

NFL

It's a catch. Wait, there's a catch to the catch.

By **BARRY WILNER**
Associated Press

It's a catch. Wait, there's a catch to the catch.

While coaches, players, fans and broadcasters become puzzled or annoyed by the NFL's "catch rule," the people in charge of developing and refining it through the years also have struggled. They simply couldn't find language to simplify it, leading to the inconsistency and controversy seen for seasons.

Especially this season.

When such NFL personages as Mike Tomlin and Sean Payton, both with strong ties to the powerful competition committee, seek re-examination and possibly changes to rules, it moves the issue front and center, just as much as the call on Pittsburgh tight end Jesse James did last weekend.

"I think that we all can acknowledge that all of this needs to be revisited," Steelers coach Tomlin said. "It's not just that play. We're having similar discussions week in and week out, so as a member of the committee, I acknowledge that we've got our work cut out for us this offseason regarding a number of those things."

"I'm just done talking about it, to be quite honest with you. You all know what we teach. Catch the football."

Some players do, yet discover they didn't. They're confused by some of the calls. Even worse, they aren't sure they understand the rules.

It should be simple, right? Receive the ball, hold onto it, get tackled and never have it move when you get to the ground.

Except there are instances when it can move as long as control is maintained. It's just another example of an NFL rule book with so many tangents that it would crush even the heftiest offensive lineman if it fell on top of him.

"Yeah, I don't even know what the language is at this point," said Bears tight end Zach Miller, who lost a TD reception by not "surviving the ground" on a play in which he was injured and sidelined for the rest of the season. "I don't



In this Sunday, Dec. 17 file photo, Pittsburgh Steelers tight end Jesse James (81) loses his grip on the football after crossing the goal line on a pass play against the New England Patriots in the closing seconds of the fourth quarter in Pittsburgh. While coaches, players, fans and broadcasters become puzzled or annoyed by the NFL's "catch rule," the people in charge of developing and refining it through the years also have struggled.

think a lot of people ... I don't even know if the rule-makers do at this point know what the language is. But they have it there and it's in place and they're trying to follow it as closely as they can. I just don't know if it's what it needs to be."

Even the current head of league officials, Alberto Riveron, and the man he succeeded, Dean Blandino, agree that getting the language right is difficult. Many others would add getting the call right is more difficult.

Two years ago, the league consulted with a group of players that included Hall of Famers Steve Largent and Tim Brown, plus current NFLers.

"And we went over this rule, a lot of the catch and no-catch situations, and at the end of the day — we had them in for two days —

they decided the best way to keep the rule is where it is right now," Riveron says. "But that does not stop us from going over it again and taking suggestions from any of the clubs."

Those suggestions definitely will be coming. They already have begun.

Blandino got them during his tenure, too. Now an analyst for Fox, he's hardly surprised that the spotlight is on the catch rule again.

"Every year, plays come up — Calvin Johnson or Dez Bryant or the play Sunday — that look like catches and people think should be catches," Blandino said. "People don't think those passes should be incomplete."

"The committee tried to write a rule to make that a catch and allow officials to call it consistently

and it's almost impossible. It was definitely one of the more difficult things to explain. You can explain the rule and reasoning and logic behind it, but a lot of people don't agree with it, that that should be the rule."

Oddly, the no-catch rule seems to bring little attention or controversy in the college game, even though the law is the same.

"The difference between control and possession" is how it is explained by Terry McAulay, a former NFL official who has worked Super Bowls and now is coordinator of officiating for the AAC. "He clearly had a control for much of the play, (but) he didn't have it long enough, the control was lost when the ball hit the ground, and by rule, and I'm speaking only college, he never

established possession. Whether he was down or not, whether the ball crossed the plane of the goal line is irrelevant because he's not a player in possession yet."

McAulay surmises that the divergent level of skill from the college game to the pros is why the catch rule comes into play so much more in the NFL.

"I think the difference is the athleticism of the players involved," he said. "The NFL player appears to be able to do many more things once he gets his hands on the football than the college player, who is so focused just on bringing it in and making the catch."

"Now we do see this every once in a while in college, but not nearly as often as we do in the NFL."

With the playoffs approaching, there's little doubt the catch/no catch will come up again, perhaps even in a critical situation, as it did at Heinz Field on Sunday.

There also seems to be little question that the outcry about the rule will lead to — at the very least — a re-examination of it.

"It will definitely be on the agenda," Blandino predicts. "Mike is on the competition committee, and any club can bring it up. They will do what they always have done: look at different examples from the season, and talk to game officials. Maybe they will talk to players and obviously get coaches' input, and then make a recommendation."

