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SEC ref: 'I know I made a mistake'

By Mike Fish
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The passionate Arkansas Razorbacks faithful and vocal Gator haters won't let up about his call. They've dialed his home and office phones. They've blitzed him with inflammatory e-mail messages. They've accused him of being a crooked ref, a gambler, some even suggesting the bigwigs back at the Southeastern Conference office were behind the controversial fourth-quarter calls -- particularly *his* fourth-quarter call -- that factored into Arkansas' 23-20 loss at No. 1 Florida on Saturday.

Marc Curles, the SEC ref who makes his living as a Birmingham, Ala.-based financial planner, would laugh it all off, all the abuse ... if he didn't hurt so much.

On the other end of the phone line Wednesday, Curles sounds like a man in serious pain. Yet, there is no dodging and weaving. No abrupt hang-up or litany of well-rehearsed excuses. Instead, the Georgia Tech grad readily concedes he screwed up and says no one will be harder on him than Curles is on himself.

"I understand people are passionate about their teams," Curles says softly. "Like I said, we sign up for this. I admit I made a mistake in this ballgame. I deserve a little bit of people getting on me. I am getting on myself.

"From a personal viewpoint, I don't need to hear what folks say, because I know if I made a mistake. And no one feels worse than I do. I have to evaluate myself. We are our own worst critics at times. All the media, the message boards and things like that, I honestly don't listen to them too much. Just don't listen to them, don't read them."

The SEC officiating crew that Curles heads up has been on the hot seat since a controversial excessive celebration call three weeks ago late in the LSU-Georgia game, a flag thrown by the back judge that the conference office later said wasn't warranted. Then Saturday, Arkansas coach Bobby Petrino left Gainesville livid about a handful of controversial calls and no-calls that seemed to favor the Gators.

Most perplexing was a 10-yard unsportsmanlike conduct penalty against Arkansas defensive lineman Malcolm Sheppard that helped fuel Florida's game-tying drive in the fourth quarter. That flag came from Curles' pocket.

Again, as in the LSU-Georgia game, the SEC office came forward and admitted a mistake had been made. In a statement released early this week, the league said it had found no video evidence to support the personal foul penalty.

Late Wednesday afternoon, the SEC removed Curles' crew from its next assignment on Oct. 31. It won't



Marc Curles, shown here during a 2007 game, understands the fans' passion but maybe not the vitriol on his home-phone answering machine.

officiate another game until Nov. 14, and the series of questionable calls might have an impact on the crew's eligibility for postseason bowl assignments, according to a league statement.

"A series of calls that have occurred during the last several weeks have not been to the standard that we expect from our officiating crews," SEC commissioner Mike Slive said in the statement. "I believe our officiating program is the best in the country; however, there are times when these actions must be taken. ... While only a few calls have been identified, the entire crew shoulders responsibility for each play. I have taken this action because there must be accountability in our officiating program. Our institutions expect the highest level of officiating in all of our sports and it is the duty of the conference office to uphold that expectation."

This weekend, Curles, a father of two, will be at home with his daughters. Curles says it is a regularly scheduled off week for his crew. The conference has eight officiating crews, and each gets breaks during the season. Crews typically stay intact during the season, but substitutions are made in cases where a crew member attended one of the universities he's been assigned to officiate.

Curles caught a glimpse of his bonehead call Saturday night when he reviewed a tape of key plays from the game.

"Quite frankly, I knew that I had made a mistake," he says of what he saw on tape.

What he had seen on the field only a few hours earlier, in front of a national TV audience and 90,000-plus packed into The Swamp for Florida's homecoming, was quite different.

"I saw out of the corner of my eye -- the play went over near the sideline," Curles recalls. "I'm trailing the play, moving in that direction. And out of the corner of my eye, I see a vicious blow, and I see the Florida player go flying down 20 yards behind the play. And in my mind, the Arkansas guy had blindsided him and knocked the player that was completely out of the play, which would have been a personal foul. Obviously, that isn't what happened. Where I made the mistake is I didn't see the whole thing. I didn't see how it developed. I saw out of the corner of my eye what I thought was a foul. I can't *think* something is a foul. I got to know it is. And that was my mistake. And I know better than that. What makes me mad at myself is that I know better than to call something if I didn't see the whole thing. And I've been sick about it ever since, quite frankly.



Florida's Jeffery Demps celebrated his game-tying touchdown in the fourth quarter. Would it have happened without the extra penalty yardage on the drive?

"I've just been thinking about it, replaying it and beating [myself] up over the call. I guess where our true character is found is in how we handle it and what we do the next time. Are we able to recover from it? We try to find a lesson to learn in every game -- me individually and as a crew. Could somebody else have seen something and come to me and said, 'Wait a minute, I saw that happen, and this is what it looked like to me'? That didn't happen, but this is a way for us to talk about it as a crew."

Petrino complained about several calls in a conversation Monday with SEC supervisor of officials Rogers Redding. On Wednesday, Petrino declined comment on Curles' admission and version of his call, saying through a spokesman that he was busy preparing his team for Saturday's game against Mississippi. Redding didn't respond to a phone message Wednesday.

Curles isn't searching for excuses, although he acknowledges he had nowhere to turn in making his split-second judgment. No one on his crew, apparently, had a different or better view of the play; or if someone did, he didn't speak up. And the play wasn't reviewable, so he couldn't join the TV talking heads and millions of viewers in seeing the error.

"They really judge us on our whole body of work," Curles says about the league's review process. "I've been in the conference five years. One call does not determine whether somebody is a good official or not. Unfortunately, we're human. The expectation from the general public, and quite frankly ourselves, is we're perfect every game. We want to get it perfect. But we're human, and it doesn't always happen. We make mistakes."

Officiating is a seasonal gig, but Curles says he and other officials put time and effort into the job, most of it rehashing previous games and learning from mistakes. Not only did his crew watch video snippets Saturday night of the Arkansas-Florida game, but -- as is the case every Sunday -- Curles and the seven other SEC referees participated in a conference call with their boss. He'll review the Arkansas-Florida game again with his crew the Friday night before their next game.



Curles, shown here working a 2007 Georgia-Ole Miss game, and his crew have this weekend off, a previously scheduled break.

Curles says he'll apologize for his mistake and its negative reflection on the crew during that meeting. Unlike the rabid fans, they'll no doubt understand that he's human and, like all of us, prone to error from time to time.

"I have gotten 50 or 60 e-mails just in the last two to three days," he says. "At work. I had about a half-dozen voice messages on my home phone when I got home Sunday. I have gotten phone calls [at work]. People are passionate about their teams, and I understand that. We kind of know what we are getting into when we do this. But some of things they say -- think about what you are saying. Saying I should be investigated for gambling. Saying I should be ashamed of myself. Saying the conference is pulling the strings.

"If people could just understand there is a human element to it. Hey, I am trying my dead-level best. I am getting e-mail from folks accusing me of being on the take, all this kind of thing. We are absolutely trying to get it perfect every time. And nobody feels worse than we do when it doesn't happen."

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