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NFL won't budge in its war over referees

League officials sticking with replacements, whose blown calls have enraged coaches, players and fans.

By RANDY COVITZ
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The NFL, a league that prides itself on image and integrity, has a firestorm on its hands.

Instead of headlines heralding the play on the field, including overtime thrillers and dynamic rookie quarterbacks, the NFL is embroiled in controversy because it has locked out its game officials this season.

A year after settling a work stoppage with its players, the NFL, a \$9 billion industry, is haggling over a few million dollars with its part-time officials and is using replacement officials.

With each week, the replacements — culled from high schools and the lower branches of college football — are making more mistakes, missing calls that endanger player safety and losing respect, both from angry coaches and from players who are pushing the limits of the rulebook.

The tipping points of a wild third weekend of the season occurred during the league's prime-time, marquee telecasts. In Sunday night's game between Baltimore and New England, both coaches made contact with officials while trying to get explanations. And Monday night's bizarre and controversial finish between Green Bay and Seattle was botched so badly that even President Barack Obama weighed in.

"NFL fans on both sides of the aisle hope the refs' lockout is settled soon," the president wrote on Twitter.

The First Fan might be in for a long wait.

Even though NFL commissioner Roger Goodell and his staff spent 16 hours on Saturday and Sunday trying to reach an agreement with the NFL Referees Association, they're still deadlocked on several issues, including pay and the league wanting to take away pension plans for the officials, who earn up to \$150,000 a year for part-time work. And even after fan outrage following the Monday night game, which many thought the Packers should have won, the NFL upheld the officials' decision that gave the Seahawks a victory.

And as long as stadiums are filled and television ratings are high, don't expect Goodell and the owners to budge very much.

"The brand power of the NFL needs more than one screw-up to affect it," said Juda Engelmayer, senior vice-president for crisis management for 5W Public Relations in New York. "A couple more calls like this, and the public will start seeing the owners as greedy people who don't care about the game any more."

"When Roger Goodell is setting out to bust the union to get what he wants, the trick is to show you can do better without the union. In this case he's failing. He's actually proving the union's point that they're needed."

A crescendo of criticism hit the NFL following the final play from scrimmage on Monday night. Seattle's Golden Tate was ruled to have caught a game-winning touchdown pass after he blatantly shoved Green Bay cornerback Sam Shields to the ground and got a hand on the ball that Packers safety M.D. Jennings appeared to have intercepted.

One official, side judge Lance Easley, signaled touchdown. If both Tate and Jennings caught the ball — called simultaneous possession — the tie goes to the offensive player. But back judge Derrick Rhone-Dunn signaled a touchback, which would have been the result of Jennings' interception.

The play went to the replay booth, where an official confirmed the call on the field, and all heck broke loose in Seattle. ESPN, which televised the game, reported 70,000 voice messages flooded the NFL's switchboard.

Both teams left the field before 11 Packers reluctantly returned to stand still for an extra point that made the final score 14-12. It was not a meaningless exercise because net points and total points are part of playoff tie breakers.

"That call was the call seen around the world, the laughable call around the world," said Engelmayer. "Everyone knew that. The NFL's becoming amateur hour. It's not going to take much more to start eroding the fan base."

On Tuesday morning, the NFL issued a statement acknowledging the replacement refs blew the play by not calling an offensive pass-interference penalty against Tate, which would have ended the game because time had expired. Subjective penalties, such as pass interference, are not reviewable by replay.

But the league also said this: "The NFL Officiating Department reviewed the video and supports the decision not to overturn the on-field ruling following the instant replay review. The result of the game is final."

The fallout has just begun.

"This is NOT the league we're supposed to represent," Saints quarterback Drew Brees wrote on Twitter. "Ironic that our league punishes those based on conduct detrimental. Whose CONDUCT is DETRIMENTAL now?"

Several plays in the Saints' 27-24 overtime loss to the Chiefs on Sunday required extensive review. Chiefs coach Romeo Crennel won both of his challenges that went to video review — one on the spot of the ball and another on a trapped ball by the Saints that originally was called a catch.

