



**SENIOR TACKLE®**  
RULEBOOK

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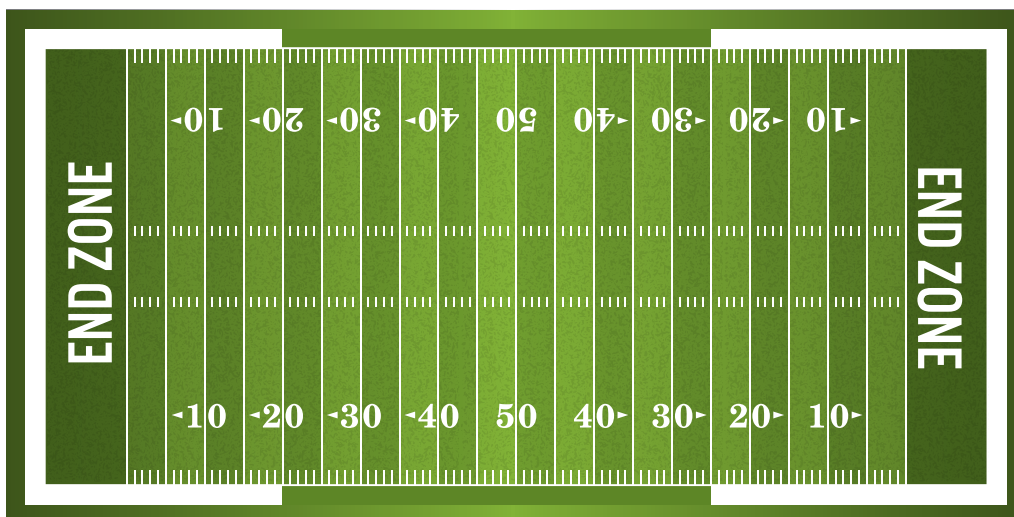
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# SENIOR TACKLE® RULEBOOK

## Playing Field



1. The game is played on a standard NFHS football field: 100 yards long by 53 1/3 yards wide with standard markings, with modifications for 6, 8 and 9 players as outlined by the NFHS.
2. First downs, down markers and the chain gang are administered in accordance with [National Federation of State High School Associations \(NFHS\)](#) or local rules.

## Rules

USA Football recommends the following rules be adopted by youth football leagues, replacing the current rules within the [NFHS](#) and [NCAA](#) books. Feel free to print this chart and provide it to your officials to take to the game field.

NFHS RULE	NFHS PENALTY YARDAGE OR EXPLANATION	USA FOOTBALL RULE EXPLANATION
9-4-5: Roughing/Running Into the Kicker/Holder	Roughing = 15; Running Into = 5	All contact fouls on the kicker/holder result in a 15-yard penalty (there is no 5-yard option for running into the kicker or holder).
9-4-3-h: Grasping the Face Mask	Grasping, pulling, twisting, turning = 15; incidental grasping = 5	All facemask fouls result in a 15-yard penalty (there is no 5-yard option for grasping but not twisting or pulling the facemask).
9-3-2-a: Illegal Blocking Below the Waist	This is legal in the free blocking zone.	All blocking below the waist, blocking in the back and clipping is illegal. There is no "free blocking zone." The penalty for clipping and blocking below the waist is 15 yards. The penalty for blocking in the back is 10 yards.
No Rule Restriction on Lining Up Over the Snapper		A defensive player lined up over the snapper must be positioned 4 yards off his line of scrimmage. Failure to do so results in the ball remaining dead and a warning issued to that team. Second and subsequent violations result in a 15-yard penalty.
7-5-Penalty: Illegal Forward Pass and Illegal Touching	5 yards plus loss of down	The penalties for illegal forward pass and illegal touching by ineligible receivers are 5 yards only (no loss of down).
7-2-5-b; 7-5-6-a: Numbering Requirements	At the snap, at least five Team A players on their line of scrimmage must be numbered 50-79. Eligible receivers must be numbered 1-49 or 80-99	Uniform numbering rules regarding eligible receivers and linemen are eliminated.

