

Football Axioms... When In Doubt Principles: Know When They Apply!

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Introduction...

Players, coaches and fans would cringe if they knew we had doubt on a call. Few realize this happens more than we'd like to admit. That's precisely why the "Axioms of Football Officiating" were developed. Axioms are the key principles that if followed, allow us to get the call right more times than not. What has not been written or discussed is the mechanics of these Axioms, which official gets to apply "when in doubt" and which official[s] should not.

Let's look first at the difference between having a call and having doubt. When you have a call, you're in good position, you've seen the whole play and simply make the call. The Axioms do not apply. When you have primary responsibility and you didn't see the whole play... good mechanics or not, you need to use the Axioms to have a better shot at a correct call.

Now let's discuss when you are not the primary official covering a play. Emphatically, the Axioms or "when in doubt principles" **DO NOT APPLY!!!** They are strictly for the covering official who has primary responsibility. It's the difference between having a call and having an opinion. You have doubt as a non-covering official but the primary official has a call. Stay out of it unless the covering official needs your help, and even then understand the difference between having a call and an opinion.

Let's look at a few of the key Axioms that occur game after game...

- A. **It's a touchback rather than a safety or momentum.** Too often we see officials not in position try to sell a safety call when in fact, the ball never came out of the end zone. This is a fundamental axiom that needs to be followed. Don't put cheap points on the board and have the team giving up the ball on the ensuing free kick.
- B. **The forward pass is incomplete rather than a fumble.** More times than not, the receiver never controlled the ball long enough to do something common to the game... run, pass or kick. Make sure that a receiver has tucked the ball away with control before ruling a fumble. Often, the receiver is outnumbered by the defense and has no chance to recover the ball. Make these plays incomplete!
- C. **The ball is accidentally batted/kicked rather than intentionally batted/kicked.** I heard a veteran official say "I know a bat when I see it. The player usually hits it about 350 feet over the fence." An over simplification, but one we should consider. Make the bat or kick obvious and intentional for everyone to see, not some little swipe and nick of the ball.

- D. **The passer has thrown the ball forward rather than fumbling it and/or the pass is forward rather than backward behind the neutral zone.** Any action by the QB's arm moving forward and the ball coming out should be ruled a forward pass. Even if the arm is going forward, untouched and the QB loses the ball as he tries to pull it back. Also, on forward/backward pass situations remember that we seldom have an official on the same yard line looking directly across to the passer to see which direction the pass was thrown. When the pass hits the ground the covering official needs to rule these incomplete. The human eye is not that good to see the full aspect of this motion or pass direction. Again, ruling these fumbles will result in more cheap turnovers than correct calls.
- E. **It's a fumble rather than the runner down.** Over the years, replays show that nearly 90% of the fumble/down situations are fumbles. You take any chance of help from your crew away when you blow the whistle without seeing the ball dead by rule. Let the play continue and get help from a crewmate. Again, inadvertent whistles are tough to explain and usually a huge inequity occurs by rule when they happen.
- F. **Stop the clock for potentially injured players.** Be vigilant at the end of a play for players who are injured and in need of assistance from trainers or medical personnel. Error on the side of safety. Many times the type of contact or hit will be a clue to the potential for injury. Officials should never attend to injured players. Leave that to the trainers and/or medical personnel. Your role is to officiate the game not provide medical services.
- G. **Don't throw the flag... MIBT.** In most instances tight situations are not fouls. MIBT means Make It Be There! See the entire situation before throwing a flag. More errors are made from guessing and throwing than by holding the flag. Phantom fouls are less forgiving and lead to crew and individual inconsistency.
- H. **Don't blow the whistle.** See leather! When you can't find the ball the last thing you want to do is blow your whistle. Be patient. What seems like an eternity is only a second longer. Find the ball in player possession when the runner goes down or is crossing the goal line before getting on the whistle. Once the whistle blows, you've taken all opportunity for help from your crew away. You have an inadvertent whistle.
- I. **The pass is backward rather than forward beyond the neutral zone.** Beyond the neutral zone the benefit of the doubt goes to the pass being backward. As mentioned before, seldom do we have an official right on the same yard line as the pass. Watch the release point of the passer and the touch point of the receiver to make your judgment. Tough plays to work but more times than not these will be backward. Remember if the pass is forward and it hits the ground, it becomes an incomplete illegal forward pass rather than a live loose ball.
- J. **The passer has not grounded the ball.** Many times the passer's arm and throw are affected by contact by the defense. Other times the intended pass receiver has made

the wrong cut on his route. Sometimes the passer who is not under duress just throws the ball away to end the down because of good defensive coverage. Grounding is a pretty severe penalty on the offense. Know the difference between a good throw away that even the defense is content with versus the passer who is avoiding a loss of yardage or trying to conserve time.

