

My blog examined the recent evolution of the NFL kickoff and investigates the effects of recent rule changes. The idea was to illustrate how the excitement of kickoffs was changed (Touchdowns vs. Returns) and show how concussions during kickoffs were affected. The main change observed was the significant drop in touchdowns scored, and kicks returned. The effectiveness of the 2011 rule change was unclear, as the reduction in concussions on 2011 kickoffs was reversed in 2012. The visualization of yards per kickoff showed how the mindset of kick returners had not changed.

The 2016 kickoff rule changes turned out to be one-sided in favor of the receiving team, as they were given an additional 5 yards for taking a touchback. Kicking teams countered the advantage by devising a new strategy of using “mortar kicks” designed to fall short of the goal line and force the receiving team to return the kickoff. This idea went directly against what the NFL was trying to accomplish, but it wasn’t a surprise to everyone. “[It seems so obvious](#),” adds Greg Zuerlein, the Rams’ kicker, and kickoff specialist. “No one is going to want to kick touchbacks when you give them five free yards. Why would you? It’s like they didn’t even ask coaches what might happen.”

The 2016 kickoff changes had unclear results, as concussions during kickoffs increased in 2017 after decreasing in 2016. This led to fundamental changes in kickoffs for 2018, and they seem to have helped make the play safer. The most significant change was the NFL banning the dangerous double-teaming lineman wedge blocks after they determined that [two out of every three concussions on kickoffs](#) occurred when using a two-man wedge. With the wedge banned, teams have replaced the heavier lineman used in wedge blocks with somewhat lighter players, which has effectively reduced the average weight of the players on the field, and the force they can generate.

In conclusion, I suggested an alternative solution to kickoffs that NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell previously mentioned. The idea would be to give the ball to the team that would have been kicking off [at its own 30](#), automatically facing a fourth down and 15 yards to go. The team can then choose to punt or go for it via fake punt or otherwise. In other words, the kickoff would be replaced with the punt, and the onside kick would be replaced with a fourth-down conversion. This idea was originally credited to then Rutgers coach Greg Schiano.

#### Sources:

1. Kartje, R. (2016, October 4). *Some NFL teams are using the new kickoff rule for strategic benefit*. Orange County Register. <https://www.ocregister.com/2016/10/04/some-nfl-teams-are-using-the-new-kickoff-rule-for-strategic-benefit/>.
2. Seifert, K. (2018, September 21). *What's really changed in the NFL's 'call to action' on concussions*. ESPN. [https://www.espn.com/nfl/story/\\_/id/24743994/really-changed-nfl-call-action-concussions](https://www.espn.com/nfl/story/_/id/24743994/really-changed-nfl-call-action-concussions).