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Bill Surface

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Watching The

With another football season in full swing, *H&S Reports* presents this article to help the average armchair quarterback understand and appreciate the role of the unsung third team on the field, the officials.

By Bill Surface

This article was written especially for *H&S Reports* by Bill Surface, a frequent contributor to *Sports Illustrated*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *Reader's Digest* and other leading publications. Among his books are *Inside Internal Revenue* and *The Hollow*, a portrait of life in the hills of Appalachia.

Whistle Men

The other Saturday night a neatly dressed high school principal picked up a film that had been left for him at the hotel desk and went unnoticed to his room. As usual, he soon was joined by five other men who remembered, as their boss had cautioned, to be as discreet as possible. After locking the room, all six men gathered behind a 16 mm movie projector and intently watched a silent movie until one stopped the projector to comment: "Look at that, would you!" By the time the men finished the film, hours later, they could not conceal their enthusiasm for what they had just watched.

A stag movie? Indeed not. It was one of the National

Football League's six-man officiating crews reviewing a week-old football game in order to get in the proper mood to officiate a game the next day. No less enthusiasm will suffice in this job. Though most officials played football during their younger days, they still had to officiate at high school or college games for at least ten years before being considered to officiate at the professional level, where they must unhesitatingly enforce the 122 pages of complex rules that often confuse the best football coaches.

Unlike coaches and players, however, officials don't have a week to refine their techniques. Typically, the officials leave as

quickly as possible after a game to return to their full-time jobs as accountants, lawyers, bankers, salesmen, teachers, and, in three cases, as a policeman, a rancher and an author of textbooks. Each official is paid, depending on his tenure in the NFL, from \$250 to \$500 for each of fourteen regular season games. If an official is selected to officiate at the Super Bowl, the fee jumps to \$1500.

Yet in their weekly meetings, the officials work out their own "game plan" that usually rivals a team's strategy for variety and thoroughness. They hold an extensive pre-game review of complex play situations that might come up during a game and go over the precisely worded rules that apply in each case.

The officials also are just as specialized as players. Barring complications, an official works with the same crew for the entire season, in the same position throughout his career, and has individual responsibilities.

Their roles:

Referee. The crew's "quarterback," the referee is the sole authority in the event that two officials disagree on a call; explains all decisions to each team's captain or coach, and signals what penalty was called regardless of which official dropped his weighted gold-colored flag to call it. His pre-game chores include checking the air pressure of the twelve official footballs supplied for each game. Often several balls will have to be inflated or deflated to the league's specified 12½ to 13½ pounds of air.

As the teams line up, the referee positions himself behind the quarterback's throwing arm in order to watch the passing action. If the quarterback is hit and the football bounces to the ground,

the referee must determine whether the quarterback grounded it intentionally to prevent being thrown for a loss (calling for a penalty), was hit while in the act of passing (incomplete pass, loss of down), or fumbled (giving possession of the ball to the team recovering). On every play, maintains one referee, he also must "baby sit for the quarterback." As fist-swinging defensemen charge forward, the referee rules if they legally tackled the quarterback while he was attempting to pass or illegally "roughed the passer" a split second after he released the ball.

To complicate these decisions, many a shrewd defenseman skillfully twists his body, ostensibly to avoid striking a quarterback who has just thrown the ball, only to have his momentum "unavoidably" carry him into the quarterback hard enough to daze him. From the grandstand it often appears that a penalized defenseman did swerve away from the quarterback while running past him. But the referee sees the defenseman "clothesline" the quarterback by subtly extending an arm so that it strikes the passer's neck with roughly the same effect as if he had run into a taut clothesline.

Umpire. His job ranges from watching for illegal equipment to relaying the ball to the line of scrimmage after each play. But the umpire's main responsibility is to keep opposing linemen from clobbering each other senseless. It isn't easy to stop. Except for grabbing a player's face mask, the huge defensemen are permitted to do just about anything that they wish during their initial charge—including even sending a fist or forearm "shiver" against the side of an offensive lineman's helmet. Since the generally smaller offensive linemen aren't allowed to use their hands (except to slap

away the defenseman's hands), they cannot always keep the onrushing linemen away from the quarterback for the average 3.5 seconds it takes to get a pass away. To stop the pass rush, many offensive linemen learn ingenious ways to grab a jersey or lock an elbow to give the quarterback the time he needs.

An umpire not only needs to get within swinging distance to detect any such violation and penalize the offensive team 15 yards; he also leaves himself vulnerable to a ballcarrier slanting into his zone with blockers determined to bring down anyone in the way. Umpire Pat Harder was exceptionally adept at dodging tacklers during his younger days as an all-pro fullback. Yet, while officiating one particularly tough game, he was buried under more pileups (five) than either quarterback.

Head linesman. Standing about eight yards from one end of the scrimmage line, the head linesman primarily decides if anyone is "offside" by charging before the ball is snapped. Many teams use a technique to disguise this violation. Say the quarterback calls a particular play on three. Then he barks the signals: "Hut 1, Hut 2, Hut 3." To gain a split second advantage, the offensive team starts at the end of the third "hut" while the center snaps the ball on "three."

