

When a Lone Ranger Isn't a 'Good Guy'

Even if you are too young to have watched the TV show, you should be familiar with the Lone Ranger, a fictional character that has become an enduring icon of American culture. He is a masked ex-Texas Ranger who, with his Native American companion Tonto, fights injustice in the American Old West. His alter ego sometimes appears on the football field, not to fight any injustice, but to prove that he can call a game alone without the aid of crewmates. This Lone Ranger isn't a 'Good Guy.'

Forward Progress

Determining the correct progress spot is perhaps the greatest indicator of a crew's excellence. It is a skill needed on just about every play. Of course, there are easy progress calls such as an unhindered runner crossing the goal line or a quarterback sack in team A's end zone, but most plays require a clear view of the ball and an understanding of when a runner is down by rule.

Running plays that end in a cluster of players pose a challenge for officials. The nearest wing official may not have the best view of the ball; in fact, he may not have any view. His partner on the opposite sideline should be able to help him. On rare occasions, the umpire may have the only view of the dead ball spot. However, umpires who frequently insist on spotting the ball themselves without looking at their partners on the wings are a good example of the Lone Ranger.

Runs along the sideline on snaps from outside team B's 10 yardline require teamwork between the back judge and the appropriate wing official. They cannot be called correctly by a lone official. The back judge is responsible for the goalline and the wing official must rule if the runner touched the sideline before the ball broke the plane of the goalline. If the ball never makes it into the end zone, the call belongs to the wing official; he alone is responsible for the progress spot. If the ball does get across the goalline, the back judge must hesitate and get assurance from his partner that the runner did not step out of bounds. In the rare cases when those two events occur in an unclear sequence, the officials must confer to get the call right.

Catch or Not

Some teams don't pass very often and some catches can, in fact, be easily called by one official. However, ruling on a catch often requires as much teamwork as determining forward progress. On short passes, the umpire must swivel and watch the flight of the ball. He may be the only official who can see a ball was trapped and not caught. His proximity to the play can also be a factor in discerning whether a seemingly caught ball moves when it touches the ground in the hands of the receiver. The umpire becomes the masked man when he calls pass interference — it is rare when an umpire can see the entire interaction between a receiver and defender.

In some scenarios, a catch can be viewed only from limited angles. What may appear as a catch from the back judge's angle may prove to be incomplete to the wing official or vice versa. The official who saw the ball touch the ground should decisively signal the incompleteness and if appropriate, a brief discussion should take place. Partners comparing views may also make sense to rule on pass interference or defensive holding. Whenever there is only one flag, a quick discussion should take place. Even with two flags, the officials must ensure they both have the same call.

When a pass is caught near a sideline and the receiver is driven back, the covering official should concentrate on whether or not a catch is made and whether or not a foul is committed when the receiver is taken to the ground. Getting the correct progress spot is of secondary concern, but that can be easily picked up by the cross-field official — his spot is also likely to be more accurate and that is crucial if the contact occurs near the line-to-gain stake. If the covering official makes the progress spot his first priority, he is apt to miss a personal foul and possibly an incomplete pass.

As with runs that end near a goalline pylon, pass receptions in that vicinity also require teamwork. The back judge has the goalline and the wing official watches the sideline. Possible catches near the endline see a reversal of those roles with the back judge ruling on the return to the ground inbounds and the sideline official confirming the catch.

Kicks

Kick plays not only have special rules but they tend to spread the players and the officials over a greater portion of the field. That puts a premium on officiating teamwork.

A highly visible display of two officials working together occurs during scoring kicks with the back judge and a wing official at the goalposts. On some kicks, making the same call promptly and decisively is more difficult than it may appear. There have been cases where opposite calls were signaled but fortunately those are rare.

Punts that go over the sideline in flight require the cooperation of the referee and the official on that sideline. The wing official should run past the approximate out-of-bounds spot and walk back toward the referee who will chop his arm when his partner has reached the correct spot.

Punts that bounce out of bounds can be handled by the sideline official, but there are do-it-all back judges who find their way to the sideline and insist on doing the wing official's job. One of the myths of officiating is the back judge is needed on the sideline to cover for the linesman who has remained at the line of scrimmage until the kicked ball has crossed it. It takes 1.5 seconds for a punter to field a clean snap and immediately kick the ball over the line. That slight delay is not a reason to cut the linesman out of the play and reduce the crew size by one.