

2023 Major NFHS/NCAA Football Rules Differences

NFHS

NCAA

Backward Pass

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| May be thrown by any player at any time for any purpose. | May not be thrown intentionally out of bounds to conserve time. |
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Ball

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| Leather and composition allowed; no panel restrictions. | Must be leather with four panels; marking the ball for special use is prohibited. |
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Batting

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| A grounded loose ball may not be batted in any direction except K can bat a grounded scrimmage kick back towards his own goal line. The penalty is 10 yards. | A grounded loose ball may be batted backward except in the end zone. The penalty is 10 yards. |
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Blocking Below the Waist

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| Not allowed outside the free-blocking zone. Within the zone, linemen of either team may only block opposing linemen. The contact must be immediate and the initial action following the snap. | Blocking below the waist is only allowed by linemen of either team on their initial charge. After the initial line charge up until the ball leaves the tackle box, the initial contact must be directed from the front. Team A stationary backs inside the tackle box may block low from the front only. On scrimmage plays, blocking below the waist outside the tackle box is prohibited. |
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Blocking in Back

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| Within the free-blocking zone, offensive linemen who were in the zone at the snap and may block in the back opponents who were in the zone at the snap. | Blocks in the back are legal within the blocking zone. |
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Blocking Out of Bounds

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| No restrictions. | It is illegal for any player to initiate a block against an opponent who is out of bounds. A 15-yard penalty with an automatic first down. |
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Chop Block

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| Any high-low or low-high block at the waist or below of opponent in contact with teammate of the blocker. | A high-low or low-high combination block by any two players against an opponent (not the runner) anywhere on the field, with or without a delay between contacts; the "low" component is at the opponent's thigh or below. |
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Clipping

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| All clipping is illegal. | Blocks from behind at the knee or below are illegal anywhere except against the runner. Blocks from behind above the knee are legal within the blocking zone. |
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Coaching/Team Box

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| Three coaches in a restricted 2-yard belt between team box and sideline only while the ball is dead between the 25-yard lines. State association option to extend. | Separate 2-yard belts for officials and coaches between the 20-yard lines. |
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Defenseless Players

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| All players are protected from illegal head contact. Defenseless receivers are limited in the methods they may be contacted. | Runners are not defenseless players. No additional restrictions in how a defenseless receiver is contacted. |
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Defensive Formation on Place Kicks

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| No restrictions. | It is illegal for 3 defensive players to line up shoulder-to-shoulder and move forward on place kicks with primary contact against a single team K player; 5-yard penalty, previous spot. When the offense is in a scrimmage kick formation, any defensive player within one yard of the line of scrimmage must be aligned completely outside the frame of the body of the snapper at the snap. |
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Defensive Holding – Penalty Enforcement

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| No automatic first down. | Automatic first down. |
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Defensive Pass Interference

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| If there is contact while pass is in flight, it is not a foul if contact is away from direction of the pass. Penalty is 15 yards under all-but-one principle; no automatic first down. Interference applies if an eligible receiver voluntarily goes OOB and returns in bounds (illegal participation). Interference restrictions apply if a forward pass is touched behind the line by A, and goes beyond line. | Pass must be catchable. Spot foul if less than 15 yards. Special enforcement inside 17 yard line; automatic first down. No PI if scrimmage kick is simulated. Interference does not apply against an eligible receiver who goes OOB & returns in bounds (possible illegal touching). Interference restrictions do not apply if a forward pass is touched behind the line by A, and goes beyond line. |
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Extending the Period

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| Period is not extended if the penalty is a safety. Any period can be extended. | The period is extended for the free kick. Offended team option for loss of down fouls. Period extension is limited to the end of a half except for a try. |
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Face Mask Fouls

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| Grasping face mask without pulling, turning or twisting is a foul with a 5-yard penalty. | Grasping face mask without pulling, turning or twisting is not foul. |
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Fair Catch

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| The ball is spotted where a fair catch is made. After a fair catch, there is an option to free kick or snap. | The receiving team may fair catch a free kick inside their 25-yard line and have the ball put in play at their 25-yard line After a fair catch, the ball must be snapped. |
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False Start

