

Jerry Markbreit: A Football Ref for All Seasons

By Hillel Kuttler

The remark from New York Giants head coach Bill Parcells startled NFL referee Jerry Markbreit, for its content, and its speaker.

"Your crew has worked an outstanding game today," Parcells told Markbreit, along the sidelines at San Francisco's Candlestick Park on the afternoon of Jan. 20, 1991. The contest was heading toward a dramatic climax. Trailing the host 49ers by one point in a National Football Conference championship game, the Giants had recovered a fumble and driven downfield. With four seconds left, they called a time-out to set up a field goal attempt. That's when the two men spoke.

Later, watching a replay, Markbreit noticed that he leapt while signaling Matt Bahr's successful kick to win the game, 15-13.

To Markbreit, the excitement came from refereeing what he considers "the best game I was ever in." The approving comment by Parcells, hardly a warm-and-fuzzy character, was an added bonus.

"It was very rewarding for me for a coach to say that," Markbreit, 82, says from his home in the Chicago suburb of Skokie.

Markbreit witnessed plenty of great competition in the 461 National Football League games he officiated from 1976 to 1999, including four Super Bowls (a record for a referee), eight conference championships and 12 other playoff games. Before that, he worked a decade for the Big Ten, a premier collegiate division, a stretch that included the 1972 Rose Bowl.

Says Barry Mano, president of the National Association of Sports Officials, who's known Markbreit for over 50 years:



Jerry Markbreit at his August 2000 induction to the B'nai B'rith Sports Hall of Fame.
Source: November/December 2000 issue of the B'nai B'rith Jewish Monthly magazine.

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"He's fair-minded, tough and never took any crap on the field."

Who knows? Someday, Markbreit could be enshrined in the Pro Football Hall of Fame. And B'nai B'rith will have helped deliver him there.

Officiating for B'nai B'rith

As a University of Illinois student, Markbreit began his officiating career by handling intramural football games. His next paid gig – \$3 a game – was for a B'nai B'rith youth touch-football league in Chicago's Grant Park on Sunday mornings in the late 1950s. That led to Markbreit's officiating high school and small-college football games before hitting the big time.

"It was wonderful," Markbreit says of the B'nai B'rith league. "I bump into some of the guys now, and they're old like I am!"

From 2004 to 2014, he served as president of the B'nai B'rith Sports Lodge, raising money for college scholarships for Jewish male and female athletes. Phil Zagon, the Chicago lodge's vice president, remembers Markbreit running meetings efficiently, often pressing long-winded participants to get to the point.

"He kept a tight rein on his board so they did what they were supposed to do," Zagon says.

Someone who earned a lodge-provided scholarship, Brent Novoselsky, went on to play tight end in the NFL. Novoselsky, now the lodge's treasurer and chair of its scholarship committee, says he's adapted Markbreit's approach to managing meetings. Coincidentally, Markbreit's wife of 61 years, Bobbie, was Novoselsky's high school English teacher.

Each man enjoys relating the rare instance of a Jewish referee working an NFL game involving a Jewish player.

Novoselsky's Minnesota Vikings were playing in Los Angeles in 1992. Markbreit threw a flag to signal a penalty against a Vikings lineman for an illegal block. The

pile of players on the ground cleared to reveal the culprit, Novoselsky, who contested the call.

Markbreit responded, "Brent, I didn't know it was you!" They smiled.

For NFL referees, lighthearted moments are rare because of their heavy responsibilities. Each referee, distinguished by a white cap, oversees six other officials at every game, announces penalties and video-review decisions and cultivates teamwork within his crew.

He, like the other officials, must make tough calls in the heat of competition, in real time, without watching the slow-motion replays that television viewers enjoy. Most importantly, that means determining whether a runner crossed the goal line for a touchdown, a receiver legally caught a pass or a quarterback's fumble was really an incompletion.

On the field, Markbreit says, his brain could slow down the lightning-quick action and pinpoint key components of a single play – a receiver's feet landing in-bounds, hands securing the ball, the ball crossing the goal line – simultaneously; he'd be impressed that subsequently watching film clips confirmed he'd nearly always decided correctly.

Some missed calls remain embedded in Markbreit's memory, even framing his career. In his first NFL game, as a line judge in Seattle, he gave the perfect signal for the two-minute warning – but in the first quarter, when no such timeout occurs. On the last play of his last game, he missed a holding call.

