The Driving Factors Behind the Chicago Bears' Miracle Comeback Wins

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Introduction

The Chicago Bears clinched the NFC North title when the Green Bay Packers lost to the Baltimore Ravens in Week 17, winning the divisional title for the first time since 2018 and ending a streak of three consecutive last place finishes in the division. Their current 11-5 record has been made possible off of *six* fourth-quarter comebacks led by quarterback Caleb Williams, a tally that stands tied at fifth on the all time list for a single season and ties Peyton Manning for the most in a season by a player under 25.

Throughout Sunday night's game against the San Francisco 49ers, announcers Cris Collinsworth and Mike Tirico repeatedly praised the Bears' remarkable ability to engineer late-game comebacks. But how have the Bears been able to come up with these miraculous comeback wins so consistently this season? Which phases of the game have been most instrumental in setting up these comebacks? What specifically are the Bears doing differently in these wins?

Ultimately, the Bears failed to make another comeback against the 49ers. What went wrong in this and other failed comebacks? By analyzing play-by-play data from all Chicago Bears games this season, I have found several clear patterns in the data that answer these questions.

Overview of Data Analysis

Play-by-play data for every Bears game this season was obtained from rbsdm.com. This data includes standard metrics as well as advanced statistics such as Expected Points Added (EPA) and Win Probability Added (WPA). From this data I calculated other advanced metrics. A full glossary of the statistics considered in this analysis is included in the Appendix.

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Further, along with season-wide statistics, several different subsets of Bears plays were analyzed to create comparisons. These are:

- The fourth quarters of the six comeback games and Week 16's overtime (our group of interest; Weeks 4, 6, 9, 10, 11, and 16)
- The first three quarters of the six comeback games
- The fourth quarters of all ten other games this season
- The first three quarters of all ten other games this season
- The whole season excluding the fourth quarters of comeback games and Week 16's overtime
- The fourth quarters of failed comebacks (Weeks 1, 14 and 17)
- The first three quarters of comeback and failed comeback games (9 games)

This data analysis occurred in three stages, with different subsets of Bears plays being compared with the fourth quarters of comeback games and Week 16's overtime in each stage. Note that hereafter, any reference to the fourth quarters of comebacks also includes the Week 16 overtime against the Green Bay Packers.

Stage 1: Comeback vs. Baseline Chicago Bears

In the first stage of my analysis I determined what the Chicago Bears did well during these comebacks compared to a standard baseline. Metrics from the 'Fourth quarters of the six comeback games' subset were compared to the 'Whole season excluding fourth quarters of comeback games' subset (two subsets whose union comprises the whole season) as well as with season-wide statistics.
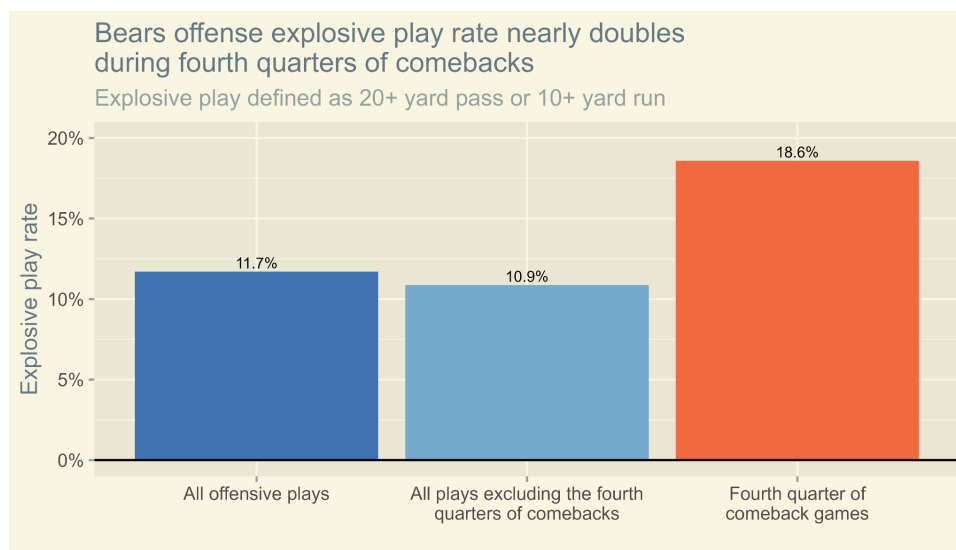
Outstanding Offensive Efficiency

Based on play-by-play data, I calculated EPA per play as well as EPA per pass attempt, EPA per run, and EPA per dropback (defined as pass attempts and scrambles). The Chicago Bears already have a solid EPA per play this season at 0.08, placing them inside the top 10 offenses in the NFL. However, EPA per play surges to an unfathomable 0.28 during the fourth quarters of these comebacks.

Bears offensive efficiency skyrockets during the fourth quarters of comebacks
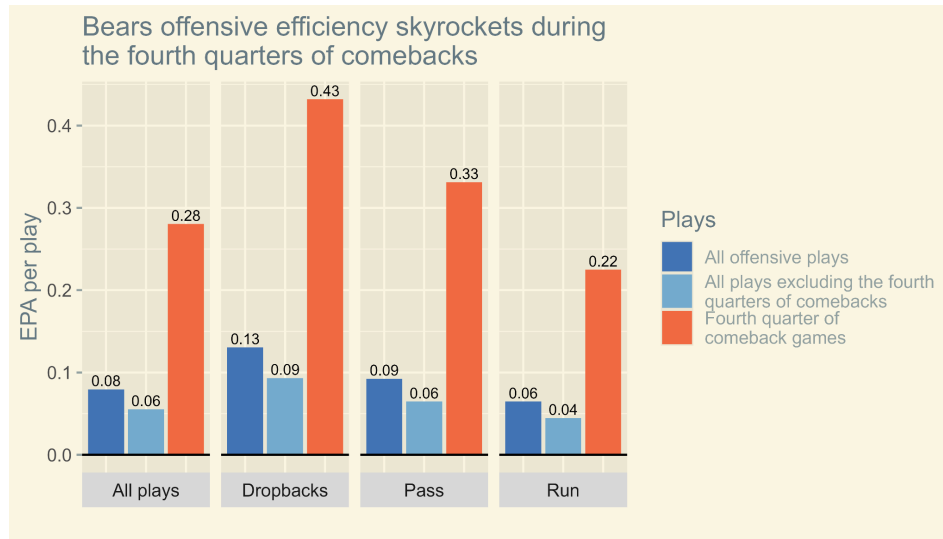
The Bears' EPA per pass and EPA per run during the fourth quarters of comebacks jump to 0.33 and 0.22, respectively, which exceeds the best passing and rushing offenses in the NFL. Notably, EPA per dropback is significantly higher than EPA per pass. This suggests that Caleb Williams is scrambling well during comebacks. Indeed, in eight scrambles Williams is averaging a remarkable 13.3 yards per scramble, including the memorable 17-yard touchdown run and a 29-yard run against the New York Giants. This far exceeds his season-wide average of 8.6 yards per scramble.

The Chicago Bears offense is much more explosive during comebacks. The Bears' offensive explosive play rate rockets to 18.6% during comebacks, compared to 10.9% in all other quarters and 11.7% on the season. Ben Johnson's offense is known for generating explosive plays, and this is most evident during comebacks.

