

**BASEBALL
PLAYOFFS**
What It Takes
To Win (and the
Giants Have It)
By Tom Verducci

**RYDER CUP
DAVIS LOVE III**
The U.S. Defeat
In the Captain's
Own Words

**SOCCER
BARCELONA**
Lionel Messi
And the Team
Of Our Time
By Grant Wahl

October 8, 2012

SI.COM

SPORTS



Oh, Now You Love Us

By Steve Rushin | P. 48

GUNS BLAZING
The iconic ref
Ed Hochuli restores
order to the NFL



JOHN W. MCDONOUGH



BLACK AND WHITE: BACK AND BRIGHT

On the field for Sunday's Bengals-Jaguars game in Jacksonville, Hochuli was met with a rare (for a referee, at least) round of applause.

BILL FRAKES

I sing of arms and a man, a man obscured by his celebrated arms, biceps bulging from his tightly tailored referee's shirt. "Tailored?" says Ed Hochuli, the impossibly fit NFL official of whom we sing. "There's no need for tailoring when you buy your shirts at Gap Kids."

And then he beams, revealing the laugh lines of a 61-year-old man whose 10 grandchildren call him Papa Touchdown.

It is Tuesday in Phoenix, the Tuesday after the Monday Night Football game in Seattle, the one that became the nation's top news story and led the President of the United States to request the return of "our refs."

Hochuli won't talk about the labor dispute that locked out the zebras for the first three weeks of the season, but he seems startled by Barack Obama's remark and wonders whether Iran's nuclear program might not be a more pressing issue. What Hochuli doesn't realize is that he himself has become a matter of national security—our national security blanket, a football referee in whose massive arms we suddenly feel safe and warm.

"Ed has captured the nation with his physique and presentation," says Jerry Markbreit, an NFL official from 1976 to '98. "When he steps on the field you know you're in good hands."

Many players feel the same way. "Godspeed, Ed Hochuli," Texans running back Arian Foster wrote that Monday night on Twitter, where the hashtag #FreeEdHochuli had taken hold.

Hochuli is huge on Twitter, despite his never having tweeted. "He's flabbergasted by his fame; he doesn't understand where it comes from," says Shawn Hochuli, a Pac-12 referee and the fourth of Hochuli's six children. "But he's well-respected and looks the part with the guns."

As the Packers were playing the Seahawks that Monday night, Hochuli was in the living room of his Phoenix home, its curio cabinets filled with ceramic zebras ("People give me zebras"), gold Super Bowl whistles ("We don't actually use those") and silver commemorative coins from a lifetime of coin flips. At Super Bowl XXXVIII, between the Patriots and the Panthers, 77-year-old ceremonial captain Y.A. Tittle asked for the coin to give to his granddaughter. Hochuli was under orders to hand it over to the Hall of Fame afterward, but, he says, "I thought Y.A. Tittle's granddaughter should have it." It was his easiest call of the evening: He dug out his own silver dollar for the flip and gave that to Tittle's granddaughter; the Hall got the (unused) commemorative coin.



GUNS SHOW

Even Hochuli's family buys into the biceps business: They gathered at Super Bowl XXXVIII, and Hochuli said seeing them in the stands was "the best moment of my career."

COURTESY OF HOCHULI FAMILY

As the rest of America watched the Seahawks-Packers game play to its shambolic denouement, Hochuli was on his sectional sofa, watching the Diamondbacks play the Rockies in Denver, as is the prerogative of a man who had already taken in 15 hours of NFL action that week. "I don't watch a lot of football for fun," Hochuli would say the next morning behind his desk at the Phoenix law firm of Jones, Skelton & Hochuli, where he works 50 hours per week as a trial lawyer. "I've tried, but I'm always looking to see if the left tackle is holding."

In preparing for a game, Hochuli might watch a 90-minute montage of nothing but left tackles holding, which even he concedes is a pretty perverted DVD. He devotes roughly as much time to refereeing as he does to the law, studying 15 hours of video a week, moderating a Tuesday teleconference for the league's other 120 officials and making certain that he (and they) are prepared for any possibility, no matter how remote.

If a team fakes a punt and passes instead-as he'll tell you with much greater enthusiasm than is warranted-defensive pass interference is no longer a foul. Or it isn't a foul in theory, because a fake-punt-turned-pass-followed-by-pass-interference play had never actually occurred in Hochuli's lifetime of officiating, which now includes more than 450 NFL games. That scenario was just an intriguing concept, like time travel, until it happened in a game he was working in San Diego last season.

