

Rules application

Note: Changes marked in blue here are those made since the publication of the Manual of Football Officiating, 19th edition in 2023 and supersede that.

Foreword

Nobody wants to see a game where every minor infraction is penalised. This would much lengthen the duration of games and make the playing and spectating experience intolerable.

Historically, officials have used their experience to judge what is appropriate to flag and what not to flag. However, to leave that to each official's individual discretion would be to make the officiating of games too inconsistent. Hence we need guidelines to operate by.

These guidelines have appeared in Chapter 3 of each edition of the Manual of Football Officiating since 1993 and are widely accepted as being the appropriate philosophy for officiating American football. They are based on standards issued by the Collegiate Commissioners Association (for NCAA football) and revised by senior international officials with input from experienced coaches.

They are now in the rulebook to facilitate wider education about the principles under which the game is officiated. In any particular game, coaches and/or players should not expect that the rules are interpreted differently than described here. The referee's decision remains final.

NOTE: This version of the Rules Application is duplicated in both the 2026 IFAF Rulebook and the 20th edition of the Manual of Football Officiating. In future, updates will appear in the Rulebook and will supersede those in past editions of the MOFO.

RA 1 – Introduction and principles

1. **These philosophies** apply in full competitive adult games.
2. A stricter interpretation is appropriate in games involving junior/youth players and/or where the players are all obviously inexperienced.
3. A stricter interpretation is also appropriate in games where player conduct or attitude in general (i.e. not just one or two players) threatens to escalate the number or type of fouls committed. This may include clamping down on "minor" fouls when frustration may lead to "major" fouls.
4. A less strict interpretation of the rules is appropriate in blowout games when one team has a large lead and is obviously dominant. However, this should not extend to ignoring safety-related or conspicuous fouls.
5. Fouls in the open field are conspicuous enough to need calling whether or not they affect the play.
 - (a) It is likely that you will lose credibility if you do not call these.
 - (b) Our philosophy has moved from "did it affect the play?" to "was it conspicuous?". This reflects that more and more people watch games on video and therefore see things differently than if they are in the stands or on the side of the field.
 - (c) A less conspicuous foul still merits consideration of whether or not it affected the play. Major fouls (those that carry a 15-yard penalty or similar) should always be called.
6. If a flag is thrown for a foul where these principles indicate that it should not have been, the penalty should still be enforced. Generally, don't wave a flag off, once thrown, if it signifies a foul by rule.
7. Also bear in mind section **5.1 of the Manual of Football Officiating** on common sense officiating.
8. Where a rule is not mentioned in this chapter, apply philosophy consistent with the following principles:
 - (a) Fouls affecting player safety should always be called.

- (b) Fouls that are conspicuous should be called.
- (c) Fouls that give a team or a player a clear advantage should be called.
- (d) Fouls that are minor/technical and probably unrealised by the players should result in a "talk to" for a first offence.

9. When we talk about gaining an advantage (or disadvantaging an opponent), pragmatically you probably have to make that decision within a couple of seconds of seeing the action. Waiting longer means that you might miss other action that you are responsible for and/or lose the spot of the foul.

RA 2 – Definitions

1. **Point of attack** is defined as follows:
 - (a) on a running play, it is the area in advance of the ball carrier – if they change direction the point of attack changes;
 - (b) on a forward pass play, it is anywhere in the vicinity of the passer or any player attempting to reach the passer, or in the vicinity of any eligible receiver running a pass route;
 - (c) on a scrimmage kick play, it is anywhere in the vicinity of the kicker or returner or any player attempting to reach the kicker or returner, or block the kick.
2. **Conspicuous**: An action is "conspicuous" if it would be visibly apparent to a spectator who knew the rules or to an official observing the game live or watching it on video. Generally, anything that takes place in the open field, or by a player standing alone, is conspicuous; anything that takes place in close line play or in a pile-up is not conspicuous. Examples of conspicuous fouls that should be called, even though they might otherwise be disregarded as "not serious", include:
 - (a) **takedown holding** (especially in the tackle box);
 - (b) **blocks in the back** in the open field;
 - (c) **illegal substitution** when a player leaves the field other than across their own sideline;
 - (d) **illegal substitution** when a team has 12 or more players in the huddle for more than 3 seconds (but don't nit pick the 3 second limit);
 - (e) **intentional illegal touching** of a forward pass;
 - (f) **false start** by a back, tight end or wide receiver;
 - (g) **offside** by Team B at their restraining line on a short free kick;
 - (h) **free kick out of bounds**.
3. **Brick in hand**: We sometimes use this term to refer to a player who we want to watch closely. Its origin is that if you saw someone outside a jeweller's window with a brick in their hand, you would be suspicious of what they would do next, and you would want to keep watching them to see if they threw it.
Examples include: when you see an offensive player chasing a defensive player, you might expect to see an illegal block in the back; when you see a player approaching an opponent at speed, you might expect to see an illegal blind-side block.

RA 3 – Contact fouls

1. **Offensive holding**:
 - (a) Only call it when *all* of the following conditions are met:
 - (i) the foul **is visibly apparent**, i.e. **it would show up on video**
 - (ii) the foul **affects the play or is conspicuous**, i.e. **it is clearly at the point of attack or is conspicuous, bearing in mind that the closer to the point of attack it is, the less it takes for it to need calling;**
 - (iii) the action **is demonstrably restrictive**, i.e. **the player is illegally slowed down or forced to take a longer route to their target;**

(iv) the foul **disadvantages the opponent**, i.e. it actually moves the player opposite the way they want to go.

(b) Actions that constitute offensive holding include:

- (i) **Grab and restrict** – grabbing the opponent's body or uniform in a manner that restricts their ability to go in the direction they wish to go.
- (ii) **Hook and restrict** – hooking a hand or arm around the opponent's body (beyond the frame of the body presented to the blocker) in a manner that restricts their ability to go in the direction they wish to go.
- (iii) **Takedown** – taking an opponent to the ground **by grabbing or hooking** when they don't want to go to the ground. Note that it is **completely legal to push or otherwise block** an opponent to the ground, provided the hands or arms are used within the frame of the opponent's body (or in the back in the free-blocking zone).

(c) A player is **restricted** if:

- (i) They are unable to turn or change direction due to continued, restrictive contact.
- (ii) Their upper body is turned by the blocker having their arms around them.
- (iii) They are unable to gain separation or to disengage from the opponent by turning, twisting, stopping, etc.
- (iv) Their balance is changed or their natural foot movement is taken away.

(d) **In the following circumstances, no advantage is typically gained**, so normally don't call holding if *any* of the following conditions are met, unless the foul is really conspicuous:

- (i) the held player makes the tackle **behind the neutral zone, or when the ball carrier made no extra yards as a result of the hold**;
- (ii) the held player knocks down or intercepts a pass;
- (iii) the held player **catches or** recovers a fumble;
- (iv) at the point of attack on a run, the opponents are squared up, moving with each other and none of the restrictions above are noted;
- (v) it happens at the same time as a tackle elsewhere on the field;
- (vi) it is behind the neutral zone and a forward pass has already been thrown, or is in the process of being thrown;
- (vii) it is part of a double-team block (unless a takedown occurs, or the defender breaks the double team and is pulled back);
- (viii) it is the result of a defensive rip, i.e. the defensive player raising the offensive player's arm;
- (ix) the held player makes no effort to get free of the block, i.e. they "give up".

(e) Holding an opponent's jersey is *not* the same as holding the opponent. For a jersey pull to be a foul, there must be demonstrable restriction to the player's movement.

(f) Watching the *disengagement* of opponents is as important as watching their engagement. If a defender slides off a block and is able to proceed normally in the direction they want to travel (usually towards the ball), then it is unlikely that holding has occurred.

2. **Defensive holding:**

- (a) Downfield on pass plays, everywhere is the point of attack – a foul on an eligible receiver can occur anywhere.
- (b) Always call fouls that prevent the passer throwing the ball and lead to a sack.
- (c) **A clothesline block** (or *clotheslining*) is usually made by a defender against an opponent (typically an eligible receiver) who is running at speed. The defender sticks out an arm as the opponent approaches, causing the opponent to run forcibly into the arm (typically forearm) at head or neck height, i.e. above the frame of the body (Rule 2-3-5). This should be called as a personal foul (and normally as targeting with the indicator being leading with the forearm).

- (d) Contact that does not demonstrably impede a receiver should be ignored.
- (e) A grab of the receiver's jersey **before a pass is thrown** that restricts the receiver and takes away their feet should be called. **A grab after the pass is thrown is defensive pass interference if the ball is catchable by the fouled receiver.**
- (f) Holding should be called against defenders who clearly *illegally* restrict an offensive player from making a lead block for the ball carrier (this includes pulling linemen on trap and sweep plays), but not where the offensive player is too far away from the play to become involved.
- (g) Defensive holding should *not* be called for contact that occurs after the pass is thrown to the opposite side of the field (unless it is a clear attempt to restrict an offensive player as in (f) above). However, if the foul occurs anywhere while the quarterback still has the ball and is looking to pass, then call it, even though the ball might eventually be thrown elsewhere **or the quarterback sacked.** This could have had an effect on the play. The timing of the hold is important.
- (h) **Defensive holding should *not* be called for contact that occurs against an eligible receiver on the opposite side of the field to a designed running play.** A foul may still be called if the run results from being unable to pass to the held receiver.

