



Tony Corrente

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Tony began his officiating career in 1971 as a member of the Long Beach Unit of the California Football Officials Association. While there he officiated three CIF Southern Section Championships and seven Junior College Bowl games. In 1981 he was appointed to the staff of the PCAA/Big West Conference where he officiated the Freedom and California Bowls. In 1991 he was invited to join the officiating staff of the Western Athletic Conference where he officiated the Alamo, Aloha and Rose Bowls. In 1995, Tony was selected to become a member of the officiating staff of the National Football League as a Back Judge. In his three years at that position he worked two playoff games including the 1997 NFC Championship game. Tony just completed his second season as a Referee in the NFL with an assignment to an AFC Wild Card game. Along with his duties in the NFL, Tony also officiated in the NFL Europe League working The World Bowl in both 1995 and 1998. In 2001, Tony worked as the Referee for the NFC Championship (Minnesota vs. NY Giants). Tony is single, living in La Mirada, California where he teaches high school social sciences.

In 1995, Tony was selected to become a member of the NFL officiating staff as a back judge before being promoted to referee at the beginning of the 1998 NFL season. In his three seasons as a back judge, he worked two playoff games including the 1997 NFC Championship Game. Tony also officiated in NFL Europe working the World Bowl in both 1995 (Back Judge) and 1998 (Referee). In 1998 he became a Referee, Corrente worked the NFC Championship Game in 2001 between the Minnesota Vikings and New York Giants. He Since joining the NFL in 1995, Corrente has been involved in 13 post-season assignments including 3 AFC/NFC Championships and as the alternate Referee in Super Bowl XL and as Referee in Super Bowl XLI between the Chicago Bears and the Indianapolis Colts.

Corrente's officiating crew for the 2009 NFL season consists of Fred Bryan, John McGrath, John Hussey, Gary Cavaletto, Allen Baynes and Greg Wilson.

Outside of his officiating profession, Corrente earned his Bachelor's degree from California State University, Fullerton in 1975 and a Master's degree in 1988 from Azusa Pacific University. He is currently a high school educator in the social sciences. As a former baseball coach, his teams won the California Interscholastic Federation Southern Section 3-A Championship in 1988 and were the runner-up for the same title in 1991.

It's official: A weekend with NFL referee Tony Corrente - PART-TIME PAYCHECK & FULL-TIME SCRUTINY - Following NFL referees is a lesson in the game's details and how the league picks apart its crews' performances as much as the teams and the fans do.

By Sam Farmer, Times Staff Writer
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In a darkened meeting room at a Jacksonville, Fla., airport hotel, nine men huddle around a video projector, intently studying the screen.

The image of an Oakland Raiders linebacker is the center of attention. He has just made a tackle, but it's what he does next that's being scrutinized.

Acceptable reaction by an excited player? Or taunting?

During a game six days earlier, this NFL officiating crew considered the reaction acceptable. But now a supervisor was telling them they got it wrong. It should have been a 15-yard penalty.

So they play the video over and over again, at least 20 times.

Less than 24 hours later, they will be confronted by a similarly debatable situation -- Jacksonville receiver Dennis Northcutt catches a 10-yard pass over the middle and reacts by quickly spiking the ball.

Under a new rule this season, that's an automatic five-yard penalty.

But after a short conversation, the crew -- was that rebuke still ringing in their ears? -- changes it to a 15-yard taunting call because when the ball bounced up it grazed a defensive player.

And two days later, the NFL, with the benefit of replay, will disagree again.

No taunting. Should have been a five-yard penalty. Another downgrade for one of the league's top crews.

"We drive ourselves crazy on the littlest of details," says one of the men, "but it's simply because we expect the best."

This is a world few people outside the officials themselves ever see. As a general rule, the NFL does not allow its 120 officials to speak to the media.

But last week, this Times reporter was granted rare behind-the-scenes access to the officiating crew working the Atlanta Falcons-Jacksonville Jaguars game -- a group led by the referee who worked the last Super Bowl, Tony Corrente, a La Mirada High social studies teacher.

The access included traveling with Corrente on Saturday and shadowing his crew throughout the weekend, including immediately before and after the game. Then, as the men returned home -- one is an office manager for a Washington, D.C., law firm, another is a pastor who resides in Spokane, Wash. -- it was off to NFL headquarters in New York to observe the league's hair-splitting evaluation of the group's game-day performance.

The NFL is the only major sports league in the U.S. that does not employ full-time officials, but the men who work the games fly first class, eat in first-rate restaurants and are well paid. Depending on experience, officials receive between \$2,750 and \$8,150 per regular-season game, \$5,000 per playoff game, and \$10,000 for a Super Bowl, plus potential bonuses.

But for that, the pressure is intense and the scrutiny unbelievable.

As a result, no detail is too small to notice.

It's less than an hour before last Sunday's game and side judge Dyrol Prioleau is warming up right alongside the Jacksonville receivers. In rhythm with their short patterns, he takes two steps forward and two steps back, as if following the play and ready to make a call.

