

CORKY KELL CLASSIC

By Craig Sager

Corky Kell Thursday, Friday head coaches agree to debut 7-man officiating crews

It was the play that made the proposed use of instant replay at the high school level into one of this offseason's most serious discussions, and one that exposed numerous areas of improvement for how playoff games are officiated. And the 2018 Corky Kell Classic is now in talks to debut a new officiating system that the GHSA recently approved for rollout in all playoff games this coming season.

Controversial calls are nothing new, but the image of Peach County wide receiver Noah Whittington stretching for the goal line with a potential go-ahead score remains a brutal reminder of just how important the roles of officials are. With 3:33 left in last year's Class AAA State Championship, and trailing 10-6, Peach County snapped the ball on a 4th down and from the Calhoun 21-yard line. Whittington flanked out the widest and worked his way up the sideline before catching a line-drive pass at the 7-yard line (already a first down and 14-yard pickup). Calhoun's Brannon Spector was never far behind and in one motion dove for, and successfully wrapped up, Whittington by his ankles at the 3-yard line. Whittington's momentum and effort carried him toward the end zone and his outstretched arm slapped the ball down directly on the goal line's white-coated blades of artificial turf. The ball came out, but it was the crown of Whittington's own helmet, which at this point was also across the goal line, that forced it out.

Standing perpendicular to Whittington, and directly behind the nearby goal line pylon, was the official who made the call of "incomplete pass." The initial reactions resembled what any team or fan base would feel after a major call didn't go its way. It had all happened so quickly, and it's not uncommon for officials to huddle and discuss such important calls, and possibly even overturn them. But this call was quickly confirmed without any sort of corroboration or discussion among the officials. Calhoun football, turnover on downs. Then came what everyone had been waiting to see: a second, third and fourth look as both the broadcast and enormous Mercedes-Benz Stadium halo board played back the sequence on repeat from a variety of angles.

Peach County head coach Chad Campbell frantically urged the officials to reconsider their ruling and look up at the replay screen, but they didn't. Calhoun maintained its lead, the clock struck zero, and the Yellow Jackets took home their program's fourth state title.

Later, video replays from another angle circulated online that appeared to show Whittington stepping out of bounds during his sideline route, which could have made him an ineligible receiver. If Whittington did indeed step out of bounds, it seemed unclear if his defender forcefully pushed him out, which would mean he could still legally be the first player to touch the pass.

One of the many snowstorms of this past winter postponed the four remaining state championship games to the following weekend, which gave the controversial Class AAA ending even more time to stew. Then, 10 days after the game was played, Campbell and nearly 40 of his assistants, players and Peach County supporters went to Thomaston to face the Georgia High School Association's Board of Trustees head-on with an emotional presentation that lasted nearly 50 minutes. Campbell requested that the game be replayed from that point, or that Peach County be named co-champions with Calhoun. None of this was ever



Peach Co.'s Noah Whittington stretches for the goal line in the 3A title game. Jason Getz/AJC

considered, according to GHSA Executive Director Robin Hines.

Instant replay is always the convenient answer to solve the would've and could've, but even at the NFL level, the implementation of second and third looks has still found ways to blur the lines of what constitutes a catch. That is why the Peach County-Calhoun play became so important.

Campbell was quick to point out in his presentation that Whittington did in fact step out of bounds before making the catch, but he argued that contact with the defender caused him to step out and Whittington reestablished himself inbounds before he touched the ball.

"They always say, the eye in the sky don't lie," Campbell added to imply that Whittington did both and the tape proves it.

Campbell's strategy was to point to every instance where rules were misapplied, and although he did not succeed in getting the game played again, or the results reversed, the GHSA considered making changes specifically because of what was perhaps his most nonpartisan takeaway. Campbell pointed out that the official who made the call got no assistance from the rest of the crew and that he was even "blown off" when he asked the head official for a meeting to make sure the right call was made. This point resonated, and after this past week's spring executive committee meeting, the GHSA responded by adding a seventh official for all playoff games moving forward and resolved to take steps ensuring officials are familiar working with each other by the time the playoffs begin.

Adding one official to 232 playoff games will cost the GHSA \$17,400 this next year, but GHSA associate director Tommy Whittle believes it will be more than worth it.

"The more eyes out there, the better," Whittle told the AJC. "With six, if you put two deep judges on the sidelines, you're weaker in the middle. With these spread offenses sending three deep, the umpire has to have his head on a swivel in the middle of the field. That's really tough to do. We've got good officials. We've just got to tweak it a little to get everybody in the right spot.

Whittle also added that there are not enough officials available to add a seventh one for every regular-season game, so that is why it will be implemented only for postseason play in 2018.

A FIRST LOOK

On Wednesday, the day after the GHSA's decision was announced, it was brought up at a Corky Kell meeting at Brookwood among four of the 2018 event's participating coaches: Adam Clack (Milton), John Ford (Buford), Bryan Lamar (Tucker) and Andy Dyer (Archer). They unanimously agreed to use seven officials for their doubleheader scheduled for Friday, Aug. 17 at Georgia State Stadium, as did the coaches from Day 1's doubleheader at Rome's Barron Stadium, including Calhoun's Hal Lamb, who is facing Ridgeland in Game 1. Corky Kell is aiming to work with the organizations providing officials for Day 1 and Day 2 - the Etowah Valley Officials Association and the North Georgia Football Officials Association, respectively - on staffing those games with seven-man crews. The idea will soon be proposed to the 10 head coaches who will play on Saturday of the event at Mercedes-Benz Stadium.

It was a controversial ending to an incredible 2017 season, but now Calhoun is helping to turn the page by agreeing to play in the first game in GHSA history to showcase a seven-man crew.

2018 Corky Kell Schedule

Thursday, Aug. 16 at ROME's BARRON STADIUM

5:30 p.m. Ridgeland vs. Calhoun

8:30 p.m. Rome vs. Marietta

Friday, Aug. 17, at GEORGIA STATE STADIUM

5:30 p.m. Buford vs. Tucker

8:30 p.m. Archer vs. Milton

Saturday, Aug. 18, at MERCEDES-BENZ STADIUM

9 a.m. Kell vs. East Coweta

11:45 a.m. Mill Creek vs. Walton

2:45 p.m. McEachern vs. Colquitt County

5:45 p.m. Brookwood vs. North Gwinnett

8:45 p.m. Norcross vs. Mays