3. **Illegal use of hands:**

- (a) **Apply the same conditions** as for offensive holding.
- (b) If the initial contact in a block is on the opponent's **helmet, face mask or neck** for more than a brief second, it should^x be called as a personal foul. If the contact lasts a shorter time, it is **probably illegal use of hands.**
- (c) Make sure you see the initial contact: it is not a foul if a player's hands slide up to a point above the opponent's shoulders.

4. **Blocks below the waist and clipping:**

- (a) When in **doubt**, the ball has not left the free-blocking zone (for blocks from the back).
- (b) For the first three seconds after the snap, when in **doubt**, the ball has not left the tackle box (for blocks from the front). Thereafter, when in **doubt**, the ball *has* left the tackle box.
- (c) To call clipping, you need to see two things:
 - (i) the blocker's last stride before the contact (so that you are fairly certain you know which direction they came from), *and*
 - (ii) you need to have seen the opponent they hit before the block (so that you know whether the opponent turned their back or not).

You must see the point of initial contact. Remember that contact to the side is **not clipping - it is covered by the blocking below the waist rule.** See the entire act.

- (d) Remember that it is the direction related to the opponent's area of concentration (not the point of contact) that determines whether a block below the waist is "directed from the front" or not.
- (e) It is not a foul for a block below the waist or clip if the contact occurs because the blocker **un-intentionally** slips or falls down and the opponent runs into them.

5. **Illegal block in the back:**

- (a) **Apply the same conditions as for offensive holding**, but also apply the conditions for calling clipping, particularly the need to see the entire act.
- (b) **In particular, blocks in the back that occur at or about the same time as the ball carrier is being tackled** should not be called, unless they rise to the level of a personal foul.
- (c) When a maul has formed around the ball carrier (defensive players trying to tackle the ball carrier and offensive players trying to prevent them from doing so), this does not give anyone licence to block in the back. Blocks in the back of defensive players by offensive players should be called if the force from the contact moves the maul significantly forward or constitutes a personal foul.

- (d) If one hand is on the **opponent's** number and the other hand is on the side and the initial force is on the number, it is a block in the back.
- (e) A block that starts in the side and ends up in the back is not a foul as long as there is continuous contact.
- (f) Touching an opponent in the back is not a foul unless it results in them being knocked down or pushed off balance sufficiently so that they stumble, misstep **or are pushed past the ball carrier and** miss making a tackle or block. Remember, the foul is for illegal *block* in the back, not an illegal *touch* in the back.
- (g) **Do not call an illegal block in the back on a fair catch if the illegal block occurs away from the play as the fair catch is being made, or the play results in a touchback.** Personal fouls (such as unnecessary roughness or blind-side block) should always be called.
- (h) Charging into a player's back^x may be called as unnecessary roughness **or as an illegal blind-side block.** This may be called regardless of the timing of the block relative to the end of the play.
- (i) Be particularly alert when you see an offensive player chasing a defensive player (and vice versa when the defensive player is not attempting to reach the ball). Imagine they have a brick in their hand. **When in "chase" mode, all action must be from the side to be legal.**
- (j) **A block in the back by a defensive player against a trailing offensive player is either a personal foul for unnecessary roughness, an illegal blind-side block or it is nothing.**

6. Roughing the passer:

- (a) If the defensive player's **main contact is on the passer's head**, it is always a foul unless the passer ducks into it or the contact is slight. However, it is only targeting if the contact goes well beyond making a legal tackle or attempting to block/deflect the pass.
- (b) Contact at the knee area or below on an offensive player in a passing posture is enforced according to Rule 9-1-9-b. Slight contact should be disregarded. **Don't be picky about the knee area - anywhere in the vicinity of the knee is a foul.**
- (c) It is a foul if a defender (in front of the passer) takes two steps before contacting the passer after the ball has been thrown/released. A defender behind the passer is given a little more leeway.
- (d) Defensive players who make a legitimate attempt to avoid or reduce contact are given the benefit of the doubt. A soft hit can still be a foul, if it is really late. (The later the hit, the lower the threshold of force needed to make it a foul.) **Any second act (distinct from the initial charge) is likely to be a foul.**
- (e) When in doubt, it is roughing the passer if the defender's intent is to punish.
- (f) When considering roughing the passer fouls, there are four possibilities:
 - (i) The contact is high (to the passer's head/neck area); timing doesn't matter. This will be a foul either for targeting (if the conditions for that are met) or for roughing the passer (forcible contact to the head/neck that doesn't rise to the level of targeting).
 - (ii) The contact is low; timing doesn't matter. The player must be in passing posture. Forcible contact to the knee area or below is a foul.
 - (iii) The contact is late; doesn't matter where on the passer's body. Contact after the pass is released that is punishing or avoidable is a foul.
 - (iv) Contact that is not punishing or forcible; even if high/low/late. This is not a foul.

7. Roughing/running into the kicker:

- (a) Generally, contact with the kicker's kicking leg will be considered as *running* into the kicker, and contact with their plant leg (even if it is off the ground) will be considered as *roughing* the kicker.
- (b) Any time the kicker or holder are knocked off their feet it should be called as *roughing*.

- (c) Where the kicker makes a move before the kick that is not part of the normal kicking motion, then it is no longer obvious that a kick will be made and there will probably be no foul unless the defensive player is out to punish them. Note that "rugby-style" kickers (those who kick on the run) are entitled to as much protection as conventional kickers after they have kicked the ball. But any contact with a kicker before the kick is simply tackling a ball carrier.
- (d) Even if the snap is bad, a kick may still be obvious. Provided the kicker or holder gathers the ball and straight away goes into their normal motion, then they are entitled to protection (always assuming the ball is kicked). **Exception:** if the kicker carries or possesses the ball outside the tackle box or more than 5 yards behind their initial position.

8. Defensive pass interference:

- (a) Actions that constitute defensive pass interference include:
 - (i) **Not playing the ball** – Early contact by a defender (who is not playing the ball) that impedes or restricts the receiver's opportunity to make the catch.
 - (ii) **Playing through an opponent** – Playing through the receiver (i.e. contacting them in the back or on the side of them furthest from the ball), whether or not the defender is playing the ball.
 - (iii) **Grab and restrict** – Grabbing the receiver's arm in a manner that restricts their opportunity to catch a pass.
 - (iv) **Arm bar** – Extending an arm across the receiver's body to impede their ability to catch a pass, whether or not the defender is **looking for the ball**.
 - (v) **Cut off** – Cutting off or riding a receiver out of the path to the ball by making contact with them without playing the ball (i.e. before the defender looks for the ball).
 - (vi) **Hook and turn** – Hooking a receiver around the waist that causes their body to turn prior to (or even slightly after) the ball arriving (even if the defender is trying to get to the ball).
- (b) Actions that do *not* constitute defensive pass interference include:
 - (i) Incidental contact by a defender's hands, arms or body in the act of moving to the ball that does not materially affect the route of the receiver. If in doubt as to whether the route was materially affected, there is no interference.
 - (ii) Inadvertent tangling of feet when both (or neither) players are playing the ball.
 - (iii) Contact occurring during a pass that is clearly uncatchable by the involved players.
 - (iv) Laying a hand on the receiver that does not turn or impede them until after the ball has arrived.
 - (v) Contact on a "hail mary" pass unless it is clear and conspicuous pass interference.
 - (vi) **Any action by a Team B player who is not aware of where the Team A player is. It is absolutely a requirement for DPI that there is obvious intent to impede.**
- (c) Further notes:
 - (i) A stationary player (in position to catch the ball) who is displaced from their position has been fouled.
 - (ii) It is never pass interference if **any player touches the ball before the defender contacts the opponent**.
 - (iii) Interference must be conspicuous to be called.
 - (iv) Remember that the defense has as much right to the ball as the offense.
 - (v) It is crucial to identify which players are playing the ball and which are not.
 - (vi) Normally, an offensive receiver will try to catch the ball with two hands. **If the receiver goes up with only one hand, is that because their other hand has been illegally obstructed?** Often, a defender will try to bat/deflect the ball with only one hand. If the defender goes up with only one hand, **know whether the other hand is doing something illegal.**

(vii) **Uncatchable pass:**

- (1) When judging whether a pass is catchable, imagine how far the receiver could have run, and how high or wide they could have jumped, if they had not been impeded. The earlier the contact, the further the receiver could have moved towards the end of the pass.
- (2) An uncatchable pass must be obviously uncatchable in order to disregard a foul for pass interference.

(viii) There is no foul when contact is simultaneous with the ball being touched ("bang-bang").
When in doubt, contact is simultaneous with the ball being touched.

9. **Offensive pass interference:**

- (a) Actions that constitute offensive pass interference include:
 - (i) **Pushing off** – Initiating contact with a defender by shoving or pushing off, thus creating a separation in an attempt to catch a pass.
 - (ii) **Driving through** – Driving through a defender who has established a position on the field.
 - (iii) **Blocking** – Before the pass is thrown, blocking that occurs anywhere down field. After the pass is thrown, blocking that occurs down field within approximately 20 yards (more if the pass is delayed) of where the pass is thrown to.
 - (iv) **Pick** – Picking off (initiating contact with) a defender who is attempting to cover a receiver.
Remember that intent to impede is not necessary for offensive pass interference - it is sufficient that the defender was interfered with. It is not a foul if the contact occurred at the same time as the pass was touched.
- (b) Actions that do *not* constitute offensive pass interference include:
 - (i) Incidental contact by a receiver's hands, arms or body in the act of moving to the ball that does not materially affect the route of the defender. If in doubt as to whether the route was materially affected, there is no interference.
 - (ii) Inadvertent tangling of feet when both (or neither) players are playing the ball.
 - (iii) Contact during a pass that is clearly uncatchable by the involved players.
 - (iv) Blocking downfield when the pass is legally grounded out of bounds or near the sideline.
(Exception: Blocking downfield can still be called if the forward passer is legally grounding the ball other than out of bounds or near the sideline.)
 - (v) When an intended screen pass is overthrown and lands beyond the line of scrimmage and linemen are blocking downfield, unless that blocking prevents a defensive player from intercepting the ball.
 - (vi) Contact on a pick play when the defensive player is already blocking the offensive player, *or if the offensive player's body is not entirely beyond the neutral zone.*
 - (vii) Contact on a "hail mary" pass unless it is clear and conspicuous pass interference.

