Unintended Consequences of NFL Rule Changes – Evolution of Kickoff Strategies

by

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Abstract

This paper studies the unintended consequences of a rule change implemented by the NFL in 2016, which moved the starting point after a touchback from the 20-yard line to the 25-yard line. This decision was intended to disincentivize receiving teams from returning kickoffs as these returns oftentimes engendered high-speed collisions and injuries. Post the rule change, while the receiving team did choose to return the ball fewer times, kicking teams started kicking the ball higher and shorter with a greater hang time in an attempt to pin the receiving team inside the 25-yard line. Reasons behind this trend provide insights into the strategic thinking and analysis deployed by special teams and on a higher level, the importance of incentives in policy making.
I Introduction

Policies implemented by governing bodies often have unintended consequences. An apt example would be the proposed solution to the problem of the proliferation of venomous cobras in Delhi during the British colonial rule in India. To curb this increase, the British government started offering a bounty for dead cobras. Expectedly, the number of cobras initially declined as people actively started hunting them for the reward. However, as cobras became increasingly difficult to find, people started breeding them in order to earn money. Soon, the local authorities noticed that they were paying a higher bounty despite very few visible cobras in the city. They got wind of the enterprising solution devised by people and canceled the bounty. Consequently, the cobra breeders set the snakes free, exacerbating the menace of cobras in the streets of Delhi.

This phenomenon of a policy leading to unforeseen second-order effects arising from misaligned incentives is often seen in business, war, and sports. People attempt to circumvent the original intention of the policy through ingenious means to serve their own interests. To demonstrate this phenomenon, this paper studies the unintended consequences of rule changes implemented in the National Football League (NFL) by analyzing the strategies of teams before and after the rule changes.

With regard to American football, historically, a kickoff return has been one of the most exciting plays, having the potential to shift the momentum and change the complexion of a game. A perfect example of such a return was the one executed by the Tennessee Titans against the Buffalo Bills in 2000. Trailing 15-16 with 16 seconds left on the clock, the Titans scored a touchdown on the kickoff return with 3 seconds remaining to emerge victorious. Another kickoff return etched in the memories of football fans is the one by Devin Hester in Super Bowl XLI. Playing for the Chicago
Bears against the Indianapolis Colts, Hester received the opening kickoff from his 10-yard line and became the first person in Super Bowl history to score a return touchdown off the opening kickoff.

Despite the exhilaration kickoff returns often generated among fans, they were heavily scrutinized for the injuries caused by high-speed collisions between returners and blockers. In fact, the injury rate on kickoffs in 2010 was higher than that on any other play\(^1\) and the number of concussions that occurred on kickoffs in 2010 stood at 35.\(^2\)

Hitherto, the spot of the kickoff was the 30-yard line. To reduce kickoff returns and limit concussions, the NFL, in 2011, decided to move the spot of the kickoff to the 35-yard line and limited running starts to five yards.

This rule change prompted the kicking team to kick the ball into the end zone more often, evident by an increase in the number of times the ball was kicked into the end zone – from 37\% in 2010 to 81\% in 2011. This also led to a decrease in the kickoff return rate – from 81\% in 2010 to 54\% in 2011. These were exactly the kind of results the NFL sought to achieve and brought about a decrease in injuries resulting from kickoffs. The incidence of total injuries during kickoffs decreased significantly from 22.0 injuries per 1,000 kickoffs in 2010 to 10.0 injuries per 1,000 kickoffs in 2011 (Ruestow, et al). Furthermore, the number of concussions on kickoffs decreased from 35 in 2010 to 20 in


2011. This reduction in injuries was predominantly driven by an increase in touchbacks as rate of injuries on returned kickoffs did not experience a statistically significant decrease (Ruestow, et al).

