



WIPP WORKS IN WASHINGTON
September 2012

"Blocked Punt" by **Ann Sullivan**

I don't know how many of you are football fans, but I fall into the category of the ever optimistic Redskins fan who can't wait for the season to start, despite the fact that the last decade should have dampened my enthusiasm. Nevertheless, every season is a new leaf in my book and this year we have a star quarterback.

When watching the game yesterday, (which by the way the Redskins lost), a glaring problem was the lack of referees that understand the NFL. If you are not aware, the NFL's referees are on lockout, so the NFL has called in the backups to referee games. According to ESPN, "Now, all NFL game officials are part-time employees, with outside jobs ranging from lawyers to teachers to business owners." The game reflected this with near brawls, incorrect calls or no calls at all—the coaches were basically refereeing the game from the sidelines.

So what does the NFL's referee strike have to do with Congress? If you think about it, the upcoming budget/tax debates could look a lot like yesterday's game.

First of all, let's talk about the structure of the Congress and those who put wide ranging deals together. When it comes to taxes, it starts with the Chairs of the Senate Finance and House Ways and Means Committees. Budget talks require the leadership of the House and Senate Budget Committees and usually the heads of the Appropriations Committees. Those in leadership positions often attend the talks as well. While the President does not join in the talks directly, the White House is usually in constant contact with the Congressional leaders of the party with respect to the negotiations.

The referee positions usually fall to the House Speaker and Senate Majority Leader making sure everyone is playing by the same rules and keeping the negotiations on track. They also, on occasion, stop the brawls that occur when those at the table get frustrated at the lack of progress or when it looks like the opposing team is taking illegal shots.

What happens when the Congressional negotiators cannot reach an agreement? There are a couple of outcomes. One, they appoint a special commission to come up with recommendations to break the gridlock. But that has not worked very well in the last few years. Think of the Simpson-Bowles Commission. Think of the Super Committee. Even though the Commission came up with a bipartisan set of recommendations, the Congress did not accept them. On the other hand, the Super Committee (also bipartisan), tasked with finding \$1.5 trillion in additional cuts to the federal budget to avoid automatic across-the-board cuts, was unable to reach consensus.

This is where experienced referees who understand the rules of the game come in. The leadership of the Congress should be able to keep the parties negotiating. They should be able to expect that the players in the negotiations will abide by the rules and stand by the

negotiated outcome. Of course we all know that the last round of budget negotiations collapsed because the referees could not deliver votes for the deal they had negotiated. The players, seemingly all went to the locker room without completing the fourth quarter. The Congress almost plunged the United States into default before the referees broker a deal.

The President got his share of the blame, acting like the NFL Commissioner who watched the negotiations collapse and appeared helpless to get everyone back to the table.

But that was the last time around. This time around, in order to avoid across the board cuts and expiration of the Bush tax cuts, the referees will need to be in firm control of the negotiations and the Congress--both Republicans and Democrats-- will have to agree to stick to the rules. They have to agree that they want an outcome that's good for the future of this great nation. The President needs to understand his role as well—working with all the owners to make sure they can live with the settlement—and backing the referees.

Just like a Monday morning quarterback, all of us have seen the mistakes made by the Congress during the last round of budget negotiations. It is easy to stand on the sidelines and speculate on how things would have changed, had the play calling been different. But the stakes in January are extremely high. Tax cuts expire **without** Congressional action. Budget cuts will take place automatically **unless** Congress acts. Congressional action on cutting the deficit and on tax reform will have an enormous impact on small businesses.

We need to empower our elected officials to act boldly. To use the football metaphor, we need our leaders to reach for the playoff spot, not just the next play.