Meanwhile, Corrente, 55, watches the quarterbacks, noticing that the Jaguars' David Garrard has a longer windup than Atlanta's Joey Harrington. Whereas Garrard brings the ball up along his right hip as he drops back to pass, Harrington lifts the snap from center straight up to his chest.

The significance?

Garrard's style makes him more susceptible to getting stripped by a pass rusher raking the ball out of his hand from the side, which is important for a referee to note. After all, it's his job to peel through a pile and figure out who has recovered any loose ball.

And, sure enough, in the second quarter, Garrard fumbles after being hit by Atlanta's Jonathan Babineaux. Fortunately for the Jaguars, center Dennis Norman pounces on the ball and Jacksonville maintains possession.

An easy call because Corrente was ready.

During the week, Corrente works with a total of about 180 students.

On a typical fall Sunday, his audience is closer to 15 million -- though if all goes as planned he and his crew will be seen and heard, but never truly noticed.

If the players get rock star treatment, an official's weekend excursion might be compared to that of a high-level foreign diplomat -- only without any potential for a night on the town.

It's Saturday afternoon, about 24 hours before game time, and no sooner does Corrente step into the lobby of his hotel when the phone rings at the front desk.

It's NFL Security making sure that he has his credentials, review material and a dozen footballs set aside specifically for the kicking game.

These balls, called "K-balls," are sealed in an overnight delivery box behind the desk. At the game, they will have their own security -- someone whose only job is to ensure no one tries to replace one with a ball that has been cooked in a microwave, crunched in a vise or otherwise worn in to make it perform better.

A short time later, Corrente takes out his laptop and sets it on a long table inside a hotel meeting room.

Soon, game action is being projected onto a large screen, and for two hours the crew pores over disputed, questionable or otherwise noteworthy calls from their last game and others around the league.

"We have to learn from our mistakes and others' mistakes," Corrente says later. "Because if we don't learn from them, we won't be around long enough to make them all ourselves."

Even before this meeting, crew members have studied tape from their previous game, submitted reports on the calls they made, and have taken their weekly 50-question test on NFL rules.

The league also has provided its evaluation of the crew's performance from the week before -- an always brutally honest assessment that can even include a critique of how athletic and tidy the officials look in uniform.

"They'll say, 'You're not looking fit,' " says Corrente, who works out five days a week and is meticulous about staying trim. "People say TV adds 10 pounds, and you know what that means. Put it this way: We want to look more like the defensive backs and running backs than offensive linemen."

Sunday, 10:20 a.m., less than three hours before kickoff -- About 30 police and private security officers are waiting as a van carrying Corrente and crew rolls through a special entrance at Jacksonville Municipal Stadium.

Police use a bomb-sniffing dog to check their bags, then they are escorted to their locker room.

The room is small, but it has a table with sandwiches and cookies and a cabinet with all the essentials: sunblock, aspirin, foot powder, athletic tape, energy bars, bubble gum and Tums.

10:29 a.m. -- Two ball boys arrive to prepare the K-balls. They have precisely 45 minutes to do so under the supervision of Brian McGready, the kicking-ball coordinator, a league-appointed official who lives in Jacksonville and works the Jaguars' home games. The ball boys do what they can to break in the brand-new footballs, but are allowed to use only water and soft-bristled brushes.

10:32 a.m. -- Still in street clothes, five members of the crew make their first visit to the field, and the temperature is already starting to climb. By kickoff, the on-field thermometer will register 108 degrees, the humidity making it feel even hotter.

That's this week. Next week, who knows? Last season, Corrente's crew worked a game in Green Bay when it was 12 degrees at kickoff -- and below that counting the wind-chill.

Whatever the weather, an NFL referee walks, jogs and runs an average of 6.6 miles during a game. For a back judge, it's 7.3.

10:40 a.m. -- Corrente is escorted to a television production truck along with line judge Ron Blum, replay assistant Bob Mantooth, and game supervisor Neely Dunn.

This is routine. Corrente talks with Fox producer Ray Smaltz about some minor procedural changes, Mantooth checks on communication with the replay booth, and Blum addresses issues about the game clock.

The league appoints one supervisor to oversee each game. Dunn, a former game official, will prepare a report on how Corrente's crew performed, studying calls that were made and ones that weren't. Later, at NFL headquarters, he and other supervisors will issue their final grades for the week.

10:55 a.m. -- Umpire Steve Wilson fills out pregame paperwork and checks charts the Jaguars and Falcons have submitted that show field-goal and punt formations. If there's anything out of the ordinary, any unusual alignments, the officials would prefer to see them first before the game.

11:01 a.m. -- While Corrente goes through an on-field microphone check, back judge Don Carey puts the game-clock operator through the paces. He wants to see the clock tick down from 15 minutes. And then he wants to see, say, 13 seconds added. And 10 seconds run off. You can never be too careful, Carey says. Once, in Houston, he had to stop a game three times in the first quarter because the guy in the booth didn't know how to run an NFL clock.

