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Should the Outcome of a Coin Flip Mean So Much in NFL Overtime?

Other Ideas Include Field-Position Bids,
Staging a Duel of Kickoff Returns

When undefeated Indianapolis played undefeated Carolina in an October National Football League game, the result of a coin toss played a key role.

After regulation, the two 5-0 teams were tied at 20. To determine first possession for the sudden-death overtime, a referee flipped a coin. Carolina Panthers defensive end Mike Rucker called out "Tails," correctly, and the Panthers got the ball. They drove 43 yards to set up a John Kasay 47-yard field-goal attempt. When he nailed it, the Panthers had won without the Colts' high-powered offense ever getting the ball in overtime.

Such outcomes have generated criticism -- in and out of the league -- of the NFL's overtime system. Is it right for a team to get possession by the random outcome of a coin flip, then score -- and win -- without its opponent getting a chance to counter? The system is different in college football, where the teams alternate possessions from their opponents' 25-yard lines. If the first team scores, the second team gets a possession of its own and a chance to tie or win. The short-lived XFL had a modified version of that system: Each team got four downs from its opponent's 20, and had to match the other's scoring success: If Team A scored a touchdown on second down, Team B would have to do the same for OT to continue. (If Team B scores on first down, they win.)

The NFL has voted down changes in its OT system in the past, but the issue keeps resurfacing. After receiving an interesting overtime proposal from two business professors at University of California Berkeley, the Online Journal decided to compile some ideas. Some were submitted in writing; others were gleaned from interviews. They range from assigning possession based on an auction to staging dual kickoffs, with the better return earning possession. After you've read the ideas, [join a discussion](#)³ with readers and some of the people behind these ideas.

Bid for the Ball

Jonathan Berk and Terry Hendershott's proposal: In the National Football League, sudden-death overtime is used to break ties. That, by itself, is not a bad idea. Sudden death is an efficient means to decide games. It is certainly preferable to the parody of the game used to break ties in college. The problem is that because of a peculiarity in the rules of football, the team who has the first possession has a significant advantage. So while the outcome is fair in that both teams were equally likely to win the coin toss at the beginning of overtime, immediately after the coin toss it is no longer fair because all too often games are decided by a team scoring on its first possession.

It is tempting to see this as a problem with the current overtime system. Calls for reform of the overtime system typically seek to guarantee both teams at least one possession. The problem with that solution is that it entails giving up on the efficiency of using sudden death to decide games. It also does not completely solve the fairness issue. If both teams are still tied after they have both had one possession, we are back in the same boat. The team that won the original coin toss has the same advantage as before. Luckily, economic theory focusing on the fair and efficient allocation of scarce resources suggests a better solution.

Without giving up the benefits of sudden death, it is possible to devise a system that is fair even after the initial possession is awarded. At the beginning of overtime, simply have the teams bid on what yard line they would start on were they to be awarded first possession. The team that bids closest to its own goal line gets possession and starts at its bid. After that the team that scores first wins. By definition, this system is fair because both teams have an equal opportunity to get the first possession at a position on the field that gives neither team a significant advantage.

JOIN THE DISCUSSION

After you've read the overtime proposals in this report, [join a discussion](#)¹ with other Online Journal readers and some of the people behind the proposals.

This report was compiled by Carl Bialik of the Online Journal. Write to him at carl.bialik@wsj.com².

Because sudden death is maintained, it is also efficient.

This system for breaking ties is also likely to be more exciting since it would automatically play to the teams' relative strengths. For example, a relatively better offensive team would bid aggressively, sacrificing better field position for the advantage of the first possession. Similarly, a relatively better defensive team would bid less aggressively, giving up the first possession in the hopes of a better field position on the second possession if they are able to stop their opponents.

Skeptics might argue that the system breaks down if both teams submit the same bid. In fact, it is easy to account for this possibility. If both teams submit the same bid, both get a second chance to change their bid. If one team elects to change its bid the problem is solved. If neither team elects to change its bid, both teams must be indifferent to whether or not they have the first possession because either team could have guaranteed itself the first possession by merely giving up a single yard. A coin can therefore be used to decide who gets the ball. Because the teams are indifferent, the results of the coin toss cannot be unfair to either team.

Jonathan Berk and Terry Hendershott are professors at the Haas School of Business at the University of California, Berkeley.

Move the Kickoff

David Romer's proposal: The overwhelming advantage of the current system is that -- like extra innings in baseball and overtime in basketball, but unlike the abominations in soccer and college football -- it preserves the character of the game. There are still drives, turnovers, punts, and play over the entire field.

Everyone knows the disadvantage of the current system: The team receiving the kickoff has a substantial advantage. As a result, a coin flip has a big impact on the outcome.

The scheme proposed by my Berkeley colleagues above, or some other auction-like scheme, would completely solve the problem. If for some reason the NFL doesn't want to adopt such a system, an alternative would be to have the kickoff from the 40 instead of the 30. The result will usually be a touchback. Some research I have done indicates that this would cut the receiving team's advantage roughly in half.

Either of these solutions would preserve the essence of overtime while reducing or eliminating the importance of a flip of a coin in deciding the winner.

David Romer is a professor of economics at the University of California, Berkeley, and the author of [a study](#)⁴ of fourth-down strategy.

Dueling Kickoffs

Bill Finnerman's proposal: What are the characteristics of the ideal overtime resolution?

1. It should eliminate the coin toss.
2. It should *not* significantly extend the time of the game
3. It should give each team a fair and equal opportunity.
4. It should settle the possession question on the field of battle.
5. And it should preserve sudden death, the excitement of which has served the NFL so well over many years.

Is there a solution that has all of these ideal characteristics?

Yes: the double kick-off! The "Double KO" is a five-second resolution of the NFL's overtime question. And it is exciting.

