

Cooney: NFL suffering paralysis of analysis

BY FRANK COONEY
THE SPORTS XCHANGE

This National Football League season became an official pain when commissioner Roger Goodell on Wednesday appointed a group of experts to create the final word, the definitive definition, of what is, in fact, a catch.

This is the most recent intervention by the suits in New York to further convolute a game understood by children, but apparently not so much by adults who believe every action should pass scrutiny perfectly, or to some acceptable level of nanotechnology.

Goodell enlisted a group of current and former general managers, former players and former officials to make recommendations to the league's competition committee about changes to

the catch rule, or rules.

When that fails, the final decision will go to the folks at the Department of Energy's National Center for Electron Microscopy (NCEM) at Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory.

When these guys go under the hood to flex their nanotechnology they peer at images that are a half-angstrom in resolution, which Goodell will surely explain is half a ten-billionth of a meter, less than the diameter of a single hydrogen atom.

The late Joe Madro, a long-time NFL scout who had his own lexicon of Yogisms, was one of the first, if not the first, to put a name on this dreaded malady — paralysis of analysis.

Madro intended to simplify scout-eze, asking one key question — can he play or not?

But in the NFL's current state of paralysis, Madro is right on the money. Where

once there were a few, logical, understandable guidelines for a catch, now there is a growing list of rules and addendums that surely will not shrink upon this newly scheduled, further review.

So, in the name of trying to get it right, everything is going wrong.

Psst, Roger, while it may be politically correct to throw players under the bus with a flurry of new rules in the name of social conscience, let's not treat fans the same way. When it comes to officiating let's not introduce needless, arbitrary punishment that requires due process under the hood as games get longer than ever, an average of about three hours, 11 minutes.

Goodell delegates the sniggling details to Vice President of Officiating Dean Blandino, an upbeat chap whose mastery of technology and PR are on display every week with videos

emailed to the media and shown on NFL Network.

Blandino is the ultimate eye in the sky, lording over every game via television from the NFL's league offices in New York. It is probably appropriate that he offers that last word from that perch because it is at least a familiar one for him. To our best knowledge, Blandino never officiated an NFL game himself. Go figure.

OK, about that catch. Time was you knew it when you saw it. Then new layers of definitions were added, especially when involving the boundaries in the end zone. If a super slow motion camera televised a picture to New York that the commissioner's signature moved improperly upon landing — no catch. Well, something like that.

Maybe new rules will require receivers to maintain possession long enough to autograph the ball with a

Sharpie. Terrell Owens can coach them up.

This multi-layered definition of a catch that brain-cramps officials, fans and every player not named Odell Beckham Jr., is an example of how the whole officiating scene has spun wildly out of control.

Officials know most of their calls will be subject to review. These officials dearly want to get a good grade and take part in the postseason games, maybe even a Super Bowl. So, rather than be judicious with their calls in the name of letting them play, officials show their quick twitch muscles at the very hint of an impropriety. If they are wrong, the flag can be picked up after a huddle of officials.

But if they miss a call, they will get a call or letter from Blandino, and it won't be an invitation to lunch in New York.

There was what seemed to

be a glaring example of this quick-twitch nonsense last Sunday in the game between the Arizona Cardinals and San Francisco 49ers.

On Thursday, 49ers defensive end Quinton Dial not only disputed the highly controversial roughing the passer call against him, he vowed to fight the \$17,363 arbitrary fine.

Dial acknowledges that his helmet came in contact with Cardinals quarterback Carson Palmer's facemask during a fourth-quarter sack in the 49ers' 19-13 loss ... and that penalty kept alive what would be the deciding touchdown drive.

But he believes instant replay clearly shows he did not target Palmer's head, and that the "illegal" contact was caused by Palmer ducking as contact was imminent.

That is certainly the way it looked on our big screen and should have on Blandino's in New York.

Watch

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to the lineup for new Foxcroft coach Tyler Erickson — possibly as soon as Saturday's season opener against Ellsworth — Smith may not have to face as many collapsing defenses as he did a year ago thanks to several other returning players as well as impact transfers Noah Allen (Penquis Valley) and Nick Fortier (Piscataquis of Guilford).

Imao Woldring, 6-7, Sr., F, Orono: The Red Riots return four junior starters from last winter's run to the Eastern C final. Woldring, an exchange student from The Netherlands, adds height and versatility to the mix as Orono moves up to Class B North. Red Riots coach Jason Coleman describes Woldring, also a soccer standout, as an all-around threat comfortable handling the ball and scoring from the perimeter or filling the lane in transition and defending the post.



