



2015 FOOTBALL POINTS OF EMPHASIS

RISK MINIMIZATION

Football is a game with the stated objective “of one team carrying or passing the ball across the opponent’s goal line or kicking the ball through the opponent’s goal by a place kick or drop kick. The game is won by the team which accumulates the most points.” NFHS Football Rules Book, Rule 1-1-1.

While this may sound like a simple concept, the game of football has changed with the addition of new offensive and defensive schemes. The blocking and tackling techniques used by high school teams have placed an emphasis on expanding the length and width of each play, resulting in more opportunities for unnecessary or excessive contact to occur between players. As the game of football continues to evolve, coaches, players, game officials and spectators must respect the simplicity of Rule 1-1 and commit to keep the game as safe as possible for all participants.

Coaches should continue to educate their players about the risks of unnecessary or excessive contact regardless of whether or not the contact occurs during a legal block or tackle. While the committee does not believe players are coached to make unnecessary or excessive contact with opponents, coaches should clearly instruct players to avoid such unsafe contact. Risk minimization applies equally to players on both teams.

Players need to have respect for the game and their opponents. Any action which includes identifying and taking aim on an opponent who is not aware of any pending contact increases the potential for serious injury to one or both of the players and must be avoided. If the contact is judged as flagrant, the offending player will be disqualified and, in most states, will miss the next contest. Players can’t help their team be successful if they are not in the current or future contests.

Game officials need to be aware of situations that are likely to produce unnecessary or excessive contact. Blindside blocks, peel-back blocks, and airborne receivers attempting to secure the ball oftentimes provide windows of opportunity for these potentially dangerous contact situations to occur. Players leaving their feet (launching) and initiating contact with opponents should be penalized immediately as unnecessary or excessive contact.

Spectators, players and coaches should not promote nor celebrate any act that endangers the safety, health and welfare of an opponent. Players of both teams should always be treated with the utmost respect. The safety, health and welfare of all players should be everyone’s priority.

What is Excessive?

While the NFHS Football Rules now expressly preclude conduct that is “excessive” and “unnecessary,” the rules have always barred efforts to injure or “take out” an opponent. Situations involving contact that exceed what is usual, normal or proper must to be eliminated from the game.

Considering this potential for serious injury, it is critical that those situations involving unnecessary or excessive contact on players are eliminated whether or not that contact is otherwise deemed legal. While unnecessary or excessive contact can occur between any players, special attention must be given to those players whose focus of concentration makes them especially vulnerable to injury. The “glamour” associated with these types of hits must be removed in order to minimize risk for all participants.

Another area where contact may be deemed excessive is where players heed the old adage provided by coaches, “Play until you hear the whistle!” The whistle rarely causes the ball to become dead; it only confirms a player’s action that has caused the ball to become dead (knee on ground). Playing and hitting until the whistle blows can cause unnecessary contact to opponents who have begun to “let up.”

Situations where momentum has slowed or stopped and there is a group of players making the play and someone comes in and drills the pile could be prevented by a timely whistle. Even in the event of a “slow

whistle,” such conduct should be penalized. In addition, coaches and players need to be aware that this type of contact is unnecessary, unwarranted and is against the rules

In summary, here is an analysis of several examples:

Does a player have a legitimate chance to make a play? – Yes

Does the player receive a blindside hit? – Yes

Was the contact unnecessary or excessive? – Yes

Ruling: Foul for personal foul/unnecessary roughness or excessive contact.

Does a player have a legitimate chance to make a play? – Yes

Does the player receive a blindside hit? – Yes

Was the contact unnecessary or excessive? – No

Ruling: Legal play.

Does a player have a legitimate chance to make a play? – Yes

Does the player receive a blindside hit? – No

Was the contact unnecessary or excessive? – No

Ruling: Legal play.

Does a player have a legitimate chance to make a play? – No

Does the player receive a blindside hit? – Yes or No

Was the contact unnecessary or excessive? – Yes or No

Ruling: Foul for personal foul/unnecessary roughness or excessive contact.

While a contact may be legal, analysis and sound judgment must also determine whether the hit was unnecessary or excessive. Coaches and game officials must work together to minimize risk to players from unnecessary and excessive contact by proper coaching from coaches and assessment of penalties by game officials.

FACILITATING NFHS FOOTBALL RULES

Many often wonder how the rules that govern high school football are developed and why they are written the way they are. The National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) football playing rules reflect a national perspective based on decisions that best serve the needs of the sport on a national level. Therefore, the purposes of the playing rules are to:

1. Minimize risk to participants.
2. Preserve the sound traditions of the sport.
3. Standardize competition.
4. Provide for orderly administration.
5. Facilitate the decision-making process of officials.
6. Permit common records.
7. Provide for evaluating competition.
8. Maintain a balance between offense and defense.

With these goals in mind, the NFHS Football Rules Committee believes the rules and the game facilitate and enrich a well-rounded educational experience that promotes academic achievement, encourages positive school/community relations and develops good citizenship and healthy lifestyles. Furthermore, the committee believes the current code of ethics for both coaches and game officials facilitate these goals as written.

One aspect of coach and official ethics is to teach and officiate the rules within the intent of NFHS Football Rules Book. THE COACH shall master the contest rules and shall teach them to their team members. THE COACH shall not seek an advantage by circumvention of the spirit or letter of the rules. THE OFFICIAL shall master the rules of the game, and also the officiating mechanics necessary to enforce the rules, and shall exercise that responsibility in an impartial, firm and controlled manner.

