WR to cover any sort of hitch or out pattern. The problem is that Wilson is still turned to the slot WR even after tailing off of him. Jimmy ends up getting back underneath, but only once the ball is in the air and nearly in the hands of Avery. The catch is made and it's an easy pitch and catch for the first down despite it being 16 yards to gain.

Another problem with this play is the lack of push up the middle.

While Wake is about to hit Luck from behind, Luck has absolutely no pressure at all up the middle, and can step up into the throw with completely clear vision and confidence.

In order to complete a pass down the field, not only does the timing and accuracy of the throw have to be perfect, but the throw has to be made with anticipation. That's why, to me, pressure on the QB on 3rd and long-to-go is the most critical part of getting off the field. If you can make him at least feel uncomfortable, or rush his throw, you have a great shot at getting off the field.

I'm not even going to bother talking about Sean Smith's missed tackle on a 3rd and 11 from the Colts 5 yard line, which, by the way, was a drive where Indy put three more points on the board, (ultimately their game winning drive).

As illustrated, there were a lot of difference areas that were poor on several of Luck's big completions on 3rd and long. The coverage needed to better; the pass rush needed to be better; the pass rush needed to be more disciplined. Ultimately though, Luck is a hell of a QB, and we can't forget that.

While Miami won't be giving up 13 of 19 3rd down to every good QB that they will face, (hopefully), Miami's pass defense has been over rated over the last few weeks and isn't as good as many thought. It's not hard to stop Sam Bradford, Mark Sanchez and a struggling Andy Dalton. Miami's defense is going to have to tighten up against top QB's like Luck down the road.

I'll close out this blog with a very frustrating stat: On all but 1 of Indy's 5 scoring drives on Sunday, (including both TD drives), the Dolphins had the Colts in a 3rd down and 10 situation or longer.