

## Replacement ref Lance Easley, back in Seattle, is 'reborn again' after 'MNF' ordeal

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Lance Easley isn't one to bask in the spotlight. He is, by and large, a typical middle-aged American man. He works for a bank, he's a devout Christian, he coached his son's football team, he was in the military, he once worked construction and once had his sight on an acting career.

As a young man, he dreamed of being a professional athlete — golf was his sport — but eventually hit his physical limitations. It was a big let-down, but then he got married, settled down and became content with his small-town life in Santa Maria along the Central California coast. There, to stay connected to his love for sports, he would also officiate college football and basketball games.

He remained open to new opportunities. In his hobbies, he kept up his chops. He'd attend officiating camps, he'd stay in touch with folks from his days as a golfer at UCLA, he'd come up with new ideas for a book or a movie he might make somewhere down the line. He'd take life as it came and accepted it for what it was — values he adopted as a born-again Christian in the mid-'80s.

So when he got the chance in the summer of 2012 to become a replacement official for the NFL, he took it. He and dozens of other refs — mostly, like him, from the lower college ranks — took crash courses in the minutia of the pro game, all the rules and intricacies of NFL football most fans don't see or know. The NFL sent Easley to Seattle for Seahawks training camp, to get a better feel for the league and prepare them for football at the highest level. But he never thought he'd actually find himself officiating a real NFL game.

By Aug. 13, the league's labor lockout of its regular officials hadn't ended, so he got to don his zebra stripes and take the field at O.co Coliseum for the Oakland Raiders' preseason opener against the Dallas Cowboys. It was Easley's "holy cow" moment — the cameras, the crowd, the noise. And while he said he was prepared physically and mentally, he and his new officiating crew found that the most challenging part was keeping the game moving: spotting the ball, managing the clock, dealing with commercial breaks. He was surprised, too, by the game's ferocity; after the Redskins-Rams matchup Sept. 16 in St. Louis, he needed blood to get the bloodstains out of his shirt.

But nothing could have prepared him for the next week, when he was side judge for Sept. 24's "Monday Night Football" game between Green Bay and Seattle. On the last play of the night, Seattle down 12-7 with 8 seconds and 24 yards to go, Seahawks quarterback Russell Wilson took the snap, dropped back, rolled left under pressure and lobbed a deep pass toward receiver Golden Tate in the left corner of the end zone. Tate jumped up for it; so did Packers safety M.D. Jennings.

What happened within the span of about five seconds that night has been debated incessantly since then in every form of media. Some have called it one of the worst calls in the history of sports. Many say Easley single-handedly ended the NFL's lockout with the regular officials. The play has been called the "Fail Mary," the "Inaccurate Reception," the "Golden Tate-away," "Senseless in Seattle" ...

Easley was standing along the left sideline when Tate and Jennings jumped for Wilson's pass. Tate pushed off Packers cornerback Sam Shields, leaped in the air, got tangled with Jennings, and both appeared to come down with the football. If Tate had the ball, it would be a miraculous game-winning touchdown for the Seahawks. If Jennings had it, the Packers would escape with a victory. But no one had clear possession.

"I'm going, 'Oh no.' I'm just praying that when I get to the ball, one of them had just taken it away from the other," Easley, 53, told seattlepi.com Friday.

"I get over there, they're so tied up and tangled up, arms all wrapped around. Nobody could pull it away, equal strength. Then I looked at my back judge who was there, Derrick (Rhine-Dunn) — we looked at each other and I'm thinking: 'Oh, OK. The media, if we don't sell this thing, they're going to crucify us.' Because if we stop and talk about it, they're just gonna go, 'These idiots, they don't know what they're doing' — just like they were all through the whole (lockout)."

"I looked at his eyes, he looked at me. He looked down, he saw the same thing I had, so there was really nothing else we could do. So bang, I go up with (the touchdown signal). His hands go up and he does 'stop clock.' That was so we could talk about it; he and I talked about it afterwards. But my ruling was official. And I knew, after I made that call, I knew that if I erred it was going to replay, they'll resolve it there. So then I just had to break up the players and deal with the chaos that came afterwards."