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### Points of Emphasis

The National Federation of State High School Associations and the NCAA annually publish a list of rules that will serve as points of emphasis each season for their game officials. These can be new rules (targeting, for example) that the organizations want officials to specifically look for, or they can be more established rules that officials have – over the years – tended to not enforce to the detriment of the game.

Youth leagues should do the same. Focusing first on safety issues, leagues should also consider emphasizing rules specific to game play or coaching habits that officials need to address.

### Timing and Overtime

1. Each game is made up of four quarters:
  - a. 12 minutes with a running clock or
  - b. 8 minutes with a standard clock
2. Leagues can decide the following based on their needs:
  - a. Number of time outs per game or half.
  - b. Whether to stop the clock on PAT attempts and/or turnovers.
3. Overtime is played only in playoff games (if the league hosts playoffs) and runs in accordance with NFHS rules.

### Play Clocks

In the NFL and NCAA, teams have either 40 seconds from the end of the previous play or 25 seconds from the official's ready-for-play whistle to snap the ball.

While some states have instituted the 40-second play clock at the high school level, most youth leagues continue to use only the 25-second clock.

- **USA Football recommendation:** Leagues should allow for 30- or 35-second play clocks at younger levels. The goal is to help younger athletes get as many plays in as they can and not disrupt the flow with constant stoppages.

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## Clock Stoppages

At all levels of football, the clock stops for the following reasons:

- Timeouts
- At the end of each quarter
- On an incomplete pass
- When a ball-carrier runs out of bounds
- On a penalty
- When a player is injured
- When a team scores
- When the ball changes possession
- When officials measure for a first down

Within the NFHS and NCAA rule books, the clock also stops to move the chains for a first down.

For youth, high school and college football, the clock will restart on an official's ready-to-play whistle after:

- The chains are reset following a first down.
- An injured player is removed from the field.
- The ball is set after a change of possession.
- Penalty yardage is marked off.
  - Under NFHS rules, with less than two minutes to play in the second and fourth quarters, the offensive team has the option whether to keep the clock stopped or restart the clock following a penalty. For example, for defensive offsides, the offense can restart the clock on ready for play if it is trying to run time off the clock or start the clock on the snap if it is attempting to score.
  - In the NFL and NCAA, unless there is less than two minutes in the first half or five minutes left in the game, the clock will restart following a runner going out of bounds. This does not happen at any time within the NFHS rule book.



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## NFL Differences

- The NFL does not stop the clock for a first down unless the runner or ball goes out of bounds.
- The NFL stops the clock for a 2-minute warning at the end of each half. This does not exist on the high school or college levels.
- The NFL will not restart the clock for some penalties until the next snap.

## Different Rules, Different Levels

Other rules also vary slightly between NFHS, NCAA and NFL. These differences within fouls and penalty enforcement are outlined below, but here are some of the most common non-penalty contrasts that exists between levels:

### • Touchbacks on Kicks

- **NFHS:** Once the ball breaks the plane of the goal line, the play is blown dead and a touchback is called. Defensive players can stand in the end zone and bat a ball back as long as the ball does not cross that plane.
- **NCAA and NFL:** The play is blown dead once a ball lands in the end zone or a defensive player who has stepped into the end zone touches the ball.

### • Neutral Zone Infractions

- **NFHS:** The play is dead, and a foul is called as soon as a player enters the neutral zone. There is no “getting back” before the snap.
- **NCAA and NFL:** Players have the opportunity to return to their side of the neutral zone unless contact is made with an opponent or a game official deems the player’s penetration into the other side too deep and stops play for safety reasons.

### • Missed Field Goals

- **NFHS:** Think of field goal attempts under NFHS rules the same way you do a punt. The ball remains live for the return team until it reaches the end zone, rolls out of bounds or is downed by the kicking team. A touchback returns the ball to the 20-yard line. A kick that stops short of the end zone and is downed is spotted there.
- **NCAA and NFL:** Missed field goals can be returned by the defense as long as they stay in bounds. Missed kicks that go out of bounds or roll dead come back to the point of the kick and possession changes.

