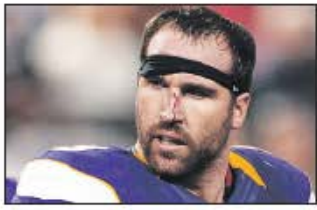


VIKINGS AT THE MIDPOINT

Up next: 3:05 p.m. next Sunday at Seattle • CenturyLink Field • TV: Ch. 9 (100.3-FM, 1130-AM)



Vikings defensive end Jared Allen was bloodied Thursday, and the team bowed.

Vikings trying to fend off doubt

• Leslie Frazier doesn't want Thursday's sound thrashing by a middle-of-the-pack opponent to start a downward spiral.

By DAN WIEDERER
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There was a moment Thursday night when an agitated and freshly wounded Vikings team seemed most dangerous.

More than 3 minutes remained in the third quarter, and star defensive end Jared Allen had just had his helmet ripped off and the bridge of his nose cut during a scrap with Tampa Bay's Donald Penn.

With each enraged breath Allen took, the crowd volume at Mall of America Field seemed to increase by 20 decibels.

And so, on a third-and-10 Buccaneers play from their own 30, Penn and quarterback Josh Freeman never stood a chance.

You could've put Anthony Munoz, two rhinos and a steel gate in front of Allen and he still would have gotten to Freeman. With rush help from Everson Griffen, Allen knifed into the backfield, his determined sack sending a jolt across the Metrodome.

Suddenly, a 30-17 deficit didn't seem insurmountable. A furious rally seemed possible.

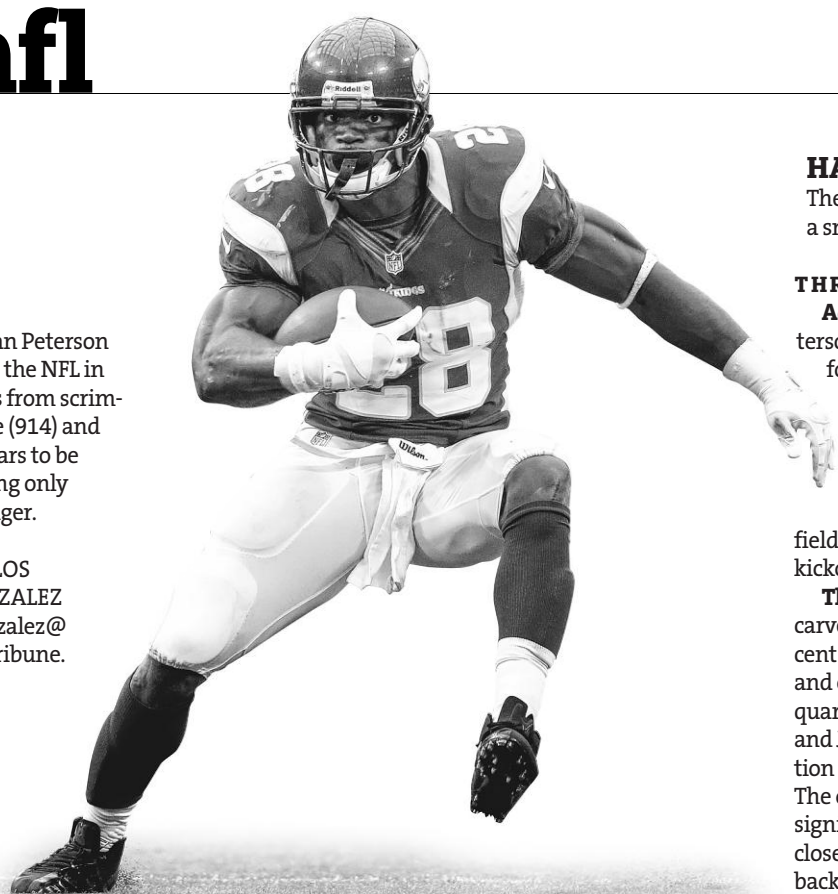
But what immediately followed more appropriately summed up the night and the sobering finish to the season's first half.

Vikings continues on C13 ▶

nfl

Adrian Peterson leads the NFL in yards from scrimmage (914) and appears to be getting only stronger.

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HALFWAY HOME

The Vikings have reached the midpoint of their season at 5-3 after Thursday night's 36-17 loss to Tampa Bay. Here's a snapshot of where the team stands heading into the season's second half:

THREE PLEASANT SURPRISES

Adrian Peterson: Coming off major knee surgery, Peterson has an NFL-best 914 yards from scrimmage and four touchdowns and appears to be getting only stronger. He's on pace to rush for 1,550 yards, and his 5.1 yards-per-carry average is a career best.

Special teams: Percy Harvin's 35.7 yards per kickoff return ranks third the NFL. But the real surprise has been rookie Blair Walsh. He's 17-for-18 on field goal attempts and has produced 31 touchbacks on 42 kickoffs.

