

Goal Line Mechanics... Referee Position

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When discussing goal line mechanics a lot of pre-game time is spent talking about the goal line going in. Equally important is the goal line going out. Accurately ruling on a runner's forward progress in the field of play or the end zone is the difference between maintaining possession of the ball by the offense or awarding two points for a safety to the defense and the subsequent change of possession following the free kick after safety. What looks like a "2-point" play in reality can be a momentum swing of 9-points.

From the goal line to the five-yard line, wing officials have primary responsibility for forward progress and the goal line. Where things get tricky is when the ball is snapped from the six-yard line to the ten-yard line. This five-yard area leaves the goal line in limbo for the wing officials who have responsibility for offensive and defensive pass receivers. Here's where the referee has to adjust his initial position prior to the snap.

Normally the referee begins 12 to 14 yards deep and a little wider than the tight end. When the ball is snapped between the five and ten-yard line, the referee should do two things: Widen out and begin only 10 yards deep. Adjusting wider and closer to the snap will allow the referee to get a better look at the quarterback who drops back to pass around the goal line and is in danger of being sacked. Referees who stay back deeper and tighter have no chance to rule on forward progress. The two wing officials may read the sack and start back to help but they have no true angle being up to ten yards ahead of the action. By adjusting closer to the goal line and staying wider than normal, the referee can avoid being in the way if the quarterback gets out of the pocket and scrambles toward him.

Remember one of the key philosophies of sound officiating... “Don’t award cheap points!” If you can’t be sure the ball in possession is in the end zone, don’t award a safety. Spot the ball in the field of play when you have doubt or are not on the goal line. It’s one thing to rule a safety when you have good position and there is no doubt. It’s another thing to guess and award points with a change of possession.

Another goal line mechanic for referees and wing officials to discuss is reverse goal line mechanics when an interception, fumble return, or punt return are threatening the goal line. Normally the wing officials have the goal line going in. Now the play goes the other way and who really is primary on the goal line? The referee is primary. When the play is tight as far as ruling touchdown or down short of the goal line, wing officials must remember to look for the referee in boxing in the potential score. Nothing looks worse than one official ruling the runner down short of the goal line by inches and another official signaling touchdown. Avoid dueling signals by getting that eye contact on tight goal line plays involving reverse mechanics. The exception to the referee having goal line responsibility is not to give up on your QB following a turnover at the expense of the goal line. After a change of possession it’s critical to find the QB and ensure he’s not on Team B’s “most wanted list”. Find the QB because Team B #99 found him and believes he gets a free shot following an interception or other turnover situation. If the referee doesn’t get to the goal line in this scenario, the HL & LJ can handle it as they do going the other way.