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Jeffrey G. Hanna

Illinois Wesleyan University, iwumag@iwu.edu

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Close Calls

With a toss of his flag, field judge Doug Rosenbaum '80 keeps NFL teams playing by the rules.

Story by Jeffery G. Hanna

Kickoff between the St. Louis Rams and New York Jets is still 45 minutes away when Doug Rosenbaum '80 jogs onto the field at the Edward Jones Dome in St. Louis to begin his pre-game warm-ups.

Rosenbaum, the field judge on the seven-member officiating crew, is watching the Jets' wide receivers catch passes on the sidelines. As a receiver heads toward him, Rosenbaum backpedals. The pass arrives, and Rosenbaum checks to see that the receiver has both feet down and inside the white stripe painted on the artificial turf.

It's a safe bet Rosenbaum will see at least one similar play— "toe-tappers," he calls them— when the game begins. But this is practice. When it's for real, it will all happen in the blink of an eye. The ball. The sideline. The toes. Catch? Both feet down? In? Out? More than 66,000 people in the stadium and countless more in front of their televisions will be waiting for Rosenbaum to make up his mind.

What will he be thinking?

Just one thought: get it right.

If you follow the National Football League, you've likely seen Rosenbaum in action and never noticed him. That's the way he wants it.

"Our goal," says Rosenbaum, who began his fifth NFL season in September, "is to stay unnoticed and not influence the outcome of a game."

Staying unnoticed is not always easy.

Take this Rams-Jets game. After four fairly uneventful quarters, the game is tied in sudden-death overtime. The Rams are driving. Quarterback Mark Bulger launches a long pass toward wide receiver Torry Holt, who sprints along the sideline — Rosenbaum's sideline.

Rosenbaum backpedals just like in warm-ups. His eyes are focused on the receiver, the defender, and the flight of the ball, just like in warm-ups. This time the ball, receiver, and defender arrive simultaneously. Holt touches the ball, but loses control when the Jets' defender slams into him. Rosenbaum throws his yellow flag high in the air, and the Ram partisans erupt in cheers, anticipating an interference penalty against New York that will move St. Louis closer to a victory that will send them to the playoffs.

Few have noticed that Rosenbaum's cap is also on the field. He dropped it to indicate that Holt, the receiver, had stepped out of bounds and then come back on the field. Since Holt was the first player to touch the ball when he reentered the field, Rosenbaum's flag signifies a penalty against the Rams.

Rosenbaum runs to the center of the field to report his call to Bill Vinovich, the crew's referee, who make the announcement that the Rams are guilty of illegal touching. The cheers disappear; the dome is

filled with boos. Rosenbaum picks up his hat and his flag and prepares for the next play, telling himself to put what just happened behind him and concentrate on what's next.

That, Rosenbaum says, is among the primary lessons he's learned throughout an officiating career that began while he was still a student at Illinois Wesleyan — worry about the next play, not the last one.

"It's just like playing the game," he says.

Rosenbaum knows something about playing the game. A football and track star at Normal Community High School, he chose Illinois Wesleyan largely so that he could continue his playing career. He returned kickoffs and punts and, as a defensive back, had six career interceptions for the Titans.

But his road to the NFL actually began in the classroom, not the playing field. As part of the physical education major, he took a sports officiating course. It covered football, baseball, and basketball. Illinois Wesleyan Coach Bob Keck, now retired, taught one segment of the class. Encouraging Rosenbaum to get some practical experience, Keck recommended him to Bloomington High School for junior varsity and freshman basketball games.

Rosenbaum never turned down an assignment, which gave him both experience and a little spending money. It was a start.

"But it never dawned on me that it would lead where it has," he admits. "More than anything I saw officiating as giving something back to the game. That's something that my coaches at Illinois Wesleyan always emphasized — the importance of giving back to the game."

From the time he graduated in 1980, Rosenbaum moved steadily up the officiating ladder. His first job out of Illinois Wesleyan was teaching and coaching at Champaign Central High School. That's when he started officiating high school football in and around Champaign. Next came college games, starting in the College Conference of Illinois and Wisconsin (CCIW). His first assignment was, coincidentally, at IWU in September 1989.

