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New NFL Overtime Rules: Work of Visionaries or Compromise Worthy of Congress?

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Larry French/Getty Images

The National Football League owners have finally done something about their overtime system.

Well, for the playoffs anyway. And only when there's a field goal involved.

It used to be that the first possession was decided by virtue of a coin toss at the beginning of the overtime period. If that team scored, then the game was over, whether or not the coin toss loser got a shot at the ball.

While the statistics were not overwhelming, the system did favor the team that won the coin toss. Given that every NFL game is important due to how few games are played each season and that the league has the only one-and-done playoff system of the four major sports, too much deference was given to the random flip of a coin.

Today, in a 28-4 vote, the NFL owners adopted a rule that would allow the team that loses the coin toss to get a possession if the opposing team scores a field goal.

Yeah, there's no really good way to phrase that. But so it is.

It's a strange rule, really. The NFL resists change the way that Republicans resist health care reform, but obviously was open to modifying this rule. But why stop at field goals in the playoffs? What about regular season touchdowns?

The NFL owners are actually discussing implementing the rule for the regular season, with a potential vote coming on the subject during their May meetings. Given the sentiment that seemed to exist coming out of these deliberations and once the idea has had a chance to settle, surely they will vote to extend the rule to the regular season.

But (and it's a big but) the idea of only limiting it to field goals is somewhat puzzling.

The argument is that it is significantly easier to score a field goal than a touchdown. Well, sure. However, the only thing that is preventing a touchdown on most plays is a defensive back not slipping during his back pedal. The first time that someone scores a 90-yard touchdown because Champ Bailey forgets to tie his shoes, and this rule will come under some heavy scrutiny.

Many argue that the NFL should adopt the college overtime rules, where each team gets equal possessions from the opponent's 25 yard line. The downside to these rules is that it's not really football. There's no kickoff, it's a significantly shorter field and it's a severely altered strategy. In many ways, those rules make the game something different, like Arena Football.

No, why not make everything simpler and give each team a single possession before declaring sudden death. It makes everything a bit more equitable, it's still football and isn't much of a change. The downside here is the onus of the coin flip is shifted from the first possession to the third, meaning that those who win the toss still can win the game without equal possessions, but so what? This is football, after all. You do still have to play defense.

This rule feels like some kind of strange compromise between the purists and the reformers that's going to have to be altered in the very near future. Wait—maybe this is the work of Congress after all.

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