(c) Further notes:

- (i) Non-flagrant contact well away from the play should not be called.
- (ii) If in doubt as to which player initiated a block, the initiator will be the one who is upright or leaning forward and the player blocked will be knocked back.
- (iii) Blocking downfield by the offense (against a player in pass coverage) on a forward pass play before the ball is thrown is always offensive pass interference. The defense (particularly the safeties) may see a block and read the play as a run, so drawing coverage away from the destination of the subsequent pass. ^x

10. **Late hit:**

- (a) The *later* the hit, the less forcible the contact needs to be to warrant a flag. The *earlier* the hit, the more forcible the contact needs to be to warrant a flag. Be more likely to call it the later the hit or the more severe the contact. Slight contact immediately after the ball is dead should not be called. The more badly-behaved either team has been earlier in the game, the more likely you should be to call a foul to maintain game control.

- (b) Any deliberate push against a ball carrier out of bounds is a foul.
- (c) When a ball carrier is near the sideline, contact that occurs before the ball carrier has a foot down out of bounds is a legal hit, **but must be proportionate - i.e. the minimum needed to force the ball carrier out.**
- (d) When a ball carrier is out of bounds but continues running down the sideline in bounds, any subsequent hit is legal provided they have not eased up and the whistle has not blown. **Once the whistle has blown, any forcible contact is a foul.**
- (e) When a ball carrier is obviously easing up near the sideline, little defensive force should be necessary to ensure they go out of bounds. Attempts to "punish" the ball carrier should be penalised as unnecessary roughness. **Quarterbacks should be given more protection under this than other ball carriers.**

11. **Face mask:** Remember a face mask foul involves *grasping* the helmet or face mask, not simply *touching* it.

12. **Unnecessary roughness:**

- (a) An act that occurs well away from the play may be classed as a personal foul even though the act itself is legal. In other words, it is the location of the players with respect to the play that causes the foul, not the legality of the contact.
- (b) Be certain that the act wasn't justified by the play situation (e.g. an interception or fumble return or a broken play). If a player is in position to influence the play or moving towards it, they are a fair target: if they are standing still, they are not.
- (c) It is not a foul if two players are each blocking each other – only contact against a player off their guard needs to be penalised.
- (d) For unnecessary hits away from the ball near the end of a play, make them dead-ball fouls rather than live-ball ones.
- (e) When a player is hit after giving themselves up **or sliding**, a foul is warranted.
- (f) After a touchdown, if there is forcible contact on the ball carrier that is obviously late and intentional, a foul must be called.

13. **Roughing the snapper:**

- (a) This foul can only occur when it is reasonably obvious that a scrimmage kick will be made: i.e. only on field goal and PAT attempts, or when a team lines up in **an obvious punting formation on 3rd/4th down.**
- (b) Don't be picky about the one second interval. If the snapper is upright before the one second has elapsed then permit contact, but if they take longer to recover then allow them more protection.
- (c) Don't call a foul if a defensive player contacts the snapper after being blocked by an adjacent offensive lineman.
- (d) Disqualify any player who attempts to punish by contact to the snapper's helmet or spears using the defender's own helmet.

14. **Targeting:**

- (a) The definition of a defenseless player is per Rule 2-27-14. **x** If in doubt, a player is defenseless.
- (b) If a hit isn't late, then the ball carrier cannot be defenseless with respect to targeting. A hit that is simultaneous with (or a fraction of a second after) a ball carrier's knee down, is not late.
- (c) Checklist for targeting fouls (adapted from Dean Blandino presentation, 2021):
 - (i) Is the player being hit defenseless (Rule 2-27-14)? If yes, then Rule 9-1-4 is in scope. If no, then only Rule 9-1-3 is in scope.
 - (ii) Is an indicator of targeting present (Rule 2-35)? **Which parts of Rule 2-35-1 apply? If none, there is no targeting.**
 - (1) What was the body posture of the initiator? If their head stays up then there is less chance of it being an indicator than if they lower it. What body part are they leading

with? Is their trajectory upward (which is an indicator) or do they just run through (which is not)?

- (2) Was the initiator attacking with force? An attack involves forward, upward or downward movement. If they are stationary, they are absorbing contact.
 - (iii) Was the contact with the initiator's crown or at the opponent's head/neck area?
 - (iv) Was the contact forcible?

15. Horse collar tackle:

- (a) The three requirements to call this are (i) the defender grabs the collar or name plate area; (ii) the ball carrier or simulated ball carrier is pulled towards the ground; and (iii) the ball carrier or simulated ball carrier is pulled backwards (not sideways or forwards).
- (b) As with other safety related fouls, if in doubt as to whether it is a foul or not, call it.
- (c) However, just grabbing another part of the jersey and pulling a ball carrier or simulated ball carrier down is not a foul.

16. Chop block:

- (a) It is not a foul if either the high or low player involved simply brushes past or makes only slight contact with the opponent. There must be force enough in each block to change the velocity of the relevant part of the opponent's body.

- (b) By rule it is not a foul if the defensive player initiates the contact.

17. Blind-side block:

- (a) "Forcible contact" requires a build up of momentum. It is less likely to occur if a player is moving slowly. It is more likely to occur the further a player has run at high speed. Momentum is a combination of mass and velocity. Bigger players don't have to run so fast to build up momentum.
- (b) When a blocker contacts an opponent with outstretched hands or arms, their elbows and shoulders will inevitably cushion the impact, so making the force less.
- (c) A player who is standing still or moving slowly cannot be "attacking an opponent" and therefore can't be guilty of an illegal blind-side block. This includes a stationary (or nearly stationary) player who, by not moving out of the way, allows an opponent to run into them. That player is also allowed to brace themselves for the impact without creating a foul for a blind-side block.
- (d) An "open field" block generally (i) is outside the tackle box or after the tackle box has disintegrated or after the O-line disperses; (ii) is more than 2 seconds after the snap; and (iii) involves players who typically were more than 5 yards from each other 2 seconds before the block.
- (e) Be particularly alert when you see a player:
 - (i) approaching an opponent at speed from the side or behind;
 - (ii) going "upstream", i.e. moving in the opposite direction to all other players (e.g. during returns after change of possession);

In each case, imagine they have a brick in their hand.

18. Kick-catch interference:

- (a) Anything that impedes the receiver from the opportunity to catch the ball should be called a foul. Their balance will have been disturbed, so hindering their ability to catch the ball cleanly. When in doubt, it is a foul. This includes:
 - (i) contact with the receiver (however incidental);
 - (ii) running menacingly close to the receiver and within their area of focus/vision;
 - (iii) standing too close to the receiver;
 - (iv) yelling or making other intentional noise while close to the receiver;
 - (v) waving arms in front of the receiver;
 - (vi) forcing the receiver to step around the opponent or change path in an effort to catch the ball.

- (b) It is not a foul where:
 - (i) the Team A player runs past the receiver without touching them or making them change course;
 - (ii) the receiver "gives up" their attempt to catch the kick too easily;
 - (iii) the receiver catches the ball and there was no contact and the extent of any non-contact interference is slight or in doubt: don't award cheap 15-yard penalties.
- (c) A player who viciously contacts a potential kick receiver has committed a flagrant personal foul and should be disqualified. Give only the personal foul signal (not the signal for kick-catch interference) in this case.
- (d) A player who is in the process of catching a kick must be given an unimpeded opportunity to complete the catch before being contacted. This protection terminates if the player muffs the ball, unless they have given a valid fair catch signal and still have an opportunity to complete the catch (Rule 6-5-1-b).

19. **Summary:** When considering personal fouls, ask whether the potential offender had options. Could they have chosen to do something differently with respect to the contact? Penalise players who choose the bad option.

RA 4 – Non-contact fouls

1. Delay of game:

- (a) If Team A is still in the huddle, or moving into formation, with 10 seconds to go, warn them verbally that there are 10 seconds remaining. Always throw the flag when the count reaches zero, unless the snap is very imminent (i.e. the quarterback is calling out "huts"), in which case they can have an extra second.
- (b) If there is a visible play clock, when it reaches zero, look and see if the ball has been snapped. If it has not, throw a flag.
- (c) After a score, it is a delay of game if either team is not on the field (or on the field but still in the huddle) within one minute regardless of whether the ready for play has been given or not. For a first offence, warn the head coach of the team rather than throw a flag. (Warn for first offence and penalise second and subsequent.)
- (d) If no (or few) players from Team B are ready to play anytime when Team A is set to snap the ball, penalise Team B for delay of game. Do *not* give Team A a free play. Near the end of a timeout (usually 15 seconds before the end), the officials on the sideline are responsible for ensuring that the captain or coach of the team knows that the timeout is about to end.
- (e) If Team A makes last second substitutions (rushing to the line of scrimmage while in the process of substituting), Team B must be given an opportunity to "match-up". If the play clock expires prior to the snap, the officials must determine whether Team B was given ample opportunity to react to the "rushed" substitution. If Team B reacts promptly but the play clock expires, Team A will be assessed a delay of game foul. If any Team B players do not leave and enter the field of play quickly, or do not start the process within 3 seconds of Team A's last substitute entering the field of play, (i) Team A shall be allowed to snap the ball and (ii) if Team B has more than 11 players on the field of play, it will be penalised for illegal substitution. (Rule 3-5-2-e.)
- (f) If Team A snaps the ball in a situation where they have been asked not to (e.g. while Team B are being allowed to make matching substitutions), for a first **unintentional** offence shut down the play and issue a warning. (Warn for first offence and penalise second and subsequent.) (Rule 3-5-2-e)

2. **Players not within the nine-yard marks:** Don't call this if Team B reacts to the offending player, e.g. by a Team B player lining up opposite them.