The video replays were inconclusive. Some may feel they showed Jennings got an interception: He appeared to have better control of the ball, and had both hands on it before Tate did. Others may feel the replays showed a touchdown: Tate got his left hand on the ball then grabbed for it with his right, and his feet hit the turf first. In any case, the replays showed no incontrovertible evidence to overturn Easley's ruling. The Seahawks won 14-12 with the extra-point kick, for which the teams had to re-emerge from their locker rooms after some confusion.

The official ruling for the touchdown was simultaneous possession, which goes to the offensive team. In a statement the following day, the NFL said it supported Easley's call but noted that Tate should have been called for pass interference.

Easley still wrestles with the moment. When he walked into a Pioneer Square coffee shop Friday morning, just steps away from the stadium where it all happened, one of the first things he told seattlepi.com was that he'd recently seen some Sports Illustrated photos that showed Tate's hand on the ball first. The NFL rules, he excitedly explained, don't specify that a receiver needs two hands on the ball — just think of all those spectacular one-handed grabs you've seen.

And he still stands by his call.

"I can't do anything about it. There's nothing I can change about that call," Easley said. "And I can't. I can't change it, and I wouldn't because I've looked at the replay several times. And according to Sports Illustrated his hand was on the ball first, so by rule, Tate was the first one to control it. Even though it was one hand. That's where the looseness is in that rule."

After the game that night, when he was back in the officials' locker room, his officiating crew got more flack for the botched extra-point than for his touchdown call, he said.

"Nobody talked about my play. I saw it —

in the locker room we had a TV so I could

watch it, and I could see what happened and I shared, 'Yeah, that's what I saw,'" Easley said. "But, I felt the weight of it on my shoulders. I felt like, this is heavy, it's big. And I'm worried about, did I make the right call, do everything, did I apply the rule correctly? I could hardly wait to get back and get my rulebook and start digging at it."

At first, Easley thought the controversy

would go away in a couple of days. He didn't sleep well that night — got about an hour of sleep, snuck out the back door of his hotel in the morning, and caught a flight home to California. He had a work meeting in Fresno the next day, so he wasn't aware of the depth of the controversy; he didn't know ESPN was showing replay after replay after replay, declaring Seattle's touchdown one of the worst-ever calls in sports. It wasn't until that Tuesday evening, when he was out with some friends, that they told him what was going on.

"Wednesday morning was overwhelming. I couldn't believe what was going on," Easley said. "I was emotionally overwhelmed to the fact that it just broke me down almost physically. I fell down to my knees, I cried out to God, I just said, 'I don't know what's going on here.' It was bizarre. I went to sleep, turned off my cell phones, hoping to wake up and it would just be a dream. Because it was too bizarre. I wasn't expecting to be the center of attention like that. It was very uncomfortable."

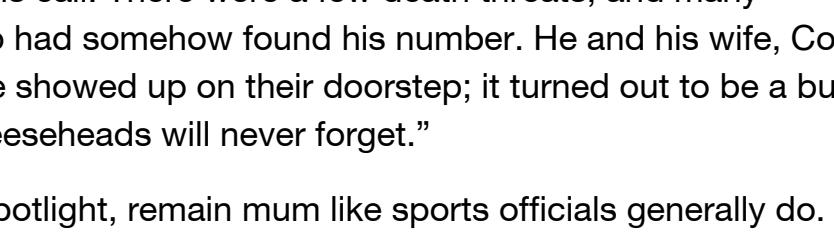
Then the threats started coming. They were mainly from gamblers, Easley said, who demanded he pay them back the \$10,000 they'd lost because of his call. There were a few death threats, and many menacing phone calls from Green Bay fans who had somehow found his number. He and his wife, Corina, had to call the cops when a suspicious package showed up on their doorstep; it turned out to be a bunch of cheese curds with a note that read, "The Cheesheads will never forget."

