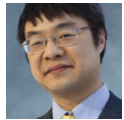


# The annual sporting event involving a football that dare not speak its name and a digression into the sportsmanship of wasting time in nonproductive activity

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I always wonder about people who are so protective of the name of their event that they don't even allow people to mention it by name. One of the most notorious examples is the organization which runs a major international gathering of athletes which takes place every four years (or every two years if you consider warm-weather sports and cold-weather sports). Another example is that you aren't allowed to refer to the championship game of the major professional American football league by its actual name without permission. You have to use some alternate phrasing like *the big game*. I propose that all media organizations which cover these types of events accept the event organizers' wishes and refuse to call it by its name. Or even simply refuse to cover it until they relax their rules.

The alternate name *the big game* is itself confusing, since there are many things that go by that name. Even within the realm of American football, the phrase *big game* can also refer to the annual match between Stanford University and the University of California at Berkeley, whose [final play in 1982](#) was particularly memorable.

For those not familiar with the timekeeping rules of American football (which includes the Stanford band, it seems): American football is not a continuous-play game. The game is broken up into relatively short units known as *plays*. Typically, a whistle is blown to indicate that a play has ended. Between plays are much longer units of time called *standing around doing nothing*. If time runs out while a play is in progress, the play is allowed to run to completion, and the results of the play are valid. An analogue in the sport of basketball is the case where [time runs out while the ball is in flight](#). The ball's trajectory is permitted to run to completion, and if it goes into the basket, the points count.

The amount of standing around doing nothing is determined by the offensive team. Some teams employ a strategy known as *not standing around doing nothing quite so much* (technically known as the *no-huddle offense*), the goal of which is to deprive the defense of time to prepare for the next play.

Some sports such as soccer (known to most of the world as the one true football *accept no substitutes*) have a penalty of the form *not making an honest effort to advance the ball* which is assessed if a team appears to be wasting time in nonproductive activity. One thing I find odd about American football is that wasting time in nonproductive activity is not only permitted by the rules, it is actively pursued as a tactic. You are allowed to waste up to 40 seconds of time (subject to other adjustments) before incurring a *delay of game* penalty, which more accurately should be named *excessive delay of game*. The result of this formalization of the concept of *wasting time* is that the amount of time which elapses between plays tends to be approximately 39.5 seconds. This is actually handy if you are watching a game that you previously recorded: When you hear the whistle which ends a play, you can hit the *skip ahead 30 seconds* button and skip over nearly all of the *standing around doing nothing*.

The fact that maximum time wastage is completely normal and expected leads to the odd phenomenon of teams walking off the field before the game has ended: If the remaining time is less than 40 seconds and the team with possession of the ball is winning, then it is assumed that the winning team will merely *stand around doing nothing* until time runs out. As a result, everybody just leaves immediately instead of standing around doing nothing waiting for the end-of-game whistle. (Indeed, if a team in this situation actually tries to *play the game*, it will probably be criticized for attempting to run up the score.)



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