Given that kickoff-related injuries still occurred after the 2011 rule change, albeit in smaller numbers, the NFL instituted another rule change in 2016 to further curb injuries. This rule change moved the ball placement after a touchback from the 20-yard line to the 25-yard line. This 5 yard cushion markedly incentivized receiving teams to secure touchbacks instead of returning the ball. Akin to the 2011 rule change, kicking teams reevaluated their strategy as well. However, this time, instead of settling for more touchbacks, kicking teams started using “mortar kicks” – high and short kicks with a greater hang time to place the ball before the end zone and give their coverage unit time to run down the field to pin the opposition inside the 25-yard line. Consequently, the number of kickoffs that bounced before the end zone increased from 15% in 2015 to 24% in 2016.

The aforementioned strategy deployed by the kicking team is an example of unintended consequences stemming from misaligned incentives. While the NFL sought to reduce kickoff returns by increasing touchbacks, its rule change incentivized the kicking teams to pursue the opposite – more kickoff returns as they faced a loss of 5 yards in a touchback. Consequently, it also did not solve the problem of kickoff-related concussions, which only decreased from 20 in 2015 to 17 in 2016, and then increased.

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The rest of the paper proceeds as follows. Section II provides an overview of past research on the subject. Section III describes the methodology used for the analysis. Section IV discusses results of the data analysis. Section V presents a discussion on the future of kickoffs. Section VI concludes.
II Literature review

Significant research has been conducted on the unintended consequences of numerous policy changes implemented in the realm of sports. While there has been a plethora of research analyzing unforeseen strategic ramifications stemming from rule changes in a particular sport, Kendall and Lenten’s (2017) work was seminal in its comprehensiveness. It examined the unexpected consequences of existing or new rules in 14 different sports, also including examples like tanking that are universal to all sports.

Rule changes relating to the kickoff in football have also garnered attention in academic literature. Ruestow, et al (2015) studied the impact of the NFL’s decision to move the kickoff restraining line from the 30-yard line to the 35-yard line in 2011, and observed a decrease in injuries from 2010 to 2011. This decline was, expectedly, driven by a decrease in the number of kickoff returns. Wiebe, et al (2018) investigated the effects of two rule changes implemented in Ivy League football in 2016 – the kickoff line was moved from the 35-yard line to the 40-yard line and the touchback line was moved from 25-yard line to the 20-yard line. The analysis revealed a significant drop in concussion rate after these rule changes. Richardson, et al (2018), akin to Ruestow, concluded that the 2011 rule change was effective in reducing injuries in the NFL.

Despite the presence of research delving into the aftermath of rule changes relating to kickoffs, much of it focusses on the drop in injury rate – the very purpose of implementing the policy changes. Second-order effects and unintended strategic consequences haven’t been studied. This paper hopes to fill the gap by analyzing changes in kickoff strategies after the 2016 NFL rule change, with a particular focus on the contrast in incentives and resultant effects between the 2011 and 2016 rule changes.
III Methodology

The analysis required play-by-play information, which was collected from Armchair Analysis, an NFL data provider. This data comprised of information for all seasons from 2000 to 2019, including 5,299 games. For each play, the data provided key metrics like play type, kickoff distance, starting point, and binary values for the occurrence of touchbacks and kickoff returns, among many others.

The data contained several plays with penalties, which, for a consequent play, deviated the kickoff restraining line or touchback starting position from what the rules normally entailed. For instance, after 2011, if a 15-yard penalty was imposed on either team on a touchdown, the subsequent kickoff would start from either the 20-yard or the 50-yard line. This change in starting position would most likely bring a change in the team’s kickoff distance. Furthermore, when analyzed with the other data, most of which represent kickoffs with normal starting points, it would distort the results and misrepresent strategy. Consequently, the data was scrubbed for kickoffs and touchbacks not taking place from their regular starting positions owing to penalties. This also facilitated an apples-to-apples comparison between the data before and after the 2016 rule change. In addition to penalties, the data was also cleaned for squib kicks and onside kicks, most of which were classified as normal kickoffs.