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| If the entire team does not become set before the snap it is an illegal shift. | If the entire team does not become set before the snap, a false start is called. |
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Field Goal From Outside the 20

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| Unsuccessful kick results in touchback if ball crosses goal line. | Ball returned to previous spot if untouched by B beyond the neutral zone. |
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Fighting

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| Disqualified from the game. | Disqualified. First half fight - for game. Second-half fight - for second half and first half of next game. Second fight --players/ substitutes/coaches for season. |
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Forward Pass - Definition

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| Initial direction must be forward. | Point of first touching must be forward. |
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Forward Pass - Spike to Conserve Time

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| If the snap is muffed, it cannot be spiked. | A muffed snap that does not touch the ground can be spiked immediately after the ball is controlled. |
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Free-Kick Line

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| K's 40-yard line. | A's 35-yard line. |
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Free-Kick Line Infractions

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| Encroachment, four players on either side of kicker and no more than one player more than five yards behind the FK line – dead-ball foul. | All are live-ball fouls with a penalty option to enforce from end of the run when kicking team is offside. |
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Free-Kick Out-of-Bounds

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| Place ball 25 yards from previous spot or 5-yard penalty and re-kick or a five-yard penalty from where the ball belongs to R. | Place ball 30 yards from previous spot, 5-yard penalty and re-kick, or a five-yard penalty from where the ball belongs to B. |
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Free-Blocking Zone

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| The zone is 3 yards on each side of the ball and 4 yards wide on each side of the line. Only players who are on the line and in the zone may block below the waist. Only offensive players | Only offensive players on the line of scrimmage within a rectangular area centered on the middle lineman and extending 5 yards laterally in each direction and 3 yards on both |
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| who are on the line and in the zone may block in the back. The zone exists only while ball is in the zone. | sides of the neutral zone may legally clip above the knee in the zone. A player on the line within the zone may not leave the zone and return to clip. Blocking in the back legal under the same conditions. The zone exists until the ball is in player possession outside the zone or is muffed or fumbled outside the zone. |
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Fumble – Out of Bounds – Fourth Down

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| Spotted where it becomes dead. Clock starts on snap . No fourth down fumble rule. | Forward fumbles are returned to spot of fumble – clock starts on ready . Fourth down fumble rule. |
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Game Clock

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| The game clock starts on the snap when the ball becomes dead out of bounds. | The game clock starts on the snap only during the last two minutes of each half when the ball becomes dead out of bounds except for forward fumble. |
| The game clock starts on the snap after a legal kick only when a new series is awarded. | The game clock starts on the snap after a legal kick. |
| The game clock always starts on the snap after a delay penalty is accepted. | The game clock starts on the snap after a delay penalty, regardless of whether it is accepted or declined, if committed by a team in scrimmage-kick formation. |
| When a penalty is accepted with less than two minutes remaining in either half, the offended team has the option to start the game clock on the snap. | Inside the last two minutes of a half, if the game clock is stopped to administer the penalty for a foul by the team ahead in the score, the game clock will start on the snap, at the option of the offended team. |
| The game clock stops for Team A first downs inbounds. | The clock does not stop for Team A first downs inbounds except for the last two minutes of a half. |

Game Length

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| 12-minute quarters. | 15-minute quarters. |
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Goalpost Uprights

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| 23 feet 4 inches apart. | 18 feet 6 inches apart. |
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Hash marks (Inbounds Lines)

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| Divide field in thirds. | 60 feet from each sideline. |
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Helmet comes off during Play

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| The player whose helmet comes off must not continue to participate beyond the immediate action in which he is engaged. Prolonged participation is illegal participation. No foul for simply removing the helmet while on the field. | Same, except prolonged participation is a personal foul. The penalty is 15 yards plus an automatic first down for fouls by Team B. Players cannot remove helmet unless in team box except for timeouts, etc. |
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Horse Collar Tackle

