

# **Snap, Lapse, Perhaps?**

## **Avoid the Errors that Ruin Your Game**

It's impossible to call a perfect game. Even at the higher levels, where every official is graded in every game, a perfect score doesn't mean the official was perfect. More than likely, some error undetected by all occurred. Sometimes, only the official recognizes the error. Probably the most common error and one of the most visible is the inadvertent whistle. Much has been written about those, so we'll leave that topic for last.

### **Down error.**

That is probably the most serious error which can be committed, and it goes down as a crew error. In major college football, replay can catch and correct that egregious error. In games where there is no outside help, the best remedy is to not make the mistake in the first place.

A prime catalyst for a down error is overlooking a loss of down. Another possible cause is confusion between a live-ball foul and a dead-ball foul that results in a down not being properly counted.

### **Phantom and missed fouls.**

While these two errors are related because they involve an incorrect call, they differ significantly in magnitude. While the coach may not like it, he can be given an explanation of how a foul was missed. The official may have been blocked out (straight-lined), he may have been in the wrong position or he just may not have been looking there — perhaps something else distracted him with good reason.

Acceptable? No. Understandable? Yes. But how does anyone explain to a coach how an official saw a foul that never happened? In all fairness, it's possible the camera did not capture everything that happened, or the official had a better view, but nothing makes a supervisor sicker than to view a foul call that simply isn't there and then have to explain it to a coach.

### **Miscounting players.**

There is no excuse for not counting, and a more understandable flub is miscounting. Sometimes, it's tough, especially with a hurry-up offense and numerous shifting players. No one will accept any excuse. Counting 11 players when there are only 10 isn't necessarily a problem. If the defense is short, the error is inconsequential. It may also be harmless on offense if the missing player is a back or an end; the formation would still be legal. If an interior lineman is AWOL, the formation would be legal unless the absentee was one of the five players required to be numbered 50-79.

Counting 11 players when there are 12 is an inescapable dilemma. The only issue is whether a five- or 15-yard penalty was missed. In NFHS, a late count may change the foul from illegal substitution to illegal participation, but that's better than a total miss.

## **Penalty enforcement.**

Almost all incorrect penalty enforcement is the result of a miscommunication, either between the calling official and the referee or the referee and umpire. There is a common denominator in the preceding — the referee. Because of that, the referee is often solely blamed for the error. Make no mistake about it: Penalty enforcement is a crew responsibility.

If the wrong distance is walked off, it could be a rules error, but a misunderstanding is the more likely culprit. Get it straight before the umpire starts walking.

The wrong starting point can cause an even bigger error. For a live-ball foul, it's either the spot of the foul, end of the run or the previous spot, and if it's against the defense it can only be one of the latter two. Pass plays followed by a running play require some thought.

Additional challenges exist when crossing the 50 yardline and especially recognizing when half-the-distance enforcement applies. When crossing the 50 yardline, it is recommended to first calculate the yards to midfield, subtract that from the amount of the penalty, and what's left is walked off from the 50.

## **The clock.**

Managing the clock is complicated by a somewhat independent clock operator who is selected by the host and more importantly, has virtually no communication capability with the field officials. The operator is often blamed for things that are not his or her fault, such as unclear or

absent signals from the field. Each crew should have a designated clock watcher, probably the line judge, who checks stoppage on such things as plays out of bounds, incomplete passes, fumble recoveries, touchdowns and violations.

On the field, managing the clock is partly rules knowledge, but mostly a communication exercise. After the clock has been stopped, it either starts on the referee's signal or the snap. The rules regarding that are straight-forward, so when it's not started properly, it was almost certainly a miscommunication with the referee.

## **Inadvertent whistle.**

Fixing an inadvertent whistle can either be easy or impossible. If there is either a foul or a violation on the play, the quick whistle is ignored. Other than the associated embarrassment, you cannot have a better fix. If the whistle precluded an obvious turnover, nothing can be done to make amends. An example is a whistle on a grounded backward pass with only a defender within reach. The offense gets a bonus — the change of possession is avoided and they get to replay a down they botched.

There are multiple causes of errant toots. The most likely is ending the play without sight of the ball. That can happen either because the official bought a fake handoff or was straight-lined from the ball when it became loose. Anticipation can also be harmful here. Examples include the punt that reaches the waiting arms of the receiver only to pass through and hit the ground. Or the runner whose knee approaches the ground as he regains his balance and continues, as well as the issue of whether the knee was down before the fumble. In less-common scenarios, the lack of rules knowledge or a brain spasm may cause a whistle when the ball is not dead by rule such as an interception in the end zone or any momentum play. In NFHS, the ball is dead when a kick try fails, but not if it's a field goal attempt that hasn't broken the plane of the goalline.