Bears offense explosive play rate nearly doubles during fourth quarters of comebacks
Explosive play defined as 20+ yard pass or 10+ yard run

Increased efficiency can come from several sources, from yards per carry to completion percentage. For the Bears offense, this increased efficiency is not coming from Caleb Williams making more passes, but instead how many yards each pass gets.

Caleb Williams is not completing more passes in comebacks
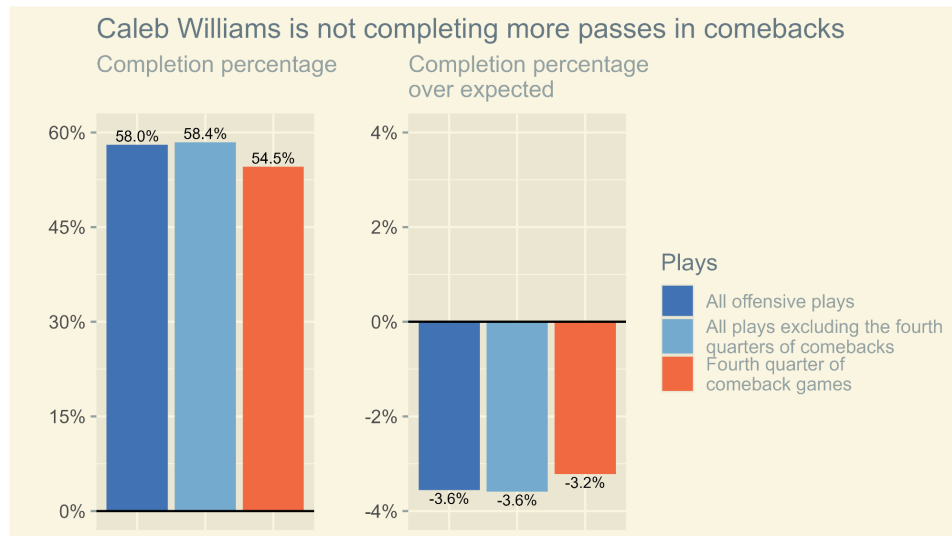
Caleb Williams is hitting on *fewer* of his passes during comebacks, with his completion percentage dipping to 54.5%. His completion percentage over expected increases slightly from -3.6% to -3.2%, but this is a very small difference. Instead, the increased efficiency comes from deeper passes and Bears' receivers getting more yards after the catch.

Bears get more yards out of each reception during the fourth quarter of comebacks
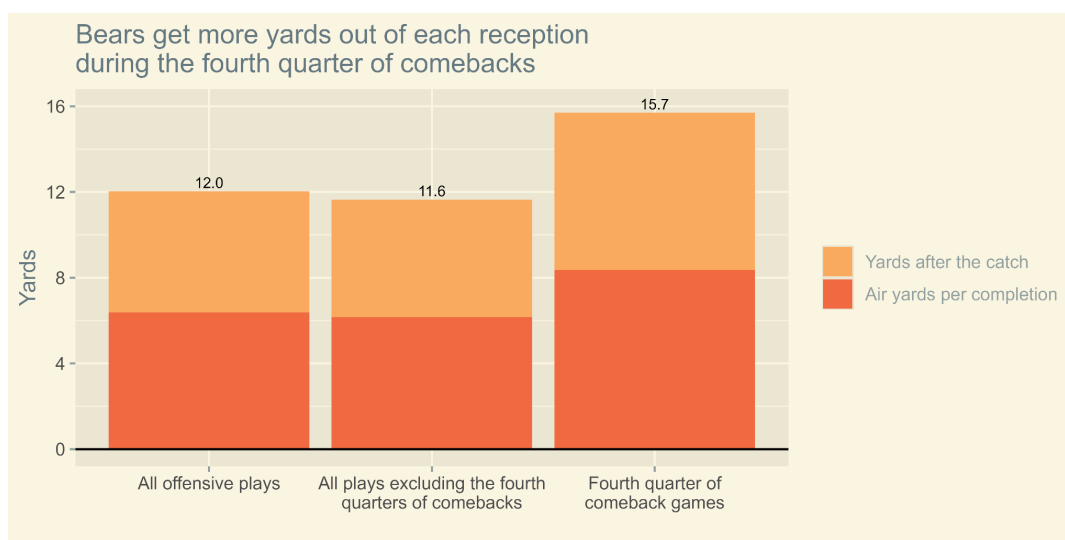
Complete passes carry an average of 8.4 yards in the air during comebacks, up from 6.2 yards in all other quarters and 6.4 yards on the season. Receivers net an

impressive 7.3 yards after the catch during comebacks, up from 5.5 yards in all other quarters and 5.7 yards on the season.

The Chicago Bears have the best turnover differential in the NFL thanks to an incredible defensive takeaway rate and limiting giveaways. However, the already remarkable 0.95% turnover rate across the season drops all the way down to 0% during the fourth quarter of comebacks. During the six Bears comebacks this year, they have committed *zero* giveaways.

Massive Contributions from Special Teams

Several of these fourth quarter comebacks would not have happened without massive contributions from the Bears special teams. Josh Blackwell, Cairo Santos, and Devin Duvernay have consistently come up with big plays during these comebacks.
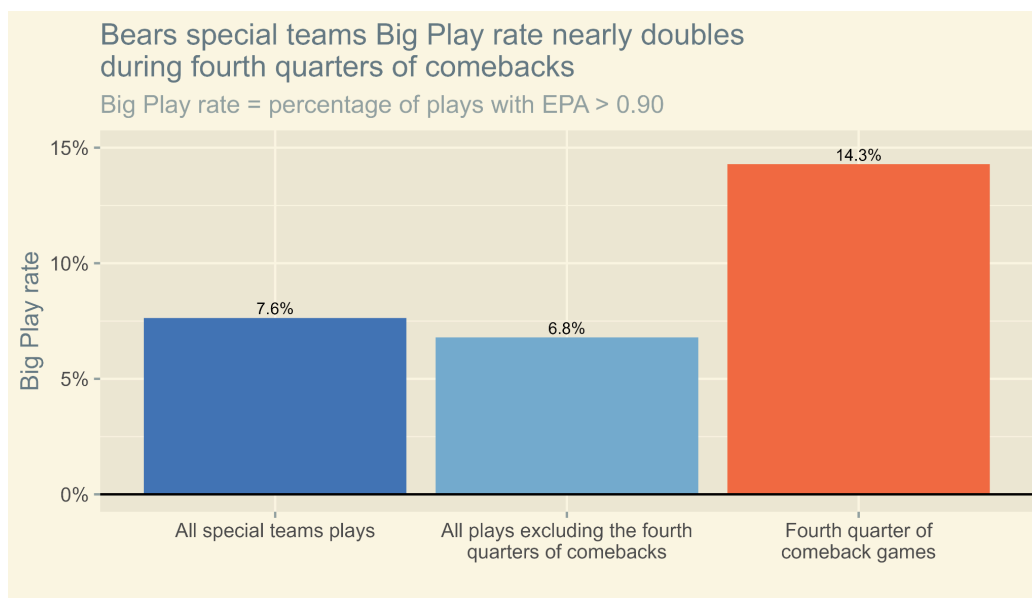

Special teams Big Play rate increases dramatically, launching to 14.3% during these comebacks from 6.8% in all other quarters, highlighting the Bears special teams' consistent ability to deliver when it is needed most. In these comebacks Cairo Santos has made 100% of his field goals from above 45-yards out. Josh Blackwell blocked a field goal in the final minute of the game against the Las Vegas Raiders, saving their lead. Devin Duvernay had a massive 56-yard kick return against the Minnesota Vikings. Cairo Santos and Josh Blackwell successfully kicked and recovered an onside kick against the Green Bay Packers in Week 16, which the Bears needed to win that game.