11:17 a.m. -- Field judge Craig Wrolstad and first-year side judge Prioleau, the youngest members of Corrente's crew, check the air pressure on all the game balls. Each ball is inflated to within a one-pound range, so equipment managers can't sneak in ones that are bloated or under-inflated to correspond with a quarterback's preference and hand size.

To ensure the footballs aren't switched during the game, the officials mark each of them using a rubber stamp -- adding their own personal touch. Walt Coleman, who's in the dairy business, uses a cow. Gerald Austin, a retired golf pro, uses a golf flag. Ron Winter uses -- what else? -- a snowflake.

Yet, with all the care, teams still occasionally try to switch out a ball. It happened once to Corrente's crew and back judge Carey confiscated the ball, turned it over to league security, they sent it to headquarters, and the team was punished.

11:32 a.m. -- Blum and Wrolstad go to the home locker room to meet with Jaguars Coach Jack Del Rio; head linesman Johnny McGrath and Prioleau meet with Falcons Coach Bobby Petrino. They all synchronize their watches to make sure there's no confusion about when the teams are to take the field.

The officials need to know some minor details such as the jersey numbers of the captains and who's the "get-back" coach assigned to keep the sidelines orderly. They would also like to know whether to watch for any trick plays.

12:10 p.m. -- The crew heads back out to the field, this time in uniform, to warm up, familiarize themselves with their surroundings, and to observe players.

12:35 p.m. -- In the replay booth high above midfield, behind a door with a block-letter sign reading "Positively No Visitors," Mantooth and video operator Terry Poulos sit bracketed by high-definition TV screens. They have equipment that allows them to run footage back frame by frame, and in front of Mantooth is a large touch-screen monitor that allows him to quickly cycle through angles so, in a challenge situation, he can get the best picture to Corrente as the referee ducks under the replay hood to look at an identical HDTV monitor.

12:48 p.m. -- Back in the officials' locker room, Corrente puts in eyedrops to keep his contact lenses moist. Although everyone but the referee is allowed to wear sunglasses -- exclusively Reebok sunglasses by league decree -- only Blum chooses to do so.

A few years ago, the officials were told by an eye specialist that a thrown football can travel five yards in the blink of an eye.

The lesson? Don't blink.

12:52 p.m. -- Four linemen from each team have been randomly selected to have their jerseys checked for foreign substances, such as silicone spray or Vaseline, that makes them slippery.

In 13 years, Corrente says he has never caught a player using such things, but it's routine. And it's not unheard of. Many years ago, Raiders cornerback Lester Hayes was known to transform his hands -- and wrists, and forearms -- into flypaper by slathering them with Stickum.

1:02 p.m. -- Corrente gathers the team captains at midfield and flips the coin. Atlanta wins the toss, elects to receive, and the game is underway.

It's Tuesday, two days after the game, in a room -- NFL officials call it their "command center" -- on the 15th floor of the league's Park Avenue headquarters.

Here, nine supervisors, each of them a former game official, convene with officials boss Mike Pereira to study every play from the past two days. Each is assigned one to three games, with each game taking about 4 1/2 hours to grade.

They are looking for infractions that were called and others that weren't, later splashing selected clips across a cinema-sized screen so the entire group can vote on what should have happened. Corrente's crew is "downgraded" for three plays: holding that was called, holding that wasn't called, and the taunting call. All in all, a solid performance.

Dunn has been a supervisor six years and says he can count on one hand the number of zero-downgrade games he remembers.

The NFL can afford to be so thorough because, unlike pro baseball, basketball and hockey teams, its teams play -- and its officials work -- only once a week.

Baseball uses six former umpires as supervisors and about a dozen "field observers" who attend about half the games. The NBA has one person who works from a broadcast center, plus an official observer in each city who attends games and grades each call. Group supervisors then review the observers' reports on games. The NHL has a manned control room in Toronto, and its officials are given laptop computers so they can receive and review video clips of controversial plays.

On average, there are 152 plays in an NFL game and the league has determined the accuracy rate of its officials to be between 96.5% and 97%.

The league also does what it can to avoid the kind of gambling scandal that recently rocked the NBA.

The NFL prohibits officials from so much as visiting Las Vegas or Atlantic City during the season, and even during the off-season requires its crew members to report such a trip to the league office, along with details on the reason, the length of their stay, and whether they plan on spending any time in a casino.

Back in La Mirada, Corrente has returned to the job he has held for 29 years, teacher.

His classroom walls carry only a few hints to his side profession -- posters from Super Bowl XL (he was an alternate) and XLI. Above the blackboard hang pennants from various colleges.

"He doesn't brag about it; he's really down to earth," says Amanda Asti, a senior who assists Corrente in one class. "Even when he got back from the Super Bowl, the only question he asked was, 'Did anybody watch?'"