

Rough turf for refs

Officials making instant decisions, not friends

Field judge Larry Thompson had a hard day Saturday. In the second quarter of the Oregon-USC football game Thompson, a Pacific-10 Conference football official, blew the whistle in favor of USC.

A chorus of boos echoed through Autzen Stadium when Thompson threw up his arms signaling a touchdown for the Trojans.

Some Oregon fans thought USC split end Jeff Simmons didn't have control of the football in the end zone.

Not long after the controversial touchdown, a call made by line judge Jack Roberts made Oregon fans bawl into

their beers a second time. Roberts signaled an Oregon touchdown, but didn't see the ball slip from running back Reggie Brown before he crossed the goal line.

"That was an official's error," explains John Misner, a Pac-10 line judge. "He anticipated. We're always drilling into our heads 'Never anticipate.'"

"You just don't call the touchdown or blow the whistle until you see the ball," Misner adds.

Roberts, Thompson and the four other officials — referee Don Habel, umpire Duke Dornan, head linesman Ray Highsmith and back judge John Barger — weren't

anticipating a hectic game when they met for their 11:30 pre-game conference.

"You really have to get your mind going during the pre-game conference," Misner explains.

Habel brought up the problem of sideline control. Officials are assigned a portion of the sidelines, and they must keep players and coaches off the playing field while watching the game at the same time.

"If you're going to get these people, get them in the first quarter," Habel says firmly.

"If looks could kill... those assistant coaches really hate it when you do that," Roberts adds. "They feel like you're picking on them."

Being the bad guy is a part of the job officials have to live with.

"Part of officiating is making judgements," Misner says. "This is what we're getting paid for. You have to live with what you decide."

The referee, distinguished by his white baseball cap, is the ultimate authority among the officials. He issues the penalties and confers with coaches after a touchy call.

The referee works in the offensive back field, keeping tabs on the quarterback and the ball carrier.

The umpire stands five to 12 yards beyond the line of scrimmage, amid the defense, and watches the defensive linemen for holding violations.

The head linesman stands opposite the press box on the line of scrimmage. The line judge stands directly across the head linesman. When the ball is snapped, the striped-shirted linemen watch for an illegal block, illegal procedure, holding, delay of game, offsides or personal foul.

Depending on where the ball carrier goes, these scrimmage sentries are responsible for watching the runner after he passes the line. If the runner dashes toward the press box side of the field, the line judge covers him for 20 yards. The head linesman's duty is to follow the runner for 12 to 15 yards.

Deep in the back field, the field judge and back judge wait for long bombs or long runs. These officials must wait until the runner passes them before they can start running. Consequently they work hard to keep up with speedy receivers and cornerbacks.

And sometimes, like last Saturday, the official is behind the player and doesn't have a clear view of the ball.

The six men on the field aren't the only officials involved in the game. Two other officials, the alternate and the observer, work on the sidelines.

When an official is bowled over by some players and can't continue, the alternate takes his place. Most of the time, the alternate works with the down markers — the crew of men in bright orange vests on the sidelines who mark the line of scrimmage.

"We do get bumped and bruised, and I've seen some knees torn-up," but otherwise officials don't get seriously injured in a game, Misner says.

"We're positioned so that we're out of the way," he says. "The most dangerous position is the umpire."

From his pressbox perch, the observer, usually a retired official, watches and records the officials' performances. The observer's report goes back to Jack Springer, supervisor of all Pac-10 officials, and from there it travels to coaches and athletic directors.

"My primary place is to evaluate work of the officials," says observer Tony Amato, a retired Pac-10 umpire and captain of the 1937 Oregon football team. "Our primary purpose is to improve officiating."

Improvement means a lot to Pac-10 officials, who take their jobs seriously. During a game they meet three times — for a pre-game conference, a half-time chat and a post-game bull session.

"There's very little that goes on in the ballgame that isn't gone over," Misner says.

The 60 officials affiliated with the Pac-10 travel from all parts of the West Coast to attend an annual clinic in Palo Alto. At the clinic, the officials, mostly in their 40s, watch horror films — clips of "screw-ups we made" or tricky calls, Misner says.

Keeping up with the rules is the name of the game in the officiating business. Every official is tested on the rules and appraised by their peers.

"We're rated all the time," Misner says. "You have to know the rules or you're not there (at the college level)."

A good official is "one that knows the proper place to be, exercises good judgement and does his job without too big of a show," says Amato. When he was a player in 1937, Amato says officials would blow horns rather than throw flags and only the referee got a whistle. Nowadays, the fans only want the players to make noise.

But they sure gave the fans a show last Saturday.

When Simmons dove into the endzone, Thompson saw the play from 12 yards back. Although he couldn't see the catch clearly, Thompson was positioned correctly, having waited for Simmons to zip by.

"It's happened a lot of times before," Misner says. "You're talking about the greatest athletes in the country. There's not an official in the country that can catch those kids."

"Nobody feels worse about (a bad play) than that official," he says. "The most difficult thing to do is to shake it off and continue to do a fine game."

"Out there you have to make an instant decision," even if there are 42,733 fans second-guessing you, says Amato. "He's not out there to make friends."

Story by Caroline Petrich



Field judge Larry Thompson (66) received boos from Oregon fans after signaling a controversial touchdown for USC's Jeff Simmons Saturday.



USC head coach John Robinson didn't always agree with head linesman Ray Highsmith Saturday in Autzen Stadium.



Photos by Steve Dykes

There are more downs than ups for football referees in the Pac-10 as this back judge is knocked down during the Oregon-Washington game.

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