

Judgment Calls That Put You To The Test

by George Demetriou



Lonnie Langford, Newport, Wash., has a great angle to see the first elements of a potential catch at the sideline. The receiver has a firm grasp of the ball. If the defender pushes the receiver so that he first touches the ground out of bounds, the pass is ruled incomplete. If the receiver maintains control of the ball after tapping a foot inbounds or after being caught and carried out of bounds by the defender, it's a catch. Photo Credit: Dale Garvey

According to Webster, judgment is the ability to make a decision. An official's judgment calls will be questioned more often than his or her knowledge of the rules.

At the prep level, without replay and the availability of clear, concise video, the truth often remains unknown. On some plays, officials have to make a calculated guess.

Numerous versions of "when in doubt" guidelines have been published throughout the years. Some have remained the same since they were formulated e.g., "when in doubt, it's not a touchdown." Others, such as whether or not it is a forward pass or a fumble, have changed to accommodate a replay review. What perhaps has been overlooked is that there are varying degrees of when in doubt and it may vary depending upon the level of play.

A distinction that hasn't been widely discussed is the one between an official, who has had a partial view of a play and is not sure of what transpired — when in doubt; and an official, who for whatever reason, simply did not or could not see the play — "no clue" if you will. In the latter case, another official may have a clean look at the play and coordination is a must, but there will be cases when no one can help. Thus there are three variables of judgment: certainty, doubt and no clue.

Here are some thoughts that can be a useful guide when an official is faced with less than 100 percent certainty as to the proper call. They are presented in relation to what are arguably the three most difficult judgment calls an official can face.

Catch or no catch?

The decision as to whether a player has caught the ball can present itself in several scenarios. In some cases the official has to decide whether a receiver in possession of the ball has first landed inbounds. The official may also have to discern at which point in the landing sequence the receiver gained control of the ball. Perhaps the most common scenario is one in which the ground is a factor — was the ball caught cleanly or did it hit the ground before being scooped up (“trapped”)? The decision is further complicated by the fact that it may be considered a catch if the ball touches the ground after it is secured by the receiver depending on whether the ball “moves” when it touches the ground. Consequently seeing the ball touch the ground doesn’t eliminate the possibility of a catch.

The traditional guidelines state that when an official is in doubt, it is not a catch. That is solid advice, but what if the official (and all officials) have no clue because their view was totally obscured, probably by intervening players? Whether the covering official was in the best position to view the play is not immediately relevant. A call needs to be made — catch or not. At that point, the official’s last resort is circumstantial evidence. Does the receiver act as if he caught the ball? Reading the reaction of the covering defender is likely not worthwhile because in his partisan view it will appear as an incomplete pass. If there is no indication the pass was incomplete, the catch should be allowed. Stating the pass is incomplete when the official didn’t see anything is not defensible. Thus, when you have no clue, it is a catch.

Runner down or fumble?

For more than 100 years, the when-in-doubt guideline for when the ball becomes loose at about the time the runner is down by rule was to declare the ball dead. Replay changed that. If the ball is declared dead, the ability for replay to reverse the call is limited to cases in which there is a clear recovery in the immediate continuing action after the loose ball. If a fumble is ruled, replay can act in all cases.

Further, analysis of plays in the NFL has revealed that in doubtful situations, it is more likely the loose ball was a fumble. Although information from prep games is more anecdotal than scientific, the NFHS Game Officials Manual does offer counsel: When in doubt, the runner was down.

The best circumstantial evidence on that type of play is the path of the loose ball. If the ball pops up, it’s an indication the ground changed its direction. A ball that rolls away from the runner is not necessarily a fumble, as the ball may have been deflected after hitting the ground.

The “no clue” guideline is to keep the ball with the team that had it. Allowing a change of possession when the official did not see what happened is inherently unfair, if not unconscionable.

Forward pass or fumble?

Again, the traditional guideline has been to declare an incomplete pass when the passer is hit and loses the ball and the official is not certain if the arm was moving forward before or after contact. With replay, officials who are in doubt are instructed to keep the ball live so replay has all options available. If the ruling is an incomplete pass and replay determines a fumble occurred and the

defense recovered it, the ball can only be awarded to the defense if there was a clear recovery in the immediate continuing action after the loose ball.

That call can be more challenging than the “runner down or fumble” call because it falls under the purview of only one official, the referee. Not only is it possible for the referee’s view of the passer’s arm to be obstructed, it is also possible the referee does not shift his focus from the blocking in front of the passer to the passer quickly enough. In either case, the referee may not be sure of what transpired.

As in the previous scenario, the circumstantial evidence is observing the flight of the ball. A ball that falls to the ground behind the passer is almost certainly a fumble. A ball that goes forward may or may not be a pass. The forward motion may be a result of the passer’s arm being hit from behind or it may be the result of the passer throwing it forward. A useful rule of thumb is to note the direction from which the defender approached the quarterback. If the passer was able to see the defender approaching, he likely was able to move his arm forward before he was contacted. If a blindside hit resulted, the chances are greater a fumble occurred.

At the prep and small college level, the guide for both when in doubt and no clue should be an incomplete pass. Possible game-changing calls should not be made simply by guessing.

In those and many other situations, an official who has doubt or no clue might be able to get help from a fellow official. On occasion, officials will see things that occur in an area where they are not supposed to be looking. Such help is much better than relying on the rules of thumb presented here. The focus must always be on getting it right and old bromides such as “fish in your own pond” or “stay away from my turf,” need to be flushed down the drain.