Bears special teams EPA per play explodes during fourth quarters of comebacks
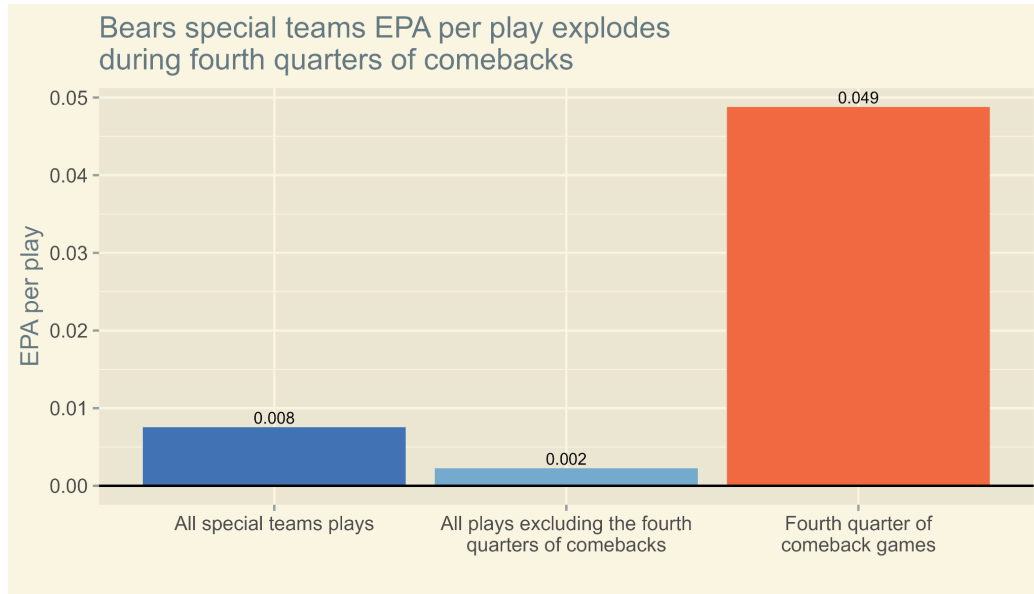
The impact of these big plays reflects in the Bears special teams' EPA per play. If it were not for these massive plays from special teams, the Bears likely would not have won these games. These plays are possibly the single greatest driving factor behind the Bears comeback victories.

Defense not Improving

While the Bears offense and special teams performances improve dramatically during these comebacks, the Bears defense actually plays worse on average. Bears defense EPA allowed per play increases to 0.011 from 0.006 in all other quarters, and

Bears defense is playing worse during comebacks
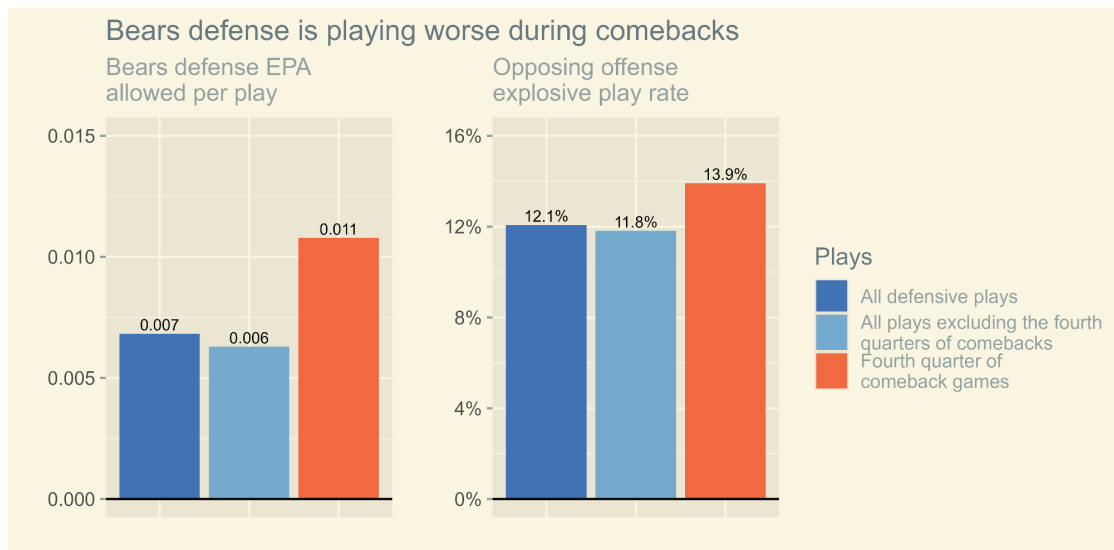
opposing offense explosive play rate increases to a poor 13.9% from 11.8% in all other quarters.

All things considered, these differences are minor at best. The numbers dipped slightly across the board, and bad performances against the Cincinnati Bengals (Week 9) and the Minnesota Vikings (Week 11), where they allowed 15 and 14 points in the fourth quarters, respectively, forced heroics from the offense and special teams.

The exception to this dip in performance is takeaway rate. On the season the Bears takeaway rate is a league-leading 3.36%, and this improves to 3.48% during these comebacks. Generating this volume of takeaways could be a significant contributing factor to Bears comebacks. However, a case-by-case analysis suggests otherwise.

The Bears defense had 4 takeaways in the fourth quarter of comeback games. Three of those came against Joe Flacco and the Cincinnati Bengals. Two of those three occurred earlier in the quarter while the Bears were leading the Bengals. The third was an interception off of a Hail Mary at the end of the game. All three of these turnovers happened while the Bears were leading the Bengals, so they should not be considered driving factors of Bears comebacks.

The fourth turnover came against the Washington Commanders when quarterback Jayden Daniels fumbled the ball trying to hand it off to running back Jacory Croskey-Merritt. It was more so a blunder by Jayden Daniels than a good play by the defense. Nevertheless, this play was a big momentum shift and did enable a comeback.

However, this means that only one out of the four Bears defensive takeaways was really a contributing factor to a comeback. When compared to the plays made by the Bears special teams, it is not a significant difference. In terms of Win Probability Added, these turnovers added 26%, 17%, 6%, and 3% to the Bears win probability. In comparison, the top Bears special teams plays added 46%, 35%, 25%, and 16% to the Bears win probability.

## Stage 2: Game-specific and Fourth Quarter Improvement

In the first stage of my analysis, I found that offensive EPA per play, explosive play rate, and yards per catch as well as special teams Big Play rate and EPA per play exhibited dramatic improvements during the fourth quarters of comebacks compared to

season-wide Bears metrics. But what if there was something about those specific games, such as personnel differences or weaker defenses, that led to the Bears improving in those metrics throughout the course of the game? Or, what if the Bears offense is always better in the fourth quarter, and this is not anything special? In this stage of my analysis I considered these possibilities.

For the first of the two scenarios, I compared plays in the fourth quarters of the six comeback games with plays in the first three quarters of those same games to see if there was any improvement. Then, for the second scenario, I compared the improvement from the first three quarters to the fourth quarter of the comeback games with the improvement (or decline) from the first three quarters to the fourth quarter of the other ten games to see if the improvement was greater in comeback games.

