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Refs, not Huskies, deserve a flag

Seattle Times staff columnist

The kid was excited. Who could blame him? He had just engineered one of the most memorable drives in the storied history of his school.

Maybe quarterback Jake Locker saved the season. At the very least he had saved the day, taking his team 76 yards in 3 ½ minutes to force a game that was too good to end into what looked like certain overtime.

"He showed some grit and determination getting his team into the end zone," Washington offensive coordinator Tim Lappano said.

Locker broke a tackle, tumbled into the end zone, and then harmlessly tossed the ball into the air.

He didn't hurl it wildly into the stands, like a point guard at the final tick of an NCAA championship game. He didn't slam the ball at the feet of a Brigham Young player, then dance like Ocho Cinco at Mardi Gras.

Locker finished this last gasp of a drive, got into the end zone in the game's final two seconds and put his team an extra point away from a tie.

Then, joyfully he tossed the ball. It was a tame celebration for a moment so important.

But the Pac-10 officiating crew flagged him, penalized Washington 15 yards, forcing Ryan Perkins to attempt a 35-yard PAT.

"I guess I'm sorry for celebrating the game of football," Locker said in a postgame radio interview.

The kick was blocked. It never got in the air. Never had a chance.

And Washington lost Saturday, 28-27, to BYU.

This season that already felt as if it were hanging by a thread now feels even more desperate.



JIM BATES / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Washington's Jake Locker celebrates with Devin Aguilar (9) after his fourth-quarter touchdown. The celebration ended quickly after the Huskies were penalized for unsportsmanlike conduct.

NCAA rule book

15-yard penalty will be assessed for excessive celebration defined as:

"Any delayed, excessive, prolonged or choreographed act by which a player (or players) attempts to focus attention upon himself (or themselves)."

"After a score or any other play, the player in possession immediately must return the ball to an official or leave it near the dead-ball spot."

"Throwing the ball high into the air."

"It really should be a no-call," Washington's remarkably composed coach Tyrone Willingham said. "But it's one that they have to call when they see it."

No, they don't.

Officials should consider the circumstances. They should consider the act and the intent of the act. And, let's be honest, they should consider the player.

Locker wasn't chirping at them all day. He wasn't engaging BYU players in trash talk. He was playing football with his usual flair.

"I didn't even realize I'd done it," Locker said. "I scored a touchdown jumped up and the ball just flew in the air. Honestly, it was just a reaction. It wasn't premeditated. But, in hindsight, it was something I shouldn't have done. I've never done it in the past."

Locker apologized to his teammates after the game. But there really was no need for an apology.

There was nothing excessive in Locker's celebration. Nothing unsportsmanlike.

Referee Larry Farina said officials had to throw a flag, adding: "It was not a judgment call."

Every call is a judgment call. Every holding penalty that isn't flagged is a judgment call.

This is a make-or-break season for this coaching staff, and a call that bad can affect the long-term future of the program.

Lappano, clearly knowing the effects of that flag, followed the officials into the tunnel after the game, his screams echoing off the walls.

"By no means did he mean any disrespect to BYU," Lappano said of Locker. "He wasn't taunting anybody. He was celebrating with his teammates. He flipped the ball up in the air.

"He understands the deal, but it's a tough lesson to learn. He feels terrible. I don't think you make that call, but I'm already in trouble anyway, so I should shut up. I shouldn't have done what I did. I just wanted to know how high [the ball] was, because everybody knows he wasn't taunting anybody."

It was a brutal call. A call that, almost certainly, will haunt the Huskies into December.

And, having said that, Washington can't use one penalty — even a flag as punishing as that — as an excuse for this loss.

Perkins had a chance to pick up Locker, make the pressurized PAT and put the game into overtime. Instead, he mishit the ball, sending it into the hungry arms of the Cougars' Jan Jorgensen.

A team that has a reputation for finding ways to lose, found a new way in this loss. A terrible call doesn't excuse the BYU drives of 97 and 84 yards the Huskies allowed in the fourth quarter.

It doesn't excuse the dropped passes. And there is no evidence that Washington, which allowed 475 offensive yards, could have stopped the Cougars in overtime.

"The officials never decide a game," Locker said in his typical stand-up fashion.

But there are moments in sports where the games are best served by restrained officials. There are events that are too good to be decided by an overzealous official.

Games are meant to be played with joy. And there never, ever should be anything wrong with doing what Jake Locker did in the final seconds of one memorable Saturday afternoon.

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