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- **Extra Points**

- **NFHS:** The defense can never score on an extra-point try. Once the kick is away or the defense gains possession of the ball, the play is over.
- **NCAA:** At the college level, if the point-after try is blocked on or behind the line of scrimmage and continues into the end zone, where it touches the ground before being touched by another player, the ball becomes dead and the try down is over. If the kick is blocked and recovered before reaching the end zone, then the defense can pick it up and return it for a possible two points.
- **NFL:** Since 2015, the defense can score two points on an extra-point try by blocking a kick or causing a turnover and returning it to the opposite end zone.

- **Automatic First Down**

- **NFHS:** The only fouls in the NFHS rule book that result in an automatic first down are:
  - Roughing the passer
  - Roughing the kicker, holder or snapper (and only if a team is in a scrimmage-kick formation at the snap)

- **Loss of Down**

- **NFHS:** The only fouls in the NFHS rule book that result in a loss of down are:
  - Illegal forward pass (grounding)
  - Illegal forward handoff
  - Illegal touching of a forward pass

- **Legal Catch**

- **NFHS and NCAA:** One foot must be established inbounds for legal possession of the ball.
- **NFL:** Two feet established inbounds are required.

See the section on the next page for more details on some of these items.



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## Penalties

The enforcement of penalties is a core role for youth football game officials. It is important, though, that officials on the younger levels work with players and coaches to understand the rules as well.

A quick word in the huddle between plays and an open dialog with coaches on the sideline often do a lot more to correct a player's action than simply throwing a flag. Officials are a vital part of the teaching process and must work together with coaches to help young athletes improve.

The following list outlines the most common penalties that occur in youth football games. The basic definitions refer to rules as outlined in the NFHS rule book with NCAA differences defined within the bullet points. For the full lists, consult the NFHS or NCAA rule books, whichever your state uses as its rules foundation.

### Offensive Penalties

**Delay of Game:** Upon the ready for play whistle, the offense has 25 seconds to snap the ball and begin the next play. It is also any deliberate action by a player to delay the spotting of the ball to begin the next play.

- **Enforcement:** Dead ball penalty. Five yards.
- **NCAA and NFL Rule:** A play that ends naturally without a penalty, change of possession, injury or other stoppage of play initiates a 40-second play clock immediately upon the dead ball whistle.
- **USA Football Suggestion:** Youth teams often require additional time to call the play and get set at the line of scrimmage. Leagues should consider expanding the 25-second play clock to 30 or even 35 for younger levels.

**Illegal Substitution:** During the same dead ball interval, no player can withdraw and re-enter as a substitute unless a penalty is accepted, a dead-ball foul occurs, there is a charged time out or the period ends. It is also an illegal substitution, if the offense breaks the huddle with more than 11 players.

- **Enforcement:** Dead ball penalty. Five yards.
- **USA Football Suggestion:** For younger levels, let the offense re-huddle to allow the extra player to get to the sideline.

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**Blocking Below the Waist:** Any block below the waist outside of the free blocking zone exception, which allows players positioned within the tackle-to-tackle box at the snap to block an opponent below the waist. This rule applies to both offensive players and defensive players, who cannot engage a non-ball-carrying offensive player below the waist (exception for an offensive player carrying out a fake).

- **Enforcement:** Live ball foul. 15 yards.
- **NCAA Rule:** Offensive players can cut defenders only if the blocker approaches from the front. The general rule of “10 o’clock to 2 o’clock” is legal for non-linemen who are outside the tackle-to-tackle box at the snap.
- **NFL Rule:** NFL players have a much freer range to block below the waist both downfield and by non-linemen. Cut blocks are only illegal on kicking plays.
- **USA Football Suggestion:** For the youth game, all blocking below the waist should be illegal.

**Chop Block:** A block below the waist on an opponent who is already engaged with another blocker.

- **Enforcement:** Live ball foul. 15 yards.
- **USA Football Suggestion:** This is considered a dangerous play and should be enforced on every occurrence. Officials are well served to explain this penalty to players and coaches when it happens.

