

The Oregonian (Portland, Oregon)

September 19, 2006 Tuesday
Sunrise Edition

HEADLINE: Football is just a game, until you're on the clock

BYLINE: John Canzano, The Oregonian

The seventh threatening telephone call at Gordon Riese's home came a few minutes after eight o'clock on Monday morning. It was from an Oklahoma fan who told Riese, the Pacific-10 Conference replay official from Saturday's Ducks-Sooners game, he was going to fly to Portland, find the family home, and kill Riese and his wife.

"I called the police," said Riese, 64, "then, I unplugged the phone."

The deputy who arrived to take the report assured Riese that murderers don't typically alert their victims before flying in from out of state to commit the crime. Then, the deputy added, "Maybe you should leave town for a couple of days, if it makes you feel better."

Football is a game, you're thinking.

Right up to the point where an Oregon player touches an onside-kick attempt a step too early, turning the scramble for the ball into a melee where players are rushing the field celebrating, and the ball is squirting through everyone's legs like they were wickets in a human croquet match.

Then, the officials on the field blow the call. Then, the review process, instituted to rectify situations just like this, upholds the bad call, causing many of us, including some self-important university president at Oklahoma, to wonder, "Was Mr. Magoo in the replay booth?"

Well, no.

It was Gordon Riese in the booth. He has a name, he has a life. And after visiting with him on Monday, and learning more from some others about what happened in that review booth, I'm convinced that every honk who criticized Riese in the last 72 hours owes the man a swift apology.

Said Riese: "I'm having a difficult time letting the blown call go. I always prided myself on getting it right. I didn't get the job done. I didn't get it right."

More on the blown call later.

First, you need to know that Riese met his wife, Susan, while they were students at Wilson High School. They had a math course together, and after an extended illness put her behind in school, the teacher assigned Gordon to be her tutor.

They've been married 42 years, had two children, and two grandchildren --- Jeff, 5, and Alex, 4. And you should know that Gordon's real job was teaching math at Benson and Gresham high schools for 34 years.

Until his retirement from on-field officiating two years ago, Riese was well respected. He worked Rose Bowls and Fiesta Bowls. When you officiate for three decades, you come to understand that you're going to make some mistakes. He just doesn't like making them, which is why he was one of the good ones.

In 1982, during the Cal-Stanford "Big Game," Riese was working as the line judge. He was running alongside the play during the wild finish, and should have been in position to see the fifth lateral, which appears to be forward. Ask Riese about it and he'll tell you that he was out of position. He'd mistakenly headed to the goal line, where he was swarmed by the Stanford band, and couldn't see the lateral.

Two years ago, after he'd retired, the conference talked him into the replay booth because it wanted someone familiar with the rules up there.

"It's a different pressure being in the booth versus being on the field," Riese said. "It's a whole different ballgame. Haven't learned to deal with that kind of stress."

Riese, who is paid \$400 a game to work the replay booth, said he knew almost immediately that the call was blown. He called it "instinct." He'd looked hard at 10 plays during the game, stopped to analyze five of them, and overturned three of those five on-field calls, getting them right. But it was that terrible onside kick that he replayed in his mind, and agonized over as he drove his brown Toyota van the two hours back to Portland after the game.

Said Riese: "I was so unsettled, I probably shouldn't have driven."

When Riese arrived home, he discovered his wife had videotaped the game, but he couldn't bring himself to watch it. He already knew what would be on the tape. So Riese just sat on the sofa in a daze until the newspaper hit his driveway, and the sun came up. You should know, the man everyone is pinning this loss on didn't sleep after the game.

"We're so worried about his health," Karen Jackson, Riese's daughter, said Monday as her father and the rest of the crew was handed a one-game suspension by the conference. "Dad has high blood pressure and right now we can't get his diastolic under 100."

Nevermind that the on-field officials blew the call. Nevermind that Oklahoma's defense allowed Oregon to score two easy touchdowns in 26 seconds. Nevermind that there were other blown calls on the field, including a couple of bizarre play-clock issues, and a thousand on-field plays, and calls by both coaches, that could have altered the outcome of this game a hundred different ways.

Nope.

It's Riese's spleen the country wants.

So let's give it to them. But first you should know that Riese didn't see the ABC television feed that viewers watched at home, which you, your spouse and your children know showed an Oregon player touching the ball before it traveled the required 10 yards. And you should know that Riese will not talk about specifics on the call, but said: "My supervisor knows what happened up there and that's all that matters."

A source in the replay booth on Saturday said that Riese found himself crunched for time, pressured by television and the on-field referee for a rapid decision, and there was such a delay in getting the video feed to Riese that he never even got to properly review the play.

The Pac-10's coordinator of football officiating confirmed that Riese didn't get all of the replays that ABC was providing.

With all the cameras working the game that one half of the country was watching, Riese saw only a single frame of video, the source said. The angle was bad. But it appeared to show an Oklahoma player touching the ball with his helmet before it hit the Oregon player. (From other angles, clearly, it hits the Ducks player first.) With no other video immediately available, and television waiting, Riese did what he's told to do when he's out of time and has no conclusive evidence.

He upheld the call on the field.

The university president wants this to go down as a no-contest. Some Oklahoma fans want retribution. Some conference officials just want this to quietly go away because it smacks of a serious problem with the replay process. And what we're really probably entitled to any regular American fifth grader would tell you is a playground do-over.

Adults don't do those things, though.

Kill the umpire, right? Zebra hunt?

This is probably a good time to remind ourselves that sports isn't war. It's not life or death. College football is supposed to be a pleasant, passionate weekend diversion, void of death threats for sure. There's just something that doesn't feel right about villifying Riese, especially after further review.

John Canzano: 503-294-5065; JohnCanzano@aol.com