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| All players are prohibited from grabbing the inside back collar of the shoulder pads or jersey, the name plate area on the back of the jersey or the inside collar of the side of the shoulder pads or jersey of a runner, and subsequently independently pulling the opponent down. There is no requirement for the tackle to be immediate nor are there exceptions for the tackle box or a quarterback in the pocket. | All players are prohibited from grabbing the inside back collar of the shoulder pads or jersey, the nameplate area on the back of the jersey, or the inside collar of the side of the shoulder pads or jersey, and immediately pulling the runner down. This does not apply to a runner who is inside the tackle box or to a quarterback who is in the pocket. |
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Illegal Kicks

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| For an illegal kick such as one from beyond the neutral zone, the penalty is 10 yards from the spot of the foul and the ball is treated as a fumble. | For an illegal kick, (when the kicker's entire body and the ball is or has been beyond the neutral zone), the penalty is five yards from the previous spot and loss of down. The ball becomes dead when kicked. |
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Injured Player

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| Any player who exhibits signs of a concussion must be removed from the game and may not return until cleared by an appropriate health care professional. It is no longer necessary for an unconscious player to have a physician's note to continue to play. | A player sustaining an injury, including showing signs of a concussion, must go to the team area for medical attention and remain out of the game until an appropriate medical professional designated by his institution approves his return. |
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Intentional Grounding to Save Yardage

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| Loss of down and 5-yard penalty from spot of pass (end of run). | Loss of down at the spot of pass, no yardage assessed. |
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Kick-Catch Interference

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| Interference occurs if a free kick is touched in-flight by K. | Interference on a free kick in-flight only applies if an R player is positioned to make a catch. The receiving team has the same kick-catch and fair-catch protection whether the ball is kicked directly off the tee or is immediately driven to the ground. Kicking team players cannot enter the area defined by the width of the receiver's shoulders and extending one yard in front of the receiver before he touches the ball. |
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Kicker Contacted

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| A kicker is protected until he has had a reasonable opportunity to regain his balance. No foul if defender is blocked into kicker/holder. | A kicker who runs outside the tackle box or carries or possesses the ball more than five yards behind his initial position in the formation, is not protected as a kicker. |
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| | No foul only if defender is illegally blocked into kicker/holder. |
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Kicking Tee

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| Kicking tee allowed for free kicks and placekicks. Tee may be two inches high. Use of illegal tee is an unfair act. | Tee allowed only for free kicks. Tee is limited to one inch high. Use of illegal tee is an illegal kick; a five-yard penalty from the previous spot. |
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Kick into Receiver's End Zone

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| Touchback when non-scoring breaks plane of R's goal line or when scoring attempt is unsuccessful. | Remains alive unless ball first touches the ground in the end zone before it touches a B player. |
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Leaping

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| Defensive players may leap from the ground to block a kick as long as they don't violate a different rule such as hurdling or leverage. | It is illegal to leap into the plane directly above the frame of the body of an opponent unless the player was aligned in a stationary position within one yard of the line of scrimmage when the ball was snapped as long as he doesn't move forward before leaving his feet. |
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Neutral Zone Infractions

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| Offensive false start and encroachment – dead-ball foul. Defensive encroachment – dead-ball foul. Defensive lineman quick/abrupt actions – unsportsmanlike conduct. | Offensive false start and encroachment – dead-ball foul. Defensive offside – dead-ball or live-ball foul. Defensive lineman quick/abrupt actions – dead-ball delay foul. |
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Nine-Yard Marks

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| Team A players and substitutes must be between the nine-yard marks after the ready. | Only Team A substitutes must be between the nine-yard marks after the ready. Players who participated in the previous down need only be between the nine-yard marks anytime after the previous down ended and the next snap. |
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Numbering Exception

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| Applies only on fourth down or a try whenever K is in a scrimmage-kick formation. On 1 st , 2d or 3d down, only the snapper can have a number outside the 50-79 range. | Applies whenever K is in a scrimmage-kick formation. |
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Offensive Formation

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| Only the snapper may lock legs with the guards. All other linemen must have both feet outside the outside foot of the adjacent player. | Any offensive lineman may lock legs with another lineman. |
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Officials Jurisdiction

