

DCMA's Weekend Whistleblower: Mr. Don Carey, NFL Official

by Mr. Tom Gelli, Chief, Congressional Affairs, DCMA Headquarters



His weekend work may cause you to cheer or grouch, to leap from your couch or sink into it, or lure you into spirited Monday morning discussions around the office water cooler. And you probably don't even know him, at least not personally, although you may have seen him dozens of times on TV. He's Mr. Don Carey — mild-mannered program integrator for a major Defense agency by day, and National Football League on-field official on weekends six months a year. We recently caught up with Mr. Carey at his office at DCMA San Diego, where we were able to call out our own audibles to DCMA's other "flag" officer.

Communicator (C): Understandably, the NFL seems to place a high value on protecting the game's image and integrity. Does the league restrict what you can say and do off the field, including the giving of interviews like this?

DC: Sure it does, but the restrictions are probably no

tighter than they are for any profession where propriety and trust come with the territory. During the season — and by that I mean from the first pre-season game through the Super Bowl — we are restricted in our dealings with the general media. We're not forbidden from talking, but we usually need an OK from the league to do so. As you might imagine, gambling is absolutely verboten. In the off-season, you can go to Las Vegas and visit the casinos after receiving permission from the League Office. Sports Book are always off-limits. Betting on any games, at any time, in any place, is strictly prohibited. There are restrictions on going to horse-racing tracks. An official must immediately notify the league of any scrapes with the law, including incidents involving alcohol, drugs or domestic violence, any of which will earn you a suspension until they are formally adjudicated. And, by the way, before agreeing to do this interview, I did touch base with the league office just to play it safe.

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C: Do you get pre-game jitters?

DC: Not really. I think I speak for all officials when I say that we're highly confident our respective crews can handle every controversy or oddity that might occur. I'm aware of the level of aggressiveness to expect from particular teams — both on the field and from the sidelines — but that doesn't trigger any undue pre-game anxiety. Actually, the post-game critiques of the crew's performance are more likely to cause a jitter or two than is the game.

C: I take it the post-game reviews are pretty thorough?

DC: Oh, yeah. The league folks in charge of officiating take a look at every play, every call and every non-call. The crew's performance gets rated weekly. Though, I must say, it's really more an exercise in advanced instruction than in criticism. It's intended to further refine our knowledge and judgment. With as many as 16 games each week, there are often several interesting plays that we can learn from and file away for future reference. These plays are included on a weekly training video prepared by the NFL Officiating Department for our review.

C: You mentioned aggressive behavior on the field and sidelines. Which fans or stadiums are the most combative?

DC: That's tough to say. It can vary season to season and week to week, depending on who the visiting team is and the playoff outlook. Off the top of my head, I'd say the fans in Kansas City [Mo.] are loud, but they're very knowledgeable. The worst-behaved fans are in the end zones at home Oakland Raiders games [in Oakland, Calif.]. The noisiest stadiums are in Indianapolis and Minneapolis [Minn.], both indoor.



C: Have you ever been at a loss as to what call to make or as to what the rulebook says about a particular game situation?

DC: Not really. We're trained to make judgments instantaneously. And as most fans know, if there's some question as to the applicability or interpretation of a rule, the officials confer to make sure we get the call right. And by right, I mean by what the rule book says, not what the announcers in the booth think. Most fans, players and coaches know most of the elemental rules of the game, but there are many nuances that emerge when you start to peel the onion. Just as an example, I doubt that the typical fan could tell you what happens to the game clock when, in the last two minutes of a half, the offensive team commits a penalty that prevents the snap and has no time outs left. Some games have ended on just such a circumstance, leaving many fans and some commentators to wonder if the officials were asleep at the switch. In actuality, the officials are merely adhering to the rule book, which calls for a 10-second clock run down in that situation.

C: Are there any players who have certain playing styles or "tricks of the trade" that pose a particular

(Above) Mr. Donald Carey, DCMA San Diego lead program integrator, signals "touchdown" as Miami Dolphins receiver, Chris Chambers, finds the end zone in Miami's late-season victory over the San Diego Chargers.

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challenge to your judgment or enforcement of the rules?

DC: Oh, yeah. Some defensive backs and some receivers are especially skilled — or should I say, sneaky — at putting hands to the body. Most defenders routinely do some reaching and grabbing, but some are better than others in knowing what they can get away with. I won’t mention any current players, but two receivers who are now retired come to mind — Chris Carter, who played with the Vikings, and Michael Irvin of the Cowboys. Both were masters at pushing [the defender] off to get separation without drawing a penalty. Although I’m aware of certain tactics and playing styles, I never enter a game with any pre-conceived notions about how a player will play. Every game and every play must be treated as a separate entity to be called in and of itself.

C: As a back judge, are you mindful of the pass defense a team is using as a play is about to be run?

DC: To a limited degree, and I guess that’s helpful. For example, press coverage and man-to-man coverage have the potential to elicit different infractions than, say, a zone defense. But to tell you the truth, today’s defensive schemes are so complex and so well concealed, that determining the type of pass coverage being used on any given play is often just a guessing game.

C: Those late-season games in Green Bay [Wisc.], Chicago and Buffalo [N.Y.] — especially at night — does the severe weather bother you?

