

Lockout of National Football League referees continues

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The National Football League lockout of its on-field officials continues into the third week of the NFL season. The lockout has been in effect since early June, when the officials' last contract expired and negotiations broke down. Two weeks later, the NFL announced that it would begin hiring and training replacement officials.

High-level college referees refused en masse to act as scabs. This left low-level college referees as the only available personnel to replace the highly skilled NFL officials. The result has been games plagued with missed calls, erroneous application of the rules, indeterminate delays in reviewing and then attempting to correct wrong calls, and near brawls between teams as the scab refs lost control of the goings-on on the field.

Fox TV analyst Mike Periera, the former head of NFL officiating, wrote on his blog: "You can't expect replacements to know the intricacies of the NFL rule book in two weeks on the job. It takes years. But it doesn't take long—two weeks—to see this is not working."

Jerry Markbreit, an NFL official for 23 seasons before he retired in 1998, said Tuesday on ESPN's *The Mike Lupica Show*, "It's obvious to me that [NFL Commissioner Roger] Goodell just doesn't even care. Otherwise, how could they replace professionalism with unprofessionalism in a game that's so tough to work, even for the best officials in the land?"

Markbreit went on to say, "The management of the games gets tougher. These guys have relied on competent, top-notch, terrific officials all these years. And now they have a bunch of amateurs out there and it's going to fall apart. It's not going to get better, as the commissioner said.... It's going to get worse."

Markbreit has served as the head trainer for NFL referees since his retirement in 1998. When the league asked him to train the scab officials, he refused. He says he has been fired by the NFL.

Markbreit and others have charged that the use of replacement referees is a sign the league doesn't care about the health of players.

In recent years, the NFL has emphasized the issue of player safety. With the recent exposure of the dangerous and long-term health effects of repeated concussions, the NFL has mandated that officials take an active part in protecting the safety of the players. The league's injury and safety panel has directed that officials receive concussion awareness training, and that they remain alert for possible concussions during games. Officials, for the first time, will now have the power and responsibility to alert team medical staffs to provide players with medical attention.

"When you look around at some of the calls being missed, player safety is the big issue," New York Giants' defensive end Mathias Kiwanuka said on Tuesday.

Giants' defensive lineman Justin Tuck expressed similar concerns. He said: "I have seen pass interference—and I am a defensive player—at a high rate that hasn't been called. I have seen holding at a high rate.... You never know what is going to happen when you get a holding call and guys feel free that they can do that because the referees aren't seeing it. You get guys that [are] getting pulled down and get hamstringing [injuries]. You get all these different types of things that could happen and player safety becomes an issue. That is what I am worried about."

Added Kiwanuka: "I don't think you can levy tens of thousands of dollars, maybe even hundreds of

thousands of dollars, in fines in a week against players, talking about ‘player safety this, player safety that,’ and not have...officials who can account for it.”

Despite widespread support for the locked-out officials from players and fans, the NFL Referees Association (NFLRA) is preparing to capitulate to the owners’ primary demand that officials’ pension rights be ultimately eliminated.

On September 18, the NFLRA sent to the media an open letter from its executive director, Tim Millis. The letter was titled “Do What’s Right and Fair—For the Game and its Officials.” The letter details how the two sides have narrowed the gap on overall compensation. However, the parties remain far apart on the issue of retirement benefits.

Millis’s letter states: “Every current NFL official was hired by the NFL with the promise of a defined-benefit pension package.... The NFL now wants to break the promise by eliminating that benefit; instead, turning to an inferior defined-contribution plan. Why does the League want to do this? Is the League in financial distress? Does the League see its financial future as bleak? Not hardly. The League states that it desires to eliminate the defined-benefit plan because other American businesses are moving away from such plans to a defined-contribution type plan....”

Millis’s solution to this attack on his members’ pension rights is to “grandfather” the defined-benefit pension plan for current officials and place new-hires under the league’s proposed defined-contribution plan.

In the face of broad support for the officials from players and fans, and growing anger over the officiating being carried out by the scabs, including concerns for the players’ safety, the NFLRA leadership is coming to the aid of the NFL by offering to end the lockout at the expense of its members.



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