"Maybe they tweak the language a bit, but there's not been a change since Bert Emanuel in 2000, and the ball touching the ground and having to come loose."

Miller knows how the public generally feels about the catch rule.

"I don't know where this is going, where it's already been. I feel like we probably need to bring in a little bit of common sense to this thing," he said. "The Bleacher Report cartoon that they put out of mine a couple weeks ago where they polled a hundred guys at a bar to see if it was a touchdown or not, I think that's kind of your best bet, because common sense is pulled in there."

NBA

Christmas a star-studded day for NBA

By **BRIAN MAHONEY**
Associated Press

NEW YORK — There's LeBron James, Kevin Durant and Golden State against Cleveland, for fans wanting more of the NBA's reigning rivalry.

For those preferring something new, the league's Christmas Day schedule has that, too.

It's a star-studded slate, with the NBA Finals rematch standing out among the top teams and power players.

The league is driven by star power, and the NBA is going all-in this year. The schedule is about the best players, not all the best teams.

And with Joel Embiid, Ben Simmons and Kristaps Porzingis starting the day, and Lonzo Ball, Kyle Kuzma and Karl-Anthony Towns finishing it, this year's showcase is as much about the guys who got next on the marquee as the ones on top already.

"They're doing it for talent. You have the talent and the marketable players, so I understand why they're picking those teams," said Sacramento veteran Vince Carter.

The schedule:

— New York hosts Philadelphia, getting its first Christmas game since 2001.

— The Warriors welcome the Cavaliers back to the place where they finished them off in Game 5 in June for their second championship in three years.

— Washington at Boston in the Celtics' first home game on Christmas.

— Oklahoma City against Houston, a matchup of MVP Russell Westbrook and runner-up James Harden.

— Minnesota visiting the Lakers, two non-playoff teams who have acquired some of the best young talent in the league in recent drafts.

Christmas was once a kickoff of sorts for the NBA, the first time a national audience paid attention to basketball with the football season winding down. ABC analyst Jeff Van Gundy, who will work the Cavs-Warriors game, was among those who had said the NBA should



AP Photo/Tony Dejak, File

The NBA is driven by star power and its Christmas Day lineup is about the league's best players, not all the best teams. Yes, the NBA will roll out LeBron James and Kevin Durant, toss in some Russell Westbrook and James Harden under the mistletoe.

consider starting its season at Christmas to get out from under the NFL's shadow.

Now it's a celebration of the success the league is already enjoying. Combined viewership on ESPN and TNT is up 21 percent this season, with games averaging 1.9 million viewers, even before what figures to be the biggest numbers of the season.

ESPN said its audience is the second-highest it's ever had at this point behind 2010-11, James' first season in Miami, and Van Gundy said he's even a little surprised.

"I don't know what it speaks to, but we do have a bunch of really good, young players," Van Gundy said. "We have a dynasty in the making in Golden State, we have a team trying to challenge them in their own conference, or a couple teams in San Antonio and Houston, and LeBron is still rolling."

All of them but the Spurs are in action Monday.

As it often is with the NBA, Christmas is about the players more than the teams.

Carter was that kind of player who NBA fans couldn't get enough of early in his career, before every game was on League Pass and highlights all over the internet. He'd have been the perfect player to get on Christmas but the league only played two or three games back then, and his Toronto Raptors were only shown once.

"We were fun to watch,"

Carter said. "We wanted that opportunity."

Now this is the 10th straight year of five games on Christmas, and with a third of the league playing, room is there for just about everybody fans want to pile in front of their TVs to watch.

Well, almost everybody. Van Gundy was hoping for the Milwaukee Bucks and their gravity-ignoring Greek Freak, Giannis Antetokounmpo.

"They should just film a scrimmage of theirs then, because Giannis is so good that he deserves to have publicity on Christmas Day," Van Gundy said.

Maybe next year. As for this year, the holiday hoops smorgasbord includes something old, something new and a little something blue:

— A tantalizing twosome that could've been a Big Three. Embiid and Simmons have the Sixers on the rise in their first year together, but imagine if Porzingis was there with them. The Knicks took the 7-foot-3 forward with the No. 4 pick in 2015, immediately after Philadelphia passed for the since-traded Jahlil Okafor.

— LeBron & KD — Enough said.

— Peace on Christmas? Maybe not in Boston, where the Celtics and Wizards renew a heated rivalry that only grew hotter after they went seven games in the Eastern Confer-

Christmas Day Schedule

- **9 a.m.** — Philadelphia at New York (ESPN)
- **Noon** — Cleveland at Golden State (ABC)
- **2:30 p.m.** — Washington at Boston (ABC)
- **5 p.m.** — Houston at Oklahoma City (ABC)
- **7:30 p.m.** — Minnesota at L.A. Lakers (TNT)

ence semifinals. Toss in Kyrie Irving going against John Wall, and the plot thickens.

