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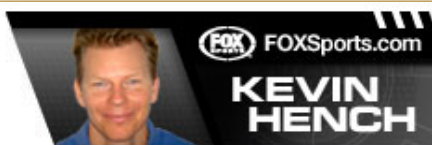
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Refs were far from Super in this one

[Kevin Hench](#) / FOXSports.com
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This is the space where I get to crow about the frightening precision of my Super Bowl prediction.

Where I get to remind everyone that I guaranteed the Steelers would win the title after they beat the Colts. That they were the only championship-caliber team among the final four. That they would dismantle the Broncos in Denver and waylay whomever the NFC sent at them.

This is the space where I get to wag a finger at my colleague Ian O'Connor, with whom I'd waged [a dueling columns battle](#) of opposing prognostication. He picked the Seahawks and made a very strong case for them.

This is the space where I get to say, I told ya so. But I won't. I can't.

I've never felt so empty being right. I feel dirty. I wish I'd been wrong. The Steelers did not deserve to win this game. They were not the better team. O'Connor was right. Seattle was the better team.

So, Paul Tagliabue, how does a team lose when it outgains an opponent by 57 yards, controls time of possession and wins the turnover battle?

Like a crazed CIA analyst running through the halls of Langley screaming into open offices about some impending calamity, I've been shrieking hysterically about the terrible officiating in the NFL and warning that some day the brutal calls were going to affect the outcome of the Super Bowl.



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That some day was Sunday.

Every single questionable, marginal or outright bad call went against the Seahawks.

Their first three big plays were all wiped out by penalty calls. On their second drive, Darrell Jackson caught an 18-yard pass on 3rd-and-6 that would have given Seattle a first down at the 23. But Chris Gray was called for holding James Farrior. When Farrior pushed upfield, Gray did hook him with his right arm, and Farrior went down. When referee Bill Leavy flagged Gray, it was a bad omen for the Seahawks. Instead of being on the edge of the red zone, they came away without any points.

On their third drive, the Seahawks looked to take a 7-0 lead when Jackson separated from Chris Hope in the end zone and Matt Hasselbeck delivered a perfect strike to his outside shoulder. The back judge looked uncertain — sound familiar, Patriots fans? — then finally jerked his flag out and called offensive pass interference to wipe out the touchdown. The replay showed receiver and defender hand-fighting, with Jackson getting the slightest push into Hope's chest before turning to catch the ball. ABC's John Madden thought the call was dubious. FOX analyst and all-time great offensive lineman Brian Baldinger had no doubts, calling it "absolutely horrendous" on [his FOXSports.com Super Bowl Instant Analysis](#). ESPN's Steve Young and Michael Irvin also had no uncertainty, dismissing the call as ticky-tack and insisting the Seahawks got robbed of a TD.

Then came a huge call on the first play of the second quarter. Peter Warrick ripped off a 33-yard punt return to give Seattle the ball at the Steelers 46. But Etric Pruitt was called for holding. How clear was it? Well, Madden thought the call was for Pruitt holding the gunner at the beginning of the play. It wasn't. The flag came in during the runback and it looked pretty minor. Another example of an official searching to make a call.

So despite totally dominating the first 20 minutes of the game, the Seahawks led only 3-0.

Then came Pittsburgh's first touchdown. Whether you think Roethlisberger broke the plane of the goal line seems to depend on which team you were rooting for. The odd part was the line judge seemed to have determined that Big Ben had come up short as he ran in from the sideline. Since Roethlisberger had been pushed back well short of the goal line I don't know what he could have seen as he got closer to the pile that would have made him change his mind. But up went the arms. Had Roethlisberger been ruled short of the plane, that call would no doubt have stood too. But you figure the Black and Gold would have pounded it in from the two-inch line on fourth down so there's not that much here for Seattle fans to complain about except for the continuing storyline that every single call was going the Steelers' way. And the worst was yet to come.

