

Week 14

@ Referees

Officiating for the NFL is not a job I would want. It's a thankless pursuit. When done correctly, officials are invisible, nameless. Yet make a big enough "mistake," and it becomes national news with the implicated official turning into public enemy #1.

As a case in point, look no further than the ending of the Week 3 *Monday Football Game* between the Green Bay Packers and the Seattle Seahawks in 2012. With eight seconds remaining in the fourth quarter, Seahawks quarterback Russell Wilson chucked up a 24-yard Hail Mary pass caught by Golden Tate for the game-winning touchdown. At least, that's how it reads in the box score.

In reality, that final play was a free-for-all. Tate most certainly committed offensive pass interference prior to making the catch—without being assessed a flag—that is, if he actually did haul in Wilson's toss. Packers defensive back M.D. Jennings appeared to catch the ball, yet when he hit the turf with Tate clinging to him, Tate kinda, sorta pulled the ball away. Both players appeared to have possession (with most observers believing Jennings had more possession). One official immediately ruled the play an interception. Another, standing three feet away from the first, ruled it a touchdown. The first official then changed his signal to match the touchdown call. While chaos ensued, the play was booth reviewed and ultimately stood as called on the field: touchdown. Seattle 14, Green Bay 12.

One call created a mushroom cloud of fallout. The closing line was Green Bay -3. So for those who bet the Packers, the game went from a win to a loss in a millisecond, causing an untold shift in millions of dollars. It also cost the Packers a bye and home field advantage in the divisional round of the playoffs (where they lost to the 49ers in San Francisco). At the same time, the bonus win propelled the Seahawks into the playoffs as a wildcard, usurping the Chicago Bears' rightful place.

As this game was played in Seattle, one might be tempted to think the result was a bit of home cookin'. And yes, "home field advantage" is a real phenomenon. In the 2011 book *Scorecasting: The Hidden Influences Behind How Sports Are Played and Games Are Won*, authors Tobias J. Moskowitz of the University of Chicago and L. Jon Wertheim of *Sports Illustrated* reported that in the last ten years the percentage of home games won in the MLB was 53.9 percent, the NHL 55.7 percent, the NBA 60.5 percent, and the NFL 57.3 percent.

Prior to explaining why this was the case, the authors wrote, "Before considering the causes of the home field advantage, keep this premise in mind: There is considerable economic incentive for home teams to win as often as possible. When the home team wins, the consumers—that is, the ticket-buying fans—leave happy. The better the home team plays, the more likely fans are to buy tickets and hats and T-shirts, renew their luxury suite leases, and drink beer, overpriced and watered down as it might be. The better the home team plays, the more likely businesses and corporations are to buy sponsorships and the more likely local television networks are to bid for rights fees. A lot of sports marketing, after all,

is driven by the desire to associate with a winner. In San Antonio, if the fans consistently left disappointed, it's unlikely that AT&T would slather its name and logo on most of the surface area of the arena or that Budweiser Select, Sprite, 'your Texas Ford dealers,' Southwest Airlines, and other sponsors would underwrite T-shirt giveaways, Bobble Head Night, and a halftime shooting contest.

"By extension, the leagues have an incentive for the home teams to win. Although attendance and revenue rise in step with winning percentage for most teams, they rise even more sharply with *home* winning percentage. And healthier individual franchises make for a stronger collective. Does this mean leagues and executives are fixing games in favor of home teams? Of course not. But does it make sense that they would want to take subtle measures to endow the home team with (legal) edges? Sure. It would be irrational if they *didn't*. [emphasis in original]"¹

After a bit of debate, Moskowitz and Wertheim declared the primary factor in the creation of home field advantage was the referees. "What we've found is that officials are biased, confirming years of fans' conspiracy theories. But they're biased not against the louts screaming unprintable epithets at them. They're biased for them, and the bigger the crowd, the worse the bias. In fact, 'officials' bias' is the most significant contributor to home field advantage."²

About the NFL, the authors concluded, "Could referee bias explain a large part of the home field advantage in football? Absolutely....The fact that home teams in football have better offensive stats—such as rushing more successfully and having longer time of possession—could be the result of getting more favorable calls, fewer penalties, and fewer turnovers."³

Though a somewhat shocking conclusion, it is all written off by Moskowitz and Wertheim as being simply caused by referees' *unconscious* biases. Officials don't even realize they are doing it because, basically, it's psychological in nature, and there's not much to be done to counter its effects.

