

The overly complicated rules for American football

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This upcoming Sunday is the biggest sports day of the year in the United States: The championship game for the professional league for playing American Football. Chicken wings take over the country. (It would be funnier if chickens took over the country.)

The rules for American football are overly complicated, so much so that even the officials get it wrong with some frequency. One part of the complexity comes from the variety of *limiting rules*, or rules designed to address an imbalance. (Another part of the complexity comes from the fact that the people who wrote the rules are insane and wish to impose that insanity on everybody who reads the rules.)

For example, some penalties cause the game clock to stop running, and a team that is losing can intentionally commit penalties, thereby prolonging the game and giving themselves more opportunities to attempt to score. To address this, there is a special rule that enumerates specific conditions under which a clock-stopping penalty also causes ten seconds to be taken off the clock, thereby discouraging the intentional foul by removing the clock-stopping benefit.

These conditions are quite precise.

The problem with the rule is that, of course, it adds yet another rule, and then you have to be careful that the new rule doesn't create its own weird side effect. But of course, it does have its own weird side effects, and these side-effects have occurred a number of times in the history of American football. For example, one rule takes effect when there are five or fewer minutes remaining in the game, but a limiting rule does not take effect until the clock drops below three minutes, resulting in a two-minute loophole. Wasserman proposes a second limiting rule to close the gap, but I claim that this just makes the situation even worse.

My counter-proposal is to remove all the clock-related limiting rules and substitute just one: If a penalty is committed that stops the clock, the team that did not commit the penalty has the option of requesting that ten seconds be removed from the game clock.²

This closes the loophole because any situation in which a team could commit a penalty to stop the clock and gain an advantage would be negated by the opposition exercising its option to remove ten seconds from the clock. There is no need to enumerate in the rule book all the cases where a clock-stopping penalty would be advantageous because the decision can be made on the field by the opposing team. If one team finds a loophole, the other team can immediately close it.

American football already has a limiting rule of this sort: If a team commits a penalty, the opposing team has the option of accepting the result of the play as if no penalty had occurred. (This is known as *declining* a penalty.) This removes some of the incentive to commit an intentional penalty far away from the ball because the opposing team can merely instruct the official to ignore the penalty.

Except that in American football, some penalties cannot be declined. For example, a delay-of-game penalty (which more accurately should be called excessive delay of game) cannot be declined, and it is not uncommon for a team to commit an intentional delay-of-game penalty in order to improve the kicking angle of a field goal attempt. (I look forward to the situation where one team repeatedly commits the delay-of-game penalty and the other team repeatedly declines it, until the amount of time remaining on the clock drops to the level that the team with fewer points decides that any further loss of time is not worth the short-term advantage.¹)

Another source of unnecessary complexity is that the rules of the game change based on how much time remains in the game and even based on the score! For example, the removal of ten seconds from the clock takes place only if the game is tied or the the team in possession of the ball is losing. Imagine if other sports changed the rules of the game based on the game progress and the score. In baseball, a batter is normally out after three strikes, but in innings eight and beyond, the batter is out after only two strikes if their team is winning. In basketball, a basket is worth two points, unless the game is in the final minute, in which case a basket is worth five points if scored by the losing team.

The fact that the rules of the game change when the clock crosses five minutes, three minutes, and two minutes means that a single game of American football is really four games played one after another.³

No wonder it's so complicated.

¹ Canadian football addresses this issue by having the referee inform the offense that any further delay of game will result in loss of possession.

² After I drafted my proposal, Josh Levin made the same proposal on his podcast. Thereby proving that great minds think alike.

³ Since the rules change when the clock reaches certain points in each half, it's actually four games played one after another, and then the same four games repeated.

Bonus Super Bowl reading: [A brief history of “What time is the Super Bowl?”](#), “the most legendary act of SEO trolling ever.”

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