Easley had decided to lay low, stay out of the spotlight, remain mum like sports officials generally do. But friends would come up to him, give him a big hug and tearfully exclaim how relieved they were that he was doing alright. So Easley decided to do a couple of interviews — one with James Brown of CBS Sports and one with the "Today" show's Matt Lauer — to let the rest of the world know he was OK.

Eventually the conversation started to change; people began to ask how he survived it all. He has continued to occasionally speak with media, and has even had a few speaking engagements. Now he's trying to be an inspirational and motivational figure, he said, preaching the values of standing firm to one's beliefs, embracing stress and pressure, seeing every day as a good day, and a firm foundation of family, friends and, for some people, faith.

"So, that's where I am now," Easley said. "The only reason I talk about it is, how can I help other people out? If this happens to somebody else or if they're in a difficult situation, what did I learn from it that they could do about it? This is not even something I intended to be involved with. I'm a banker, I go to the opera with my wife, I'm a regular guy who just was an official — but those days are probably over."

Lance Easley looks through a locked fence at CenturyLink Field on Friday, during his first trip back to Seattle since his infamous call on 'Monday Night Football.' (Joshua Trujillo/seattlepi.com)



Lance Easley, left, talks with TV host Matt Lauer on NBC's "Today" Show on Oct. 9, 2012. (Peter Kramer/NBC/NBC NewsWire/Getty Images)

So he's writing a book about his ordeal titled "Making the Call: Living with Your Decisions," coauthored by Bodie and Brock Thoene. He signed a deal in February with Barbour Publishing, which mainly publishes Christian books but has some sports-related titles, and expects to release the book in August. He's also working on a short documentary, "The Last Call," about his return home after the Packers-Seahawks game, plus a feature-length documentary he's directing titled "Guardians of the Gridiron," following officials on the high school circuit in Central California.

He was back in Seattle this past week for the first time since that "Monday Night Football" game, for the sole reason of

going to the opera with his wife. Corina had been hesitant about returning to Seattle, worried about her husband's safety. But if there's any NFL city where Easley is safest, it's likely to be Seattle. On Friday morning, after meeting with seattlepi.com at Caffe Umbria, he strolled down to CenturyLink Field to take a look again at where it all happened. No one on the streets recognized him without his stripes.

But his life has, without a doubt, changed forever. He's got his book deal, he's working on his film projects, he's sharing his experiences. He may not be as big as Kim Kardashian or Lady Gaga — though for a while in late September he was a more popular Twitter topic than them ("It must be because of my looks," Easley joked) — but he has found himself in a public spotlight he only dreamed of ever experiencing as a PGA golfer.

"People think they want to be Kim Kardashian or a famous person," Easley said. "They think that until that happens to you. Then you start finding out how overwhelming it is. Even right now, my life's pretty overwhelming. I can hardly get everything done. You need good people around you. I learned I can't be everywhere at once, I can't touch all of these people. Quality relationships, living a simple life — there's a lot to be said for that."

"If you look at where we're at in the world," he added, society needs to "let people heal, to take care of our relationships, just all work together. So that's kind of something that I've really embraced out of this whole thing, that I've learned. I feel like I've kind of been reborn again."

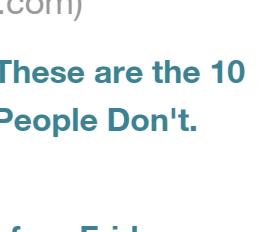
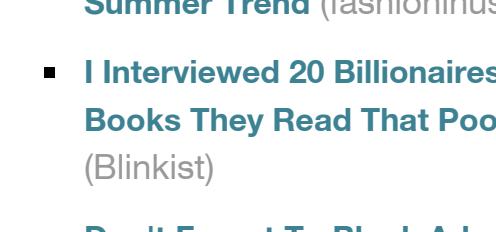
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