

Competition Committee Press Conference with St. Louis Rams Head Coach Jeff Fisher, NFL Vice President of Officiating Dean Blandino and NFL Senior Director of Officiating Alberto Riveron
Monday, March 18, 2013

Jeff Fisher: We will discuss the possible rules changes twice with the coaches, once with the membership. Tomorrow they will be discussed with the entire membership and the owners. There is a chance we may do some voting tomorrow on several of these, but if we don't get to them then clearly we'll be finishing up on Wednesday. Playing Rule Proposal No. 1, it's the instant replay proposal. I think you're all familiar with that. Basically in a situation where a coach throws a [challenge] flag and he shouldn't, we're basically going to charge him a timeout instead of penalizing him. The only time he would be penalized is if he does not have a challenge or for some reason throws the flag inside of two minutes. That one basically is going to allow us to go ahead and review the play even though the coach challenged it when he shouldn't of. In most cases, those plays are going to be related to turnovers and scoring plays."

Dean Blandino: "That's the Thanksgiving Day game, the Detroit play. Coach [Jim] Schwartz threw the flag when it was an automatic review by the replay official. So take that same play in 2013, the play still gets reviewed but Detroit is charged a timeout. If they don't have a timeout, then it's a 15-yard penalty."

Fisher: "And it still would be reviewed."

Blandino: "And it still would be reviewed, so we would be able to fix that mistake."

Fisher: "So I think it's a good, clean Proposal No. 1. We have another one that just relates to jersey numbering. Numbers are in our rule book and anytime we propose a change to the rule book, we have to make a proposal. We have a lot of tight ends and H-backs now that are starting to wear 40 numbers, and currently in the rule book it doesn't permit them to. So we're going to allow tight ends, H-backs and fullbacks to wear the 40 numbers. And then the next non-player safety related proposal relates to the Tuck Rule. Arm coming forward, ball comes out – incomplete, incomplete, incomplete. As soon as the passer attempts bring the ball back to his body or actually tuck it back to his body, if it comes out it's a fumble. If he completes the tuck and then the ball comes out, it's still a fumble. We've been asked why all of a sudden? We've been talking about it for years, we have two years of historical data now with replay reviewing turnovers. It's being ruled a turnover, it's being ruled a fumble on the field; we have two years of that. Officials are getting it right and we all think it's a fumble, so now let it be a fumble."

On if the Tom Brady play in the playoffs against the Oakland Raiders would be ruled a fumble under the proposed rule change to the Tuck Rule:

Blandino: "Correct."

Fisher: "Correct. This is not retroactive by the way."

On why there was the Tuck Rule in the first place:

Blandino: "It was a bright line. It was a bright line to say that once the hand started forward with control, that was a pass and it was a pass until the player actually tucked the ball away. So there was a clear delineation. Now there is more judgment involved in terms of when the tuck

actually begins, but we feel we can officiate that, and certainly with replay involved we can have the ability to review it in replay.”

On if there has been any pushback to the proposed rule change to the Tuck Rule:

Fisher: “Was Oakland in there? [Laughing] No, we haven’t. It’s been well received. It makes sense.”

Blandino: “Just remember that an example here, this is still a forward pass. The quarterback starts forward with control – that’s still a pass, no change. Now I’ll show you the difference... Now when the quarterback begins to tuck the ball back toward his body – he’s starting to bring it in – now it’s a fumble. This was ruled a fumble last year, reversed in replay to an incomplete pass because he had started the forward motion and he never got it all the way back to his body. Now once he starts to bring it back, any subsequent loss of control makes it a fumble. That’s the difference. Very similar to the Brady play.”