Here's how it would work: To begin overtime, each team on consecutive plays will kick off to the other. The team that advances the ball furthest on its kickoff will retain possession at the point on the field to which it advanced the ball.

Think of it: We have added but five or six incredibly exciting seconds to the game. And we have preserved sudden death.

Imagine the following:

The New York Jets and Kansas City Chiefs have tied 27-27 in regulation. Overtime begins with the Double KO. The Chiefs kick off to the Jets, and Santana Moss returns the ball to the 32-yard line. Now the Jets kick off to the Chiefs, and returner Dante Hall, near the goal line, watches the ball in the air. If he can get it back to the 33 or beyond, the Chiefs will have possession. If not, the Jets will have the ball at their 32. "I can do it," Hall says to himself. The frenzied fans in the stadium rise to their feet. Across the country, the eyes of millions of NFL fans are absolutely riveted to their television sets. The excitement is palpable...

Bill Finnerman is a management consultant in Clifton Park, N.Y., a former state commissioner of cable television and state assemblyman, and a New York Jets fan. In February, he submitted a longer version of the above proposal to the NFL, club owners and coaches.

Give Both Teams the Ball

Duane Rockerbie's proposal: The incidence of overtime games in the NFL is very low, certainly under 5% of all regular-season games. Given that there are so few ties at the end of four quarters in the NFL, the question of the fairness or incentives of the rules used during overtime play would seem to be a minor concern. Nevertheless, rules are rules and rules committees consider rule changes very carefully.

Two questions can be asked of the overtime rules used in the NFL. Are the rules fair in the sense that they are unbiased concerning which team emerges victorious? Do the rules have effects on team incentives that are not detrimental to the quality of play (in both the overtime period and during regulation time)?

In the NFL's overtime system, a coin toss determines the first team to be awarded possession of the ball, which seems fair enough in principle. Statistically, each team has an equal probability of being on offense for the first possession. However, when the first offensive series determines the winner, the system would seem to have determined an arbitrary winner.

Unless one can think of a more equitable way to determine the team with the first offensive possession, the coin flip seems completely unbiased and unarguable. Given that, a more equitable set of rules might allow each team one possession in even order after the coin flip. That is, if the Rams win the coin flip and score on their first possession, the Seahawks would then be given one possession of the ball to try to score themselves. Each team would play the equivalent of a half-inning in baseball until a winner is decided. This would lengthen the overtime play and may result in more ties at the end of overtime.

NCAA rules specify that each team gets a turn on offense at the opposing team's 25-yard line until the end of a full quarter. If a winner is not decided, a second "inning" is played and so on. The NCAA effectively adopts a very different set of rules during overtime play than those used in regulation time, perhaps in the hope of promoting more fairness in play since future NFL careers (and television contracts for the NCAA) might be affected by the outcome. The NFL need not be so gentlemanly. If the overriding objective of the NFL overtime rules is to avoid a tie, the current system might have to do.

Duane Rockerbie is associate professor of economics at the University of Lethbridge in Lethbridge, Alberta, and co-author of [a paper](#)⁵ on the National Hockey League's overtime system.

One Team's Take

Tom Donahoe's view: We don't like the current system. It just seems that too much depends on the coin flip -- who wins it and who loses it.

We talked about it last year when it came up for discussion at the league meeting. We felt a fairer system would be one where each team had an opportunity to have the football. If each team had a possession, and then you went to sudden death, you wouldn't be in a position where because of a kickoff return or poor kickoff, you never get a chance to touch the ball and you lose the game.

It was voted down -- overwhelmingly defeated. The majority felt the system we had was the best overtime system because it is exciting, it is sudden-death. Most people seemed to be in favor of it, particularly the coaches. It was a little bit surprising. There seemed to be a lot of talk going into the meeting that there was a groundswell of support to change it. When people got together in the room, it just didn't seem to develop that way

Somebody's going to have to lose one of those meaningful games on the first possession of overtime in order to reopen the discussion.

[On the bidding idea] That's way too revolutionary for the National Football League. It sounds more like a videogame to me. I couldn't see that happening.

[On the college system] It was brought up. The NFL always seems to be against copying anything anyone else is doing. There wasn't much sentiment for the college system.

Tom Donahoe is the president and general manager of the Buffalo Bills.

From the College Ranks

John Adams's view: Our objection to the NFL system is mainly that overtime might go a whole quarter, whereas ours is typically one to two periods, so it's over relatively fast.

When we put this in about 10 years ago as a mandatory thing, everyone seemed to understand immediately, and everyone seemed to immediately enjoy it. Generally it's well-accepted. Every time we've asked our coaches if they want to change it, they say they want to keep it the same.

I'm sure the NFL wants to make theirs as near to regular game conditions as they can. Ours is too, except we start at the 25-yard line. The difference in theirs is sudden death; the difference in ours is no special teams. We think it's an advantage -- our system assures both teams of having the ball.

One of the problems that the NFL is concerned with is that their field-goal kickers are so good that if they start from the 25, they almost assure you of a field goal. Our kickers are good, too, but not quite as accurate or as long. If they ever adopted a system like ours, they would have to start around the 35 or 40.

One of the objections that we get is that we totally eliminated special teams. I would assume the NFL has that same objection. Every year, we get people that say, "You have got to go to the NFL system." I'm sure they get some that say, "You have got to go to the college system."

We've proposed a couple of things in our questionnaire where we might make some slight changes in our system. The most obvious might be having to go for two after a touchdown. The two-point try is 42% successful. That might cut down a little bit more on the length of our overtime. The results are back, though I haven't seen them. We present the first week of January, and the rules committee meets the first week of February.

John Adams is secretary and editor of the National Collegiate Athletic Association's football rules committee.

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