After cleaning the data, it was segmented into 3 time periods based on different rules in those periods, as depicted in Table 1. Thereafter, relevant metrics like kickoff distance, percentage of mortar kicks, and starting positions after kickoffs were calculated.
Table 1 – Rules in different time periods

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kickoff starting position</td>
<td>30 yards</td>
<td>35 yards</td>
<td>35 yards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Touchback starting position</td>
<td>20 yards</td>
<td>20 yards</td>
<td>25 yards</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
IV Discussion of Results

Effects of 2016 Rule Change

Results from the data analysis reveal a conspicuous change in strategies of both the receiving and kicking units. Given that the 2016 rule change moved ball placement after a touchback from the 20-yard to the 25-yard line, receiving teams stood to gain 5 yards in case of a touchback. Expectedly, receiving teams started returning fewer kickoffs received inside the end zone. From 2011 to 2015, the percentage of kicks kicked into the end zone and returned by the receiving teams was 36.51%. In the four seasons after the 2016 rule change, this metric plummeted to 20.92%. Evidently, the NFL was successful in incentivizing receiving teams to return the ball fewer times.

On the contrary, the rule change also implied that kicking teams would now have to face the receiving teams at the 25-yard line, instead of the 20-yard line, after a touchback. This loss of 5 yards, without any benefit, incentivized some kicking teams to force the receiving teams to return their kickoffs. As Greg Zuerlein, the Los Angeles Rams’ kicker and kickoff specialist, said in 2016 – “It seems so obvious. No one is going to want to kick touchbacks when you give them free yards. Why would you? It’s like they didn’t even ask coaches what might happen.”

The kicking teams started using mortar kicks – shorter and higher kicks with a greater hang time in order to force a kickoff return and give their coverage unit sufficient time to run down the field and try to pin the opposition inside the 25-yard line. Between 2011 and 2015, the average kickoff distance stood at 65.53 yards, slightly above the 65

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yards required to reach the end zone. However, in the seasons after the rule change, the kickoff distance fell to 64.05 yards, visibly below the 65 yards required to reach the end zone. Furthermore, the percentage of kickoffs that did not reach the end zone increased by more than a third from 16.85% in 2011 – 2015 to 22.83% in 2016 – 2019.

Figure 1 below illustrates the average kickoff distance from 2011 to 2019, with the sharp drop after the rule change highlighted. Figure 2 depicts the percentage of kickoffs that did not reach the end zone from 2011 to 2019, with the spike after the rule change highlighted.

Figure 1 – Average Kickoff Distance from 2011 to 2019
To summarize, there were 2 strategic adjustments to the rule change – 1) the receiving teams started returning fewer kickoffs that reached the end zone, and 2) the kicking team started kicking the ball before the end zone, forcing a kickoff return, a greater number of times. These two effects negated each other, leading to the kickoff return rate staying flat over the 2 years following the rule change. This has been depicted in figure 3 below, which illustrates the percentage of kickoffs returned from 2011 to 2019, and highlights the kickoff return rate staying flat for 2 years post the rule change. While there was a slight decline in kickoff returns in 2018, that was the result of a separate set of rule changes instituted by the NFL in 2018. Some of these changes, which include the elimination of running starts for the kicking team and declaring the play a touchback as soon as the ball touches the receiving team’s end zone, were responsible for the decline in kickoff returns in 2018. Figure 4 below provides a graphic representation
of all rule changes implemented in 2018.

*Figure 3 – Percentage of kickoffs returned from 2011 to 2019*

*Figure 4 – Rule Changes Instituted in 2018*
Hence, these unintended consequences – kicking teams’ increased deployment of mortar kicks and no change in kickoff returns – was the result of a policy change offering misaligned incentives to one party.

Contrast between 2011 and 2016 Rule Changes

The above results are in stark contrast to the aftereffects of the 2011 rule change implemented by the NFL. When the NFL moved the kickoff restraining line from the 30-yard line to the 35-yard line, given the reduction in distance between the kickoff restraining line and the receiving team’s end zone, kicking teams were incentivized to kick the ball into the end zone a greater number of times. When the ball was kicked into the end zone, receiving teams were often averse to returning the ball as securing a touchback assured them a starting point of 20 yards during that time. Consequently, receiving teams were incentivized to return the ball fewer times as well.