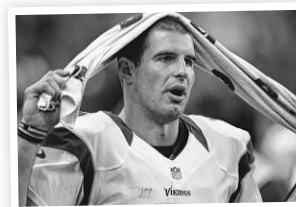
The secondary: A year ago, opposing quarterbacks carved up the Vikings pass defense, completing 68.2 percent of their passes for 4,019 yards with 34 touchdowns and only eight interceptions. In 2012, thanks to a starting quartet of Antoine Winfield, Chris Cook, Harrison Smith and Jamarca Sanford, opposing QBs have a 62.8 completion percentage for 1,793 yards with 11 TDs and four picks. The opponents' quarterback rating: 88.3 — not stellar but significantly down from 107.6 in 2011. Worth keeping a close eye on now: Cook's broken arm could be a huge setback, giving Josh Robinson and A.J. Jefferson heightened roles.

THREE QUESTIONS

Christian Ponder's consistency: The quarterback's September-to-October statistical regression was undeniable in several key categories. Ponder had a worse completion percentage (.683-.626), took more sacks (11-8) and committed four times as many turnovers (8-2). So how will the 24-year-old deal with the growing fan anxiety and the daily media inquiry into his confidence levels?

The wide receivers: Percy Harvin (60 catches, 667 yards, three TDs) might be an MVP candidate. But the rest of the receiving corps has combined for 43 catches, 546 yards and two scores, leaving the Vikings as one of the NFC's more one-dimensional offenses.

The schedule: Five of the next seven games are on the road, starting next Sunday at Seattle. Five of the last seven are against NFC North foes. Those four division games against the Packers' explosive offense and the Bears' opportunistic defense suddenly seem as daunting as ever.



DAN WIEDERER

Doubt is at the Vikings' door

◀ VIKINGS FROM C1

After Tampa Bay's punt, the Vikings offense dry-heaved. Adrian Peterson's first-down run lost 2 yards. Christian Ponder's second-down scramble went for 6. And then John Sullivan's third-and-8 shotgun snap short-hopped into Ponder's shin and resulted in a 12-yard loss.

On came punter Chris Kluwe, out went the feel-good vibe that had characterized the season's first seven weeks.

"I feel like that's when the game was lost," Peterson said.

And when Allen and the defense retook the field? Well, they couldn't get off it for 9 minutes, 9 seconds. Sixteen plays went by. The Buccaneers chewed up 87 yards and converted five third downs.

With 7:03 left, rookie running back Doug Martin scored from a yard out, finishing a drive that, for the Vikings, seemed much more significant than the seven points surrendered.

Instead, a 36-17 loss sent them into a long weekend, feeling as dejected and confused as they have all season.

"It's the NFL, man," linebacker Chad Greenway said. "You can never get too up or too down. Because you can get humbled at any point."

Down and out

Suddenly, so much of the optimism and confidence that built during the Vikings' 5-2 start seems to be souring. And that has left coach Leslie Frazier worried about boosting his team's mood.

"That," Frazier said Friday, "is what I've been wrestling with — last night after the game and this morning as well. Because it's one game. And it was a tough loss. But it is only one game. And you can't allow that to carry over to other games.

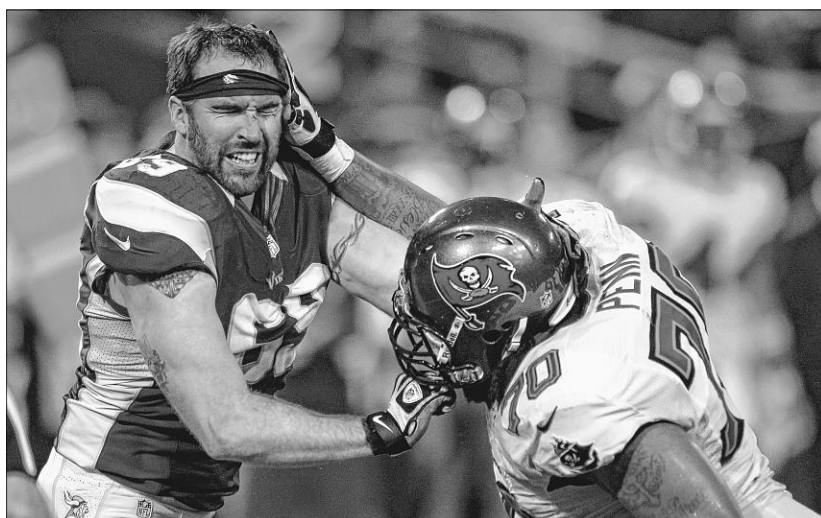
"Because I know we can play better, and there are some things we have to correct. But if you don't move on from that game, it can linger and it can have negative effects on future games."

Frazier's hope is that Thursday's loss was an aberration, with the run defense struggling and the passing attack totally out of sorts. But the worst fear is that this may be the Vikings' true identity, exposed by a Bucs squad that was hungrier and devised a game plan to expose those problem areas.

So now the Vikings enter November bombarded by doubt and questioning as to whether Ponder is truly a long-term answer at quarterback.