Offensive Efficiency

The massive improvement in EPA per play is unique to the fourth quarter of comebacks. First, EPA per play during the first three quarters of comeback games is 0.03, which doesn't even come close to the EPA per play during the fourth quarters of comebacks, at 0.28. Next, the Bears actually play significantly worse during the fourth

Bears offensive efficiency during comebacks is an anomaly
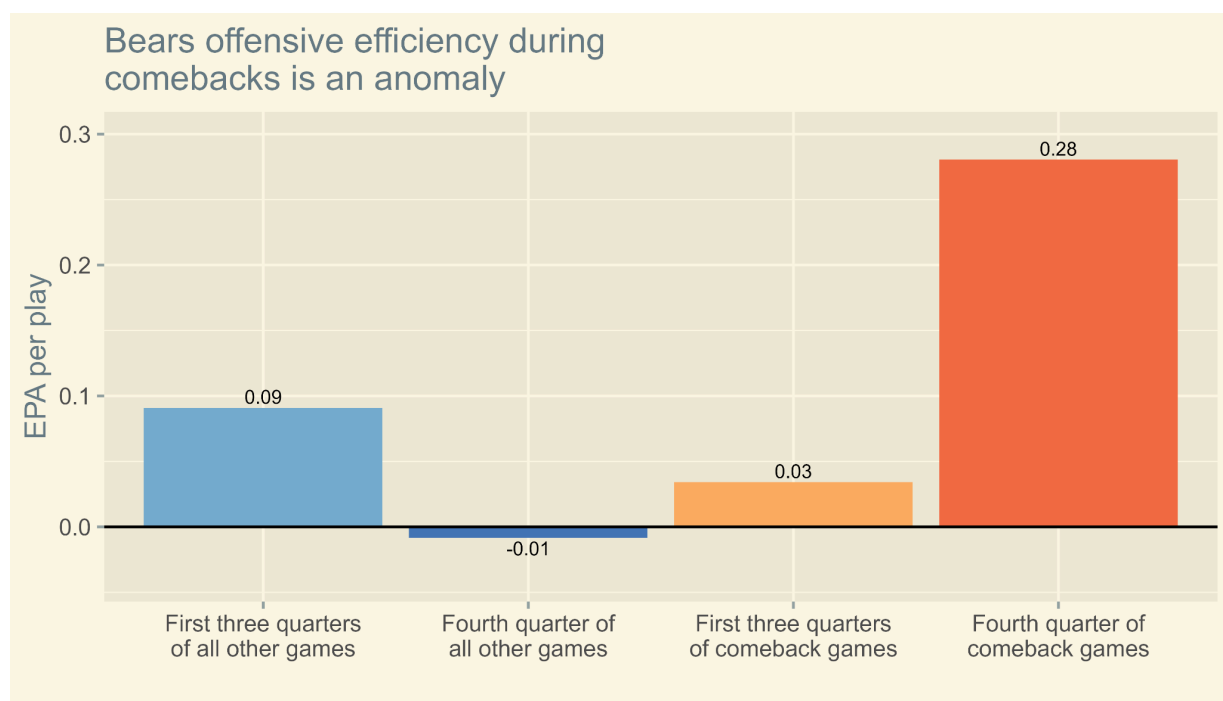
quarters of the other ten games compared to the first three quarters of those games. Therefore, the improvement in EPA per play during comebacks is not reflective of possible improvements in those specific games or in the fourth quarter in general.

The surge in explosive plays is also unique to fourth quarter comebacks. The explosive play rate during the first three quarters of comeback games is 9.2%, which is less than half than the rate of 18.6% during the fourth quarters of comebacks, showing that the improvement in explosive play rate during comebacks is not a product of improvement in those specific games. Further, similar to EPA per play, the explosive play rate decreases from 12.0% in the first three quarters to 10.4% in the fourth quarter of the other ten games, showing that the improvement in explosive play rate during comebacks is not a product of general improvement in the fourth quarter.
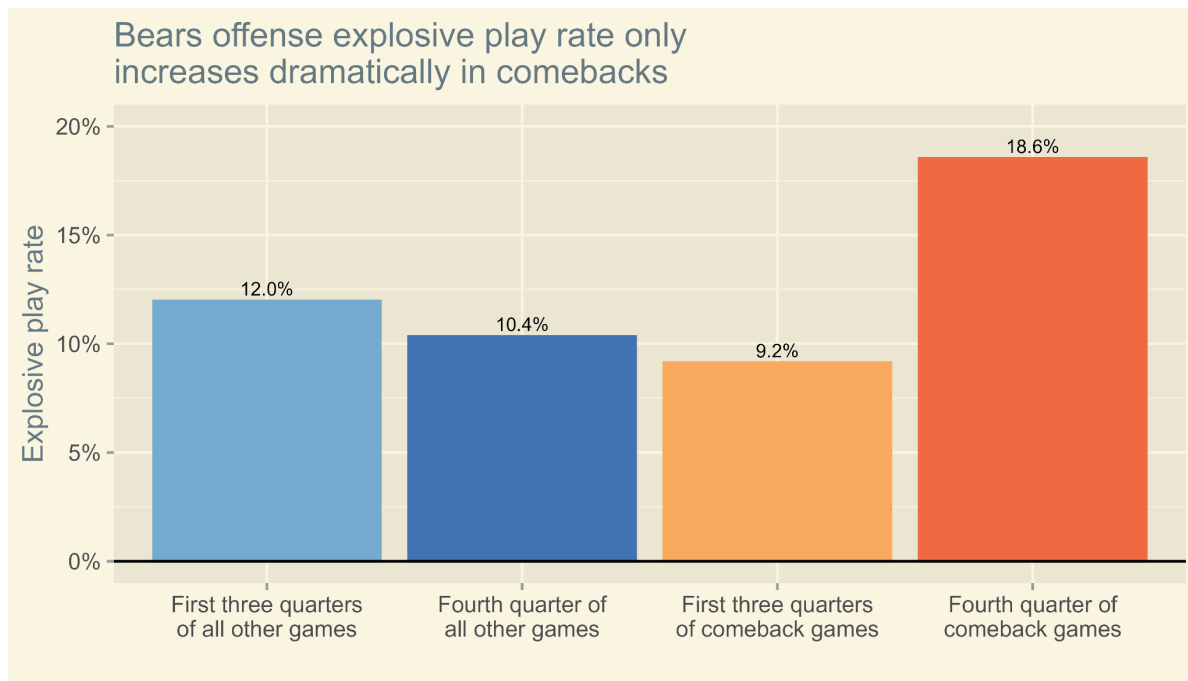

In yards per reception, however, the Bears do improve from the first three quarters to the fourth quarter of the other ten games, rising slightly from 11.8 to 12.1 yards per reception. However, this improvement is far less than the improvement from the first three quarters to the fourth quarter of comebacks, where the Bears improved from 11.1 yards per reception to 15.7 yards per reception. This improvement comes from both air yards per completion and yards after the catch.

