

Bigger Faster Stronger

How NFL rule changes have led it on a collision course with player safety

In 1993, after experiencing a decade of decreased touchdowns scored, the NFL's Commissioner Paul Tagliabue was worried. After many of the games during the 1993 season were labeled as dull and boring, the NFL decided to implement a comprehensive package of rules designed to favor Offenses. Tagliabue was quoted as saying the new rules would "have a significant effect in boosting [offensive] production."

The results were immediate and pronounced. Scoring jumped up 15% from 1993 to 1995, and the NFL had its mojo back. However, with more scoring comes more of the most violent play in the NFL: the kickoff. The NFL has determined that concussions are five times more likely to occur on kickoffs than any other play. While kickoffs increase in the years after the rule changes, the percentage of touchbacks remains the same. This indicates that more kickoffs are being fielded during each game. Kickoffs are dangerous because players on both sides can achieve maximum speed before colliding with other players. Adding to this danger is that modern NFL players are bigger, faster, and stronger than ever before, leading to an even greater force generated during collisions.

As evidence pours in linking traumatic brain injuries with playing in the NFL, the pressure mounts for more rule changes to make the game safer. In 2011, the NFL moved kickoffs to the 35-yard line to encourage fewer returns. The rule was in addition to the 2009 rule banning players from forming wedges of three or more players during kickoffs. Wedges create a human "wall" that coverage teams had to run through to make a tackle, which doubled or even tripled the amount of force generated during collisions.

The 2011 rule succeeded in increasing the number of touchbacks during kickoffs, thereby reducing the number of kickoffs fielded. Additionally, the number of concussions during kickoffs decreased by about 43 percent from 2010 to 2011.

Sources:

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