





Keeping a Mental Pre-Snap Checklist

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I am certainly not above “borrowing” material from time to time. And, this is one of those times.

Anyone who has ever been around Big 12 veteran football official Phil Laurie knows the importance he has placed on “Pre-Snap Rituals.” How many meetings have we attended where this important subject has been discussed? The article below is just another way of looking at a subject that is so important, yet so easy to put on the back burner. Review the article below – take the information that is important and apply it at your next assignment. It is critically important!!! FS

If you’ve officiated football for any length of time, you’ve no doubt had to deal with less-than-experienced chain crews: a trio of dads pulled out of the stands or perhaps the 12-year-old offspring of the coaches.

Sometimes Murphy’s Law will rear its ugly head even when you have a top-flight chain gang. To avoid mishaps of any kind, develop a mental checklist you can run through between snaps. Being aware of these items will not only help avoid and correct debacles, but will also allow you to project a sense of ease, poise and self-assurance.

Knowing the down is an absolute necessity. Each official should confirm the correct down with at least one other official before each snap. The referee should also announce the distance to be gained for a first down. Additionally, knowledge of the game situation can help prepare officials for what is to come. The play selection will almost assuredly vary for third and one than for third and 12.

Noting the yardline of the line-to-gain will help you determine more quickly whether the play warrants the clock being stopped for a possible first down. Noting the yardline of the snap can aid in determining whether the passer has crossed the neutral zone. Finite knowledge of both yardlines, snap and line-to-gain, can help reconstruct chain placement if the chain crew errs.

Clock management can be enhanced with knowledge of whether the clock is running or stopped. By mentally noting the clock status when the ready is whistled, there need not be much discussion as to whether to restart the clock on the ready after a dead-ball foul or an injury timeout. Also noting the time remaining can help determine if the clock has malfunctioned.

A second wrist band can be used by the referee to track clock status: on the index finger when the clock is running and unengaged (or on another finger) when it is stopped.

*FS adds: As an umpire, I use a second wrist band as an **LBPI** (Lateral Ball Position Indicator). This helps remind me where the ball will be placed should an incomplete pass take place. I wear it on my left hand: Left pinkie = left hash mark; Left ring finger = left goal post; Middle finger = middle of the goal post; Right (I don't know the name of this finger) = right goal post; and thumb = right hash. I use combinations of two fingers to indicate spots between the five above. FS*

Has a member of your crew ever granted a team a timeout when that team had none remaining? In a local game several years ago a linesman did just that. The referee let the timeout stand and assessed the offenders a five-yard penalty for delay of game (an improper decision, of course). You can avoid excess timeouts by simply reminding yourself of the timeouts remaining before each snap: "Two white, one green." It becomes increasingly important as the half winds down and the timeouts are used.

Each official usually has responsibility for counting a particular team. Noting the incoming substitutes for that team can aid in detecting substitution infractions such as a player entering and leaving during the same dead-ball period.

Noting the down and distance can also be helpful in anticipating what play will be run. Understand that anticipating the call is not advocated, but anticipating the play has many advantages.

If a team shows itself to be "right-handed," sending the runner to the right side behind a talented tackle, you can bet that tackle will be involved in a short-yardage play or one near team B's goalline. If number 20 has been punting for the first three quarters, but number 18 is in deep formation on a fourth-down play in the fourth quarter, you might anticipate a fake. Those kinds of mental notes can put you a step ahead of the action.

Finally, noting agitated players can help prevent further problems or help you decide whether to call a foul in a marginal situation. Here's a real-life example: The umpire noted one player who seemed exceptionally bloodthirsty after making a tackle. The official made a mental note to watch the player. Sure enough, the same player was flagged later for taunting and was finally ejected later for a flagrant late hit.

Putting it all together, the mental rundown would go something like this: "Third and five from team A's 32 yardline. First down is at team A's 37 yardline. The clock is running; about five minutes to go at the ready. Each team has all of its timeouts remaining. No. 43 brought the play in for the offense."

It took you about 10 seconds to read the preceding paragraph. Can you think of a better way to spend 10 seconds between each down?