BDN FILE

Foxcroft Academy's Hunter Smith shoots the ball in the second half of a game against Hermon in January 2014 in Hermon.

Since he took Woldring to a preseason showcase in Bid-

deford, Coleman has heard from 36 interested schools

from the postgraduate level to Division I universities.

Football

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This challenge involved practical technologies judged to be close to a commercial phase, and seven finalists for the award won an initial research grant of \$500,000.

The tether, first devised for use in knee and ankle braces for soldiers, "utilizes an elastic strap that at slow speeds acts like a rubber band, stretching and relaxing easily," Eric D. Wetzel, Ph.D., of the Army Research Laboratory told Reuters.

"But pulled very quickly, it resists with a lot more force, about 100 times more force ... it acts like a shock absorber," he said about the tether that runs down from the chin strap and is anchored to the body under the jersey.

"Usually we think about things like ballistics and blast injury, but we're now thinking more about brain injury and concussion," he said.

Jason Kroll, in business development for Viconic, demonstrated the dramatically lower impact levels a head would experience landing on turf cushioned

by their product.

"There are about 2,000 new artificial turf surfaces installed in North America annually," he said. "An artificial underlayment surface is only installed about 10 percent of the time, so there is a tremendous opportunity for this technology."

Dave Marver, representing the University of Washington project, said their researchers found that the football helmets they tested were good at protecting against skull fracture but not in mitigating concussion risk.

"So, we have a multilayer design that does both of those things, reduces concussion risk and protects against skull fracture," he said.

Miller said that while these initiatives could eventually improve player safety for professionals and school age competitors, rules changes and concussion protocols were making a difference already in the NFL.

"Over the last three years in regular season games, we have seen concussions drop by 34 percent, and helmet-to-helmet hits causing concussions drop by 37 percent," the NFL official said. "Nobody is declaring success, but that is a trend."

Coach

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Depending on the dynamics of the video interviews with three to five preferred candidates, UMaine could either schedule campus visits or simply make an offer without the formality of a visit.

"You don't want to move with haste, but you want to move with appropriate speed at this time of year," said Creech, who previously stressed the importance of having a coach in place during the critical offseason recruiting period leading up to National Letter of Intent signing day in February.

Creech said that ideally, UMaine can find a Cosgrove prototype who can hold down the job for the foreseeable future. The eventual choice likely will have had some leadership experience, proba-

bly at the Division I level.

"You rarely see people dipping down into lower divisions to hire Division I head football coaches," offered Creech, who picked longtime successful Division III coach Bob Walsh for the men's basketball job but said football is different.

"I think most likely our candidate profile is going to be a coordinator-type person from an FBS (Football Bowl Subdivision) or FCS (Football Championship Subdivision) school," he added.

It is Creech's hope that the committee will reach a consensus and make a unified recommendation to him that would be carried forward to UMaine President Susan Hunter and an offer would be tendered.

However, the buck stops with Creech in making the choice.

"It's ultimately my responsibility and decision," Creech said.

