

Points of emphasis

For 2024, 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. Special attention should be given to the rule stating that if a coach receives two unsportsmanlike fouls in a single game, they are disqualified.

The Rules Committee has instructed officials to be more diligent in their observations of these actions and they are instructed to flag violations of the rule when it occurs in an area they can observe. Coaches are expected to set an appropriate, professional example for their players, fans and the many others who watch the game and to intervene when they see members of their team exhibit behavior that is not acceptable under the Sportsmanship guidelines of the Football Code.

Protection of defenseless players / targeting

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

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

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. 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.

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.

Disconcerting signals and pre-snap actions

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

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

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

Unsportsmanlike conduct / taunting

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

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

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