3. Illegal formation and eligibility of receivers:

- (a) Don't wait until the fourth quarter to enforce these rules - deal with illegal formations as soon as they first arise.
- (b) It is always a foul when Team A has five (or more) players in the backfield at the snap. Team A gains a blocking advantage by being further away from the defense.
- (c) It is still a foul for five players in the backfield even if Team A has only 10 (or fewer) players on the field at the snap.
- (d) Work to keep offensive linemen legal. Only call an intended offensive lineman as being in the backfield if:
 - (i) it is obvious (clear gap between their head/shoulders and the nearest Team A lineman), or
 - (ii) they are lined up with their head clearly behind the rear end of the snapper - a foul to be called without warning, or
 - (iii) when a warning to the player and a subsequent warning to the coach are ignored. (Warn for first and second offence and penalise third and subsequent.)
- (e) Give more leeway to wide receivers and slot backs in determining whether they are on or off the line of scrimmage than you do to interior linemen or tight ends. Be particularly generous on fields that are not well marked out.
- (f) Only regard a wide receiver as covering an inside receiver on the line of scrimmage if there is no stagger between their alignments. If in doubt, the inside receiver is *not* covered up.
- (g) In determining the number of players in the backfield, be generous to players who may not precisely meet the requirements of Rule 2-27-4. If a Team A player is borderline, regard him as a back if there are fewer than 4 backs; regard him as a lineman if there are fewer than 7 linemen. If there are multiple borderline players, do the above for each.
- (h) Remember that if Team B sees a player with an eligible number lined up near the line of scrimmage, they will assume they are also eligible by position. Similarly, if Team B sees a player with an ineligible number lined up near the line of scrimmage, they will assume they are on the line of scrimmage.
 - (i) On a trick or unusual play, formations should have the highest degree of scrutiny and should be penalised unless they are *completely* legal.

4. Snapper moving the ball:

- (a) When taking their stance, permit the snapper to move the ball forward no more than a ball length, and never across the line to gain or goal line. If they move it forward more, shut down the play, reset the ball and warn the player and their coach that further infractions will be penalised. (Warn for first offence and penalise second and subsequent.)
- (b) When taking their stance, if the snapper lifts the ball off the ground, shut down the play, reset the ball and warn the player and their coach that further infractions will be penalised. (Warn for first offence and penalise second and subsequent.)
- (c) If the snapper simply rotates the ball in place (e.g. to improve their grip), this is not a problem.

5. False start:

- (a) Movement by a Team A player is not a false start unless it:
 - (i) is movement of one or both feet; or
 - (ii) is sudden; or
 - (iii) causes a defensive player to move in immediate reaction and this is the first time such movement has been observed; or
 - (iv) is a restricted lineman lifting their hand(s).
- (b) If a back misses the snap count, makes a sudden movement and then stops abruptly, it is a false start. (If they were genuinely going into motion, they wouldn't stop.)
- (c) Team B's "immediate reaction" needs to be a typical play response. Merely pointing at Team A players who may have moved is NOT.

- (d) Don't be picky: if in doubt as to whether movement was prior to the snap or not, it was *not*.
- (e) When in doubt, a quick or abrupt movement by the snapper or quarterback *is* a false start.

6. Offside:

- (a) When a defensive player, before the snap, moves and an offensive player subsequently moves, a conference between the Umpire and the wing officials is mandatory. This is to determine if the defensive player was in the neutral zone and if the offensive player was threatened. When in doubt, the defensive player *was* in the neutral zone. When in doubt, the offensive player *is* threatened. If the Team A player who first moves is not threatened, it is a false start.
- (b) When a defensive player, before the snap, crosses the neutral zone and charges towards a Team A back, it is a dead-ball offside foul. The time to call this as a foul is when the defender passes the hip of the nearest Team A lineman.
- (c) When in doubt whether a defensive player who has crossed the neutral zone contacted a Team A player, there *was* contact.
- (d) Don't rule a defensive player offside if they are stationary and only intruding on the neutral zone by a trivial amount.
- (e) Don't be picky about offside, particularly on fields that are not marked perfectly.
- (f) Don't call offside if the defensive player is moving forward at the snap but is not actually in the neutral zone.

7. Team B movement and signals:

- (a) A "stem" is where a Team B lineman moves laterally, and the movement is at least enough to change from head-up on one opponent to head-up on another, or from head-up to gap between two opponents, or vice-versa.
- (b) When there is a coordinated movement by two or more Team B linemen, the signal to initiate it must not come from a lineman.
- (c) A movement by a Team B lineman that constitutes a stem is legal. A quick, abrupt or exaggerated movement by a Team B lineman that is not a stem (e.g. stamping a foot, waving an arm) should be interpreted as an attempt to get Team A to false start.
- (d) The following are fouls by Team B:
 - (i) Replicating a Team A starting signal (e.g. words or a clap), whether or not Team A reacts. Other than a clap, it is not a foul to make a noise that Team A isn't using, or to make hand gestures that don't create a clapping sound.
 - (ii) A quick, abrupt or exaggerated movement by a defensive lineman that is not a stem *and* causes Team A to false start.
- (e) Penalise a Team A player for delay of game if they use words that sound like "move" or "stem" (Rule 7-1-5-a-5).
- (f) With the exception of disconcerting signals, infractions under Rule 7-1-5 only become a foul if Team A reacts and does so authentically. If legal movement by a Team B lineman causes a Team A player to reach into the neutral zone and touch the Team B player, it is an encroachment foul on Team A. That is not an authentic reaction to being threatened.

8. Illegal motion: A player is in illegal motion only if their forward movement is conspicuous. A motion man angling forward while in motion at the snap has committed a live-ball foul, not a false start.

9. Ineligible receiver downfield:

- (a) Call it only if it is conspicuous.
- (b) An ineligible receiver must be clearly more than 3 yards down field at the time the pass is thrown - don't be picky if the player is just at 3 yards. Be cautious that if a player is seen 5 yards downfield and moving downfield as the ball passes them, they were probably not more than 3 yards downfield when the ball was thrown.

- (c) If a lineman blocks downfield, call it as ineligible downfield unless they go far enough to block a **defensive player** in pass coverage in which case call it as offensive pass interference.
- (d) By rule, it is not a foul for **ineligible receiver downfield if the pass is legally thrown away near or beyond the sideline.**
- (e) See RA 4.3.f above for determining whether a **Team A** player is eligible or not.
- (f) Don't call it if the offense is legally throwing the ball beyond the neutral zone to save a loss of yardage.
- (g) Don't call it if a screen pass is overthrown and lands beyond the neutral zone, unless the presence of the ineligible receiver prevents a defensive player from catching the ball.

10. Intentional grounding:

- (a) Don't call it if the passer was contacted clearly *after* they have started the act of throwing the ball, or if the ball was touched. Under these circumstances, you must assume the passer intended to throw the ball to a receiver.
- (b) Do call it if the passer was contacted *before* they have started their throwing motion. They are not allowed to throw the ball away to avoid a sack. In some circumstances it may be appropriate to rule the ball dead (rather than penalise for intentional grounding) because they were held and their forward progress stopped.
- (c) Do not call intentional grounding if the passer throws the ball away **when not under defensive pressure**. They are entitled to waste a down if they are in no danger of being sacked. The clock is not a factor. (**Exception:** if the passer throws the ball only a few yards - typically less than 5 yards from them.)
- (d) There is no need to call **intentional grounding** if the pass is intercepted *and* this would be the only foul called.
- (e) Getting the ball to within one yard of the neutral zone is to be regarded as close enough. Don't be technical on this.
- (f) **When in doubt whether the forward passer is or has been outside the tackle box, they are or have been outside the tackle box.**
- (g) If a pass is touched by an ineligible receiver, it will normally just be a foul for illegal touching. However, if the passer does this in an obviously deliberate manner to avoid a loss of yardage, then a foul for intentional grounding is justified. By rule, you cannot have illegal touching on an illegal pass.

11. Illegal substitution:

- (a) If a replaced player is leaving the field of play or end zone but is still clearly on the field of play at the snap, then it should be called as a foul.
- (b) A replaced player who re-enters the field after leaving it has fouled. However, a player who leaves the field believing they are being replaced, but who is not in fact replaced, should be allowed to re-enter without penalty (provided this is not a deception).
- (c) If substitutes enter the field thinking the ball is dead but don't interfere with play, then don't call it.
- (d) If the offense breaks its huddle with **too many** players on the field, this confuses the opposition and should be penalised. However, there can be a foul only if the ball has been declared ready for play (Rule 2-14) or the 12th man does not leave the huddle immediately.
- (e) If the defense has **too many** players on the field when the snap is imminent,^x there is no foul until the ball is snapped, **unless Rule 3-5-3-c applies.**
- (f) Fouls associated with the substitution process and having **too many** players on the field will normally be violations of Rule 3-5. However, an intentional attempt to confuse opponents will be penalised for unfair tactics (Rule 9-2-2-b).

