

Thorman’s Snaps and Pace: Week 4

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Welcome to the Week 4 edition of *Snaps & Pace* — winner of the 2024 FSWA Best Football Series — where we examine trends in play volume and game pace. It is meant to be a 30,000-foot view of upcoming contests, while identifying main-slate matchups that will — and will not — be played on fertile fantasy soil. For a primer on why this is important, [click here](#).

Small samples breed variance — and that’s already been proven in single games and over the course of the season’s first few weeks. When we flip a coin two times, it’s no surprise if it comes up heads twice. When we flip it 100 times, those results will be closer to 50/50. Those in favor of the most likely outcome want as many iterations as possible.

So it’s not great news for favorites that only six teams are producing at least 124.4 combined offensive snaps in their games, when that was league average last year — even during a down season for play volume. Only one team averaged fewer than 120 combined plays last year, and *10 teams* are under that mark now.

There are many reasons play volume is down, from shallower target depth breeding fewer yards per pass and higher completion rates that keep clocks grinding, to new kickoff rules, to a crop of quarterbacks who collectively need their hands held pre-snap more than the Bradys and Mannings did.

The knock-on effect is favorites have fewer opportunities for their dominance to come to fruition. Just ask the Packers if they ran enough plays in Cleveland on Sunday, or if the Bills would rather have had more snaps against the Dolphins on Thursday. The solution is playing faster, but not everyone gets the memo — we’re looking at you, McDermott and Siriani.

For us, it leaves fewer glaringly up-pace spots with the promise of ample play volume. Those mythical matchups do still exist, and we shall find them — so let’s dive in.

“Situation neutral” is meant to provide context and refers to plays while the game is within seven points during the first three quarters (minus the final two minutes of the first half). Neutral Pace (average play-clock seconds used), Neutral Pace Over Expected (POE), and Pass Rate Over Expected (PROE) are based on neutral game script and are provided by our data science team.

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Up In Pace

New Orleans Saints at Buffalo Bills

One of the few bankable play-volume catalysts of the early season, the Saints are going to get trucked again. At least they play fast while getting run over. Despite their smothering in Seattle on Sunday, New Orleans posted the second-fastest neutral pace of Week 3 and got off 70 snaps — well above the

depressed current league average (61.1). The Saints don't necessarily bring good football to town, but they deliver play volume. Their three opponents had matchups with New Orleans that averaged 5.7 more offensive snaps than in their non-Saints games. Only the Cowboys and Browns have thrown it more, and the Saints have two pass catchers ranked top 10 in targets, despite New Orleans' PROE ranking just 27th. It's not always pretty with the Saints — actually it's rarely pretty — but at least there's a lot of it.

The Bills should take a lesson. They played with their food last Thursday long enough to require a random roughing-the-punter penalty to avoid flirting with disaster. Buffalo ranks 23rd in neutral pace and, instead of lapping bad teams, their plodding will invite unnecessary variance. Perhaps 10 days to think about that inspires them to play faster, but they've shown zero inclination to pick up the pace since **Joe Brady** took over as OC. Still, they are a wagon — and as 16.5-point favorites are unlikely to be forced into an aggressive offensive approach. Fortunately, the Saints will handle pace-pushing, which should elevate the average combined plays of Buffalo's games (120.7). Bills contests do rank third in total points (57.8), as Buffalo is second only to the Colts in scoring and sits third in explosive play rate (13.1%). Pure blowouts often are played sparingly due to favorites taking a vanilla, clock-killing approach — but they don't often contain this much opportunity.

Chicago Bears at Las Vegas Raiders

Let's stick with the theme of banking on a fast offense to elevate their opponent — only this time in a projected close game. The Bears played at a slower but still-brisk pace in their almost-shootout with the Cowboys. Chicago ranked seventh on the week in neutral pace over expected (+0.9) despite taking a more run-based approach (-7% PROE; 23rd) in a game they essentially controlled. For the season, the Bears are second fastest in neutral pace. Their games haven't been particularly voluminous, but the 124 combined snaps in Week 3 were at least above this season's depressed average. Chicago's contests have, however, sparked more scoring than a divorcee support group on margarita night. Their average of 56.3 total points ranks fourth, and no one allows more points per snap than the Bears. They also surrender explosive plays at a top-10 clip (11.4%), which syncs up well with the Raiders and Jameis West.