What about those economic advantages that go hand-in-hand with home field advantage? Don't worry. Moskowitz and Wertheim wrote, "First, let's be clear: Is there a conspiracy afoot in which officials are somehow instructed to rule in favor of the home team, especially since the league has an economic incentive to boost home team wins? Almost unquestionably no. We're convinced that the vast majority of, if not all, officials are upstanding professionals, ***uncorrupted and incorruptible***, consciously doing their best to ensure fairness. [emphasis added]"⁴

In all honesty, I don't know if I've ever read a more absurd statement in a non-fiction book than that. Referees are human. They are fallible. And as numerous FBI files have shown me, they are certainly corruptible. In fact, the authors almost admitted as much shortly thereafter. Moskowitz and Wertheim wrote: "Remember, too, that on top of the anxiety caused by passionate and sometimes angry fans, the refs receive stress from their supervisors and superiors. In a variety of ways—some subtle, some not—officials must take in cues that the league has an economic incentive for home teams to do well. If your boss sent a subtle but unmistakable message that Outcome A was preferable to Outcome B, when you were forced to make a difficult, uncertain, and quick decision, how would you be inclined to act?"⁵

All of the above may have come into play during that Monday Night game, but what truly made it so memorable was the fact the referees making that deciding call were substitutes. In its never-ending quest for “integrity,” the NFL locked out its real officials prior to the 2012 season and filled its officiating ranks with an assortment of unqualified referees mostly queued from the NCAA’s division II and III. The league’s goal in the lockout? To save a few million dollars in referee pay and benefits.

One of those replacement referees, Jerry Frump, told *Time Magazine*, “We were pawns. This really became a business deal. I told my crew when we first got together, I said, ‘Gentlemen, you’re now working for probably one of the largest corporations in the country, maybe even the world. We need to keep that in mind, because we need to conduct ourselves professionally and in a way that does not degrade or disrespect what they stand for.’ This was [the NFL’s] choice. They chose to take this position in the negotiation with the union. Whether I would have [taken the job]—if I hadn’t done it, somebody else would have. We did the best we could.”⁶

Their best, unfortunately, was nowhere near good enough for football fans or pundits (even though no one stopped watching). The NFLPA posted a letter to the league on its website which stated, “It is lost on us as to how you allow a Commissioner to cavalierly issue suspensions and fines in the name of player health and safety yet permit the wholesale removal of the officials that you trained and entrusted to maintain that very health and safety. It has been reported that the two sides are apart by approximately \$60,000 per team. We note that your Commissioner has fined an individual player as much in the name of ‘safety.’ Your actions are looking more and more like simple greed. As players, we see this game as more than the ‘product’ you reference at times. You cannot simply switch to a group of cheaper officials and fulfill your legal, moral, and duty obligations to us and our fans. You need to end the lockout and bring back the officials immediately.”⁷

The Monday Night debacle did just that, reinstating the NFL’s true officiating corps for Week 4. Although some NFL owners didn’t see what the big deal was with the replacement refs. While using them in the preseason, Cowboys owner Jerry Jones said, “As long as it’s the same for both sides—and it will be—we’ll be all right. And they’re going to get better as they move along.”⁸ Texans owner Bob McNair agreed, “We have complaints, it doesn’t matter who’s officiating. And we look back at it as to those calls that we think were bad calls, and we don’t have any more now than we had before. Now, clearly the officials that we have now are not as good professionally as the ones we’ve had, otherwise we would have had the others all along. But in terms of the impact on the game, I’ve been watching it and frankly I can’t see any difference.”⁹

That might have been the case for McNair because in actuality the “real” NFL officials are frequently as off-kilter as their replacements appeared to be.

