

With two minutes, 37 seconds left in the game, it looked as though the Cardinals, with a 23-20 lead, might carry the day. But, starting from the Steeler's 22-yard line, quarterback Ben Roethlisberger calmly led his team downfield, deep into Steelers' territory. Then, it all came down to one pivotal pass.

With 35 seconds left on the clock, the Steelers were at the 6-yard line. With the offensive line holding off Arizona defenders, Roethlisberger dropped back to the 13 and let go of a high-and-outside pass destined for wide receiver Santonio Holmes.

Three red jerseys crowded Holmes in the end zone and the ball, barreling toward him, missed the outstretched hands of Cardinal Aaron Francisco by mere inches.

Holmes was already in motion. Leaning over the white boundary stripe, he snatched the football from the air. Gripping it with both hands, he stretched out his 5-foot, 11-inch frame. Pointing his toes like a ballet dancer's, he strained to touch paydirt while falling out of bounds.

In the stands, Steelers' fans and foes screamed and shouted, rode waves of emotion. Gautreaux, on the sidelines, watched with calm intent. Then, he charged into the end zone and thrust his arms into the air, making the call: Touchdown!

Holmes' acrobatic catch would ultimately give the Steelers a 27-23 win and their sixth world championship. But not before officials decided to review the play, causing Steelers' fans — and members of Gautreaux's family seated in the stands — to hold their collective breath.

"My wife said it was the longest 90 seconds of her life," Gautreaux recalled.

Replays from various angles confirmed his on-the-spot analysis: Holmes indeed had both feet in bounds to score on the play. Gautreaux said he never had a doubt. "I felt good about it. I was confident in my decision."

Yet, controversy would linger, not over Holmes' catch, but what he did afterward. In the end zone, he celebrated by mimicking NBA star LeBron James' pre-game ritual. James likes to get basketball fans fired up by pouring talcum powder onto his hands, then creating courtside clouds with it.

While NFL officials weren't looking, Holmes performed his own version of the stunt. First, he shook the football as though it were a container of talc. Then he tossed the ball skyward, pretending the ball itself was a powdery shower.

Think you know as much as an NFL ref? Take our quiz to see if you could wear the stripes.

1. Which team gets to call the coin toss before each regular season game?
2. How many kicking balls are prepared for a regular season NFL game?
3. How many teams participate in an NFL game?
4. Does a receiver have to have only one foot – or both feet – in bounds for a pass to be ruled complete?
5. During the opening kickoff, the football sails through the uprights. What's the score?
6. What does it mean when the referee puts his hands on his hips?
7. How deep are the end zones?

Answers on Page 36

NFL rules forbid using a football as a prop; however, Gautreaux, the closest official, didn't see the celebration. Neither did the six other referees. "I did what I needed to do, staying in my position, watching," said Gautreaux.

After Gautreaux turned away to set up the next play, Holmes began shaking the ball. A moment later, Gautreaux looked back. "I did see him throw the ball in the air, but that's not a foul," he said.

A foul would have forced Pittsburgh to kick off from its 15-yard line and could have possibly changed the outcome of the game. (NFL officials settled the matter more than two weeks later, fining MVP Holmes \$10,000 for his end zone enthusiasm.)

But because Gautreaux wasn't familiar with James' pre-game antics, he said he's not sure what he would have done if he had witnessed the entire scene. "Even if I'd have seen it, I can't honestly say I would have flagged it or I wouldn't have flagged it, because that has to come instinctively."

It's an instinct honed over decades.

In 1972, Gautreaux graduated from Teurlings High School in Lafayette, where he had played basketball and baseball. Although he was offered walk-on spots in both sports at Louisiana College in

Pineville, he declined the offers. "I wanted to go to USL," he said. "I wanted to be closer to home."

Gautreaux spent what would have been his first college semester earning extra money by working in his father's sign shop. In January 1973, he enrolled at USL, where he would earn a degree in education.

While attending USL, Gautreaux began officiating, first at recreational and junior high school games, then as a high school official. "The competitive spirit I had in sports just transferred to officiating. When I officiate, I compete against myself, because I want to get everything right."

His dedication and determination did not go unnoticed. While working USL scrimmages, Gautreaux made an impression on then-head coach Nelson Stokley and assistant coach Gerald Broussard. The two men drafted a letter of recommendation that helped Gautreaux become an NCAA official.

Gautreaux immersed himself in what he calls his "hobby" — officiating. "I officiated college football, basketball and baseball, all at the same time, so I was gone a lot. But when I was at home, I always tried to make it a priority to spend time with my family.

"Family and faith are the two most important things in my life. And, then, you know, football."

In 1999, Gautreaux joined the now-defunct NFL Europe league. "It was great. Maybe one weekend I'm working in Barcelona, Spain. The next weekend I might be in Berlin ... It was a paid vacation."

It was also a proving ground. "There was always someone there from the NFL office who observed you and interacted with you — on the field and off the field — to see how you'd gel with the NFL guys," Gautreaux said.

"They wanted to know, 'What kind of person are you? You might be a good football official, but how's your personality? How do you get along with other officials?'"

After four years working in Europe, he earned a chance to join the NFL. Gautreaux was flown to New York, where league executives quizzed him and psychologists grilled him. The process took several days.

