

Controversial ruling helps Packers

A late-game fumble recovery ruled in favor of Green Bay results in a tie-breaking goal and a 34-31 win

BY ARNIE STAPLETON
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

GREEN BAY, Wis. — Shootouts usually come down to who has the ball at the end. This one came down to who had it at the bottom.

Minnesota's Derek Ross and Green Bay's Ben Steele, who had been cut by the Vikings in training camp, each claimed ownership of Robert Ferguson's fumble at mid-field in the closing minutes.

The officials eventually ruled Green Bay had possession, and the Packers drove for Ryan Longwell's 33-yard field goal as time expired for a 34-31 win Sunday, their fourth straight.

The Vikings, who had rallied to tie with two touchdowns in a 93-second span, lost their third straight game and fell into a tie with the Packers atop the NFC Central at 5-4.

"There wasn't any doubt in my mind I had the ball," said Steele, whose legs were cramping and arms

aching as he scuffled with his fellow backup Ross for the prized possession. "I wasn't going to give it up until the ref said, 'Eighty-two, you've got it.' There was a lot of scratching and clawing. It seemed like an eternity, but there was no way I was going to let go of that sucker."

Ross said he was robbed by referee Ron Winter, plain and simple.

"Clearly, I had the ball. Yeah, we had the ball," Ross said. "I don't think the referee did a good job of getting everybody off the pile to see clearly I had the ball."

Ross said a 300-pound lineman — who was actually the 250-pound Steele — pried one of his arms back and he was helpless to do anything about it: "I'm on the bottom of the pile for two minutes, eventually he's going to win that one."

The Vikings, who were celebrating their big break all over the field, were stunned by the referee's ruling.

"We thought we had the ball," Minnesota coach Mike Tice said. "We thought we had the ball from the get-go."

The scrum was in front of the Packers' sideline, but Green Bay coach Mike Sherman didn't exactly express confidence in the call.

"I'll have to look at the tape to see who got it. Ben Steele was credited with it," Sherman said. "I'm just proud of the effort we showed today, even at the end when we did fight to get the ball."

Ferguson broke into the open at midfield and thought he had a clear shot at the end zone when Antoine Winfield swooped in and forced the fumble.

Both Brett Favre and Daunte Culpepper threw four touchdown passes without an interception. It was Favre's 18th game with four or more TD tosses, second only to Dan Marino's 21.

Favre hit receiver Javon Walker, tailback Tony Fisher, tight end Bubba Franks and fullback William Henderson in the end zone as the Packers built a seemingly safe 31-17 lead.

"I knew it wasn't enough," Favre said. "All you have to do is look at Monday night against Indianapolis," when the Vikings rallied to tie only to lose on a last-second field goal.

Culpepper, working without star receiver Randy Moss (strained hamstring) for the second straight game, threw for 363 yards, connecting with Nate Burleson 11 times for 141 yards and a score.

"I love him. He's a gamer," Culpepper said.

Culpepper's 2-yard shovel pass to Onterio Smith with 2:53 left made it 31-24. The Vikings held and got the ball back with 2:18 left. Culpepper needed just three plays and less than a minute to move Minnesota 58 yards to a 17-yard TD toss to Moe Williams with 1:20 left.

That's when Ferguson fumbled and Steele burned the team that cut him in training camp, hoping to sneak him onto the practice squad — only to see the Packers snatch him away.

"It definitely was a little extra special to get that against my old team," Steele said.

Roetman: It comes down to one week

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of your hands or slip past you."

With the loss to UCLA, Oregon's season comes down to a single game. Eleven consecutive winning seasons and an eighth-straight bowl appearance ride on a trip up I-5 to face a hated rival. The Ducks must go into Corvallis and defeat an Oregon State team that also needs a victory for a winning season and a bowl invitation.

Oregon has one week to get its collective head on straight. One week to fix defensive assignments. One week to work on tackling technique.

And most importantly, one week to get hungry again.

"We just have to look at ourselves and ask ourselves a question," Phinisee said. "Are we ready to come out and perform? Because if we're not, we may not go to a bowl game this year."

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