The NFC Championship Game sent the Saints to the Super Bowl for the first time in franchise history. It also had the type of ending that only the NFL can provide:

One team, one drive, one possession, one field goal. The Vikings offense never took the field. From the moment Minnesota lost the overtime coin toss, they were fighting a steep uphill battle. As soon as New Orleans' high powered offense crossed into Minnesota territory on the ensuing drive, a field goal attempt was well within sight. From that point on, the game essentially hinged on the accuracy of Garrett Hartley's kicking leg.

It is true that the Vikings -- and more specifically, Brett Favre -- created their own mess. Favre killed a shot at what could have been a game-winning field goal attempt by hip-shooting the ball straight to Saints defensive back Tracy Porter on an incredibly stupid throw with seven seconds left in regulation.

But that interception doesn't change the fact that the events of the game from that point forward still shine a much-needed light on the NFL's overtime rules.

The NFL's sudden death overtimes rules, which have been in place for the playoffs since the 1940s and in place for regular season games since 1974, essentially takes the overtime format the NHL used prior to 2005 and attempts to fit it to football.

There is a timed period -- a full 15 additional minutes in the case of the NFL and five minutes in the case of the NHL -- in which the game proceeds under regulation-time rules, except the NHL now permits one fewer skater on the ice. The first team to score, wins. If the timed period ends and neither team has scored, the game ends in a tie. In order to remove the anticlimactic tie-game outcome, the NHL instituted a shootout system in 2005 as a fail-safe means of determining a winner. If the overtime period ends in a tie, a series of penalty-style shots determines the game.

A tie is still a possible outcome in an NFL game, though it's rare. The last NFL tie occurred between the Eagles and Bengals in 2008, and before that, between the Falcons and Steelers in 2002. It's so rare, after the '08 tie Eagles quarterback Donovan McNabb confessed that he didn't even know an NFL game was allowed to end in a tie.

The argument in favor of the current NFL overtime system says that it has rarely failed to decide games. That's true, but it's also true that football possessions are completely apples and oranges when compared to hockey possessions.

In a hockey overtime period, both teams are likely going to have multiple opportunities to take possession of the puck and create a scoring chance. In football, there is no face-off. There is a coin toss, kickoff, and the receiving team takes the ball and drives it down the field. If the offense is successful and the team's kicker has a strong leg, the team that loses the coin toss will never get a scoring chance. The probability of an win-loss outcome is high, but the system is inherently not fair. Both team battled through 60 grueling minutes to reach overtime, and the outcome can hinge on what side of the coin is facing upward.

In the interest of fairness, the sudden-death format isn't the best fit for a game like football. There are other ways to handle overtime games, methods that can produce definite outcomes while allowing each team to have a reasonable chance to win. Let's take a look at a few of them. Some are more practical, some are a little more creative.

Sudden death -- first team to six points

This method is the one I tend to favor. It takes the current overtime rules and eliminates the "win the coin toss, drive the ball and kick the field goal" scenario, which is the most damning argument against the current NFL overtime setup.

In a nutshell, if you win the coin toss and don't want to give the ball to the other team, you need to score a touchdown. If you kick a field goal, the other team still gets the ball back. If they score a touchdown, they win. If they kick a field goal or fail to score, you get the ball a second time. From there, if you can kick a second field goal, you win.

The setup doesn't completely eliminate the kicker from the game's outcome, but it makes the kicker a less pivotal player. It also encourages teams to drive for the end zone instead of field goal range.

Ultimately, this method ensures that if a team succeeds in preventing the other team from having an overtime possession, it's because they earned it by putting the ball in the end zone. If neither team can get the ball into the end zone, field goals can still determine the outcome, but it would be a more difficult task than under the current rules.

College rules

Sometimes called the "Kansas Plan," this is the method made famous after it was adopted by the NCAA. It's also used in various forms by the Canadian Football League and high schools in states around the U.S.

Essentially, it's a hockey shootout adopted to football. Offenses take possession of the ball at attempt to outscore each other in rounds of drives that usually start deep in the opponent's territory. In NCAA-sanctioned college football, the drives start at the defense's 25-yard line. If your offense is on the field in the top half of the first round and you score a touchdown, the other team has to match your touchdown in the bottom half of the round or you win the game.

