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THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION *Magazine & Journal Reader*

Monday, May 7, 2007

A glance at the current issue of the *Journal of Quantitative Analysis in Sports: Overtime luck in college football*

In the spring, a college sports fan's fancy turns to thoughts of baseball or track or lacrosse, not often to football. But two business professors with an interest in the sport have published their views this season on what they see as a widespread misconception on the gridiron.

There is a "statistically significant advantage" to starting overtime on defense in Division I-A football, but that advantage is much smaller than coaches like to believe, according to a study by Peter A. Rosen, an assistant professor of business administration at the University of Evansville, and Rick L. Wilson, a professor of business at Oklahoma State University.

There is no "sudden death" overtime in college football, in which the first team to score wins. Instead teams are given one offensive possession each, and the team leading after both possessions wins. A coin toss is used to determine which team will get the ball first. In the 328 overtime games in Division I-A since 1996, when the overtime rules were adopted, the winner of the coin toss has opted to defend first on all but four occasions.

Coaches choose to defend first because it allows them to plan their offensive attack better, say the two professors. As one

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Big Ten coach told them, "all teams start on defense first in OT, so you know what you have to do to win." A coach in the Pac-10 Conference guessed that "around 75 percent of teams that choose to play defense first end up winning the game."

It's actually closer to 55 percent, according to the authors. In overtime games since 1996, they found, the team that was on defense first won 180 times.

"The concept of fairness is not easy to quantify," they write, "but the game data do not suggest that losing the coin flip is an insurmountable disadvantage."

Moreover, it appears that the differential is shrinking. "In the first five years of the overtime rule, teams that started on defense had a record of 88-53," the authors note, "but during the last six years, teams that started on defense have a losing record of 92-95."

The key for teams that go on offense first seems to be scoring seven points. Those that did, according to the study, lost just 28.15 percent of their overtime games. When teams on offense first scored fewer than seven points, however, opponents won 76.7 percent of the time.

The [article](#), "An Analysis of the Defense First Strategy in College Football Overtime Games," is available through the Berkeley Electronic Press.

--Jason M. Breslow

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