Bears offense yards per reception increases slightly in the fourth quarter but increases much more in comebacks
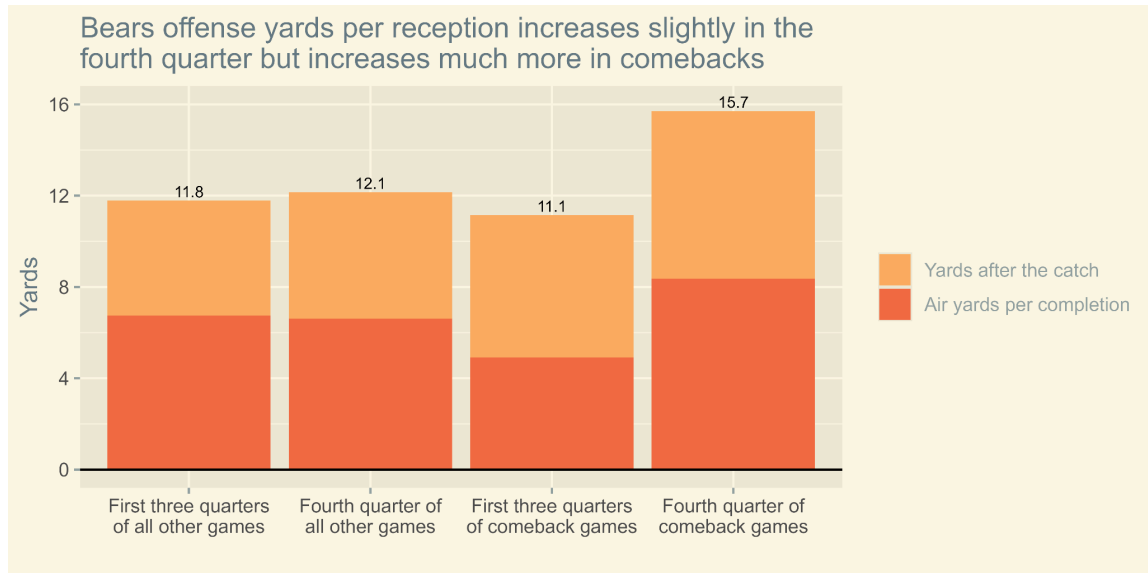
In these metrics the Bears were worse in the first three quarters of comeback games than in the first three quarters of the other ten games. This makes sense as there is a selection bias since the Bears needed to make comebacks in these games.

Special Teams Big Plays

The spike in special teams Big Play rate is unique to the fourth quarter of comebacks. In the first three quarters of comeback games, special teams Big Play rate is a normal 8.8%, rising dramatically to 14.3% during comebacks. In the other ten games,

Bears special teams Big Play rate improvement is not fourth quarter or game specific
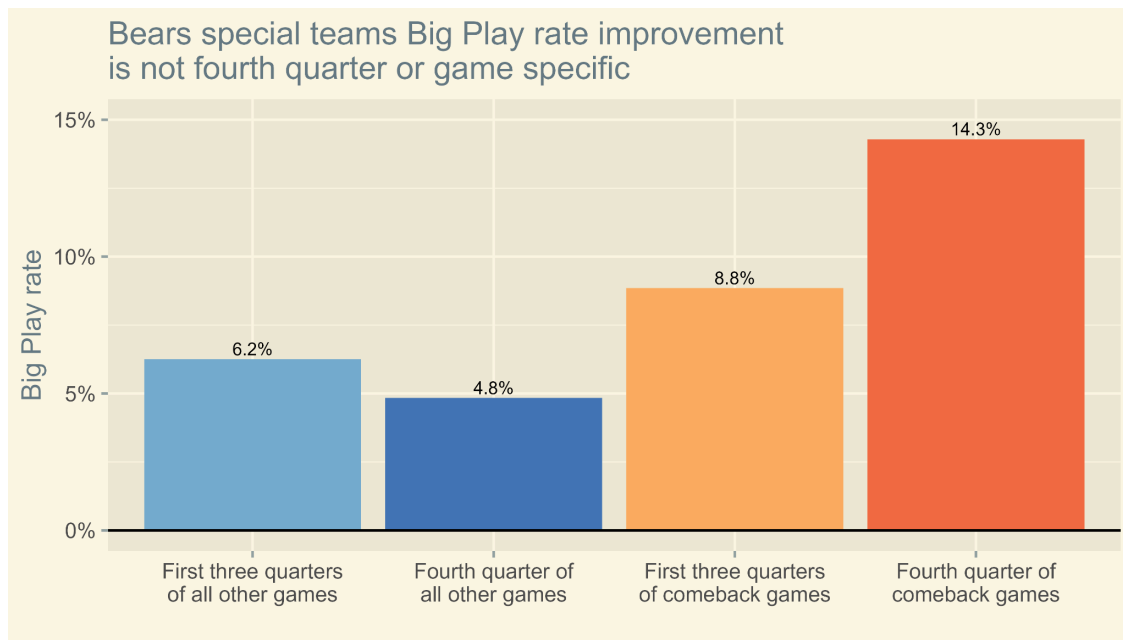
the Bears declined from 6.2% the first three quarters to 4.8% the fourth quarter, showing that the improvement during comebacks does not come from general improvement in the fourth quarter. Special teams EPA per play tells a similar story.
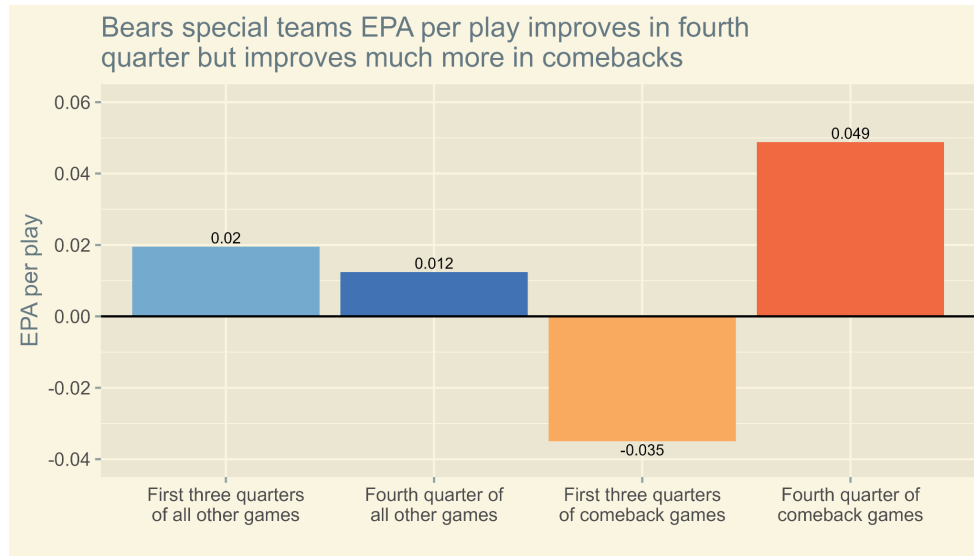
In the second stage of my analysis, I have determined that the improvements in offensive EPA per play, explosive play rate, and yards per catch are unique to the fourth quarters of comebacks, and do not come from general improvements in the fourth quarter or better play in those specific games. Similarly, the volume of momentum shifting plays generated by Bears special teams during these comebacks is unmatched.

Stage 3: Comebacks vs. Failed Comebacks

In the third stage of my analysis, I compared the successful fourth quarter comebacks with the unsuccessful ones. I considered the games that the Bears lost by one possession as failed comebacks, as these were close games that the Bears came close to winning but fell short. These games are Week 1 against the Minnesota Vikings, Week 14 against the Green Bay Packers, and Week 17 against the San Francisco 49ers, with final scores of 24-27, 21-28, and 38-42, respectively. In none of these games did the opposing team take the lead only within the final two minutes of regulation. The Packers and the 49ers each regained their leads on their last possessions after losing it earlier in the quarter, but left ample time on the clock for the Bears to put together potential game-winning drives.