In 2013, 40-year old Dean Blandino was named the NFL’s vice president of officiating. According to the league’s press release about his promotion, he joined the NFL fresh out of college as an officiating intern in 1994, served as an instant replay official from 1999-2003, and managed the NFL’s instant replay program from 2003-2009. What it failed to mention was that Blandino also worked as a stand-up

comic¹⁰ and never once served as an on-the-field official. Nonetheless, Blandino was handed officiating's top spot.

At the 2014 National Association of Sports Officials (NASO) annual convention, Blandino gave the keynote address. One way to improve officiating, he claimed, was through consistency. "We have to make sure that we're checking at each level that the message is clear," he stated. "And how do we do that? How do we achieve consistency in officiating? That's the goal. Coaches, players, administrators—all of our stakeholders—want consistency....But the only way to achieve true consistency is through a consistent evaluation system. Officials must be held to a standard, and that standard should be applied across the board. We need to shrink the gray areas, simplify the rules...effective communication and consistent evaluation will lead to consistent officiating."¹¹

It's not easy to be consistent given the state of the NFL's rules. This league reacts in the same way our government often does. As soon as there is a perceived "wrong," no matter how once-in-a-lifetime the play may have been, the NFL attempts to correct it by adding/altering a rule. Instead of clarifying, these adaptations only seem to muddy the waters. Blandino alluded to this in his address when he held up two NFL rulebooks, the current version and one from 1940. He announced that there was only a one page difference between the two; however, "the pre-World War II edition was closer to pocket size."¹² "I can fit four pages of (the older book) onto every page of (the 2014 book)," Blandino told the crowd. "And the 2014 book has 130 pages of casebook plays. Not 130 casebook plays—130 pages. Because as game officials, we need to have every situation accounted for."¹³

Three of the plays/penalties the NFL decided to focus on in 2014 were illegal contact, illegal use of the hands, and defensive holding. In the 2013 preseason, illegal contact was called 18 times, defensive holding 38 times, and illegal use of the hands 28 times. When the 2014 preseason kicked off, yellow flags littered every stadium in the league. Illegal contact was penalized 99 times, defensive holding 172 times, and illegal use of the hands 124 times; a five-fold increase.¹⁴ There were worries NFL officials were becoming too strict as games were noticeably slowing due to penalties.

To the rescue came Blandino. As the preseason wound down, he told NFL Network's NFL Total Access Postgame, "When the regular season rolls around, I think everybody will be on the same page and I think you'll see those foul totals go down."¹⁵ While an average of 23.1 penalties were being called per game during the preseason, Blandino believed that number would drop to around 15 or 16 in the regular season. "That's the level that it's been and I think once everybody gets through this adjustment period I think that's where we'll see the penalties because we certainly don't want to delay the game but we also have to call the violations that are there," Blandino said.¹⁶

But, wait a second. If those preseason penalties were legitimate—and no one claimed they weren't—what would cause the total number of flags thrown a game to drop by seven or eight as Blandino suggested? Would players wise up? Would referees intentionally scale back? Was Blandino going to employ some Jedi mind tricks? Something had to give because by Week 16 of the 2014 season, Blandino's prediction proved true. The NFL's 17 officiating crews were calling an average of 16.1 penalties per game.¹⁷

Yet inconsistencies existed within that average. For starters, the range of the average number of penalties called per official varied. According to ESPN, referee Carl Cheffers was issuing 19.1 penalties a game while fellow official Clete Blakeman called a mere 13.¹⁸ Six penalties may not seem like much, but in a game of inches, a 30-yard (or more) swing created by six additional flags could be huge. And it wasn't just the number of calls, but what the referees were penalizing varied, too.

