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For many fans, it's exciting when a major sporting event goes into overtime. Two teams, evenly matched at the end of regulation time, get to compete a while longer. What more could fans want?

For National Football League (NFL) fans and many others, overtime also provides an exciting opportunity to complain about the current system and offer suggestions for improvement. This could be because only one team can win, which means the other team's fans can always find something "unfair" about the process. Or, in the NFL's regular season and some other sports, the game could end in a tie, which is in some ways even less satisfying for fans. But the NFL's overtime rules come under special scrutiny due to the emphasis they place on the toss of a coin.

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may also be the reason they have not used the overtime rules from collegiate football, in which teams alternate possessions without kicking off.

In March 2022, the NFL made another change to overtime rules,⁸ seemingly in response to the public outcry⁹ following the Bills-Chiefs game. Starting with the 2023 playoff season, there will still be a coin toss to determine which team starts on offense in overtime, but each team is guaranteed to possess the ball at least once (unless a safety is scored on the opening possession of overtime). If the team on offense first doesn't score a touchdown, or if the score is tied after each team has had the ball, the next score ends the game. Rather than a mechanism design approach, they have chosen to stick with a format that more closely resembles the game in regular time. Whether the latest change will eliminate the advantage formerly conferred by winning the toss is yet to be seen, as no games have gone into overtime as of the date of this paper.

In closing, and in fairness to the NFL, some additional details may be worth considering. By the end of the 2021 season, 164 total overtime games had been played since the 2011 rule change. Teams winning the coin toss went on to win the game 86 times (52.44%) and lost 68 times (41.46%), with 10 games ending in a tie (6.1%). This still means an advantage for the coin toss winner, but the numbers are an improvement over the previous system's most recent record, and are surprisingly close to those calculated theoretically by Leake and Pritchard (2016).¹⁰ The most recent rule change was likely due to the observation that in the 12 playoff games going to overtime since 2011, the team winning the toss went on to win 10 times, 7 times on the first possession.¹¹

⁸ <https://www.si.com/nfl/2023/01/12/nfl-new-overtime-rules-guidelines-2023->