If you kick a field goal in the top half of the round, you must keep the other team to a field goal or less in the bottom of the round. If the other team answers your field goal with a touchdown, you lose.

The NCAA alternates which team goes first in each round. After the second overtime round, if a winner has not yet emerged, extra points are ruled out and teams must go for two-point conversions after touchdowns. Interceptions and fumble recoveries can be returned for scores by the defense per NCAA rules, but in high school, turnovers usually result in a dead ball and the end of the possession.

This method of overtime makes for great TV. Every football fan in Ohio remembers Ohio State's thrilling, pressure-packed overtime win against Miami in the 2002 national title game. The only trouble is, if overtime goes four or five rounds, the final score and final statistics can really get thrown out of whack.

What was a tightly-contested 17-17 game in regulation can suddenly sprawl into a 45-38 final in which the second-rated defensive team in the league plummets to ninth based on giving up three or four short-field touchdowns in overtime. The NFL values its stats and rankings, and defensive coordinators around the league probably wouldn't be keen on the idea of an offense-biased overtime that has the potential to kill a defense's reputation.

It's a little different in college ball, where dominant defensive teams are few and far between.

But in the NFL, where many teams pride themselves on their defense, this style of overtime has hand grenade potential in league meetings.

Move the kickoff spot up to the 40 yard line

This setup would move the kickoff spot up 10 yards from normal regulation kickoffs, which are booted from the 30 yard line. The idea is to increase touchbacks and regularly pin offenses deep in their own territory, which would presumably make it more difficult for a team to take the opening kickoff and immediately drive into field goal range. Putting the offense on a long field increases the probability of fourth-down punts, and therefore, changes in possession.

Here's the problem: If the team that fields the opening kickoff returns the ball to the 10-yard line and the ensuing drive nets little to no additional yardage, that team would then be forced to punt from deep in their own territory, or even their own end zone. Unless the punter uncorks an 80-yard cannon shot downfield, there is a good chance the other team will take over with favorable field position to -- guess what? -- take the ball, drive into field goal range and win the game.

In a roundabout way, it penalizes the team that wins the overtime coin flip. And in the event that the team receiving the opening kickoff is able to pick up a couple of first downs but the drive stalls, the other team is likely taking possession deep in their own territory, setting up a see-saw of drives beginning deep in the offense's territory, and reducing the chances of a scoring opportunity.

The object is to make overtime fair, not kill all scoring chances.

Five-minute periods, with rotating kickoffs

This is sort of a modified shootout format. The clock doesn't stop, so team that wins the opening kickoff doesn't have a lot of time to drive the ball into field goal range. They're basically forced into a hurry-up offense from the outset. If either team fails to score in five minutes, the clock expires and the team that received the first-overtime kickoff must then kick the ball off to the

other team at the outset of the next overtime period.

It increases the chance of each team having at least one possession, but this is also a tiring way to run overtime. It's basically a series of five-minute sprints until someone scores. By the fourth or fifth overtime, offenses and defenses would begin to succumb to fatigue, increasing the possibility of injuries and, in hot weather, dehydration.

Full overtime period, followed by a field goal "shootout"

Want to put the game at the feet of the kickers? Make them an absolute last resort. Play a full 15-minute overtime period without sudden-death rules. If the game is still tied at the end of that period, do what the NHL does and decide the game with a shootout. Or in this case, a "kick-out."

Pick a field goal distance that is makeable for NFL kickers, but not a slam dunk. Say 45 yards. Each team lines up, 11-on-11, and attempts one field goal. If both kickers make or miss their attempts, the shootout goes to a second round with the order alternated. If both kickers make their attempts, the line of scrimmage is pushed back a couple of yards, requiring a 47 or 48 yard attempt. If the game still isn't decided, a couple additional yards of distance, and a 50-yard attempt. And so on, until a winner is determined.

If both kickers miss in a given round, the distance stays the same for the next round.

By the time the distance reaches 55 yards and beyond, a missed field goal is only a matter of time.

If you don't like putting kickers in such a powerful position, this isn't the overtime setup for you. But then again, how is it really different from the current overtime rules?