

Lessons for Lawyers from the Super Bowl: Leadership is Fragile

By [Joseph B. Altonji](#) on February 5, 2013

Like virtually everyone else at the Super Bowl party I attended Sunday evening (in Chicago), I didn't have a favorite in the game so I could sit back and watch events unfold. Also like most, and perhaps driven by the opinion of the experts, I expected San Francisco to win the game convincingly, if not easily, so I hoped the commercials would provide some added interest.

Turns out this was wrong on all counts, but the lessons here are somewhat more complicated. As everyone knows, Super Bowl XLVII was a tale of two games – a “before” and “after” game – as in “Before Power Failure” and “After Power Failure”. In the BPF game, the Ravens dominated, with San Francisco struggling to even look credible. After a record tying run-back of the second half kickoff, the game looked all but over. Then “it” happened. A bizarre electrical failure delayed the game for well over a half hour and everything changed. Clearly the 49ers dominated the APF game. Only a final red-zone stand and a no-call for pass interference on the 49ers last play kept the Ravens from letting victory slip away. The Ravens capped it off with a self-imposed safety to “play it safe” and kill the clock (upsetting millions of squares games across the country). So the Ravens won, barely, and the game goes down as close.

The real lessons here are more substantial:

1. ***Even an underdog can be a dominant player if it sticks to its game and plays its heart out.*** As a law firm, be the firm you are – not the one someone else expects you to be, or all things to all people. Do what you do really well. Execute, execute, execute.
2. ***You can get knocked off your game very easily, and the fall can be very fast.*** Successful organizations are extremely fragile. We have seen highly successful firms fall very rapidly, going quickly from leader to also-ran, and sometimes worse, in a few short years. The causes of the fall can be many and varied. The more things that come together at once, the harder it is to sustain the original position.
3. ***Luck matters.*** No one predicted the power failure at the Super Bowl, but the 49ers capitalized on it, regrouped, and found a way to fight back. They didn't win but the difference in the game was stark. We have clients who have found a way to capitalize on unexpected fortune in ways that have changed their futures. When the market presents a potentially game-changing opportunity, real leaders grab it. Equally important, don't let bad luck strip the firm of the advantages it has built. Regroup.
4. ***When things are not going your way, react quickly, adjust, and rethink.*** Get back on your game when appropriate but be wise enough to recognize when you need a new game plan. The legal business has changed, and many formerly “prestigious” firms are struggling with how to succeed when having the “best lawyers” no longer guarantees success.
5. ***Unlike in football, you cannot run out the clock.*** The game is not over after 60 minutes, or a year, or five. You need to build a firm that can continuously weather the ups and downs, the streaks of bad luck, and the inevitable changes thrown at you by competitors. Resilience is a critical survival skill that allows the firm to change directions swiftly and decisively when needed. Unfortunately, this vitally important characteristic is hard to find in most firms.

Building a championship football team is challenging, requiring sustained and consistent effort and intensity. Staying at the top is even harder. Building a championship law firm is no different, and the “long term” is far longer.

The game ended less than 48 hours ago, but that's history. The 49ers and Broncos are the current Vegas favorites for Super Bowl XLVIII...