

# 5 BAD HABITS OF FOOTBALL OFFICIALS

By: Jon Bible – Referee Magazine – September 9, 2019

My eyebrows raised a bit when it was suggested I write a column on bad habits because it implied I had messed up everything there is to mess up on the field. But I soon realized I have and that it's a good topic. What follows is a list of five things, chosen from many candidates, that I have done wrong or seen others do wrong (or both) and that can result in problems on the field.

## 1. Not following keys.

There are prescribed mechanics for us to follow, which include keys — certain players we are supposed to watch, at least until we have to get into zone coverage. Obviously, in seven-official crews it is easier to stay with our keys longer than it is in five- and four-official crews, but even in the latter we have assigned duties. If we deviate from them because of ignorance or inattention, we can miss a train wreck that can spoil the whole game. Having two or three sets of eyes on one player and none on others is not calculated to make for good officiating.

When I was a referee in the Big 12 Conference, I had a crewmate who once started a pregame (I assigned them to different guys each week) by taking his car keys out of his pocket, jingling them and putting them on the table. He used that visual device and remarked that, just as keys are essential to a car running, they are a vital component of a good performance by the officiating crew on the field. Truer words were never spoken.

In a college game that I observed, a huge hole by the offense on a sweep to the left was missed, springing the runner for a large gain. Not only did the offensive player jerk and twist the defender, but, for good measure, he tripped him as he finally got loose and tried to get outside to pursue the runner. But there was no call on the play, and I have to believe it was because the official who should have

been keying that player — the third receiver in on a formation with triple receivers to one side — did not realize that the guy was his key or, if he did, got off of him too quickly. The result was a big miss that, fortunately, did not affect the outcome of the game.

In your pregames, review who is responsible for which players and zones on the field and for how long. Everyone needs to be on the same page, and that can only happen if each knows what he and everyone else is supposed to be doing.

## 2. Being too quick to turn to get a new ball.

If we turn around to get a new ball or run to pick it up if we're not getting balls from the sideline the instant an incomplete pass hits the ground, we're likely to miss some post-play personal fouls that, if not called, can start a war.

One of the axioms of great officiating is to be great dead-ball officials. To do that we have to see what happens after the play ends, and we can't do that if we're looking for a new ball. So, pause a few seconds to scan your area, process what is going on, and be certain that everything is calm after a pass hits the ground or a runner goes out of bounds, and then get a new ball. The world won't come to a halt if you wait a few seconds after a play ends to get a new ball in. In fact, the overall pace of the game may improve.

## 3. Having tunnel vision.

That can involve many things — focusing too much on the ballcarrier as he is running (being a “ball watcher”), on the sideline spot when he goes out of bounds or on the spot where he is tackled. In all three cases we're not likely to see what is going on 10 or even five yards away from the play, because our eyes are zeroed in on one particular spot and nothing that may happen around that spot will register in our mind.

When a runner goes out of bounds, register the spot mentally and keep officiating. The spot isn't going to go anywhere, and you'll likely catch a lot of off-the-ball action that can be a crew-saver.

I used to work with a high school back judge who was a runner and was great at sprinting to the dead-ball spot when a ballcarrier was tackled. He was always Johnny-on-the-spot in terms of sticking his nose right into the area where the ballcarrier and tackler were. The problem was that he was so focused on that tight little spot that he routinely missed after-play shoving, pushing and worse that was happening right around him. Instead of keeping his head on a swivel, looking side to side to see what might be happening in the vicinity — and sometimes, on deep passes, the back judge may be the only official who can do that — he let his tunnel vision cause him to miss a lot of dead-ball action.

A corollary to that is don't officiate air (watch an area of the field where nothing is happening or has the potential to happen). Instead, help out somewhere else. We don't want to make a habit of fishing out of our pond — calling fouls in front of another official — but there are times when we'll be able to assist.

#### 4. Throwing a flag and not continuing to officiate.

That is so easy to do, and we've all done it. We see something that looks like a foul, we process (hopefully) whether it has enough impact on the play to warrant calling, we decide that it does so we throw our flag, and then it's as if everything stops. "Am I right?" may be running through our minds, and/or it may be "What's the number of the fouling player?" But either way we tune out.

Suppose, for example, there is a long pass into the end zone. The receiver and defender go up and you see action by the defender that warrants a pass interference call. So you throw your flag. But then you tune out, so you miss the fact that the receiver caught the ball and got one foot down inbounds for a

touchdown. You go to the referee to report your foul, and his question is, “What happened on the play?” You get a deer-in-the headlights look because you don’t have a clue. If it’s a 40-yard pass that should have been a touchdown, but all you got was the foul, you’ll cheat the offense out of a lot.

## 5. Unprofessional conduct at game sites.

Lots of officials have gotten in a lot of deep water simply because of how they acted before and after games. Too often I’ve seen officials get out of their van and yuk it up all the way into their dressing room, and perhaps even look sloppy as they walk. That conveys the attitude that we’re not serious about the task at hand, which can set the stage for disaster before the opening kickoff occurs.

Dress appropriately when you go to the game site. Be professional in your comments and relationships with school officials, coaches and the like. No off-color stories and not a lot of jokes. Even if conditions are substandard — no towels, a crowded coach’s office to dress in — don’t complain to everyone within earshot. Instead, deal with it and contact your assigner afterward. Don’t leave the dressing area looking like a war zone. Try to leave it looking pretty much like it was when you got there.

Officiating a football game will never be as easy as fans and TV commentators think it is. There will always be judgment calls that could go either way, and players will always get in front of us so as to obscure our vision. But we can cut down on the number of negatives that can mar an otherwise good performance by avoiding mistakes like the ones above.

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