



850 Ridge Avenue
Suite 301
Pittsburgh, PA 15212
Office: (412) 321-8440
Fax: (412) 321-4088

October 14, 2021

The following is the result of the George Mason University (GMU) protest of their 12:00 pm game against Ohio State University (OSU) on October 10th, 2021 which resulted in a final score of OSU 29 – GMU 28.

Game protested by GMU for an Officials Decision in Violation of NCFA/NCAA Rules.

Requested action – Acknowledgement that GMU is a better or equal team to OSU in the NCFA rankings OR Exclusion of the results of the play in question.

Protest:

GMU has protested their 12:00 pm, 10/10/21 game against OSU, due to the officials ruling on a kickoff play allegedly being in violation of NCAA Rule:

SECTION 5. Safety

How Scored

ARTICLE 1. It is a safety when:

- a. The ball becomes dead out of bounds behind a goal line, except from an incomplete forward pass, or becomes dead in the possession of a player on, above or behind their own goal line, or becomes dead by rule, and the defending team is responsible for the ball being there (A.R. 6-3-1-IV; A.R. 7-2-4-I; A.R. 8-5-1-I-II, IV and VI-X; A.R. 8-7-2-II; and A.R. 9-4-1-VIII).
When in question, it is a touchback, not a safety.

Exception:

It is not a safety if a player between their own team's five-yard line and goal line:

- (a) intercepts a pass or fumble; or recovers an opponent's fumble or backward pass; or catches or recovers a kick; and
- (b) the player's original momentum carries that player into their own end zone; and

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- (c) the ball remains behind that team's goal line and is declared dead in that team's possession there. This includes a fumble that goes from the end zone into the field of play and out of bounds (Rule 7-2-4-b-1).
If conditions (a)-(c) are satisfied above, the ball belongs to this player's team at the spot where that player gained possession.
- b. An accepted penalty for a foul leaves the ball on or behind the offending team's goal line (**Exception:** Rules 3-1-3-g-3 and 8-3-4-a) (A.R. 8-5-1-III and A.R. 10-2-2-VI).



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GMU Asst. Director of Competitive Sports, Paul Bazzano stated, "This email is in reference to the attached play (video) that occurred with approximately 2:30 remaining in the first half of George Mason @ Ohio State on Sunday, October 10.

The momentum from the original kickoff carries the ball into the end zone after being touched by the Mason player at the 3 yard line. The same player who touches the ball, picks up the ball in the end zone and proceeds to return the ball. The returner stops shy of the goal line and takes a knee, where the play is then blown dead.

According to the referee, the returner stepped out of bounds on the endline. If the player did in fact step out, why did none of the referees, including the head referee (best angle) never blow the play dead? If the player did in fact step out, the ruling still would not have resulted in a safety. This is a prime example of the momentum exception.

This single call took a 14-14 ball game with 2:30 left in the half and awarded Ohio State 2 points and the ball in great field position. Mason ultimately would be down 9 at the half as a result. The coaching staff and players deserve an explanation for this ruling. These are the type of calls that result in suspensions at the NCAA and NFL levels and can drastically impact the outcome of a season.

The improper enforcement of this single call had game changing implications and will more than likely keep a group of students from competing for a national championship. I feel an explanation is needed to better understand how/why this call was managed in the way it was. It appeared that all referees were set to rule the play as a touchback, until the Ohio State sideline began shouting "safety."

I would greatly appreciate if the league would look into this. The officials and crew are unknown at this time. The club is trying to contact the Ohio State team for information."

GMU Head Football Coach, Jim Poythress added, "When the protest was made we were told nothing could be done. When the exact rule was quoted we were told we were incorrect and that we would be flagged if we continued to dispute the ruling. So, we shut up and played. We kicked from the 20 and sent our exhausted defense back to the field. This was a 9 point swing." And "Obviously we can't replay or restart the game. We only wish to be acknowledged as the better or equal team in your ratings. We feel we may have been robbed of our opportunity to play for the championship."

Defense:

OSU Head Coach, James Grega stated, "At no point during or after the game was I made aware that George Mason was playing under protest. I spoke with the George Mason Head Coach at length after the game, and there was no mention of a dispute with how the safety call was made. In addition, I spoke with the Head Referee at halftime to request that he alert our team when it was time to come back out from halftime, and once again, no mention of a protest was relayed to me."



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Investigation:

The NCFA interviewed the Referee (Dave) who officiated the game in question. His recount of the play in question was as follows:

“I was standing in the center of the endzone at the time of the kickoff. The kicked ball was headed to my right where a GMU player was awaiting for the ball at approximately the 7 yard line. I turned my eyes up field to look for any illegal blocks on the play. When I turned back to the ball the GMU player was running with the ball in the end zone. His teammates were shouting for him to take a knee which he did. I blew the play dead and brought my line judges together for a conference to discuss what had happened. We conferred for about a minute where my line judge to that side of the field (Art) informed me that the impetus of the ball reaching the end zone was a result of the ball carrier and not the kickoff itself. Thus I ruled a safety.”