**Clipping:** Blocking or falling into the back of an opponent from the waist down.

- **Enforcement:** Live ball foul. 15 yards.
- **USA Football Suggestion:** This is considered a dangerous play and should be enforced on every occurrence.

**Equipment Violation:** Failure to wear required equipment or wearing non-approved equipment during a down.

- **Enforcement:** Five yards if dead ball foul at the snap. 15 yards if live ball foul during the play.
- **NCAA Rule:** This is a 15-yard penalty if flagged during a play under NCAA rules. If caught before the snap, there is no foul, but the player must be removed from the game.
- **USA Football Suggestion:** At younger ages, allow players to reset mouth pieces, buckle chin straps, etc., by holding up the snap.

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**Illegal Formation:** Failure to have at least seven players on the line of scrimmage at the time of the snap.

- **Enforcement:** Live ball foul. Five yards.
- **NCAA Rule:** The NCAA rulebook does not require seven on the line of scrimmage. The requirement is no more than four players in the backfield.
- **USA Football Suggestion:** Officials should work with receivers and offensive linemen to correctly line up prior to the snap. Receivers can check with officials whether they are on or off the line.

**Illegal Shift:** Failure of all 11 offensive players to be stationary simultaneously for at least one second prior to the snap, a player going in motion or a legal shift. An illegal shift is also when two players in motion at the same time during the snap.

- **Enforcement:** Live ball foul. Five yards.

**Illegal Helmet Contact:** Any butt block, face tackle, spear or other intentional use of the helmet to butt or ram an opponent. Any contact by the crown of the helmet to a defenseless player. Any contact to a defenseless player's head or neck area.

- **Enforcement:** Live ball foul. 15 yards.
- **NCAA Rule:** The NCAA also carries potential "targeting" for illegal helmet contact on a defenseless player that can lead to an ejection. No such automatic rule is in place within NFHS guidelines.
- **USA Football Suggestion:** This is considered a dangerous play and should be enforced on every occurrence. Youth leagues should consider extending this rule to include any contact by the crown of the helmet, including on tackles and blocks.

**Illegal Forward Pass:** Any forward pass with either foot beyond the neutral zone or a second forward pass within a down.

- **Enforcement:** Live ball foul. Five yards. Loss of down.
- **NCAA Rule:** At the NCAA level, both feet and the ball must be beyond the neutral zone to incur this foul.

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**Ineligible Receiver Downfield:** Any ineligible receiver beyond the expanded neutral zone – typically three yards beyond the line – before the last legal pass is thrown from behind the line of scrimmage to beyond the line of scrimmage.

- **Enforcement:** Live ball foul. Five yards.
- **USA Football's Suggestion:** The most common confusion around this call comes on screen passes. If the pass touched or caught behind the line of scrimmage, ineligible receivers can be as far downfield as they want.

**Intentional Grounding:** Any forward pass thrown into an area where there are no eligible receivers – except for a legal spike following a snap under center.

- **Enforcement:** Live ball foul. Five yards from spot of foul. Loss of down. There is no “outside the pocket” exception for leagues using NFHS rules.
- **NCAA Rule:** This is a spot foul and loss of down under NCAA rules. No additional yardage.
- **NFL Rule:** Like the NCAA, a passer outside the pocket can throw the ball out of bounds anywhere past the line of scrimmage and not be penalized.

**False Start:** Any shift, motion or movement that simulates action at a snap.

- **Enforcement:** Dead ball foul. Five yards.
- **USA Football Suggestion:** At younger levels, players will naturally fidget or sway because of undeveloped core strength. Be lenient with this rule unless it causes an unfair advantage.

## Defensive Penalties

**Horse Collar Tackle:** Grasping a ball-carrier by the back collar or inside the shoulder pads, then pulling the ball-carrier back and toward the ground.

