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In debt debate, life imitates sport

By [Dana Milbank](#),

It's fourth and long in America's fight to avoid default, but our leaders still can't agree on the field conditions.

"The White House moved the goal post," House Speaker [John Boehner protested](#) Friday night.

"There was no change at the goal post," White House chief of staff [Bill Daley responded](#), via "Meet the Press" Sunday morning.

Yet Harry Reid, the Democratic leader in the Senate, is on record saying the uprights were indeed moved — by the Republicans. "It is like trying to kick a field goal and the goalposts keep moving," he said earlier in the budget fights.

It's time to throw a flag and penalize both sides for unnecessary sportsmanship: specifically, turning the debt-limit impasse into an extended athletics metaphor.

A week ago, [President Obama said](#) "we're in the same playing field," but [by Monday night](#) he was accusing Republicans of playing "a dangerous game that we've never played before." A confused Jay Carney, the White House spokesman, went from saying that both sides "[need to move this ball down the field](#)" to asserting that "[the ball is in their court](#)." Boehner countered that, wherever the goal posts are, "[the ball continues to be in the president's court](#)."

On the Senate floor, lawmakers found debt-limit precedents in fox-hunting and gladiator fights. Meanwhile, Rep. [Jim Jordan](#) (R-Ohio), the leader of a large bloc of House conservatives, explained his support for a plan that had no chance of passage: "Every Friday night, when they get ready to play the game, there's always one team that's favored," but "they still play the game, and sometimes the underdog wins."

There's only one problem with the governing-as-football idea: This isn't a game. If you lose the full faith and credit of the United States, you don't shake hands at midfield and meet for a rematch later in the season.

The trivialization of the debt dispute by our elected sports buffs points to a larger problem with our politics: that lawmakers have abandoned governing as they pursue a perpetual contest to gain seats in the next election. Policymaking has become just another means of campaigning, as partisans on the sidelines chant slogans and hector the opposing team and leaders keep track of wins and losses — not

for the American public, but in their own game of gaining and holding majorities.

A revealing example came late last week when word broke of a possible deal between Obama and Boehner. As The Post's [Paul Kane reported](#), Senate Democrats protested to Obama's budget director that the president was squandering their advantage: "The Democrats were winning, the senators said." Never mind that without a deal, millions could lose their jobs or their homes. The Democrats were winning.

Reporters, who have long favored the political horserace over substance, willingly serve as the politicians' sportscasters. A bestselling book by two political journalists is called "[Game Change](#)." Politico's must-read morning cribsheet is called "[Playbook](#)." When Reid put out a debt-limit proposal, the New York Times called it "[a Hail Mary pass](#)." When Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell presented his plan, NBC's Chuck Todd called it a "Hail Mary punt." [Politico asked](#) why Obama (who speaks of the importance of "skin in the game") has been on the "sidelines" rather than being a "legislative closer."

Lawmakers are shrewd enough to disavow the gamesmanship they practice. "This isn't a game of chicken," Reid told Republicans. "No more games," McConnell told Democrats. But political athletes can't help themselves.

Sen. Sherrod Brown (D-Ohio) complains that Republicans "did not play ball with us," and Sen. Chuck Schumer (D-N.Y.) lectured House Republicans on "how we are going to play ball here." Rep. Sander Levin (D-Mich.) likened Obama to "a relief pitcher who enters a game in the fourth inning trailing 19-0 and allows another run to score. . . . [F]ans should be far angrier with the starting pitcher."

On the other side, Sen. Jon Kyl (R-Ariz.) tells Democrats to "get in the game," and McConnell instructs Obama to "get off the sidelines," but Rep. Tom Graves (R-Ga.) says it's "way too late in the ballgame" for an Obama proposal. Sen. Jim DeMint (S.C.) warns that "Republicans are playing a lose-lose game," while Rep. Louie Gohmert (Tex.) sees Republican legislation as a "game-changer."

Default would certainly be a game-changer, and not a favorable one. But not to worry: On the Senate floor, Dan Coats (R-Ind.) said that, "even though the clock is ticking down," he still expects a happy outcome. Why? Because he's a sports fan. "I have seen miraculous comebacks in the fourth quarter of basketball games, maybe the last two minutes," he said.

I saw "Hoosiers," too, senator. But if the debt-limit standoff ends badly, we will have lost more than a basketball game.

danamilbank@washpost.com

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