

UC Berkeley

Working Papers

Title

The line of scrimmage

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3950k1b6>

Author

Roizen, Ron

Publication Date

1994

A1458
no.94-9

✓4/30/94

The Line of Scrimmage

Ron Roizen

Working Paper 94-9

**INSTITUTE OF GOVERNMENTAL
STUDIES LIBRARY**

APR 26 1994

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA



UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA AT BERKELEY

The Line of Scrimmage

Ron Roizen

Working Paper 94-9

Working Papers published by the Institute of Governmental Studies provide quick dissemination of draft reports and papers, preliminary analysis, and papers with a limited audience. The objective is to assist authors in refining their ideas by circulating research results and to stimulate discussion about public policy. Working Papers are reproduced unedited directly from the author's pages.

THE LINE OF SCRIMMAGE

Ron Roizen (*1)

510-848-9123

revised 20 February 1994

When I started the process of becoming a high school football "referee" a half-dozen years ago I had to put aside a fan's perceptions and understandings of the game and take up an official's instead. Everything changed. As an official I no longer "watched" the game in the same way--indeed, I didn't *watch* it at all in any ordinary sense of the term. Each of the four officials (*2) in a typical varsity-game crew has a specific zone of observational responsibility, and woe betide the official whose attentions stray too far from his zone. Indeed, learning *not* to watch the game's center of attention--the star runningback juking his way downfield or a long pass's graceful arc--is one of the first and most difficult transitions a novice official must make. The officiating crew must collectively watch the whole field of play, and hence a division of observational responsibility among them is essential.

The game's *language* changed too. Precisely specifying what happens in a game requires knowing and consistently using a technically precise vocabulary. Even the most rudimentary concepts suddenly became complex, nuanced, and problematic. Consider, for instance, "the

(*1) Off the field, Ron Roizen lives in Berkeley and works as a research sociologist at Southwest Regional Laboratory.

(*2) The four: (1) the *referee* wears the white hat and is the crew's chief official, (2) the *umpire*, (3) the *head linesman*, who manages the crew in charge of the chains, and (4) the *line judge*.

to enforce the encroachment rule while receivers were trotting back to their huddle or before officials had spotted the ball. Therefore, the encroachment rule comes into effect only when the referee gives the *ready-for-play* signal--or, as officials refer to it, when he *chops-in*. The *ready-for-play* is signaled by a short whistle blast and a chopping motion with the right forearm. Chopping-in is a signal referees rather like to stylize to their own tastes--so that there are a great many ways to chop-in. No matter how it is executed, however, the *ready-for-play* signal indicates that the offense now has 25 seconds to snap the ball and that the encroachment restriction is henceforth in effect.

The scrimmage line concept is operationalized quite differently for the offensive and defensive teams. The reason for the difference is that football's rules are more detailed and demanding for the *offensive* team's players than for the *defensive* team's players. For instance, the rules require that the offensive team lines-up seven players on its line of scrimmage, but the defensive team's players may line-up anywhere they like. Only offensive players legally in the backfield or on the ends of the offensive line may catch a forward pass, but any defensive player is entitled to intercept one. Offensive interior linemen must remain motionless once they've put a hand on or near the ground, but defensive linemen may move all they like.

This asymmetry gives rise to an equivalent asymmetry in the care and precision with which "being on the line" and "being in the backfield" are defined for the two teams. For the defensive team, being on the line is a simple matter: any player within a yard of his own line of scrimmage is considered "on the line." For the offensive team, however, the matter is more complicated. The offensive center

the officiating crew) which of its players are truly on the line and which are truly in the backfield. The no-man's land buffer provides the rulebook's instrumentality for defining that duty.

The scrimmage line's importance doesn't evaporate with the snap and the end of the dead ball interval. Though the scrimmage line has little importance in running plays it remains crucial in passing plays. Fans know that passers may not pass the ball beyond the line of scrimmage. Less generally known, perhaps, is that a passed ball must cross the line of scrimmage before rules against pass interference come into effect. The scrimmage line retains so great an importance in pass plays that it determines where one of the officiating crew will position himself during such plays. The crew's *umpire* is responsible for calls relating to the line of scrimmage during pass plays. The umpire initially lines up on the defense's side of the ball, a step or so behind the linebackers. When he sees that a passing play is unfolding, he moves forward to the line of scrimmage and stays there--in officialese, that's his *mechanic* for a pass play. Thus positioned, he's at a good spot for observing four things: (a) watching for holding by interior linemen, (b) watching for ineligible receivers who slip past him and go illegally downfield, (c) determining whether a passed ball actually crossed the line of scrimmage, and (d) determining whether the passer launched his pass beyond the scrimmage line.

Oddly enough, the passer is allowed to launch his pass from anywhere on his side of B's--that is, the *defensive team's*--scrimmage line. The reason for using B's scrimmage line rather than his own (i.e., A's) is pragmatic. Once play has started, the umpire may use the downmarker on the sideline to establish the scrimmage line's

disadvantage for his own team. How? Football's rulebook prescribes that when a player on the receiving team touches a punted ball on the receiving team's side of the neutral zone, that ball becomes fair game to the offensive team and can be recovered and kept by them. A punt that has been untouched by the receiving team can thereafter belong only to the receiving team. Defensive team touches that occur either *in the neutral zone* or *on the kicking team's side of the neutral zone* are disregarded with respect to this possession implication. Disregarding such touches provides the legal wherewithal for linemen to try to block or deflect the punt--for even if they succeed in only touching the ball, such touching will not create the prospect of gaining possession for the kicking team. It follows that an *expanded* neutral zone allows even a defensive linemen who has been pushed backward into his own team's turf to still try to block or deflect a punted ball without at the same time having to fear that the kicking team will thereby gain a possession advantage if he succeeds.

Long before I donned an official's uniform and nervously walked out on the field to work my first JV-level game, I used to watch "You Make The Call!" commercials on TV. Little did I then suspect that the expertise that a seasoned football official brings to his craft is not simply one of knowing the rules rather better than the average, or even the most devoted, football fan. Football's rules are part and parcel of a wider architecture of precise and interlaced language. To administer the rules well and fairly a football official must achieve a seamless mastery of that architecture. To be sure, this specialized knowledge includes some arcane and entertaining esoterica. For the most part, though, it consists of deepened and enriched conceptions of such ordinary and humble ideas as the *line of scrimmage*.

U.C. BERKELEY LIBRARIES



C114006114