Fisher: “Playing Rule Proposal No. 2 is the first player safety-related proposal and that’s the change on the PAT/field goal rush teams. Again, that was generated by coach [John] Madden’s subcommittee – coach [Tom] Coughlin, coach [John] Harbaugh and coach [Andy] Reid came in and brought a bunch of plays and the committee looked at them. In addition to that, we had the Players’ Association meeting there at the Combine; they came in and showed us a lot of the snaps. We basically have a problem. We have 2,000-some PATs and field goals, and 20 were blocked or something like that. We have a player safety problem upfront, particularly because of the overloading and the pushing. Because we clean up the A gaps with the snapper, he gets protection, you only have four gaps and that includes the outside gap. They were creating situations where you were getting four and five guys on two, or three guys on one. When the protection teams’ legs typically are interlocked – their feet are – they have no way to protect themselves. So what we are proposing is that we allow no more than six players on either side of the snapper. You can have up to six – no more. We’re no longer going to permit them to push where the pusher pushes the rusher through the gap. In addition to that, we’re no longer going to permit the rush team to go low; they were permitted to go low prior to this rule change. We feel like with the six people lined up to one side on the line scrimmage, we feel like we still have the ability to affect and/or potentially block field goals and extra points. It’s clearly a safety-related issue and an issue that we feel strong about.”

Blandino: “The only other part of this rule is that the snapper in addition to you can’t line head up on the snapper; you have to be outside of the frame. He becomes a defenseless player, so when he’s in the process of snapping the football he becomes a defenseless player like a receiver does attempting to catch a pass. Can’t hit him in the head or neck, can’t hit him with the crown or forehead hairline parts of the helmet. Here’s just an example. This would be an illegal formation in 2013. You can see you have seven on the line of scrimmage on one side of the snapper; you can have no more than six. The idea there is try to eliminate some of the mismatches that we were seeing, especially on the edge; three on one, three on two, that type of thing. You can have no more than six so that’s an illegal formation [and] would be a five-yard penalty going forward. Here going low, if you watch at the bottom of the screen you’re going to see to the left side of the offensive formation the player going low. That’s illegal with this proposed change; that would be a low block, similar to what we have on punts and kickoffs where you can’t go below the waist. That becomes a 15-yard penalty when the receiving team – the defense – goes low into the offensive formation.”

On if the data shows a lot of injuries on PAT/field goal plays:

Fisher: “There were injuries, yes. Talking to coaches and the players, it’s just not something they look forward to doing. It’s like, ‘Oh, we scored again? We have to go out there and protect, kick an extra point or try?’ Again, we feel like and the coaches feel like we’ll still have an opportunity to affect rushes and hit creases and block and get our hands on kicks.”

On if there is pushing from behind on those plays:

Blandino: “That’s this play here. You see the second level – the pushers – that’s going to be UNR. That’ll be a 15-yard penalty for pushing from the second level, so that’s something that this rule change will prohibit as well. The last part of it is the protection of the center who is the snapper, what we’ve seen – and particularly on PATs because it’s almost an automatic play, at 99.4% last year – some of this stuff, just watch what happens to the snapper there. Really no attempt to block the kick; he’s really just going in and hitting the snapper. We felt that’s certainly a defenseless posture. He has to try and get his head up, and now we have this guy crashing down on him so now he’ll be a defenseless player. That was the last part of the rule. That’s a 15-yard penalty, UNR.”

Fisher: “The alignment, if someone lines up with seven guys on the line of scrimmage that would be a five-yard penalty, illegal formation.”

More on proposed rule change:

Fisher: “On the PAT team, there is a little more risk to go for two on the try. But to fake on the field goal, obviously teams do that. You can apply all of the same techniques and still cover the wings, so that’s the issue with it. It’s the pushing and the loading up specifically on the guard and tackle that got ugly.”

Blandino: “Yes, the pushing from the second level, pushing the down linemen into the formation is illegal as part of this.”

Fisher: “The next one we’re talking about is the peel-back block. The peel-back block is an act usually by an offensive player that’s going to go downfield and move down the line of scrimmage and then turn back towards his own endline and then block low. Prior to this proposal, it was permissible inside the tackle box, so the guard could start the play, turn back on the screen pass, turn back around [and] as long as he hadn’t left the tackle box it was permissible for him to block low on a defenseless player. Last year the hit we’re all familiar with – the [Brian] Cushing hit – actually was illegal because they left the tackle box and then the block was initiated. So what we’re proposing now is that really under no circumstances will you be permitted to block low below the waist when you’re blocking back towards your own endline. Including the tackle box also where it’ll be illegal.”