12. Failure to wear mandatory equipment:

- (a) Regard failure to have a mouthpiece or to secure all points of a chinstrap as seriously as failure to wear a helmet. If you observe a player leaving the huddle without a mouthpiece or chin-straps, remind them to secure their equipment. Players who ignore the reminder must be dealt with by rule (Rule 1-4-8), but give quarterbacks and other players calling signals more time to do so. The same procedure applies to players wearing opaque or mirrored eye shields.
- (b) Do not stop either the game clock or play clock **unless you are charging a team with a timeout due to a player not responding to 2 notifications to leave the field**. If a player does respond and leave the field, Team A needs to ensure it snaps the ball before the play clock expires and Team B needs to ensure it has no more than 11 players on the field at and after the snap. If a restricted lineman needs to be replaced, it will be a false start when they stand up, **unless Team A takes a timeout**.
- (c) For other non-critical mandatory equipment, instruct the player to remedy the problem the next time they are off the field. If they ignore the instruction, when they return to the field tell them to go off and fix the problem immediately. If they do so, then fine. If their team replaces them immediately, do not penalise for an illegal substitution. If their team takes a timeout or suffers a delay of game penalty, that is their choice. If they stay and attempt to participate in a play, deal with them by rule (Rule 1-4-8).

13. Illegal equipment: Anything that might be a risk to participant safety must be dealt with before the ball is next put in play. Other infringements may be left for the player to rectify next time they leave the field, but must be rectified before they can legally return.

14. Illegally kicking the ball: If a player intentionally contacts the ball with knee, lower leg or foot with the objective of propelling the ball in any direction, they are kicking it. If it touches their knee, lower leg or foot incidentally or as part of an attempt to obtain possession of the ball, this is not regarded as a kick and there is no foul.

15. Illegal wedge: For a wedge to be illegal (Rule 6-1-10), it has to form before the end of the kick and continue during the beginning of the return. If they touch/hold hands, this is a dead giveaway. It is *not* an illegal wedge if they are moving towards their own end line. Once the return gets up-field, players will come together as a consequence of the play – this is *not* considered as an illegal wedge.

16. Offside on free kick:

- (a) Officiate the Team A restraining line as a plane **(at the edge of the line nearest Team A's goal line, if you have replay)**.
- (b) On an onside or other short kickoff (intentional or unintentional), any player (other than the kicker or holder) breaking the plane before the ball is kicked is offside.
- (c) On a deep kickoff, do not be too technical.
- (d) Only call a foul if a kicking team player (other than the kicker) obviously takes a run up of more than 5 yards on a free kick. Players who simply adjust their position or stance should not be penalised for being temporarily more than 5 yards behind. The aim of the rule is to reduce a player's momentum at kickoff.

17. Handing the ball forward illegally: Handing the ball forward (except where allowed by rule) is always a foul. A team can gain significant yardage (as well as the benefits of deception) from this illegal play.

18. Team A player out of bounds:

- (a) Whenever any Team A player returns inbounds after voluntarily going out of bounds during a kick play, or an eligible receiver touches the ball illegally after voluntarily going out of bounds during a pass play, it is always a foul. A Team A player leaving the field of play gains an advantage by avoiding being blocked. Remember that a player is out of bounds even if only one foot touches the sideline or end line – this **should not be ignored**.

(b) Any contact by a Team B player that causes a Team A player to go out of bounds should be regarded as the cause of it, provided the Team A player attempts to come back in bounds immediately.

19. **Continued participation without helmet:** "The immediate action in which they are engaged" ends once a player disengages from contact with an opponent and is no longer confronting, or being confronted by, that opponent. A player who loses their helmet while engaged with an opponent (including when overpowering an opponent) is expected to disengage when it is safe to do so. A player whose helmet comes off without being engaged or confronted by an opponent (i.e. they are just running) cannot continue to participate from that point.

RA 5 – Unsportsmanlike conduct and fighting

1. Celebration:

(a) Celebration is different from taunting – be more tolerant of it. **Allow brief, spontaneous, emotional reactions at the end of a play. Penalise prolonged, self-congratulatory or demeaning acts.**

(b) A "sack dance" over a tackled opponent should always be penalised.

(c) **Always penalise spiking the ball after a play, except for a spontaneous celebration after a score (or where the player reasonably believes they have scored). However if this is in the direction of an opponent (even unintentionally), it is taunting and should be penalised. For the ball to be "spiked", it must be forcibly thrown into the ground - merely dropping it isn't a foul.**

(d) A celebration should be penalised if it involves:

- (i) any of the 20+ specific prohibitions in Rule 9-2-1;
- (ii) the ball;^x
- (iii) player equipment;
- (iv) field equipment (including a goal);
- (v) any object taken from another person;
- (vi) any prop;
- (vii) a player going to the ground in a delayed (not immediately after the score) and unnecessary manner.

(e) An act that isn't on the above list is probably legal, so be tolerant of it, unless you believe it is abusive, threatening or obscene, provokes ill will, or demeans the game. Don't be a prude (one who is excessively concerned with being or appearing to be proper, modest, or righteous; or a person who is easily shocked or offended by things that do not shock or offend other people).

(f) If an illegal celebration occurs near the goal line, assume that it occurred *after* the score unless an official was in an excellent position to rule on its exact location.

(g) "Choreographed" means that one or more players have clearly pre-decided, pre-arranged or rehearsed how they will move (as in a dance).

2. Dissent:

(a) Players play with passion and emotion – coaches share the same traits. At various times, players and coaches can be happy or sad, joyous or disappointed, satisfied or frustrated. These are normal human emotions (officials have them as well), but need self-control.

(b) Players and coaches are entitled to be disappointed. It is only when it is excessive or challenges an official's authority that it becomes dissent.

(c) Dissent is when players, coaches or other persons subject to the rules:

- (i) speak in an abusive, aggressive or denigrating manner to an official;
- (ii) assert as true something that it is contrary to rule or an official's ruling, or assert as false something that is true;
- (iii) continue to argue a proposition after being informed that it is incorrect, or asked to stop;

- (iv) make denigrating comments about an official or a decision while speaking to each other;
- (v) make gestures (with hands or otherwise) that signify frustration or lack of respect at an official;
- (vi) throw/kick the ball or equipment in disgust;
- (vii) move aggressively towards an official to argue or complain.

Dissent differs from a player or coach asking a genuine question.

- (d) If a player or coach shows the official respect, then the official will show them the same level of respect in return.
- (e) We distinguish between overt dissent and covert dissent. The former is conspicuous, usually because the speech is loud enough for many people to hear, or the gestures are clear and in the open. Covert dissent is where only the official hears it and can be treated slightly differently.
- (f) There are six levels of response to dissent:
 - (i) **Ignore it.** If the dissent is minor, and is the first example of its kind from that player or team, then it *can* be ignored. It might be an isolated incident, never to happen again. However, there is always a risk that ignoring dissent will give encouragement to the participants to repeat it. Ignoring it is certainly not the appropriate response to repeated dissent.
 - (ii) **Pretend you didn't hear it.** Ask the player or coach to repeat their comment ("what did you say?"). If it was inappropriate, they will likely not repeat it. If they do, then there is no doubt that you must respond firmly, professionally and rapidly.
 - (iii) **Quiet word.** A quiet word with a player or coach is often more beneficial than an immediate penalty. It shows your commitment to resolving the issue without recourse to a strict application of the rules of the game.
 - (iv) **Public rebuke.** Sometimes, the player or coach needs to be spoken to loudly enough that their teammates are aware. This may be necessary in order to solicit their help in controlling their emotions.
 - (v) **Penalty.** If dissent is conspicuous to spectators, then it needs to be penalised as unsportsmanlike conduct. Conspicuous dissent includes all actions that involve audible abusive language, thrown equipment, or running towards an official. Verbal dissent also certainly needs to be penalised if it is said a third time (or more).
 - (vi) **Disqualification.** If a player or coach is penalised for dissent twice, then they will be disqualified under Rule 9-2-1. In extreme cases, an act of dissent may be so flagrant as to require immediate disqualification.

There is no need to go through these levels in order. A serious (and conspicuous) act of dissent may require immediate penalty, and possibly even disqualification.

- (g) The following acts by a participant should *always* result in a foul being called:
 - (i) making an aggressive gesture towards an official;
 - (ii) speaking in an abusive, aggressive or denigrating manner to an official that can be heard clearly by spectators;
 - (iii) making "demonstrative disagreement", such as raising hands in incredulity;
 - (iv) smacking themselves to demonstrate how they were fouled;
 - (v) running directly at an official to complain about a call;
 - (vi) making excessive enquiries about a call, even in a civilised tone (as in RA 5.2.f.v above).
- (h) Failing to deal with dissent is letting your colleagues and the sport down. Not only does dissent undermine officials, it can also severely disrupt the atmosphere and flow of a game. If you think you are unconcerned by dissent and ignore it, remember that the same player may make the same comment to a less imperturbable official next week, but that may be the straw that breaks the camel's back and causes that official to quit.
- (i) If you hear dissent directed at another official, *you* deal with it. An important part of officiating teamwork is to back up your colleagues in this way.