Strive for Excellence, Commit an Occasional Doozy

"My philosophy of life is: You strive for excellence. You want perfection, but there is no perfection. The best officials are the ones who make the fewest mistakes," he says.

One mistake was a doozy, before tens of millions of TV viewers. At midfield at the

start of Super Bowl XVII in 1983, Markbreit erred on the coin toss, incorrectly calling "heads," but quickly corrected the gaffe after closer examination of the ceremonial coin. Markbreit is perhaps best known for a call he made late in a 1978 contest that gave the Oakland Raiders a game-winning touchdown after quarterback Ken Stabler fumbled the ball and a teammate, Dave Casper, kicked it into the end zone and recovered it. The rule would later be changed to prevent such recoveries.

Two calls that Markbreit takes most pride in occurred on the same play – and were not covered by the rules; rather, he decided on the spot. In a late 1986 game in Chicago, he ejected Green Bay Packers lineman Charles Martin for picking up Bears quarterback Jim McMahon and slamming him to the turf head-first – an act that Markbreit thought had killed McMahon. It was the first NFL ejection not given for fighting. Markbreit also negated a colleague's flagging of a Bears player for retaliating for Martin's hit. He did so, he later explained, because ruling otherwise would have endangered his crew.

Markbreit has long had a habit of reading the NFL rulebook every day of the year to stay sharp and anticipate any situation. In Soldier Field that day, Markbreit explains, he relied instead on common sense. He expresses gratification that the league supported him on those rulings.

Markbreit was nearly 52 years old at the time – precisely in the 50-65 range he considers sports officials around the world to be in their prime.

"I was at my very best between those years. In real life, a 50-year-old to some people sounds old; in the officiating world, we're young. You mature, you can handle problems, you can figure out what's wrong," he explains.

"Officiating is the same thing. You store up all of these wonderful things that you need to use as an official, and, miraculously,

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See Jerry Markbreit in action: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ok60L3RBCs0>

they're in your head – and when something happens on the field, the answer, the solution, comes out.”

For Markbreit, confidence built over time. He strove in each position to attain the next rung on the officiating ladder.

“I didn’t know if I was good enough to get in the pros,” he says – and even after applying to officiate in the NFL and being hired, he was “scared to death” of failing.

“Risk in your life is really the only way you can achieve anything,” Markbreit says. “It’s to take a chance, move to the next level, not really knowing how well you’ll do but having the guts to do it anyway. No risk, no gain.”

Since leaving the field, Markbreit sold advertising for *Where* magazine and was trade and barter manager for 3M. Markb-

reit has applied his game-day wisdom as an NFL “trainer” of officials. Whenever the Bears play at home during the exhibition season and regular season, he’s at a game to evaluate that day’s referee, write a report with observations and suggestions and share it with that person confidentially; when the Bears play out of town, he watches on television and does the same. (He also consults on referees for the Big Ten each Saturday.) “The best part of my life has been the refereeing,” Markbreit states.

That’s a big change from his refereeing career. The 1986 game was Markbreit’s only one in Chicago. The NFL’s policy is not to assign games involving officials’ hometown teams because, as Markbreit notes, fans “know where you live.”

Alberto Riveron, the NFL’s senior vice

president of officiating, says Markbreit remains “an invaluable resource for the league” as “a very good teacher, consultant and motivator.”

“Everyone on staff, starting with myself, has the utmost respect for him,” Riveron, a former NFL referee, continues. “I would not be sitting in this chair without Jerry. He helped me when I was on the college level: with mechanics, rules, communicating with people, the way you run meetings.”

The two, Riveron says, are “like family,” with a friendship extending “way beyond the professional side.”

Their friendship deepened in 2016, when Riveron’s son Tyler, 24, passed away. In 2005, Markbreit and Bobbie lost their younger daughter Betsy, 45, to breast cancer.

“He knew how I felt, because that’s how he felt. It brought us closer together,” Markbreit says. “When you go through the same sad, horrible thing, you really do know how they feel.”

Markbreit remains close with several other NFL-referees colleagues, some of whom he speaks with daily. Those friendships included inter-religious discussions on issues such as their respective holidays. In Phoenix once, Markbreit’s head linesman, Terry Gierke, a Catholic, removed his cap for the crew’s pre-game prayer before they headed onto the field. It was just before Yom Kippur.

Atop Gierke’s head was a kippah.

Says Markbreit: “It was wonderful. He said, ‘I know it’s your holiday coming, and I wanted to honor you by wearing this yarmulke.’” 🕍