



## **WEEK 1: FIRST THINGS FIRST**

1. See the ball before you blow your whistle.

Losing sight of the ball is without a doubt the leading cause of errant play-killing. There is no hurry. There is nothing wrong with having a few plays that end with no one blowing a whistle. If no official can see the ball when the play ends, there should not be a whistle. A couple of good habits to develop are waiting one second after seeing the ball and letting an incomplete pass bounce twice before sounding the whistle.

Although some inadvertent whistles are the product of rushing, that is not the only cause. Concentration and focus are crucial in staying out of the abyss. Whether the game is tied or a blowout, all officials must keep their heads in the game.

2. Say the penalty as you throw the flag.

By saying the penalty out loud when throwing the flag you allow yourself the ability to be able to remember the type of foul and the fouling player. You are better able to remember the play once it has concluded and before you are able to relay your penalty information to the crew and/or the referee.

3. Know your pre-snap keys.

Wing officials should remember the phrase, “Snap. Tackle. Back.” That’s who and what you watch as each play begins. Umpires observe the center and the guards. The referee has the quarterback and the backs. In that way, all 11 offensive players are observed at the start of a play. Once the ball is snapped, read the type of play and focus on players in your area. For instance, if the linemen drop back, it’s likely a pass. If a guard pulls, expect a sweep. If the linemen fire out, it’s a running play between the tackles.

## **WEEK 2: FORMATIONS**

1. Actions during the execution of a trick or unusual play have the highest degree of scrutiny and should be completely legal.

Deception and trickery are a big part of the game. Fake field goals, simulated handoffs, shifts, motion and varied snap counts are all common and, run properly, are legal. The key phrase there is “run properly.” When an offensive team chooses to attempt a trick play, officials must be even more picky when it comes to the formation, player movements, etc.

A good example is an onside kick. On a run-of-the-mill free kick, it is accepted practice to not flag a player who is slightly beyond his free-kick line at the kick. However, on an onside kick,



the free-kick line should be treated as a pane of glass; it is a foul if a team K player breaks that pane, since a big advantage can be gained.

2. When in question, a quick or abrupt movement by the center or quarterback is a false start.

Subtle movements like a head bob by the quarterback or the center raising his hind end before snapping the ball should be considered false starts even if the defense doesn't react. Those movements may or may not be planned. Call those fouls early in the game and you likely won't see them the rest of the game.

3. If you can't discern who moved into the neutral zone first, give the benefit of the doubt to the defense.

When an offensive lineman and a defensive lineman move into the neutral zone simultaneously or close to it, the benefit of the doubt go to the defense. It is incumbent on offensive players to be motionless because they know the snap count and the defense does not.

### **WEEK 3: BLOCKING**

1. When considering blocking below the waist, observe the initial movement by offensive linemen.

In most cases, the initial move will be the limiting factor. The block must be lineman on lineman, in the free blocking zone and executed before the ball leaves the free-blocking zone. If the block is not initiated immediately after the snap, it is likely the ball has left the free-blocking zone. That is especially true when the quarterback is not under center or the offense is in scrimmage kick formation.

2. For blocks in the back, if one hand is on the number and the other hand is on the side and the initial force is on the number, it is a block in the back.

The force of the block could be slight and still a foul if the contact propels the player past the runner or prevents him from making the play. If the force is clearly on the side, it is not a foul. If the blocker is in a "chase mode," all the action must be on the side.

If an official can see both jersey numbers, unobstructed, on the back of the player being blocked when the initial contact occurs, it's difficult to rule such contact a foul.

Mere contact with the opponent's back, such as a slight brush that does not change the contacted player's stride, is not a foul. However, if the defender stumbles and misses an opportunity to make a tackle, it is a foul within the intent of the rule.



3. Blocks that start on the side and subsequently end up in the back are not fouls as long as contact is maintained throughout the block.

It's important to distinguish between contact from the side, which is legal, and illegal blocks in the back, which carry a penalty. One criterion is whether the person being blocked had an opportunity to see the blocker before being hit. A block from the side, even though it results in a player being put on the ground, is not a foul unless for some other reason it is also a personal foul.

4. Allow legal contact until the receiver occupies the same yardline as the defender. Continuous contact is illegal.

There is no "chuck zone" in amateur football. Contact between receiver and defender is allowed to a point. Until a pass is thrown, a team A player who moves downfield and contacts an opponent is not a receiver; he's a blocker. And a defender is allowed to fight off the block. But once that team A player has reached the same yardline or has gone beyond that defender, he has demonstrated he's either going out for a pass or is looking for a different opponent to block. He should be able to perform that duty unfettered.

