

6. AXIOMS OF OFFICIATING

6.1 – When in doubt principles

"When in doubt" is not the same as "I don't know" or "I think it might" or "I'm not sure". In doubt means "feeling uncertain about something" – you do not know objectively what happened. This should trigger an attempt to gain more information, either by adjusting your position and view, or by communicating with another official. Sometimes the actions of the players convey information about what *they* believe happened during the play, giving you additional evidence to help you make the call.

If you are reasonably sure of something, then go with that – it is more likely to be correct than to fall back on the relevant "when in doubt" principle. For example, if you are reasonably sure a passer fumbled the ball, don't rule that he passed it just because principle 6.1.6 says so. The principles are there for when the evidence is much more 50/50 about what truly happened. We are not usually looking for decisions to be made "beyond reasonable doubt".

Note that the principles below do *not* change when video review is available. Given the quality of video we will most often see, it is likely that many reviews will let "stand" the call on the field, so it is important to make that call as fair as possible.

When in doubt:

1. the forward pass is incomplete rather than a fumble;
2. as to whether the ball touched the ground during a catch, it did not touch the ground;
3. a catch, recovery or interception is not completed^λ (Rule 2-4-3-h);
4. on a simultaneous catch or recovery, whoever comes up with the ball gets it;
5. the forward pass is catchable (Rule 2-19-4);
6. the passer has thrown the ball rather than fumbled it (Rule 2-19-2-c);
7. the pass is forward rather than backward behind the neutral zone (Rule 2-19-2-a);
8. the pass is backward rather than forward beyond the neutral zone or when there is no neutral zone;
9. as to touching the ball, a player has not touched it (Rule 2-11-4);
10. a player is defenseless^λ (Rule 2-27-14);
11. call timeout for injured players;
12. a departing player has left the field prior to the snap;
13. the ball is dead^λ (Rule 4-1-3-a);
14. the player is in bounds rather than out of bounds;
15. if the ball carrier is being held by only one player, the ball is still alive; if held by two or more, forward progress is stopped;
16. a kicking team member has (a) entered the area in front of the receiver; (b) contacted the potential receiver before (or simultaneous with) his first touching the ball; (c) interfered with a receiver in position to catch the kick and who does not do so;[†]
17. the one second pause has been violated;
18. offensive players are legally on the line;
19. offensive players are legally in the backfield;
20. players are legally moving rather than in illegal motion;
21. defensive signals are legal;
22. the passer has not intentionally grounded the ball;
23. the forward pass was thrown from in or behind rather than beyond the neutral zone;
24. the defensive back has legally initiated contact in passing situations;
25. it is a touchback rather than a safety (Rule 8-5-1-a);
26. the ball is dead in the field of play rather than a touchdown;
27. it is a touchback rather than a momentum exception;

28. it is targeting^λ (Rules 9-1-3 and 9-1-4);
29. it is a legal block rather than clipping;
30. the face mask, chin strap or helmet opening has been grasped then twisted, turned or pulled^λ (Rule 9-1-8-b);
31. the block is legal rather than at or^λ below the waist;
32. as to disintegration of the free-blocking zone^λ (Rule 2-3-6), it is intact;
33. as to a block in the back, the contact is below the waist rather than above (Rule 2-3-4-a);
34. the back at the snap is not positioned outside the normal tackle;
35. the foul is roughing rather than running into the kicker (Rule 9-1-16-a-8);
36. it is legal use of hands rather than holding or illegal use of hands;
37. the ball is accidentally batted or kicked rather than intentionally (Rule 2-16-1-a);
38. as to whether an illegal block occurs in the end zone or field of play, it occurs in the field of play;
39. an unsportsmanlike conduct foul occurred while the ball was dead rather than live;
40. on changes of possession in or near the end zone, the return has NOT left the end zone;
41. a foul by Team B on a scrimmage kick occurred after (not before) the ball was kicked;
42. a block below the waist occurred before (not after) the ball left the tackle box[®]
43. there is no foul;
44. don't throw the flag;
45. don't blow the whistle.

