

Blackwell had his finger amputated to prolong his playing career.

Scorecard

Déjà View

From the SEC to the Pac-10, instant replay is transforming the way college football games are officiated. And here's the really odd thing about the system: It works **By Mark Beech**

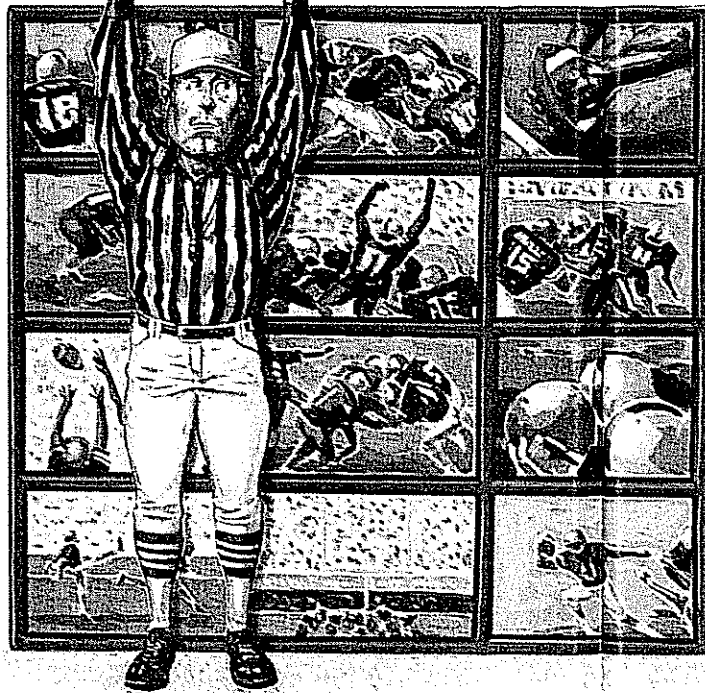
INSTANT REPLAY for college football refs? SEC supervisor of officials Bobby Gaston didn't think he needed it. Though Gaston knew the system had worked well in the Big Ten last season (and has been kicking around the NFL in various forms for 20 years), he had conducted his own review of SEC game tapes from 2004 and concluded that replay would have overturned only seven out of more than 10,000 calls. But to his surprise, in January—less than a year after commissioner Mike Slive had declared, "Our people just don't see it as a panacea"—Gaston got word from the SEC coaches' conference that all 12 of them wanted the conference to bring in replay for the 2005 season.

This tells us two things about college football: 1) Coaches remember the bad calls that went against them more vividly than the ones they benefited from, and 2) it's a new day out there and video replays are now as much a

part of the collegiate gridiron experience as prats and beer.

Consider: Officials' replay is a regular feature in nine of the 11 Division I-A conferences (only the Sun Belt and the WAC aren't using it), and although still in the experimental phase, it is well on its way to having its own codicil in the NCAA rule book. Replay's nearly universal popularity has less to do with the number of errors corrected—only 21 of more than 15,000 plays were reversed in the Big Ten last year—than the sense of security it gives coaches, players and fans. "The reversals are conditioning everybody that we're getting it right all the time," says Tim Milles, the Big 12's supervisor of officials.

The most prevalent college system is almost identical to the one used by the NFL from 1986 through '91; officials in the booth decide which plays are questionable and then they review them. The system failed in the NFL mainly because rerunning



everything through a couple of VCRs was too time-consuming to justify the one reversal every four games the league was averting. Now, though, thanks to technological advances, missing a call is no more inconvenient than missing last week's episode of *Lost*. In several conferences officials just rerun disputed plays using a simple \$50 TiVo box. (If needed, they can also view additional feeds from camera angles

that aren't aired.) Judges in the ACC and SEC are getting similar results with a touch-screen software system called DVSPORT.

What's truly surprising is that instant replay isn't, as feared, slowing the game down. (Last year televised games with replay were only about three minutes longer than in 2003, when there was no replay.) Broadcasters are aware that their pictures are being used by the officials, so close plays

are rerun on the air early and often. "It's totally changed the way games are covered," says Gaston. "The TV guys know when we are potentially going to need a replay, and they'll just start sending us everything they have."

When replay officials find an error—as they did during Florida's 16-7 victory over Tennessee in Gainesville last Saturday night, overturning a completed pass in the second quarter that would have given the Vols a first down at the Gators' one—they notify the referee on the field by activating a buzzer the ref carries. ("We don't use one of those little beepers, either," says Gaston. "We have one that makes them jump a little bit when it goes off.") After play is halted,

the replay is evaluated by the officials—most conferences use three—in the booth. "We're not nitpicking up there," says Big Ten commissioner Jim Delaney. "If there's not indisputable video evidence, we're moving on."

The system has worked so smoothly that coaches sometimes are unaware that every play is thoroughly reviewed. After a 17-10 loss to Notre Dame on Sept. 10, Michigan coach Lloyd

Carr questioned why a play on which he thought his quarterback Chad Henne had crossed the goal line had not been reviewed. In fact it had, but the officials determined so quickly that Henne hadn't scored and the call was correct that the game didn't have to be interrupted. Perhaps Carr would have liked to have thrown a challenge flag onto the field, but only one conference, the Mountain West, allows that NFL-inspired maneuver. The Mountain West policy is intended to make coaches feel as if they have some control over the situation—but as it turns out, not all of them want it. "To me, it's redundant because they're already reviewing every play," says first-year Utah coach Kyle Whittingham. "It's also a distraction. I've got enough on my plate already."

The NCAA rules committee is expected to make a proposal on replay after the season, which means it could be part of the rule book as early as next fall. Gaston, of all people, may now be replay's most enthusiastic advocate. He's instructed his officials to err on the side of perhaps relying too heavily on the replay. "If there's a game-deciding play, we will stop everything to satisfy fans and coaches," says Gaston, who calls such review sessions "p.r. stoppages" and proudly notes that there are several during each SEC game. "We don't want to extend games," he says, "but we do want to sell the idea that the system works beautifully." □

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