Geno Smith was back on his horse on Sunday afternoon, after wetting himself in prime time a week earlier. His 11.6-yard aDOT was the highest of Week 3, no one completed more passes of at least 20 yards, and only **Caleb Williams** had more yards on deep throws. Which, considering this matchup, is nice. For all of their early-season issues, the Raiders rank fourth in explosive play rate (12.7%). And for all of the preseason handwringing over **Pete Carroll**'s supposedly draconian run-heaviness, Las Vegas ranks third in neutral pass rate (63%) even after skewing run-heavy while their Week 3 matchup remained close. We have one offense that has seemingly found some quick-paced footing and another that has its moments, facing turnstile defenses for a tight indoor matchup (LV -I). This may be that back-and-forth affair we're looking for.

Baltimore Ravens at Kansas City Chiefs

Arrowhead hosts yet another matchup in which one offense projects to propel the pace of another to a mutually voluminous result. That's the hope, anyway. The Ravens are looking to rebound from a frustrating home loss to a Lions team that slowed the game and choked out Baltimore's play volume. The Chiefs will have the opposite effect. The Ravens are tied for the second-fewest plays per game (52.3) but lead the league in points per snap. They are more desperate for play volume than **Derrick Henry** is for Stickum. Baltimore has leaned oddly pass-heavy — perhaps because Henry's dropping more balls than puberty. The Ravens are perfectly neutral in PROE on the season (0%) after finishing seventh in Week 3 (+3%). They ranked 29th a year ago (-8.2%). Another change from last season is Baltimore's beat-up defense intimidates no one. After ranking third in defensive success rate, they currently sit 29th. Ravens contests have surprisingly produced the league's most total points at 69.0 per game.

It will be nice for the Chiefs to not be intimidated by a defense, as, despite constant offseason bleating, their offense has been more implosive than explosive. Whereas the Ravens lead the league in rate of 15+ yard gains (17.2%), the Chiefs rank 22nd (8.8%). Their contests deliver the eighth-fewest total points (38.7), but Kansas City still offers an encouraging tempo profile. The Chiefs are second in PROE (+8%) after topping all teams in Week 3, and they sit ninth in neutral pace. Like the Ravens, they are above average in offensive EPA per play (eighth) and below it on the defensive side (21st). This isn't your older brother's Chiefs offense, but it should get **Xavier Worthy** back, and **Andy Reid** figured out what to do with **Tyquan Thornton**. We're as surprised as you are. The Ravens couldn't coax passable play volume out of a game in which the Lions were slowly grinding their faces into the turf, but a matchup with the Chiefs should deliver a decent amount more. There's too much offensive talent on both sides to ignore what might happen with extra opportunities.

Slow-Paced Slogs

Cleveland Browns at Detroit Lions

The Browns' defense looks, once again, like a unit to avoid. Sure, **Lamar Jackson** threw four touchdowns against them in Week 2 — but they held the Ravens to under 250 total yards and three of those touchdowns came directly off of turnovers. The drives totaled seven plays and began at the Browns' 36-, 24-, and 5-yard lines. It's been a Cleveland steamrolling of everyone else, including the Packers last Sunday. The Browns have also, wisely, begun shifting to a run-heavier approach — going from +3% in PROE, to -1%, to -4% over the first three games. With **Quinshon Judkins** usurping the backfield and averaging over five yards per carry, Cleveland's offensive identity takes a more logical shape. Featuring the 20th-ranked neutral pace and coming off of a 118-combined-play outing, these are not the chuck-it-around, high-volume **Joe Flacco** Browns we hoped for. Their contests average a paltry 38 total points and rank 31st in full-game explosive play rate (7.2%).