Take offensive holding, the one call that some argue could be made on every down. It's one of many subjective penalties in the NFL; one that's an "I know it when I see it" kind of play for most officials. Through Week 16 of the 2014 season, the officiating crews headed by Carl Cheffers and Jerome Boger each had penalized teams for offensive holding 54 times. Yet working the same number of games, Walt Coleman's crew only threw 26 flags for offensive holding and Bill Vinovich's squad issued a mere 23. Other subjective penalties featured similar discrepancies. Gene Steratore called unnecessary roughness 19 times by Week 16, Clete Blakeman, five. Illegal use of the hands, a preseason focal point, was flagged 27 times by Walt Anderson, but on just four occasions by Walt Coleman.¹⁹

Was that the type of consistency Blandino demanded? Where one crew will call a particular penalty less than half the time another will?

Punishing a referee for poor work is rare. Every game and play is reviewed to examine each official's performance. The highest graded referees are awarded positions in the playoffs and Super Bowl. If it's felt that a particular official isn't working up to NFL standards, he can be downgraded. It takes a very large consensus of opinion for this to happen. So much so that even when the NFL publicly acknowledges an official made a glaring mistake (which occurs almost weekly), such corrections won't lead to a black mark against the offending referee. "As part of evaluating the performance of our game officials," the NFL stated, "the officiating supervisors recognize that for an incorrect call on a close judgment play the official may have used appropriate reasoning. On such a call, the official is not downgraded."²⁰

Fans might be more tolerable of the league's officiating if what are believed to be steadfast rules weren't so apparently open to interpretation. One ref's holding is another's legal block, even though both could point to the same specific rule to justify their decision. As such, the league's best defense against negative perceptions is an increase in transparency. But that word's definition depends on whom you ask.

"If you asked 100 sports fans who were walking down the street what is transparency," said former VP of NFL officiating turned FOX Sports commentator Mike Pereira at the NASO conference, "they would say to you 'admitting that you're wrong.' I mean that's the definition in their mind of transparency. And I think we have to move the needle and bring the officials out from behind the curtain so to speak. I think this: We are now a part of the game. No matter what level we're on we're part of the game. I mean why are we part of the game? Because social media has made us a part of the game, technology has made us part of the game."²¹

NASO president and founder Barry Mano added that sports officials in general have been "forced to lead a cloak and dagger existence. We are forced to always not say something. We're never permitted to

comment because I guess we're too stupid, we can't comment. I mean part of that plays out here. If you keep pushing a group of people behind the scenes and under a cloak or a veil what do you think the general public is going to think about us?"²²

Whether they want to be or not, the NFL has always protected its referees. Rarely are they interviewed, and if they do speak post-game, it is often to an unnamed "pool reporter." At the same time, players and coaches are not allowed to criticize the officiating. Any such talk is almost certainly met with a hefty fine.

Instant replay was supposed to smooth over everything and lead to better and more accurately officiated games. Instead, it has turned into officiating's Achilles heel. Television, especially the advent of HDTV, has warped officiating in ways the league could never have expected. Now anyone sitting at home, in a bar, or even watching the game on their smartphone can see mistakes being committed by referees that affect the outcomes of games, causing knee-jerk reactions within the NFL.

To combat this and aid in transparency, the NFL launched a two-pronged attack in 2014. Blandino laid out the league's plan at the NASO conference. First was the implementation of a "command center" to oversee all instant replay challenges. Based in New York, it allowed communication between Blandino, his staff, and the on-the-field referee involved with the replay. "Digital feeds are being sent all over the country," Blandino said, "and someone in New York is making a decision affecting the outcome of a game in Seattle. It's amazing where we've come."²³

The goal was obviously to make the right call in each situation. The more brainpower the league engaged the more likely it was going to get things correct. But the decision to include Blandino and Co. in making in-game rulings led some (like me) to a conspiratorial conclusion. Would the "right" call actually be the correct call, or would it be the one that aided the team the NFL preferred? If the league was already placing its finger on the scales to tip games in favor of the home team more often than not, who's to say the conversations taking place during reviews aren't also predisposed to certain outcomes? If this weren't the case, and the league truly sought more transparency in its officiating, then why aren't the conversations between the stadium referee and NFL HQ broadcast to its television audience? They are just discussing the finer points of the rulebook, right?