(j) Engage with the captain(s) and coach(es) to make clear it is their responsibility to control their players, to prevent dissent or to stamp it out at first sign. Doing this shows that the official is attempting to work *with* the teams rather than penalise.

(k) Where appropriate, advise coaches and players to ask genuine questions rather than make assertions about what is true or false.

(l) If left unchecked, dissent is like a disease that will grow and undermine your authority.

3. Flagrant unsportsmanlike acts requiring disqualification: The following acts of unsportsmanlike conduct normally are flagrant and require disqualification:

(a) Spitting at an opponent or official.

(b) Any abusive language that involves derogatory reference to an opponent's or official's ethnic origin, colour, race, nationality (except in the context of international competition), religion/belief, sex/gender identity, age, class or social background, political belief, sexual orientation, disability or any other speech intended to demean or brutalize.

(c) **Participating without being cleared by a healthcare professional after suspicion of a concussion.**

(d) Any other act of unsportsmanlike conduct which, by its nature or prolonged duration, is extremely objectionable, conspicuous, unnecessary, avoidable or gratuitous.

(e) Any action specifically directed at one or more officials, officials assistants or spectators is generally more extreme than the same action directed at an opponent.

4. Multiple fouls:

(a) Do not penalise a player or team twice for the same unsportsmanlike act.

(b) However, where there are multiple, distinct acts by the same player or by different players, it is appropriate to penalise them separately. Two unsportsmanlike acts by the same player will result in them disqualifying themselves.

(c) Examples of separate acts include:

(i) a prohibited celebration followed by dissent at an official's call;

(ii) taunting an opponent followed by bowing to spectators;

(iii) shoving after the ball is dead followed by removing a helmet;

(iv) a prohibited celebration followed by one or more substitutes entering the field to join the celebration;

(v) **anyone** reacting in an unsportsmanlike manner following being informed of the circumstances of a prior foul;

(vi) **walking away after an unsportsmanlike act, but then returning to commit another unsportsmanlike act.**

(d) Examples of acts that normally would NOT be regarded as separate include:

(i) more than one player participating in a delayed, excessive, prolonged or choreographed celebration;

(ii) a player taunting more than one opponent;

(iii) a player bowing in more than one direction;

(iv) a player making one unsportsmanlike comment or gesture and then **a similar** one a few seconds later.

5. Other points regarding unsportsmanlike conduct:

(a) **Live or dead:** If in doubt whether an unsportsmanlike conduct foul occurred while the ball was live or dead, it was dead.

(b) **Who to penalise:** Do not penalise the conduct of anyone other than a player or coach. If someone else is giving you a problem, ask the team or game management to deal with it.

(c) **Simulating being roughed:** Normally a kicker who simulates being roughed should be ignored. A penalty should only be administered if necessary to exert proper game control.

- (d) **Simulating other fouls:** A player attempting to draw a foul by an opponent by conspicuously simulating a reaction to mild or non-existent physical contact has committed unsportsmanlike conduct.
- (e) **Removing helmets on the field:** Players who unthinkingly remove their helmets on the field of play should not be penalised unless they are (i) directing anger or criticism at an opponent or an official; or (ii) celebrating. Remind them to keep their helmets on. A player removing their helmet in the vicinity of the sideline just prior to entering the team area should be ignored.
- (f) If you observe a coach signalling to an obviously uninjured player to go down, this is one unsportsmanlike conduct foul for feigning an injury, but both the player and the coach will have the foul counted against them for the purposes of Rule 9-2-6-a.
- (g) **Unusual technical fouls:** When a participant inadvertently breaches an unusual rule (e.g. Rule 1-4-10), a first offence can usually be dealt with by a warning and an immediate requirement to rectify the breach. A penalty is only necessary when the breach has been intentional. (Warn for first offence and penalise second and subsequent.)

6. Sideline interference:

- (a) While the ball is dead:
 - (i) Provided participants in the team area respond reasonably promptly to requests to get back from the sideline, there is no need to warn or penalise them, no matter how many times it happens.
 - (ii) Give a sideline interference foul (Rule 9-2-5) only if a head coach repeatedly (i.e. more than once) ignores requests (made while the ball is dead) to keep their team back from the sideline while the ball is alive or in continuing action after it is dead.
- (b) While the ball is in play:
 - (i) Coaches, substitutes and other non-players *on* the field should always be flagged for sideline interference (Rule 9-2-5). An exception is not to be too bothered if the ball is near Team B's goal line and the personnel are still near their team area.
 - (ii) If they are *between* the sideline and the coaching box line, use your discretion and issue a verbal warning if they did not actually cause any problem.
 - (iii) Any contact between an official and a team member on the field or between the sideline and the coaching box line should be called as a team unsportsmanlike act (Rule 9-2-5-b) (with normally a 15-yard penalty from the succeeding spot) even for a first offence. This also applies if there is no physical contact but the official is forced to change direction either to avoid contact or to maintain their view of what they are observing.

7. Fighting:

- (a) Three rules talk about "striking" an opponent: how do you decide which to call?
 - (i) Personal foul (Rule 9-1-2-a): Normally use this for action that occurs while the ball is live. Unless the action could cause catastrophic injury, don't regard it as flagrant.
 - (ii) Unsportsmanlike conduct (Rule 9-2-1-a-1-j): Normally use this for action that occurs in the aftermath of a play.
 - (iii) Fighting (Rules 2-32-1 and 9-5-1): Normally reserve this for more serious, more severe, more prolonged action. It is unlikely that a single strike constitutes a fight.
- (b) If action is deemed to be "fighting" then the player must be disqualified. It is *not* fighting if players are merely pushing each other (i.e. no deliberate punches, kicks or blows are struck or aimed). If in doubt, it is *not* fighting.
- (c) Disqualify a player for punching only when the act appears to be malicious. Consider factors such as the level of intent, the force of the blow, the duration of the incident and whether it is a first offence. Minor, frustration-driven contact may be treated as an unsportsmanlike act, unless one or more of these factors applies.

- (i) We have seen players disqualified for fighting because an official saw them "throw a punch". When evaluating the video of those incidents, it is almost always the case that what the official interprets as a punch is a failed attempt by a tackler to grasp an opponent or force a fumble - movements are rapid and jerky but don't always lock onto their target.
- (ii) Why would a player throw a punch during live ball action? A punch is not going to land a blow on the opponent's head because of their helmet. It is not likely to land a blow on the opponent's upper torso because of their pads. It might land a blow if it was precisely into the solar plexus, but that is also near where ball carriers carry the ball and therefore a legitimate target for forcing a fumble.
- (iii) If you clearly saw a defensive lineman (for instance) thrust their closed fist(s) into an offensive lineman's stomach area, you might regard that as a personal foul, but only if you clearly saw closed fists - open or partially-open hands would be an indicator that this was not intended as foul play.
- (iv) Striking an opponent is most likely to be done out of frustration at being held or taunted. This is usually best dealt with as unsportsmanlike conduct, unless it is prolonged (i.e. there are several blows) at which point it becomes a fight.
- (v) However, where a punch is not an immediate act of frustration, it may justify disqualification. This is more likely when the action has at least one of the following characteristics: **delayed, calculated, very forceful, contemptuous, repeated.**
- (vi) If in doubt as to whether a player has intentionally elbowed an opponent, look at the player's hand. It is a natural reaction to make a fist before striking with the elbow. An open hand probably indicates unintentional contact.
- (vii) Similarly, punches based on frustration tend to have a "wind up" where the puncher pulls their arm/elbow back before striking. Short-arm jabs are possible, but less likely to inflict a major blow.

- (d) During a fight, try to distinguish between those players (on the field at the start of the fight), substitutes and coaches who actively participate in a fight and those who are trying only to separate the combatants. The latter should not be disqualified.
- (e) Only disqualify a player if you are certain of their number. If two opposing players are fighting with each other, don't disqualify one unless you know the identity of the other.
- (f) Unnecessary roughness when Team B has no chance to win and Team A has clearly indicated its intention to "take a knee" should normally result in disqualification of the player committing the foul.

8. Retaliation:

- (a) For the purposes of this section, we define retaliation as when a player commits an aggressive act in direct response to an aggressive act by an opponent on themselves or a teammate. Retaliation may be by physical contact or by unsportsmanlike word or deed. Retaliation normally occurs within a few seconds of the original act, but could in theory be delayed.
- (b) Normally, we want to impose the most severe punishment on the participant who started the incident (the "instigator"). The "punishment" in this context, may be a warning (for a minor infringement), a penalty (for a significant infringement) or disqualification (for a serious infringement).
- (c) If the retaliation is of less seriousness than the original act, the retaliator should normally receive a lesser punishment than the instigator. For example, if A31 commits an unnecessary roughness foul on B45, and B45 retaliates by (a) pushing A31 away; or (b) swearing at A31, then in both cases we would likely not penalise B45, but simply warn them. This would also apply if A31 spat on B45 (a mandatory disqualification according to RA 5.3) and B45 retaliated by pushing A31. A31 would be disqualified, but B45 may only be penalised or warned.

(d) However, if the retaliation prolongs or escalates the incident by being as (or more) severe than the original act, then normally the retaliator should receive the same or a higher punishment than the instigator. For example, if B45 responds by (a) committing an equally unnecessary act of roughness on A31; or (b) starting a fight with A31, then both would be severely penalised. In the case of a fight, Rules 2-32-1 and 9-5-1 together mandate disqualification of both players.

