

## Big plays help Dolphins beat Rams 28-17 in Tua Tagovailoa's first start

By Paul Gereffi  
The Associated Press

**M**IAMI GARDENS, Fla. — On the sideline, Tua Tagovailoa showed plenty of moves. He entertained those along the bench by dancing after the Miami Dolphins' first touchdown, and greeted 5'6" Jakeem Grant with a leaping chest bump to the face mask after another score.

On the field, however, Tagovailoa didn't do much in his first National Football League (NFL) start. Teammates made sure he didn't need to.

Tagovailoa threw his first career touchdown pass then let the defense and special teams take over with a succession of big plays, and the Dolphins stamped themselves as playoff contenders by earning their third consecutive win, 28-17, against the Los Angeles Rams.

The Dolphins were outgained by 326 yards, the largest discrepancy for a winning team in 18 years. They struck for scores 75 seconds apart on Andrew Van Ginkel's 78-yard fumble return and Grant's team-record 88-yard punt return.

Miami came up with four takeaways in the first half, and at halftime led 28-10 despite being outgained 224-54.

The big plays helped Tagovailoa overcome a costly early turnover. The No. 5 overall pick in this year's draft finished 12 of 22 for 93 yards, with several passes dropped.

"I don't think I played to the standard of what this offense is capable of," Tagovailoa said. "It's good we got the win. Thank god we have a good defense."

Los Angeles' Jared Goff faced constant pressure and went 35 for 61 for 355 yards and one score, with two interceptions and two lost fumbles.

"This is going to hurt," Goff said.



"Our defense played really well and gave us all the opportunities we needed."

The Rams ran 92 plays to the Dolphins' 48, and Miami won while Tagovailoa's offense totalled eight first downs and 145 yards.

"It's a team football game," Miami coach Brian Flores said. "It's not a one-man show."

The Dolphins (4-3) have outscored opponents by a combined 95-34 in the past three games, and they're above .500 for the first time in their 23 games under second-year coach Flores.

The Rams (5-3) did manage to give Tagovailoa a jarring NFL greeting. The first time the rookie tried to throw, the ball came loose when his arm was hit by Aaron Donald, and Tagovailoa was then driven to the turf by Michael Brockers as Leonard Floyd recovered the fumble.

"That was a good hit," Tagovailoa said. "That was definitely a welcoming."

Los Angeles scored a touchdown three plays later for a 7-0 lead.

**FIRST PRO START.** Miami Dolphins quarterback Tua Tagovailoa (#1) made his first National Football League (NFL) start over the weekend in a 28-17 win against the Los Angeles Rams. (AP Photo/Lynne Sladky)

Then came 28 consecutive points by the Dolphins. Tagovailoa capitalized on their first takeaway by throwing a 3-yard touchdown pass to DeVante Parker. Tagovailoa retrieved the ball as a souvenir and carried it to the sideline, then launched into his celebratory dance.

The early 33-yard scoring drive was the Dolphins' longest, as the big lead allowed them to keep Tagovailoa mostly under wraps.

"You can just tell they were trying to ease him in there," Rams safety John Johnson III said. "He's going to be a good player, but it's hard to judge a guy against our defense. We tried to make him see a lot of different things, and for the most part it worked."

The Rams' defense received little support from their offense, though. One early Los Angeles scoring threat ended when Emmanuel Ogbah forced a fumble by sacking Goff. Van Ginkel scooped the ball up with nothing but open field in front of him and sprinted the distance to give Miami a 14-7 lead.

Barely a minute later, Grant sprinted through a seam in the Rams' punt coverage for his fifth career return TD, and his third punt return for a score, both franchise records.

Shaq Lawson's strip-sack of Goff and Kyle Van Noy's return gave the Dolphins the ball at the one year line, and they scored on the next play for a 28-7 lead. It was a stunning sequence for the Rams, who had just eight turnovers in their first seven games and trailed for less than 54 minutes previously all season.

"We heard a lot about the Rams' defense," Miami safety Eric Rowe said, "but they had to worry about our defense."



**FINALS FIGHT.** Miami Heat head coach Erik Spoelstra gestures as forward Jae Crowder (#99) walks by during a National Basketball Association championship playoff game against the Los Angeles Lakers last month in Lake Buena Vista, Florida. (AP Photo/Mark J. Terrill)

### Spoelstra builds Miami family but falls short of a championship

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prevalent, 111-108. Robinson shot 7-of-13 from downtown to score 26, a career-best performance, and Butler scored 35, including eight of the team's final 10 points. After the game, Spoelstra said of Butler, "His will to win is remarkable... Every young player coming into this league should study footage of Jimmy Butler."

Incredibly, Dragic returned for the critical game 6, but he wasn't at full strength, scoring five points in 19 minutes. The Heat were inspired to see him back on the court, but Los Angeles was the better team. They outscored Miami by 20 in the second quarter and held a 29-point lead by the start of the fourth quarter. Miami fought back to narrow the deficit to 13, but the result was the same: James won his fourth ring, his first with the Lakers.

Following the game, Spoelstra talked about Butler, who has played for three other teams but says the Heat feels like his home now. "I think that's what we're all looking for is to be a part of a family," Spo said. He went on to talk more about that family: the leadership of Butler, the maturity of Adebayo, the growth of Herro, and the work ethic of Dragic. One can only wonder how his family might have fared if not for the game 1 injuries to two of his best players.

Spo has again made something special in Miami, but this time it's not built around a trio of superstars. Instead, he's created a family of rising stars and veterans who worked together through pain and difficulty during one of the strangest seasons in NBA history. When next season comes around and things hopefully get closer to normal, the rest of the league better watch out.

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