

Nothing 'part time' about Ed Hochuli's approach to game as NFL's most famous referee

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Referee Ed Hochuli (87) dispenses justice with Falcons coach Mike Smith during a game. (AP)

OK, maybe some of us took Ed Hochuli for granted.

Maybe some of us cursed him and his fellow NFL referees, or sang "Three Blind Mice" too loudly, or yelled how he was "missing a great game."

Maybe we made too much fun of his physique. We shouldn't have wondered, as we do with Dwight Howard, whether his uniform is tailored to show off his biceps. Hochuli, in better shape at age 61 than most of us ever will be, is more than just fodder for a good Halloween costume. We should realize this now that the NFL replacement refs have [already misidentified Atlanta for Arizona](#), confused the end of the first quarter for the end of the half, and mistook a fumble with down-by-contact.

Maybe some of us should have forgiven Hochuli sooner when he made that mistake in the [Broncos-Chargers game in 2008](#). We should have known how hard it was for him to forgive himself.

Maybe, as we face the brink of a season without Hochuli and all the other "part-time" NFL referees with impossible jobs, we should realize how much sweat "Hochules" and others have put into being the best at what they do.

Maybe it's time we learn that that now.

Let's start with the "guns." That's what everyone wants to know about – more than his football background or his cool day job. So here goes: In the gym, Ed Hochuli does an hour of cardio daily and lifts weights for another four days a week. His wife, Cathie, doesn't ask if he's going to the gym; she asks when. You can say this is about vanity, but to him it's part of his profession. "I ought to look like an athlete," he says.

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He knows the jokes are out there. Heck, sometimes players come up to him to measure their arms against Big Ed's. He's flattered, but he insists he's not a power lifter or a bodybuilder. He doesn't carry a jug of water around the gym, squat 400 pounds for one rep and scream at the mirror as his veins pop out. Hochuli's just doing his job, he says, which requires running around for three hours with the best athletes on the planet without a backup or a breather other than halftime or timeouts. Referees can run up to seven miles during a game, and you'll notice not many of them are overweight. And much like players, referees have to make decisions on the run. That's part of why Hochuli studies the rulebook while he's on the bike or Stairmaster. "In some sick way," he says, "I enjoy the workouts."

The real sickness, though, is how much he enjoys the sport.

Hochuli was born in Milwaukee, grew up in Tucson, Ariz., played as an undersized linebacker in high school and did the same at UTEP. He was good, not great, and he had another passion: law. He entered law school in Arizona right after graduating from El Paso. Then he had a problem: money.

"I was married and in law and had a child," Hochuli says. "I needed the \$50 on Saturday morning."

So, taking the advice of a high school coach, he started officiating youth games. And well, he was very good at that. "Very quickly you fall in love with officiating," he says. "Anybody who tries it really does."

He rose quickly, from youth to high school to junior college to small college to what was then the Pac-10. He says he didn't have any designs on a refereeing career and didn't even know the NFL was scouting him. But it's the NFL, and he's not going to say no. He went through the FBI background check, the psychological evaluation and the interview process – all while he was still in law school.



Ed Hochuli says he gives five-hour rules tests once a week to other locked out referees. (AP)

Then, just like that, he was an NFL referee. And a trial lawyer. At the same time. He still is. Hochuli is actually a partner at Jones, Skelton and Hochuli in Phoenix, which has a staff of 70 lawyers. Hochuli has tried more than 150 civil cases and is even scheduled to speak in September at the Arizona Biltmore Hotel on ethics in mediation. He's as much of an expert on the law as he is on refereeing, as versed in seeking justice as he is in meting it out.

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He doesn't make a big deal out of this. "Somebody gets hurt because a soda can explodes," he cites as an example. "The can company might hire me to defend them." He loves the law. He does get "amped up" at times. He likes cross-examination, his chance to challenge the logic of others the way millions of fans poke at his.

But it's not the same.

"There is nowhere near the amount of pressure in the law practice as there is on the football field," he says. "Nobody's videotaping the trial and showing it back in slow motion. The officiating has been very good for my law practice; I never get nervous in the courtroom anymore."

Maybe he's so comfortable explaining himself to the judge that he becomes glib when explaining his on-field calls to the tens of thousands of judges in the stands on Sundays. Hence his 63-word explanation of why a Percy Harvin fumble was a fumble. Some groan at his dissertations, but Hochuli, again, is just trying to get it right. Same way in the courtroom.

Hochuli won't give up the law. Remember, this is what he went to school to do. But it's not a "sickness." That word is used to describe only one of his jobs.

After every game, Ed Hochuli gets to his locker, grabs his phone and texts three numbers to his son, Shawn, who is a Pac-12 ref. The numbers are all grades, on a scale of 1 to 10. The first is: "How did the crew do?" The second is: "How did I do?" The third is: "How was the game?" And after Shawn's games, Ed gets three numbers from him.