On how this rule proposal will affect zone-blocking schemes:

Fisher: “It’s not going to affect any of the run game. This is more so in screens, more so in bootlegs and things like that. We’re still allowing adjacent linemen to go down in the run game and we still have the one man removed block on the backside of runs, which ends up being a chop. But we’re not changing any of the block. Keep in mind this is back towards your own endline, so if Team A is going this way, it’s a foul when they turn around and block back this way.”

Blandino: “This was the Cushing play. It’s the left guard so he starts in the tackle box, then he’s going to move to a position outside of the tackle box and then deliver that block. When we first put the rule in, we were seeing it on the screens, things like that. So you’ll see he’s going to set him up and then the block occurs back towards his own endline. If that had occurred in the tackle box, tackle to tackle, that would have been legal. We feel like that’s not a block that we want in the game and it’s not something that is really critical to the run game. Basically now, that same block – we’re really talking about the block from the side because the block from behind [is] clipping, that’s covered. This is really the block when you approach from beside or behind go below the waist and you hit the opponent on the side back towards your own endline. This block would be illegal in 2012 and continue to be illegal. This is the block that we’re hoping to capture with this rule. You’ll see here it’s going to be the right tackle. He’s going to set him up and now block back towards his own endline below the waist from the side. That’s in the tackle box, that’s legal last year. Under the new rule change proposal it would make the block illegal and we feel that that player, he doesn’t have to go low there; he has options – he can go high, he can wall him off. That’s the block we want to get out of the game.”

On if there was any pushback from the coaches with regards to this proposed rule change in terms of its effect on the run game:

Fisher: “There was really no issue. We didn’t have any disagreement whatsoever with the coaches or issues that were raised regarding the current status of the run game. Like I said, this does not affect the run game per se, at all. This is just typically in pass plays where most times you have a defenseless player that doesn’t see the block. A lot of the discussion we had even with the players in Indy, the players were OK when the adjacent lineman if the play starts this way, when this adjacent lineman went low as long as he got his head across. They’re used to that, they anticipate that, so there was not a lot of concern there.”

Fisher: “And then finally, Playing Rule Proposal No. 6 restricts a ball carrier and a tackler’s ability to initiate contact with the crown of their helmet. This one has gotten a lot of attention and discussion and so far it’s going well. We have a couple of plays that we’d like to share with you, one that is and one that isn’t. We’ve talked at length about how we think it should be enforced but the important thing here is this is a block that is out in space. It’s clearly – and we emphasize clearly – outside of the tackle box, which is tackle to tackle, and further than three yards down the field. So clearly, and they’re going to enforce it as if it is, it’s that play where two players are coming together like this and dropping their helmets where they make contact with the top crown of the helmet. Face good, hairline good, this good but when the crown comes down, we’re going to have issues. We’ve looked at a lot of plays. Basically, the best way to phrase this is we’re bringing the shoulder back in the game. We want to bring the shoulder back to the game. We all know the helmet is a protective device; it’s not designed to be used like it’s being used as of late and we want to protect our players, specifically out in space.”

Blandino: “We went through all of Week 16 last year, looking for these types of plays. We pulled about 34 plays where we had helmet-to-helmet contact out in space and of those 34, we identified five in which this rule would have captured. Five in 16 games, one in every - a little bit more - than three games. Obviously that is one week, but that is what we came up with. From the 16 games in Week 16, there were five instances we felt based on the video would have been illegal. We are going to pull others examples beyond those five, but those five, we are going to pull more plays to share with the coaches, players and game officials. Also, the legal ones. We have two examples of legal plays because we are not trying to legislate all – there is going to be helmet-to-helmet contact between a runner and a tackler, that is not what this rule is

designed to take out. It is where one player lowers the head and delivers a blow with the crown, the top of the helmet, lines up a player and hits him when we feel he has options to do something else.”

