

Vikings snip Bucs, go 5-0

By Dave Goldberg
The Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS — Unlike his Tampa Bay counterpart, Keyshawn Johnson, Randy Moss doesn't have to ask for the ball.

The Minnesota Vikings wide receiver, who had his first big game as a pro on a Monday night two years ago, made a leaping catch of a 41-yard TD pass from Daunte Culpepper midway through the fourth quarter to give the Vikings a 30-23 victory over Tampa Bay on Monday night.

"Daunte doesn't need that," Moss said when asked if he told Culpepper to throw to him. "I don't have to keep emphasizing in the huddle that I'll be there. Daunte makes the right reads. That's why he's Daunte."

The game could define the season for both teams.

While the Vikings joined St. Louis at 5-0 as the NFL's only two unbeaten teams, it was the third straight loss for Tampa Bay (3-3), which entered the season as the clear favorite to win the NFC Central. Although they won the division last season after starting 3-4, they're now 2 1/2 games behind Minnesota.

"It's huge," Culpepper said. "You'd much rather be 5-0 and improving than 4-1."

Moss was the difference — in the spotlight again after making his first national splash in a Monday night game in Green Bay two years ago.

"Randy plays hard all the time," coach Dennis Green said. "Not just on Monday night. He makes big plays when you need them."

The Vikings led for nearly the entire game following Culpepper's 27-yard scramble for a touchdown 24 seconds into the game after Johnson fumbled a pass on the

Bucs' first play from scrimmage.

But the Tampa Bay defense gradually took control, despite another fumble that led to a Minnesota touchdown. Then, early in the fourth quarter, with the Bucs trailing 20-16, Andre Hastings fumbled a punt and set the Vikings up at the Bucs' 39.

On fourth down, the Vikings set up for a 53-yard field-goal attempt. But Warren Sapp, who blocked a field-goal attempt in Washington last week, blocked it; Donnie Abraham picked up the ball and raced 53 yards for the score to put Tampa Bay up 23-20.

"When they went ahead, we HAD to come to life," Culpepper said. "It was a do or die situation."

And Culpepper, who finished 15-of-19 for 207 yards, came through with Moss' help.

First, he completed a 22-yard pass to Moss on a third-and-10.

And then Moss, who had five catches for 190 yards and two touchdowns at Green Bay on Oct. 5, 1998, came up big again.

On a first down from the Tampa 41, Culpepper dropped back and threw the ball to the end zone. Moss leaped into the air between Abraham and John Lynch and grabbed the ball for the score that put the Vikings ahead 27-23.

"He just jumped and got it," said Tampa Bay coach Tony Dungy, who just shook his head and smiled wryly after Moss made the catch. "Our guys have to go up and get it with them."

But there were still 8:42 left.

The Bucs drove to the Minnesota 47. On a fourth-and-1, Shaun King handed off to Mike Alstott, who passed back across the field, where third-string tight end Todd Yoder was wide open. But the ball was over his head and behind him.

Minnesota then drove 51 yards to set up Gary Anderson's 19-yard field goal that made it 30-23 with 59 seconds left.

Tampa Bay was lucky to be trailing by just seven points at halftime.

On the first official play from scrimmage — the first actual play was a penalty — Johnson fumbled after catching a short pass from King and Orlando Thomas recovered at the Bucs' 27, setting up Culpepper's TD run.

The Bucs tied it on King's 11-yard draw 11 minutes later, capping a nine-play, 74-yard drive that began when Lynch recovered Culpepper's fumble of a shotgun snap.

Minnesota responded with 10 points in just over a minute.

First, Anderson kicked a 38-yard field goal. Then, Aaron Stecker was stripped of the ball by kick-off man Mitch Berger, and Moe Williams recovered at the Tampa Bay 27, setting up a 26-yard TD pass from Culpepper to tight end John Davis.

Martin Gramatica's 23-yard field goal gave them a 17-10 lead at halftime.

Anderson added a 42-yard field goal on Minnesota's first second-half possession to make it 20-10.

Gramatica cut it to 20-16 with field goals of 33 and 35 yards, the latter on a drive during which the Bucs reached the Minnesota 2 only to be set back when King was penalized 15 yards for throwing a ball at John Randle after an aborted play.

But after Tampa's big play, Moss and Culpepper responded.

"We made too many mistakes," Dungy said. "To beat this team we had to play a perfect game and we didn't."

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