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Willingham: 'Not the right call'

Pac-10's head of refs backs crew

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By TIM BOOTH
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Seemingly everyone has a strong opinion about the 15-yard unsportsmanlike conduct penalty called on Washington quarterback Jake Locker after scoring in the final seconds against No. 18 BYU -- pundits, coaches, even the manager of the New York Yankees.

Washington coach Tyrone Willingham decided to weigh in with his thoughts on Monday, two days after giving a reserved response following the Huskies 28-27 loss to the Cougars.

His opinion, like so many others: The refs were wrong.

"I think we all know that was not the right call ..." Willingham said. "It's an opportunity to use discretion and it was not used. The proper judgment was not used. That was not an act of a young man taunting. That was not an unsportsmanlike act at all and therefore it should have been viewed in its totality and not just in the letter of the law."

Locker was flagged on Saturday after tumbling into the end zone on a 3-yard touchdown run with 2 seconds left in regulation to pull Washington within 28-27. As he leapt to his feet, Locker threw his hands in the air, sending the ball sailing upward, before beginning to celebrate with his teammates.

Officials immediately called a penalty, because, as a point of emphasis for officials this year, Locker violated one part of the excessive celebration rule in the NCAA rule book -- throwing the ball in the air.

Pac-10 coordinator of football officiating Dave Cutaia agreed that it is a harsh penalty, but supported the call based on how the rule is written.

"Every call is a judgment call," he said. "(The official) saw the ball thrown very high in the air and made the call. I can't say the call is incorrect."

Cutaia would like to see the rule amended, so actions like Locker's don't draw as severe a penalty as players who openly taunt the opposition or showboat following plays.

"The rule unfortunately is very specific. ... Perhaps a rule change is in order to make it not so severe," he said.

Locker's initial response questioning what he did wrong was the prevailing theme among commentators and pundits following Saturday's game. Columnists from New York to Los Angeles weighed in with the prevailing belief that no one would have cared if the call had not been made. Even Yankees manager Joe Girardi made a passing comment before Sunday's series finale against the Mariners, saying the call on

Locker was "horrible."

Coaches, meanwhile, have been reluctant to criticize the call. Oklahoma coach Bob Stoops -- no stranger to controversy with Pac-10 officials -- declined to comment Monday, although he said he'd seen the play.

Two years ago, Oregon beat Oklahoma in Eugene after a blown call on an onside kick led to Oregon's winning touchdown in the final minute.

The Pac-10 admitted the ball was touched by an Oregon player before it traveled the required 10 yards, and possession should have been awarded to Oklahoma, which had, in any event, recovered the ball. The league suspended the officials responsible for a game -- including Cutaia, who was the referee.

Willingham questioned the explanation given by referee Larry Farina following the game, when Farina said, "it was not a judgment call." Willingham's contention is that officials are allowed to use discretion on every call. Willingham and Cutaia spoke this weekend about the call, but neither would elaborate on their talk.

"I believe that from the time they start the ballgame they have the ability to call what they believe is a foul, and what is not a foul they have the ability to let that go," Willingham said. "I think it's clear. You always have a choice and they had a choice."

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