

Uptempo NFL Is Forcing Refs Into Shape

By KEVIN CLARK

The NFL is faster than ever. The “no-huddle” offense has exploded and forced one position on the field to get into better shape.

The referees.

Last weekend, the NFL gave referees fitness tests to whip them into shape for the coming season, which may be their toughest ever. Veteran referee Mike Carey, now an NFL rules expert for CBS, estimates referees run anywhere from 6 to 7 ½ miles over the course of a game. This year, they’ll have to do it at an unprecedented pace. Last season, teams ran 150% more plays without stopping for a huddle than they did in 2008. From 2012 to 2013 alone, the increase was 37%.

At a fitness clinic in Dallas, NFL referees were subjected to all the same tests that would be done on a quarterback or linebacker. The league has always had some sort of routine health evaluation for referees, but those within the game say the NFL has never put together an event quite like this. Dean Blandino, the league’s vice president of officiating, said the clinic tested “all different types of functional movements”—from flexibility to speed.

“We’re trying to help them and we feel that’s going to translate into better officiating. Better movement, better officiating,” Blandino said. “If it helps us officiate more plays [in the no-huddle], that’s a good thing.”

Former referee Jim Daopoulos, who until 2013 served in the league office as a supervisor of officials, said fitness tests had mostly been “ cursory-type” reviews and the results didn’t have an impact on the overall grade an official received. Grades dictate which referees get high-profile assignments. Daopoulos said fitness was emphasized under Jerry Seeman, who departed as the league’s officiating czar in 2001.

“The no-huddle is putting more pressure on the umpire—they’ve got to get the ball, run in there, set it. You are seeing a tendency that they need to be the most fit and athletic guy out there,” Daopoulos said. In Dallas, “they did some 40 yard dashes, stuff like that and when you look at the staff, they are as good a condition as they’ve ever been. You aren’t seeing guys 20, 30 pounds overweight.”

Carey, now on Thursday Night Football and CBS’ NFL Today, said uptempo offenses are as intellectually draining on the officials as they are physically. On a routine Sunday, he said “most of the exhaustion at the end of a game comes from decision making.” And



The NFL gave referees fitness tests to whip them into shape so that they would be fit enough to keep up with players such as Carolina quarterback Cam Newton.

these no-huddle offenses only make things worse. Last season three teams—the Denver Broncos, Philadelphia Eagles and Buffalo Bills—ran plays without a huddle more than 60% of the time. Those teams vary in style. For instance, Denver’s Peyton Manning usually snaps the ball late in the play clock, giving opponents and the referee 20 or so seconds to adjust. The Eagles, however, love to snap the ball quickly.

Those quick snaps do the most damage to referees. Carey said each referee must have a “presnap dialogue.” He’ll analyze the formation, the down-and-distance, the clock and substitutions. The entire script is sped up to a lightning-fast degree when an uptempo, no-

huddle offense is employed by a team. Carey added that the officials will be helped by new communication systems in which all seven officials can communicate using microphones.

The new pace of the game has made the most fit referees into stars in the officiating world. Daopoulos talks about one game official, Carl Paganelli, as if he were as dominant as Seahawks cornerback Richard Sherman. With the ability to get easily in and out of formations at a quick pace and set the ball, Paganelli might be the most important guy on the field on some Sundays. “He just moves very well,” Daopoulos said.

The purpose of the Dallas clinic was more about evaluating the officials so that

they could be monitored going forward. “We put them through the tests and then we work with the official if we need areas of improvement,” he said. Blandino said the no-huddle didn’t present a “major” problem last year, but it did play into the thinking on the new standards.

The referee fitness test push puts a spotlight on something normally overlooked in the world of pro football, where athleticism and fitness are a must: Referees are actually athletic.

“It’s just like a cornerback,” Blandino said. “Officials on the sidelines need to be able to change directions and pivot and you could go to a back-peddle to a turn and a sideways run. The agility part of it is important, moving side-to-side

and avoid players coming at you, that’s what our officials need to be able to do.”

The NFL’s mindfulness of referee fitness is made more important by the fact there are no strict standards on age or health. FIFA international soccer referees, for instance, cannot work after age 45. “The officials that can’t [perform], over time we have to look at making a change, but it is all performance-based,” Blandino said.

But for now, referees are running, lifting and stretching with one goal in mind: keep up with the new pace of the game.

“People ask me how referees get ready for the season,” Daopoulos said. “I tell them ‘going on the interstate and dodging cars.’”

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