Instead, viewers are subjected to announcers' commentary now bolstered by an "officiating expert" such as the aforementioned Mike Pereira. A Big Brother invasion of the broadcast booth is the second part of the NFL's plan. "Blandino said the goal today is to 'communicate accurate and timely officiating information to the largest possible audience.' By monitoring telecasts of games, the officiating department can confirm or correct announcers' comments regarding rules. The department has the ability to speak to the producers or the commentators off the air. Additionally, the network can contact the command center to get an interpretation. 'We're going to proactively explain rules,' he said. 'If we're speaking with one voice, it helps for clarity, consistency.'"²⁴

This'll hold true except, you know, in the case of judgment calls where interpretation might actually be needed. "Judgment calls happen every down, every play whatever sport you're in," Blandino said. "And we are not going to go on air talking about judgment calls. It may be correct, it may be incorrect. We'll

evaluate that, but that's not what this is about. We'll discuss the relevant rule and what the officials are keying on as part of an educational process. But this is not to second-guess game officials and their judgment."²⁵ As for truly egregious errors, "Those will be handled on a case-by-case basis," Blandino stated.²⁶

All of this came to an ugly head in the one place the NFL didn't want it to: the playoffs. Much to the league's chagrin, wildcard weekend and the divisional round were both marred by questionable calls. These two particular plays act as a perfect microcosm of all the damage the NFL has done to itself when it comes to officiating its games.

Up 20-17 with just over eight minutes remaining in the game, the Detroit Lions had driven from their own 5-yard line to the Dallas Cowboys' 46. On 3rd-and-1, Lions quarterback Matthew Stafford faded back and lofted a pass up to tight-end Brandon Pettigrew. To all in attendance, those watching at home, and even the nearest referee, it appeared that Cowboys linebacker Anthony Hitchens committed pass interference to prevent Pettigrew from making the reception. A flag flew, referee Pete Morelli announced the foul to the disheartened Cowboys' faithful, and the ball was spotted at the new line of scrimmage. It appeared as if the Cowboys playoff run was at an end.

Then, without a word of explanation from Morelli, the penalty was erased. Morelli simply announced, "There is no foul on the play." It was Lions' ball back at the Cowboys' 46-yard line.

The decision caught everyone off-guard. It stunned even FOX's broadcasting crew. No one could explain what just occurred, because, well, nothing like it had happened before.

Despite having cameras covering every inch of the field from multiple angles, NFL rules forbid reviewing penalties either by a coach's challenge or by a call from the replay official. So the play wasn't reviewable, despite the league specifically instituting instant replay to get calls "right." Yet without replay's assistance *something* had to occur to reverse the initial pass interference call. Since NFL referees are now wired to each other to ease communication and since the replay official high above the field has a direct connection to the NFL's command center, methinks all of these entities were involved in overturning that penalty.

"What do you expect when you come to Dallas?" Lions safety Glover Quin said after the game. "Ain't gonna speculate that. But the league likes the story lines and headlines."²⁷

Blandino's call for consistency and communication was only heeded after the game when Morelli offered up the official explanation for picking up that flag. "The back judge threw his flag for defensive pass interference," Morelli said. "We got other information from another official from a different angle that thought the contact was minimal and didn't warrant pass interference. He thought it was face guarding [which is not a penalty in the NFL]."²⁸

Yet defensive pass interference wasn't the only penalty should have been called on this play. While the referees were assessing the foul (that is, prior to picking up the flag to negate it), Cowboys wide receiver Dez Bryant stormed out onto the field without wearing his helmet to yell at the refs. This was caught on

camera and highlighted during the broadcast. However, none of the officials apparently saw Bryant—despite the fact he was verbally abusing them—because if one of them had, it would have resulted in a 15-yard unsportsmanlike conduct penalty. So even when the refs decided not to assess the pass interference call the Lions should've been sitting pretty with 1st-and-10 at the Cowboys' 31.

Only they weren't. It was 4th-and-1.

The Lions subsequently shanked a punt, the Cowboys drove the length of the shortened field, and with just over two minutes remaining, scored game-winning touchdown. Dallas 24, Detroit 20. As Jerry Jones jumped up and down in the arms of New Jersey governor Chris Christie (who should've been the NFL's sworn enemy for attempting to legalize sports betting in his state), the rest of Cowboys' nation celebrated a tainted victory.