After watching the Lions on Monday night, and **Dan Campbell** in the postgame locker room, everyone wants to jump aboard. Of course, Campbell can talk a dog off a meat wagon, but his offense is slow-paced and run-based. Detroit operates at the 28th-fastest neutral pace and, after turning in the 28th-

highest PROE of Week 3 (-9%), ranks 30th on the full season (-7%). The Ravens were moving the ball at a decent 5.9 yards-per-play clip but only had 54 offensive snaps. It’s safe to say the Browns will not be as efficient. Only the play-volume famines in Minnesota and Miami are yielding fewer combined snaps than Lions games (118) — and although Detroit will produce some tasty statistical morsels on Sunday, there likely won’t be enough to feed the many fantasy mouths at this table.

Tennessee Titans at Houston Texans

The silver lining on this game not having much play volume is it also doesn’t have many fantasy targets, with all due respect to the dueling 38% catch rates of **Calvin Ridley** and **Christian Kirk**. The Titans continue to play slowly and hand off often, despite the presence of their top-pick rookie passer. Tennessee ranks 28th in neutral pace and 25th in PROE. Their games are mid-pack in combined play volume (122.3), an area in which they finished dead last a year ago (119.1). Even that has declined for two straight Titans games. Already 32nd in yards per play (3.6) and leading the league in sideline shots of a confused coach who just **gave up play-calling**, this is a falling knife not yet worth catching.

Watching the Texans is like running into your ex chain-smoking outside *7-Eleven*, rubbing a \$1 scratch ticket with the edge of another scratch ticket. It’s sad because they used to be fun — but there’s no easy path forward. Houston is committed to remaining balanced but can’t run the ball, shellshocked **CJ Stroud** is not handling pressure — real or imagined — very well, the sieve of an OL has a pass-block win rate ranked 26th, and new OC **Nick Caley** looks less like a branch off the **Sean McVay** tree than something that **Josh McDaniels** scraped off his shoe. At least the Texans’ defense is elite. Not surprisingly, their games yield the league’s fewest total points, by far (29.7) — as well as the fifth-fewest combined plays (119). The Week 4-low projected total might be misleading, to the upside.

Carolina Panthers at New England Patriots

After simply offering the Falcons enough rope to get hung by their Penix, the Panthers might need to extend more in New England — not that the Patriots also didn’t lose last week by stepping on their own johnsons. Whether the Panthers are capable of pushing a game’s pace is the question. Carolina is sporadically competent on the ground (15th in rushing EPA) but not as often through the air (24th). Their offensive line is beat up, pass-catching tight end **Ja’Tavion Sanders** is hurt, **Tetairoa McMillan** could see **Christian Gonzalez** all afternoon, and **Bryce Young** might be a month early with the pumpkin costume. The Panthers are 27th in explosive play rate (7.3%) and their games produce the seventh-fewest total points (28.8). Ranked 26th in neutral pace and coming off a low-volume contest, Carolina will likely require assistance in elevating the matchup’s tempo.

Mike Vrabel was sure to mention how much the Patriots need **Rhamondre Stevenson**, and at some point, they will attempt to get him involved after he fumbled his way to the bench again. The matchup couldn’t be much better against a run-funnel Panthers defense ranked 24th in rushing EPA per play surrendered, but fourth best against the pass. Whether it’s **Mondre** or **TreVeyon Henderson** or **Antonio Gibson** testing the Panthers, we could see a more deliberate pace after a mountain of Week 3 miscues — similar to how New England slowed down in Week 2 (23rd in neutral pace) after a sloppy opener. The play volume hasn’t been there in two of the Patriots’ three games (119 combined snaps; 28th on the season) despite their mostly pass-leaning, quick-tempoed approach. Considering they will play the role of pace-pusher in this matchup, that does not bode well when trying to parse opportunities in an offense featuring a frustratingly wide touch distribution.

Pace Notes

– With **Jayden Daniels** on the shelf and the Raiders offering light resistance, the Commanders did not play nearly as fast as we’ve come to expect. Washington ranked 22nd in neutral pace on the week (38.7 seconds). It was a far cry from their to-date seasonal mark (35.1; second fastest) or when the Commanders led the league a year ago (34.8).

