



Among the key figures on special teams this season have been rookie punt returner Davone Bess (15), Patrick Cobbs (38) and rookie kicker Dan Carpenter (5).

Photos/NANCY KERRIGAN (Miami Dolphins), RICHARD C. LEWIS and MICKI LEWIS



The Dolphins have defied expectations in just about every possible way, and the result has been a very enjoyable season in South Florida.

But there's one area where the Dolphins really wish they were performing the way they were expected to — special teams.

It was supposed to be a strength on a team not expected to have many strengths, but instead it has been one of the rare weaknesses. Sure, there was some improvement against New England, but one decent game can't wipe away the problems of the previous 10 games.

Just think back to the offseason and all the moves the Dolphins made. It seemed as though every new player brought in had made his mark on special teams, and the list was a long one.

Sean Ryan, Charlie Anderson, Boomer Grigsby, Keith Davis, Nathan Jones. All of them were supposed to come in and, if nothing else, make the special teams better.

Didn't work out that way.

Of the five special teams specialists signed, only Anderson and Jones are still with the team. Worse, the special teams actually have taken a step back.

Of the seven significant special teams statistical categories — kickoff return average, punt return average, kickoff return average allowed, punt return average allowed, punting average, net punting average and field goal percentage — the Dolphins ranked lower in the NFL through Week 11 than they did last season in all but one of them.

The only exception was gross punting average, which had gone from 14th at 43.2 to 11th at 44.8.

Even as the Dolphins put together a four-game winning streak that catapulted them into playoff contention, almost every victory was marred by a major special teams breakdown that made things more difficult than they otherwise would have been.

There was the 95-yard kickoff return by Denver's Eddie Royal, the 50-yard kickoff return by Seattle's Josh Wilson, and then the 97-yard punt return for a touchdown by Oakland's Johnnie Lee Higgins.

As a result, Coach Tony Sparano found himself answering as many questions about those breakdowns as anything else after each victory.

"We keep coaching it like we coach it and we hope that we're going to turn the corner," Sparano said. "These guys are working hard every single day and will keep doing it."

A breakdown of the different facets of the special teams shows it's a very wide corner the Dolphins are hoping to turn.

## kickoff coverage

This has been the No. 1 problem.

Heading into the New England game at Dolphin Stadium, the Dolphins ranked last in the league in this category.

In addition to Royal's long return, the Dolphins also allowed a 40-yard return to Justin Miller to start the Oakland game, a 50-yard return by Houston's Andre' Davis and an 81-yard return by Ellis Hobbs in the September victory at New England.

## kickoff returns

This hasn't been as obvious, but the Dolphins also were last in the league in this category through Week 11 with a mediocre 19.5 average.

Of course, that average would be better had Charlie Anderson not been called for holding when Ted Ginn Jr. took one all the way back at the start of the Seattle game.

Ginn has appeared close to breaking long returns on a few occasions, and it's clear he provides more explosiveness as the returner than rookie Davone Bess, who began the season handling that job.

## punt returns

Bess has been the punt returner since the start of the season, although Ginn has gotten some opportunities when the opponent is backed up in its own end.

It appears that the Dolphins coaches trust Bess' decision-making more than they do Ginn's, and Sparano often has talked about Bess' ability to make the first tackler miss.

In the open field, though, it's Ginn who gives the Dolphins the best chance of breaking a long return. Through 11 games, the Dolphins didn't have a punt return longer than 25 yards.

## punt coverage

This is a problem that almost proved very costly against Oakland, as Higgins' punt return put the Dolphins behind, 15-14, in the fourth quarter.

And the loss at Houston will be remembered for Matt Schaub's last-second quarterback draw, but the Dolphins might never have been in a position to lose had it not been for Jacoby Jones' 70-yard punt return for a touchdown in the first half.

The punt coverage goes hand-in-hand with the punter, and Brandon Fields could use a little more consistency in terms of his hang time. The proof is the fact Fields was 11th in the NFL through 10 games in gross punting average but only 29th in net average.

But there's no question Fields has been a better punter than he was as a rookie in 2007.

## field goals

This is one area where there can't be too many complaints.

Rookie Dan Carpenter had a tough act to follow after replacing veteran Jay Feely, who was coming off a 21-for-23 season. But Carpenter has missed only two attempts all season and he aced his first test under pressure when he nailed the game-winner against Oakland.

In terms of his kickoffs, it's impossible to compare what Carpenter has done with Feely's performance last year because Feely often was asked to pooch-kick because then-coach Cam Cameron didn't trust his coverage units.

Around the NFL, Carpenter ranks in the middle of the pack in terms of average distance on his kickoffs, but he has only five touchbacks — a figure that ranks among the bottom third.

The bottom line with the special teams is that it's the one unit that hasn't taken a step forward since last season.

Sparano has tried a lot of different combinations to make things work, even using starting safety Renaldo Hill extensively in the Oakland game.

Whatever needs to be done, the Dolphins simply need better production from the kicking game.

"I don't like to think that I'm on the part of this team that may be the weak link at this point in time and things keep happening," said Jones. "We've got to keep trying to fix it. We make good plays at times, but we've just got to become more consistent."

"And that's going to happen. I'm not worried about it. I have full faith and trust in the other guys out there with me and the coach."