Ed Hochuli by day: lawyer.

This is a great way to reflect and bond, but it's faulty as a measure. The last game Hochuli did, the NFC championship game, got a "10" for the crew, even though it's remembered for a reversed call – a Giants punt bouncing off the knee of San Francisco return man Kyle Williams. The contact between Williams and the ball was imperceptible and appeared only on close TV replays. Hochuli is fine with that. But it highlights the problem in his job: there's no real final score. He cannot win. People still debate the Ahmad Bradshaw "fumble" in the late stages of the fourth quarter of that game, in which Hochuli's crew ruled the forward progress of the Giants' running back was stopped. Just like in his daily workouts, the results are never clear. You do the best and hope you don't miss something. There are always imperfections, both in his eyes and in the eyes of others.

"I've been officiating 35 some years," Hochuli says. "Every time I throw the flag, the player disagrees."

His job is to forget, to move on. He can't. Hochuli remembers a time when he called a facemask on a defender and the player appealed to him immediately. "I got his shoulder!" he said. "I swear to you, Ed!" Hochuli realized he wasn't sure. He picked up the flag. He thinks about that play often.

That was more than 10 years ago.

Then there was what Hochuli calls "my most famous mistake." Yeah, that game in Denver, when the Broncos had the ball at the Chargers' 1 yard-line with 1:17 left in the game. Jay Cutler lost control of the ball and Chargers linebacker Tim Dobbins grabbed it. Hochuli blew the whistle and ruled it incomplete. The entire stadium seemed to know immediately it was the wrong call.

So did Hochuli.

"Just about the time I finished blowing my whistle, I knew I was wrong," he says. "There was nothing I could do. Just suck it up and move on to the next play."

He had no idea his mistake would become a national discussion. He got hundreds of hate emails from Chargers fans and tried to respond to every one. He apologized profusely. But still he didn't sleep for a month. "I deserve some negative publicity," he says. And he says it in the present tense. He's still nagged by it.

"It was the worst time to make a big mistake," he says.

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Hochuli actually has a forgetting mechanism. Before every single play, he says out loud to himself, "Lock and load." It's his cue to move on from the play before. "If you don't have the ability to do that," he says, "you won't survive in the NFL."

But the calls, big and small, linger. A hold or non-hold, maybe an illegal shift. Usually it's something millions miss but Hochuli sees in his memory over and over again.

Hochuli has strong opinions about the labor conflict that has the NFL currently being officiated by replacement referees until an agreement is reached with the NFL Referees Association. But Hochuli knows from both his jobs that rules are rules. He's afraid of interfering with the negotiation process. But he's dying to get back to work, even at 61. Every week he sends out a five-hour rules test to keep the other referees sharp. He also logs an hour of film and sends that out for his colleagues to practice. And he holds a one-hour conference call on a weekly basis. So yeah, maybe that's "part-time" in the sense that referees are only putting in 10 or so hours a week while they wait to continue their part-time jobs.

Keep in mind Hochuli and his fellow referees are the only guys out there without helmets. When there's a change of possession, 22 guys run straight at him, and his job is not to protect himself, but to make sure the quarterback doesn't get clocked. Hochuli doesn't feel like there is a "concussion issue" for officials, but he admits "there are times you definitely feel in danger out there."

This isn't some sly sympathy play. Hochuli doesn't do that. The only thing about his reputation that irks him is the idea that he's a part-time worker. That awakens the "Hochules" persona everyone imagines.

"The full-time referee thing is funny to me," he says. "I am a full-time referee. Everything the NFL asks me to do, I do. Got a game in San Diego, they send me the assignment, and I go. Many times I have gotten out of trials because of games. I know about them in advance. I tell the judge and the lawyer way in advance."

Hochuli feels that after 20 years as an NFL referee (including serving as crew chief for two Super Bowls), the "part-time" label should go. Yes, the games are only three hours, but the time he spends on the craft, between studying, traveling, preparation and review, is beyond 40 per week. But he knows by now that refs are never fully appreciated. They don't win games for you in the minds of fans; they only cost you games.

But that was before the specter of replacement refs costing games, which seems much worse.

When asked to name his favorite player of all time, Ed Hochuli does not go with a skill guy; he picks Anthony Munoz.

"To watch him block was artistic," Hochuli says of the Hall of Fame offensive lineman. "His feet were so good. He was always between the rusher and the quarterback. He never held."

Quite the compliment from someone who realizes there is some form of holding on every single play. But it shouldn't be surprising to hear this from Ed Hochuli. The offensive lineman, like the referee, is largely unnoticed when he's good. His mistakes can be devastating. But the best at the craft are so detail-oriented that the common eye can't appreciate what they do on every play.

Munoz was perfect. Hochuli was just glad to be as close to perfect as humanly possible – so he can text three 10s to his son.

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