Fisher: “They would offset.”

Alberto Riveron: “The enforcement will be a 15-yard penalty and if it happens on the runner, it will be a spot foul. If we get into a situation where – I think we saw one – the offensive player and the defensive player are both committing a foul, it will be an off-setting penalty and they will replay the down. The way we are officiating it - we just talked about it - in space. We talked about the tackle box where it is three yards downfield or outside the tackles. We will have two officials downfield - a field judge and a side judge - 22 yards [and] 25 yards down field. We will really get a wide look at this and from that perspective you can see the runner put his head down and/or you can see a defensive player come across the field and line up an opponent. So you really get a clear shot from a faraway distance where our official is stationed. And there could be a situation where we could have a foul and another official could come and say ‘He did not put his head down, he did not use the crown of his helmet.’ It might have been incidental contact but we can talk the other official out of a foul much like we do right now.”

Fisher: “Outside the tackle box. Either/or.”

Riveron: “Either outside the tackle box or three yards down the field.”

Riveron: “The tackle box is defined as tackle-to-tackle, three yards on the defensive side of the ball or -when you get on the offensive side of the ball - it is line of scrimmage all the way back to the end line.”

Fisher: “We want to make a serious attempt to get the shoulder back into the game. We think that is very important as a league. We are not saying the ball carrier cannot get small. We are not saying the ball carrier cannot protect the football, because if he is going to go down to cover the football, if the shoulder goes down, we know the head goes down, we understand that. We have some one arm dominant runners in this league where if they are running away from their dominant side, they don’t switch hands with the ball, so if I am running as a right handed ball carrier and I am running to the left, the defender coming here, my only opportunity is to go down to protect the football. Protecting the football is OK, providing you do not strike with the crown of your helmet and that is what we are trying to differentiate. The other thing that is going to come up, the crew is going to do the best they can, but there may be instances where this is sent upstairs and it is not penalized on the field but it will be fined.”

Blandino: “Just like any other player safety foul, if we don’t call it on the field, it is still subject to supplemental discipline with a fine. These are the plays we are looking at. We are looking for the obvious. This is the [runner] or defender; here it is the running back lowering his head, using the crown of the helmet to deliver the blow. That is the type of play. This is the tape we are going to show the game officials and the players. That is the obvious type of act we are trying to get out. On the flip side, when you talk about the defender, and we talk to coaches, coaches say we don’t want players tackling, using this technique, we are trying to protect two players; the player that gets hit, but here, the player doing the hitting, he is putting himself in a position to get a serious neck injury and that is what we are trying to take out of the game. Using that technique, lowering the head, using the crown of the helmet to deliver that blow.”

Blandino: “Correct. This is not subject to review and replay. This is strictly on the field and not a reviewable play.”

Blandino: “We want him to lead with the shoulder. Correct, I will show you a couple of examples of plays where the helmets make contact, but neither player is delivering a blow with the crown of their helmet. You might see this at the goal line where both are trying to get to a spot. Here they are both going to lower their heads, but there is side contact, it is not the crown of the helmet, the running back is trying to protect himself, protect the football, the defender is trying to keep him out of the end zone. We are not trying to take that hit and that play out of the game. Here a back is trying to get small, lower his head to protect the football, this is not what we are looking for to be a foul in 2013. He certainly lowers his head, but he is trying to protect himself, protect the football, the defender comes in, there is contact with the facemask, not the crown, those are legal plays in 2013.”

Blandino: “Correct, it is just trying to get the shoulder back in the game. We understand the shoulder goes, the head is going to come with it. We really feel on the Richardson play he has options and he doesn’t have to lower his head like that and hit him in that manner.”

Blandino: “We don’t tell officials to err either way. We aggressively enforce player safety fouls. We are going to teach with video and we are looking for the obvious foul where the player delivers the blow. Like Coach Fisher said, there may be instances where we don’t have a flag, but we have a fine and that happens now.”