Additionally, I included the first three quarters of these nine games as a baseline for comparison. In this stage of my analysis, my goal was to find in the data an explanation for why the Bears were unable to make another three comebacks in the games against the Vikings, Packers, and 49ers.

Offense

The Bears offense improved in some metrics and got worse in other metrics during failed comebacks. The Bears offense generally played slightly below average during the first three quarters of these games compared to their season-wide metrics, so any improvement is not necessarily indicative of solid play.

During the first three quarters of these nine comeback-situation games, offensive EPA per play was a solid 0.07. This rises to an impressive 0.11 during failed comebacks. Explosive play rate rises from a substandard (for the Bears) 8.9% to a typical 11.5%. Although these are improvements from the first three quarters, they are not very big improvements when compared to successful comebacks.

Further, air yards per completion and yards after the catch improve slightly during failed comebacks from 5.6 yards to 6.7 yards and from 5.4 yards to 5.7 yards,

Bears offensive efficiency does not improve enough in fourth quarters of one possesion losses
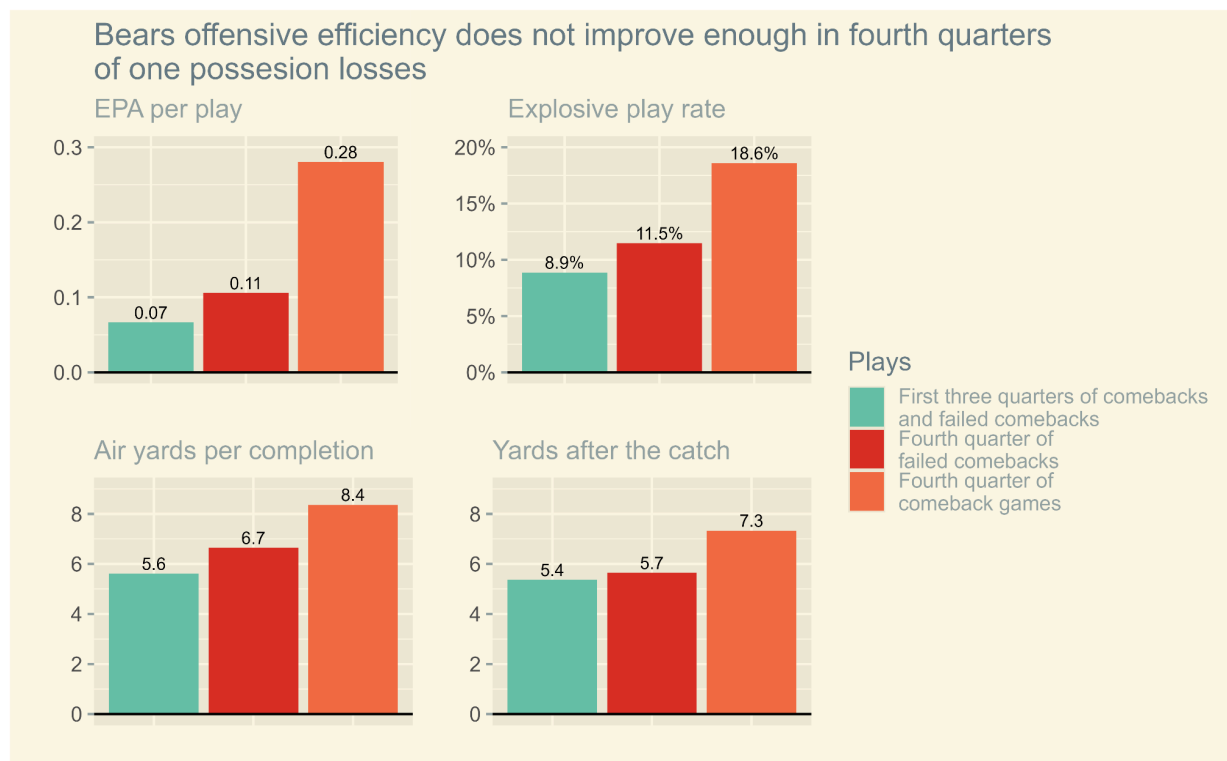
respectively, however this is not as much as the improvement in both metrics during the fourth quarter of successful comebacks. Completion percentage falls to a pitiful 51.3% during the fourth quarters of failed comebacks, hurting efficiency. In general, the Bears offense is solid during failed comebacks, but not as good as in successful comebacks.

Defense

In the first stage of my analysis I determined that the Bears defense does not help nor hurt the Bears significantly during comeback games. However, it is possible that in failed comebacks the Bears defense played well, but it is not as important as having an elite offense, so the Bears still lost. Alternatively, it is possible that extremely poor defensive play led to failed comebacks despite the Bears playing solid offense.

The data suggests that it is the latter possibility. The Bears defense played horrible during failed comebacks. After all, they did allow 21 points to the Vikings in the fourth quarter of Week 1. Their EPA allowed per play shot up to 0.53, they generated zero takeaways, and they allowed explosive plays on 18.6% of plays. In particular, they could not stop anything in the air, with an EPA allowed per pass of 0.86 and opposing offenses completing 73.7% of passes.


Bears defense is horrific during failed comebacks
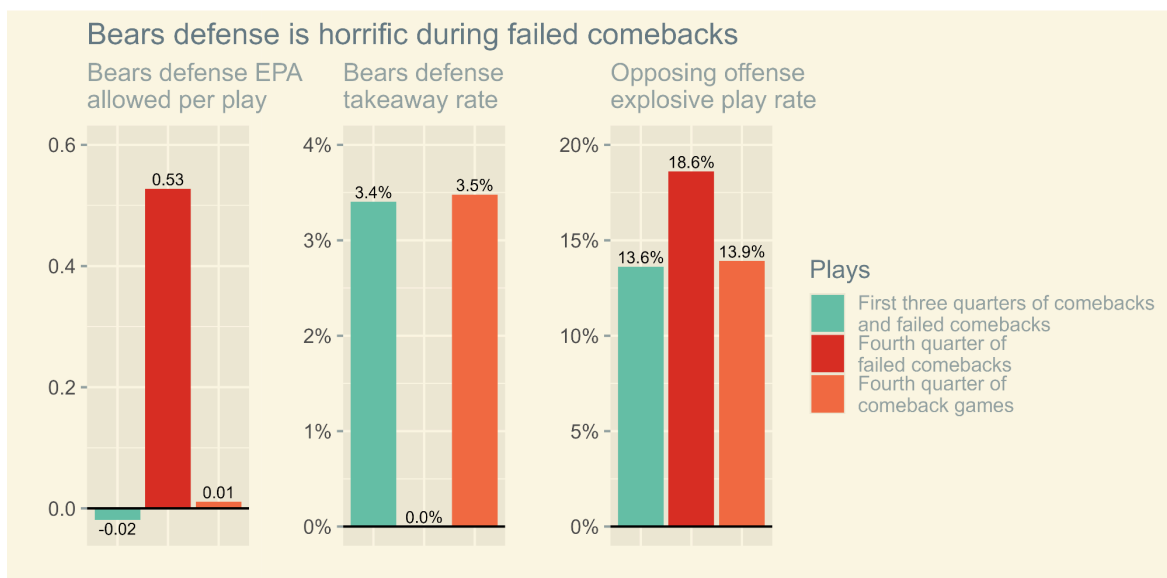
These types of performances undo any potential gains made by the offense during these failed comeback attempts.

