

# Football Points of Emphasis - 2018

By NFHS on June 14, 2018

## **football**

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### Proper Wearing and Use of Required Equipment

Prior to the start of each game, the head coach must verify that all of his players have the proper equipment and that no illegal equipment will be used. The purpose of equipment rules is to ensure the safety and protection of both the player wearing the equipment and his opponent. Due to the potential for injury, game officials must strictly enforce equipment rules. Game officials have been reluctant to penalize a team for the failure of a player to properly wear all of the required equipment. This reluctance may be due to game officials assuming that equipment violations are a minor offense and do not warrant penalties. In view of this reluctance, a rule change has been implemented to lessen the severity of the consequence of violating equipment rules. With the lessened severity, it is imperative that game officials follow appropriate procedures when equipment violations occur. Equipment rules are an extremely important part of the game, and it is therefore essential that game officials are diligent in promptly addressing any and all equipment rule violations.

Equipment violations can be grouped into three categories: (1) failure to properly wear required equipment, (2) failure to wear or use legal and/or required equipment, and (3) wearing illegal equipment. The first category encompasses instances where the required equipment is present, but is not worn properly. Examples include, but are not limited to, unsnapped chin straps, tooth and mouth protectors that are dangling, or jerseys that do not fully cover the shoulder pads or back pads. If game officials observe any improperly worn equipment during a dead-ball period, they should declare an official's time-out and ask the player to make a correction. However, if the equipment issue is not recognized until the snap is imminent, the game official should immediately sound his whistle to prevent the snap from occurring, declare an official's time-out and require that the player leave the game for at least one down to address the equipment issue. The second category is when a player is missing any required equipment. In this situation, an official's time-out must be declared, the player must leave the game for at least one down and will not be allowed to return to the game until the missing equipment is obtained and properly worn by the player. The third category occurs when a player wears illegal equipment. Examples include, but are not limited to, the wearing of cleats that exceed ½-inch, or the presence of a sticky substance on a player's uniform. If a player is detected wearing illegal equipment, his head coach is charged with an unsportsmanlike conduct foul under Rule 9-8-1h.

If any equipment becomes illegal or defective during the game, correction must be made before the player continues to participate. Examples include chin-strap snaps which break off of the helmet or a jersey that slides up over the top of the shoulder pad. If the correction can be made without the assistance of a team attendant, and without delaying the ready-for-play signal by more than 25 seconds, an official's time-out

may be called to perform such correction. Alternatively, a team may request a charged time-out to perform the correction. However, if correction cannot be completed within 25 seconds, or during a charged timeout, the player may not continue to participate until correction is made.

### **Pace of Play and Timing Issues**

In order to maintain a fair balance between offense and defense, a consistent pace of play should be established and maintained by the game officials during the entire contest. Each team should be allowed an equal opportunity to make substitutions and call plays during the time between the dead ball and the next ready-for-play signal. The pace of play should not change during the contest, and should be the same from game to game, and from officiating crew to officiating crew. Therefore, the committee recommends the ready-for-play signal be given between 12 and 15 seconds after the previous dead ball. This pace of play should be consistent no matter if either team wants to hurry up or slow down. Long incomplete passes, plays into the side zones and first downs may require the game officials to hustle to get the ball and line-to-gain equipment properly set, while short runs up the middle may require a slight delay before marking the ball ready for play. Consistency is the goal without regard to particular game situations.

To accomplish a consistent pace, the referee should develop a “feel” for 12 to 15 seconds. This feel can be accomplished in many ways. A few examples could be for a referee to establish a routine of duties to perform after each dead-ball whistle, then mark the ball ready-for-play after completing those duties. A referee could also use the game clock to time 12 to 15 seconds if it is running and easily observable. Lastly, a referee could ask an observer to record the amount of time between a dead-ball whistle and the next ready-for-play so pace -of-play adjustments can be made during their next contest. With some attention by the referee and effort by the entire officiating crew, consistent pace of play can be achieved.

In a similar fashion, game officials should also be vigilant about unfair use of the game clock. Rule 3-4-6 has been around for many years and allows the referee to start or stop the game clock when a team attempts to illegally conserve or consume time. This rule applies at any time during the contest including the last two minutes of either half. Game officials are encouraged to become “clock aware” at 4:00 in each half for potential illegal clock manipulation. Game officials should also be “clock aware” near the end of the first and third periods if weather conditions or field conditions could give a team an advantage through the delay or acceleration of the reversal-of-field position at the end of each period.

In 2017, the NFHS Football Rules Committee adopted Rule 3-4-7 which gives an offended team the option to start the clock on the snap when a penalty is accepted with less than two minutes left in either half. This option applies to any accepted penalty by either team if the clock would otherwise start on the subsequent ready-for-play signal. In a situation where there is a live-ball foul by one team and a dead-ball foul by the other, or a dead-ball foul by both teams, each team would be given the option to start the clock on the snap if it would have otherwise started on the ready-for-play. If either team exercises this option, the clock

will start on the snap. It is of no significance whether or not the clock was running at the time a foul occurred.