"We were almost giddy," Hochuli says of his seven-man crew. "We were saying to each other, 'It happened! It finally happened! And we got it right!'"

Getting it right is Hochuli's joy and his mission, though getting it wrong is also part of his purview, most famously in 2008 when he ruled that a fumble by then Broncos quarterback Jay Cutler was an incomplete pass, a blown call that cost the Chargers a victory. Hochuli apologized profusely, for several days, both publicly and personally, to anyone who e-mailed him, though doing so soon became impossible. It is a measure of football's place in American life that there were 150 e-mails on his work Blackberry when he boarded a postgame flight to LAX; 1,100 when he deplaned a short time later; and 25,000 after six days, at which time the server at Jones, Skelton & Hochuli finally cried uncle.

This same level of care has made him one of the league's top-rated officials, worker of two Super Bowls and an alternate for three more. "He's the bellwether of officiating," says Markbreit, who now trains league referees. "Among the best of the best ever. He's got charisma, he's a deep-feeling guy, he's a wonderful human being. And he's Hercules. If I had his physique, I'd still be refereeing."

To some football fans, Hochuli or Hercules-he is sometimes called Hochules-is a two-dimensional cartoon, the Venus de Milo inverted, a pair of arms and nothing else.

"The guns thing?" Hochuli says, walking into a gleaming health club in Tempe for the two-hour workout he does four times a week. "I think it started with Phil Simms. At least that's what I always tell him. He was calling a blowout and there was nothing else to talk about, so he drew two circles around my arms with the telestrator and said, 'Look at this guy's biceps.'"

Now players flex in his presence, demanding to compare pythons. "Which is ridiculous," Hochuli says, "because every one of their arms is the size of my thigh."

In college, at UTEP, where he played linebacker, Hochuli benched 370 pounds. But he spent the next 20 years ducking the weight room in favor of running marathons. By 1990, when he became an NFL back judge, he weighed a buck-seventy-five.

That's when he started lifting again. "I think it's important to look like an athlete," says Hochuli, who now weighs 210. "Athletes themselves respect you more. I tell [other officials] to look good, to look professional. I'm also vain enough that I want to look good. I work for a law firm-which is a conglomeration of egomaniacs-and as an NFL referee, where you also find a lot of big egos."



IN ALL STRIPES

This referee is more than just muscle: He practices law 50 hours a week, devours sci-fi and keeps a cabinet full of decorative zebras in his living room.

JOHN W. MCDONOUGH

Self-deprecation endears Hochuli to people but is squarely at odds with his professional obligations. "As an official, you try to project confidence without arrogance," he says. He sometimes emerges from under the replay hood having reviewed a decision that is obstinately ambiguous, only to get a signal from the television crew that it's time to announce his verdict to the nation. "You gotta sell it," he says.

This is a problem on those days when you can't compose a simple declarative sentence. It took Hochuli 56 seconds to explain the new overtime rules before the fifth quarter of last year's NFC title game in San Francisco, leaving viewers more confused than they had been beforehand. "An overtime broke out in the middle of Hochuli's explanation," jokes Hochuli himself, whose three decades as a trial lawyer and extemporaneous speaker occasionally abandon him when he switches on his field mike. "Sometimes I open my mouth and don't know how the sentence is going to end," he says. "I can't tell you how many times I start to say something and realize halfway through, This is going to be on YouTube, isn't it?"

In that same NFC title game last January, Hochuli's tongue could not locate the word indisputable, as in indisputable video evidence. He finally settled on a rarefied legal term—"uncontroverted"—that sent a nation to its law dictionaries and the video, of course, to YouTube.

All of which makes Hochuli endearingly human in a way that Hochules never could be. He likes to walk the dogs with Cathie, his wife of 2½ years. ("That's an old-guy thing to do, isn't it?" he sighs.) Asked what kind of dogs he has, he is tempted to go off the record: "I should have two Dobermans, right? We have two little lapdogs. Shih Tzus. Sadie and Sophie."

"He's a total science-fiction nerd who goes to Comic-Con every year, listens to science fiction podcasts and waited in line overnight to [attend a panel discussion by the cast members of Lost]," says Shawn Hochuli, laughing but not kidding. "I'm surprised he didn't tell you any of this."