5. Blocks in the back and personal fouls should be called regardless of their timing relative to the runner being tackled.

A common but not universal philosophy is that if a player is fouled but is still able to make the tackle, there is no foul. Additionally, some believe that a foul that occurs nowhere near the runner can be passed on if the defense drops the runner for a loss or a short gain. That is not the case when "safety fouls" are involved. If a team A player clips, blocks an opponent in the back or blocks below the waist, the foul should be called regardless of when or where the tackle is made.

6. Rarely should you have a hold on a double-team block unless there is a takedown or the defender breaks the double team and is pulled back.

The theory is that if the offense is willing to commit two blockers to one defender, a defender who could have been blocked by one of those blockers is now unblocked. Thus, the defense enjoys an advantage rather than being placed at a disadvantage. As a result, a holding penalty would be "piling on."

7. When in question if an illegal block occurs in the end zone or field of play, it occurs in the field of play.

When a team A foul occurs in its own end zone and the penalty is accepted, it is a safety. A safety is a momentum-changing play. If a foul occurs so close to the end zone that it could reasonably be judged to be in the field of play, go with that option. For example, a blocker



engages the opponent a yard or so deep in his own end zone and the contact morphs into a hold. If the contact continues into the field of play, use that as the spot of the foul rather than the end zone.

#### **WEEK 4: HOLDING**

1. Actions that constitute offensive holding include but are not limited to the following six categories:

- Tackle. A tackle as a block is most likely to occur as part of a block below the waist at the line. It is also an act of desperation by an offensive lineman badly beaten by a defender.
- Takedown. A takedown is often fairly obvious. It may momentarily look like a wrestling match. A size mismatch between blocker and rusher increases the probability of a takedown. A factor to keep in mind is that backfield pass blockers are often smaller than defensive linemen, making the need for an “equalizing” technique more probable.
- Pullover. The pullover almost always occurs on a pass play. The offensive lineman grabs his opponent at the armpits or chest plate of the shoulder pads and then pulls him over himself, making it look like the defender ran over his blocker and fell down in the process.
- Hook and resist. In order to hook an opponent, the blocker must allow his hands to get outside the frame of his body. That is usually easily discernible. For a foul to occur, that act must result in a restriction that affects the play. If the defender immediately blows through the extended arm, no holding has occurred.
- Grab and restrict. If the defender beats his blocker, the blocker may grab the defender’s jersey as he is moving away. The jersey grab can be subtle or patently obvious.
- Jerk and restrict. This type of hold begins with two hands on the opponent’s chest. After contact is made, the blocker slides his hands up under the opponent’s shoulder pads and grabs the jersey. With that firm grasp, the blocker jerks the opponent aside or moves him away from the point of attack, thus delaying his advance.

2. Defensive holding is generally limited to four types:

- Pull and shoot. That tactic used by defensive players (usually linemen) is designed to create a gap in the offensive line. The defensive lineman grabs the offensive lineman and pulls him to one side, allowing a teammate to rush through the opening and rush the quarterback or block a kick.



- Holding a pulling lineman. In order to prevent the offense from setting up the blocking in front of a screen pass or sweep, a defensive player (usually a lineman) will hold a pulling lineman. It often shows up as a shirt-grab or outright tackle.
- Holding on a chip block. That hold begins when an offensive lineman fires out at the snap and legally blocks the defensive lineman (usually but not always a nose guard) below the waist. An adjacent offensive lineman will either fire out or chip block the nose guard, trying to work his way to the second level of defense, usually a linebacker. If the defensive lineman holds the adjacent lineman, he prevents the lineman from getting to the linebacker.
- Holding an eligible receiver. A defensive end will sometimes hold the tight end, preventing the receiver from getting off the line to execute a block or get into a pass pattern. Cornerbacks in press coverage are also known to latch onto wide receivers.

3. If there is a potential offensive holding but the action occurs clearly away from the point of attack and has no (or could have no) effect on the play, offensive holding should not be called.

The runner hits the right side, makes it through the line and gains enough for a first down. But action that qualifies as holding occurs on the opposite side of the line, away from the point of attack.

Was there a rules violation? You bet. Should a flag be thrown? Yes, if officials were inclined to throw the flag for every single violation committed in the game. That, no doubt, would result in a long day for players, coaches and fans. But officials must embrace the advantage/disadvantage philosophy. Color that play gray.

When considering holding, if the offensive player's act cannot be described using one of the six categories of holding, think twice before throwing the flag. Likewise, if the questionable block is on a player who could not reasonably make the tackle, a verbal warning is in order.