6.2 – Points to ponder

Always remember:

1. player safety is your number one concern after your own;
2. make the tough call;
3. don't get emotionally involved;
4. a pre-game conference is a must;
5. if you look like an official you'll perform like one;
6. count the players;
7. correct obvious errors;
8. see leather;
9. know the down and distance;
10. sell the call but don't over-officiate;
11. call what you see but see what you call;
12. don't guess – know;
13. if two officials are marking a spot, one could be doing something else;
14. let the mind digest what the eye has seen;
15. what effect does it have on the play?;
16. it's what you learn after you know it all that counts;
17. on the wings, don't get trapped inside;
18. in the defensive backfield, don't get beat deep;
19. after throwing your flag continue to officiate;
20. 4th down, kill the clock;
21. take a second to take a look;
22. the three virtues of a good official are attitude, consistency and competence;
23. the only part of officiating to emphasise is your signalling;
24. be decisive – indecision (or is it indecisiveness?) gives the impression of uncertainty;
25. never stand still during an entire down – people will think you are lazy;
26. if officials are close enough to touch each other there is generally something wrong;

27. don't get mad and don't get even;
28. if the fans and coaches don't know your name or who worked the game, you've had a great game;
29. it is more important to get it right than to look good;
30. don't dillydally – if you are going to get it wrong it is better to get it wrong quickly than it is to get it wrong slowly, but it's still better to get it right;
31. false pride has no place in officiating;
32. there are probably 5 "big" calls per game – make sure you get them right;
33. officials can **influence** people (affect their behaviour) because they have **power** (the ability to influence someone), and **authority** (the right to exercise power), but there can be no authority without respect for that authority and respect has to be earned – it does not come automatically with the stripes;
34. if you are not *sure* it's a foul, it isn't, except against the QB;
35. if they get beat, they cheat!
36. there is no such thing as a *late* flag, only a *considered* flag;
37. ignorance can be corrected, but stubbornness and stupidity might be permanent;
38. you're only as good as your next call.

6.3 – Principles of effective officiating

All officials must:

1. be helpful (preventive officiating);
2. have a thorough pre-game conference;
3. be prepared to compromise;
4. avail themselves to other officials;
5. help fellow crew members as much as possible;
6. encourage less experienced officials to ask questions;
7. give advice when needed;
8. be on time;
9. know their position;
10. know that uniformity is important;
11. act in a professional manner at all times;
12. be aware of primary and secondary responsibilities;
13. be people watchers not ball watchers;
14. be clock conscious;
15. never miss a down;
16. give good signals;
17. not allow linemen to talk;
18. be in the position to make the call;
19. not turn their back to the ball;
20. blow their whistle like they mean it;
21. keep their mouth closed around the goal line;
22. keep up-to-date with the mechanics of crews smaller than you normally work – you never know when injury or delay will force you to work that way;
23. be able to control their sideline;
24. be able to cover situations far downfield;
25. be aware of tempo;
26. know penalty enforcements;
27. never alienate a member of their crew;
28. "make it be there" – no phantom calls;
29. "get the play right" – if there is doubt, discuss it.

6.4 – Ten tips from Sports Officials UK

1. Know the rules and rules applications and apply them accurately. That way you will achieve the consistency that competitors need.
2. Be decisive and strong in your decision making. Competitors will trust decisions made confidently and assertively but not aggressively.
3. Make sure the players understand your decisions. Then you will reduce their reasons to challenge them.
4. Don't take challenges personally. Questioning your decision is not an attack on your integrity.
5. Watch for flashpoints. If you see what might cause an outburst you can prevent it.
6. If you get a decision wrong, acknowledge it. Players accept you are human – they don't trust perfection.
7. Don't try to redress injustices. Apply the rules, and let justice take care of itself.
8. Be friendly and approachable. Players will relate to a person more than they do to an official.
9. Give every event your best effort. For some competitors this is the highlight of their season.
10. Enjoy your officiating. If you don't enjoy being there, the competitors will know.