

REFEREES

So far only players have been discussed as the focus of NFL game-fixing probes. But there are other men out on the playing field who can influence the outcome of a football game: the officials. One-time NFL and AFL owner Harry Wismer wrote of fixing a game, “The person I would go to [for a fix] would be an official, probably the umpire. The umpire is the man whose primary duty is to observe the blocking and the use of hands by both the offense and defense. Players and coaches say it is almost impossible for a play to be run without an infraction of some kind. Holding is the usual call and the officials could probably call it every time a play is run. If my partner in crime were the umpire, he could control the scoring by dropping his flag whenever the wrong team scored. There is another logical reason why the officials would be the ones to try to fix. They are underpaid and overcriticized. They are a perfect target for a player or a coach who is anxious to alibi on a poor performance.”⁵⁰ He’s not alone in these thoughts.

Gambling expert and author Larry Grossman told me something similar. “Look, who’s to say in an NFL game or college game you throw a flag in the end zone or you throw a flag on a defensive guy or holding—there’s holding on every play—I mean refs can affect a lot of the action without making it obvious. A couple calls here, a couple calls there, you know, throw a flag on a runback play or not throw a flag... it’s those little edges, those little things that can make the difference in a game.” Complementing that notion was legendary Philadelphia sports radio host Howard Eskin who said to me in an on-air interview on WIP in 2010, “Years ago I think officials, I’m talking maybe 15, 20 years ago, weren’t making enough money, did have other jobs, and it’s easy [to fix a game]. In the NFL, you can call a hold anytime you want and change if a team’s on a drive, you can only have so many 15-yard penalties and be able to recover from that. I believe that could happen because the money is different for officials than it is for players.”

Despite this, the FBI rarely possessed information causing the Bureau to investigate NFL officials. In 1976, a source gave “some information RE officials in the NFL who are allegedly being paid by the hoodlum

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figures to assist in the outcome of a game. The identity or location of these hoodlum figures is not known.” This same source alleged that these hoodlums also worked with NBA officials as well. As a result, “[redacted] of the NFL and [redacted] of the NBA [redacted] have been contacted in NYC and expressed an interest in helping the FBI by plotting the calls of the various officials to determine if there is any pattern and validity to the information being received.” This particular investigation went nowhere of significance; however, there was no further mention of either league providing the FBI with any officials’ phone records.

But in 1979 another more invasive investigation began, centering around two NFL referees. As Dan Moldea wrote, “Oddsmaker Bobby Martin told me that during the late 1970s, he suspected one particular referee of being involved in gambling and influencing the outcomes of NFL games. ‘There was too much unnatural money showing up on the games he was officiating,’ Martin says. ‘So I put the word out on [the referee] to see what I could find out.’ One of those whom Martin called was Las Vegas gambler Lem Banker, who told [Moldea], ‘Yeah, we had suspicions about certain games with some of the officials during the late 1970s. I remember Bob called me and wanted me to check out one particular referee. We watched some of the games, and a lot of unnatural money did show up. But we could never prove anything.’ A third gambler told [Moldea’s] associate, William Scott Malone, that two particular referees had been involved in game fixing since 1977. But the source refused to provide any details—because he was personally involved in the scheme. However, the same referee was named by Martin, Banker, and the confidential source, who also named the second referee.”⁵¹

The investigation was a three-pronged affair. On one side was the FBI. On another, the IRS. And on the third was NBC reporter Chuck Collins. All seemed to begin with similar information, but in the end each reached somewhat different conclusions. The basic story was the FBI received information from an informant claiming that New York mobsters were paying two or three NFL referees \$100,000 apiece for each game fixed. The referees’ job was to ensure that the mobsters won their bet by covering the spread and/or shaving points. These games were mostly Monday Night affairs, and according to the information were:

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Seattle Seahawks vs. Atlanta Falcons, fixed for Seattle; played Monday, 10/29/79 — Seattle won 31–28 and covered in most places

Cleveland Browns vs. Kansas City Chiefs, fixed for Cleveland; played 9/9/79 — Cleveland won 27–24 and covered

Pittsburgh Steelers at Houston Oilers, fixed for Houston; played Monday, 12/10/79 — Houston won 20–17 as the underdog with the Steelers favored by 3 or 4

New York Jets at Minnesota Vikings, fixed for the Jets; played Monday, 10/15/79 — Jets won 14–7 and covered

New York Giants at Washington Redskins, fixed for the Redskins; played Monday, 9/17/79 — Washington won 27–0 and covered

Dallas Cowboys at Cleveland Browns, fixed for Cleveland; played Monday, 9/24/79 — Cleveland won 26–7 as underdog with Dallas favored by 3

San Diego Chargers at Oakland Raiders, fixed for Oakland; played Thursday, 10/25/79 — Oakland won 45–22 and covered

Miami Dolphins at Oakland Raiders, fixed for Oakland; played Monday, 10/8/79 — Oakland won 13–3. Game was pick'em, but Oakland was favored in some areas, Miami in others. It was thought the mobsters did not win their bets on this game.