NFL officials wanted to know: Was Gautreaux ready? How would he respond to the pressures of professional football?

"I guess I did all right," he jokes. "They hired me."

Gautreaux has been an NFL official for seven years. He said the biggest difference between college and pro-level play is the speed of the game. The professionals move faster and the pace and flavor of the game are more intense. “These guys are professional athletes, they all perform right on that gray line. Is it a foul? Or is it not a foul? It’s right on that line.”

So how does a ref get it right nearly 100 percent of the time? Well-honed instincts and what he describes as “focused imagination.”

“You have to feel the play, see how it’s developing ... It’s all about angles.

“When you’re officiating, you have to get that angle, where you can see between things. You have to anticipate where the defensive guy’s gonna go, because you don’t want to get blocked out.”

And, “it’s visual imagery,” according to Gautreaux.

“You learn to take a mental picture, a snapshot, of critical moments in the game. In your mind, you see that action. You see the feet, you see the ball. You replay that picture in your mind.

“It’s concentration. It’s years and years of experience.”

And when it all comes together, he continued, “You’re not worried that there are 70,000 people in the stands.”

More than a dozen of Gautreaux’s family members were among the Super Bowl throng in Raymond James Stadium in Tampa, Fla., to cheer on their favorite ref.

Gautreaux credits his wife, Betsy, and their three children, Daniel, Jennifer, and Bennett, with helping him make his NFL dreams come true. “Without the support of my wife and my children, I couldn’t have been successful – at any level.”

In his full-time job, as head of athletic programs and parks maintenance for Lafayette Consolidated Government, Gautreaux oversees youth and adult programs, tennis programs, an aquatics program, therapeutic recreation and park maintenance. He also manages new projects, such as Lafayette’s skate park.

Gautreaux’s management role gives him opportunities to practice another set of key skills – working with people.

“I’ve always wanted to be a person of service,” he said. “I like to help people and I like dealing with people.”

For some, qualities like patience, forbearance and forgiveness are the

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hardest to cultivate. But they are of the utmost value in what Gautreaux calls “the sidelines of officiating” – dealing with inevitable conflict.

“One of the things I tell young officials is, ‘When a coach is in your face, yelling at you, don’t take it personally.’

“I look at it as, ‘They’re getting on my striped shirt, not me, Greg Gautreaux.’ But some people can’t do that. They’re not willing to turn the other cheek.”

A devout Catholic, Gautreaux attends morning Mass Monday through Friday. “With the NFL, one of the things I disliked was missing Sunday Mass. I started missing Sunday Mass and I felt guilty. So, I started going to daily Mass.

“I talked to the priest about it,” he said, with a light laugh. “I said, ‘Well, you know, five to one, I should be OK.’

“I think faith has had a strong role in my ability to balance everything in my life.”

That faith has also seen Gautreaux through some trying times.

His brother, Michael, was born with spina bifida, a condition that kept him confined to a wheelchair. “When he was born, the doctors told my parents he wouldn’t live long, that they shouldn’t even take him home,” Gautreaux said. Michael died in 1998 at age 47.

“My daddy loved football. My brother loved football. They used to love to look at the NFL on Sunday. But, unfortunately, both of them died before I got into the NFL.” Gautreaux’s parents and brother all died within four years.

“They all taught me so much about life, about being a person of caring and service. And I think all of this has helped me in football officiating. In officiating, you need to be a communicator. What you are communicating is that you have confidence, that you know what you’re doing. You’re communicat-

ing to coaches about plays and they have to trust you.

“My father was an excellent man of patience. I never heard the man curse, never saw him get upset. When somebody might curse him out, he would turn and say, ‘You know what? I’m sorry you feel that way, but I’m going to say a little prayer for you.’ And he didn’t mean it sarcastically.”

When faced with an angry outburst, Gautreaux remains calm.

“Unlike my daddy, I might not tell the coach, ‘Coach, I’ll pray for you,’ but I’m gonna deal with him in a manner where I want him to understand what’s going on.

“I know he’s not gonna be pleased with a call that goes against him, but if I can explain something, or present it in a manner that he can accept, that’s the key.”

This year, Gautreaux will be a guest speaker at the British American Football Referees Association Conference. He’ll likely be answering the same question he’s been asked hundreds of times.

“People ask me, ‘How did you get into the NFL?’ I always tell them, ‘By taking care of details, making sure you dot every i and cross every t. Something that you’re in control of, you make sure you get it right. And if it’s something you’re not in control of, you can’t worry about it.’ ” ■

Answers to quiz on page 35:

1. The visiting team. The winning team captain gets to choose whether his team will receive or kick and, also, which goal his team will defend.
2. A dozen. Here are the rules: “Twelve (12) new footballs, sealed in a special box and shipped by the manufacturer, will be opened in the officials’ locker room two hours prior to the starting time of the game. These balls are to be specially marked with the letter “k” and used exclusively for the kicking game.”
3. Three – two teams of players plus a team of officials.
4. In the NFL, both feet must be in bounds. But the NCAA only requires one foot to be in bounds.
5. 0-0. A kickoff may not score a field goal.
6. The hands-on-the-hips signal can have one of three meanings: offside, encroachment or neutral zone infraction.
7. The end zones are 30 feet deep. The field is 360 feet long and 160 feet wide.

Source: www.nfl.com/rulebook