

Learning the ABCs of DPI

What Constitutes Defensive Interference?

The late Woody Hayes, whose Ohio State teams used the run the way Al Capone used bullets, once said, "There are three things that can happen when you throw a pass, and two of them are bad."

A completed pass is certainly good, but a defensive pass interference (DPI) penalty is almost as good. As more teams use the pass as a main offensive weapon, the chances for interference penalties increase as well.

Defenders and pass receivers have equal rights to catch a pass. A defender cannot exercise that right, however, if he is not looking for the pass. Thus, two things an official should consider in a potential DPI situation are whether contact occurred and whether the defender was "playing the ball" (looking for it) or "playing the receiver" (looking at him) when the contact occurred. (In NFHS play, faceguarding would constitute interference regardless of contact. In NCAA rules, the ball must also be catchable.)

If the defender was playing the ball, DPI should not be called, with the exceptions noted, even if there is significant contact. That is why you will not see pro and college officials throw flags when a receiver and defender get "tangle feet" and both hit the ground, as long as both of them are looking for the ball; if one is playing the other and not the ball, he will draw a flag.

Don't be fooled by the defender who looks at the receiver as they move downfield together, continues to play him as the pass arrives, makes contact and then looks back toward the ball to make it appear that he was playing the ball all the way. Pro players are skilled at that and college players are getting better at it. Because high school players mimic what pro and college players do, it is creeping into the prep game as well.

Defenders and receivers routinely put their hands on each other, feel each other out, etc., as they move downfield. The key question is when that contact becomes significant enough to impede or restrict the receiver as he runs his route or attempts to catch the ball. Generally speaking, DPI can be grouped into fairly clearly defined categories.

- **Playing through the receiver.** That usually occurs on a slant route or when a receiver turns to face the quarterback and the defender tries to time his hit to coincide with the ball's arrival but is a step or two early and goes over the top of the receiver or through his back. DPI should be called even if the defender is looking for the ball. That can be a tough call if the official keying that receiver is straightlined; then it can be a nightmare to determine whether the contact occurred before or just as the receiver touched the ball. Another problem that accounts for erroneous flags is that defenders can appear to be going through the receiver's back when in reality they get around him to bat down a pass. Be careful that you don't penalize a great defensive play.

- Twisting the receiver. Merely putting an arm on a receiver's back or even around his waist is not DPI if the contact doesn't impede the receiver's ability to catch the pass. It is another story when, just before the pass arrives, the defender uses the arm around the receiver's waist to spin him around. That is DPI. Again, timing is everything: Did the spin occur before or just as the ball arrived? Do the best you can to get in position to see the whole picture.
- Arm-bar. That usually happens when the defender and receiver are running pretty much together and the defender gets inside position and then extends his forearm into the receiver so as to subtly push him away and keep him from adjusting to where the pass is thrown. The defender can't use that arm to exert pressure on the receiver even if he is looking for the ball at the time. That is a call on which back judges can provide a lot of help, since other officials will often be screened off.
- Pinning a receiver's arm. That is another subtle move that can be easy for an official to overlook. The defender may or may not be playing the ball as the pass arrives. As the receiver reaches up to catch it, the defender grabs his arm and pins it, thus preventing the receiver from reaching upward with both arms. It is obviously much more difficult for a receiver to make a catch with one hand than it is with two, so that often barely perceptible and hard-to-pick-up move by the defender can have a material effect on the play.
- Cut-off. The ruling on cut-offs is for NCAA only. The defender and receiver establish their routes as they move downfield. As the ball arrives, the defender, who may be looking back at the ball at the time, alters his path and veers into the receiver with his body to prevent him from getting to where the pass goes. The defender "cuts off" the receiver, in other words. As is the case with some other forms of interference, a cut-off doesn't have to be huge to have a major effect on the receiver. On the contrary, it can be a subtle change of direction. Don't confuse that situation with the one in which a defender legitimately adjusts his route given the direction of the pass. We're talking here about the defender who knows full well which way the pass is traveling and moves away from the path of the ball to block or wall off the receiver.

Written by Jon Bible, a veteran football official from Austin, Texas. He is a referee in the Big 12 Conference.