

Pro officials causing stir

Associated Press
NEW YORK — National Football League officials remained under fire Tuesday for a continuing string of controversial calls that have affected the postseason playoff picture dramatically.

The latest complaints were from Al Davis, boss of the Oakland Raiders, who popped off in the wake of his club's last-second loss to Houston on Sunday.

"We have to get rid of the incompetent officials in the league and we will," said Davis, an influential member of the NFL's competition committee.

The criticism began a month ago when St. Louis defeated Washington in overtime after tying the game in the final seconds on a scoring pass to Mel Gray that was ruled no catch by one official and a touchdown by another. It took a lengthy conference by the team of officials assigned to the game before the TD was certified.

After the game, Washington Coach George Allen complained bitterly, especially after viewing replays of the tying TD. A group of Redskins' fans even tried to sue to have the game result overturned.

That game proved a turning point for both teams. The Cardinals went on to clinch a playoff berth, winning three of the next four games. Washington, meanwhile lost another overtime game to Oakland the next week and then won two games in the final seconds against Minnesota and Atlanta before slipping out of the playoff picture when they were beaten by Dallas last Saturday.

If Gray's TD catch had been ruled no-catch, the Redskins record would now be 9-4 and they would be tied with Dallas and St. Louis for first place in the National Conference East.

That's how important that single call was to Washington.

Meanwhile, the AFC East race also has been the center of controversial official rulings. Two weeks ago, Buffalo, trailing Miami by one game, played the Dolphins in the Orange Bowl. The Bills fell behind early and then rallied to close the gap to 24-21. Momentum seemed to be going Buffalo's way, especially when John Skorupan recovered an apparent fumble by Mercury Morris deep in Miami territory.

But officials ruled the ball was dead, erasing the turnover, and then

tacked on a 15-yard penalty against Pat Toomay for unsportsmanlike conduct. The Dolphins moved from there to a clinching TD that finished Buffalo's playoff hopes.

Buffalo owner Ralph Wilson exploded with rage over the call. "It was a rotten call that cost our team a chance for the Super Bowl," said Wilson. "The official who made that call should be barred from football. Anyone that incompetent should not be allowed to officiate."

That kind of talk is likely to lead to a fine from Commissioner Pete Rozelle. If that happens, Wilson will have help paying it from Carroll Rosenbloom, owner of the Los Angeles Rams. "When a man gets robbed like that, he must give me part of the action. I know the feeling. I have lost two playoff games because of bad officiating. I suffered in silence and I wound up with a coronary."

A week later, last Sunday, the Dolphins played at Baltimore with first place in the AFC East at stake. Late in the first half, with the game scoreless, Miami quarterback Don Strock threw for the end zone and

Nat Moore. For a split second, it appeared that the Dolphins had scored but the officials ruled that Moore had come down out of bounds.

Widely circulated replays appeared to show Moore landing in the end zone producing what would have been a TD.

"It appeared from our game film that Nat had both feet in bounds," Don Shula, coach of the Dolphins, said Tuesday. "But we did not question the call because we had an offensive tackle in motion on the play. If the catch had been ruled good, the play would have been called back."

Still, clubs have kept up a stream of criticism against the officials. Besides Davis, Wilson and Rosenbloom, who have complained from the ownership level, coaches have also questioned the efficiency of the officiating. Among the critics have been Bud Grant, the usually taciturn boss of the Minnesota Vikings, who last week called the officiating arrangement "a multimillion-dollar operation being handled by amateurs on a Sunday afternoon."

Landry worries little on playoffs

Associated Press
DALLAS — Dallas Coach Tom Landry said Tuesday he didn't care who the Cowboys met in the National Football League playoffs but it might as well be Minnesota because "we'd have to face the Vikings sooner or later anyway."

Landry said flatly: "Minnesota is the team to beat."

"Minnesota is very solid," he said. "They have drafted well and Chuck Foreman is the most productive back in the league next to O. J. Simpson."

Minnesota and Los Angeles are tied with 11-2 records. If both teams win Saturday, then wild card Dallas plays at Minnesota next Sunday.

Should Los Angeles beat Pittsburgh and the Vikings lose to Buffalo, Dallas would play in Los Angeles Saturday. Should both teams win, Minnesota has the complicated tie-breaker edge over Los Angeles.

"If we play Los Angeles I'm sure they'll remember September like we remembered August," Landry said.

Los Angeles humiliated Dallas in an Aug. 9 exhibition game, then was ambushed Sept. 21 in a season opener in Dallas.

"There's no question we'd like to play in sunshine as opposed to freezing weather," Landry said. "But the opponents really don't make that

much difference. We might as well face Minnesota first."

Landry said he wouldn't bench injured quarterback Roger Staubach for Sunday's season finale against the New York Jets in Shea Stadium. Staubach suffered sore and bruised ribs in a collision with Washington middle linebacker Harold McClinton in last week's 31-10 rout of the Redskins.

"There's a certain risk involved," admitted Landry.

"But I don't believe you ought to go into a football game and leave your No. 1 quarterback on the bench. He's played 19 games at a risk. Roger will handle himself okay."

Landry said the Cowboys will go into the Jet game with every intention of keeping the momentum from their beating of the Redskins.

"If you go into a game relaxed, that's when you get hurt," Staubach said. "If you go in there moving and hitting, you don't get hurt. Our main goal is to follow up our solid defensive performance against Washington with another good one against the Jets."

Landry added: "I'll tell you one thing — the confidence factor on this young team is up after the Washington game. We grew up Saturday."

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