DC: Well, I must say I’m aware of it, but like the players, we play through it. Actually, the cold-weather equipment and clothing accessories are much better



(Above) Mr. Donald Carey (left), DCMA San Diego lead program integrator and NFL on-field official, chats with Indianapolis Colts head coach, Mr. Tony Dungy, before the start of the American Bowl preseason game in Tokyo, Aug. 6, 2005.

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than they were 11 years ago when I broke into the league. Plus, once the game gets underway, you get so caught up in your responsibilities and the action that you don’t give much thought to the playing conditions. I will admit that when the schedule for the officiating crews comes out at the beginning of the season, I do look to see which cities I’ll be heading to in December. If I see I’ve got a night game at Lambeau [Green Bay] in mid-December, I know there’s a good chance it will be a chilly gig. It’s just the nature of the beast.

C: When you officiate a game, are you aware of the teams’ respective records and the game’s impact on the teams’ playoff prospects?

DC: Oh, sure, and any official who would tell you otherwise is not being completely truthful. But, again, team records, conference standings, playoff implications, whatever, have no bearing on the officiating. Each game is called in a vacuum, untainted by any surrounding circumstances. Each official and crew is rated just as rigorously on a game between two also-rans as it is for a game between playoff contenders. So, yes, you’re aware of the records and the game’s significance, but you really don’t give it any thought after the opening kickoff. An official couldn’t survive with that kind of on-field mentality.

C: Are you ever glad that, as a back judge, you’re not the one emerging from the curtain of the replay monitor to announce that the home team’s apparent touchdown has just been overturned?

DC: No. That wouldn’t bother me. Fan displeasure comes with the territory. My brother is a referee in the league, and he’s got the responsibility of announcing review determinations. I’m pretty sure he’d tell you the same thing. The same is true

for real-time calls. Officials make calls as a player’s actions warrant. There’s no thought given to how a call is going to be received by the coaches, players or fans. The anticipated hostile reaction has no influence. Fans, and to some extent coaches, tend to see with their hearts, not with their eyes.

C: Do you have a particular team that you, as a fan, root for? Perhaps San Diego?

DC: No. An official cannot be a fan of a particular team — even if it would have absolutely no impact on his impartiality and objectivity. An official must practice complete detachment. I know that sounds very Zen-like, but it is essential in the realm of officiating. It is this detachment that gives an official his warrant to wear the striped shirt irrespective of what teams are playing.

C: If you could be a one-man rules committee for a day, would you change the rules of overtime to allow each team at least one offensive touch of the ball?

DC: Yes, I believe I would. NFL Europe does that. Under the current overtime rules, the coin toss has great potential to determine the outcome, especially since the receiving team needs only two or three sets of downs to get into field goal range. As an historical footnote, soon after the NFL adopted overtime, there was a Thanksgiving Day game in which one team scored touchdowns on two consecutive plays — the last play of regulation and on the kickoff of overtime. Thirteen points without the other team even getting a chance to run an offensive play. I guess it does raise some questions as to competitive fairness. However, the league makes and modifies rules of the game after careful review and consideration. Officials do not make the rules. We are charged with enforcing the rules.

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not with their eyes.”*

C: Do the players give any thought to the officiating crew and any quirks or tendencies that it or its members have?

DC: Not so much the players but coaches do. Some teams keep books on officiating crews, looking for tendencies or inclinations toward making certain calls. Don't know if it really does them any good, but with some NFL coaching staffs, no stone is left unturned.

C: Are there certain coaches who burn your ears more than others? If so, who?

DC: I won't give names, but sure, some coaches are more vocal than others. But that doesn't bother me or cause any official to keep his distance. There are occasional flare-ups, but for the most part there's genuine respect between coaches and officials. It's not an adversarial relationship, although it's not unusual for coaches and officials to see things differently — literally and figuratively. We both have to handle the emotional pressure. A coach can't get so steamed about a call that he loses his focus on the game. Officials realize that for the coaches and their staffs, the game is their life's work and their livelihood. The coaches perceive our participation in the game as a part-time endeavor. I suspect that causes some coaches to think we — the officials — aren't as committed to the game as they are. That's understandable, but not true.

C: If you ran into a coach or a player at a restaurant or movie theater, would he recognize you and know who you are?

DC: Yes, most would, depending on how long they've been in the league. The league publishes a book that has background profiles and pictures of the officiating crews and their members. The coaches give it a pretty thorough going over.

C: Would you speak with them in such a setting?

DC: We'd exchange greetings and light pleasantries, but nothing more than that.

C: You mentioned the officiating crew's game schedule for the season. How does that work?

DC: There are 17 crews who work as a unit throughout the season. The schedule of regular-season game assignments is determined by a computer model before the start of the season. It's largely random, but there are controls to ensure that a crew doesn't visit the same stadium more than once and that it doesn't work the game of a particular team more than twice. The league office has authority to modify assignments in the case of unusual circumstances. Each crew gets two bye weeks in the course of the season.

C: You used the term “emotional pressure.” Would you rather work a high-profile game or a less significant one?

DC: High profile. I like the big games.

C: When you watch a game from the comfort of your couch, are you able to watch it as a fan, or are you officiating it in your head?

DC: [laughter] Okay, I'll admit it. I'm officiating, and that doesn't exactly add to my viewing enjoyment. I often find myself watching the action occurring on the fringes away from the ball. But, I must say, it's reassuring to make a call on a play unfolding in real time and then have your judgment validated by the slow-mo replay. And, yes, I support the use of instant replay. Whatever it takes to get it right.