## **Enforcement of Penalties for Personal Fouls and Unsportsmanlike Conduct Fouls**

Rule 9-4 provides a list of illegal personal contact fouls. These acts are illegal due to the potential for injury to an opponent. With a few notable exceptions, these fouls do not carry an automatic disqualification, although disqualification may result if the covering official judges the foul to be flagrant. Additionally, the penalties for repeated violations in the same game are not cumulative. For example, if a player pulls a ball carrier down by the face mask and later in the game commits a taunting foul, the player remains in the game. Unnecessary roughness fouls are personal fouls — not unsportsmanlike conduct fouls — and are not being included in the specific fouls that would lead to disqualification unless the act is flagrant. Unsportsmanlike conduct fouls never involve contact with an opponent.

Game officials need to be aware of all circumstances before enforcing the distance penalty for a personal foul as there are several factors to be evaluated, such as the type of play (loose ball vs. running play), whether there was a change of possession, whether a score occurred during the play or whether a double foul or multiple fouls occurred.

Rules 9-5 and 9-8-1 define noncontact unsportsmanlike conduct and provide general examples of such fouls including using profanity, vulgar language or gestures, attempting to influence a game official's decision, a coach allowing his players to use illegal equipment, being on the field except as a substitute or replaced player and several other situations.

Specific examples of unsportsmanlike conduct include but are not limited to the following: any delayed, excessive or prolonged act by which a player attempts to focus attention upon himself; using abusive, threatening or insulting language or gestures to opponents, teammates or game officials; or using baiting or taunting acts or words that engender ill will between teams.

Unsportsmanlike conduct fouls accumulate and any player or non-player who receives two such fouls is automatically disqualified from the contest. However, any single foul judged by the game official to be flagrant is disqualification. Unsportsmanlike conduct penalties are always enforced from the succeeding spot.

Situations have arisen in recent years regarding unsportsmanlike conduct that have not been correctly called. For example, the "Where's the tee?" play described in the case book is an example of unsportsmanlike conduct. The ball should be declared dead and the penalty should be enforced as a dead-ball foul. Football has been and will continue to be a game of deception and trickery involving multiple shifts, unusual formations and creative plays; however, actions and language designed to confuse the defense into believing there is a problem and a snap isn't imminent are beyond the scope of fair play.

## Defenseless Player and Blindside Blocks

In 2017, the NFHS adopted rules defining and giving examples of defenseless players, and rules prohibiting forceful blindside blocks outside the free-blocking zone unless initiated with open hands. Coaches and game officials should understand, teach and apply these rules in a manner promoting player safety and minimizing the risk of player injury.

**Defenseless Player** — A defenseless player is one who, because of his physical position and focus of concentration, is especially vulnerable to injury. The most common types of defenseless players include passers, receivers, sliding runners, runners whose forward progress is stopped, players out of the play and players who are blindside blocked.

A defenseless player is not in an equal physical position with the player attacking him and could be severely injured when contacted. For example, a player passing or attempting to catch a ball is completely exposed to opponents. A player obviously out of the play has no reason to think an opponent will charge into him. A runner in an opponent's grasp and whose forward progress has been stopped cannot defend himself from an opponent taking a free shot at him. A downed runner or a runner giving himself up and sliding feet first cannot protect himself against unnecessary contact. A player receiving a blindside block is unaware of the opponent charging him. What is common among all these situations is that the player cannot defend himself or avoid potential contact, leaving himself vulnerable to injury. Special attention must be given to contact against these players to determine if it is legal. Although defenseless players who are involved in the play may be contacted by an opponent, the player initiating contact must do so in a legal manner.

The term "defenseless player" is relatively new to the rules, but the protection afforded these players is not. For several years, the rules have penalized roughing the passer, kick catching interference, illegal helmet contact, unnecessary roughness and late hits. Classifying players as defenseless reinforces the prohibition against illegal contact and emphasizes the need to protect the most vulnerable players. Excessive and unnecessary contact, including forceful contact to the head or neck area of a defenseless player, has long been illegal, and it has no part in the game. Coaches must exercise leadership in eliminating illegal contact, and game officials must act decisively to penalize illegal contact to minimize the risk of player injury.

**Blindside Blocks** — A blindside block is an effective blocking technique. There is nothing improper in executing blindside blocks generally, and the rules do not preclude their use altogether. Instead, to enhance player safety and minimize the risk of injury, the rules prohibit a specific type of blindside block: one that is forceful, is not initiated with open hands and occurs outside the free-blocking zone.

A blindside block is a foul if: (1) the block occurs outside of the free-blocking zone; (2) the blocker does not initiate the block with open hands; and (3) the block is forceful. If all three of these factors are present, the blindside block is illegal.

