Up to this point there's been plenty of assessment regarding Bill Belichick's taking an early powder from his team's Super bowl loss and little regarding the actual moves he made during the game. Commentators seem more comfortable calling the Hoodie an unsportsmanlike ass than calling his tactical skills into question. But his decision to eschew a field goal attempt and go for it on 4th-and-13 midway through the third quarter ought to be pondered for a bit. In a game as close as this one was, it's one of those pivotal plays that made a direct contribution to the outcome.

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With seven minutes remaining in the third quarter, the Patriots, leading 7-3, faced 4th-and-13 from the New York 31-yard line. New England had held the ball for the entirety of the period, thanks in very large part to the replay-reviewed illegal participation penalty on ex-Akron Zip Chase Blackburn, which wiped out a punt and gave New England a fresh set of downs on the Giants 37. The Pats (after converting a 3rd-and-13 on the series immediately following the penalty) had penetrated as deep as the New York 25, but were thrown into the 4th-and-long thanks to Michael Strahan's clutch sack on the previous play.

It seemed a no-brainer to bring on Stephen Gostkowski to attempt a 48-yard field goal. Instead, Belichick kept his offense on the field and went for the first down, and Tom Brady' pass sailed harmlessly out of bounds along the side of the end zone. New England's offense was in Giants territory both at the end of the first half and the beginning of the second, and wound up with zero points to show for it. A touchdown would have made it 14-3 and, considering no team in Super Bowl history has come back from a double-digit second-half deficit to win, would have essentially iced the game. A field goal would have forced the Giants to score a touchdown just to tie, against a defense that hadn't given one up since the second quarter of the Jacksonville game.

New England had gone for it on fourth down at least once in all but three of their regular-season games, for a total of 21 attempts. They converted 15 of those, including six in a row at one point in mid-season. So on the surface, it appeared that the Artists Formerly Known as the Bay State Patriots were simply dancing with who brung ‘em. But as the tagline for *American Beauty* said, look closer.

Here is the entirety of New England's fourth-down attempts during the 2007 regular season, along with the distance, field position, and score at the time of the attempt. Successful conversions are bolded:

@ N.Y. Jets: 0-for-1 (fumbled field goal snap on 4th-and-10)

San Diego: 1-for-1 (**4th-and-1 from SD 3-yard line, leading 31-14)**

Buffalo: 1-for-3 (**4th-and-1 from BUF 26, tied 0-0**; 4th-and-7 from BUF 29, trailing 7-3; 4th-and-6 from BUF 8, leading 38-7)

@ Cincinnati: 1-for-1 (**4th-and-1 from CIN 7, leading 17-7**)

Cleveland: 1-for-2 (**4th-and-1 from CLE 29, leading 20-10**; 4th-and-goal from CLE 4, leading 27-17)

@ Dallas: 2-for-2 (**4th-and-1 from DAL 15, leading 14-10; 4th-and-goal from DAL 1, leading 41-27**
)

Washington: 2-for-2 (**4th-and-1 from WAS 7, leading 38-0; 4th-and-2 from WAS 37, leading 45-0**)

@ Buffalo: 2-for-2 (**4th-and-1 from BUF 3, leading 35-7; 4th-and-1 from BUF 10, leading 42-10**)

Philadelphia: 0-for-1 (4th-and-4 from PHI 33, trailing 28-24)

@ Baltimore: 2-for-2 (**4th-and-1 from BAL 25, trailing 17-10; 4th-and-6 from BAL 35, trailing 24-20**
)

Pittsburgh: 1-for-1 (**4th-and-1 from PIT 15, leading 24-13**)

@ N.Y. Jets: 1-for-1 (**4th-and-2 from NYJ 20, leading 10-0**)

Miami: 0-for-1 (4th-and-8 from Miami 26, leading 28-7)

@ N.Y. Giants: 1-for-1 (**4th-and-2 from NYG 37, trailing 7-0**)

Some bullet points from the numbers:

- New England's longest fourth-down attempt during the regular season came on 4th-and-10, and that was an unplanned attempt brought about by a botched snap on a field-goal try.
- The longest planned attempt came on 4th-and-8, in the fourth quarter against the heinous Dolphins in a game the Pats were leading by three touchdowns.
- All but two of New England's fifteen successful fourth-down conversions came on 4th-and-1.
- All but one came on 4th-and-2 or less.
- The longest of New England's successful fourth-down conversions came on 4th-and-6 against Baltimore, in a situation in which the Patriots, trailing 24-20 with less than two minutes to play, had no choice but to go for it. (Tom Brady scrambled twelve yards on the play.)
- Aside from instances in which they were tied or trailing (7 of 21), the Patriots went for it just once when they were ahead by a touchdown or less; at Dallas, on 4th-and-1 from the Cowboys 15, up 14-10. And that was in the second quarter of a game in which New England was moving the ball at will.

Defenders of the decision will point out that Stephen Gostkowski hasn't exactly made them forget Viniateri (or even John Smith) when it comes to kicks of length, and they'd be right to do so. Here is the sum of the ex-Memphis Tiger's attempts from forty yards-plus this season:

San Diego: **missed from 41 yards**

@ Dallas: made from 45 yards

Pittsburgh: **missed from 48 yards;** made from 42 yards

@ N.Y. Giants: made from 45 yards

Gostkowski (whose career-long is 52 yards) didn't attempt a 50+ yard field goal in 2007, and attempted just five from 40-49 yards (making three), including just one from 48 yards, the approximate length of the would-be Super Bowl kick. He missed that attempt wide right. For his two-year NFL career, Gostkowski is 5-of-9 from 40 or more yards, a success rate of 55%. A 48-yarder would have been far from a sure thing, especially with the pressure involved.

Still, 55%- or even somewhat below 55%- is better than 0%.

You could make the argument that Belichick didn't want to risk giving prime field-position to the Giants, who would have taken possession at their own 38-yard line with a missed field goal. But if the Hoodie was that concerned about seven or eight yards, he should have just punted. Did he or ex-Canton McKinley quarterback Josh McDaniels actually have a play for 4th-and-13?

As inexperienced as Gostkowski is, and as few attempts as he's made from that distance, he or any other kicker in the NFL should be able to make a 48-yarder indoors. Gary Anderson made a game-winner in the playoffs from that distance in 2003, or close to it. And he was 73 years old at the time. If Belichick calls for the field goal, and Gostkowski misses, it's on the kicker. But he goes for it and the Patriots offense can't convert, it's on the head coach. Asking even Brady and Co. to do something they hadn't been asked to do at all this season was asking too much.

Bill Belichick might be boorish, philandering, and a horrifically sore loser, but his record and accomplishments speak for themselves. Still, to not even attempt a field goal on that pivotal drive was the worst in-game decision I've seen from the Hoodie since he pulled Mike Tomczak for Todd Philcox with the Browns winning at Minnesota
back in 1992. Like then, he gambled from weakness when he didn't have to. Greatest coach of all time? Last Sunday the Hoodie wasn't even the best coach in the stadium.