Coaching and officiating the rules are extremely important to maintain the integrity of the game, and to minimize risk to the athletes participating in the game. The following are rules identified as a reminder to all coaches and game officials involved in football to minimize risk.

Free-Blocking Zone

For many years, the NFHS Football Rules Committee has addressed a variety of rules related to the free-blocking zone and blocking below the waist. Currently, the rules have been modified and updated to allow blocking below the waist in a specific zone and within a very short period of time. Low blocks can sometimes result in lower leg injuries. On the other hand, blocking below the waist helps to level the playing field for those players who are at a size disadvantage compared to that of their opponents. The committee continues to stress the importance of officiating the rule as written, instead of prohibiting blocking below the waist completely.

The free-blocking zone is a rectangular area extending laterally four yards either side of the spot of the snap and three yards behind each line of scrimmage. A player is in the free-blocking zone when any part of his or her body is in the zone at the snap. All players involved in the block must be on the line of scrimmage, in the zone at the snap and the contact must take place within the zone. Blocking below the waist is permitted from the time the ball is snapped until the ball leaves the zone. When the free-blocking zone exists, offensive and defensive linemen may block each other below the waist. Backs, linebackers and receivers are not permitted to block below the waist.

When the ball is directly snapped hand-to-hand to a back, a block below the waist is legal as long as the blocks are between linemen who were in the zone at the snap, the contact is in the zone, and the ball has not left the zone. As long as the ball remains in the zone, those players may legally block below the waist.

When the ball is snapped to a back in shotgun formation, however, the ball leaves the zone, and the zone disintegrates almost immediately. To be legal, a block below the waist must occur immediately after, and nearly simultaneously with, the snap. Any delay would cause the block to occur after the ball has left the zone. It is nearly impossible for a lineman in a two-point stance to legally block below the waist in this situation because of the time required for the lineman to drop from an upright position and block an opponent below the waist. For linemen in three- or four-point stances, they must block their opponents immediately after the snap in order for a low block to be legal in this situation.

Prior to the snap, game officials should be aware of whether the ball will be snapped hand-to-hand or to a back in shotgun formation, player positioning and alignment, and which players may legally block below the waist.

Illegal Equipment

No player shall participate while wearing illegal equipment. This applies to any equipment, which in the opinion of the umpire is dangerous, confusing or inappropriate. The coaches' pregame verification to the referee and umpire that all players are properly equipped in compliance with the rules also includes the exterior helmet warning labels. Coaches should bring casts, braces and other such items to the game officials' attention so that the umpire can inspect the items.

Players should be instructed on how to wear equipment properly, and must wear all mandatory equipment when participating in the game. When a player's equipment becomes damaged during play, it must be corrected before the player may participate further.

Players cannot be allowed to participate in the game, and substitutes cannot be allowed to become players when they are not properly wearing required equipment or when they are wearing illegal equipment. Game officials should not allow players to enter the game or let the ball become live when they observe infractions of the equipment rule. It is not always necessary for a game official to call a foul and penalize a team if game officials are able to make the player and coach aware of the problem so it can be fixed before the ball becomes live.

Sideline Interference

To ensure the safety of all involved, non-players, including substitutes, athletic trainers and coaches, must remain in their team box and out of any restricted areas, especially while the ball is live. Non-players may

never be on the field while the ball is live and may only be on the field when the ball is dead in limited situations.

In the excitement of the game, it is not uncommon for substitutes and other non-players to move closer to the sideline beyond their team box area. This inevitably causes coaches to move up into restricted areas and closer to the field, often impeding game officials in their duties. Crowding at the sideline puts players, non-players, coaches and game officials in danger of severe injury. Game officials and coaches must be aware of this problem and take steps to prevent and correct it.

Coaches, substitutes, athletic trainers and others affiliated with the team may in their team's area, which is out-of-bounds and between the 25-yard lines. Their movements and positions are limited by the sideline, the 25-yard lines, a coaches' area and the team box.

The coaches' area extends at least 2 yards deep out-of-bounds from the sideline. A maximum of three coaches – and only coaches – may be in this area when the ball is dead between plays. However, all coaches must leave this area when the ball is about to become live, such as when the snapper is approaching the ball, and no one may be in this area while the ball is live.

The team box area is outside the field, beyond the restricted area and between the 25- yard lines. All coaches and non-players associated with the team may be in this area. A nonplayer may not be outside of this area unless to become a player or return as a replaced player.

When non-players are outside of the team box area, or anyone is in the restricted area while the ball is live, game officials will give a sideline warning to the team involved. A second offense results in a 5-yard penalty. All subsequent offenses result in 15-yard penalties for unsportsmanlike conduct fouls, which are charged to the head coach.

If a game official unintentionally contacts a coach or other nonplayer in the restricted area while the ball is live, the team is assessed a 15-yard penalty for a nonplayer, illegal personal contact foul. As a nonplayer foul, the penalty is enforced from the succeeding spot. A second such offense would result in the head coach's disqualification. Unlike a foul for sideline interference (non-contact, Rule 9-8-1k or 9-8-3), no warning or 5-yard penalty is required in this situation.