

Too Close to Call

By Tim Sloan

The one thing that fouls up the ability to make a good call is the element of surprise. Early in your career, just about everything surprises you because you're watching plays from a completely different perspective than when you played. As you gain experience through repetition, ordinary plays don't surprise you anymore. Making the right call has a lot to do with learning to expect the unexpected and confirming the result of the play rather than anticipating the result.

Even if you've conditioned yourself to not be too quick to make a call, the other critical aspect is high-probability positioning. You're never going to be in perfect position all the time. Much of the time, however, it's possible to move yourself into position to see the most likely outcome of the play from the most beneficial angle and distance and there are things you can do to help that.

The biggest mistake I see officials make is getting too close to a play. Ideally, you want to be five to 10 yards from it at the moment of truth; that's far enough that you can be aware of the involved players' hands and feet without having to glance back and forth between them and yet close enough that you get some parallax between the players. At that distance, you can get a portrait of the play that's easier for your brain to process. If you get too close to the play, you miss important details because they're out of your field of view. You also risk getting run over.

Getting too close to a play is typically a product of the urge to hustle. The best thing we can do to keep distance from a play is to stop running — not veer or backpedal, then stop running at the right moment. That allows a play out of bounds to pass in front of you and the angle between players to open up to you. Knowing when to stop running dovetails with the next important aspect — seeing the play develop.

Every official has an area of responsibility which usually includes the players in that area. As the play develops, you're never quite sure whether those players will become involved in a call you have to make or not. Until something happens that commits players to an outcome, like the quarterback passing or the punter kicking, you always want to be looking through your players to the current position of the ball. For a back judge, that's fairly easy as long as he can stay downfield of the deepest defenders. For a line judge and linesman that's tougher because, on a pass or kick, the wing has to keep up with players so he can monitor them but also tell when the ball's coming. That means the official has to react to his keys at the snap.

The first impulse of an official on any play should be to react to tangibles like the linemen retreat blocking or

the quarterback dropping back and following his assigned players until he knows otherwise. He can always peel back (or stop) if the play develops differently, but he can never make up ground that he's lost.

That brings us to the third element of successful coverage: avoiding ball-watching. If you have read your keys, stayed with your players and determined the direction of the ball's flight, you can forget the ball and focus all your attention on the players it's headed toward. Inexperienced officials, who take that extra long look at the ball, miss early clutches and entanglements between players that might be fouls. More importantly, however, when you can visualize where the ball's going to come down, you have a period of time to decide when and where to stop and watch the play's completion. You want to be stationary so that you don't lose details in the blur of the background or the jiggling of your eyeballs. Don't waste your experience by getting a poor angle on a routine play.

Next you have to determine what details to focus on and how to watch them. A lot of that depends on your sense for the advantage of the players involved. If a player is clearly in position to catch a ball unmolested, you can focus on him and watch for the elements of a good catch. If opponents have an equal chance for the ball, try to look for jostling between them. If a defender may or may not reach a receiver before the ball arrives, watch for the contact between the players and decide whether it was well timed or illegal. Those aren't hard-and-fast rules, of course, but things that will help you seize upon the elements of the play that are most likely to cause a problem.

Finally, when the play actually happens, make sure you can see it. Some officials tend to flinch or blink when the play is actually made. You can avoid flinching if you try to watch the play "bug-eyed." You actually want to force your eyes wider open so that there's no danger of missing anything.

Sometimes, the best reaction you can make to a play is none at all. Until you blow a whistle or make a signal, the world waits with bated breath. If

a player runs a few steps with a pass that might have bounced or scoops up a fumble when the runner was down by contact, so what? Wait for help and think twice, but whatever you do, hold your call until you've given yourself every reasonable chance to be sure.

Making the right call in a game isn't about being the fastest gun in the West. It's about getting the most confident look you can. When you learn to play the percentages and expect the unexpected, you start getting better and more consistent results.

Tim Sloan, Bettendorf, Iowa, officiates high school basketball, football and volleyball. □


Positioning

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