Will Analytics Play a Role in the Super Bowl? Most Definitely

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DURHAM, N.H.—During the recent NFC championship playoff game the coach of the Detroit Lions, Dan Campbell, faced a tough decision - trust the analytics or trust his gut? Listen to some old-school NFL watchers and the feeling was the team used too much math. But according to Peter Zaimes, lecturer in decision sciences at the University of New Hampshire and an expert in sports analytics, those kinds of decisions come into play in every football game, even Super Bowl LVIII.

“Analytics are here to stay,” said Zaimes. “And even though it didn’t work out for the Lions, there is a 100% chance that math will be used in the Super Bowl. Analytics are now a major part of the NFL. The Lions game was so high profile that it forced analytics-based coaching calls to be put under a microscope. The NFL is still experiencing a bit of growing pains when it comes to using data in making decisions. The same thing happened with baseball, when the MLB started using analytics, but now it’s hard to imagine the game without it.”

Zaimes oversees UNH’s Sports Analytics Lab where students are matched with real-world sports clients and equipped with the tools to execute and understand the many ways analytics are used in the world of sports enabling students to learn data science techniques and apply them across the world of sports. They gather and analyze data and provide actionable, realistic and timely recommendations. Clients include the Baltimore Orioles, 603evo (baseball player development program) and the University of New Hampshire sports teams.

He says analytics in football, similar to what happened in baseball, are shifting coaching and decision making. Currently, there are two different camps of coaches, those that were players and may rely more on their gut, and those who trust more in the numbers and have become savants with analytics.

Zaimes reminds that real-time data hasn’t been a part of NFL coaching for all that long. Super Bowl LII, held in 2018 between the New England Patriots and the Philadelphia Eagles, is known as the first analytics Super Bowl. The Eagles followed the numbers to look for holes in the Patriots’ defense and when it identified a weakness the Eagles were able to score and win the game.

Zaimes can be contacted at Peter.Zaimes@unh.edu (mailto:Peter.Zaimes@unh.edu); (603) 862-1973

Media Contact
Robbin Ray ’82 (mailto:Robbin.Ray@unh.edu) | Communications and Public Affairs | robbin.ray@unh.edu (mailto:robbin.ray@unh.edu) | 603-862-4864
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