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| 30 minutes before scheduled kickoff or as determined by the state association. | 90 minutes before scheduled kickoff. |
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Onside Kick

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| Kicking the ball directly into the ground so that it goes into the air in the manner of a ball kicked directly off the tee (pop-up kick) is illegal and is a dead-ball foul. | Players have the same kick-catch and fair-catch protection whether the ball is kicked directly off the tee or is immediately driven to the ground (pop-up kick). |
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Overtime

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| Equal series from 10-yard line (State Association option). | Equal series from 25-yard line. No kick try after first series. After the second series, teams alternate attempting a two-point try. Referred to as "Extra Periods." |
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Participation

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| 12 or more players on the field at the snap result in a 15-yard penalty for illegal participation. | 12 or more players on the field at the snap are a 5-yard penalty for illegal substitution. |
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Placekick Holder

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| Must rise to keep ball alive. May rise to catch or recover a snap. | Need not rise to keep ball alive. |
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Play Clock

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| A 40/25-second play clock is used. After a touchdown and following a kickoff, the play clock will be set at 25 seconds. | A 40/25-second play clock is used. After a touchdown and following a kickoff, the play clock will be set at 40 seconds. |
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Player Voluntarily Out of Bounds

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| Player of A and K is guilty of illegal participation if he returns to field. All players are prohibited from intentionally going out of bounds and returning. | Foul for A on a kick, but an A receiver may return unless first to touch forward pass. |
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Roughing the Passer

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| No contact after it is clear the ball has been thrown. | Same plus all forcible contact against the passer at the knee or below unless he is making a wrap-up tackle without forcible contact with the head or shoulder. |
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Scrimmage Kick Formation

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| Deep player must be 10 yards back. Also for FG attempt, the holder may be 7 yards back with a kicker in position. | Same plus it must be obvious a kick will be attempted. |
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Shift

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| Movement of one or more players. | Movement of two or more players. |
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Sideline Infractions

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| Teams whose players and coaches are in the restricted area and do not contact an official while the ball is live are penalized as follows: (1) An official sideline warning. (2) A five-yard penalty for the next infraction. (3) A 15-yard penalty for each additional infraction. | Teams whose players and coaches get outside their designated areas and do not contact an official are penalized as follows: (1) A warning for the first infraction; (2) five-yard delay-of-game penalty from the succeeding spot for the second and third infractions; (3) A team 15-yard unsportsmanlike conduct penalty from the succeeding spot with an automatic first down for Team B fouls for the fourth and any subsequent infractions. |
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Snap

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| It is encroachment if the defense touches the ball or the snapper's hands or arms before the snap has ended. | If the ball is touched by a team B player during a legal snap, the ball remains dead. |
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Substitution

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| Replaced player must depart within 3 seconds of arrival of substitute. Breaking the huddle with 12 or more players is not a foul unless it violates the above. | Replaced A player must depart immediately (3 seconds), but A cannot break huddle with 12 players. While in the process of substitution, Team A is prohibited from rushing quickly to the line of scrimmage and snapping. |
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10-second Runoff

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| No provision. | Please see penalty enforcement section. |
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Targeting

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| No automatic DQ. Applies to all players | Automatic DQ, subject to review (player may remain in team box). Unless hit is with crown of helmet, applies only to defenseless players. |
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Timeout

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| Coach may go to huddle. All timeouts are one min. Successive timeouts are allowed. | Coach may not enter field. Length varies based on TV. Successive timeouts are not allowed. |
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Touchback

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| Ball is next snapped at 20 yard line. | Same except 25 yard line if during a free kick. |
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Try

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| Ball dead when kick fails or when B secures possession. B cannot score. Ball remains alive on fumble if Team A recovers. | The ball remains live as on any field goal attempt. B may score two points. |
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| Not attempted following touchdown on last timed down if game decided and playoff qualification is not a factor. | Prior to change of possession, the try ends if A1 fumbles and a teammate recovers. Not attempted following touchdown on last timed down if game decided. The try is not attempted unless a score would affect the outcome of the game; however, if the scoring team is ahead by one or two points, they have the option to forego the try. |
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Video Review

