

Points of emphasis

For 2026, the Rules Committee wishes coaches, players and officials to take particular note of the following points.

Sideline control

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

Coaches will be allowed to only step to the sideline to call offensive and defensive signals after all action has ceased. That working space (six-foot white border) is intended to allow officials to adequately perform their duties; to protect the safety of officials, players and coaches; and to allow teams to demonstrate good sportsmanship within the team area. Since 2025, if any player, coach, or team personnel approaches an official with a device to review or view video during the game, that will result in an automatic unsportsmanlike conduct foul (Rule 9-2-1-a-1-m). Special attention should be given to the rule stating that if a coach receives two unsportsmanlike fouls in a single game, they are disqualified.

The Rules Committee has instructed officials to be more diligent in their observations of these actions and they are instructed to flag violations of the rule when it occurs in an area they can observe.

Coaches are expected to set an appropriate, professional example for their players, fans and the many others who watch the game and to intervene when they see members of their team exhibit behavior that is not acceptable under the Sportsmanship guidelines of the Football Code.

Protection of defenseless players / targeting

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

These actions are now in two rules: Targeting and Making Forcible Contact With the Crown of the Helmet (Rule 9-1-3) and Targeting and Making Forcible Contact to Head or Neck Area of a Defenseless Player (Rule 9-1-4). Use of the helmet as a weapon and intentional (targeted) contact to the head or neck area are serious safety concerns. The penalties for fouls under both 9-1-3 and 9-1-4 include automatic disqualification. We continue to emphasise that coaches and officials must be diligent to ensure that players understand and abide by these rules. Rule 2-27-14 defines and lists characteristics of a defenseless player.

Illegal contact against a quarterback/passer

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

The rule then lists several specific acts which are illegal when they occur against a passer or potential passer. The Rules Committee over time has given options for the quarterback to protect themselves, such as sliding feet first and to legally throw the ball away outside the tackle box. The definition of a

defenseless player has been expanded to include an offensive player in a passing posture with focus downfield, [even if a pass is not thrown](#). Because of the extremely vulnerable situation the quarterback position presents, it is important for all officials, and the referee and the centre judge in particular, to be a presence and recognise when a passer is threatened or is in a defenseless position. The crew must make it a priority to afford the quarterback all the protection the rules provide.

Feigning an injury

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

Head coaches are expected to set a culture within their team to ensure that this type of dishonest action will not be tolerated. Feigning an injury is not ethical and is completely against the spirit of fair competition. It is a bad look for our great game. [For the 2026 season, a new rule was approved to address these tactics. If a player presents as injured after the ball is spotted by the officials, that team will be charged a team timeout or a delay of game penalty if all timeouts have been used.](#)

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

Concussions

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

Pre-snap actions for offense and defense / disconcerting signals / offensive alignment

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

[Updated](#) language in Rule 7 makes it clear for Team A, that any movement that simulates action at the snap is a foul. This includes abruptly shifting a player or players that simulates the start of a play. Team B will be held to the same standard of not simulating action at the snap as Team A. Coordinated Team B movement, including lateral and backward movement that simulates action at the snap is a foul. Additionally, the defense cannot use words or signals that simulate the sound or cadence of, or otherwise interfere with the offensive starting signals. This includes using a clap on the defensive side of the ball that may disconcert the offense. [The terms "move" and "stem" are reserved for the defensive cadence and may not be used by the offense.](#) Also, for the current season, special focus on the offensive alignment is a point of emphasis. Guidelines have been introduced to ensure we are consistent in dealing with restricted linemen that are not on their line of scrimmage. Also, we will ensure that Team A is in proper alignment at the snap, especially when there is a player with an eligible number covered up. These type formations will be evaluated just as we do for "gadget plays" and the offense must be precise in their alignment or should be penalised.

Unsportsmanlike conduct / taunting

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

The pregame warm-up rules are designed to ensure proper sportsmanship before our contests. Officials should be vigilant during the pregame whenever players are on the field. Unsportsmanlike acts before the game are detrimental to the sport and should be monitored and violation penalised by the game officials. Postgame acts are the jurisdiction of the disciplinary authority. Coaches and players should be mindful of their actions and cannot allow poor sportsmanship to blemish positive work from the game. Disciplinary regulations will determine any postgame impacts to the participating players, coaches and institutions.

Pace of play, substitutions and length of game

Since the implementation of the 40-second play clock, we have seen an ever-increasing use of the up-tempo offense. This style of play is often used to prevent the defense from matching up to the current game situation by not being able to substitute, which may create an advantage for the offense.

The rules and properly executed officiating mechanics work well to prevent the offense from gaining an unintended advantage by allowing the defense to match up when the offense substitutes. The availability of a Centre Judge enhances the crew's ability to consistently administer the substitution process. Adherence to these guidelines will allow a reasonable amount of time for the defense to change personnel, if desired, following an offensive substitution.

Equally important are plays in which the offense does not substitute. In these situations, officials have been instructed that they are not to significantly increase the pace used to spot the ball and make it ready for play. Doing so would place the defensive team at a distinct disadvantage not intended by rule. It is important that a consistent pace be maintained when spotting the football and making it ready for play in all games. That will allow defensive coaches the ability to recognize how much time is available prior to the ball being ready for play and whether they will have an opportunity to make adjustments to personnel.

Proper implementation of these guidelines will ensure that the mechanics of game officials will not affect the balance between offense and defense and that neither team will gain an advantage not intended by rule regardless of the style of play.

Sportsmanship

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

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

Coaches and players are reminded of their responsibility to show class and sportsmanship in all postgame activities. Postgame actions that are unsportsmanlike may also result in action by the disciplinary authority to the team or player.