This alignment of incentives led to the desired outcome. Kicking teams started kicking the ball into the end zone a significantly greater number of times, as evident by the drastic drop in kickoffs that did not reach the end zone in 2011 in figure 5 below. Given that receiving teams were less incentivized to return the ball now, the kickoff return rate also experienced a sharp drop in 2011, depicted in figure 6 below, and exactly as intended by the rule change.
Figure 5 – Percentage of kickoffs that did not reach the end zone from 2000 to 2015

Figure 6 – Percentage of kickoffs returned from 2000 to 2015
Hence, in 2011, both the kicking and receiving units reacted similarly to the rule change, aligning their strategies to lead to fewer kickoff returns. However, in 2016, post the rule change, their strategies diverged, with the kicking teams seeking to increase the number of kickoff returns. This divergence, stemming from the incentives offered to each party, explains the difference in results after the rule changes.

Rationale behind using Mortar Kicks

While moving the touchback starting position from the 20-yard line to the 25-yard line does put the kicking team at a loss in case of a touchback, the efficacy of using mortar kicks could still be debated upon. The NFL reduced the kicking teams’ running starts in 2016 and 2018, making it increasingly difficult to reach the receiving team’s end zone faster. Furthermore, the possibility of a long kickoff return, potentially leading to a touchdown, poses another risk for kicking teams.

In order to determine whether the mortar kick strategy has a positive expected value for the kicking team in the form of improved field position, the median starting yardages of the receiving teams after kickoff returns were calculated and segregated based on the position at which the ball was received. Tables 2 and 3 depict the aforementioned information for the time periods 2011 – 2015 and 2016 – 2019 respectively. This analysis suggests that mortar kicks are effective, albeit only in certain cases.
Table 2 – Median starting yardages of receiving teams after kickoff returns for 2011 – 2015

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yard line kick was received at</th>
<th>Starting positions</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>75th percentile</td>
<td>Median</td>
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<tr>
<td>1 to 5</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 to 10</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>26</td>
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<tr>
<td>11 to 15</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 to 20</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 to 25</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Returned from the end zone</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 – Median starting yardages of receiving teams after kickoff returns for 2016 – 2019

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</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>11 to 15</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 to 20</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 to 25</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Returned from the end zone</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The aforementioned analysis suggests that kicking the ball between the 1 to 5 yard line would, on average, result in a positive expected value for the kicking team.
Furthermore, the 25th percentile of the table shows that kicking the ball anywhere between the 1 to 15 yard line would be beneficial for the kicking team as opposed to settling for a touchback. If a simplified assumption that the top quartile kicking units would, on average, restrict the opposition to a starting yardage corresponding to the 25th percentile is used, kicking the ball between the 1 to 5 yard line would enable the kicking unit to stop the receiving team at the 20-yard line, on average. This would result in a gain of 5 yards for the kicking team, when compared with the starting yardage after a touchback. Median values were considered for this analysis instead of mean values, which were inflated owing to a few disproportionately large values arising from long kickoff returns.

Kicking units seem to have unraveled this method of using mortar kicks. This is evident in the increase in the percentage of times a kickoff reached the 1 – 5, 6 – 10, and 11 – 15 yard lines after the 2016 rule change, as depicted in table 4 below.

Table 4 – Frequency of kickoffs that land in a certain region

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Metric</th>
<th>2011 - 2015</th>
<th>2016 - 2019</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kickoffs that reached the 1-5 yard line</td>
<td>8.85%</td>
<td>14.70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kickoffs that reached the 6-10 yard line</td>
<td>2.86%</td>
<td>4.94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kickoffs that reached the 11-15 yard line</td>
<td>1.27%</td>
<td>1.64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kickoffs that reached the 16-20 yard line</td>
<td>1.03%</td>
<td>0.94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kickoffs that reached the 21-25 yard line</td>
<td>0.71%</td>
<td>0.65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kickoffs returned from the end zone</td>
<td>30.36%</td>
<td>16.14%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Another observation from this analysis was that the median starting yardages when
the receiving team returned the ball from the end zone was 21 yards in 2011 – 2015 and 22 yards in 2016 – 2019, as illustrated in tables 2 and 3 respectively. Consequently, receiving teams were more inclined to return the ball from the end zone when the touchback starting position was 20 yards instead of 25 yards. This, once again, is apparent in the decline in kickoffs returned from the end zone from 30.36% in 2011 – 2015 to 16.14% in 2016 – 2019.