Though sometimes it appears obvious to spectators that a team is offside, the linesman's decision does not always concur. Example: A defensive tackle prematurely charges across the scrimmage line but the referee, after hearing the linesman's decision, signals that the team with the ball is being penalized. The head linesman simply ruled that one of the interior linemen had illegally moved his head or body to lure the defense offside.

In another apparent lapse, a defensive lineman may plainly move before the ball is snapped but escapes a penalty. However, the linesman saw that the center had unconsciously rocked the ball forward, simulating a snap, and thereby allowing any defensemen to charge across the line of scrimmage.

Line judge. Stationed on the other end of the line of scrimmage, the line judge is largely responsible for covering shorter passes; spotting out of bounds plays on his side of the field and marking the forward progress of the ball. Also the crew's "artillery man," the line judge keeps both the pistol used to signal the end of the game and a watch that is synchronized with the official scoreboard clock (which an operator stops and starts on his signals). If the clock fails, the line judge's watch becomes the official timepiece. For economy reasons, the line judge's role may be shared by other officials in some college games.

Field judge. Initially positioned about 25 yards up the field, the field judge needs both excellent speed to stay with the fleet pass receivers, and the judgment to make instant decisions on "pass interference" situations. Running his pass pattern, an evasive receiver suddenly fakes, twists, and leaps for the ball that, hopefully, is arriving over a particular shoulder. When the receiver and pass defender leap for the ball, the two men claw, elbow, kick and scream until one—or neither—catches it. The field judge must decide if the defenseman cleverly used his hands, feet, knees or hips to prevent the receiver—as he angrily gestures—from catching it. Or did the pass receiver similarly interfere with the defenseman once he saw that he had no chance to catch it himself?

But another of the field judge's duties helps him to end prolonged objections by the players. He keeps the watch that determines if the ball is snapped within 30 seconds after the referee has marked it ready for play with a slashing motion of his hand. When an exhibitionist sees a field judge flick on the stop watch, it's obvious that he will be in even more trouble with his coach if he doesn't get back to the huddle and avoid a penalty for delaying the game.

Back judge. Positioned on the other side of the defensive backfield about 15 yards deep, the back judge also covers downfield action, particularly on pass plays or punts. Like the field judge, most of his calls involve offensive or defensive pass interference. After a team has scored or the ball has changed hands, the back judge will usually look to the sidelines for the man wearing a red coat and earphones—the TV producer's field man. If he signals that the producer needs another time out to show one of a minimum of 16 commercials during the game, the back judge will pass the signal along to the referee. When the team attempts to kick a field goal, the back judge and field judge must simultaneously signal if the ball goes through the uprights and over the cross bar of the goalpost.

Whether in pro or college games, fans insist officials could be more accurate if they verified controversial decisions with "instant replay" cameras used by television networks. Losing teams occasionally point out costly errors such as nullifying a critical touchdown because a runner or receiver was called out of bounds only to have the films prove that he was not. Except for deciding if a player touched a boundary, officials insist, cameras seldom detect players

skilled at concealing their violations. When films clearly show questionable decisions, a referee maintains, officials have an accuracy rate of at least 95 per cent. They need it. In the NFL, veteran observers attend every game to evaluate each official's performance. Moreover, each official must submit to the league his "game card" listing every infraction that he called and the other officials who also called them. After studying the cards, Mark Duncan, the NFL's director of personnel, and Art McNally and Mel Hein, the supervisors of officials, review films of each game to determine if the officials were in the correct position to see every obvious foul.

Officials who consistently use questionable judgment are quietly replaced by men on the NFL's waiting list. No matter who commits them, mechanical errors are rarely tolerated. If an official erroneously interprets a rule, other members of his crew are required to correct him tactfully or be held equally responsible. In the last minute of a game in 1968, for example, the Los Angeles Rams advanced close enough to the Chicago Bears' end zone to kick a field goal—which could have won the game. But, apparently forgetting that a penalty had nullified one play without loss of the down, the officials routinely motioned that

the Rams did not advance the necessary 10 yards within four attempts and must surrender the ball. Though the Rams' coach had a reputation as one of the shrewdest in the business, neither he nor anyone else discovered that the Rams had used only three downs until hours after the game. The entire officiating crew, considered one of the league's finest, was suspended for the remainder of the season.

While most TV football fans can remember at least one instance where their favorite team lost a game because of an error in judgment by an official, and close examination of game pictures in the newspapers will sometimes reveal holding or interference infractions, the overall record of NFL officials is outstanding. Altogether they work 182 games during a regular season. With an average of about 140 plays from scrimmage each game, that means well over 25,000 separate plays, each judged from six different angles on the field. In the game of football, with its violent action and emotional impact, a great deal of discretion is called for if the officials are to keep the game moving, under control and exciting to stadium and TV fan alike.

"Common sense has to prevail," maintains veteran NFL referee Tommy Bell, "or you could call a penalty on every play." □

The winter issue of H&S Reports will present a companion article about the officials who work in the professional basketball and hockey leagues.