

NFHS

Crunch Time

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Crunch Time

By Marion Hope



In high school football, “Crunch Time” is a period of activity when the score is tight, time is running out and the game is on the line. The last two minutes of the second quarter and the last five minutes of the fourthquarter typically produce very exciting action and we as game officials must be trained, prepared and ready to handle any and all issues that typically arise.

As a licensed FAA Airline Transport Pilot, I train every year on the aircraft on which I am certified. I do this on specific simulators to refresh my knowledge of the systems, their applications and various emergency procedures. Over time, we all forget things. Procedures and details can become vague memories in just a couple of weeks. Are we really prepared when the unexpected happens? In flying, correct and responsible responses to these situations are often a matter of life and death. There is an old trainer saying that states “preparation combined with anticipation equals a correct outcome.” It is no accident that the Captain on the US Air flight that safely landed in the Hudson River was able to act precisely. He practiced that scenario all the time.

In officiating, we can also say that preparation can lead to correct outcomes. The pregame conference is essential to preparing the crew for crunch-time situations. Visualizing the critical situations helps us become mentally prepared for the upcoming game. As always, the devil is in the details. It is the study of these details that frequently separates the playoff-caliber official from the regular-season official.

Mistakes are usually made by game officials when they hurry or rush decisions and mechanics. The same truth goes for the teams. In tight competitive games, teams tend to hurry and rush during the “Crunch-time” periods. Game officials need to be prepared for this by not rushing, maintaining concentration, following their mechanics and therefore minimizing officiating errors made in “Crunch Time.”

In the pregame conference, reviewing what could happen during “Crunch Time” prepares us to react accurately and normally. Some of the situations which can cause trouble are:

1. Timing:
 - a. Clock Accuracy - All game officials should have a role in monitoring the accuracy of the clock, verifying that the clock starts and stops correctly. The clock operator may not see signals to start or stop the clock, may anticipate the play and incorrectly start or stop the clock, or just get caught up in the game and lose track of their duties as clock operator.
 - b. Pace – High school rules do not allow us to increase the pace of getting the ball ready for play in order to match the pace that a certain team wants to dictate. It is permissible to “hustle” a little more to get the ball spotted, but the referee should allow the same amount of time as in the rest of the game’s plays to blow ready. Do not get caught up in the excitement and consciously or unconsciously up the tempo.
 - c. Pile Ups and Injuries - Who should stop the clock should a pile up delay marking the ball ready for play? When should the clock be stopped if a player is injured? Knowing how the crew will handle these situations in stopping and restarting the clock will prevent having to correct the clock or giving an unfair advantage to a team.
 - d. Timeouts – Each game official should know the number of time-outs each team has remaining and remind others on your crew of this information. Make sure that you don’t incorrectly award a time-out to a team that has none, allowing a team an advantage to stop the clock.
2. Down and Distance — Each game official should be aware of the current down and the yard line that is needed to obtain a first down. Knowing the down and distance is key in stopping the clock accurately and timely. Do not bite on the back stake. Make this mistake with 11 minutes showing in a quarter and no one will notice. Make this mistake with less than a minute and everyone will notice.
3. Rules Knowledge:

- a. Extending a Period - Should you have a foul on the last play of the game, make sure you are correctly applying rules with respect to extending an period and allowing the game to end.
- b. Lose a Down/Give an Extra Down. When things become frenetic on the field during crunch time, the chances of losing a down or allowing an extra down increase exponentially. Review with your crew those times it has been done in their past (i.e.; quick spike, line up and run another play) is the perfect time for game officials to give an extra down as some will not change their bands to the next down.
- c. Dead Ball and Live Ball Fouls - Certain fouls cause the ball to remain dead, while some fouls allow a play in progress to continue.

Desperate people do desperate things, so be prepared for unusual plays as the game winds down. Watch for illegal forward passes and multiple backward passes on the last play of the game. Be ready to rule on the legality of these plays and have the confidence to step up and make a ruling.

When I review "Crunch Time" with various crews, it is always interesting to seek the input from each crew member of the mistakes they have made in these situations. I simply add them to the list and it becomes a part of further discussion and learning for future crews. Any officiating breakdown in these crucial situations normally places one of the teams at a disadvantage not intended by the rules. By reviewing these final minutes of frenetic activity under pressure ahead of time, mistakes are minimized or eliminated during real game situations.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Marion Hope, who has worked 450 high school football games since 1982, was selected the NFHS' South Carolina Football Official of the Year for 2000. Hope served as secretary of the South Carolina Football Officials Association from 2004 to 2009 and as the organization's president in 1999-2000. He has officiated 20 South Carolina state championship football games and six state championship basketball games. From 2000 to 2004, Hope was the game officials representative on the Executive Committee of the South Carolina High School League. He was inducted into the South Carolina Football Officials Hall of Fame in 2002 and into the South Carolina Basketball Officials Hall of Fame in 2008.

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