



Snap Judgment

As both an attorney and an NFL official, J. Jeffrey Rice lives in a world full of split-second decisions.

Every officiating crew in the National Football League consists of nine members — seven on the field and two in the instant replay box. Each official has a designated role during the game, but as umpire, J. Jeffrey Rice must both police the trenches, where the offensive and defensive lines do battle. He also serves as the go-to crew member when questions arise about the rules.

Rice says the skills he exercises while wearing a striped shirt on Sunday aren't too different from those he uses in his weekday life as an attorney in Fort Myers.

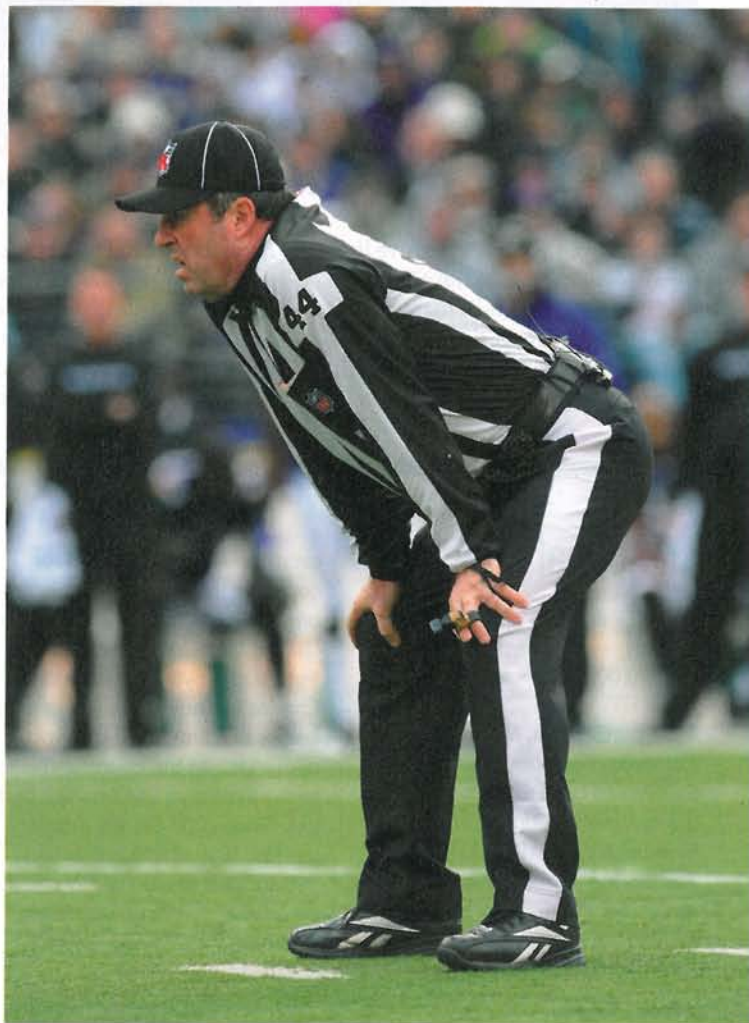
"In court, I've got to know the law. I've got to be able to make split-second decisions or react to a judge's question," Rice says. "When I'm on the field, I have to know the rules backwards and forwards because I have to make split-second decisions there, too."

Growing up, Rice played football and other sports. While in law school at Case Western Reserve University in Ohio, he started officiating high school football games to help support himself and to stay involved in athletics. Now in his 16th year with the NFL, he still likes being part of the game, and the weekly stipends supplement his law income — NFL refs earn between \$2,500 to \$8,000 a game, based on seniority.

Rice works between 50 and 60 hours a week as managing partner of Goldstein, Buckley, Cechman, Rice & Purtz, and then another 40 to 50 hours a week for the NFL during the season. His NFL responsibilities include off-season work as well, including visits to NFL training camps and clinics that each of the NFL's 119 referees must attend.

"I'm very fortunate because I've been around the legal field long enough that a lot of my peers are judges and everybody thinks it's kind of neat what I do, so they've been very cooperative with me in scheduling and working out any conflicts that may occur," he says.

As umpire, Rice watches the linemen for false starts, holding, chop blocks and hands-to-the-face penalties. "I'm kind of the policeman of the game," he says. "It's my job to keep the large people in control, and if I can keep them in control then the game will remain in control."



J. Jeffrey Rice, 61

Career: Managing partner, Goldstein, Buckley, Cechman, Rice & Purtz, Fort Myers

Specialties: Commercial law, construction law, construction lien cases, real estate closings

Officiating: NFL referee since 1994

Top assignments: 2002 and 2004 Super Bowls; 2001 Super Bowl alternate; 2011 Pro Bowl

Most abusive fans: Oakland, New York

Exercise routine: 20 to 30 minutes of cardiovascular, 10 minutes of weight training and 10 to 15 minutes of stretching four or five days a week, all done in a converted storage room at his law office.



"I'm kind of the policeman of the game," says attorney/umpire Rice (left).

Even for a one-time offensive lineman, working close to the action can be dangerous. Rice tells many stories that end with him at the bottom of a twisted pile of 300-pound football players. His injuries have included a

hyperextended knee, cracked ribs, a concussion and various gashes.

NFL officials need "a thick skin," Rice says, not only because of the screaming fans, players and coaches, but also because of their supervisors.

Officials are graded on every play and every call. The officials with the highest grades become eligible to work post-season games. Those graded the lowest may end up out of the league.

"They'll look at every play and say, 'We agree that's a good call,' or they might say, 'We don't think that was a good call — respond,'" Rice says. "And then you have to review it and respond and say, 'Here's why I called it. Here's what I saw,' and they'll agree or disagree. We live in a glass house."

While the pressure to never make a mistake is immense, Rice says the job does have its perks. For one, it has made him something of a "mini-celebrity." At airports and on airplanes, people notice his Super Bowl rings and strike up conversations. Some people even recognize him. And being an NFL umpire hasn't hurt his law career.

"It kind of gives me, when I meet a new attorney or a new judge, it gives us something besides the law or the case to talk about," Rice says. "It gives us another way to get to know one another."