Frazier isn't in panic mode with that situation just yet. He asserted Friday that, barring injury, Ponder will be the starter for the rest of the season. And he reminded the quick-trigger critics to not heap too much blame on one player.

"We have to make sure we're get-



« WE CAN'T BE CONSUMED WITH ONE BAD GAME. THERE'S NO REASON TO SULK OR GET OVERLY DOWN ON OURSELVES. »

Vikings rookie safety Harrison Smith

A REVVED-UP MOMENT

Vikings defensive end Jared Allen scrapped with Tampa Bay offensive tackle Donald Penn in the third quarter Thursday night, firing up the fans — and Allen, too, of course. He followed with a third-down sack of Tampa Bay quarterback Josh Freeman, but the Vikings offense failed to capitalize on the momentum swing.

Photos: Andy King, Associated Press (left) and Jeff Wheeler, jwheeler@startribune.com



ting everybody on the offense to play up to the standards that we're asking and not make it all about the quarterback," Frazier said.

Which is why the Vikings' Week 9 practice plan will be heavy with blitz pick-up work.

There will also be calls for the offensive line to be more stable and for receivers to polish their route running.

"And then when guys are [open]," Frazier said, "we've got to make sure we get the football to them on time."

The road to recovery

A demanding week awaits. The practices and classroom sessions will call for intense focus. And next Sun-

day's game in Seattle will prove even more challenging.

Yet for as dreary as things seem, these Vikings have faced character-testing hardship at several other points.

It may seem like an eternity ago, but don't forget that late in Week 1, after the Vikings surrendered a deflating 39-yard touchdown pass in the final minute and fell behind Jacksonville 23-20, veteran receiver Michael Jenkins came to the huddle and convinced the offense there was still enough time to recover.

Then Ponder delivered two completions for 32 yards in 10 seconds, Blair Walsh kicked a game-tying 55-

yard field goal and the Vikings triumphed in overtime.

A week and a half later, after a shaky 23-20 loss in Indianapolis, veteran cornerback Antoine Winfield stood in front of the team and delivered an animated pep talk, calling for greater concentration and toughness.

The next weekend, the Vikings took a 49ers squad widely labeled as one of the NFC's best and pummeled it for a 24-13 win.

Frazier and General Manager Rick Spielman have made a point to build this team around resilient and dedicated players, guys who will invest in strengthening their weaknesses. That, the Vikings believe, is the tonic

for when a confidence crisis surfaces.

So now this most recent face-plant has to be processed properly. The Vikings must be honest with themselves about their deficiencies and devoted enough to begin addressing them.

"We've played several strong games to this point," rookie safety Harrison Smith said. "That's what we want to build on. We can't be consumed with one bad game. There's no reason to sulk or get overly down on ourselves. We're 5-3. That's where we are. And it's time to move forward."

They'll do so into the sharp teeth of a taxing second-half schedule. And they'll do so with the uncertainty growing.

standings

national conference

	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH	WEST
	W L T PCT	W L T PCT	W L T PCT	W L T PCT
Chicago	5 1 0 .833	2 2 0 .714	6 0 0 1.000	5 2 0 .714
Vikings	5 3 0 .625	3 3 0 .500	3 3 0 .500	4 3 0 .571
Green Bay	4 3 0 .571	3 3 0 .500	2 4 0 .333	4 3 0 .571
Detroit	2 4 0 .333	3 4 0 .429	2 4 0 .333	3 4 0 .429

american conference

	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH	WEST
	W L T PCT	W L T PCT	W L T PCT	W L T PCT
Baltimore	5 2 0 .714	4 3 0 .571	6 1 0 .857	3 3 0 .500
Pittsburgh	3 3 0 .500	3 3 0 .500	3 3 0 .500	3 3 0 .500
Cincinnati	3 4 0 .429	3 4 0 .429	3 4 0 .429	2 4 0 .333
Cleveland	1 6 0 .143	4 3 0 .571	3 4 0 .429	1 5 0 .167

week 8 games

THURSDAY
Tampa Bay 36, Vikings 17

SUNDAY
Carolina at Chicago, noon, **Ch. 9**
San Diego at Cleveland, noon
Seattle at Detroit, noon
New England at St. Louis, noon
Miami at N.Y. Jets, noon
Atlanta at Philadelphia, noon
Washington at Pittsburgh, noon
Jacksonville at Green Bay, noon, **Ch. 4**
Indianapolis at Tennessee, noon
Oakland at Kansas City, 3:05 p.m.
N.Y. Giants at Dallas, 3:25 p.m., **Ch. 9**
New Orleans at Denver, 7:20 p.m., **Ch. 11**

MONDAY
San Francisco at Arizona, 7:30 pm **ESPN**

Byes: Buffalo, Cincinnati, Baltimore, Houston



ONE TO WATCH
New Orleans at Denver, 7:20 p.m.
A shootout between Drew Brees and Peyton Manning in prime time. Joe Vitt now in charge of the Saints.