Black, White and Yellow All Over

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The NFL encompasses everything great about this country we affectionately call America, with big hits, big plays, and big time entertainment all in one place. Fall Sundays are a time when the football faithful shut themselves in as they worship the pigskin gods on 50 inches of flat screen goodness, counting down to the single greatest day in American sports—Super Bowl Sunday. While baseball may be America’s greatest pastime, football is her finest achievement. Nothing is quite as beautiful as a perfectly thrown back shoulder fade, or a neck breaking stiff arm, or a bone crunching tackle. It takes 11 individual players, each a master of his own trade, to move in unison as they craft a masterpiece with each touch of the ball, each player a different stroke of the brush. Two sides fight, claw and scratch for every last yard in a test of will and endurance. The arbiter between these two warring parties is the American gridiron zebra, otherwise known as the referee. These men serve as keepers of the game, ensuring it is played to the letter of the law to the best of their very human (and for that reason fallible) abilities.

However, the usual guardians are currently sitting at home as spectators instead of standing on the sidelines of the field they swore to protect, caught in the middle of a quarrel over compensation. Instead, the powers that be have entrusted the integrity of the sport unto a group that know the rules of the game about as well as a group of $5^{th}$ graders suiting up for the first time. As opposed to acting as peacemakers, bringing both offense and defense together as they gently guide each play, these scab refs stand between the two sides not unlike a brick wall. Rather than help contribute to the masterpiece of football, the replacement refs sit looking over the artist’s shoulder, waiting for just the right moment to ruin the game’s natural beauty and athleticism with one swift splash of hideous yellow paint. Their irreverent and inconsistent officiating is not only sacrilegious, but it threatens the very integrity that the league’s higher ups have promised to protect.

Many football faithful find themselves lost, staring up at fading posters of super-ref Ed Hochuli, longing to see those perfectly chiseled muscles signal for just one more first down. Until Ed and his mighty gang of refs return, we fans are the ones who suffer most as we are forced to watch our beloved sport turn into a comedy of errors. Not only have the replacements proven to be inept, but it has become clear that they lack even a basic understanding of the sports rules. Sitting at home watching these poor scabs try to do their job is like being forced to watch a Lamborghini roll around on spares. Simply put, it sucks. And it’s not just the bad calls that have left many a fan so distressed, but the time it takes for that motley crew of scabs to reach a consensus. Even the most upset and frustrated fans cannot help but find a sick pleasure in watching all four officials flock together helplessly for what feels like an eternity to discuss even the simplest of plays. Then just when you think they have decided upon the call, they reconvene for round 2 and eventually round 3. It would be hard to get upset at such a delay if it led to the correct call, but just when we think we’ve seen it all, the refs decide to call an eight yard penalty against the defense. The most casual observer of the sport picks up pretty quickly the fact that penalties are assessed in increments of five, though we’ll let it slide this time. At this point everyone just wants to move on to the next play before the refs decide that they need to meet again and discuss the ethical merits of Utilitarianism. So everyone just plays along, nodding their heads and smiling, as if to reassure the refs that their incongruous scribbles are a really
good drawing of a giraffe. This is what football has turned into: trying to appease a bunch of ignorant little kids long enough so as to allow the adults to do their jobs.

With each fine that is levied and suspension enforced, the NFL ensures its fans that nothing is more important to it than the integrity of the sport. But with each late yellow flag that is haphazardly thrown (or not thrown) by the abomination that is the replacement referees, Commissioner Goodell is forced to bite his tongue and stubbornly reassure the fans that he is satisfied with the job that they are doing. Just one year ago, the NFL season was threatened with labor uncertainty by its players who squabbled with the owners over who should make more millions of dollars. If the gap could be closed between these two sides, you would think the expert negotiators would be able to reach an agreement with the NFL Referees Association in no time at all. But instead we’re left to watch helplessly as America’s golden child crumbles right in front of our very eyes, undone by some of the most incompetent and under-qualified individuals the league has ever seen. This emotion is best, and most eloquently, summed up by Tom Crabtree, tight end for the Green Bay Packers: “Imagine you make a painting. It isn’t perfect by others standards but it’s your painting. You are proud. Then someone takes a shit on it.”