(e) In any case where retaliation is delayed (to the next play or later) and deliberate, disqualification of the retaliator alone is normally required. This includes cases where the retaliator is a teammate of the player who was the victim of the original attack.

9. **Pre-game:** During the pre-game warmups and during the coin toss ceremony, penalise acts by anyone subject to the rules that are designed to provoke their opponents.

(a) This includes conspicuous acts such as choreographed action (e.g. a haka), flag planting, waving a team's flag at an opponent or its supporters, or any similar action (or simulation of these).

(b) Taunting an opponent and other non-conspicuous acts should also be penalised.

(c) If you can see signs of the build up to one of these provocations, step in and try to persuade the player(s) to stop. Penalise if they do not do so.

10. Apply a zero tolerance policy to acts of unsportsmanlike conduct and fighting in junior/youth football.

11. Approved Ruling 9-2-6:II defines which fouls count towards disqualification under Rule 9-2-6-a.

RA 6 – Fouls that always involve advantage

The fouls that previously appeared in this section have been moved to Section RA 3 (Contact fouls) or Section RA 4 (Non-contact fouls) as appropriate. [×]

RA 7 – Catches and fumbles

1. If the ball moves from the control of one player to another (whether teammate or opponent) during the act of gaining possession, the ball belongs to the player in final control (provided they had control inbounds). This is not a simultaneous possession. If the last player in control did not have control inbounds, or any player was out of bounds at the same time as they touched the ball, the ball is loose out of bounds. If in doubt as to whether a player had control inbounds, they did not.
2. If the receiver gets their toe inbounds but their heel **or ankle** comes down a fraction later out of bounds (or vice versa) then the pass is incomplete. If the whole foot touches the ground, it all has to be inbounds for the catch to be completed. **Similarly, the fingers, palm and wrist are all regarded as part of the hand.** This principle does not extend to the foot and leg/knee, nor to the hand and arm/elbow – these are regarded as separate parts of the body and only the first contact with the ground is relevant.
3. It is not a fumble if the ball is stripped after the ball carrier has been driven back. The ball is dead once the ball carrier is so held that their forward progress is stopped.
4. A player has the ball long enough to become a ball carrier when, after their foot is on the ground, they do one of the following (sometimes known as "acts common to the game") (Rule 2-4-3):
 - (a) avoiding or warding off impending contact by an opponent;
 - (b) tucking the ball away;
 - (c) advancing the ball (or retreating with it); or extending it towards the goal line or line to gain;
 - (d) taking additional steps while upright (i.e. not while falling to the ground);
 - (e) passing the ball or handing it off.
5. Do not try to be too technical on ruling a catch. We do not want officials who try to have "the greatest eyes in the history of the game" and rule too many times the receiver has completed the process of the catch and fumbled the ball when it should be an incomplete pass. The most important principle is "when in doubt, incomplete".

6. We use exactly the same approach whether the catch is in the end zone or in the field of play.
7. In ruling whether a Team A player has passed or fumbled the ball, bear in mind the following:
 - (a) Any action by the player's hand moving forward and the ball coming out should be ruled a forward pass.
 - (b) If the player is able to see the defender approaching, they are likely to be able to move their hand or arm forward before they are contacted. When they do not see the hit coming, the chances are greater that a fumble occurred.
 - (c) After the player was hit, if the ball lands behind them it is more likely that a fumble occurred.
8. Checklist for possession (adapted from Dean Blandino presentation, 2021):
 - (a) Is control established with hand(s) or arm(s)? Was control established before the ball touches the ground (catch only)? Slight movement is not a loss of control but a bobble, juggle, bounce or the hands coming off the ball would be.
 - (b) Establish which body part touched the ground (or pylon) first. Was it completely in bounds?
 - (c) How long did the player have control of the ball?
 - (i) If upright, when did they transition from receiver to ball carrier? Did they have the ability to ward off or avoid an opponent? Did they tuck the ball away, turn upfield and/or take additional steps? Did they extend the ball for additional yardage (goal line or line to gain)?
 - (ii) If going to ground, did they maintain control when they touched the ground? Or, did they perform an act common to the game (e.g. extending for additional yardage) on their way to the ground?

RA 8 – Other rules applications

1. **Fair catch signals:**
 - (a) Don't be picky about fair catch signals. Any waving signal or raising a single arm above the head is sufficient to indicate that a fair catch has been called for.
 - (b) Players obviously shading their eyes from the sun have *not* signalled for a fair catch.
 - (c) Any "get away" or "T" signal before or after the ball touches the ground is an invalid **fair catch** signal. **A "T" signal is when a player stretches their arms out, similar to an official's matching substitutes signal [Sup36].**
 - (d) A receiver who points at the ball and keeps their hands below their shoulders with no waving motion has made no signal and can advance the ball. A receiver who keeps their hands below their shoulders and has a waving motion, or one who has their hands just above the shoulders with no waving motion, has made an invalid signal.
2. **Poor field markings:**
 - (a) **Onside kick:** If in doubt on a poorly marked field, the chain can be used following a free kick to measure whether a spot of first touching is illegal or not.
 - (b) **Incorrect hash marks:** Sometimes a field is marked with hash marks at the wrong distance from the sideline (e.g. the NFL distance of 70ft 9in instead of the correct 60ft). If this is the case, to ensure the integrity of the game, do not play to the marked hash marks - use cones or other indicators behind the end lines to approximate the line of the hash marks, and spot the ball between them.
3. **Spotting the ball:**
 - (a) **Spotting the ball for a new series:** The ball should be placed nose-on to a yard line after a change of possession. For example, if a return ends with the ball between the B-28 and B-29, move the ball to the B-29. The exception is the ball should not be moved if, inside Team B's three-yard line, a kick is downed on the ground or a fourth-down run/pass play ends.
 - (b) **Change of possession close to goal line:** If an interception, kick catch or recovery is made inside the one-yard line and immediately carried into the end zone, try to make the play a touch-

back rather than a momentum exception. Where Team A illegally touches a kick near the goal line, try to rule the touching as being in the end zone, particularly if they carry the ball into the end zone.

- (c) **Ball coming out of end zone:** If there is a change of possession in the end zone (or the momentum exception rule applies), when in doubt during the return the ball has NOT left the end zone.
- (d) **Ready for play:** The ball can never be ready for play if an official has not at least touched it at the succeeding spot. If a player spots the ball themselves, and they get the ball in the correct position, an official still needs to touch it and get into position to officiate before the ball becomes ready for play (Rules 2-2-4 and 4-1-4).

4. **Timing:**

- (a) **Timing in the last few seconds of a period:**
 - (i) One second can be enough to make the ball live. If the clock starts on the ready, the Referee should wait until Team A is set before declaring the ball ready.
 - (ii) Two seconds are not long enough for the ball to become live and then dead again **before time expires** (Rule 3-2-5).
 - (iii) With five seconds or less remaining when the ball is snapped, a normal field goal attempt will end the period.
- (b) **Timing on free kicks:** No time will run off the clock if a free kick is recovered cleanly by a player who is on the ground or has signalled for a fair catch. At least one second will run off if they muff the ball and then catch or recover it.
- (c) **Timeouts and flags:** When in doubt, a charged team timeout preceded (and may thus cancel) a 5-yard penalty foul that prevented the snap.
- (d) **Timeouts and injuries:** If a team calls a timeout, but before the Referee makes the announcement, the other team is discovered to have an injured player, give the first team their timeout back. If one team calls a timeout right after the end of the play and at the same time an injured player is discovered, give them the timeout back unless they choose to still take it. Remember that a timeout cannot be used to allow an *injured* player to stay in the game, though it can be used for a player whose helmet has come off (Rules 3-3-6-a-1 and 3-3-10-a).
- (e) **Coach requesting a timeout:** Officials should not be distracted from their game duties by the possibility that a head coach may request a timeout.
 - (i) When a snap or free kick is imminent (i.e. when Team A is in its formation), wing officials must not turn their eyes away from the field of play. In these circumstances, the head coach may need to attract the attention of one of the officials in the middle of the field (referee, umpire, back judge), or even the wing official on the opposite sideline, who is facing them. A "T" hand signal (like signal Sup45) *and* verbalising the word "timeout" are both necessary under these circumstances.
 - (ii) When the ball is dead and there is no threat of action on the field, a verbal request to the nearest official will be sufficient.
 - (iii) Under no circumstances shall an official stop the clock unless they are certain that the request comes from the *head* coach. If the official is unsure whose voice requested the timeout, and is unable to turn round to find out, no timeout will be granted.
 - (iv) Before the snap, anticipate a coach asking for a timeout when you know their team is a player short or looking confused. At the end of a play, anticipate a coach or player asking for a timeout when the game clock is running and their team wants to conserve time.
- (f) **Coaches on the field during timeout:** During a charged timeout, coaches who come on to the field less than 9 yards from the sideline and do not go beyond the 20-yard lines are not normally to be regarded as a problem unless their behaviour draws attention to themselves.

5. **Trick plays:** Be very strict in penalising trick plays that constitute unfair tactics. Such plays include (but are not limited to):

- trick plays depending on the ball being concealed or substituted (Rule 9-2-2-a);
- trick plays associated with simulated substitutions, particularly "hiding" a player near the side-line on their team's side of the field (Rule 9-2-2-b);
- trick plays involving players' equipment (Rule 9-2-2-c);
- trick plays where Team A runs a "normal" play having informed the opponents that it would be "taking a knee" (see also RA8.6.c below) (Rule 9-2-2-d);
- trick plays with actions or verbiage designed to confuse the defense into believing the snap or free kick is not imminent (Rule 9-2-2-d) – this includes pretending to have a problem with the play that has been called, an equipment problem with a shoe, the ball, etc. and feigning an injury (Rule 9-2-2-e); it also includes assuming the role or functions of an official.

