



## 2021 NFHS FOOTBALL GAME OFFICIALS MANUAL POINTS OF EMPHASIS

### **Clock Management Communication**

Accurate and effective communication during the game is critically important for the game officials, coaches, players and the press box personnel. Recent NFHS football rules change(s) that impact clock management issues call for careful consideration of the necessary changes for game officials to correctly communicate important information throughout the contest – especially during critical game situations when the clock issues are very important. Game officials must utilize sound and effective mechanics throughout the entire game to ensure that they are adequately prepared when the game situations call for critical decisions to be made by the coaches and players.

One very important change that is a result of the new 40-, 25-second play clock is that the covering official(s) must utilize a physical signal that is clearly visible at the end of every down. The most common signals that are necessary when the ball becomes dead include Signal No. 7 (dead ball with one arm straight up) or Signal No. 3 (stops the game clock) or Signal No. 10 (incomplete forward pass). A down that involves a score would involve another appropriate signal as well. Please note that the result of any down only calls for one signal to be used. Coaches, players, clock operators and the other game officials depend on this important information to make critical decisions that sometimes must be made very quickly. A game officials crew that has developed effective and consistent habits to clearly communicate this important information throughout the contest is thoroughly prepared when critical game situations call for quick decisions. Effective clock management becomes a shared crew responsibility when each member of the crew learns the correct signals and is prepared to utilize them in an accurate and consistent manner.

Game official crews that are assigned to work a game where visible play clocks are not available on occasion or all of the time are likely to be familiar with the local association/ state mechanic that is recommended for use when the play clock has reached the 10-second mark and then the 5-second mark. It is the recommendation of the NFHS Football Game Officials Manual Committee that a clearly visible physical signal must occur when the play clock reaches 10 seconds and that an additional signal is necessary at the 5- second mark to count down the final seconds prior to the possibility of a delay of game foul. The game official who is responsible for this signal might choose to visit with both quarterbacks prior to the game to allow them to clarify any questions or information they may have concerning this mechanic.

## **Respectful Communication Between Coaches and Game Officials**

If the primary mission of high school football was to win state championships then, by design, 99 percent of all teams would never fulfill the goal. If winning games was the primary goal then, for sure, 50 percent of teams would never be fulfilling the goal. All NFHS sports rules books include a “Mission Statement” (Appendix A in the NFHS Football Rules Book) that clearly states the primary goals as promoting “leadership, respect, integrity and sportsmanship.”

To that end, coaches and game officials should always be communicating with each other in a manner that models such behaviors for the student-athletes. Guidelines to model such communication is always included as Appendix F (for Coaches) and Appendix G (for Officials) in the NFHS Football Rules Book.

NFHS Football Rule 9-8-1 states that it is unsportsmanlike conduct and thereby clearly illegal for any non-player (coach) to “attempt to influence a decision by a game official” such as screaming for holding by a defensive coach over and over, or consistently asking for a pass interference call by an offensive coach.

The rule further defines that it is unsportsmanlike conduct to “indicate an objection to a game official’s decision.” While it is likely not appropriate to be calling such a foul unless it is an extreme case, game officials and coaches need to keep in mind that young student-athletes are watching their every move. If a coach disagrees with a decision, he or she should be requesting a “conference time-out” and respectfully presenting his or her case. Note that this procedure calls for both coach and game officials to discuss any disagreement specifically “in front of the team bench” (as a learning opportunity for players to see how adults respectfully speak with other adults) as opposed to some secret screaming session in the middle of the field. If they are not sure enough about their position to risk a time-out, then they need to abide by NFHS Football Rule 9-8-1.

## **Preventing Inequities Due to Illegal Substitution and/or Illegal Formation**

After the ready-for-play, each A player who participated in the previous down and each A substitute must have been, momentarily, between the 9-yard marks before the snap. (Rule 7-2-1)

With the newly revised definition for the “ready-for-play,” a “wide out” type substitute can gain the advantage of being unnoticed and uncovered or even in illegal position if game officials do not consistently recognize whether or not the players are all abiding by this NFHS football rule.

The ready-for-play may be a signal given by the referee. However, with the new rule it may also be initiated by the umpire placing the ball on the ground and moving into position. It only takes one instance for a receiver to go uncovered for A to gain the advantage of a long reception or even a score. Game officials need to be especially conscious of the position of outside substitutes when either type ready for play occurs. Wing officials should be especially

alert for substitution issues.

## **Responsibility for Minimizing Risk in the Game**

It is so very important to understand that the school administrators, coaches, players and non-players, and game officials are equally responsible for minimizing the risk in the game of football! It is quite clear that there have been many NFHS football rules changes recently that directly address risk minimization of the participants. The purpose of this Point of Emphasis is to encourage all game officials to carefully study these NFHS rules of the game for football and prepare themselves to make appropriate decisions throughout the game that address this area of concern. It is very important to always remember that a decision to not throw a flag for a risk minimization-related foul sends a very clear message that the game official approves of the action by the player(s) and is likely to see the same foul repeated. Game officials should take the time to carefully study the items listed below and prepare to react appropriately in each and every game. **Every game official must take responsibility for minimizing the risk of all participants in high school football.**

NFHS Football Rule 9 clearly addresses the conduct of all participants, and Sections 3 and 4 specifically deal with physical contact between players that may result in these risk concerns. Let's look at several specific examples. Please note that this list is not all-inclusive:

**Targeting** is defined as "an act by any player who takes aim and initiates contact against an opponent above the shoulders with the helmet, forearm, hand, fist, elbow or shoulder (s)." Any player who is in complete control of himself (not fighting off a block) must be held to a very high standard when making this contact against an opponent. We simply cannot miss or pass on this type of foul in an effort to protect both players. Remember that a targeting foul does not result in automatic disqualification, but that certainly can be a consideration.

**Blindside Block** is defined as "a block against an opponent other than the runner, who is not able to see the blocker approaching." This action that includes forceful contact clearly results in a foul unless the block outside of the free-blocking zone is initiated with open hands (open palms to the opponent).

**Tripping** is defined as "the intentional use of the lower leg or foot to obstruct an opponent below the knee." It must be noted here that a player may not trip any opponent (includes the runner). It is also important to note here that an injury to both players is certainly possible.

**Defenseless Player** is defined as "a player who, because of his physical position and focus of concentration, is especially vulnerable to injury." It must be noted here that physical contact against a defenseless player may very well be perfectly legal, but any player must take extreme care to make certain that the contact is legal by rule to avoid a foul. Game officials must carefully observe any defenseless player to determine that the contact by an opponent is legal. It is also necessary to note here that unnecessary or excessive contact may very well occur.

**Illegal Helmet Contact** is defined as “an act of initiating contact with the helmet against any opponent.” It is important to note here that a helmet is to be used for protection and not to be used as a weapon.

**Spearing** is “an act by any player who initiates contact against an opponent at the shoulders or below with the crown (top portion) of his helmet,” and is likely to be the most common example of illegal helmet contact.

**Roughing** an opponent may include action against a passer, a kicker, a holder or a snapper. Each of these players are certainly in a vulnerable position at a critical moment and clearly must be protected.