

NFL WEEK 5 / GAME-DAY EARLY

Baker Out: Why Tampa Bay Faces a Tougher Test in Dallas

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Buccaneers at Cowboys | 8:15 p.m. ET | AT&T Stadium



BAKER MAYFIELD: OUT

Baker Mayfield is officially out with a right-thumb injury. Rookie Jalon Daniels will make his second NFL start, with Easton Stick elevated to serve as his backup. Tampa Bay's report confirms the injury designation; today's roster announcement confirms the quarterback arrangement. [1, 2]

Mayfield's absence removes an experienced quarterback from an offense already struggling to sustain drives. Tampa Bay enters 0-4 and is averaging 19.0 points per game. Its third-down conversion rate is 34.6%, and its red-zone touchdown rate is 41.7%. Those season totals include games with Mayfield, so they do not establish how much of the problem his absence has caused. [3]

The following effects are football analysis, rather than measured changes or guaranteed outcomes.

Less experience when protection breaks down

Tampa Bay has allowed the league's highest sack rate per pass attempt through four games. With Daniels learning on the field, identifying pressure, adjusting protection and releasing the ball quickly become especially important. Losing Mayfield raises the challenge of managing those situations; the offensive line still has responsibility for solving them. [3, 4]

OFFENSIVE IMPACT / PATH TO COMPETING

What changes without Mayfield

Statistics: first four games of the 2026 regular season unless otherwise stated.

A harder path to consistent passing production

Daniels' debut against Green Bay produced 148 passing yards, one passing touchdown and two interceptions. He also rushed for 55 yards, showing a way to keep drives alive. One start is a small sample, but the turnovers highlight the risk of asking him to carry a full passing workload immediately. [3]

More dependence on the running game and easy completions

My assessment is that Tampa Bay would benefit from productive early-down runs, quick throws and controlled use of Daniels' mobility. That approach can reduce difficult third downs. If Dallas builds an early lead, however, Tampa Bay may have to abandon that balance and ask its rookie to throw in obvious passing situations.

More pressure on a depleted defense

Antoine Winfield Jr., Benjamin Morrison and SirVocea Dennis are also ruled out. Dallas has averaged 30.5 points per game through its first four contests. Short offensive possessions or turnovers could leave Tampa Bay's defense facing additional snaps or unfavorable field position while already missing those players. [1, 4]

Dallas still offers an opportunity: it has allowed 28.0 points per game over the same four-game sample. Daniels does not need to replicate Mayfield's entire role to move the offense against that defense. Tampa Bay's clearest route to staying competitive is to protect him, limit giveaways and finish the scoring opportunities it creates. [4]

The main cost of losing Mayfield is less experienced decision-making at the moments that decide drives. Daniels' mobility offers a useful alternative, but this road start asks him to develop while the Bucs urgently need a win. His absence makes the job harder without making the result inevitable.

Sources and verification

All sources were checked for this report. Injury designations are from the official team report; quarterback roles are from the October 8 roster announcement. No exact return date is confirmed here.

1. [Buccaneers - October 7 final injury report](#)
2. [Buccaneers - October 8 Easton Stick elevation and quarterback update](#)
3. [Buccaneers - Week 5 game preview and four-game statistics](#)
4. [Buccaneers - Week 5 storylines and matchups](#)