

Some Features of the New Football Rules

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ONE of the most noticeable features of the new football rules is the effect that has been produced upon the general conduct of the players. Several years ago the Rules Committee, realizing that the rules were far too moderate, and were being laxly administered by the officials, in consequence of which many serious and harmful features were creeping into the game, formulated a more drastic set of regulations, and let it be understood that the officials were supposed to enforce them. The rules against rough play were broadened, the penalties made more severe, abusive or insulting language used to officials or players was put under the ban, the jurisdiction of officials was extended, an additional official recommended and many other salutary changes made.

The result has been exceedingly gratifying; all concerned—players, officials and coaches, seem to have entered into the spirit of the reformation and are making an honest effort to stamp out all unfair and unnecessarily rough tactics.

Still, even today a football game is no Elysian field for an official; the players can hardly be called a bashful set of young men, and the official must keep a tight rein over them as they will take advantage of his every weakness.

One of the greatest sources of friction between players and officials, is the fact that many of the players are not well versed in the rules, and, in consequence, their contentions are often very stubborn and unreasonable. I can hardly remember a game in which I have officiated that some player has not rushed up and demanded a decision on some play over which I had absolutely no jurisdiction, and the proper official was in

such a position that the play necessarily escaped him. Few players make any pretense toward knowing the respective duties of the officials nor even the capacity in which the different men are acting.

This lack of familiarity with the rules does not only redound to the officials' discomfort, but often plays an important part in the result of the game. It is a common occurrence to see members of a team, and sometimes the whole outfit, stop playing when the umpire sounds his horn and either permit long gains to be made, or lose the opportunity of making them themselves; the umpire's signal, it might be stated, never legally suspends play, but simply indicates when a foul has been committed. The writer has seen at least two long runs resulting in touchdowns, and numerous shorter gains made, due solely to the defensive team's lack of familiarity with the rules. Two years ago there was a game of mediocre importance actually lost because one of the captains did not have his knowledge of the rules at his command. The attacking team had the ball on its opponent's ten-yard line, and tried unsuccessfully for a goal from the field, the play terminating in a touch back; the umpire caught one of the kicker's side off-side, but the defending captain, instead of declining the penalty and kicking the ball out from the twenty-five-yard line to a place of safety, accepted the penalty, the attacking team was put back five yards, tried the same play again, and this time was successful. This was the only score made during the game.

When the umpire in a baseball game makes a decision on a close play there

are always nine men for and nine against him. It is much the same in football, the only difference being there are two more men on each side. It is peculiar that every one of those twenty-two players and perhaps a number on the side lines, know that there can be absolutely no doubt about that disputed play, when the official who is watching with all his might, and in a position of vantage, finds it difficult to make a decision.

And then between the halves or after the game you very often encounter a coach (usually of the defeated team) who is bent on your vivisection—nothing but your heart's gore can, in any manner, appease his implacable thirst; you offer him a cigarette, but he doesn't smoke your brand, and in a few minutes you learn that you have never seen even the outside of a rule book.

Even with amenable players and coaches, the officials have exceedingly hard duties to perform and often their work is unsatisfactory, even to themselves. As long as humanity is restricted to its present anatomy, no official can see anywhere near all he is supposed to, and, in a great many cases, the line of demarcation between legal and illegal plays is so dim that it is exceedingly difficult to tell the status of a play even though it is enacted in full view. A glance at the cuts in the back of the rule book will demonstrate the truth of this statement—compare for instance: 9 and 10, 15 and 16, 24 and 25, and 26 and 27, in which the difference between legal and illegal plays can hardly be detected by the average person. Then take into consideration that in actual play, no one position is maintained by a player for more than a fraction of a second, add to this the fact that some players are tricky enough to commit fouls only when they are well hidden from the officials, and you get a faint idea of how difficult it is to do competent work.

The play under the new rules, which has caused officials more trouble than any other, perhaps, is the forward pass. Even where the recommendations of the rules committee are carried out, and the prescribed number of officials are on hand the play is hard enough to supervise; but when by agreement, as is

often the case, the field judge is dispensed with, and his duties are undertaken by the referee, the burden is placed upon the referee of marking the spot from which the pass was made, and being able to tell twenty, thirty or even forty yards down the field whether or not the ball touched a player before striking the ground; if it did so touch a player, to which side he belonged; if he belonged to the side putting the ball in play, what position he occupied when the play began; and, if he is legally entitled to get the ball and does not retain it when it first touches him, whether or not it strikes another player of his own side before being touched by an opponent.

Well, the referee has to "go some" when this play comes up; but the trouble is he can't "go" with his feet because he doesn't dare lose sight of the spot from which the pass was made, as it is from this point that many of the penalties are inflicted, so all he can do is to "go" with his imagination. Often by agreement the umpire takes some of these decisions; but this arrangement is always unsatisfactory as he already has his hands full and must necessarily neglect some of his own duties.

Football officiating is about as difficult a task as is encountered in the field of athletics. One does not get the thorough grounding in the rules as does the baseball umpire, for instance, as, at most, one officiates in only eight or ten games a season, and this is hardly enough to make him a thorough master of the regulations. It is no easy task even in a cool hour to arrive at the exact intent of the committee, and when on the field of play one is compelled to make an instantaneous and practical application of the rules, it is sometimes exceedingly confusing. I admit to spending a good deal of time and study on the rules prior to every game I officiate in, before I feel competent to do satisfactory work.

With the renewed interest that has attached to it the last two years on account of its spectacular trend, and the gradual disappearance of all deserved adverse criticism, the game is in a fair way to maintain its premier position in American college sports.