And those weren't even dangerous plays. In the Pittsburgh-Oakland game on Sunday, Raiders receiver Darrius Heyward-Bey was knocked unconscious on a helmet-to-helmet hit by the Steelers' Ryan Mundy. No flag was thrown.

And in almost all games it's apparent that wide receivers are shoving defenders to get open, and defensive backs are making contact beyond 5 yards, both of which are penalties.

"The good thing about it is it lets guys come out and play physical," Chiefs defensive end Tyson Jackson said on Tuesday. "It's something you have to deal with. We have to understand what kind of calls they're making and try to play to the best of our ability."

"Some people rather see less calls, some like to see more. It all depends on the person ... no matter what, people are going to complain about the calls. It's football."

Who are these replacements in striped shirts? They have experience at the amateur level, but if they're aspiring to become full-time NFL referees, they're taking a chance, because once the lockout is settled the union likely won't accept them.

Larry Lady, commissioner of the NAIA's Heart of America Conference, is aware of some former NAIA officials working NFL games and at least one official who was dropped by the NCAA Division II Mid-America Intercollegiate Athletic Association.

"These replacement officials are taking far too much abuse," said Lady, an NCAA Division I referee himself for more than 20 years. "They have had a crash course on the rules, they've had a crash course on mechanics, which are different than what they're used to."

One of the two officials in question in the Seattle game, Rhone-Dunn, worked Big 12 games and was on the Sugar Bowl crew for LSU's win over Notre Dame in 2007. Easley works junior college and high school games in California.

"They're getting most of the calls right, just like any other official," Lady said. "But they cannot be expected to perform at the level at which regular officials will perform, or they would have been regular officials. They're not as good as the regular officials, and everybody has to realize that."

"Sure they've made mistakes. There have been more video reviews per game than if regular officials would have been there. That play (Monday) night, nobody will ever know if that play would have been called correct (by the locked-out officials). We suspect it would have, but we don't know."

Making the jump from high school and small-college facilities to major NFL stadiums can be as intimidating as adjusting to the high-paced pro game.

"It's like asking a junior high school official to go call a game in front of 80,000 on a Saturday," said John Laurie, a former Big 12 official who lives in Overland Park. "They're used to 50 people on the sideline. They're simply not used to the speed of the game."

Or the intensity, said Walt Anderson, a two-time Super Bowl official waiting to begin his 17th NFL season.

"In real time, things are happening in an environment that's very intense," said Anderson, who is coordinator of Big 12 football officials. "It's not unusual that when you put people in an environment they're not accustomed to, they're probably not going to respond like people who are accustomed to it."

The mixed response to Tate's touchdown catch wasn't the only problem. As Laurie watched the scrum in the end zone, he waited for the officials to come together and reach a consensus.

It never happened.

"I thought for sure there was going to be a conversation," Laurie said.

During the hubbub of the first three weeks of the season, Goodell and the league office have been pretty quiet on the issue of the replacement referees, other than to fine Denver head coach John Fox \$30,000 and defensive coordinator Jack Del Rio \$25,000 for verbally attacking officials during the second game of the season.

"What's he (Goodell) going to say?" said Engelmayer, the public-relations specialist. "There's nothing he could possibly say unless he's contrite and says he's sorry. Even he could not have seen that call (at Seattle) as the right call. He knows that was an amateur hour there, and the amateur refs are running the show. Anything he says right now would be seen as gratuitous.

"Either he's got to say something to defend his position, which nobody is going to buy, or something which is going to prove he doesn't care about the game. 'Let the game suffer, so I can squeeze the union for what I want.'"

Goodell's greatest hope — and risk — may be for the replacement refs to improve as the season goes on.

"If these temporary refs don't make any more bad calls, and the season goes on, then Goodell has a chance of winning his position," Engelmayer said. "People do forget. A couple more mistakes like this, and they won't forget so easily. One, they'll forget; two, they'll start laughing; and three, they'll remember forever."

The Star's Blair Kerkhoff contributed to this report. To reach Randy Covitz, call 816-234-4796 or send email to rcovitz@kcstar.com.

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