Riveron: “One of the things we are going to do is to show a lot more what is legal so we can train officials and not unnecessarily throw a flag. We are going to concentrate heavily on the three yards down field, on outside the tackle, and as you can see, most of these fouls occur outside the tackle box. They occurred in wide open areas. If we can show our officials more plays that are legal that will be a great way to train because as we know it, most of the shots we have seen are legal. Most of the contact is legal. We are trying to get that one individual situation where the head is lowered – and you can see on the field, you can see a player put his head down - and the contact is with the crown and you can see it, but we have to train our officials more and more to realize what the legal plays are so that is one way we are going to do it.”

Blandino: “More to Al’s point, we have the added benefit where the head has to come down. We have hits to defenseless receivers where the head doesn’t have to come down. You can have with the side of the helmet, helmet-to-helmet, so we feel officials will be able to see this.”

Blandino: “We are always going to reinforce player safety but I can tell you the video we have reviewed the last two to three years, they are getting the message. We are seeing players adjust. We can put together tapes of 50, 60, 70 plays where they are lowering the target, letting up when they know the ball is gone, they are adjusting. They will adjust. When you are at the risk of a foul, a risk of an injury when you lower your head, they will adjust.”

Blandino: “They are going to be coached.”

Fisher: “With respect to – I don’t know who has commented on it – of our great players in the past, we have watched a lot of tape. Until they fully understand the rule and the direction we are going, I can understand their concern. We have done a lot of work in this area the last two-three weeks. We have watched a lot of tape. Again, we just want the shoulder back.”

Fisher: “We had former runners in the building as well.”

Fisher: “We hope that it will. This is the last thing those of us. Let me rephrase, as a runner in this league, you do not last long if you run tall, we understand that. You are not going to have a long career if you are a tall runner, you have to be able to protect yourself, we understand that. But we think there is a difference between protecting yourself and striking someone with the crown of your helmet.”

Blandino: “The second defender on Charles that was an issue because that is where the crown of the helmet went in. There was nothing Charles could have done. This is on the defender.”

Blandino: “Charles catches the pass, the defender is on him, he is lowering his head to protect himself, he is trying to brace for the hit. We don’t see that as a blow with the crown. He is ok with that. It is this hit here, 58 with the foul.”

Blandino: “We are not officiating intent. We are looking for the lowering of the head and the delivering of the blow with the crown. We look at the helmet as four sides: there is the facemask, there [are] the sides, there is the hairline-forehead which is just above the facemask, and then the crown if you think of if you put a beanie on top of your head, that would be the crown there.”

Blandino: “Would not have been a foul. We looked at that quite a bit, we looked at it during our meetings in Indianapolis and then in Florida. Ridley lowers his head more than Pollard does, but Ridley by the time he gets through the first level, Pollard is on him and he is trying to protect himself and he ends up getting hit. Pollard’s head is up, it is just one of those plays where there is helmet-to-helmet contact. It is not a good result, but there wasn’t a foul based on this rule. It could be in the body sure.”

Fisher: “From a committee standpoint, we looked at all the concussions from defenseless players – quarterbacks, running backs, different phases of the kicking game. There is ongoing studies right now of gathering the concussion data. We are trying to do everything we can from a coaching standpoint. I might have mentioned in the conference call, we had in 2011, no concussions on touchbacks. This year we had four. We look at it and asked why is it happening. We think we can handle it with coaching. We had kickoff teams running down the field and taking their eyes off of return blocking schemes to look in the back of the end zone, nine-yards deep, and they are getting hit. So we think we can bring that number back. As far as data is concerned, we are still gathering data.”

Fisher: “Yes, correct.”

Fisher: “We are still gathering data. We think we still have concussions caused by the ground - the surface - either/or with teammates - with friendly fire - but we do know the number is significantly down on kickoff coverage.”

Fisher: “There is a chance the membership will get together tomorrow, but if not, clearly be done by Wednesday morning.”