Individual Team Analysis

Strategies of individual teams were assessed to discern which kicking units have been deploying mortar kicks most frequently. The analysis, expectedly, revealed that some teams used mortar kicks more often than others. This partly reveals the belief each particular team has in its kicking unit. Surprisingly, as many as 28 out of 32 teams have started kicking the ball before the end zone, forcing a kickoff return, a greater number of times after the 2016 rule change.

Table 5 – Percentage of kickoffs that did not reach the end zone

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Team</th>
<th>2011 - 2015</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Los Angeles Chargers</td>
<td>36.13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New England Patriots</td>
<td>30.71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pittsburgh Steelers</td>
<td>29.41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York Giants</td>
<td>28.62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Houston Texans</td>
<td>28.57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detroit Lions</td>
<td>28.06%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Tables 5 and 6 provide a list of the teams using mortar kicks the most frequently before and after the rule change. Before the rule change, between 2011 – 2015, the Washington Redskins had the highest percentage of kickoffs that did not reach the end zone – at 29.84%. Since the rule change in 2016, the Los Angeles Chargers have leapfrogged the Washington Redskins with 36.13% of their kickoffs falling before the end zone.


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Team</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Washington Redskins</td>
<td>29.84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York Giants</td>
<td>26.84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York Jets</td>
<td>26.78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buffalo Bills</td>
<td>25.65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pittsburgh Steelers</td>
<td>25.30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green Bay Packers</td>
<td>22.89%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
V Discussion on future of kickoffs

Numerous rule changes enacted by the NFL over the last decade have made kickoffs relatively safer. However, they have also made the play much less exciting. Kickoff return touchdowns, arguably the most exciting play resulting from a kickoff, have plummeted in recent years, as displayed in figure 7. From a high of 24 in 2007, the number of kickoff return touchdowns in a season hasn’t crossed 10 since 2012.

Figure 7 – Number of kickoff return touchdowns from 2000 to 2019

In addition, while this drop in kickoff return touchdowns has coincided with a decrease in the incidence of injuries, the decline hasn’t been enough to alleviate the worries of the NFL Competition Committee. This is primarily because concussions still happen on kicks that are not returned, given that most players of both teams still run towards each other. This has led the NFL to explore the outright elimination of kickoffs. Mark Murphy, the Packers president and a member of the NFL Competition Committee,
gave a message to the coaches and coordinators in 2018, saying, “If you don’t make changes to make it safer, we’re going to do away with it. It’s that serious. It’s by far the most dangerous play in the game.”

While legislating the kickoff to death will make the sport safer, it would also remove a historical and integral part of the game, possibly antagonizing longtime football fans. The NFL Competition Committee does recognize this, with its chair, the Falcons president Rich McKay, saying, “We understand that its been a historical part of the game, and nobody wants to mess with the history part of the game unless it need be.” Furthermore, it would also lead to job losses in the special teams and from a strategic standpoint, eradicate the possibility of the kicking team’s retaining possession through an onside kick, even in dire situations with little time left.

Given the drawbacks associated with eliminating kickoffs, several alternatives to make the play safer have surfaced. One of them is a rule change instituted by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), which states that a successful fair catch by the receiving team within its own 25-yard line would result in a touchback. While this does make the play safer, it almost eliminates the anticipation of a long kickoff return. It, arguably, also undermines a strategic aspect of the game as Stanford coach David Shaw argues, saying, “Field position is the basis of the game. To fair catch a ball and

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automatically move the ball up is difficult for me to take.”