- **Enforcement:** Live ball foul. 15 yards.
- **USA Football Suggestion:** This is considered a dangerous play and should be enforced on every occurrence.

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**Illegal Kick:** Popup kicks in which a kicker drives the ball into the ground in an attempt to make it go up in the air and not come down until the coverage team can converge on the landing spot.

- **Enforcement:** Dead ball foul. 15 yards.
- **NCAA Rule:** This is a legal kickoff within the NCAA rulebook with some limitations
- **NFL Rule:** The NFHS and NFL both outlaw these types of onside kicks.
- **USA Football Suggestion:** This is considered a dangerous play and should be enforced on every occurrence.

**Offside:** Any player entering the neutral zone once the ball is ready for play and before the snap.

- **Enforcement:** Dead ball foul. Five yards.
- **NFL Rule:** There is no “getting back” before the snap. Once a defensive player enters the neutral zone, the play is blown dead.
- **USA Football Suggestion:** Officials should help players who line up offside to move back prior to the snap.

**Roughing the Passer:** A continued effort to knock or tackle a passer after the ball has been thrown.

- **Enforcement:** Live ball foul. 15 yards. Automatic first down.
- **USA Football Suggestion:** This is considered a dangerous play and should be enforced on every occurrence.

**Roughing the Kicker/Holder:** Any contact with potential harm on the kicker or holder after a placed kick is away. Nullified by a defender making contact with a kicked ball behind the line of scrimmage or being blocked into a player.

- **Enforcement:** Live ball foul. 15 yards. Automatic first down.
- **USA Football Suggestion:** This is considered a dangerous play and should be enforced on every occurrence.

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**Roughing the Snapper:** Any contact on the snapper during the execution of a PAT, field goal or punt before the player is allowed the opportunity to regain his or her balance.

- **Enforcement:** Live ball foul. 15 yards. Automatic first down.
- **USA Football Suggestion:** This is considered a dangerous play and should be enforced on every occurrence. At the youngest levels, leagues should consider extending this rule to all snaps so centers and quarterbacks have the best opportunity for a clean exchange.

### All-Player Fouls

**Blindside Block:** Any block against an opponent other than the runner, who does not see the blocker approaching unless it is initiated with open hands.

- **Enforcement:** Live ball foul. 15 yards.
- **NCAA Rule:** A blindside block in the NCAA is legal unless it is targeting.
- **NFL Rule:** The NFL enforcement is narrower in that a player must deliver the block with the helmet, forearm or shoulder to the head or neck area of a defender. This rule also encompasses hits on defenseless receivers.
- **USA Football Suggestion:** This is considered a dangerous play and should be enforced on every occurrence. Even if your league follows the NCAA book, all blindside blocks should be illegal at the youth level. The key is leading with the head, shoulder or forearm against an opponent who is not aware the hit is coming. The same contact that leads with open hands would be legal as long as it is not in the back or to the head/neck.

**Facemask:** Grasping an opponent's face mask or any edge of a helmet's opening.

- **Enforcement:** Live ball foul. Either five yards (incidental) or 15 yards (excessive).
- **NCAA Rule:** There is only a 15-yard facemask penalty under NCAA rules. What would be a five-yard penalty under the NFHS rules is no longer a foul.
- **Different on Sundays:** The NFL enforcement carries an automatic first down.
- **USA Football Suggestion:** Make all youth football facemask penalties 15 yards to stress a prohibition on contact to an opponent's head.

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**Holding:** Using the hands, arms or legs to hook, grasp, restrain or otherwise impede an opponent. Grabbing an opponent is not enough. There must also be an element of control.

- **Enforcement:** Live ball foul. 10 yards.
- **NFL Rule:** The NFL marks most offensive holding penalties from the line of scrimmage. By NFHS rules, the 10 yards are marked from the spot of the foul. For defensive holding, the NFL awards an automatic first down. The NFHS does not.
- **USA Football Suggestion:** A quick word with a player or coach about a hold that does not impact a play is more efficient than calling the foul. If it's at the point of attack, though, throw the flag.