Special Teams

In the first two stages of my analysis I determined that big plays by Bears special teams was possibly the biggest driving factor in manufacturing comebacks. So, how did special teams fare in failed comebacks?
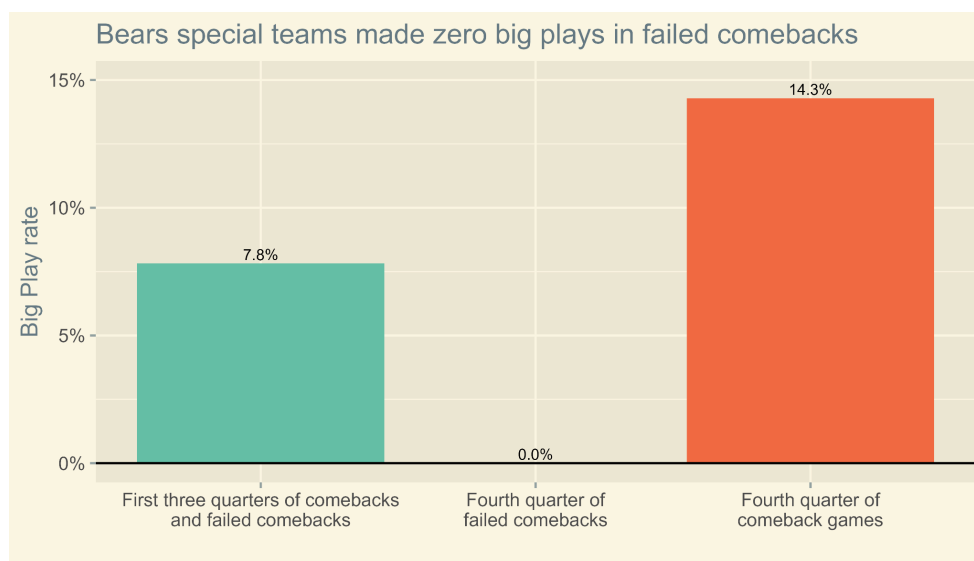
Not good. Bears special teams made zero big plays during failed comebacks, and their EPA per play plummeted to -0.18. They were of no help to the Chicago Bears' comeback efforts during these failed comebacks.
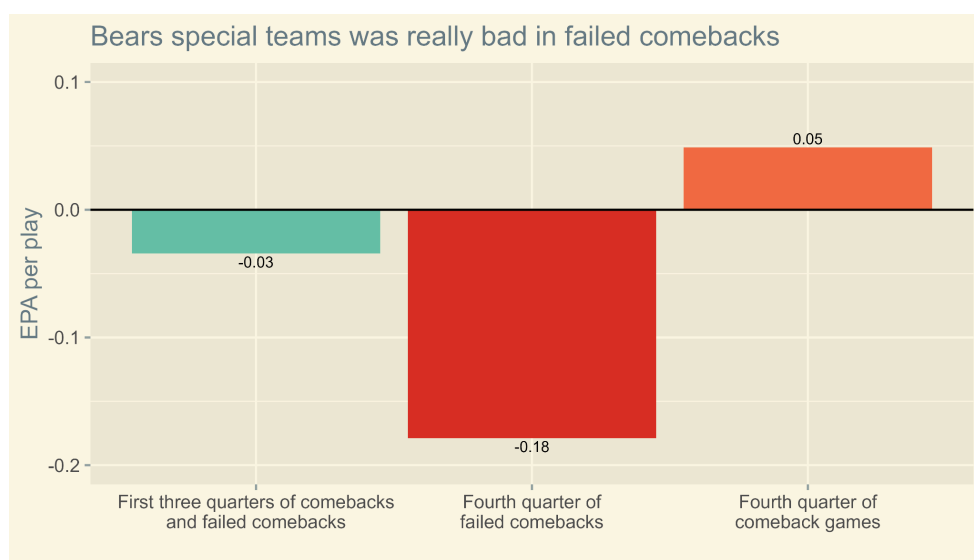
Despite solid offensive play, bad defense and special teams hurt the Bears' chances of making another three comebacks.

Discussion

Findings

In Stage 1 of my analysis, I found that offensive efficiency driven by explosive plays and yards per reception and the rate of massive plays from special teams improve dramatically during the fourth quarters of comeback wins. In Stage 2, I verified that these improvements were not a product of general improvement in the fourth quarter nor of general improvement in those specific games. Together, these findings suggest that <u>explosive plays on offense, improved yards per catch, and big special teams plays were the biggest driving factors behind the Chicago Bears' comeback wins</u>.

Additionally, in Stage 3 of my analysis I found that the reason the Bears failed to make three additional comebacks was likely because of poor defense and special teams, and not necessarily because of their offense not improving enough.

Next Steps

In this project I limited the scope of my analysis to Chicago Bears comeback wins this season. Ultimately, I found some metrics that stood out and contributed greatly to their comebacks. In a future project, I plan to utilize the nflfastR R package to expand the scope of my analysis and determine, across the league, which factors are most likely to lead to a successful comeback. An explosive offense and big plays by special teams led to the Chicago Bears making comebacks, but is this also the case for other teams across the league? Does having a better offense, defense, or special teams best enable a team to be able to make comebacks? Why are some teams better at making comebacks than others? I hope to answer these questions and more in a future project.
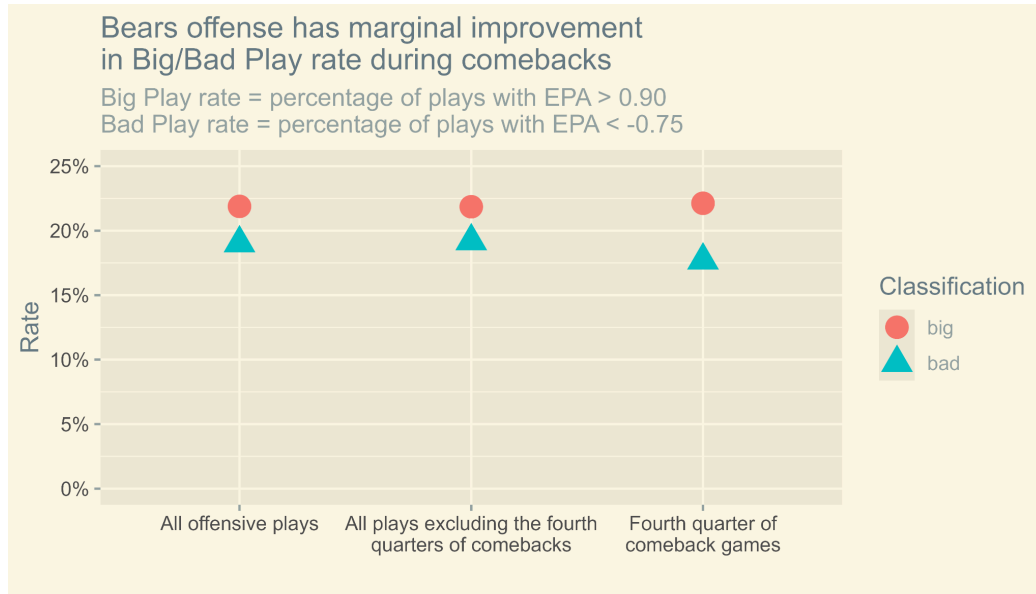
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Appendix