Coaches should teach proper blindside blocking techniques, and game officials should evaluate whether a blindside block is legal, based on these three factors and the considerations below, as well as the underlying spirit and intent of the rules—to promote safety, eliminate illegal contact and minimize the risk of injury to players.

- *Whether the player being blocked can see the block coming.* A blindside block is “a block against an opponent other than the runner, who does not see the blocker approaching.” In other words, it is a block that the opponent does not see coming.

Game officials must first determine whether a block is a blindside block. Usually, this will be obvious. The player being blocked will be looking away from the blocker while being blocked from the side by an opponent. In some situations, however, the player being blocked may turn his head to see the blocker just before contact occurs. Such contact is still considered a blindside block. Though the player may have seen the blocker approach, he did not do so in sufficient time to have a reasonable opportunity to react, adjust and defend himself.

Some element of time, though it may be very short, is necessary to accomplish the rule’s safety purposes. In most situations, the blocker is running at full speed, increasing his momentum and focusing on one player. The player being blocked, however, is focused elsewhere and completely unaware of the charging blocker. Such a player who turns his head at the last second and sees his opponent just before contact cannot realistically protect himself. He is just as defenseless and vulnerable to injury as if he had not turned his head at all. Game officials should not be overly technical with this requirement and should always err on the side of player safety. The intent of this rule is to protect the player being blocked. It is not intended to create a legal way of throwing a shoulder or body block. When in question, the block is a blindside block.

- *Whether the block occurred outside of the free-blocking zone.* If a blindside block occurs in the free-blocking zone, it is legal even if the contact is forceful and even if it is not initiated with open hands. Of course, the contact must otherwise be legal—a player cannot clip or target an opponent, for example. However, the free-blocking zone exists only during scrimmage plays, and it disintegrates as soon as the ball leaves the zone. When the zone is gone, any blindside block by rule occurs outside of the free-blocking zone and, if forceful, must be initiated with open hands to be legal.

- *Whether the block was initiated with the open hands.* Any forceful blindside block outside the free-blocking zone must be initiated with open hands. Blocks initiated with the shoulder or body are dangerous because of the amount of force they generate. Blocks initiated with open hands are significantly less dangerous because they do not typically generate that same amount of force. The open-hands requirement is intended to reduce the force associated with blindside blocks.

As a result, game officials should consider two things in determining whether a blocker has complied with the open-hand requirement. First, the blocker’s initial contact with his opponent must be with open hands

if the block is forceful. Second, the force of the block should come from the blocker's hands and arms rather than from his shoulder or body.

A player who makes first contact with open hands and imparts a force to the opponent by extending his hands and arms has complied with this rule. However, a player who makes first contact with open hands but nonetheless forcefully drives his shoulder or body into his opponent has not complied with the rule. Instead, he has thrown a shoulder or body block with all the force that his shoulder and body carry. The open-hand requirement is meant to reduce that type of force. It is not intended to allow an otherwise illegal shoulder or body block simply by placing open hands on the opponent at the last second.

- *Whether the block was forceful.* If a player has thrown a non-open-handed blindside block outside the free-blocking zone, game officials must finally determine whether the block is forceful. If the block is forceful, it is a foul; if not forceful, it is not.

"Forceful contact" is something more than minor contact but something less than excessive contact. The contact should be significant enough to notice, but it does not have to be violent or otherwise unnecessary to be forceful. As an aid to judging whether a block is forceful, the covering official should consider whether the blocker was only attempting to take his opponent out of the play, or whether the block was intended to take the opponent out of the game. The former is legal, while the latter is illegal.

Game officials should take the entire block into consideration. The focus should be on the block itself and the blocker, because he is the player generating the force behind the block. The reaction of the player being blocked may help, but it is not the determining factor. Game officials should never base their decision on forceful contact solely on whether the player goes to the ground.

Where a blocker's shoulder or body contact results in minor movement of the opponent and the force of the block is not obvious, the block is not forceful. However, where the blocker makes contact with some obvious degree of force behind the block, contact is forceful regardless of the effect on the opponent.

Finally, game officials should be diligent in observing these blocks and penalizing infractions. Although the rule applies throughout the game, blindside blocks are most likely to be made by the offense on returns following interceptions, free kicks and punts. They may also occur when the offense reverses direction on the field. Game officials must use proper mechanics on these plays and be in position to observe players throwing blindside blocks. The most likely offenders will be those doing something different from others. For example, if most players are moving north, these players will be moving south or east and west. These are the players who crack or peel back, "swim upstream" or "go against the grain," and they are suspect for potentially committing illegal contact fouls.

Through good position and technique, a player initiating an open-handed blindside block can effectively obstruct his opponent with sufficient forceful contact while minimizing the risk of player injury. By teaching

these techniques and consistently penalizing infractions, coaches and game officials will have continued taking positive steps toward reinforcing player safety, minimizing injury, and removing unnecessary and excessive contact from the game.