4. If there is a potential for defensive holding but the action occurs clearly away from the point of attack and has no (or could have no) effect on the play, defensive holding should not be called.

The philosophy regarding defensive holding is similar to that of offensive holding. If a receiver is held but the quarterback never looks in his direction, or if the hold is on the side of the field clearly opposite from the side on which the play is run, you can likely pass on it. The most common defensive hold is the "pull and shoot" on scoring kicks. The lineman will grab the offensive lineman and pull him aside, allowing a teammate to dart through the opening to block the kick. That should be called every time.

5. Watch the defender's feet to determine if there is a hold.



Holding is as much a foul of omission as commission. A blocker who fails to move his feet often finds himself needing to grab the defender in order to prevent the defender's movement and advance.

At the snap, watch the initial charge of the defense and the reaction of the offense. If you observe an offensive player grasping an opponent, shift your focus to the blocker's feet. If he stops moving his feet, he likely is holding to compensate. If the defender is faster or stronger than the blocker, the blocker usually has no choice but to hold.

Blockers who have poor footwork or are out of position are going to hold because they get caught flat-footed. But if the blocker is able to keep his feet, keep his body between the defender and the runner and does not have to resort to leverage in order to repel the defender, the block is likely legal.

6. Holding can be called even if the quarterback is subsequently sacked as it may be the other half of an offset foul.

Some officials think that calling holding when the quarterback is sacked or the runner is downed behind the line is "piling on," or adding insult to injury. In fact, it is an insurance policy. If a different official has a flag down for a live-ball foul by the defense, the penalties will offset. If the hold is not called and the only flag is for a foul by the defense, the defense will not only be deprived of its great play but will be penalized.

## **WEEK 5: PASSING**

1. When in doubt if a pass is forward or backward, rule it forward.

When a pass is thrown, it's not always easy to draw an imaginary line from the passer to the receiver. An uncaught backward pass may be recovered and advanced by either team. So ruling it backward when it could go either way actually benefits the defense. Calling it an incomplete forward pass is fair to both teams; the offense can't gain yardage and the defense benefits because the offense has used up one of its downs.

2. When in question on action against the passer, it is roughing the passer if the defender's intent is to punish.

Remember the prime criterion is whether the contact was unavoidable and part of a legitimate effort to tackle a player holding the ball. If the defender is within one step of the passer, in almost all cases he does not have enough time to react to the release of the ball and legitimate contact should be excused. At the other end of the spectrum is the rusher who is three steps or more away from the passer. In that case, it is clear the defender has enough time to avoid contact.



A defender who is two steps away forces the referee to exercise his judgment. Could the contact have been avoided? In making that decision, it is prudent to consider not only whether the defender had control of his feet, but also the control of his arms. In other words, was he truly trying to make a tackle and couldn't stop, or was he trying to deliver a blow or otherwise inflict punishment upon the offensive player?

If the referee believes the defender dove at the opponent's knees for a purpose other than tackling him, it's a foul. Likewise, any forearm or shoulder to the head should be considered illegal.

3. A late flag when ruling officiating intentional grounding is the optimum procedure.

Two essential elements — duress and the lack of eligible offensive receivers in the area where the pass is thrown — drive the mechanics that make a late flag the optimum procedure. The referee's primary focus is on the quarterback. If there is duress on the play, the referee must stay with the quarterback a bit longer than usual to ensure that player is not fouled. The opportunity for the referee to watch the flight of the pass is extremely limited. That will only happen if the pass is thrown away from the referee and remains within his field of vision. Consequently, the referee will always know if the pass was released under duress, but will rarely know if there was an eligible offensive receiver in the area where the ball was thrown. That means unless the ball was spiked to the ground for an obvious foul, the referee will not have all the information necessary to throw his flag. For those plays to be called properly, the referee can be assisted by any member of the crew who should run in immediately and tell the referee if the ball went into an area devoid of eligible team A receivers. The referee will then throw a late flag.

4. The referee should drop back the same number of steps as the quarterback drops back.

The referee wants to keep everything in his line of sight. By dropping back with the quarterback, the referee is always the same distance away from the quarterback with his actions and can see the whole picture of the field.

5. If an interception is near the goalline (inside the one yardline) and there is a question as to whether possession is gained in the field of play or end zone, make the play a touchback.

Team B has just made a great play by intercepting a pass deep in its own territory. To make that team start a new series on or inside its own one yardline effectively negates that play. Also, starting a play at the 20 yardline takes some pressure off you, since you won't spend the next play(s) on the ensuing drive having to decide if a runner was tackled inside or outside his own end zone.