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| Allowed for playoffs only by state association adoption. | Allowed – special review procedures (instant replay). Also, conferences are to review games for flagrant fouls. |
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Wedge Formation

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| It is legal to block from a wedge formation during any down. | It is illegal for two or more members of the receiving team to intentionally form a wedge for the purpose of blocking for the ball carrier after the ball has been kicked, except when the kick is from an obvious onside kick formation. |
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Uniforms/Equipment

Facemasks

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| An overbuilt facemask is legal. | An overbuilt facemask is illegal. |
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Gloves/Hand Pads

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| Any color except ball colored. Must meet the NOCSAE and SFIA standards. | No restriction on the color of gloves. The specifications in effect for gloves apply to hand pads. |
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Helmets

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| Similar team color not required. No rule on taking helmet off. | Team color and design must be same. Facemasks same color. |
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Illegal/Mandatory Equipment Penalty

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| For use of illegal equipment: a 15-yard penalty for USC charged to head coach. For use of legal equipment improperly worn: The player is sent to the sideline for one play. He is not allowed to return until the equipment is made legal. A timeout may not be used to keep the player in the game. | The player is sent to the sideline for one play. He is not allowed to return until the equipment is made legal. The team may keep the player in the game without missing a down by taking a timeout to fix the equipment. |
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Jersey

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| All must be long enough to reach the top of the pants, and shall be tucked in if longer. Jersey color violations are reported to state association. Visiting team must wear white jerseys. | Full length and tucked in. Undergarments (e.g., T-shirt) may not extend below the waistline. Jersey color violations are a foul at the start of each half, a 15-yard penalty and the loss of a timeout at the start of each quarter. |
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| Effective in 2021, home team jerseys must be a dark color that clearly contrasts to white. | Visiting team must wear white jerseys unless prior agreement |
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Jersey Numbers

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| Effective in 2024, the entire body of the number shall be a single solid color that clearly contrasts with the body color of the jersey. | <p>The entire body of the number shall be a single solid color that clearly contrasts with the body color of the jersey.</p> <p>No more than two squad members may be assigned the same jersey number for a game.</p> <p>The penalty is the same as for jersey color violations.</p> |
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Knee Pads

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| Must cover the knee. | The pants and knee pads are recommended to cover the knees. |
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Pants

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| Extra outside pad may be worn. | External pad not allowed. All players must have same color/design. |
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Shoes

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| Required. | Not required. Disqualified if cleats are longer than ½ inch. |
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Socks

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| Not required. | All players must have same color and design. The sock/leg covering must cover the entire area from the shoe to the bottom of the pants. |
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Towels

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| Any player may have a towel that is any solid color with no words, symbols, letters or numbers (except a manufacturer's logo and a school logo), and must be no larger than 4"x12". | One (4"x12" min/18"x36" max) plain white towel per player. Must be moisture absorbing and cannot be sticky. |
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PENALTY ENFORCEMENT

NFHS:

Basic spot enforcement applies with all fouls penalized from the basic spot which can be the previous spot, the spot of the foul, the end of the related run or the succeeding spot. Loose-ball plays include the snap, kicks, legal passes or fumbles in or behind the neutral zone and includes the run(s) which precede such legal or illegal kick, legal forward pass, backward pass or fumble. The basic spot is the previous spot. Basic spots make a distinction between fouls which occur when a running play ends behind or beyond the neutral zone. The basic spot for a running play is not always the end of the related run and the spot of the foul can be a basic spot. The basic spot is the previous spot for fouls by the defense when the related run ends behind the neutral zone and for contact fouls by the offense which occur behind the neutral zone regardless of where the related run ends.

Only roughing the passer, snapper, or kicker /holder include an automatic first down.

For roughing the passer, the dead-ball spot is the spot from which to enforce the 15-yard penalty. If there is a change of team possession or the run ends behind the previous spot, the penalty is enforced from the previous spot.