The source first overheard the information regarding the September 17 Redskins-Giants fix while playing in a Houston-area high-stakes poker game. The FBI trusted him enough to attempt to record conversations between himself and the person of interest. But then the problems began. The informant was caught attempting to sell this same information to IRS agents. Then the source's information was considered "nebulous and third- and fourth-hand." Then, despite passing a polygraph examination, the FBI dropped its investigation because it received information that the source was a pathological liar.

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Another significant problem with this information was that these two referees did not work every game mentioned. As the FBI report stated, “The enclosed 1979 season officiating assignments for the National Football League were provided by [redacted] Security, National Football League (NFL). [redacted] advised that officials for all NFL games are assigned as a team. This officiating team, as reflected on enclosed assignment sheets, consists of seven individuals. The team headed by [redacted] and [redacted] were the only officiating teams who were assigned to two games each of the eight suspected games reflected in Houston teletype to the Bureau.” So the two referees in question officiated only four of the suspected eight games.

Of note, however, was that the NFL revealed to the FBI how it rated its officials and that other internal NFL investigations had been conducted regarding referees in the past. “[redacted] advised that the officials for each NFL game are scored by a panel of three NFL officials after each game. The purpose for this scoring is to judge which officials will be assigned to the league playoff, championship, and Super Bowl games. [redacted] stated that officials are penalized points for missing calls, being in the wrong position to make a call, or making an erroneous call. [redacted] further advised that each official in the NFL is investigated by his office and watched closely during the first three years which he is assigned as an official. [redacted] further advised that his office regularly investigates all claims of game fixing involving officials in the NFL. [redacted] stated that the usual complaint is that erroneous calls were made by the officials to beat the point spread. [redacted] stated that to date, all complaints investigated by his office were unfounded.” Who made these complaints, why they were made, regarding which referees and which games remains unknown.

Though the FBI gave up, the IRS did not. Why? Because the same informant whom the FBI blew off managed to give the IRS the outcomes of the eight allegedly fixed games prior to them being played. That wasn't all. The IRS trailed the beard betting for the mobsters in Las Vegas and watched him place bets large enough on the games in question to alter the betting line. Despite this credible information and the urging of the agent in charge of the case, the IRS squashed the investigation

and refused to continue.

The NFL, of course, looked into these allegations and found nothing to substantiate the source's claims. “[redacted – from the NFL] advised that on the basis of a full and complete investigation conducted by his office, a review of the closing line spread sheets, and the fact that no one official was involved in all or most of the games on the dates listed above, he is of the opinion that the allegations regarding game fixing are unfounded.”

But NBC Chicago reporter Collins didn't quit so easily. Collins “advised that he had received additional information tending to support alleged bribery of NFL officials to fix football games. NBC investigation apparently indicates that car dealers are acting as agents for organized crime money and betting on fixed football games.” These were high-end car dealers, owning Rolls-Royce and Fiat dealerships in Las Vegas, Los Angeles, and Honolulu. As Collins continued his probe, few were willing to lend a hand—least of all the NFL. “[redacted – Collins] has been in touch with the NFL and they have refused to furnish information. He indicated that NFL had his name apparently given them by the FBI. Inasmuch as [redacted] is furnishing information to the ASAC, Houston, concerning the developments in this matter, the fact that [redacted] is talking with the FBI should not be disclosed.” Though the FBI's report stated that Collins “alleged that he has determined that two of the games involved alleged payoffs” and expected a transcript of the recording that backed these claims, it appears as though he never publicized his findings.

This appears to be the last major game-fixing investigation conducted by the FBI in regards to the NFL. Could no one have successfully fixed or even attempted to fix an NFL game since 1980? It's possible, though quite unlikely. In 1983, the NFL suspended Baltimore Colts quarterback Art Schlichter for the entire season because he was gambling on NFL games, though reportedly not on his team's games. Yet on Sundays, he readily admitted that he'd pay more attention to the scoreboard detailing other ongoing games—on which he had bet—rather than the play right in front of him. Schlichter was a compulsive gambler, but he wasn't

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caught betting by the NFL even though his habit had emptied his bank account. His downfall came when the bookmakers to whom he was indebted threatened to break his passing arm. Seeking help, Schlichter didn't turn to the NFL; he went to the FBI. His career and life never fully recovered. Amazingly, no other player in the NFL has since had a similar condition which has ever been made public. Yet in 1986, the NFL revealed to *Sports Illustrated* that "it issues 10 to 12 warnings a year to specific players about associating with gamblers and, like the other professional sports leagues, it likes to give the impression that it has an efficient security staff that pounces on cases involving improper associations."⁵²

