

Football Game Officials Manual Points of Emphasis - 2024-2025

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PREGAME ADMINISTRATION

Many game officials may be under the impression that their job begins at kickoff and ends when the game clock expires. However, efficient administration of a game requires advance planning by the crew to ensure awareness of potential distractions that can cause problems and disrupt the orderly conduct of the game.

Pregame administration begins a few days before the game. The referee, as crew chief, has some added administrative responsibilities. The referee should contact the host school (either the athletic director or designated game administrator) by email or phone a few days prior to the game to confirm the date and time of kickoff. This is particularly important if the game was assigned months – and sometimes years – in advance. Games can and will be cancelled or rescheduled by schools, and members of the officiating crew are usually the last people to know of such changes. Moreover, it is a common business courtesy to contact clients in advance to confirm arrangements.

The referee should also inquire about parking location, changing facilities (if provided), the name and phone number of a contact person for the crew upon arrival, and whether there are any special activities occurring prior to the game. The referee should inform the school of the approximate arrival time of the crew. The referee should also inquire where the locker rooms are located for each team. This information can be important because some teams go to their locker room or another designated location after warm-up and return to the field just a few minutes before kickoff. If the referee is not aware of the team's location and has not had an opportunity to meet with the team's head coach, the pregame meeting will be rushed if it is held just minutes before kickoff.

Once the referee has contacted the school, the referee should provide the crew with all the information and specify the crew's arrival time if crew members are arriving separately. After the crew has arrived and changed into game uniforms, the referee should lead the crew in a pregame conference.

When the crew takes the field, each crew member has certain responsibilities, as detailed in this manual. Those responsibilities include field inspection, checking player equipment, checking the chain crew equipment and meeting with the chain crew, meeting with the clock operator, meeting with ball helpers, and checking and securing game balls.

Pregame administrative responsibilities should be conducted in a professional manner and should not be taken lightly. If game officials are diligent in conducting their pregame administrative tasks, the game will flow more smoothly and efficiently.

CLOCK MANAGEMENT

The rule implementing the 40-second play clock that was passed recently by the NFHS created not only some subtle changes to clock management but also had direct impact on the pace of play.

Occasionally, clock operators are volunteers, but in most cases they are hired by the home team and it is not unusual for them to be partisans. The vast majority of operators are ethical, reliable individuals who are burdened with multiple responsibilities. It is common for the game clock operator to also be responsible for maintaining the scoreboard. The latter duty requires the succeeding spot, down and distance to the line-to-gain to be updated promptly after each play. When a team achieves a first down inbounds, the game clock stops and is restarted when the referee signals. That interval should be no more than 3-5 seconds. The problem arises when the referee gives the start-the-clock signal – the “silent wind” – while the clock operator is working on the scoreboard console instead of watching the referee. The clock operator’s briefing should include a request to refrain from changing the scoreboard (down, distance and yard line where the ball is located) until the referee has restarted the game clock.

After a first down inbounds, the ready-for-play occurs when the ball has been spotted and the game official who spotted the ball has stepped away into position. Under no circumstances should the ready be delayed if the chain crew is still moving and is not in position. In such a case, the linesman can drop a beanbag to mark the spot of the snap. In that situation, to ensure the game clock is promptly started, the referee should begin the silent wind when the umpire has possession and is about to spot the ball. That will compensate for the clock operator’s reaction time to the signal and ensure the game clock has been started and is running when the ball is snapped. The prompt starting of the game clock will ensure neither team gets an unfair time advantage especially during the last two minutes of a half. If the spotting of the ball is delayed for any reason e.g., wet ball, exceptionally long gain, etc., the referee can adjust accordingly by slightly delaying the silent wind.

If there is a visible play clock that is not being operated by an on-field official, play clock operators should be certified game officials who are knowledgeable of NFHS play clock rules. Operating the play clock is a more difficult proposition than operating the game clock. The game clock operator can adequately do the job by following on-field signals with only minimal knowledge of NFHS rules. The play clock operator frequently must act without a visible signal from a game official. Knowledge of the situations where a 40-second play clock is required versus a 25-second play clock is essential as is always keeping the referee in view for a play clock re-set signal.

THE IMPORTANCE OF DEAD-BALL OFFICIATING

Dead-ball officiating may be viewed by some game officials as an afterthought and a time to take a break. However, when the ball becomes dead, it is the most critical time for game officials to continue to perform their duties in order to maintain decorum among opponents. Game officials should strive to be excellent dead-ball officials since the likelihood of fouls being committed is at perhaps its highest.

Dead-ball fouls include behavior that is outside of the normally accepted boundaries of football and can involve both players and nonplayers. Some examples are baiting and taunting, fighting, throwing equipment in frustration, verbal abuse of game officials, and initiating contact with an opponent after the play is over. Because this type of behavior tends to gender ill will between opponents, it is imperative that it is immediately recognized by game officials and penalized accordingly.

NFHS football rules penalize unsportsmanlike actions in different ways:

- Illegal personal contact is a category of fouls that involve contact with an opponent. Frequently referred to as a personal foul, illegal personal contact can result in disqualification if the game officials deem the foul to be flagrant. Even though they may involve unsportsmanlike actions, penalties for dead-ball illegal personal contact fouls, with limited exceptions, are always enforced from the succeeding spot, the same way as penalties for unsportsmanlike conduct fouls are enforced. While there are no rules mandating additional penalties for multiple illegal personal contact fouls committed by the same player or nonplayer, good dead-ball officiating will prevent participants from repeatedly committing these types of fouls. Game officials must recognize situations where opponents are likely to commit dead-ball fouls and prevent them from happening through positioning and communication with players.
- Unsportsmanlike conduct fouls, by definition, are non-contact fouls (other than illegal participation) that do not influence a play. The penalties for these fouls are always enforced as dead-ball fouls (i.e., from the succeeding spot). When an unsportsmanlike conduct foul is judged to be flagrant or when any player or nonplayer commits two unsportsmanlike conduct fouls in the same game, the offender is disqualified. Unsportsmanlike conduct fouls cannot be combined with illegal personal contact fouls to disqualify an offender.

Recognizing unsportsmanlike actions requires game officials to be familiar with and use approved mechanics. Since most dead-ball fouls occur within three seconds of the end of a play, maintaining appropriate distance and angles after a play ensures game officials who do not have runner responsibility will be positioned so that they can monitor areas around the ball. This “Halo Principle” allows effective coverage of all 22 players. Rather than rushing to retrieve the football or focusing on the area around the runner, game officials should gently pinch-in toward the nearest players keeping them within sight and sound until the opponents have separated and teams are on their own side of their line of scrimmage. This is particularly important after a touchdown or try, when multiple players and substitutes are intersecting as they enter or leave the field.

Understanding the need to eliminate unsportsmanlike actions from the game, properly and consistently penalizing unsportsmanlike conduct and illegal personal contact and using NFHS-approved football game officials’ mechanics and officiating philosophies are all critical steps to improve sportsmanship in high school football.