The following fouls have special enforcement provisions and options for the offended team: free kick out-of-bounds; kick-catching interference); unfair acts; roughing the passer; fouls by the kicking team on kick downs and fouls on scoring plays. Any foul on a scoring play can carry over to the try or succeeding kickoff.

Where there are 15-yard penalties for dead-ball fouls or live-ball fouls treated as dead-ball fouls committed by each team, and prior to the penalty administration; each 15-yard foul will cancel a 15-yard foul on the other team. Any remaining 15-yard fouls will be enforced. Also, a five-yard penalty for a dead-ball foul will be enforced separately and in the order of occurrence and would not cancel a five or 15-yard penalty.

Fouls on touchdown or successful field goal plays may be enforced on the try or succeeding kickoff provided they occur after any change of possession.

NCAA:

The all-but-one principle applies during running plays beyond the line or when there is no scrimmage line. The basic spot for fouls during a pass play (other than defensive pass interference less than 15 yards beyond neutral zone) is the previous spot. EXCEPTION: Holding, personal fouls, illegal facemask fouls and illegal use of hands behind the neutral zone are always enforced from the previous spot. Other specific penalty spots exist for kicking fouls. All personal fouls include an automatic first down. Numerous fouls carry a specific enforcement spot. Carry-over penalties are only for personal fouls on a scoring play and personal fouls against snapper, holder, kicker and passer on a successful try.

For roughing the passer, the end of the last run is the spot from which to enforce the 15-yard penalty. If there is a change of team possession during the down or the run ends behind the previous spot, the penalty is enforced from the previous spot. Also applies to personal fouls and unsportsmanlike conduct fouls by Team B on pass plays.

On both free and scrimmage kicks, excepting field goal plays, fouls by the kicking team may be enforced from where the play ends if B is in possession at the end of the play.

When unsportsmanlike or dead-ball personal fouls by both teams are reported to the referee and before any of the penalties have been completed, the fouls cancel. Unsportsmanlike conduct is penalized as a live-ball foul if it occurs by a player while the ball is live. If a player commits an unsportsmanlike act before a touchdown is scored, the score is nullified and the offending team is penalized from the spot of the foul. The penalties for unsportsmanlike acts committed by coaches or other bench personnel are administered as dead-ball fouls regardless of the status of the ball when the foul occurs. Penalties for unsportsmanlike fouls by team B include an automatic first down. Penalties for dead-ball fouls (for example, unsportsmanlike behavior after the player crosses the goal line) are assessed on the ensuing kickoff or the try.

Fouls on a successful field goal and live-ball personal fouls on touchdown plays may be enforced on the try or succeeding spot as well as live-ball fouls enforced as dead-ball fouls and dead-ball fouls.

A 10-second runoff of the game clock is part of the penalty option for fouls that stop the clock with less than one minute in either half. The runoff does not apply if the game clock is not running when the foul occurs. The fouls included are:

- Any foul that prevents the snap (e.g., false start, encroachment, defensive offside by contact in the neutral zone, etc.).
- Intentional grounding to stop the clock.
- An illegal forward pass thrown from beyond the neutral zone.
- A backward pass thrown out of bounds to stop the clock.
- Any other foul committed with the intent of stopping the clock (referee's discretion).

The offended team may accept the yardage penalty and decline the runoff. If the yardage penalty is declined, the runoff is declined by rule. Following enforcement of the penalty and runoff (if any) the game clock starts on the referee's signal. However, if the fouling team has a charged team timeout remaining it may avoid the runoff by using a timeout. In that case the game clock starts on the snap following the timeout which either team may use to confer.

A 10-second runoff is also an option when instant replay reverses the ruling on the field inside of one minute in either half and the correct ruling would not have stopped the game clock.

These NFHS/NCAA Football Rules Differences are presented in summary form and should only to be used as a guide; not all nuances are described. This information is in no way meant to replace the NFHS Rules Book. 2023 changes are shaded. These differences have been generously compiled and provided by George Demetriou, Rules Interpreter for Colorado. The NFHS is not responsible for content accuracy or the maintenance of this information. You may contact the author at georgedemetriou@comcast.net.