

# Points of emphasis

For 2023, the Rules Committee wishes coaches, players and officials to take particular note of the following points.

## Officiating mechanics

IFAF has adopted, on the recommendation of the Rules Committee, a change to Rule 11-2-2 regarding officiating mechanics. Officiating responsibilities and mechanics are specified in the current edition of the *Manual of Football Officiating*, published by IAFOA. Officials are responsible for knowing and applying the material in the Manual.

The purpose of the rule change is to standardise officiating mechanics, especially across different size crews. The IAFOA manual is the only one that covers crew sizes from 3 to 8. The Rules Committee felt that it was best for officials working international games to do the same things that they do regularly in their domestic games (as far as possible). Since domestic games are frequently officiated by crews of 4 or 5, or in some countries using larger crews is limited to special occasions, it is important that the responsibilities and tasks associated with the officiating positions change as little as possible. The one exception to this principle is obviously that on larger crews, the responsibilities of the crew can be spread out over more people and each individual official can therefore have less to do.

It is a recipe for disaster for officials who are working in their national competitions for most weeks of the year to have to switch to a somewhat arbitrarily different set of mechanics for the one or two weeks of the year when they work international competition.

We hope that in due course all national federations and/or officiating organisations will choose to standardise their mechanics and so facilitate the effectiveness of their officials in international competitions. We recognise that this will be difficult for organisations in USA, Canada and Japan to adopt.

The IAFOA manual is the one previously known as the "BAFRA" manual. An IAFOA Mechanics Committee has been established, based on the existing international advisory committee that has determined recent versions.

What IFAF is doing here is simply standardising the way that games are officiated. No other major international sport has different positioning requirements for its officials. American football outside the USA (and Canada and Japan for historic reasons) should be no different.

## Sideline control

Coaches that need to have conversations with officials about specific rulings within the game must do so from the Team Area. Coaches are encouraged not to enter the field of play or leave the Team Area to debate officiating decisions, and those that do so will have committed an automatic Unsportsmanlike Conduct Foul.

Coaches will be allowed to only step to the sideline to call offensive and defensive signals after all action has ceased. That working space (six-foot white border) is intended to allow officials to adequately perform their duties; to protect the safety of officials, players and coaches; and to allow teams to demonstrate good sportsmanship within the team area. Special attention should be given to the rule stating that if a coach receives two unsportsmanlike fouls in a single game, they are disqualified.

The Rules Committee has instructed officials to be more diligent in their observations of these actions and they are instructed to flag violations of the rule when it occurs in an area they can observe. Coaches are expected to set an appropriate, professional example for their

players, fans and the many others who watch the game and to intervene when they see members of their team exhibit behavior that is not acceptable under the Sportsmanship guidelines of the Football Code.

## Protection of defenseless players / targeting

The Rules Committee continues to embrace the targeting rule in order to promote player safety, reduce head contact and eliminate specific targeting actions from the game. The language in 9-1-3 and 9-1-4 stipulates that no player shall target and make forcible contact to the head or neck area of a defenseless player or contact an opponent with the crown (top) of their helmet. [The definition of "crown of the helmet", approved starting with the 2023 season, focuses the attention on the top of the helmet.](#) The term "forcible contact" has replaced the word "initiate" to ensure the intent of the rule is clear.

× These actions are now in two rules: Targeting and Making Forcible Contact With the Crown of the Helmet (Rule 9-1-3) and Targeting and Making Forcible Contact to Head or Neck Area of a Defenseless Player (Rule 9-1-4). Use of the helmet as a weapon and intentional (targeted) contact to the head or neck area are serious safety concerns. The penalties for fouls under both 9-1-3 and 9-1-4 include automatic disqualification. We continue to emphasise that coaches and officials must be diligent to ensure that players understand and abide by these rules.

Rule 2-27-14 defines and lists characteristics of a defenseless player.

## Helmets

The helmet is intended to protect the player from head injuries. It must therefore be fitted properly so that it does not come off through play. Coaches, equipment managers and trainers must be diligent in seeing that players wear the helmets properly, and officials must firmly enforce the rules requiring chin straps to be tightly secured. The rules (Rule 3-3-9) now call for the player whose helmet comes off to leave the game for one down, unless this is the direct result of a foul. The player may remain in the game if their team is granted a charged timeout.

## Uniform and equipment compliance

There is a growing trend in the game with players choosing not to wear their uniform and/or required equipment properly. It is the responsibility of the team to ensure that the equipment uniform rules are understood and followed by players. The responsibility of officials is to enforce the rule when any player is clearly non-compliant.

[From 2022](#), all officials will be alert to players that wear their pants and knee pads significantly above the knee and be prepared to take action. In addition, compliance to the jersey rule is important and officials noticing players out of scope with the rule should get this corrected or send the player out of the game. This also includes a tee shirt that is untucked and hanging down below the top of the pants.

The intent with this point of emphasis is not to distract officials or make them overly involved in equipment monitoring, but to encourage officials to act when players are blatantly disregarding the rules involving the uniform. Pregame warmups and dead-ball periods are a good time to be proactive with players concerning the uniforms and equipment.

## Safety and medical considerations

IFAF strongly encourages coaches and officials to be diligent in ensuring that players wear mandatory equipment. It is especially important that equipment and pads cover body parts for which they were designed. Particular attention is drawn to wearing uniform pants that cover the knees, which are easily abraded when exposed. With the change made in 2018, players, coaches and athletic equipment managers should ensure that the player's pants are fitted properly. Since 2018, pants and knee pads must cover the knee to be legal. If an official discovers illegal equipment, or a player failing to wear mandatory equipment properly, that official should inform the player that they must leave the game for at least one down and is not allowed to return until the equipment is made legal. The player may be allowed to return without missing a down if their team takes a charged team timeout, but only if they correct the equipment issue as well.