## **WEEK 6: CATCH**

1. Consider all external factors when ruling catch vs. no catch.

Sometimes players make a tough call for you. One example is an attempted diving or shoestring catch. If the receiver's shoulders slump, he expresses disgust verbally or otherwise indicates disappointment, he's telling you the pass was incomplete. Not that seeing him jump up and "show you the ball" automatically means he caught it. But lack of that or a similar gesture is a pretty good clue.

A spray of those tiny black rubber pellets on a turf field, a splash of water on a wet day or a poof of dirt on a dry track may also be helpful.

2. In order to complete a catch, a player must touch the ground while he is in control of the ball.

If the ball is lost after the receiver has touched the ground, due to contact or not, it should be ruled an incomplete pass instead of a fumble unless the receiver has clearly demonstrated complete control of the ball. Complete control is indicated by taking a step, tucking the ball away or some other action ordinarily associated with running with the ball.

3. The umpire can be extremely helpful in determining a catch or trap.

Some high school umpires continue to watch the action in the line after a pass is thrown, sometimes for several seconds, whereas collegiate umpires are taught to pivot the instant the pass is off so as to help the wing and deep officials with catch or trap plays over the middle. Indeed, a catch or trap 10 yards from the line of scrimmage and in the middle of the field is one of the toughest calls to deal with. An alert umpire who spins when the pass is thrown can save the crew by making the call himself or helping another official who has to try to make the call while looking through the receiver's back.

4. When in doubt, the pass was trapped rather than caught.

If it is not certain a catch was made, it is an incomplete pass. The covering official can be guided by the position of the receiver's hands. If his hands are under the ball, the likelihood that it's a catch is increased. At least one official must observe the ball possessed by a player without it having touched the ground.

5. The official who is closest to play may not always have the best look when judging catch/no catch.

The official who is closest may be so close he is not be able to see the whole picture. An official who may be a little farther away can see the whole picture and may have the best look to determine a catch or no catch. Think of taking a group picture with a camera without a zoom lens; you have to back up away from the group of people to get everyone in the photo.





## **WEEK 7: END OF PLAY**

1. The ankle or wrist are considered part of the foot or hand.

A runner is down when any part of his body other than a hand or foot touches the ground (the ankle or wrist are considered part of the foot or hand, respectively). Additionally, a runner is not down if any part of his body touches another player (teammate or opponent) who is lying on the ground.

2. When judging forward progress, if a runner appears to be stopped, he should be given an opportunity to escape.

If a runner is stopped, forward progress is marked at the ball's farthest advance. If he breaks free and renews his charge, or runs backward of his own accord, progress is marked at the farthest ball point of his subsequent advance.

The most judgmental scenario occurs when a runner breaks free and renews his charge, but staggers and goes down without further contact by the defense. In that situation, "down by contact" is a factor. If the official judges the runner went down as a result of the initial contact, the runner is entitled to forward progress at the spot he was first contacted. If not, forward progress is marked at the spot he went down. When a runner is taken backward, the spirit of the rule entitles him the spot where he was originally contacted unless he is subsequently able to move forward under his own power. Whether the defense continually maintains contact with the runner is not a factor.

3. If legal contact occurs before the runner has a foot down out of bounds, consider it a legal hit.

A runner tight roping the sideline presents a challenge for opponents as well as officials. If the defender holds up, thinking he is risking a penalty for a hit out of bounds, the runner will continue to advance. On the other hand, a late hit can lead to player injury or the precursor to a confrontation.

As long as the runner is clearly inbounds, and the contact is otherwise legal (e.g. not a horse-collar, striking blow, etc.), consider the hit legal.

## **WEEK 8: DEFENSIVE PASS INTERFERENCE**

1. Actions that constitute defensive pass interference include, but are not limited to, the following six categories:



- Early contact by a defender who is not playing the ball is defensive pass interference provided the other requirements for defensive pass interference have been met, regardless of how deep the pass is thrown to the receiver.
- Playing through the back of a receiver in an attempt to make a play on the ball.
- Grabbing and restricting a receiver's arm(s) or body in such a manner that restricts his opportunity to catch a pass.
- Extending an arm across the body (arm bar) of a receiver thus restricting his ability to catch a pass, regardless of the fact of whether or not the defender is looking for the ball.
- Cutting off or riding the receiver out of the path to the ball by making contact with him without playing the ball.
- Hooking and restricting a receiver in an attempt to get to the ball in such a manner that causes the receiver's body to turn prior to the ball arriving.

