

Plan B has been working for Chargers

by Bill Center

SAN DIEGO - Something has been happening to the Chargers at halftime.

LaDainian Tomlinson acknowledged as much Wednesday.

"You see us come out, particularly on that first drive of the second half, and put points on the board," the running back said. "At halftime, we just try to get some plays that are going to work for us. We see what other teams want to do to us."

What other teams haven't been able to do over the past eight weeks is stop the Chargers from scoring on their first possession of the second half - which helps explain the team's seven-game winning streak heading into Sunday's AFC divisional playoff game in Indianapolis.

For the season, the Chargers have scored on an NFL-best 12 drives to open the second half. Over the past eight weeks - including the wild-card game - they have opened the second half with five touchdowns and three field goals. The eight opponents have scored just once on their first possession of the third quarter.

Meaningful?

Absolutely, says Norv Turner.

"I've never been around anything like that," the head coach said. "I'm excited about how things have gone all season in the third quarter. Nine of the (12) scores have been touchdowns. Coaches and players have responded to what we do at halftime."

Over the past eight games, the Chargers have outscored the opposition 112-45 in the second half, with a 44-7 margin on the first drive.

On the flip side, the Chargers have scored just seven times on their first possession of the game - and have scored on just three of their past 11 game-opening drives.

But come the second half, the Chargers flip it into overdrive.

Over the past eight games, the Chargers have averaged 10.1 yards per play on their first possession of the second half. Only two of the 50 plays they've run resulted in losses. And they've drawn only one penalty on their first drive of the third quarter.

Turner said he thought the Chargers' ability to convert third downs has had much to do with the success on the first drive of the second half.

Truth is, the Chargers have faced only eight third-down situations on their first second-half possessions over the past eight games. They've converted five. The other three ended in Nate Kaeding field goals.

The keys have been Tomlinson and Philip Rivers.

Starting with the game in Jacksonville on Nov. 18, Tomlinson has carried 20 times on the first possession of the third quarter and gained 165 yards. He has accounted for an additional 49 yards on two receptions.

Rivers has completed 19-of-27 passes for 284 yards - the load distributed among tight end Antonio Gates (four catches for 72 yards) and wideouts Vincent Jackson (5-76), Chris Chambers (4-59) and Buster Davis (2-28).

But it hasn't been Rivers and Tomlinson alone.

In those eight games, the Chargers' average starting position on their first drive of the second half has been their 36-yard line. Darren Sproles has averaged 32.8 yards the five times he has returned the second-half kickoff in those games - including a 61-yarder against the Raiders.

Defensively, the Chargers have forced three turnovers and four punts on the opposition's first possession of the second half over the past eight weeks. The opposition's average first drive of the second half lasted fewer than five plays and the average gain was 4.3 yards per play.

Only four teams all season have scored on the Chargers on their first possession of the third quarter.

Baltimore is the only club to do so over the past eight weeks.

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