Two additional alternatives present strong arguments to replace the current kickoff. One of them is an idea proposed by Greg Schiano, the head coach of Rutgers, in 2011. This idea, called the Schiano proposal, states that instead of a kickoff, teams would face a fourth down and 15 yards to go. Essentially, the punt would replace the kickoff while the fourth down conversion would replace the onside kick. This proposal has legitimate merits. In addition to being safer than a kickoff return, a punt return also has a higher probability of leading to a touchdown, the most anticipated aspect of a kickoff.

Furthermore, a fourth down conversion with 15 yards to go has a greater probability of success than an onside kick, while also being more strategic in its execution. Nevertheless, notwithstanding all its merits, this proposal is unlikely to be implemented in the near future, given the drastic changes it puts forward. Even if it does come to fruition, it would be more gradual after the kickoff goes through multiple other modifications.

The last, and most likely, alternative is the adoption of XFL’s kickoff rules. XFL, a professional American football league, introduced a new set of rules for the kickoff, where the kicker would be the only player on his half of the field. The other players in the kicking team would be lined up at the opposition’s 35-yard line, 5 yards away from the receiving team’s blockers at the 30-yard line. No one except the kicker and returner is allowed to move until the ball is caught, which eliminates high speed collisions between blockers and defenders. Furthermore, if a kickoff goes through the end zone, the ball is

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placed at the 35-yard line. This disincentivizes kicking teams from kicking the ball into the end zone. Consequently, this proposal eliminates high speed collisions and incentivizes more returns to keep the play safe and exciting.

This rule seemed to working well for the first few games of the XFL season, after which the league was declared bankrupt owing to pandemic-related losses. Through the first eight games of the season, 90.1% of kickoffs were returned, which is higher than the kickoff return rate in any NFL season of the 21st century. This has enamored this novel kickoff formation to football fans, who have reacted very positively to this new rule. In fact, even Mark Murphy, the Packers president and a member of the NFL Competition Committee, said that he was intrigued by the XFL kickoff formation and acknowledged the additional safety brought about by it.

All in all, while there are several alternatives to the current version of the kickoff, the XFL kickoff formation, objectively, seems to resolve all issues related to the kickoff. It makes the play safer by eliminating high speed collisions and exciting by incentivizing kickoff returns without antagonizing the traditional football fan who has grown up watching the kickoff, eagerly anticipating a return.

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VI Conclusion

This paper studies unintended consequences often resulting from policy changes, stemming from misaligned incentives to one or more parties. If the intention of the policy is not in line with the incentives offered to these parties, they are spurred to act in enterprising ways that counteracts the policy. This was evident from the NFL’s 2016 rule change, which sought to reduce kickoff returns and injuries, but incentivized kicking teams to pursue the opposite.

Results from this paper corroborate the overarching thesis. After the rule change, receiving teams chose to return only 20.92% of kickoffs that reached the end zone, a sharp decline from 36.51% before the rule change from 2011 to 2015. On the contrary, however, kicking teams increasingly started forcing kickoff returns by kicking the ball before the end zone a greater number of times. The percentage of kickoffs that landed before the end zone increased by more than a third from 16.85% in 2011 – 2015 to 22.83% in 2016 – 2019. Both actions negated each other, which led the kickoff return rate to stay flat for the next two years, until another rule change was instituted in 2018.

The aforementioned unintended consequences were in stark contrast to the results emanating from the 2011 rule change. The 2011 rule change incentivized both the receiving and kicking teams to align their strategies to have fewer kickoff returns. Resultantly, the kickoff return rate and consequently, incidence of injuries plummeted after that rule change.

The analysis also revealed the competitiveness and professionalism of special teams. Despite only standing to gain 3 to 4 yards, on average, on a well-executed mortar kick, kicking teams chose to abide by this strategy. Given that they faced the risk of a long kickoff return, potentially leading to a return touchdown, kicking teams do not seem
as risk averse as football players are often said to be.

All in all, these unintended consequences have implications for the future of kickoffs. Given the difficulty involved in making the play safer with the current formation of players, drastic measures seem imminent over the next few years. Amidst the plethora of alternatives, the XFL kickoff rules, with a proven record, albeit short, present the strongest case to be adopted by the NFL.
Works Cited