Glossary

Following is a list of all metrics considered in this analysis accompanied by definitions:

- Expected Points Added (EPA): An advanced metric that measures how good a play was compared to its expectation, taking down, yards to go until a first down, and distance to the endzone into consideration (Best Ball Stats)
- Success Rate: the percentage of plays with a positive EPA
- Turnover Rate: the percentage of plays that result in a fumble or interception
- Big Play Rate: the percentage of plays with an EPA greater than 0.90, which is above the 80th percentile of plays (Best Ball Stats)
- Bad Play Rate: the percentage of plays with an EPA less than -0.75, which is below the 20th percentile of plays (Best Ball Stats)
- Completion Percent: the percentage of successful pass attempts
- Completion Percent Over Expected: An advanced metric that compares the actual completion percentage and the expected completion percentage, accounting for the difficulty of passes
- Explosive Play Rate: the percentage of plays that result in a 20+ yard pass or 10+ yard run
- Win Probability Added (WPA): An advanced metric that measures how much a play increased or decreased the team's probability of winning the game
- Air Yards per Completion: the average yardage complete passes traveled through the air
- Yards After the Catch: the average yardage receivers gained after the catch.
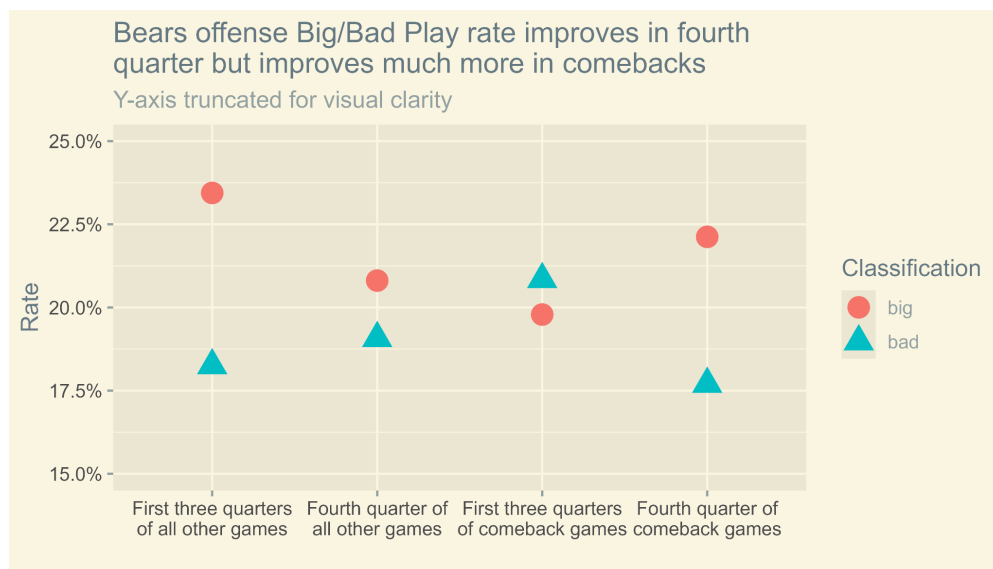
Additional Findings: Big/Bad Play Rate and Success Rate

As metrics derived from EPA, it would not be a surprise to see improvements in offensive Big and Bad Play rate as well as in Success Rate during the fourth quarters of comebacks due to the large increase in EPA per play. However, the increase was not as significant as perhaps would be expected.

Bears offense has marginal improvement in Big/Bad Play rate during comebacks

Big Play rate = percentage of plays with EPA > 0.90
Bad Play rate = percentage of plays with EPA < -0.75

Big Play rate increases slightly to 22.1% from 21.9% in all other quarters and 21.9% on the season. Bad Play rate decreases slightly more to 17.7% from 19.2% in all other quarters and 19.0% on the season. Success Rate improves to 49.6% from 44.9% in all other quarters and 45.4% on the season. It is possible that these seemingly small improvements have much greater effects than similar improvements would for other metrics like explosive play rate, which I included in the main section of my analysis.

The improvements in Big and Bad Play rate and Success Rate showed some degree of robustness to the considerations of Stage 2 of my analysis, although not as much as the metrics included in the main section of my analysis.

Bears offense Big/Bad Play rate improves in fourth quarter but improves much more in comebacks

Y-axis truncated for visual clarity

Note that the y-axis is truncated in the preceding graph. Big and Bad Play rates improved from the first three quarters to the fourth quarter of comebacks and declined from the first three quarters to the fourth quarter of the other ten games. However, while Success Rate also declined from the first three quarters to the fourth quarters of the other ten games, its improvement within comeback games was relatively minimal.
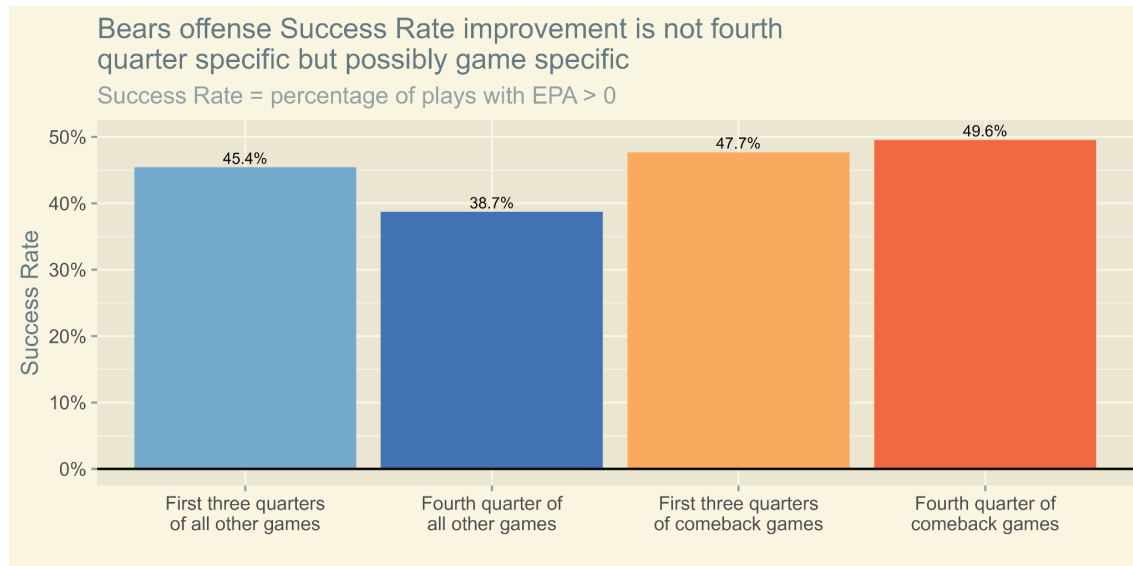
Because the improvements in Big and Bad Play rate and Success Rate were minor, requiring manipulation of the y-axis to be visually clear, I concluded that they were not significant contributing factors to comebacks.

Data and Code Availability

Play-by-play data obtained from rbsdm.com/stats/box_scores/. Processed data and code are available on my GitHub folder for this project, at https://github.com/nmaydanchik/ChicagoBearsComebacks. Tables with metrics calculated for offense, defense, and special teams are available on the GitHub folder for this project. Data analysis and plot generation was conducted entirely in R.

References

Batra, Ayush. "Expected Points Added: A Full Explanation." bestballstats.com, bestballstats.com/expected-points-added-a-full-explanation/.