Football players are especially susceptible to methicillin-resistant staphylococcus aureus (MRSA), which is resistant to commonly used antibiotics. MRSA results in lost playing time. More seriously, it has caused the deaths of several football players in recent years. MRSA is typically transmitted through body-to-body contact from an infected wound or via an object (e.g. towel) that has come in contact with the infected area. It is not transmitted through the air, is not found on mud or grass, and cannot live on artificial turf.

IFAF recommends observing common medical precautions to reduce the incidence of MRSA infections, including:

- Proper wearing of all required padding and uniform equipment.
- Keep hands clean by washing thoroughly with soap and water, or by using an alcohol-based hand sanitiser routinely.
- Immediate showering after all physical activity.
- Avoid whirlpools or common tubs when having an open wound.
- Proper washing of athletics gear and towels after each use.
- Referring all active skin lesions to the athletic trainer.
- Covering all skin lesions appropriately before participation.

## Illegal contact against a quarterback/passer

Because of the position they play, the passer is often in a vulnerable position, with little or no opportunity to protect themselves from, or to prepare for, forcible contact. In recognition of this, there is an explicit rule (Rule 9-1-9) which addresses this unique situation: "No defensive player shall unnecessarily rough a passer when it is obvious the ball has been thrown."

The rule then lists several specific acts which are illegal when they occur against a passer or potential passer. The Rules Committee over time has given options for the quarterback to protect themselves, such as sliding feet first and to legally throw the ball away outside the tackle box. [The definition of a defenseless player has been expanded to include an offensive player in a passing posture with focus downfield.](#) Because of the extremely vulnerable situation the quarterback position presents, it is important for all officials, and the Referee and the Centre Judge in particular, to be a presence and recognise when a passer is threatened or is in a defenseless position. The crew must make it a priority to afford the quarterback all the protection the rules provide.

## Feigning an injury

With the advent of the up-tempo offences, there is a growing trend of defensive players feigning an injury in an attempt to slow down or break the rhythm of the offense and try to gain an unwarranted time out. Full protection under the rules should go to a player that indeed suffers an injury; however, on occasion some potential injuries are suspect, happen in unusual windows between plays and appear to be staged. The Rules Committee had serious discussions on potential options on how to best take away incentive for players to feign an injury including adding additional time before a player could return from injury.

Head Coaches are expected to set a culture within their team to ensure that this type dishonest action will not be tolerated. Feigning an injury is not ethical and is completely against the spirit of fair competition. It is a bad look for our great game.

Special attention is directed to the strongly-worded statement in The Football Code (coaching ethics, section g).

## Concussions

Coaches and medical personnel should exercise caution in the treatment of a participant who exhibits signs of a concussion. When in question, officials will declare an injury timeout for any player exhibiting signs of a concussion. See Appendix C for detailed information.

## Disconcerting signals and pre-snap actions

The intent of pre-snap rules is to define and govern what is allowed by the offense and defense. The offense, by design, has an advantage of knowing the starting signal, cadence, or sound, and the defense has an advantage as they are not limited in terms of overall player movements before the snap. To discourage tactics at the line of scrimmage designed to cause an opponent to foul or to give either team an unmerited advantage, officials must be on high alert for any type of illegal pre-snap actions by either team. Additionally, coaches should not teach illegal pre-snap actions designed to make their opponent foul.

These actions can sometimes be difficult to observe or hear in our noisy stadiums; therefore, officials must be on high alert to stop these illegal actions. For the offense, focus should be on any movement by one or more players that simulate the start of a play. Special attention should be directed to the quarterback for action that includes any quick, jerky, or abrupt movement that simulates action at the snap.

On the defensive side of the ball, officials should pay special attention to sounds and actions that could create a disruption to the offense's starting signal or cause the offense to false start. This includes defenders near the line of scrimmage that make quick, abrupt, or exaggerated actions that are not part of normal defensive movement. The defense may move, but the movements may not simulate action at the snap. Additionally, the defense cannot use words or signals that simulate the sound or cadence of, or otherwise interfere with, the offensive starting signals. This includes using a clap on the defensive side of the ball that may disconcert the offense.

## Unsportsmanlike conduct / taunting

Currently the Rules Committee is satisfied with the solid judgement that officials are demonstrating evaluating celebration issues and this focus will continue. For the current season, it will be a point of emphasis for officials to penalise any taunting action that is directed at an opponent. These actions are a bad look for the game and can lead to unnecessary confrontations between the teams and must be eliminated.

The pregame warm-up rules are designed to ensure proper sportsmanship before our contests. Officials should be vigilant during the pregame whenever players are on the field.

Unsportsmanlike acts before the game are detrimental to the sport and must be cleaned up.

## **Sportsmanship**

After reviewing a number of plays involving unsportsmanlike conduct, we are firm in our support of the unsportsmanlike conduct rules as they are currently written and officiated. Many of these fouls deal with players who taunt their opponent or inappropriately draw attention to themselves in a premeditated, excessive or prolonged manner. Players should be taught the discipline that reinforces football as a team game.

IFAF reminds head coaches of their responsibility for the behaviour of their players before and after, as well as during, the game. Players must be cautioned against pre-game unsportsmanlike conduct on the field that can lead to confrontation between the teams. Such action can lead to penalties enforced on the opening kickoff, possibly including disqualification of players. Repeated occurrence of such unsportsmanlike behaviour by a team may result in punitive action by IFAF against the head coach and their team.