Paired with a ground-committed -9% PROE, which ranked 26th on the week, it resulted in uncharacteristically muted play volume. With both Daniels and **Terry McLaurin**’s game statuses in question, along with the fact that Washington just gathered 200 yards on the ground — a fast-paced, air-it-out Week 4 plan seems unlikely.

Even if the Commanders pick the pace back up in Atlanta, the Falcons seem insistent upon shutting it down. They rank dead last in neutral pace, and their pivot to a slightly pass-heavier approach did not agree with **Michael Penix Jr.** Atlanta entered Week 3 ranked 29th in PROE (-8.1%) but edged it to -3% — good for 17th on the week. It was frustrating for the Falcons’ Penix, with zero deep connections and not penetrating within 30 yards of scoring.

Indoor meetings between formerly fast-paced teams — at least one of which has only temporarily slowed — are not something to ignore for fantasy. Most signals point to a run-based, slow-paced, lower-volume matchup in which at least Washington’s touch tree is not very condensed. Considering the underlying tendencies of each OC, however, we are keeping this one out of the *Slogs*.

– Right or wrong, **Jaxson Dart** will make his NFL debut at home against the Chargers. It might make more sense to wait until the Giants’ Week 5 date with the Saints, but **Brian Daboll** was likely to have a mutiny on his hands. More importantly, if you like this sort of thing, there have been **clear signals since the summer** that when New York goes to Dart we will see a spike in pace.

While the Giants did not run a single no-huddle play with **Russell Wilson** this preseason and have gone to it only sparingly when in catch-up mode since then, Dart registered significant hurry-up rates in all three appearances in August. It aligns with his time at Ole Miss, and all indications are it will be part of the Giants’ offensive plan with the rookie. If Dart survives the Chargers, his trip to the bayou is the early favorite for fastest-paced game of Week 5.

– A quick item on the Chargers’ offense, which we have emphasized has been playing slowly despite their extreme pass-heaviness — they are no longer playing slowly. Ranked 22nd in neutral pace coming into Week 3, Los Angeles continued to speed up on Sunday night. Despite a perfectly neutral PROE (0%) contrasting with severe passing leans in their first two games (+15%, +14%), the Chargers’ matchup with the Broncos registered the second-most combined snaps of Week 3.

If Los Angeles’ pivot to a faster pace is sticky, and they continue to throw at a high rate — or even a moderate one — our former play-volume concerns disappear. We get our next clue against a likely quick-paced Giants team led by **Jaxson Dart** on Sunday, for a matchup that suddenly features a quietly significant play-volume ceiling.

– Will the Eagles heed the wake-up call that Ray Charles could see coming? Heading into Week 3, they had plummeted from sixth fastest in neutral pace last year to fourth slowest this year, despite their PROE rising from -9% to -6%. Philadelphia refused to throw downfield, as **Jalen Hurts’** aDOT dropped from 8.1 yards to 5.9, and his completion rate jumped to 76% from 69%. Those extra passes were just fancy handoffs that kept game clocks bleeding while Hurts burned play clocks.

Eagles games lacked play volume, with 116.5 combined snaps — an average that would’ve ranked last by a distance in 2024. On a per-drive basis, they were second in time (3:45) and fifth in plays (6.8), but only 23rd in yards (28.3). They wasted a lot of time essentially going nowhere, letting overmatched opponents hang around. Eventually that will bite anyone in the ass and, thankfully, the Rams slapped the Eagles in the face.

Out of necessity, Philadelphia reintroduced tempo — going no-huddle on 54% of their 39 plays after falling behind 19-7. They only had three hurry-up snaps before then. Their 48% first-half pass rate jumped to 63%. Hurts’ 5.4-yard aDOT returned to a 2024-like 8.6 yards, and there was much rejoicing among members of the Eagles’ passing game.

While this will not be the approach every week, hopefully it served as a reminder of what Philadelphia’s passing game *should* do to begin most games. If nothing else, they need to quit crawling between plays to give themselves more opportunities for their superior talent to set the pace.

[Caleb Williams, Chicago Bears, In-Season Package, Snaps & Pace](#)



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