While the NFL has not publicly released any information regarding the current standing of how many players it must admonish for their associations with gamblers, the problem has not completely vanished. When Michael Vick was arrested on charges of running a multistate dogfighting operation, no one seemed to mention that the reason dogs are fought is to wager on the outcome. Who was Vick betting with, how many other gamblers were involved, and was football ever discussed at these events were highly relevant questions that never seemed to be asked or answered. In 2011, a reported 25 NFL players, including Terrell Owens, Santonio Holmes, Santana Moss, Gerard Warren, and Adalius Thomas, invested \$20 million or more into a failed Alabama casino named Country Crossing. NFL rules forbid its employees from any involvement in a gambling operation. Fines and suspensions should have followed. Instead, this story, like many others of such impropriety, vanished.

Former FBI Special Agent Tom French doesn't seem to believe the NFL is as free from outside influence as it contends. He told me, "I think when they [the NFL] say that [none of its games has ever been fixed] it means that no one's ever been convicted of doing that. Let's put it that way, because with the amount of money that's bet on sports today and...well, look at the characters that play professional sports for the most part, football, basketball...baseball, well, I don't know. Baseball got more heat from Pete Rose, probably more than the other two sports, you know? But the other two sports are the ones that most easily can be

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fixed....Look at it this way: you've got a third and goal to go, and say the line is—well, it doesn't matter what the line is, but it's third and goal and you run the ball in, okay? Holding. The flag goes down. You push them back ten yards and now you take the field goal instead of the seven. I mean, in a sport where betting is so big and half a point is huge, what do you think four points is? So I mean you have people who have women problems, drug problems and everything else, and everyone would say, 'Why would a multimillionaire guy fix a sport?' Well, it could be any one of a million reasons. It could be financially, even though he's making all that money, believe it or not. Or it could be that someone's shaking him down, that he knows something and is extorting him. Maybe he's got a girlfriend or something and he's portrayed as a family guy, and he doesn't want this to get out. So you don't have to lose, you just have to knock a couple of points off. Instead of getting 15 tonight, you get 12."

Everyone I talked with, including some who would not go on the record, had suspicions regarding certain NFL games, certain players, and at least one official. Every gambler has a "bad beat" story that often turns into how a game was fixed. And many fans, too, have a game in their memory in which things just did not seem right. Are all these people crazy? Or have they correctly sensed when something was amiss within the NFL? Strange things often happen in NFL games in conjunction with the betting line. A famous case in point is the November 16, 2008 San Diego Chargers-Pittsburgh Steelers game. The Steelers were 4½-point favorites and most of the money was bet on them to cover. The Chargers had the ball on their own 21-yard line, down 11–10 with five seconds remaining in the game. They attempted a hook-and-ladder play wherein the receiver catching the ball repeatedly laterals it to a teammate in an attempt to confuse the Steelers' defense, hoping against hope that a hole opens for a miracle score. Instead, on the second attempted lateral, Steelers safety Troy Polamalu knocked the ball out of a Chargers player's hand. Polamalu scooped up the live ball and ran it in for a touchdown. Steelers win 17–10 and cover the spread, right? Wrong. For some reason, the play was reviewed by the officials even though, no matter what, the Steelers were going to be winners...but not against the spread. After a lengthy review, the referee ruled that the Chargers had committed an illegal forward pass during one of the two laterals and therefore the play

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was dead. No touchdown. This official's call was 100 percent incorrect, but oh well. Game over, 11–10.

In Las Vegas, this caused an instant uproar. Bettors who had cashed their winning Steelers tickets—that's how long the delay was on the field—were literally chased down by casino security in at least one sports book to get back the house's money. At the same time, Chargers bettors were scrambling on the floor to find the pieces of once losing tickets that had been ripped up and thrown away. There's no way to say this outcome was fixed, but it is an excellent example of what one ruling by an official—an incorrect ruling to boot—can do in regards to the wagering public.

Former chief of NFL security Warren Welsh believes that with all the reviews and discussions, both by the league and by the media, if the same official was intentionally making bad calls this referee would be publicly discovered. Though he did admit, "You can't do this in the case of one game," only if it were an ongoing action. When I reminded Welsh of the case of Tim Donaghy in the NBA and asked if a similar situation could occur within the NFL, where a dirty official could fall through the cracks of league security, he told me, "I think potentially all these things can happen. I just think that there's so much oversight by not only the officials that are working the game, but the integrity of the players, instant replay, these analysts that are talking and talking, I think it would be fairly hard to escape something. But again, there are things that can happen. Just passing on information. Like your best friend. You don't gamble, but your best friend does. And you're chatting about girls and this, that, and the other thing, and the conversation turns to, 'What do you think is going happen this week?' Innocent things can turn into real things, too. I think if you look historically at some of this stuff, it started in a real naïve way and then it just got out of control."