**Pass Interference:** Any player interfering with an opponent to move forward, catch or bat a legal forward pass beyond the neutral zone.

- **Enforcement:** Live ball foul. 15 yards.
- **NCAA Rule:** Spot foul if less than 15 yards downfield. Automatic first down.
- **NFL Rule:** The NFHS rule for defensive pass interference is not a spot foul and does not carry an automatic first down. Also, under NFHS rules, "catchability" is not a factor in this foul. A pass can be considered completely uncatchable, and a foul may still be called.
- **NOTE:** Face guarding – the act of obstructing a receiver's view while not turning to look for the ball – is no longer illegal on any level.

**Targeting:** No player shall target and make forcible contact to the head or neck area of a defenseless opponent with the helmet, forearm, hand, fist, elbow or shoulder.

- **Enforcement:** Live ball foul. 15 yards.
- **NFHS Rule:** There is no automatic ejection within the NFHS rule book for this foul, though officials can remove a player from the game if the foul is considered egregious.
- **NCAA Rule:** The NCAA rule expands the rule to include contact with the crown of the helmet to any part of a defenseless player's body. Ejection is automatic if targeting is upheld on replay.
- **NFL Rule:** The NFL rule expands this penalty to all areas on the field, not simply a defenseless player – i.e., quarterback in throwing motion, receiver in the act of making a catch.
- **USA Football Suggestion:** This is considered a dangerous play and should be enforced on every occurrence whether as a targeting foul or unnecessary roughness. Teach players to engage defenseless players properly.



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**Unnecessary Roughness:** Any contact by a player or coach that is deemed excessive or unnecessary.

- **Enforcement:** Live ball or dead ball foul. 15 yards.
- **NCAA Rule:** This foul carries an automatic first down under NFHS rules.
- **NFL Rule:** This penalty does not include an automatic first down under NFHS rules. Also, there is no automatic ejection for a second offense.
- **USA Football Suggestion:** This is considered a dangerous play and should be enforced on every occurrence.

**Unsportsmanlike Conduct:** Any non-contact action by a player or coach that is intentionally harmful or especially objectionable.

- **Enforcement:** Live ball or dead ball foul. 15 yards.
- **NFL Rule:** This penalty does not include an automatic first down under NFHS rules. Also, there is no automatic ejection for a second offense.
- **USA Football Suggestion:** These types of action have no place in youth sports and should be enforced on every occurrence.

**Unfair Acts:** Any player or coach hindering play or committing an act that is considered a travesty of the game not otherwise covered by a rule. Examples include: hiding a ball under a jersey, continuing to commit dead-ball penalties to run out the clock, coming off the bench to make a tackle or block, unfair deception of an imminent snap through non-football related actions, etc. The invocation of this rule is entirely at the game officials' discretion.

- **Enforcement:** Live ball or dead ball foul. 15 yards. If an unfair act negates a gain or loss that would otherwise result in a score or larger distance, officials have the right to award yardage as they see fit.
- **USA Football Suggestion:** These types of plays have no place in youth football.

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**Illegal Contact:** Within the area five yards beyond the line of scrimmage, a defensive player may chuck an eligible receiver in front of him. The defender is allowed to maintain continuous and unbroken contact within the five-yard zone, so long as the receiver has not moved beyond a point that is even with the defender.

- **Enforcement:** Live ball foul. Five yards. Automatic first down.
- **NFHS Rule:** This rule does not exist within the NFHS rule book. A misconception, though, is that defenders can make contact with receivers all the way down the field until the ball is thrown. A defender can still be called for holding or illegal contact to the head or neck area, but a receiver is considered a potential blocker until the ball is thrown.
- **NCAA Rule:** This rule does not exist within the NCAA rule book, and the same caveat applies as within the NFHS rule book.
- **USA Football Suggestion:** Unless your league specifically addresses this situation, it is perfectly legal for a defender to bump or push an eligible receiver downfield before the ball is thrown. A defender can still be called for holding, blindside block or illegal contact to the head or neck area if he or she violates those rules.



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