UMaine Capsules	
Men's College Hockey	
MAINE vs. NEW HAMPSHIRE	
Time, site: Friday, 7:30 p.m., Alford Arena, Orono; Saturday, 7 p.m., Whittemore Center, Durham, New Hampshire	
Records: Maine 4-8-3 (2-4 Hockey East), UNH 4-6-3 (1-1-3)	
Series, last meeting: Maine leads 63-52-6, Maine 4-0 1/24/15	
Key players: Maine — LW Blaine Byron (5 goals, 5 assists), C Cam Brown (2 & 7), C Will Merchant (5 & 3), D Dan Renouf (3 & 5), C Steven Swavely (2 & 3), D Rob Michel (0 & 4), G Matt Morris (4-2-1, 2.52 goals-against average, .930 save percentage); UNH — C Andrew Poturalski (11 & 14), RW Tyler Kelleher (6 & 17), D Matias Cleland (2 & 9), LW Dan Correale (8 & 2), D Cameron Marks (0 & 8), RW Maxim Gaudreault (5 & 2), G Daniel Trione (2-6-3, 4.01, .877)	
Game notes: Maine has won four of the last five meetings. UNH is the No. 9 scoring team in the country (3.62 goals per game) but the Wildcats are also one of nation's worst defensive clubs (3.92 gpg allowed, 56th among 60 teams). UNH has surrendered three or more goals in 10 games. Maine will have to neutralize the high-powered line of Correale-Poturalski-Kelleher. The dynamic Kelleher leads the country in assists. UNH's power-play percentage (25 percent) is ninth best thanks to eight goals in its last 25 chances (32 percent). Poturalski and Correale have combined for nine power-play goals. Poturalski was the HE Player of the Month (6 & 17 in seven games). Maine's veterans have finally come to life in the four-game winning streak as Renouf has 3 & 3, Byron has 4 & 1, Swavely has 2 & 2 and Brown and Merchant each have 1 & 3.	
Women's Basketball	
MAINE vs. NORTHEASTERN	
Time, site: Friday, noon; Cabot Gym, Boston	
Records: Maine 6-3, Northeastern 4-21	
Series, last meeting: Maine leads 34-21, UM 60-51 on 12/13/14	
Key players: Maine — 5-8 G Sigi Koizar (17.2 points per game, 3.8 rebounds per game, 4.0 assists per game, 1.4 steals per game), 5-10 G/F Liz Wood (10.3 ppg, 6.0 rpg, 2.9 apg, 2.8 spg), 6-2 F Mikaela Gustafsson (7.9 ppg, 4.1 rpg, .518 FG pct.), 5-10 G Chantel Charles (7.3 ppg), 5-8 Sophie Weckstrom (7.1 ppg, 2.4 apg), 5-11 F Bella Swan (5.2 ppg, 3.6 rpg); Northeastern — 6-0 F Samantha DeFreese (17.2 ppg, 9.2 rpg, 1.1 blocks per game), 5-5 G Jess Genco (10.5 ppg, 4.8 rpg, 3.0 apg, 2.1 spg), 6-0 F Gabriella Giaccone (9.7 ppg, 4.8 rpg), 5-7 G Claudia Ortiz (7.8 ppg, 3.8 rpg, 1.7 spg), 6-2 C Francesca Saily (5.5 ppg, 6.7 rpg)	
Game notes: UMaine opens its two-game weekend set looking for its third straight win. The Black Bears handled Division III Colby 82-42 on Tuesday. Northeastern, which beat New Hampshire 66-54 on Tuesday, has already matched its win total from last season (4-25). The Huskies are starting two freshmen in Genco and Giaccone. UMaine is No. 75 in the NCAA Rating Percentage Index (RPI), one of the measurements used to select and seed teams for the NCAA tournament. The Black Bears rank 55th in scoring defense (55.3 ppg) and are No. 21 in assist-to-turnover ratio (1.22). Koizar has emerged as UMaine's offensive catalyst while shooting 49 percent from the field, including 51 percent on 3-pointers and 87 percent from the foul line. Northeastern has been strong defensively, giving up only 58.7 ppg while holding opponents to 28 percent accuracy from the 3-point stripe. The Huskies have tended to start slowly, so UMaine could benefit from an efficient offensive effort early.	

UMaine

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Morris began the season in a three-way battle for the goaltending job with sophomore Romeo and freshman Rob McGovern.

McGovern eventually won the job but was injured in a 6-0 loss to UMass Lowell during which he allowed four goals on eight shots in the first period.

Morris made 23 saves on 25 shots over the final two periods, and that led up to his last four starts.

The 5-foot-10, 205-pound native of Ridgewood, New Jersey, said the hip surgeries have made a big difference.

"Now that I'm healed, my lateral movement has been much better, and I've felt a little crisper on the ice," said Morris, who is 4-2-1 with a 2.52 GAA and a .930 save percentage overall this season.

He also has simplified his

game, which has helped him avoid giving up "soft" goals that plagued him earlier in his career.

"I've been focusing on the basics. Sometimes when you're focusing on that back door [pass] or the rebound chance, that's when you can give up a soft one because you're leaning a little bit or you're still moving instead of getting your feet set," said Morris.

"When I've had success, my angles have been on, I've had the proper depth, and I haven't been over-thinking the play," he said.

"He's is such a competitive, athletic goalie. When he has his confidence, he's hard to beat. He's our backbone and, hopefully, he can keep it going," said junior defenseman Dan Renouf.

Morris is looking forward to the weekend.

"It's the biggest rivalry in Hockey East. It's fun to be a part of it. I've got to make sure I'm ready to go," said Morris.

Goals

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opponents as Gardiner and Nokomis of Newport and a trip to Camden Hills of Rockport, a longtime Class B power now in Class A.

"We're a bunch of 17- and 18-year-old kids," Broncos' senior guard Nick Gilpin said. "I don't think it really matters who we're going to play. We're going to suit up and play our hardest, no matter what, every night. There's nothing we could do about being in the lower class this year, but obviously we're going to go out every night and do what we can."