That sumptuous treat would melt into a bitter pill for the Cowboys to swallow the following week in Green Bay. As time ticked down to less than five minutes to play, the Cowboys faced a 4th-and-2 on the Packers' 32-yard line. Instead of running with (my fantasy nemesis) DeMarco Murray, quarterback Tony Romo threw up a bomb for Dez Bryant. Leaping over Packers' defensive back Sam Shields, Bryant caught the ball, took three steps, and stretched out for the end zone. Upon hitting the turf, the ball popped out of Bryant's extended hand, flipped in the air, and was cradled back in his arms. The official positioned at the goal line not six feet from the play signaled it a catch. Cowboys' ball, 1st-and-goal at the Packers' 1-yard line.

Packers' head coach Mike McCarthy quickly issued his red challenge flag. The catch was going to be reviewed. Of course, unlike the subjective penalty call in the Lions-Cowboys game, this subjective ruling of a catch *could* be challenged because the NFL says so.

Referee Gene Steratore went under the hood and conferenced with Blandino back in New York. Though ruled a catch on the field, upon further review the NFL decided this was an incomplete pass. There would be no second round of Jones-on-Christie man-love. Packers' ball, first down. Game, set, match. Green Bay 26, Dallas 21.

"When it happened I did not think for a minute it was not a catch," former Cowboys quarterback turned FOX Sports broadcaster Troy Aikman told *Sports Illustrated*. "When it happened, I'm thinking it is an unbelievable catch. Then when we went to break, [Fox rules analyst] Mike Pereira said he thought the call was going to be overruled. I said, 'Really? It looks to me like if anything is changed to the call it will be ruled a touchdown.' They ruled it the way Mike saw it. I'm not going to argue with Mike. After the game you hear from all sorts of people about the call and 99 percent of my friends who texted me are just fans and most don't know the rules. But I did hear from some coaches and that got my attention. And they felt it was a poor call."²⁹

Some NFL fans (like me) saw this as a week-late "make-up" call. The Cowboys won a playoff game on a "bad" call, now they had one taken away on a similar decision. This was done, the thought goes, so the league wouldn't be seen as playing favorites (although both controversial calls and games did go the home team's way. Just sayin').

The NFL had its ways of explaining the non-catch. Blandino tweeted shortly after the call was made, “Bryant going to the ground. By rule he must hold onto it throughout entire process of contacting the ground. He didn't so it is incomplete.”³⁰ Steratore went into more detail post-game, saying, “Although the receiver is possessing the football, he must maintain possession of that football throughout the entire process of the catch. In our judgment he maintained possession but continued to fall and never had another act common to the game. We deemed that by our judgment to be the full process of the catch and at the time he lands and the ball hits the ground it comes loose as it hits the ground, which would make that incomplete. Although he re-possesses it, it does contact the ground when he reaches so the repossession is irrelevant because it was ruled an incomplete pass when he had the ball hit the ground.”³¹

Here again is a failing of Blandino’s cry for consistency and clarity. Phrases like “process of the catch” and “a move common to the game” can’t be deciphered. The Supreme Court would render split decisions on what both terms meant. So what has happened is fans who have watched football their entire lives no longer understand something as simple as what makes for a “catch.” I think you’d be hard pressed to find a single football fan who didn’t believe Bryant caught that critical 4th down pass as long as those same people didn’t then try to interpret the NFL’s rule(s) for what a “catch” is. That’s how convoluted the NFL has made its rules. What you see with your eyes in beautiful 4K resolution on your 60” LED TV screen can be wrong...if the NFL is making the final decision.

The situation is not about to improve. “The NFL commissioner and all of his henchmen want to have a say in officiating when they know nothing about what they’re talking about,” Mike Pereira said at the NASO conference. “I mean it’s really amazing the phone calls that I used to get from [NFL Commissioner Roger] Goodell during games and he had no idea of what he was talking about, yet he and his guys are setting policy.”³²

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