"Coach Keck was still an assistant then," Rosenbaum says. "Officiating your first college game on the field where you played— that was just very cool."

Rosenbaum knew nothing was more important than experience — even if it meant driving from one side of the state to the other on a steamy summer Saturday to officiate for free at three preseason scrimmages.

"I did that only once," says Rosenbaum. "I got up at 5 a.m. and drove to a morning scrimmage at Western Illinois, came back to Illinois State for an afternoon scrimmage, and then went to the University of Illinois for an evening scrimmage. You didn't get paid, but you got experience and exposure and added to your chances of getting to the next level. So whenever they called, I said yes."

Then, out of the blue, a colleague asked if Rosenbaum wanted to officiate in the Canadian Football League. Naturally he said yes. Now he was driving to O'Hare Airport before dawn every Saturday to catch the first flight to Saskatchewan or Edmonton or Montreal. He learned a new set of rules — the CFL has 12 players instead of 11, three downs instead of four, and a wider and longer field, among other differences.

“The travel would beat you up, but I liked the Canadian game because it was wide open,” he says.

Rosenbaum caught on quickly. In his second season, in 1996, he was selected for Canada’s Super Bowl — the Grey Cup.

By this time, Rosenbaum had begun to think seriously about the NFL. In 1997, he interviewed with the league, took the two-hour psychological examination, had the physical, and had a background check. Then he waited. He was now on the Big Ten roster of officials and also officiated in both the indoor Arena League as well as in Europe, where the NFL had started a developmental league. That was valuable experience, but it wasn’t the NFL.

“You’re spinning your wheels and wondering if it’s every going to happen because you see the years going by,” Rosenbaum admits.

But he never regretted his time in the Big Ten where he was introduced to the most pressure he had faced as an official. Attendance at Big Ten games was more than double what he’d ever seen in Canada. At the end of the 2000 season, Rosenbaum got his biggest assignment — the national championship game between Oklahoma and Florida State at the Orange Bowl.

The NFL called in the summer of 2001.

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Officiating started as an avocation for Doug Rosenbaum. In theory, it still is. After one year of teaching in Champaign, he managed the Illinois Farm Bureau’s Rock Island County office before moving back to Bloomington/Normal in 1988. Since then, his day job has been as a financial planner, most recently with the Kingston Financial Group in Bloomington.

As his time commitment with the NFL increased, Rosenbaum stopped soliciting new clients and now strictly services existing accounts.



As a field judge, Rosenbaum often makes the most difficult calls of a game, such as if a receiver caught the ball inbounds or was interfered with while trying to make a catch. His decisions are often greeted with cheers — or boos. (Photo by Bill Stover)



Being in less than peak physical condition is no longer an option for NFL officials, but Rosenbaum (above) has always kept himself in shape, regularly working out several hours a week at Illinois Wesleyan's Shirk Center. (Photo by Marc Featherly)

"Each year the league had added a little more to the job," says Rosenbaum of the NFL. "I think we probably spend 40 to 50 hours a week during the season, excluding the travel."

That includes the many hours that Rosenbaum spends every week in the Shirk Center, lifting weights and running. The league has placed increased emphasis on its officials' fitness, and there's little wonder. Fatigue can cause an official to lose focus.

"The minute you lose focus, you'll be scratching your head wondering what happened," Rosenbaum says.

Besides that, Rosenbaum has to keep up with some of the world's fastest athletes.

"Even with the 25-yard head start that I have in my position as a field judge, the receivers are on you in a heartbeat," he says. "If I get beat, I'll be out of position. If that happens too many times, that's a problem."

In addition to daily workouts, Rosenbaum has responsibilities between games. He and the other members of the crew receive a DVD of the game telecast before they leave the stadium every week. Throughout the week, Rosenbaum analyzes every call the crew makes.

The hours add up.