When asked if anyone from GMU approached him about playing the game under protest, he stated “No one from GMU approached me to question the call nor did anyone ever mention they were protesting the game.”

The NCFA then interviewed the Line Judge (Art) who recounted the play in question as follows:

“The GMU player received the ball at about the 7 yard line where he initially bobbled the ball before securing the catch, and then proceeded to retreat to the end zone where he took a knee. Because he initially secured the ball outside the 5 yard line he was not protected by the 5 yard momentum rule and thus it was a safety rather than a touch back. I don’t know if anyone filmed the game but if they did you should watch it and you should be able to see that’s what happened.”

When asked if he was aware of GMU playing the game under protest, he stated “To be honest I was on the opposite side of the field from the GMU bench so I don’t know if they disputed the call but I can say that no one called time out or came on to the field to dispute the call with the Ref (Dave).”

NCFA Protest Rules:

17.00.00 (Protests)

17.01.0 No protest ever shall be permitted on judgment decisions by the official.

17.02.0 On Field Protests

17.02.1 On Field Protests consist of protests regarding Uniform Violations, Equipment Violations, Officiating decisions believed to be in violation of NCFA rules, Official qualifications, and In-Game Known Roster Violations.

17.02.2 Any On Field protest by the coach of a competing team must be made at the time of the action or incident that caused the protest and before play is resumed.

17.02.2.1 If the game ends (legal contest) in a protest able situation, the offended team has until all officials have left the field to voice its protest intentions.

17.02.2.2 All On Field protests must be made to the Referee.

17.02.2.3 All On Field protests must be reported to the NCFA (via the NCFA GAME PROTEST FORM) no later than midnight E.S.T. of the Tuesday following the “NCFA Week” in which the protested game occurred.

17.02.3 When a coach claims that an official’s decision violates NCFA rules, the Referee must: (1) allow the coach the right to file a protest; (2) announce to each coach, to the official scorer and to the public-address announcer that



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the game is being played under protest, and (3) note and record the game situation at the time of the protest. No replay of any part of a game will be allowed even if the protest is proven to be legitimate, if the play in question did not directly affect the outcome of the game. If the protest is proven to be legitimate and could have had a bearing upon the game, then it is upheld and play resumes from the point of the protest.

Ruling: Protest Denied – The score of this game will remain 29-28 in favor of OSU.

Reasoning:

NCFA Rule 17.01.0 states that no protest ever shall be permitted on judgement decisions by the official. Having interviewed the Ref (Dave) and Line Judge (Art) and their recount of the play in question, based on their judgement of how the play occurred there was no violation of a rule implementation.

While the NCFA has the benefit of being able to review the play through game film, we are able to see that the play in fact consisted of the GMU returner retreating to the 4 yard line where the kickoff deflects off of his hands into the end zone. He then proceeds to recover the ball in the back of the end zone, return the ball towards the goal line, and then knelt the ball shy of the goal line. Given the benefit of this video review, the play should have been called as a touchback. However, this was not the JUDGEMENT of how the play unfolded by the officials and thus they implemented the rules correctly based upon their opinion of how the play occurred.

Additionally, NCFA protest rules view a protest of “Officiating decisions believed to be in violation of NCFA rules” as an On Field Protest (17.02.1) which requires that “Any On Field protest by the coach of a competing team must be made at the time of the action or incident that caused the protest and before play is resumed.” (17.02.2) and “All On Field protests must be made to the Referee.” (17.02.2.2).

Based upon the reports of the Referee (Dave) and the Ohio State Head Coach (Grega), if GMU did in fact declare that they were playing the game under protest, they did not declare that to the Referee at the time of the incident and thus this protest is invalid regardless.

Additional Notes:

CollClubSports/NCFA Protest rules are strategically designed to require that on field protests such as this be disputed and announced specifically at the time of the infraction so that all parties involved are made aware of the objection. This provides an opportunity for any infractions to be realized and corrected so that the contest can continue in a legitimate manner. Additionally, the situation at the time of the protest can be documented (Down/Distance/Time/Score, etc) so that if the league determines that a rules infraction did take place and was left uncorrected, the option to replay the remainder of the game from precise situation where the infraction took place remains available. This has been done in the past (though rare) in other CollClubSports leagues.

While GMU had requested via this protest that: “Acknowledgement that GMU is a better or equal team to OSU in the NCFA rankings OR Exclusion of the results of the play in question.” the NCFA does not have the power to physically alter rankings as they are based upon a mathematical formula which includes (in part) the opinions of the voting panel. Should this ruling alter the opinions of the voting panel is at the full discretion of those individual voters. Lastly, the NCFA would never “Exclude” one play and its scoring result from the middle of a game without



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replaying the remainder of that game from that point, unless that one play was the final play of the game and there was no additional contest to be played.

Sandy Sanderson
NCFA President