

Advantage/Disadvantage

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By Jon Bible

Simply stated, advantage/disadvantage assumes that some fouls could be called on nearly every play in a game, but if that were done, the times of games would be greatly lengthened and their flow unduly disrupted. Moreover, it would royally tick off everyone involved — coaches, players, fans and officials. Therefore, the theory goes, fouls should be called only if the act created an unfair advantage.

Far from being an easy approach for officials to implement, advantage /disadvantage necessitates a more complicated thought process than the “see a foul, call a foul” approach. Under the latter, one must recognize that an act is potentially a foul and decide whether, according to rulebook criteria, it is a foul. Advantage/disadvantage requires a third step: Deciding whether an act that is a foul should be called or ignored based on its effect on the play. All of those decisions must, of course, be made in a few seconds.

The proper application of advantage/disadvantage will mean that flags will sometimes fly quite late, because the impact of an act on the entire play did not become apparent until some time after the act occurred. Conversely, it will mean that flags will occasionally be picked up when it is clear that an act that is by definition a foul did not create an unfair advantage for the offending team.

Say, for example, pass receiver R1 is held by a defender as he leaves the line of scrimmage. Using advantage/disadvantage, the official who keys on R1 will watch what the quarterback does. If he never looks at R1 and instead throws to the other side of the field, no foul should be called because R1 obviously was never an intended target and the hold had no bearing on how the play developed. In contrast, if the quarterback scans the field, indicating that R1 might be a primary or secondary receiver, the official must decide the following: Did the hold clearly restrict R1 and take him out of his route? If so, did that perhaps cause a pass to him to be incomplete or a completed pass to result in less yardage? If the quarterback threw elsewhere or ran, might that have been because R1 was not where he should have been? If the answer to any of those questions is yes, a flag should be thrown. It may come late because the impact of the hold could not be determined until some time after it occurred.

An example of the flip side, a situation in which a foul occurs but should not be called, is a play I had last year. A defender rushing the quarterback was tackled by a blocker, but in such a way that it actually helped him get a sack. I threw my flag when the takedown occurred without registering the fact that far from impeding the defender, the foul helped him. The graders properly gave me a “marginal” call (as distinguished from a “correct call” or an “incorrect call”), saying that while a foul had occurred, it should not have been

called because it did not harm the defense. I actually knew that at the time, and if it happens again I will pick up the flag and make the appropriate announcement on the microphone.

To be honest, although I began working football in 1970, I did not make advantage/disadvantage part of my officiating package until I got into the now-defunct Southwest Conference (SWC) in 1987. Instead, as I worked my way from peewee into high school, I more or less used the “see a foul, call a foul” approach. That was largely because advantage/disadvantage was not a focal point of the state and local chapter meetings and training programs I attended. We talked about rules (although often that involved someone standing in front of the group and reading verbatim from the rulebook) and mechanics, but not about philosophy. In that realm, what I did manage to pick up along the way came largely from bull sessions with older officials on trips and at the beer joints and can be summarized as follows: Use common sense. I have to admit that I was never quite sure what that meant; what is common sense to me might not be to you.

In the SWC, however, advantage/disadvantage was stressed as much as rules and mechanics and even more so when I got to the NFL in 1994. One reason I left the NFL, I might add, was that, having been a referee most of my career, I did not do a good job of applying advantage/disadvantage downfield as a side judge. Now, with the proliferation of NFL officials serving as college conference supervisors, I see advantage/disadvantage applied throughout the college ranks. We focus on it in our Big 12 Conference spring and summer training sessions and in the August two-a-days we attend at the conference schools. It controls how we are graded on a weekly basis. In my opinion, that is as it should be.

I submit, however, that advantage/disadvantage is not stressed nearly enough, if indeed it is discussed at all, in the high school and lower levels. There is no good reason why it should not be. I believe that it does not receive enough attention based on my own experience, what I see on the agendas of local, state and even national officials meetings and what I hear from officials around the country. My sense is that rules and mechanics are stressed almost exclusively and lots of tests are given, but that officials continue, for example, to call holding on a left tackle even though a back runs the ball around right end. I even know one umpire who often brags about calling nine or 10 holding fouls a game, which pretty much tells me that advantage/disadvantage is not a prime consideration for him.

When newer officials get the opportunity to hear and talk about advantage/disadvantage, it is like a revelation and they lap it up. A couple of years ago I discussed advantage/disadvantage at a chapter meeting and was swamped with questions from members, including veteran officials who are usually bored to death in those meetings. Last year, at a June camp in Colorado at which crews of officials worked seven-on-seven high school games on nine fields, the instructors concentrated as much on advantage/disadvantage as on mechanics and rules. The campers reported that it was the best instruction they had ever received and they wished they got that sort of training back home.

Let me make it clear that I regard unsportsmanlike conduct and personal fouls as fouls that should always be called. Those fouls either compromise player safety or give the offending team an advantage over the team that plays the game properly. Moreover, they often precipitate retaliatory fouls and even fights.

Knowledge of the rules and mechanics is essential for officials in any sport. There is far more to good officiating than that, however, and officials and the participants at all levels would be better served if more emphasis were given to philosophy, and specifically to advantage/disadvantage, than there now seems to be.

This column originally appeared in the 11/02 issue of Referee. At that time, Jon Bible was a referee in the Big 12 Conference. He is now a referee in the United Football League. Rules information has not been updated

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