

Forward Progress... It's An Art, Not A Science!!!

A fundamental skill for all football officials is marking accurate forward progress of a runner. We say this is a game of inches. This can be true in certain situations but in many others it's not. Let's first look at some basic mechanics for officials and then discuss specific forward progress situations.

Most forward progress situations are called by the wing officials. Wing officials whenever possible need to sidestep and slide with the runner while observing action in front of them. When the run ends the wing official stops at the progress point and then moves in accordingly. If the progress spot is critical for a first down or awarding points, then the wing moves as far into the field as possible but never goes around players to get to the spot. When the spot is not critical the wing just "squares off" and stops without coming in. Too often we see wing officials who are a yard or two off from one side of the field to the other. Someone needs to adjust especially in non-critical progress spots. Most officials give forward progress with their lead foot. We do not recommend pointing to the ground or tapping your thigh or knee. The umpire also needs to know who has the spot and only spot the ball one time.

Remember when the runner's knee goes down forward progress is determined by where the ball is in relation to the knee. Watch the runner's body position for determining where to spot the football. If he is up in a vertical position the ball will most likely be a ball's length in front of his knee. When he is just falling forward with the ball tucked in his chest area the progress spot will be a foot or two ahead of the knee. On a stretch with his arms slightly extended will be a yard in front of his knee. When the runner is fully extended he may have the ball a yard and a half in front of his knees. These body positions will also help you determine down versus fumble situations. Picking up the height of the fumble in relation to the body position can be an indicator of when the knee or forearm hit the ground in relation to the ball coming out.

When the run goes wide to the sideline, the wing official should stop and give ground, letting the runner pass in front of you. Once the runner has safely cleared, the wing then moves downfield from behind. Keep in mind when trailing a runner you will not have a clean look at the football in possession of the runner as he goes to the ground. Patience is essential in these situations to avoid an inadvertent whistle when the ball comes loose. Depending on whether your crew is five, six or seven officials, you may need to get help on ruling the runner down versus fumbling. Also, when trailing the runner you can get forward progress help from your opposite side wing. Cross-field mechanics on these plays wide to your side needs to be discussed thoroughly. Once the runner is down a quick look across to your partner can allow you to move to the progress spot and mark it accurately.

In goal line situations when the runner goes up the middle it is difficult to see the runner and the ball through the maze of blockers and defenders. Whether a knee is down or the ball comes loose is nearly impossible to see from out on the wing position. A priority for wing officials is to tell themselves prior to the snap to "find the ball". Not spending too

much time on the outside blocks and finding the runner is critical. Be slow to use your whistle or better yet let the play end itself without a whistle in these tight goal line plays. Come into bodies and let your Umpire find the ball. We don't advocate Umpires signaling touchdowns but he can verbally and physically show you the ball. The Umpire many times will see the runner who is down stretch the ball out a second time trying to convince you he has scored. Good crew mechanics will help you get the call right and make your crew look solid.

A difficult forward progress to rule on is the curl or buttonhook route where the receiver is coming back for the ball. More times than not the wing official will not be on the exact yard line where the reception and subsequent contact occur. The wing has to focus in the catch and pick a spot on the field where the contact occurs. If the receiver maintains control of the pass and is driven back and down the wing must sharply move downfield and square off the progress spot. As suggested earlier you should look across the field and see if the opposite wing has a spot. Many times this is easier to see from the opposite side of the field. Again good crew mechanics on these types of plays will give the impression to players, coaches, and spectators that your crew has credibility and knows what they are doing. The covering wing official must know when possession of the pass is determined. The receiver who solidly controlled the pass and is driven back gets his forward progress at the spot of the defensive contact. If the receiver bobbles the pass or the ball is moving when contact occurs and the receiver is driven back, forward progress isn't established until control is ruled. In these situations it may be behind the initial contact spot or even the spot the receiver goes to the ground.

What seems like an eternity on the field is really taking just a few seconds. The covering official has to remember an important philosophy... If you're going to let the runner break free to gain yardage or possibly score then you have to let him loose yardage or fumble. You can't just give the runner the advantage of breaking free to gain yardage. In determining if a runner is wrapped up or not you have to see if he got his legs back. Was he in control and attempting to advance? The runner can be knocked back by multiple defensive hits and if he goes down or is subsequently wrapped up by the defense he is entitled to his original progress. If he regained his legs and makes a move to run then he may gain yardage, loose yardage, score, or even fumble. Again it seems like an eternity on the field but you have a second or so to run this through your mind. If you determine he was controlled the entire time, then get on the whistle and give him his progress. If not, let the play continue.

Forward progress is more an art than a science. When watching game film, either of yourself or others, watch for these types of plays and mentally practice them so when they happen on the field you are better prepared recognize and properly rule on them.