Class AA: This closely resembles the largest-school class for high school football, with Gorham, Noble of North Berwick and the girls basketball program at Portland's Catherine McAuley High School the lone non-Class A grid programs in the new basketball class. Portland is the reigning Western A champion, and coach Joe Russo's boys basketball club graduated just four players off that 19-3 team. Brothers Amir Moss and Terion Moss are among the leading returners for the Bulldogs, who seek their second state title in three years. Bangor, the state's northernmost AA club, did not qualify for postseason play last winter for the first time since 1986, the first season after new coach Carl Parker departed his initial two-year stint on the Rams' bench. Bangor will return a relatively inexperienced squad this winter, with senior forward Justin Smith and senior guard Ethan Dorman the team leaders. Bangor and Portland are joined in Class A North by Cheverus and Deering high schools of Portland, Edward Little of Auburn, Lewiston, Oxford Hills of South Paris and Windham.

Class A: Hampden returns its starting lineup intact after defeating Portland by 20 points in the 2015 Class A state final as Gilpin, fellow seniors Brendan McIntyre, Conar Moore and Jake Black and sophomore center Ian McIntyre pursue one more title run together. Brewer figured to be one of Hampden's chief antagonists this winter as led by senior forward Matt Pushard, but the Witches are regrouping early after losing senior guard Logan Rogerson to a football-related hip injury.

Messalonskee of Oakland graduated star center Nick Mayo to a starting role at Division I Eastern Kentucky, but the Eagles may be deeper this year. Medomak Valley of Waldoboro has won two Eastern B titles in the last three seasons but is now the smallest school in Class A North. The Panthers have one of the region's best players in senior forward Nicholas DePatsy to go with 6-foot-6 center Cameron Alaire. Another team up from Class B, Oceanside of Rockland/Thomaston, has senior guard Keenan Hendricks to challenge defenses.

Class B: This may be the deepest division statewide. Mount Desert Island, which rose from the No. 12 seed to the regional semifinals last year, has a tested junior class including Riley Swanson, Aaron Snurkowski and Rus-

sell Kropff. Neighboring Ellsworth also boasts a veteran presence featuring Nick Bagley, Bryce Harmon and Bruce St. Peter. Old Town, 30-6 during the last two regular seasons with a state title in 2014 and a regional semifinal appearance last winter under coach Brian McDormand, has guards Drew Coulombe and Kaleb Gifford and a healthy Andre Miller to lead its charge, while Foxcroft Academy expects 2015 Big East Conference Player of the Year Hunter Smith back from a hip injury to join a lineup bolstered by transfers Noah Allen and Nick Fortier. Another transfer of note is junior guard Andre Rossignol moving from Van Buren to Caribou to join Donovan Savage in the Vikings' backcourt. Maine Central Institute of Pittsfield may be the best of the four KVAC schools in the division. Five schools up from Class C are led by Orono and Central of Corinth. Orono returns its lineup nearly intact, and that junior-led group is joined by promising freshman Connor Robertson and Imao Woldring, a 6-7 senior exchange student from The Netherlands who already is drawing attention from scholarship-level college programs. Central returns hardworking forward Kyle Ham and a bevy of guards for new coach Riley Donovan.

Class C: George Stevens Academy of Blue Hill ranks among the favorites with its backcourt combo of Taylor Schildroth and Will Entwistle and a tall frontcourt featuring sophomore Max Mattson and senior Nick Szwesz. Lee Academy is another top contender with guard Howie Lin returning to provide veteran leadership and Travon Rhodes adding a 3-point presence after transferring from 2015 Class C state champion Calais. Others expected in the mix could include Bucksport, Dexter and two teams up from Class D, Schenck of East Millinocket and reigning regional champion Fort Fairfield. Schenck's Justin Thompson and Fort's Chris Giberson should be two of the more prominent juniors in the division.

Class D: Always one of the more entertaining divisions come tournament time, this year should be no exception. Washburn ranks as one favorite as led by seniors Jarrett Olson and Noah Caron. The battle for top billing in the County also should include Easton and new coach Manny Martinez, perhaps best remembered for floating a last-second runner over 6-10 Richmond center Marc Zaharchuk to win the 2008 Class D state championship for Central Aroostook of Mars Hill. The Bears return veterans Jake Flewelling, Logan Halvorson and Drew Sotomayor. Southern Aroostook of Dyer Brook, with Nolan Altwater and Jackson Mathers back, also should contend under veteran coach Bill McAvoy. Down East Maine won't be lacking in title challengers, either. Machias reached the 2015 semifinals, and sophomores Jacob Godfrey and Jordan Grant and juniors James Mersereau and Mark Anthony provide coach Jim Getchell a young but talented nucleus.

UP NEXT: High school girls basketball preview.