So let's sing of a man and the arms, in that order. For it's the man who radiates through the television screen a sense of justice and fair play. As a lawyer, Hochuli still goes to trial three or four times a year, and prospective jurors are always asked if they have any knowledge of his other profession. One man confessed that he was so certain of Hochuli's integrity as a ref that he'd be inclined to believe anything that Hochuli said in the courtroom. That juror was duly dismissed-which might have been his goal all along-but still: On a football field Hochuli exudes righteous impartiality. His unusual surname, after all, derives from Switzerland, land of neutrality.



FLEX SCHEDULE

Hochuli may not follow the talk his arms stir up on social media, but he knows they help him keep the respect of the players he refs every week.

JOHN W. MCDONOUGH

Through no doing of his own, but rather through a deep national longing, Hochuli became the human face of locked-out officials, "more famous for not working than he ever was for working," as Markbreit says. When the lockout ended last week, 49ers receiver Randy Moss tweeted, "Just found out Ed Hochuli and the boys are back!" Years ago, a fan approached him at Phoenix's Sky Harbor Airport and asked, "Are you Ed Hochuli?" Hochuli shook hands with Charles Barkley.

All Ed Hochuli ever wanted to be was a lawyer, he says, just like his dad, Walter, who moved the five Hochuli children from Milwaukee to Tucson when Ed was eight. "I was never a kid who pretended he was Babe Ruth," he says. "I never said, 'I want to be famous; I know what I'll do: I'll referee Pop Warner football games-that'll get me trending on Twitter.'"

Forty years ago, a high school coach in Tucson named Dean Metz told a recent college graduate that refereeing was a great way to stay involved in football and also to earn some extra cash. The

young man, newly married, started reffing four Pop Warner games every Saturday morning for 50 bucks a week. "I was instantly hooked," Hochuli says. "It was the internal challenge to be right."

Pop Warner led to high school, which led to junior college, which led to a back-judge job in the Pac-10. Finally, in the spring of 1990, after a league psychologist interviewed him for five hours, Hochuli had a job in the NFL.

"You were in my blind spot," Hochuli once told Junior Seau, who'd run into him. "You mean I got you in the eye?" Seau replied.

In his first game, in Green Bay, he was, like every new official, astonished by the speed of professional players. That preseason night at Lambeau Field, Hochuli threw his first NFL flag, for pass interference. While the hankie was still tracing its majestic yellow arc, the rookie back judge had a terrible epiphany: That isn't pass interference in the NFL. Unable to catch the flag, he pretended it was never thrown, retrieving the marker and stuffing it back into his pocket like an airbag that had accidentally deployed.

Within a few years he was promoted to referee, having never even held that position in college. He still doesn't know why he was given the white hat. "I'm a far better referee than I was a back judge," he says. "The most important aspect of being a referee is leadership. Officiating is so much bigger than the sum of the pieces. You take care of each other. I'm in no way comparing officiating to war, but you have an esprit de corps when everyone is mad at you."

Of course, everyone is happy with Hochuli and his fellow officials now. When fans gave the real refs a standing ovation in Baltimore last Thursday night, before their first game back, 77-year-old Jerry Markbreit sat in his den in Skokie, Ill., and shed a tear.

"It'll last a week," Hochuli says of this strange honeymoon, which last week saw him get his own taped TV introduction on CBS ("Ed Hochuli, University of Texas-El Paso....") before he called a Jaguars-Bengals game in Jacksonville. Soon enough, the fans' focus will return to its rightful place, the players, for whom he has a profound respect. "They're real people-fun guys with great personalities," he says. "I am so impressed with them. We have a very superficial relationship, but the number of times I have seen a player drag himself up in agony, just killing himself for this job, and then stay in the game to do it again...."

He remembers Brett Favre rolling right and reversing left toward a blindside hit from Warren Sapp and thinking, They're gonna bring out the ambulance. But Favre popped up instantly, smacked his face mask against Sapp's and screamed, "Is that the hardest you can hit, you [polysyllabic profanity]?!"

To witness their talent up close is a privilege. "Half a dozen times a game," he admits, "I still say, Wow!"

On rare occasions one of these athletes will pancake Papa Touchdown. Junior Seau sped late to a tackle in one game and leaped over the pile to avoid piling on, breaking his fall on Hochuli. Like a London pedestrian, the referee apologized for getting hit. "You were in my blind spot," he told Seau.