The Seahawks were on the verge of taking a 17-14 lead early in the fourth quarter when officiating disaster struck. Hasselbeck had drilled a pass down the seam to Jerramy Stevens to set up first-and-goal at the one when suddenly Leavy appeared in the middle of the screen to call the play back on account of holding on Sean Locklear. No less a source than newly minted Hall of Famer John Madden



Steelers 21, Seahawks 10



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came right out and said it was a bad call. This penalty was beyond ticky-tack. Baldinger called it "another terrible call" and added that the Steelers were offsides on the play. It was yet another official searching for a call, desperate to throw his flag, yearning to impact the action. Why, why, oh, why? That's 14 points the officials simply took away from the Seahawks. Incredible.

After a sack, Hasselbeck threw a pick and then was penalized 15 yards for making the tackle. I'm not kidding. The same thing happened in the Indy-Pittsburgh game in the regular season. It's like the officials become so discombobulated during the change of possession that they just randomly start throwing flags. The call was that Hasselbeck had thrown an illegal block below the waist on the return. Never mind that Hasselbeck wasn't trying to block anybody and did, in fact, make the tackle. Just another terrible call that cannot be reviewed in Paul Tagliabue's NFL.

The Steelers took quick advantage of their enhanced field position and just like that it was 21-10 Pittsburgh when it should have been 17-14 Seattle.

But the stripes weren't done.

First, they blew a fumble call on the field — of course against Seattle — before overturning it after replay. Then, with the Steelers trying to run out the clock, Leavy granted Roethlisberger a timeout, even though the play clock clearly read zero before the quarterback signaled for time. It ended up being the final bad call in Seattle's coffin.

As Madden and Al Michaels watched the replay they shared a laugh about a similar bad non-call in an earlier playoff game between the Bears and Panthers. This is what it has come to: Announcers comparing the bad calls happening before them to the bad calls from earlier rounds of the playoffs. Is this really what the NFL wants?



Did the refs get this Ben Roethlisberger touchdown call right? It's certainly up for debate. (Elaine Thompson / Associated Press)

With Cris Collinsworth lobbying for pass interference to be eligible for review on *Inside the NFL* after New England got jobbed in Denver; Joey Porter inveighing against the league after the game in Indy; Young and Irvin railing at halftime of the Super Bowl; Baldinger being spot-on with his Instant Analysis critique of the officials; and Madden and Michaels wondering aloud about the officiating during the game ... is anybody in the league office listening?

Or can we pretty much count on next year's playoffs being dominated by the officials too?

In other notes ...

● **Was that Mike Holmgren or Mike Martz?**

POLL

The one area where most people agreed Seattle might have an edge was on the sidelines. Mike Holmgren was supposed to be a better game coach than Bill Cowher. But a funny thing happened to Holmgren at the end

of the first half (and again at the end of the game): He became Mike Martz. Not once, but twice, Holmgren basically ran the clock out on himself.

One other decision Holmgren made should haunt him. After Mack Strong did a shameful job of not stretching out for a first down — on a tackle by a cornerback no less — the Seahawks faced 4th-and-inches at their own 26 with a 3-0 lead in the second quarter. The situation reminded me of when Bill Belichick went for it in a similar situation against the Colts in the playoffs three years ago, made it and sent a statement. Despite having an MVP tailback who was 16-for-16 on 3rd-and-1 this season, Holmgren went the safe route and punted. The Steelers scored and Seattle never led again.

● **Darrell Jackson, what might have been**

After tying a Super Bowl record with five catches in the first quarter, Darrell Jackson was shut out. But, oh, what might have been. If not for a holding call, a marginal offensive pass interference penalty and a momentary lapse of knowing where he was on the field, Jackson could have had eight catches in the first half for 124 yards and two touchdowns.

As it turned out, his five catches for 50 yards will be easily forgotten.

● **Joey Porter vs. Jerramy Stevens**

Joey Porter was pretty invisible. Jerramy Stevens wished he was. Despite scoring a touchdown, Stevens had three huge drops, two of which were drive killers when the Seahawks were marching deep in Steelers territory. Porter may have had only three tackles and no sacks, but the "soft" label he hung on Stevens sure seemed to fit as the 6-foot-7 tight end short-armed several passes and seemed to be hearing footsteps all night.

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