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Doug Rosenbaum's first NFL game could not have been more memorable. After joining the league in 2001, he had worked three exhibition games before the officials were locked out by management in a labor dispute. When the regular season began, Rosenbaum was home watching his TV. The opening weekend was just days before the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, which forced cancellation of the following weekend's games. Before play resumed, the labor dispute was settled. Finally, Rosenbaum's NFL debut came Sept. 23, 2001, in Dallas.

"Under any circumstance, I would remember my first game, but the circumstances were truly unforgettable," says Rosenbaum. "Firefighters and policemen unrolled an American flag that covered the entire field. When Martina McBride sang the National Anthem, the stadium was deathly quiet. There wasn't a dry eye in the place — fans, players, coaches, officials, everyone.

"I was already nervous, and then there is all of this added emotion. I thought I was prepared, but I remember getting in position for the opening kickoff and thinking to myself, 'Whatever you do, don't screw up.'"

That sentiment never disappears. "The minute you think that you've got the hang of this, something you've never seen happens and you wonder, 'Did I just see what I thought I saw?' Every game you put a little something new in the computer in your head."

And mistakes are unavoidable. In his second season, Rosenbaum was in the middle of a controversial play in a New York Giants–San Francisco 49ers game. A muffed field goal turned into a pass play on which interference should have been called to give the Giants another chance to win. The call was missed, and Rosenbaum’s name was all over the papers.

Worse, it was Rosenbaum’s last game of the season. He had to replay that call in his head throughout the off-season. “You’d hope that you would have a game the next week so that you could get rid of that,” he says.

Rosenbaum calls the job “the most humbling experience anyone could ever encounter. One minute you’re cruising along without a worry and then, within seconds, all that changes. You’ve got to have the mental toughness to deal with that,” he says. “We’re human. We’re not going to get it right every time.”

While fans at home and even in the stadium can see plays replayed from a variety of angles in super slow motion, Rosenbaum gets one shot at being right. Instant replay has helped make the sure that the calls are correct, and Rosenbaum welcomes the technological assistance. “When one of my calls went to replay in my first year, I was scared to death that it would get overturned,” he says. “I think we all like instant replay because we want the call to be right.”

Two of the hardest calls for Rosenbaum as the field judge are defensive pass interference and those toe-tappers on the sidelines or in the end zone. Interference is strictly a judgment call about whether or not a defender has gained an advantage. Those sideline catches require an official to see the ball and the player’s feet all at once. “These athletes are so good at getting their feet down, it’s hard to believe,” Rosenbaum says.

Rosenbaum made a critical call in last January’s National Conference championship game between Atlanta and Philadelphia. Philadelphia quarterback Donovan McNabb threw a short pass to tight end Chad Lewis, who caught it while falling out of the end zone. Rosenbaum ruled touchdown, but the Falcons challenged his call. Instant replay upheld his decision.

“If the replay had shown that I’d been wrong, “ he says, “then the fans out there would be saying, ‘How could he miss that?’ But you’re trying to process everything as it’s happening.”

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Doug Rosenbaum’s progression is not quite complete. He’s gone from Illinois Wesleyan’s classrooms and playing field to officiating junior varsity basketball to the CCIW to the Canadian Football League’s Grey Cup to college football’s national championship game and to the NFL. He has officiated in the playoffs, including the conference championship game in Philadelphia. So what’s left? Only the Super Bowl.

Because the NFL values experience above all else, officials cannot



“Our goal,” Rosenbaum says of professional football officials, “is to stay unnoticed and not influence the outcome of a game.” Keeping focused on making the right call when players, coaches, and fans are loudly voicing their own opinions is just part of the job. (Photo by Bill Stover)

be considered for that ultimate assignment until they've had five years in the league.

"I can understand why the league wants officials to have those five years before they can call the Super Bowl," Rosenbaum says. "As I look at my own career, every game is a new experience. The game in St. Louis was the first time I'd ever had my hat down, a flag down, and potentially three different things going on at the same time. I learn something new every game. When you stop learning, it's a sign that you should stop officiating."

Rosenbaum isn't ready for that by a long shot. And the Super Bowl? If he's asked, of course he'll say yes.