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## Helmet-to-helmet calls make confusing impact

By Marc Morehouse  
The Gazette

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IOWA CITY — Safety is an emphasis for college football officials this season. That's a great concept, laudable in every way imaginable. The problem is this: Football isn't built for safety.

Helmet-to-helmet penalties have played a role in two Iowa games this season. Iowa benefited from a helmet-to-helmet personal foul call when Iowa State defensive back Leonard Johnson smacked tight end Tony Moeaki after a short pass Sept. 13. The 15 yards moved Iowa to Iowa State's 31 and the drive ended up as six points.

Last week against Northwestern, Iowa defensive backs Shaun Prater and Bradley Fletcher tackled Rasheed Ward after a 9-yard gain on a third-and-10 play. Fletcher was called for helmet-to-helmet contact, giving NU a first-and-goal at Iowa's 5. The drive turned into the winning points.

One helmet shot not called might have shaped the game even more. Iowa running back Shonn Greene got hung up at the line of scrimmage early in the fourth quarter. Northwestern safety Brad Phillips cleaned up, with a shot on Greene's helmet. Greene was knocked out of the game and the fumble set up Northwestern's winning drive.

"That's one where probably (you) need to go back and look at," Iowa Coach Kirk Ferentz said.

During Big Ten media days in August, reporters were shown an officials' emphasis video. Above-the-shoulder tackles and tackles involving the crown of the helmet were singled out for 15-yard penalties.

The highlight used to emphasize this was a hit Michigan State's Nehemiah Warrick put on Wisconsin receiver Kyle Jefferson last season in Madison, Wis. Warrick led with his head and no penalty was called. According to a story in The Capital Times, UW radio play-by-play announcer Matt Lepay called Big Ten coordinator of officials David Parry at halftime, and Parry said the play should have been a 15-yard penalty.

The hit on Moeaki was a penalty. The hit on Ward was a penalty. The hit on Greene wasn't. The hit on Jefferson wasn't.

The rule seems to have an element of judgment.

"I think it's really ambiguous right now," Ferentz said. "We've had them go against us and one for us. Just one person's opinion, because of the emphasis, I'm not sure we're not over-officiating that particular play.

"I'm not faulting anyone. I just think that's the fallout of where we're at right now."



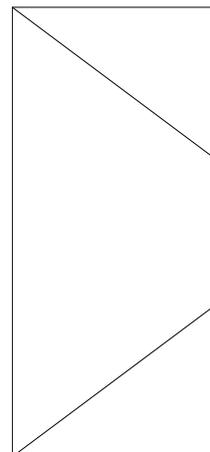
(Cliff Jette/The Gazette)

Iowa's Karl Klug (left) tries to tackle Tyrell Sutton of Northwestern during the third quarter of Saturday's game at Kinnick Stadium in Iowa City. Helmet-to-helmet contact has been a point of emphasis for college football officials this season.

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The NCAA rules committee refined the rules this year regarding the use of the helmet as a weapon and targeting defenseless players.

The rule says: "It is now a foul when a player targets an opponent and initiates contact with the crown (top) of the helmet.

This rule is intended primarily for the safety of the player who initiates the contact. It is also a foul if a player targets a defenseless opponent and initiates contact above the shoulders."

Hits on defenseless players were targeted in the emphasis video.

"I guess when I think of helmet-to-helmet, I think of spearing, something where you're really putting someone in danger, trying to intentionally put someone in danger," Ferentz said. "Or a flagrant hit, I've seen a couple this year that have been called."

These are bang-bang, heat-of-the-moment plays. They're also not reviewable. What the official sees, he calls or he doesn't.

"I think it's tough coaching tackling right now," Ferentz said. "I think it's tough to officiate tackling. That's just my observation."

Violence is an inherent part of the game. Ferentz doesn't think it's more violent now than it's ever been.

"In general terms, yeah, athletes are bigger, stronger, faster than they have probably ever been, so the impacts can be (more violent)," Ferentz said. "But it's always been a pretty violent game. It's a collision sport."

Even though it doesn't look like it, safety is on the players' minds. They're playing in a game, not fighting in some battle.

"Anytime you see a player go down, whether it's our team or the other team, you hope it's not anything serious," Iowa quarterback Ricky Stanzi said.

"You know, we're trying to play a ballgame here. We're not trying to hurt people. Anytime you see that, it's never good. We're just trying to play football."

If you watch a game closely enough, you wonder how helmet-to-helmet isn't called every down. Linemen begin every play in a three-point stance.

By nature, the head is front and center while firing out. The head is a point of emphasis.

Iowa offensive tackle Bryan Bulaga signed up for this. He knows the helmet-to-helmet is a tough call. He thinks officials want to keep players safe and keep the game clean.

But he's out there playing the game.

His head and the helmet that protects it are tools of this game.

"You've got a helmet on, you use it," he said.

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(Cliff Jette/The Gazette)

Northwestern's Brendan Smith closes in on Iowa's Shonn Greene as Iowa's Bryan Bulaga smacks helmets with Prince Kwateng of Northwestern on Saturday in Iowa City.

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