

Officials' primary focus needs to change with game

By Bill LeMonnier Thu, 12/30/2010

For years, officials have been taught to key on the offensive team from the snap to the end of the play. The rationale is simple: This mechanic takes you to the point of attack and allows you to properly officiate the play.

This is still the framework for sound officiating, but the game has changed from three yards and a cloud of dust to a game played by high-skilled athletes who are bigger, stronger and faster than ever before.

Unfortunately, with this comes the danger of high speed contact that puts players at risk for serious head and neck injuries, particularly when defenseless players are being targeted to the neck and head area by their opponents. This is a whole new challenge for officials in their efforts to keep the game safe.

Officials need to re-think their approach and shift their attention from offense to defense to deal with a variety of situations. Crew mechanics vary depending on the number of officials at a specific game. That said, player safety must be the No. 1 priority.

Examples include but are not limited to:

- punt receivers focused on catching the kick;
- pass receivers in a defenseless position;
- ball-carriers in open areas;
- a quarterback in the act of passing the ball;
- players who are obviously out of the play.

Punt receivers

While the primary covering official focuses on the receiver and the catch, the other nearby officials need to shift from the receiving team to the kicking team's gunners. These are the potential tacklers who at high speed can hit the punt return player while he is defenseless. The argument sometimes is that you will miss a hold or a block in the back by doing this. This isn't true. You will see the player you are keying on being held or pushed in the back just as easy -- maybe even better.

Pass receivers

A high hit on a pass receiver generally won't happen from a defender in man-to-man coverage. This hit will come from another defender who is in high-speed pursuit and getting there from another direction.

The primary covering official takes the potential catch/no-catch and interference judgments. The off officials key on defenders coming in, whether it is to jar the ball loose or on an obviously overthrown pass.

The catch/no-catch will still be ruled on by the primary covering official. Crews don't need two or three officials signaling an incomplete pass when the receiver is leveled by high contact.

Ball-carriers

When ball-carriers break outside at or near the line of scrimmage, the runner is at full speed and defenders are coming up at full speed. This open-field contact at or near the line of scrimmage is nearly impossible for the head linesman or line judge to properly view. The wing official has the runner and point of attack blocks coming at him.

The last thing he sees is a defender from the opposite direction targeting the runner. Depending on the crew, this responsibility will be on the back judge, deep wing official or umpire.

Quarterbacks passing

Referees need to adjust their mechanics to look for the defender who has clearly beat his block and is coming in unmolested on the quarterback. This often comes from the opposite side or blind side.

Referees must recognize this and be ready to move left or right to see the potential contact to the thrower's neck and head. Too often, referees are straight-lined and miss the contact point by the defender or have stayed too long on a block and never see the hit on the QB.

What's more important: holding or player safety? We're not saying holding isn't important, but we are saying safety is without question more important.

Players obviously out of play

Old school football thinking says if you're on the field you can be lit up. That thinking has to be eliminated from today's game.

When the play goes away and a player is just standing there, he cannot be blindsided by his opponent. The punter admiring his kick, the receiver who relaxed after the pass obviously went over his head or the QB not actively participating after an interception are not clay pigeons.

Players, coaches and fans need to be educated that these hits are cheap shots that cause more injuries to the head and neck than any other part of the game. Football is designed to have contact, but it was not intended to be an outlet for mayhem.

The game needs to be played lower than the head and neck. I once heard a coach tell his players that his team would not play that way. He prayed their opponents wouldn't play football that way, and he closed by telling his team that he didn't ever want to be standing in a hospital after a game telling a player's mother why her son would be spending the rest of his life in a wheelchair.

Respect your opponent and respect the game.