"You mean I got you in the eyes?" Seau replied.

Hochuli howls. Aspersions on his eyesight are a game-day leitmotif. Former Falcons coach Jerry Glanville once said something unprintable to him, and Hochuli replied, "What did you say?" Glanville turned to an assistant and said, "Hear that? He's not just blind, he's deaf too."

He's less blind than blond. "He definitely has his blond moments," says Shawn. Like the time Hochuli forgot his uniform for a game in Green Bay. "I couldn't go to Foot Locker," he says. "Different stripes." A colleague sent his jersey up from Milwaukee, and the Packers' seamstress sewed on an 85.

But far more often Hochuli is wildly overprepared. He carries the same silver dollar all season for coin flips but still makes a member of his crew carry a spare, which Hochuli asks to see three or four times every game.

To summon his fullest concentration, he says out loud before each snap, "Lock and load." It's a mantra he repeats every single time the quarterback goes under center. He is a movie and baseball buff, and he recalls the film *For Love of the Game*, in which Kevin Costner played an aging Tigers pitcher who blocks out hostile crowd noise with a mantra of his own, Clear the mechanism.

"Your concentration level has to be so high for so long," he says—there are roughly 160 plays in every game—"and you're mentally exhausted when it ends. But it's hard to get off that high. It's like a mainline IV of adrenaline in my arm. I love that 50 million people are waiting for me to be right or wrong. It outweighs all the garbage-standing in a security line at the airport. The NFL spends eight hours reviewing every official in every game, and as long as my grades are solid, I would love to stay long enough to work with my son Shawn."

Shawn, a financial adviser in Newport Beach, Calif., resisted officiating at first. When he finally started, he reffed for two years without telling his father. He wanted to make it entirely on his own—a welcome effort in a profession where charges of nepotism are known to divide the ranks—and only ever used his first name when introducing himself to other refs in the Arena League, in NFL Europe and in the WAC and Big 12 conferences. But he is still his father's biggest fan as well as his acolyte. "My dad is my hero," Shawn said before refereeing the Cal-Arizona State game last Saturday. "He's my idol."

Ed Hochuli was standing on a corner in downtown Phoenix one day when he saw a guide dog lead a blind man across the street. As the pair safely reached the other side, the man pulled a biscuit from his pocket and fed it to the dog.

Hochuli couldn't help himself. "Excuse me, sir," he said to the man. "This is probably none of my business, but your dog just crossed against the light. You might not want to reward him for that."



FLIP REMARKS

Hochuli (here handling Sunday's coin toss) has a penchant for verbosity that has landed several of his calls on YouTube.

BILL FRAKES

To which the blind man said, "I'm just finding where his mouth is so I can kick him in the ass."

The transformative power of a kick in the ass is not lost on Hochuli, who was divorced from Bonnie, the mother of his first five children, 20 years ago. "I failed," he says, growing very quiet. "It was a very dark period, and...." He pauses, gathering himself to go on.

"My son Aaron was eight years old at the time," he continues. "And for the next four years-I'm sorry, it will be hard to get through this-but for the next four years he didn't speak to me or even look at me. For four years I kept showing up: 'Great practice today, Aaron.' And he'd walk right past me without looking." The tears are now coming, and his square jaw is going. "I'm sorry," Hochuli says, "but it tears me up."

He takes a deep breath and says, "When you fail, you have to kick yourself in the ass and go on. A lot of times we feel sorry for ourselves and let the defeats define us." Instead, he just kept showing up to see the boy who wouldn't see him back, until one day Aaron returned his gaze.

There's a picture on Hochuli's office wall, taken in 2004, of his children-Heather, Scott, Jennie, Shawn, Aaron and Rachel-and various spouses and grandchildren outside of Reliant Stadium in Houston before Super Bowl XXXVIII. All of these Hochulii wear number 85 referee jerseys, even the babies. During warmups, Hochuli spotted them in their seats, a herd of zebras in a sea of Patriots and Panthers jerseys. "The best moment of my career," he says, "was looking up and seeing that."

Aaron calls his dad "a big softie with a big heart, a great guy who'd do anything for his kids and grandkids." The boy is 28 now, with two children of his own. On Friday nights he referees high school football games in Arizona, in unspoken homage to his father, Papa Touchdown, who was once broken and then repaired, and who has now returned to where he belongs: behind the glass panel of our flat-screen TVs, the ceramic zebra in our national curio cabinet.