- K. **Don't mirror signals.** Too often we see officials mirror another official's signal on an incomplete pass or a touchdown. If you weren't a primary covering official or did not have the same call, leave it alone. If your partner is wrong and you mirror that signal it makes it difficult to overrule this call. Not only is your partner wrong but you are too!
- L. **It is a block below the waist, clipping, or a chop block.** Player safety is paramount to the game of football. Ruling these situations as fouls when you are "in doubt" is a forgivable mistake. Not calling these fouls, especially when a player is injured from the foul is not forgivable. Additionally this is one of the quickest ways to end your hopes of a long and successful career and invite expensive litigation from injured players.
- M. **The ball has not been touched on a kick or a forward pass.** In kick situations, the last thing you want is a cheap turnover. Don't guess if the ball has been touched by either team. Watch for changes in direction of the football. Watch the player's initial reaction. If you don't see it clean and clear, the player did not touch the ball!
- N. **The forward pass is catchable [NCAA Only].** Today's athletes are faster and more skilled than at any time in the history of the game. In less than one second, a receiver can run ten yards, jump high enough to dunk a basketball, and make eye popping one-handed catches. When you see contact that is pass interference, stop and find the ball before throwing your flag. Always give the receiver the benefit of the doubt especially when the contact is early in the pass and/or when the contact is severe.
- O. **It is roughing not running into the kicker.** The kicker is in a vulnerable position unable to protect himself. Give him the benefit of the doubt and go with roughing when the contact puts him at risk of injury. Save the running into the kicker for contact that needs to be called but never put the kicker at risk.
- P. **It is a 15-yard facemask penalty versus a 5-yard penalty.** Years ago officials seemed reluctant to call a 15-yard facemask penalty. It seemed to be the avenue of least resistance in just calling the 5-yard foul. The fouling team was happy 15 wasn't called and the offended team was happy to get an extra 5 yards added to the run. Today the pendulum has swung the other way with officials calling more 15 yard fouls than ever before. Defenders rarely just grasp the mask. Most times they grab, yank, twist and pull. Go with the 15-yard foul whenever possible.

- Q. **Forward progress is stopped.** Forward progress is a real art rather than a science. The official who can decide when to rule progress and when to let a run go is a master of this art. Remember something about progress and fumbles... If you decide progress, the runner cannot gain or lose yardage, nor can he fumble. If you decide the runner is free to run, then he can fumble too. You can't let him advance and maybe score unless you're willing to let him cough up the ball. What seems like an eternity is really only a one second pause to read the play and see if the runner is really wrapped up and under control. Like other axioms, don't let a cheap turnover occur when you have doubt.
- R. **It is interference with the opportunity.** Have you recently tried catching a football that someone kicked 40-50 yards and 60 or more feet in the air? Have you had anyone running down toward you wanting to take your head off your shoulders just after you caught the ball? Most of us haven't done this for a while and are glad we don't have to do it for a living. It doesn't take much to distract a kick receiver from focusing on the football/kick. When in doubt, put the burden on the kicking team to give the receiver a clean shot at catching the kick. A muffed punt will result in a turnover more times than not. Again, try and avoid cheap turnovers.

Conclusion

One Axiom that needs some discussion and reconsideration is "When in doubt it is an incomplete pass/trap rather than a completed pass." If we haven't seen the ball touch the ground why would we call it incomplete? If you see it touch the ground, make the call... incomplete pass. If you aren't sure, look for help from another covering official, maybe even the umpire. Don't take a good athletic play away from a receiver.

Axioms can be game savers but they don't excuse us from the responsibility of why we're out there. Put yourself in position to make the call by using sound officiating mechanics, rule knowledge and good common sense. But never give up your responsibility to MAKE THE CALL!