

A Little Officiating Magic

Calls aren't magic, but you can use a few tricks.



Photo Credit: Dale Garvey

The Magician’s Oath is to never reveal the secrets of magic to non-magicians. Nonetheless, there are various “tricks” officials can use to call a game properly. Magic can be categorized into about 10 effects and most of them, such as levitation, are of no utility during a football game; however, an official will find some of the effects to be useful.

Transformation

That stunt is when a magician transforms something from one state into another, such as changing the color of a silk handkerchief. Officials are sometimes faced with close calls that beg for transformation. Perhaps the most common are whether the runner was down before he fumbled and whether the quarterback passed the ball or fumbled it.

There are “when in doubt” guidelines for those and many other situations. Those axioms contain sound advice that has been battle-tested over the years. But beware that some, primarily the two aforementioned items, differ by level of play.

The key discriminator is the presence or absence of replay. Calling a fumble in both cases keeps the ball live and allows a video review, while the alternatives severely limit the available options if the call on the field is proven incorrect. Without replay, if there is doubt, the ball should be ruled down to avoid an undeserved turnover.

One call that requires precision (*and knowledge of geometry*) is whether a pass is forward or backward. The guidelines differ depending on the location of the pass — either behind or

beyond the neutral zone. The default for a pass thrown from behind the line is a forward pass and for passes beyond the line, doubtful cases should be called a backward pass. If you need help breaking the code on that, it translates to making it what it was supposed to be — just like a magician.

Some of the effects of magic can be useful to a football official

Extreme caution must be exercised here. Officials should not cover up gross mistakes (or *any obvious mistake for that matter*), but if there is a question, rule as if the play was executed as planned. It's not wise to interpret a play as if it occurred in a manner that clearly was not intended.

As an example, if a punter misses kicking the ball and it falls to the ground, it's a fumble. Arguing that he flipped the ball forward making it a pass will get you in the magician's hall of shame. If he subsequently kicks the ball off the ground, it's a foul. You could argue it was a drop kick, but you know that wasn't the plan.

Production

In that act, the magician produces something from nothing, perhaps a rabbit from an empty hat. The analogy to that in a football game is when a call needs to be made and the official has no clue as to what transpired. That won't happen very often and when it does, it doesn't necessarily mean the official did anything wrong. Sometimes officials get blocked out or events occur in a manner no one can anticipate.

In some situations, the answer is simple — ***if the official didn't see it, it didn't happen***. If the runner wasn't observed touching the chalk, he didn't step on the sideline. If the official didn't see the whole act, there was no foul. Whether or not a catch was made is very difficult to categorize because there are numerous variations.

The when-in-doubt axiom says when there is doubt, it was not a catch. That works well when the issue was whether the ball was trapped or caught or when the juggling ends as the runner nears the sideline. But how about the situation when the receiver turns away from the official as he goes to the ground? The ball comes in high enough to have been caught but low enough to where it might have hit the ground. Furthermore, the official has no inkling as to whether the ball was caught cleanly or muffed to the ground and possessed after a quick bounce. Unlike the potential out-of-bounds call where no call means the runner remained inbounds, that situation requires a decision and a quick and decisive one. Hesitating and looking for help might work, but depending on the crew size, there might not be any readily available assistance. The

reactions of the receiver and the nearest defender might offer a clue as to what took place. Does the receiver act like he caught it? Does the defender immediately start waving incomplete (*beware there are great partisan actors out there*)? In the absence of any sign the ball was not caught, it is best to allow such a catch.

Vanish

It would be nice if an official could snap his fingers and make an irate coach disappear just like the magician makes his assistant disappear from a cabinet. That's not likely to happen, but there are tricks to calming down such a coach and getting the issue to go away.

A disgruntled head coach should be allowed to speak his mind; he will eventually tire and return to his position or allow a meaningful conversation to take place. Assistant coaches are not entitled to complain to officials. The official should ask the coach what he saw and if the coach is off the mark, the response can be on a theoretical basis. "Well, if that's the way it happened, then ..." The official's request can be tweaked for repetitive complainers. "What did you see from over here?" Or "... from waaay over here?"

If possible, the official can transform the discussion to a rules issue, "By rule ..." If you do that, you must be absolutely positive of the rule. If you cite the rule incorrectly and the coach subsequently looks it up, you are vulnerable to a complaint that either you don't know the rules or that you tried to BS the coach.

Escape

That one is where the magician is placed in a restraining device or a death trap, and escapes to safety. For officials there isn't much trickery needed here. Once the game is over, the officials should immediately escape together by a direct route. They should not take the time to shake hands with each other on the field or with coaches.