Rules of thumb:

- If an unusual act appears to be unfair, it is probably contrary to the rules.
- Relevant to simulated substitutions is to ask yourself, "Could the team have equally well run that play on the other side of the field?". If the "simulated" replaced player was moving towards their own team area, this is more suspicious than if they were moving towards their opponent's team area.

6. **Take a knee plays:** When Team A informs the officials that they intend to "take a knee" (sometimes known as the "victory formation"):

- Ensure that Team B is informed.
- Remind Team A that Team B will still be able to stop the clock if they have timeouts remaining.
- Remind Team A that they will be penalised (under Rule 9-2-2-d) if they subsequently run a "normal" play after having declared their intention to "take a knee" (see also RA 8.5.d above). This includes not taking a knee immediately (less than 3 seconds) after controlling the snap.
- Remind Team B of Team A's declared intention on each subsequent play, unless Team A informs you that they will run a normal play, in which case inform Team B of that.
- Warn Team B not to "punish" opponents or otherwise attempt to interfere with the process (other than in a legitimate attempt to gain possession of a loose ball).
- All officials may choose to change their initial position for the snap. By "pinching in" closer to their nearest player(s), they may be in better position to deter, prevent or de-escalate any aggressive actions.
- Penalise players from either team who try to take advantage of the situation to either gain yards (Team A) or punish an opponent (Team B normally). If Team A consumes time unfairly, Rule 3-4-3 may be used to restore time to the game clock.
- If the score is close, then Team B has a legitimate right to attempt to gain possession. However, if the margin in the score is wider than could reasonably be overcome in the time available, Team B should not instigate any forcible contact.
- If Team A line up in a "victory formation" but do not inform the officials or Team B that they intend to take a knee, this guidance does not apply and Team A may equally legally run a "normal" play or take a knee (at their risk).

7. **Inadvertent whistle:**

- The overall philosophy for the rules on inadvertent whistles (and their application) is to reset the state of the game as closely as possible to what it would have been had the inadvertent whistle not been blown. Also, part of our philosophy is that we do not want what is an officiating mistake to cancel out either a piece of exceptionally good or exceptionally bad play by one

or more players, whenever possible. An inadvertent whistle should be as inconsequential as possible.

- (b) When an inadvertent whistle occurs just before the ball would anyway have become dead, the exceptions in Rule 4-1-2-b provide effective mechanisms by which the next play would be the same (or close to) what it would have been had the whistle not been blown. This is also the case when a foul has occurred (Rule 4-1-2-c).
- (c) When an inadvertent whistle is followed by a dead-ball situation not explicitly covered by an exception in Rule 4-1-2-b, if there is a plausible opportunity to apply one of the parts of Rule 4-1-3 (for example, Rule 4-1-3-s) in preference to Rule 4-1-2-b, do so. That will minimise the consequences of the inadvertent whistle, perhaps to zero.
- (d) When an inadvertent whistle occurs early or in the middle of the intended play, the fairest outcome is usually applying the relevant section of Rule 4-1-2-b that leads to the option of the down being repeated (unless the dead-ball spot is advantageous to the team in possession).

(e) **Continuing action:** After an inadvertent whistle, if one or more players in the vicinity of the ball continue to play the ball, regardless of the time, then that is the immediate continuing action. This period stretches as long as those players in the vicinity continue to play the ball, regardless of what other players do on the field.

8. **Dealing with disqualifications:** A disqualified participant must leave the playing enclosure (Rule 9-2-6-b) within a reasonable amount of time. Provided they are making progress towards leaving at a reasonable rate, the game should continue. However, the game may need to be suspended if the disqualified participant attracts attention or delays their departure. The offending team is responsible for escorting their participant away and may be penalised (for delay of game) if this is not achieved. If the disqualified participant or the person(s) responsible for them commits a (possibly further) unsportsmanlike act, this should be penalised.

RA 9 – When in doubt principles

If you are reasonably sure of something, then go with that – it is more likely to be correct than to fall back on the relevant "when in doubt" principle. However, the "when in doubt" principles reflect experience that, in certain situations, one outcome is more common than the other. Therefore, by going with the more common outcome, you are more likely to be correct, but that is not guaranteed. The principles are not there to excuse failing to apply the correct mechanics.

Note that the principles below do *not* change when video review is available. Given the quality of video we will most often see, it is likely that many reviews will let "stand" the call on the field, so it is important to make the call on the field as fair as possible.

When in doubt:

Pre-snap

1. offensive players are legally on the line;
2. offensive players are legally in the backfield;
3. defensive signals are legal;
4. a departing player has left the field prior to the snap;
5. a charged team timeout precedes a foul that prevents the snap;
6. the one second pause after a shift has been violated;
7. players are legally moving rather than in illegal motion;
8. it is a false start rather than illegal motion;
9. an eligible receiver is not covered up on the line of scrimmage;
10. when a Team B player moves into the neutral zone before the snap and causes a Team A player to react, the movement is towards the Team A player;

11. when a Team B player aligned right to the line of scrimmage jumps forward and causes a Team A player to react, the Team B player *was* in the neutral zone and is the one penalised;
12. when a Team B player shoots the gap between Team A linemen, there *was* contact causing an off-side foul;
13. a quick or abrupt movement by the snapper or quarterback is a false start;

Blocking

14. the back at the snap is not positioned outside the normal tackle;
15. as to disintegration of the free-blocking zone (Rule 2-3-6) or tackle box (Rule 2-34), they are intact;
16. a block below the waist occurred before (not after) the ball left the tackle box
17. it is a legal block rather than clipping;
18. the contact is below the waist rather than above it (Rule 2-3-2);
19. a blind-side block is legal rather than illegal;
20. as to a block in the back, the contact is at or below the waist rather than above (Rule 2-3-4-a);
21. it is legal use of hands rather than holding or illegal use of hands;

Passing

22. the forward pass is incomplete rather than a fumble;
23. the forward pass is catchable (Rule 2-19-4);
24. it is a fumble rather than a forward pass if the passer was hit from their blind-side, or if you see an empty hand moving forward, otherwise the passer has thrown the ball rather than fumbled it (Rule 2-19-2-c);
25. the passer has not intentionally grounded the ball;
26. the pass is forward rather than backward behind the neutral zone (Rule 2-19-2-a);
27. the pass is backward rather than forward beyond the neutral zone or when there is no neutral zone;
28. the forward pass was thrown or forward hand-off made from in or behind rather than beyond the neutral zone;
29. the forward passer is (or has been) outside the tackle box;

Possession and touching

30. a catch, recovery or interception is not completed (Rule 2-4-3-h);
31. as to whether the ball touched the ground during a catch, it did not touch the ground;
32. on a simultaneous catch or recovery, whoever comes up with the ball gets it;
33. it is a fumble rather than the running play has ended;
34. as to touching the ball, a player has not touched it (Rule 2-11-4);
35. the ball is accidentally touched rather than intentionally batted or kicked (Rules 2-11-3, 2-16-1-a and 2-16-1-d);

Kicks

36. with respect to kick-catch interference, a kicking team member has (a) entered the area in front of the receiver; (b) contacted the potential receiver before (or simultaneous with) their first touching the ball; (c) interfered with a receiver in position to catch the kick and who does not do so;
37. if it occurs close to the time of the kick, a foul by a Team B player trying to get to the kicker will have previous spot enforcement; a foul by a Team B player trying to aid the return will have posts scrimmagem kick enforcement;
38. a foul by Team B on a scrimmage kick occurred after (not before) the ball was kicked;
39. the kicker is outside the tackle box;
40. it is not a scrimmage kick formation;
41. a kicking team player has not broken the plane of their restraining line;

Ball live/dead

42. the ball is dead (Rule 4-1-3-a);
43. the player is in bounds rather than out of bounds;
44. if the ball carrier is being held by only one player, the ball is still alive; if held by two or more, forward progress is stopped;
45. an unsportsmanlike conduct foul occurred while the ball was dead rather than live;
- 46. the ball was dead rather than the whistle was inadvertent;**

Contact and fouls

47. a player is defenseless (Rule 2-27-14);
48. the defensive back has legally initiated contact in passing situations;
49. the face mask, chin strap or helmet opening has been grasped then twisted, turned or pulled (Rule 9-1-8-b);
50. the foul is roughing rather than running into the kicker (Rule 9-1-16-a-8);

Near the end zone

51. it is a touchback rather than a safety (Rule 8-5-1-a);
52. it is a touchback rather than a momentum exception;
53. the ball is dead in the field of play rather than a touchdown;
54. as to whether an illegal block **or other illegal act** occurs in the end zone or field of play, it occurs in the field of play;
55. on changes of possession in or near the end zone, the return has NOT left the end zone;
- 56. Team B caught or recovered the kick in its own end zone rather than in the field of play;**
- 57. the kick was touched in Team B's end zone rather than in the field of play;**
- 58. if there is a change of possession in the end zone (or the momentum exception rule applies), during the return the ball has not left the end zone;**

Miscellaneous

59. call timeout for injured players;
- 60. an injury was observed before the ball was spotted;**
61. the Referee should invoke Rule 3-4-3 (unfair clock tactics) when the game clock is under 5 minutes of each half;
62. there is no foul;
63. don't throw the flag;
64. don't blow the whistle.