NFL brass curtails end-zone celebrations

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As a series of plays from the 2005 season flashed on the screen at the NFL meetings, people began to yawn. Examples of "down by contact" or minor movement that led to illegal procedure calls just weren't attention grabbers.

They woke up quickly when a tape came up showing Cincinnati's Chad Johnson catching a touchdown pass from Carson Palmer, then picking up a pylon and putting the football from the back line of the end zone.

"He has a better stroke than I have," said supervisor of officials Mike Pereira, who was overseeing the video session.

Entertaining as Johnson's putt looked, it won't happen again — at least not without repercussions.

NFL owners voted 29-3 Wednesday to limit end zone demonstrations, including those using props such as Johnson's pylon putt or Terrell Owens' Sharpie signing; or another Owens specialty, sit-ups after a score.

Moves like that will now draw a 15-yard unsportsmanlike conduct penalty.

Also banned: Johnson's proposal to a cheerleader on the sideline — another of his shows last year — because he got down on one knee and doffed his helmet.

On the other hand, his "Riverdance" routine, one of last season's highlight film bests, will be OK because he stayed on his feet. That kind of thing is still allowed, as is spiking, dunking or spinning the ball after a TD.

Still, there will have to be some innovation by the celebrators.

"I'm looking forward to seeing what Chad will come to celebrate with now," Indianapolis coach Tony Dungy said after the vote.

Owners and league officials acknowledge the entertainment value of touchdown celebrations, many featuring Johnson, Owens or Carolina's Steve Smith, three of the league's top wide receivers.

But they also had had numerous communications from officials of youth football leagues, saying that more and more youngsters were imitating NFL players. And they said a group of players, most of them defenders, who talked to them during meetings in Indianapolis last month agreed the demonstrations were a bit over the top and should be modified.

The innate conservatism of NFL coaches also played a part in the vote, on which Dallas, Philadelphia and Tampa Bay were the dissenters.

"I think it's needed," said San Diego coach Marty Schottenheimer, who is entering his 21st season, most of any current head coach. "The game is about the team, not the individual."

There also were more substantive rules changes on the final day of the three-day owners meetings, although nothing as flashy as the ban on demonstrations:

They included:

• Allowing down by contact calls to be reviewed by replay to determine if the ball came out before the ballcarrier was down, and who recovered it. In the past, those plays were not reviewable when officials ruled the whistle had ended the play.

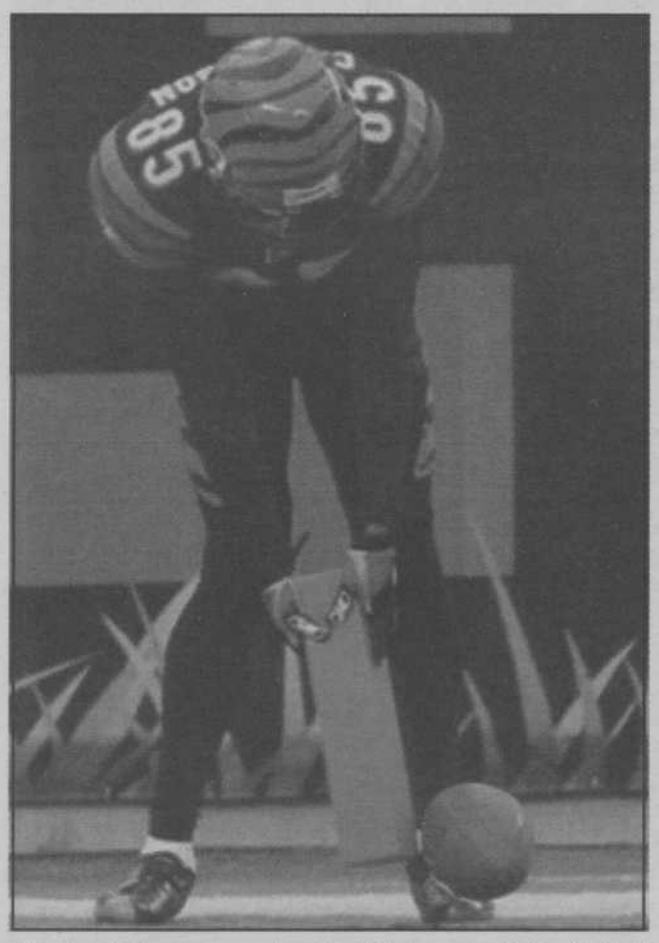
• Prohibiting pass rushers from hitting a passer in the knee or below unless they are blocked into him. The officiating department showed low hits that caused serious injuries to Cincinnati's Palmer, Pittsburgh's Ben Roethlisberger and Tampa Bay's Brian Griese, although in all cases, those would not draw penalties because the rushers were blocked in such a way that they could not avoid the hits.

• Toughening the horse-collar rule enacted last season. It now bans tacklers from taking down ballcarriers from the rear by tugging inside their jerseys. Last year's rule required that the tackler's hand got inside the runner's shoulder pads. Only two horse-collars were called in 2005 and the officiating department said one was an incorrect call.

• Prohibiting defensive players from lining up directly over center on field-goal and extra-point attempts to avoid injuries to long snappers.

The teams rejected a proposal aimed at cutting down illegal procedure penalties by eliminating such calls on players flanked outside the line of scrimmage who flinch without the defense reacting. A flinch will remain a 5-yard penalty.

The meetings adjourned with little action on finding a successor to commissioner Paul Tagliabue, who announced his retirement a week ago.



Cincinnati Bengals receiver Chad Johnson putts the football with the goal line pylon after scoring on a 54-yard touchdown pass from Carson Palmer against the Baltimore Ravens, in this Nov. 27, 2005, photo, in Cincinnati, Ohio.

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