— Westbrook vs. Harden alone would have been a good gift, but it's even better after Chris Paul joined Harden in Houston, and Paul George and Carmelo Anthony surrounded Westbrook in Oklahoma City.

— Christmas is for kids, and the Lakers have Ball and Brandon Ingram, the last two No. 2 picks, and the lesser-known Kuzma who might become the best of the bunch. The Wolves have their own youngsters in Towns and Andrew Wiggins, but it's the acquisition of Jimmy Butler that could finally end the postseason drought that dates to 2004.

Teams win titles but stars are the stories on Christmas, as the Celtics know.

Kevin Garnett, Paul Pierce and Ray Allen had just departed when Brad Stevens arrived, and the NBA didn't want the league's most storied franchise without its superstars. So Boston was ignored for three years before finally getting back on the schedule last year, and now Irving, Jayson Tatum and these Celtics make history as the first to be home for the holiday.

"I understand that it's probably not everybody's favorite event, people that bust their tail and work in the arenas and are there all the time, and maybe media and everybody else," Stevens said. "But to be a player or coach on Christmas Day, it's pretty special and I think it's something that having not been there, our first couple of years, I don't take for granted that we're on that schedule, for sure."

BRIEFLY

Wyoming routs Central Michigan in Potato Bowl

BOISE, Idaho (AP) — Josh Allen threw three touchdown passes in his final game for Wyoming, and the Cowboys took advantage of Central Michigan's eight turnovers to cruise to a 37-14 victory Friday in the Famous Idaho Potato Bowl.

During the postgame award ceremony, the game MVP award declared his intention to give up his final season of eligibility to enter the NFL draft. Wyoming (8-5) rebounded after losing its last two regular-season games with Allen sidelined by a sprained right shoulder.

Allen was 11 of 19 for 154 yards with no interceptions. He showed off his arm strength on a perfect 45-yard pass that hit receiver C.J. Johnson in stride in the end zone.

Central Michigan (8-5) had won five straight. The eight turnovers broke the previous Famous Idaho Potato Bowl record of six.

Wyoming entered the game first in the nation in turnover margin and second in forced turnovers and will likely finish at the top of both rankings after the bowl season concludes.

Wyoming took a 21-7 lead in the first quarter.

Wyoming's offense struggled in the red zone after the first quarter, settling for three field goals in three trips.

Central Michigan struggled everywhere on the field, watching promising drives end on turnovers or other drives stunted due to Wyoming's relentless pass rush. The Cowboys had a season-high five sacks.

Late in the third quarter, Central Michigan found a spark and cut the deficit to 30-14. The Chippewas strung together a seven-play, 65-yard drive that ended on a 3-yard run by Jonathan Ward.

But Central Michigan failed to build on that momentum, losing it all on a scoop and score.

Ohio thumps UAB 41-6 in Bahamas Bowl

NASSAU, Bahamas (AP) — Dorian Brown rushed for 152 yards on just 12 carries and scored four touchdowns, Nathan Rourke threw for two scores and Ohio beat UAB 41-6 in the Bahamas Bowl on Friday.

Ohio (9-4) averaged 38.9 points per game during the season, setting a school record with 467 points scored, and the Bobcats exhibited that prowess in the opening half of this one, using big plays to build a 27-3 halftime lead.

Brown, a redshirt senior, scored on runs of 74, 9, 25 and 14 yards, two in the second quarter and two in the third.

That was too much for the Blazers, a feel-good team seeking its first bowl victory on just its second try. The loss spoiled the end of a remarkable first season back for UAB (8-5), which was predicted to struggle and didn't.

UAB President Ray Watts had cut the football program in December 2014 because a university report deemed it too expensive.

After public outcry, football was reinstated, but NCAA rules required the school to skip the 2016 season to help the players who stuck it out re-adjust to competing at the top level of college football.

The Blazers, under Conference USA Coach of the Year Bill Clark, responded by winning a school-record eight games and finished second in the conference's West Division. They won six of their final eight games.

On this day, though, they ran out of miracles.

The high-scoring Bobcats have a veteran offensive line with more than 100 starts and they repeatedly took advantage of that experience. Rourke had plenty of time to throw, and when the Bobcats decided to run, holes were there. They finished with a 249-99 edge on the ground.

Rourke was 12 of 18 for 185 yards passing and rushed for 30 yards.