

Prohibition on Slapping the Head Now Applies to All Players in High School Football

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In an ongoing focus on minimizing risk of injury in high school sports, the NFHS Football Rules Committee strengthened a rule related to illegal personal contact. Both revisions recommended by the committee were subsequently approved by the NFHS Board of Directors.

The Football Rules Committee is composed of one member from each NFHS member state association that uses NFHS playing rules, along with representatives from the NFHS Coaches Association and NFHS Officials Association.

Previously, Rule 9-4-7 stated that defensive players could not use the hand(s) to slap the blocker's head. This year, the Football Rules Committee approved language to apply the prohibition equally to the offense and defense.

"By eliminating the words 'defense' and 'blocker's' from the rule prohibiting slapping an opponent's head, the prohibition now applies to all players," said Bob Colgate, NFHS director of sports and sports medicine and liaison to the Football Rules Committee.

The other revision approved by the committee for the 2026 NFHS Football Rules Book concerns play cards worn primarily by quarterbacks. Previously, play cards could be worn only on the wrist or arm. This year, the committee approved wearing the play cards on the belt as well.

"The Football Rules Committee added the belt to the choices for players as the belt poses no health risk issue to the player and poses no danger to the opponent," Colgate said.

"From a rules perspective I believe the committee feels like the high school football game is in pretty good shape," said Steve Roberts, chair of the NFHS Football Rules Committee and associate executive director of the Arkansas Activities Association. "The two proposals that passed do not present significant changes to the game but do clarify and add options to enhance the overall value of the sport to all participants."

The four points of emphasis identified by the committee for the 2026 season are Flagrant and Unsportsmanlike Fouls, Helping the Runner, Sideline Management and Control, and Identification of the NFHS Authenticating Mark on Game Balls.

In addition to the two major rules revisions noted above and several editorial changes, two rules changes approved in 2025 will become effective during the next two seasons.

Last year, the committee approved two new additional requirements in Rule 1-5-1d(5) for tooth and mouth protectors, which are required in high school football. **Effective in 2026**, tooth and mouth protectors a) shall not include any attachment(s) that do not serve a purpose and function in protecting the teeth or mouth, and b) shall not include anything that is a health or risk issue and could pose danger to themselves or other players.

A new item was added to Rule 1-5-2d regarding a change in arm sleeve specifications. The new language, **effective with the 2027 season**, states that “arm sleeves, whether attached to a shirt or unattached, manufactured to enhance contact with the football or opponent, must meet the SFIA specification at the time of manufacture. Arm sleeves must have a permanent, exact replica of the SFIA arm sleeve seal (meets SFIA specification), that must be visible and appear legibly on the exterior of the arm sleeve.”

The Sports and Fitness Industry Association (SFIA), in working with football arm sleeve manufacturers and the NFHS, has developed the new football arm sleeve performance specifications to be **effective with the 2027 season**. The new specifications closely align with the current NFHS rules for football gloves.

A complete listing of the football rules changes will be available on the NFHS website at www.nfhs.org. Click on “Sports” at the top of the home page and select “Football” and then “Rules.” The print version of the 2026 Football Rules Book will be available for purchase in late April at www.NFHS.com, and the digital version will be available in April via NFHS Digital at www.NFHS.org.

According to the 2024-25 NFHS High School Athletics Participation Survey, 11-player football is the most popular high school sport for boys with 1,029,588 participants in 14,269 schools nationwide. In addition, there were 35,097 boys who participated in 6-, 8- and 9-player football, along with 4,969 girls in all four versions of the game for a grand total of 1,069,654.