## 2. Develop a feel for the legality of contact.

When determining whether contact qualifies for an interference call, some officials employ a test similar to the block-charge distinction used by basketball officials. Did the offensive player charge into the contact, or is it a case of unavoidable contact that warrants a no-call? Still other officials think in terms of advantage-disadvantage when deciding whether contact should draw a flag. While those notions can give you a feel for the play and help build consistency in the way you call interference, do not rely on them to the exclusion of knowing and applying the rules.

## 3. Enforce a penalty only in those cases in which the contact involves an obvious intent to impede the opponent.

You will often see a play in which a defender has one arm across the receiver's back while his other arm reaches across to knock the pass away. Some officials (and most offensive coaches) incorrectly think that should automatically draw a flag for defensive pass interference. However, unless the defender uses the arm across the receiver's back to grasp, control, spin or slow the receiver, let a good football play stand and keep the flag in your pocket. The same philosophy should apply any time a receiver and defender trip accidentally when their feet entangle. Don't make a cheap pass interference call when the contact is inadvertent or incidental to fair play.

Distinguish those examples of unavoidable or incidental contact, where a no-call is appropriate, from the type of play in which the defender knocks the pass away from a position directly behind the intended receiver. If the defender hits the opponent flush between the numbers when making a move to deflect the ball, defensive pass interference should be called. The penalty is legitimate because the defender could not have broken up the pass without going through the receiver's body.



Calls on pass interference can be tough, close calls. When a safety hits the receiver even a split second before the ball arrives, the contact is illegal. Make sure, though, that you actually see the interference; don't let crowd reaction influence you to call it.

4. Once the offense throws the ball, all eligible players on both teams have equal territorial rights to move toward, catch or deflect the pass.

Do not flag either side when there is a collision (unavoidable or incidental contact) between opponents who are both trying to catch, bat or otherwise make a play on the ball. Know a good, fair football play when you see it and don't ruin it with an unwarranted penalty.

A defender cannot exercise that right, however, if he is not looking for the pass. Thus, two things an official should consider in a potential defensive pass interference call are whether contact occurred and whether the defender was "playing the ball" (looking for it) or "playing the receiver" (looking at him) when the contact occurred. (In NFHS play, face guarding would constitute interference regardless of contact. In NCAA rules, the ball must also be catchable.)

There is no foul if a receiver and defender get "tangled feet" and both hit the ground, as long as both of them are looking for the ball; if one is playing the opponent and not the ball, he will draw a flag.

## **WEEK 9: OFFENSIVE PASS INTERFERENCE**

1. Actions that constitute offensive pass interference include but are not limited to the following four categories:

- Initiating contact with a defender by shoving or pushing off thus creating separation in an attempt to catch a pass.
- Driving through a defender who has established a position on the field.
- Blocking downfield during a pass that legally crosses the line of scrimmage.
- Picking off a defender who is attempting to cover a receiver.

2. Offensive pass interference for blocking downfield should not be called if the pass is nowhere near the contact.

If the pass is thrown to one side of the field and a block is thrown on the far opposite side, it is unrealistic to think that defender was prevented from making a play on the ball. It is good preventive officiating to counsel the blocker that the same block may be illegal if it occurs in the vicinity of where a pass is directed.



3. Offensive pass interference should not be called on a screen pass when the ball is overthrown behind the line of scrimmage but subsequently lands beyond the expanded line of scrimmage (up to three yards) and linemen are blocking downfield, unless such blocking prevents a defensive player from catching the ball.

Officials realize not everything is black and white; some situations involve shades of gray. Good referees understand that potential interference on a screen pass is one of those gray areas. The art of officiating should be applied to not prolong the series unnecessarily. No advantage is gained by a man downfield on that play.

4. A flag for interference should not be thrown at the instant an offensive player initiates contact downfield.

Remember that the play must ultimately involve a pass that flies beyond the neutral zone. If the offense runs the ball or tosses a pass behind the line, the early contact is not illegal. So, when an end hustles out to throw a block on a defensive back or linebacker, you must store that action (and the jersey number of the blocker) in your memory to let the play unfold. Delay the flag until that preliminary block qualifies for a pass interference call.

## **WEEK 10: SCORING PLAYS**

1. When in question, it is not a touchdown.

Touchdowns should be earned rather than awarded on a technicality. Be sure the ball is in the runner's possession and that it breaks the plane of the goalline. Wing officials earn their salt by being able to discern the location of the ball when a runner takes the ball into the middle of the line on a goalline play. Don't mirror a signal made by another official unless you are positive of your call. Two wrong signals don't equal one correct call.

2. When in question, it is not a safety.

The entire ball must be out of the end zone in order for a team to avoid a safety. That being the case, because a safety is a scoring play, the offense is given the benefit of doubt if the official is unsure of the location of the ball.